

1947 & I: Remembrance of Things Past

I.J. SINGH*

* I.J. Singh, Professor Emeritus, Anatomical Sciences at New York University, is the SR Editor (Overseas). He is also the author of four collections of essays on his journey as a Sikh in North America. Email: ijsingh99@gmail.com

I WANT TO PUT MY FINGER ON SOME defining epoch or time that shaped our sense of Self.

When I look at Sikhs during the 19th and 20th centuries, a few pivotal moments come to mind.

From the Sikh point of view, two events were epoch-making in the 19th century. One was the rise of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who consolidated and ruled a large swath of northwest India for a shade less than 50 years with remarkable sagacity and justice. The second half of the century saw the end of the Sikh Raj and its replacement by the British who reigned for the next 100 years.

The twentieth century, too, gives us three periods of reckoning; two of them are seared in our being. The third, the Singh Sabha period, though vitally significant, occupies much less of our attention.

The middle of the twentieth century saw the end of the British Empire in 1947 and emergence of a “free and secular” India. The second half of the last century saw the pogroms and orchestrated killings of Sikhs in the 1980’s that spawned a new class of deniers of history – no different from those who deny the Holocaust or the genocide of Armenians in 1915.

Sikhs worldwide are now in the midst of marking 25 years of the politically engineered killings of Sikhs in 1984 and that decade.

But what happened to us in 1947? It will be 62 years this August 2009. More than a generation has passed on, along with their memories and first person accounts. And true to Indian tradition, we have not valued or preserved that past! **Is it because we have so much history that it weighs on us like unwanted baggage and we don’t know what to do with it?**

But to a dwindling minority it still lives, fresh as the day it happened, and its repercussions are alive in Punjabis – Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims — the world over.

These two events of the 20th century – 1947 and 1984 – are not separate and distinct. They are inseparably interlinked, but let me come to their interconnection a little later in this story.

Officially, on August 14, 1947 Pakistan became independent of the British; a day later on August 15, India was proclaimed independent. (Pakistan was carved out of Western Punjab and Eastern Bengal. The latter became Bangladesh when it separated from Pakistan in 1971.)

In 1947, I was in school at the local Montessori in Lahore, the third of four children. The oldest was starting high school, the youngest was barely two.

Time plays tricks. As I sit down to recapture those days I have to rely on my older siblings – a brother and a sister — to help sift the facts from the fiction of my childhood memories.

For a ten year old, these were exciting and heady times. Schools closed for several weeks. Some nights one could see flames and smoke rising from nearby localities. There were news of widespread riots and killings all around us. The nights reverberated with cries of “*Allahu Akbar*” from the adjoining neighborhood that was largely Muslim, followed dutifully by responding cries of “*Bolay So Nihaal, Sat Sri Akal*” from the Sikhs and Hindus holed up in our local gurdwara.

Then a family friend and neighbor was waylaid on his way to work by a mob and killed.

The local residents organized a night patrol of the area by volunteers. My father, too, along with a small group walked the streets in the middle of the night carrying a 3-foot *kirpan* – the only weapon in the house.

My father’s convictions were so simple that no facts could budge them: He held that since Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs had been neighbors for so many generations – centuries – no political theories or partitions could sunder those ties for very long. The passions that fed hatred, he was sure, would wear out; the love that binds us all will remain. (Obviously, we hadn’t heard of the Holocaust then, and had also selectively overlooked early Sikh history.)

Over the weeks most of our Sikh and Hindu neighbors abandoned their houses to move across the putative border that was to define the two nations. A couple of days later our milk vendor disappeared; now there was no milk in the house for four children. Two days later, a Muslim vendor appeared at the door and offered help. Our parents rightly wondered if they could trust the man; could the milk be poisoned. It was decided to put our trust in the Guru, and this Muslim supplied us milk for the remaining few days until we left.

Our supply of wheat flour finished. There was whole wheat in the house but no flour. So mother would be up at 3 or 4 in the morning to prepare coarse stone ground flour by hand. My sister, who was then 12, remembers helping her some mornings. Fritters made of chick pea flour would do for “vegetables.” Sometimes now my sister makes them and remembers those days over 60 years ago.

Six days after Pakistan and India were born as separate countries, the Muslim *tonga* driver who used to take my sister and I to school every day came to our house and warned us of the foolishness of trying to stay and stick it out — **indeed begged us to leave. He promised to arrange a truck to get us out.**

Seven days after partition of the country, a covered truck came so that passengers would not be visible. For us, where it took us would have to be simply a matter of trust. We were loaded on to it with no more baggage than we could hand-carry, and driven to *Mughal Serai*, the train station of Lahore.

August 22, 1947 was an unbearably hot sunny day. I had never seen so much army at a train station or so many desperate people waiting for a train for so long. Crowds milled about, in and around the platform and train tracks. We, too, were in the crowd, and my sister recalls that a passing train caught the corner of one of our bags and destroyed it as it thundered by.

Hours later, our 'waiting for Godot' ended. We boarded the only train that came. People were hanging by the handles, riding the footboards and piled on rooftops of the cars.

We entrained in the morning. Then the train sat on the tracks in the sweltering heat for much of the day, leaving in the evening. Finally, it crawled – perhaps one could have run faster. Midway it stopped on its tracks for hours. There were human bodies scattered on both sides. We wondered if this is how life would end. Hours later, by about 10 at night, it had covered the 40 miles to Amritsar across the Indian border. It disgorged us all – famished and tired, with no place to go.

We were accommodated for the night in a tent at a refugee camp. My mother was able to get two *rotees*, promptly gave half to each and proclaimed that she was not hungry.

The next day, my father reached a distant relative in Amritsar. He kindly put us up for a few days. And then we moved another 50 miles to Jalandhar.

While at Amritsar, father was able to arrange a police escort to take him to Lahore. He wanted to reclaim whatever he could from the house he had locked up and left behind. **But there was nothing to rescue; the house had been ransacked and occupied the day we abandoned it. We were lucky to have left when we did. That same night a mob had raided our locality and seized whatever they could lay their hands on. There was a hospitable Muslim family living in our house now.**

Jalandhar was teeming with Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan. Every day there were caravans of new arrivals, and everyday one saw cavalcades of Muslims being escorted by the army to trains that would take them to Pakistan. History tells us that the refugee problem in Punjab in 1947 was larger than that in Europe after the Second World War.

Somehow we got a foothold in one part of a large house abandoned by a Muslim family that had crossed over to Pakistan. It was partially burnt; on one side the roof had collapsed. But parts were intact enough to provide shelter to many families. We all shared a single hand pump that provided water. There was no hygienic code and no enforcement of it. The miracle is that none of us sickened or died.

There was no school for us, but our parents were anxious that we do not morph into street urchins. There was not much for me to do all day except play around in the streets. So my parents organized reading and study times that they supervised. There was no electricity in the house, so we studied by the light of a kerosene lamp — sometimes an adventure, often a pain.

I remember the taste of World War II surplus dried onions and powdered eggs that often were our meals. And I remember my mother turning over her portion of milk to her children with the lame excuse that she could not digest it.

Keeping the kids busy and out of trouble was next only to keeping them fed and clean. My older brother, then in his teens, was sent to volunteer at a "refugee camp," a city of tents to spend his days in service of those who were needier.

One day at that camp he came across an old man who had finally made the escape from Gujranwala. It was our maternal grandfather. My brother brought him home. Later an aunt made it across the border with two small children in tow and joined us.

Some months later, an uncle, who had been given up for lost and perhaps dead, arrived from parts of Pakistani territory that have always remained somewhat lawless. He had apparently been severely injured and thrown out of a train on his way out of Pakistan. Some kind people, possibly Muslim, took care of him, treated him and sent him along later, still recuperating from his many wounds.

One memory of my Jalandhar days will always haunt me. One day I was hanging around outside our ramshackle house in the middle of the day. It was near the railroad tracks and I heard the staccato sounds of explosions. Not knowing anything — but curious, I wandered off towards the tracks. A train of Muslim refugees lay still on the tracks surrounded by a crowd of armed Hindus and Sikhs who were busily killing any Muslim they could, in and out of that train.

This, I learned, was in retaliation of the rumored murder of a train load of Sikh and Hindu refugees who were on their way to India a day or two earlier in Pakistan.

So I ran home and at the street corner saw a Sikh washing a blood-stained dagger.

Such were the days. Now, every August 15th, I cringe when I hear respected political leaders of India proclaiming that India's freedom was won by Mahatma Gandhi in a peaceful, bloodless revolution. **One evening in Jalandhar we heard that Gandhi had been shot dead by a Hindu, Nathuram Godse.**

We all rail against the perils of bureaucracy, but it was the Indian bureaucracy that saved us. Luckily for us, our father had worked for the Punjab Public Service Commission in Lahore for many years. We knew that when the government reorganized in the Indian Punjab, there would be a reconstituted Public Service Commission, and we would be somewhat flush again.

That's exactly what happened. In 1948 Simla, that used to be India's summer capital under the British, became the seat of Punjab government, and we moved there.

Eleven years later, when Punjab and PEPSU combined into a single state, the Public Service Commission relocated to Patiala. **On arriving in Patiala, father was honored by the local gurdwara for his father's contributions 36 years earlier. This must have been a most gratifying moment for my father in his new homeland.**

In 1922, when father was 14, my grandfather was the stationmaster at Nankana Sahib (now in Pakistan), the birthplace of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. Sikhs had launched a massive non-violent struggle to free the place from its British-appointed corrupt caretakers. Many Sikhs were killed, injured or arrested. Sikhs prevailed, the British government conceded, and even Gandhi, who later won accolades for his non-violent ways, admittedly learned the meaning of courage and power of peaceful protest.

History tells us that in 1922 my grandfather provided the Sikhs with succor and comfort for which the British promptly shipped him to Moga after the imbroglio.

I often wonder! How did our whole family get across the troubled land in 1947 and how did my relatives ever find each other? How did so many come through seemingly so unscathed? It seems no less than a miracle. I also wonder why, in all these years, there has been so little conversation of this period in our lives. There are no records and few relics or reminders; those with memories have passed on.

I know that many suffered much, much more during 1947 and have moving stories to tell. I hope they will and soon.

I think of T.S. Eliot who reminds us of ‘the cunning passages and contrived corridors of history that deceives us by vanities.’

In less than 20 years, penniless Punjabi and Sikh refugees from Pakistan had transformed their new homeland into the most prosperous state in India. They fathered the “Green revolution” that fed much of India, so that the annual famines that characterized the country finally occurred no more.

I look back and see that such momentous events — the partition of a country, widespread killings, transfer of millions across artificially created political borders and a refugee problem, the likes of which had not been seen in recent history — are matters that deserve more than a footnote in history.

It would have served the nation far, far better to minimize the glorification and institutionalization of Gandhi (Mahatma), Nehru, Patel, et al who engineered and oversaw these events and instead to purposefully address the needs and stoic suffering of millions. When I look back I see that these matters never became pivotal to a national conversation.

The largely uprooted minority of Sikhs felt even less welcome and more diminished by a legal framework of a new nation that lumped them with Hinduism, thus denying them their own identity.

Over the years, Indian politicians have continued to play the card of divisive politics – pitting Indians against each other – based on religions, languages, cultures etc. It seems to me that, with the exception of the recent years of Manmohan Singh’s ascendancy, since 1947, Sikhs have felt progressively more alienated from the nation that is India.

Perhaps that’s where one should look for the genesis of the troubles of 1984. I await with bated breath a political theorist with the grand vision to successfully trace the strands of history that connect 1984 to its roots in 1947, and even further back to the events of 1922-25 that suborned a religion to the judiciary of a nominally secular state.

It has now become so difficult to answer when people ask me where I am from. My first few formative years were spent in what is now Pakistan; the next thirteen years in India (Simla and Amritsar), and I have spent nearly 50 years in the United States. **Most people appear perplexed — and rightly so – if I answer “New York.”**

“You can’t go home again,” said Thomas Wolfe, and the line often reverberates in my head. Yet, before the end of my days I would like to see the streets where I ran around and the house where I was born.

