

Forced to leave Okara, Pakistan



Anand Sarup

Born in Lahore on 5th January 1930 to Savitri Devi and Shanti Sarup. Brought up in an open environment, chiefly under the influence of a learned and iconoclastic grandfather who had, after much study and reflection, decided against denominational commitment. Anand Sarup developed a deep commitment to democracy and freedom because his family participated actively in the freedom struggle. In 1947, together with his family he went through the trauma of losing all, and then assumed an active role in rebuilding a new status and identity for the family. He joined the IAS in 1954 and held many unusual assignments including the Vice Chancellorship of the G.B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, which, in gratitude to his bailing it out of a system breakdown, conferred a D.Sc. (Honoris Causa) upon him. He retired in 1988 as Education Secretary, Government of India. Later, he became Chairman, National Book Trust. Also co-authored, with Sulabha Brahma, *Planning for the Millions*.

Editor's note: This is Part 1 of a three-part story. Part 2 describes the family's move to India and initial resettlement, and Part 3 deals with the family's re-establishment.

I do not know the date. One evening in early 1947, when our family went up to the roof, we found the sky lighted with a huge fire in the direction of the walled city of Lahore. Next morning, the news that one of the oldest settlements of Hindus (inside the Shah Aalami Gate) had been set on fire was circulating in the city.

At that time, my family lived in Qila Gujar Singh, at a distance of about just three or four miles from the Shah Aalami gate. Yet, this distance was a significant one because there were no modern communication systems. Very few people had cars or bikes, and there were no local buses. Perhaps less than 0.5 percent of households or offices had telephones. In India at that time, there were no TVs. Even in Lahore, which was a relatively modern city, less than 1 percent of the people had radio sets. The government ran the broadcasting system, and never reported any controversial events.

I think the news about the fire was published but the Tribune, which was (and is even today in India's Punjab) a highly reputed, secular, independent newspaper, had not reported who had set the area on fire and what had followed thereafter. However, the grapevine was very active those days and often accurate. We heard that a Muslim Magistrate, Mr. Cheema, had cordoned off the area and stood and watched the area burn, preventing people from escaping. Many people had perished in the fire and there were reports of mothers throwing their children from the first or second storey tenements, hoping that they would somehow survive.

This horrifying news came as a shock to the citizens of Lahore, a very old city known for its trade, industry, educational institutions and cultural organisations. The old Lahore city was within a fort with gates that had been given names by the Mughal rulers, especially Akbar's son Jahangir, who liked to spend as much time as possible in Lahore. The old city, including the Shah Aalami area, had a roaring trade in textiles, grains, artefacts, etc.

The British Government, after the annexation of Punjab – the last area to be conquered and brought under the Crown – felt that they had to demonstrate their might to the hard fighting Sikhs. So, they did everything on a grand scale here to establish the prestige of the conquering Imperial Government. Besides establishing a magnificent Government College at Lahore, many other institutions had been set up through the government's initiative in Lahore even before they were established in Delhi.

Fortunately for me, an agnostic even when 17 years old, Lahore had Dyal Singh College, a non-communal institution established under the influence of the Brahma Samaj, a group that favoured reforms in the Hindu Society, women's education, widow remarriage and abolition of Sati.

Interestingly, Lahore also had a Dev Samaj College, established by a sect that denied the existence of God. Most of the colleges were located outside the fort area.

Lahore had a Mall, a beautiful and broad road running a distance of some five miles, which was the envy of all other cities of India. And there was the Lahore YMCA, which was a great centre of discussion on all kinds of subjects, and the SPSK (Society for Propagation of Scientific Knowledge) Hall. Even today, those who moved across the borders describe Lahore of the pre-independence period as a grand city. Even now, from time to time, the Prithvi Theatre of Mumbai, puts up a play with the title: *Jis Lahore Nahin dekhyia, O Jamaya hi Nahin*, meaning that the one who hasn't seen Lahore has been born in vain.

And, yet, Lahore was burning ...

I was part of a group of secular individuals who were interested in the prevention of spread of violence. This group had a few Muslims and the others were mainly Hindus, with some who, like me, were agnostics. Those days, Rajinder Singh, then about 21 years old, was staying with my family. (Those days if you had to go and stay in a hotel in a city where you had friends, it was presumed that either you or your friends were boors, incapable of making real friends.) He was the youngest brother of the freedom-fighting martyr Bhagat Singh. Our families were linked because we were also heavily involved in the freedom struggle.

Bhagat Singh

Bhagat Singh was one of the most articulate and romantic revolutionaries of the 1920s. In 1928 in Lahore, he shot an English police officer, Saunders, who was supposed to have been involved in mercilessly beating a Punjabi political leader, Lala Lajpat Rai, which led to his death. Later, Bhagat Singh and his companions threw a bomb in the Punjab legislative assembly, chiefly to show that the repressive violence could not prevent freedom-loving Indians from getting anywhere and doing whatever they felt was called for to register their anger. Bhagat Singh won great respect among all patriotic Indians not as a young and impetuous terrorist but as a serious intellectual who had reflected on India's problems and drawn conclusions about the shape of Free India.

Bhagat Singh used his trial and his incarceration on death row to propagate his socialist ideas and force India's national leaders to reflect on the need for defining the goals of India's freedom movement in egalitarian terms. He also wrote a paper explaining why he was an atheist. Even now, after so many decades, one can occasionally see his pictures painted on the back of trucks plying in the farthest corners of the country.

We asked Rajinder, and two other friends, Suraj Bhan and Mohammed Saleem, to go and check up the rumours, especially whether the stories about Cheema were true.

Mohammed Saleem and Suraj Bhan

Saleem was a secular Muslim with whom I lost contact after the partition. Suraj Bhan had gone to jail in 1942, as part of 'Do or Die' movement launched by Gandhi and the Congress. In 1947, he was studying for his MA in Philosophy in the Dyal Singh College, where I was also a student. Suraj Bhan remained a close family friend until his death in the 1990s.

They came back and confirmed that the Magistrate Cheema had used the police force in his charge to prevent people from escaping from their burning homes. This information filled all of us with great anger. Rajinder Singh felt that what Cheema had done was no different from what Saunders was guilty of. And since Cheema had acted like a state protected terrorist, he had to be taught a lesson in precisely the way Rajinder's brother Bhagat Singh had taught a lesson to the state sponsored terrorists in the late 1920s. If Cheema were killed, others in the government would understand that somehow, they too would be punished for their misdeeds.

We discussed this idea at great length. One of our concerns was that as non-communal people, we did not want to be bracketed with the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), which, irrespective of its claim to be protector of Hindus, was actually doing nothing for this in Lahore.

Anyway, we finally decided not to oppose Rajinder Singh and his friend Shinghara Singh. They had acquired two hand grenades and planned to go to the Mozang Area, where Cheema had his bungalow. The hand grenades came from an ordnance factory in Baghbanpura, very near Lahore. At that time, such weapons had begun leaking out because the system of governance had collapsed governing system had already collapsed.

Until this time, the two of them had never handled a hand grenade. This did not matter to them – they were impassioned, filled with a sense of bravado and even willing to resort to violence. As they neared Cheema's house, they realized they had to test one of the grenades to discover whether it was live or not. They had no idea that it would make a loud noise when it was detonated. The noise of the detonation alerted the *dhobis* (washermen) washing their clothes on a *nullah* (stream) nearly two hundred yards away. The *dhobis* rushed and overpowered the two adventurers.

Next morning, when there was no news in the papers, we concluded that Rajinder and Shinghara had not succeeded in their mission. But, we were not concerned about their welfare, and assumed that they would show up in due course. I went to the college as usual. At midday, my father sent a person to contact me at the college. He told me that my father was waiting for me at the residence of Mr. Sardul Singh, a lawyer, who was my father's friend and had been with him in Multan jail in the 1942 Do or Die movement.

When I reached there, we had a brief exchange during which Sardul Singh told me that there were arrest warrants against me, and the police had already searched our home. He gave me a thousand rupees – a huge amount considering that a family of five could live comfortably on provisions costing Rs. 20 a month – and told me to go underground to avoid arrest. His fear was that as a non-Muslim, I would be summarily killed in police custody if I were arrested. When I asked him where I should go, he told me not to tell him or anyone else, because police torture could easily make them reveal my whereabouts.

I think this happened in early April 1947. For the next six months, I wandered all over Punjab. I began with a visit to Khatkar, where Bhagat Singh's family lived. I knew that by convention, the police never entered this village and I would be perfectly safe there. However, I had not reckoned with the hospitality of Beji, Bhagat Singh's mother. She was a grand old lady who, even at that point, was more worried about Rajinder Singh bringing a bad name to the family by squealing to the police the names of the others who were part of the conspiracy to kill Cheema than about Rajinder's own safety. As soon as I arrived, she looked at me once, and then made some critical remarks about my mother never feeding me properly and starving me with her new fangled ideas.

I soon discovered that in her thinking sons had to be made big and tough – she herself was six feet tall and her hands were wide enough to hold at least a quarter of a *seer* (सेर – a *seer* is almost equal to a kilogram) of butter. Her way of making me tough was to force me to eat as much butter as possible, and drink at least two *seers* of milk, with a lot of *malai* (cream) on it. The next morning, when I sat down to eat my breakfast I learnt that in addition to raw carrots and radishes, I had to eat at least two *rotis* left over from the previous day with a glass of buttermilk that had a handful of freshly churned out butter floating on it.

Even though I loved butter on a piece of bread, and even a *paratha* with butter and *gur* (गुड़ jaggery) spread over it, such quantities of butter floating in my buttermilk was altogether too much for me. But how could I argue with Beji, particularly when her *devrani* (husband's younger brother's wife), the wife of the famous revolutionary Ajit Singh, joined her in encouraging me not to starve myself!

Ajit Singh

Ajit Singh was a *Kisan* (farmer) leader who started a movement for the rights of the tillers in 1906. He led the Kisans in their fight for their rights, and forced the British Government to take some steps to prevent the alienation of land to non-cultivators, especially moneylenders. Ajit Singh, who was Bhagat Singh's *chacha* (father's younger brother), was the real inspiration for Bhagat Singh. Bhagat Singh. He idolised his uncle as a symbol of social and economic justice. When Ajit Singh launched an agitation against the impoverishment of the farmers, he wrote a famous song with the words: *Pagri Sambhal Jatta; Pagri Sambhal Oye; Lut leya mal tera, lut leya maal oye*. ("Hold on to your status and interests, o cultivator, for the others are robbing you of your wealth.) Even today, farmers are electrified by this call to action.

Ajit Singh disappeared in 1909 when he heard that the British Government was planning to exile him to the Andaman Islands. I always addressed his wife as *Chachiji* (father's younger brother's wife), because that's what she was for my friend and co-conspirator Rajinder Singh. She did not know whether Ajit was dead or alive. So, she wore white clothes to indicate that she was a widow; but she covered her head with a coloured, not white, *dupatta*. When we asked her about this disparity, she always replied that she wore white because she feared that her husband was dead but used a coloured *dupatta*, just in case he was alive. She did not want to announce his death by wearing white altogether. Ajit Singh did come back alive from Europe in 1946, and we had a great time decking up *Chachiji* with all kinds of finery to signal her return to the status of a happily married woman.

However, faced with the prospect of having to consume such prodigious quantities of milk and butter, I had no choice but to leave this safe haven. From here I went to many of my father's friends in remote areas but after roaming about for two months, landed up finally at the *Dera* of a Mahant who had Hindu as well as Muslim followers.

Since the police seldom came to this remote village, I felt safe. But, as ill luck would have it, one day two farmers came to blows over the rights to irrigation water. In the heat of the fight, one of them sliced the other's head with a spade. Soon enough, the police came to investigate this brutal incident. To avoid the possibility that the police would see me and inquire who this obviously city-bred boy was, I was asked to go hide in the nearby field planted with green chillies! I do not know how I survived the next two days of hiding. My big problem was the all-consuming thirst that forced me to drink the dirty canal water. But after the police left, I spent the next few days learning to ride a horse.

I also observed how an unlettered Hindu *Pir* in a predominantly Muslim area had managed to persuade everybody to look after him and let him cultivate the lands given to him by their Muslim forefathers. Actually he was revered not for any religious learning but for some protection that his ancestor had provided against natural disasters. Some years later, I learnt that the *Pir* had stayed on his village after the formation of Pakistan, married a Muslim girl, and converted to Islam to keep his lands intact.

After spending nearly a month in this village, without even a radio or a newspaper, I was bored and decided to try to return to Lahore. I went by bus, and one fine morning landed up at the home of my friend Abdul Majid Khan. He was a class fellow of mine, who had all along kept in touch with my family and therefore knew why I had gone underground. He told me how my father too had had to flee Lahore when confronted by the police investigating the Cheema Murder Conspiracy Case. My father was saved by the intervention of a police officer he had met while he was an under-trial detainee in the 1942 Do or Die freedom struggle and had come to admire his courage.

My stay at Abdul Majid's home had a strange undertone. Abdul had become a rabid Muslim Leaguer because he believed that Hindus and Muslims could not live peacefully together.

Nonetheless, at a personal level, he was a loyal and affectionate friend – after all, we had both failed together in the Intermediate Examination! So, he kept me safe –in *purdah* – at his home for three weeks. Finally, he assured me that the police had become too busy chasing a very large number of

cases, and their system of communication had broken down. So long as I did not go back to my parents' house in Lahore, I would be safe. Later, Abdul Majid was instrumental in facilitating my father, mother and two sisters to reach India in relative safety. Even after they left Pakistan, he saved some of their valuables and delivered these to my father, at the Wagah Border.

With this assurance, I decided to go to Okara (ओकरा), where I felt I would be safe in my grandfather's home. At that time, my grandfather taught Comparative Religions in Dyal Singh College, Lahore, but since the normal timetable for education had been disrupted, he was staying on at his home in Okara. Thus, I went to Okara, where two of my sisters had also arrived, to be with the grandparents and enjoy some peace and quiet.

Okara was one of the towns that came up after people moved from their old villages after irrigation canals were built in Punjab. These canals brought great prosperity to the farmers and gave rise to the growth of *mandi* (trading) centres. Okara was one of the biggest markets for wheat and raw cotton. Some enterprising people had set up cotton ginning mills there, and later, the Birlas, a leading industrial house, set up a modern spinning mill under the name of Satluj Cotton Mills.

Politically, the Congress party dominated Okara. The Hindus and the Muslims had always lived in amity there. My grandfather was one of its most respected residents, known and revered for his learning, his teachings, his spotlessly selfless life and his knowledge of the wide world. My *Chachaji* (father's younger brother) had been a Congress leader of repute for nearly twenty years. It seemed at that time that at least Okara would be a haven of peace and tranquillity for everybody.

By 14th August 1947, when Pakistan was formed, in Okara there had been no violence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. All the people had reconciled to continuing to live on in Pakistan. This is where they had their livelihood, their old neighbours, their homes and the artefacts they were used to. Until then it had been peaceful in Okara, and it was expected that with time, the dust would settle down, and the old equations between the administration and the different communities and their leaders would be re-established.

In Okara, my family and most of the Hindus had accepted the fact of the formation in Pakistan. Just to underline this point, Pakistan's flag was hoisted in the crossing in front of our home, with the officers of the local administration doing the honours. We all saluted the flag without any reservations, and my uncle made a little speech urging everyone to commit to serve Pakistan as a loyal citizen. Our family would have continued in Okara in spite of the murder of my *bhua's* (father's sister) husband by Baluchi soldiers at the Lahore railway station. With all its imperfections, at that point, we were happy with our life in Okara.

Everything went well for a few days. The wheels of trade continued to revolve slowly but smoothly in this big *mandi* town.

Then tragedy struck. One day, a train came from India with many Muslim refugees. The town rose to the occasion. The refugees were accommodated under tents in the Company garden and provided with every kind of provisions. Some rich traders threw in some bags of almonds and other dry fruits too as a measure of good will. They also arranged for a doctor to visit the Muslim refugees everyday. We all believed that, somehow, all the refugees would be comfortably accommodated in a few weeks, and then we would all be able to go on with life as usual.

This was not to be.

After about ten days, another train came from India, all splattered with flesh and blood, carrying scores of Muslims killed in cold blood and also many women who had been raped most brutally. This naturally gave rise to great tension between Hindus and Muslims, because the Muslims in Okara could not understand the logic of killing people who were already on their way out of India. Neither

the local Hindus nor the local Muslims knew how to respond to this situation. On top of it, Pakistan Radio was saying regularly that what had befallen to this trainload of Muslim was happening also to other Indian Muslims trying to get to Pakistan on foot and by trains.

The Muslims among the local Congress workers, who until then had been guarding the Hindus, knew that this was a situation they would never be able to handle. They threw up their hands and asked the non-Muslims to leave their homes, and, as an interim measure until things settled down, go into the relative safety of the walled *mandi*. The Hindus were greatly perturbed and felt that in the circumstances created by Indian Hindus and Sikhs, whom they cursed in the strongest terms, they had no choice but to follow the advice of their Muslim friends.

Even after the arrival of the second train and after we moved into the *mandi* area, the local Muslims were able to ensure that we could still leave the walled *mandi* to visit our homes at least during the daytime. Even at this point, my *Chachaji* was telling everybody how dangerous communalism was, and urging Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to learn to live without hating each other.

Communal tensions in Okara

There was and is a long history of communal tensions between Hindus and Sikhs and the Muslims all over India. Ever since Muslims from across the river Sindhu had conquered India and hordes of Afghans, Turks and Iranians had migrated here in their wake and converted a large number of Hindus to Islam, the local Hindu population had come to believe that their religious identities were in danger. This fear arose largely because the Muslim invaders were better organised and were generally able to defeat the Hindus. Moreover, the Muslim invaders were clear that one of their religious duties was to destroy the Hindu icons and in the process fulfil their role as dutiful Muslims. Consequently Hindus and Sikhs saw the Muslims as religious adversaries intent on converting them to Islam.

While Okara town was relatively peaceful, the people in the countryside around it were determined to drive the non-Muslims out. They saw this as the only way of making a living space for the Muslim refugees. Every night, the villagers around the town congregated and shouted *Allah-o-Akbar* to the strident beating of drums. This created a sense of panic and reinforced the belief that non-Muslims could not survive in this area.

Thus, we were left with no choice but to go to India.

Epilogue

To our family, with its long association with the freedom movement, neither the murder and mayhem taking place all over northern India nor the transfer of population on the basis of religion made any sense. To the lumpen elements who actually did the jobs of killing, looting and raping, our names were enough to identify us with the Hindus. We knew that it would be foolish to hope that such people would either give us the time to explain or they would understand that in spite of our Hindu sounding names, we were agnostics, not Hindus. In any case, to them anyone who was not a Muslim had no place in Pakistan and deserved to die.

When we left for India, my grandmother, a practical woman, had somehow got hold of some cyanide, and tied it in a knot in her *dupatta* so that the girls accompanying her could escape rape by committing suicide! I did not know this till a little while back. One of my sisters told me about it when I mentioned that I was writing about the train journey from Okara.

The forced migration created in me and others like me, a deep sense of 'homelessness'. No wonder, long after the formation of Pakistan and all the animosity that keeps coming to the fore now and then, plays like *Jis Lahore Nahin Dekhya, O Jamaya hi Nahin* continue to appeal to the old Lahoris in particular and Punjabis in general. When you read Zauq's proud verse about Delhi "*Kaun Jaye zauq pe dilli ki Galiyan chhor kar*" or you hear someone saying "*Lucknow hum par fida aur ham fidaye*

Lucknow”, you feel envious. Those who have lost their *Watan* (homeland) have lost a sense of belonging, which I notice, Hyderabadis, Jaipur people and the old families of Poona (now called Pune) value as a prized possession.

Forty years later, when I visited Okara in 1987, I realised that most of the Muslim migrants there were from Jullundur, and many of them had named their establishments after Jullundur. There were Jullundur Shoe stores, Jullundur Bakeries, Jullundur Provision stores all over the town – just as in India you will find Okara Carriers, Okara Boot Houses, and Okara Engineering Stores *et al.*

Bhagat Singh’s family

Bhagat Singh’s parents, Kishan Singh and Beji, and everyone else of that family left Pakistan and resettled in their original village Khatkar Kalaan in Nawanshahr District in India. (The family had earlier moved from here to Lyalpur District, which became part of Pakistan.) The Punjab government has put up a small museum about Bhagat Singh in Nawanshahr District.

Bhagat Singh’s brother Rajinder Singh was released from Lahore Jail in mid 1948 because the police came to admire his unlimited capacity to bear torture. He finally settled down as a farmer, in the Tarai area, next to the farm of Ranbir Singh, his elder brother and my close friend. Rajinder got married, had children, and settled down to a humdrum life, with occasional forays into politics.

Since the medical facilities in Nawanshahr district were not very good, Kishan Singh and Beji would come to Ludhiana, and stay with my parents to deal with their medical problems.

Beji was a pretty sharp lady. She was able to make political capital of her son’s martyrdom. Her husband Kishan Singh, however, was unable to give her much support in this, since he had started suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. She was helped in managing the family’s political image by Bibi Amrit Kaur, the only sister of Bhagat Singh and his four brothers.

Broader issues

While preparing to leave Okara, all of us who were departing from our home- *Watan*- reflected on what was happening to us and why? The immediate cause for our having to leave had nothing to do with what we had done to our neighbours, who were threatening us. We were, as were the Muslims coming over from India, victims of a general conflagration that robbed whole communities of Hindus and Muslims of sanity. Of course, if the blood soaked train full of dead and mutilated bodies and raped women had not come to Okara when it did, we may have stayed on for a little while--only a little while- longer. It would be unrealistic to believe that our stay in Okara could have been prolonged by more than a few weeks. The violence between Hindus and Muslims had started, in Bengal, especially Calcutta, Naokhali and many other places. It had started much before the actual formation of Pakistan. Even if the fateful train had not come when it did, events leading to our departure would have caught up with us sooner or later.

When I read the analysis of the violence during the Partition, I do not find adequate recognition of the significance of the fact that even before the actual transfer of power, all the government servants had been given the choice of opting for either India or Pakistan. This meant that many Hindu and Sikh government personnel left the areas likely to be included in Pakistan, and most of the Muslim officials had left the areas likely to be in India. As a result, government personnel, including Army units, members of the ICS, IPS and the lower echelons of civil and police services, could no longer be counted on being neutral. In fact, many government officials looked the other way when their co-religionists rioted and pushed vulnerable minorities out of their homes. I have always wanted to find out who ordered this exchange of army, police and civil officials, and why no body reflected on its likely impact on the law and order situation.

After the elections of 1946, Gandhiji was unable to bring about a compromise between the Congress and Muslim League about the formation of a joint Government, even though the agreement with the Cabinet Mission provided a framework for it and this could have prevented the division of the country. However, more than anyone else, the credit for bringing peace to such a large Hindu majority area must go to him. As we all know, he knew that a large number of Hindus hated him for his pacifism but being a man who was committed to the unity of all religions, he willingly paid for this with his life. Let us face it: ever since, both India and Pakistan are paying for the short sightedness of their leaders.

Without going into the long history of Hindu Muslim relations, it seems to me that a major cause of their animosity – which often led to violence – between these communities, was their professional specialisation. The Muslims, generally agriculturists or craftsmen, often saw Hindus as exploitative traders and middlemen who took away a large chunk from what they produced with the sweat of their brows.

Even in areas where Hindus and Sikhs had maintained low profiles because they were small minorities, they did not have much to do with the Muslims, whom they privately regarded as unclean and immoral. How could they accept, as equals, a community that ate beef and allowed first cousins to marry? Many Muslims hated the infidels who worshipped stone icons, and practised untouchability against their own co-religionists. Naturally, intermarriages between the two could never be accepted.

I sincerely believe that the Hindu-Muslim divide and the divide between various castes in India will never be bridged unless there are widespread intermarriages between them. ❖

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