

Swamiji



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Born in 1941, Vinod was brought up and educated in Amritsar. He attended Government Medical College, and subsequently trained as a surgeon at PGI, Chandigarh. He left for USA in 1969, and retired in 2003 as Director of Critical Care Services at a teaching hospital in Michigan. Married with two grown sons, he continues to visit India at least once a year.

The word *swami* has entered the English language, thanks to the writer RK Narayan and hordes of hippie visitors to India. But in this personal tale, the word has a special resonance.

By *Swamiji*, I refer to was my grandfather's younger brother. I do not even remember his given name. This was a bizarre incidence in the family's history! You would have to imagine that a family of middle class traders amongst them had produced a saffron clad personage who in his lifetime renounced the world for the good of humanity!

By the time I first had a look at the face of *Swamiji*, his older brother Lala Charan Das, my grandfather was dead. My grandfather was something of a legend in Amritsar because of the amount of wealth that he had accumulated and the fact that he had married three times! They were perfectly legal marriages, after the demise of consecutive wives.

His second marriage happened to have produced the most respectable progeny: four daughters and a son, my father. Lovingly named Panna Lal, meaning diamond, by his mother, his official name was Sat Dev. That was the name that appeared on our school certificates and tax documents. He was usually recognized as the heir to his father's legacy.

My mother used to talk about how my grandfather's mother had died crying for her lost son, whom I came to know as *Swamiji*. This son had disappeared when he was very young at one of the numerous Hindu festivals that attracted huge crowds, among them strange-looking Sadhus. These men of God or mendicants lived outside the pale of Hindu customs and conventions. *Swamiji* had been kidnapped as an eight-year-old boy and lost to his parents forever. Though they lived with the loss, it was said that his mother would travel to all parts of undivided Punjab to look for her son at many fairs.

I had seen *Swamiji* when he came to our house with his guru. They camped in the large room we called Hall-Room, and used the adjoining room for sleeping and dressing. A small wooden platform covered with a white sheet was set up and the old guru sat on it. The platform was set against the wall so the old man could lean against the wall bolstered by a large round pillow. *Swamiji* sat at his feet and humoured the old man.

The guru was reputed to be almost a hundred years old; to my young eyes, he looked ancient. He was something of a tyrant. He was foul mouthed. He used terrible words to summon and berate his disciples. He complained constantly about everything including the food, his bed, the weather and the fact that he did not sleep too well! The shrivelled old man with dark swarthy skin, scraggly beard and a saffron headdress is etched in my memory as a crotchety old man who was hard to conceive of as being holy! He was thin, almost cadaverous looking, over six feet tall but now bent with age.

But the fact that *Swamiji* was one of our own seemed to compensate for the fact that the old guru lorded over *Swamiji* and other lesser sadhus! The old man was known to be incontinent, and two holy men probably at the low end of the order looked after him. *Swamiji* was good-natured, always smiling and tolerant of the old guru's bad temper. It was also understood that he had raised *Swamiji* as his son, and made him his heir apparent for the religious order in Srinagar.

The story of how years later *Swamiji* was discovered to be related to us was what fascinated me. The discovery was credited to Satya Bua, my father's older sister. In 1946 she had gone to Haridwar - the holy city at the foothills of Himalayas, which is revered by Hindus. This is where the Ganges enters the plains. She had gone there to escape from the heat of the summer of the plains of Punjab. Her home in erstwhile Pakistan was soon to be lost forever. But she did not know that at the time!

As she went to an evening gathering of the holy men who held religious discourses, she was struck with the resemblance of a sadhu to her father, Charan Das. The man was very fair, of medium height and balding just like her father. For a moment, she shuddered with the thought that her father had renounced the world and joined an order of sadhus. But this swami spoke well in chaste Hindi with Sanskrit verses spoken casually. Satya Bua knew this was beyond her father's reach!

An older sadhu always accompanied the swami. She made discrete queries about his background, and discovered that he came from Srinagar, Kashmir. She went back to the evening gathering several times until she gathered up her courage to question the swami. When she finally asked the swami as to where he was from, he evaded her. As she persisted, he conceded that he was from Punjab. His guru was more perfunctory, and he dismissed my aunt.

Not one to be discouraged easily, she next asked the swami about his parents' names. He was still reluctant to admit anything, and so was his guru. Meanwhile, she had wired her father about his long lost younger brother. Her father was expected in Haridwar any time. But Satya Bua never let the swami know about it!

She took her father to the evening prayer meeting, and to her dismay found that the swami was not at there. But many devotees at the place turned to her father, and asked in confusion as to why he had abandoned his sadhu garb! That seemed to confirm my aunt's suspicions.

They tracked down the swami's *akhara*, place of living. The brothers were eventually reunited after more than fifty years! It must have been an amazing scene! *Swamiji* was just two years younger than my grandfather but their physical resemblance was so close that they could have been twins. It was clear that the old guru had kidnapped *Swamiji* at

the tender age of eight, and raised him as his heir. In later years, he was both very demanding and loving to *Swamiji*. It is understandable that our family members felt a certain animus against the old man.

In later years, *Swamiji* would visit our house every few years. By now his old guru was dead after having lived for over a hundred years. *Swamiji* would never say a bad word about him. *Swamiji* was revered in Srinagar, had a large property in the heart of the city. He would come and stay at our house for a few weeks at a time. This was despite the fact that grandfather's widow, Champa Devi, his third wife, had adopted him as her personal guru.

Technically, she was our step-grandmother but she was the same age of my aunts and my mother. The lady was never held in much respect by her numerous daughters or daughters-in-law. She had inherited a lot of wealth which, after grandfather's death, she had spent lavishly on herself and her two young sons and a married daughter.

Champa Devi had gone through the mandatory year of mourning after grandfather's death. She claimed to be guided by *Swamiji*. I recall how on a special paper she laboriously wrote God's name Ram in red ink over and over again. In my mind's eyes I can see her bent over a small wooden stand, dipping the reed pen in old-fashioned inkwell and performing this useless task. She was going to take these to Haridwar, roll dough pills in them and feed them to the fish that lived in the Ganges River! Some Brahmin had devised this special feat of penance in the holy city. *Swamiji*, to his credit, did not have anything to do with this act.

He was treated with a great deal of reverence. He belonged to us and yet he was a man of God! There would be religious talks and small group meetings in our house. Strangely enough, the women of the large extended family seemed to vie for his affection and attention. Many of them adopted him as guru, a common practice among the Hindus. They knew that this saintly man was not of the world and would not involve himself in their affairs. Yet each one of them tried to gain his favour. They were proud just to be able to say that *Swamiji* approved of a particular person or decision. For years afterwards, it was amusing to hear how *Swamiji* had sided with one aunt or cousin in division of assets or property! My father, who resembled him most closely in facial features and complexion, never made any overt demands on his affection.

In 1957, I got a personal and close look at *Swamiji*, when I turned fifteen. The vacation period after the matriculation examination meant that I had about two months of free time. So Vijay, a son of my father's business partner, and I decided to go to Srinagar. Vijay was thin and even shorter than me. In middle school, we used to spend summer afternoons at the shop. Vijay had little interest in studies but was a street savvy kid. He lived inside the walled city of Amritsar in Chowk Passian. He would spend hours watching old men play chess in the public square. So, in a few short weeks, he would beat my older brother and me. This was despite the fact that we had introduced him to the game!

In those days, a Kashmir holiday in summer was a dream come true. But staying at a hotel was out of the question. Since numerous carpet traders did business with our fathers, we were to stay with one or the other. As a precaution, my father also gave me

the address of *Swamiji* and a letter of introduction to him. We first visited the Muslim businessman Ali, who traded with my father. Ali's business was in the heart of the city.

The old city of Srinagar with its narrow winding streets and ill-kempt houses was a revelation. How the Kashmiris used the river for dumping their refuse was an eye-opener. In the morning, we had to walk through winding streets to go to *hamam* for a bath. These were ordinary facilities, and not some fabulous marble baths as the name implied. A low wooden stool and a pitcher of lukewarm water were provided for the bath. You brought your own soap and towel and took bath-wearing underwear.

Ali, who told many tales in Amritsar, proved to be a miser. He made us sleep at his old shop, rarely had any special food cooked for us and expected us, two teens, to look after ourselves. The running joke between Vijay and Ali was about cooking a chicken-dinner. Ali, "But first I have to catch the chicken." Vijay would be angry, "But damn it Ali, don't you always get chicken curry when you come to Amritsar!" Ali would simply shrug at his comment.

We had decided that after spending time in Pehalgam we will not stay at Ali's shop. We managed to rent a tent which we set up by the Lidder river in Pehalgam. We had a pleasant enough week at tourist attractions, which included a pony ride to Chandanwari. The plains dwellers like us were overjoyed to see an ice-bridge.

On our return from Pehalgam, we moved to the Residency Road where *Swamiji* had his place. *Swamiji* greeted me, "You are Panna Lal's son? The youngest?" He enquired after my parents and Champa Devi. He enquired after her sons, my uncles Chaman and Roshan, and expressed his displeasure when I told him that they mostly did nothing.

Our move to *Swamiji*'s place allowed us to roam around the Bund area, and also visit some other business associates of our fathers. These men were less tight-fisted than Ali! *Swamiji*'s place had a huge wooden door, which was closed at all times. A small trapdoor at the bottom allowed us to enter the center. *Swamiji* had made it very clear that there was to be no meat brought on to the premises. So if we wanted to eat meat we were welcome to do so in the restaurants.

Swamiji was now old and frail compared to what I remembered from years ago. He lived a very simple life of prayer, devotion and distribution of alms. Though his gardens and ashram were located in downtown Srinagar, they were spartanly furnished. Our beds consisted of thin mattresses laid on wooden boards.

We would look after our own breakfast, enjoying the red tea of Kashmir with rolls of freshly baked bread. *Swamiji* asked us to join him for lunch. A dal, rice and leafy vegetable lunch was rounded out with pieces of melon. *Swamiji* would expertly take out his dentures and slip them back in his mouth. An attendant stood by to pour water from a brass pot to wash hands. Most of the vegetables served for meals were grown in the backyard.

Swamiji indicated that his ashram had a lot fewer people than in its heyday. But he never seemed to regret any parts of his life, though I felt he was rather lonely. He was well looked after. The piece of property that he held on Residency Road, if sold would probably have made him a rich man but he was not interested in that.

He was once generous enough to give us a little spending money. Every day, he asked us about what we were going to visit. We told him that we were going to rent bikes and go around the downtown area. He approved of that. We had visited the famous Shankaracharya Mandir, which was nearby and were ready to visit the fabulous Mughal gardens. For that we would have to take a bus. He asked his attendant to prepare some food for the day trip.

When the time came for our return trip to Amritsar, he gave a little sigh and became quiet.

A few years later, *Swamiji* died. I don't remember if any of my relatives went to Srinagar for his last rites.

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