

A Prosperous and Peaceful Village Life– Pre-Partition



R P Bhatla

R P Bhatla is a graduate in Civil Engineering. He retired in 1994 as Deputy General Manager from Engineers India Ltd. He continued to work as General Manager, Triune Projects Ltd., General Manager Enron India, General Manager, PLL/Simon Carves India Ltd, and Advisor L&T Faridabad.

Editor's note: This is the first of several stories related to the life of the Bhatla family before and after the Partition of India in 1947.

In 1930, my father, Sakhir Chand, became the *Kar Dar* (estate manager) for Ahmadyar Khan. Mr Khan owned more than 500 acres of land in Kot Khan Village, in District Jhang in West Punjab, which became a part of Pakistan in 1947. Much of the land was by the side of the river Jhelum. It was fertile land, irrigated by the Persian water wheel, an ancient system of lifting water from open wells. My father's job involved a lot of running around to supervise everything that had happened on the estate. In addition, he had to co-ordinate all court cases related to the land and its owner. My father and his forefathers had earned and lived on this arrangement for more than a hundred years.

It was a good, comfortable living. My father's compensation was a percentage of the estate's production: grain produced, cattle feedstock, and fresh vegetables. There was a small cash payment also. Our place had about a hundred date trees, which gave us a variety of date fruit. The family had plenty of food and always some spare money. The three brothers together in one family with common income were doing well, and the joint family had accumulated plenty of gold & jewellery.

My grandparents had expired before my father got married. In 1931, when he was 35 years old, my father married Maya, daughter of Karam Chand Bhandula, who himself had been a *Kar Dar* of a rich Hindu zamindar family at Chella village in District Jhang for many years. Karam Chand's family was well to do.

Maya, my mother, was only 17 when she got married. But, soon after her marriage, my mother became the boss of the house with my father playing the second fiddle. She had no formal education but could easily read Hindi and Punjabi religious books. However, she could not write.

It was joint family with my father and Wazir Chand, his older brother and Bishan Dass, his younger brother. Wazir Chand was a primary school teacher, while Bishan Dass had a shop that sold cloth. My father's brothers were also hen pecked by their wives. Overall, the family life was peaceful. It was an ideal living situation with all cousin brothers and sisters (eight boys and three girls) playing, often joking, and running around.

Kot Khan village had a primary school up to Standard 6. The school had a large compound with a number of classrooms. Its main problem was that school did not have English. The emphasis was on mathematics and Urdu language. The firm foundation set for arithmetic at this school proved good for me over the years in high school and later. After Standard 6, you had to look for a new school with English language.

It appears unbelievable today that the Standard 4 final examination used to be held at another village, about 6 km away. Similarly, the Standard 6 final examination was also held at another school some

distance away. The young students had to walk a long distance to appear for the test and tread back same day.

In Standard 6, when the final examination's date was approaching, the school used to arrange special classes in the school premises at night. The students were required to sleep at school. The school headmaster, Mr Elahi Bakhsh, was a highly motivated teacher who used to keep track of his good students. One of his sons was also a teacher at the school.

When World War II ended in 1945, the school celebrated it and *Ladoos* distributed to all students, with a holiday the following day. People hoped that the end of the war would mean a return to normal life. For example, before the war, wheat was available at 5-7 kg per rupee. During the war, the price more than tripled to 1.5 kg per rupee.

I remember going with my family on foot or bicycles to village Chella, about 5 km away, to see Ramlila, which was regularly celebrated every year. There used to be a *Mela* at village Massan at Dusserah time, when all Hindus would get together every year, stay there for 3-4 days to perform any religious ceremonies. Massan, on the right bank of river Chenab, was famous for its temples. Even political parties would hold meetings at this location and state their viewpoints. On Baisakhi day (13th April) every year, most Hindus would go to river Jhelum, about 1.5 km away, to bathe in it.

Kabadi was a very popular game at Kot Khan. There would be matches between college going students and the local rustics. Another local game was *Guli danda*, which we played in the clean and hard ground east of village Kot Khan. Most of the boys participated in this game, which involved a lot of running around.

My *tauji* (father's older brother), Wazir Chand, died at a relatively young age of about 46 years. He was remembered for his kind and generous approach as the oldest male member and head of the family. Soon after her husband's death, our *taiji* (*tauji*'s wife) wanted the joint family to be divided, with each of the three brothers getting his due share. Her main concern was that she wanted to be sure that she would get and receive her ornaments and her share of the family's cash, which she wanted to invest in her sons' education. She had three sons. The oldest son was studying in DAV College, Lahore, and other two sons were studying in a high school at Adhiwal, which was half way between Jhang and Meghiana towns.

My *taiji* got the old house in which the joint family had lived. Two new identical houses were constructed side by side for my father and his younger brother, and we shifted to the new houses after the family split. We had a common compound in this newly constructed house. There were some tensions when the young boys would intrude into each other's space. The family ladies would often crib and argue, but I never observed any shouting by the men or the cousins. We had a very cordial relationship with our cousins throughout.

In those times, in our community, the girls were given education in temples, without any formal school education. This was the case for my sister in Kot Khan, though she did attend a formal school soon after Partition, and earned her Matric (Standard 10) degree.

Our relations with Muslims were generally peaceful. There were no untoward incidents except some theft of a cow or a buffalo. During World War II days there was some politics creeping in the village life. Some sort of compromise would be made as to who would become the village's *Numberdar* (senior officer).

Hindu and Muslim marriages were celebrated separately. However, a few selected persons were invited to Muslim marriages. Since we were close to the Khan family, we were always invited to their weddings.

But, we never ate at their house because beef was served at their parties. Instead, we would be given dry food supplies, which we would cook separately at our home.

Muslims were generally not invited to Hindu weddings. However, the Hindu families would always deliver some gifts to the homes of their Muslim friends and acquaintances, as a token of mutual respect.

There was never any quarrel between Hindus and Muslims. Hindus would participate in the Muslims' religious discourses, which were in chaste Urdu but always secular in nature. These were held at least twice a year in open compounds, and attracted a large number of people who came to listen and participate.

At Kot Khan, the Bhatla community had constructed a Gurudwara and appointed a *Granthi* (a preacher), even though there were no Sikh families living there. The gurudwara was quite boisterous with weekly gatherings. There was also a Hindu temple with a Pujari for religious ceremonies. The Hindus would generally ask the Hindu pujari to select the date for a wedding or any other auspicious occasion. But for day-to-day religion, the Hindus of Kot Khan were more comfortable with Sikh scriptures.

My maternal grandparents belonged to Chella village, at a distance of 5 km. We often spent some days of our summer vacation there. Chella was a bigger village with a middle school. The next stop for education beyond Kot Khan was Chella. This village had a large Hindu population and was more prosperous with rich Hindus living there.

My maternal grandparents shifted from Chella to a village known as Chak Number 383, near a town called Toba Tek Singh, and opened a shop there. This was a predominantly Muslim area, with just a few Hindus who used to work as traders. I had shifted to their home for my Class 5 because the school there used to teach English, unlike the school in Kot Khan. I got admission in an Islamia high school at Kaloya near Toba Tek Singh. This school had predominantly Muslim students with only four or five Hindu students. I spent one year in this school 1946-47 but found no differences because of religion. The teachers were more interested in students based on their merit.

In 1947, when problems between Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities started rising up, and peace hung in the balance, I was shifted back to my parents in Kot Khan. I had then sought admission in a school at Kot Shakir across the river Jhelum and stayed in the hostel there.

Things were going well for all the three families in 1947. There was enough money, and the families' sons were studying in English medium schools or DAV College, Lahore.

Then came the Partition of India. On a national level, it did make India independent. On a personal level, it destroyed our families' peaceful and prosperous lives. ❖

© R P Bhatla 2012