

Memories of the Forties: The Turbulent Years



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On August 9, 1947, amidst gunfire, burning houses and shops, we left our house on Lower Range in Park Circus in a government Weapons' Carrier with two armed guards for the Sealdah Railway station in Calcutta. My father was on the partition committee for the public works department in the Government of Bengal, and had opted for Pakistan. I had, therefore, to leave behind my school, my close friends, and familiar institutions, parks and other sights I was used to from my birth and I had to say goodbye to many fond memories. I knew that perhaps the country was being divided for good and we were going to a new land I had never seen before. We were to leave our land to which we may never return. The frequent communal riots and political disagreements in the immediate past had led one to the conclusion that further efforts to live together would be futile. But the trauma of the change and the sorrow for the division of the country remained with me for quite some time.

It seems now that it all happened only the other day. I began school in January 1940- - I was then six and a half years old. My father took me and my elder brother from Park Circus to the Ballygunj Government High School in Calcutta for the admission test-- in my case for class three. We were both admitted -- it was competitive, as intake in every class was limited to only thirty boys. Thus began my school years in Calcutta that continued through the war years, Bengal famine, political turmoil, and communal riots and ended with the partition of India in 1947.

The school was a government demonstration school attached to the David Hare Teacher's Training College, whose principal was kind of a supervisor of our school. The trainee-teachers next door would sometimes observe our classes as part of their training. The Principal Dr. K.D. Ghose, a Cambridge hockey blue, sometimes played hockey with us after classes. Our schoolteachers were all of high quality with good degrees (some with first classes from the Calcutta University, some gold medallists and a few with British qualifications). Punctuality, discipline and good conduct were strictly imposed.

Our school (which along with the Hare School was one of the best in Calcutta) had as students-- children from the Calcutta Hindu elites at that time. Some of the famous names from my school that I can recall were Sir Jadunath Sircar (historian), Sir Bijayprasad Singha Roy (legislator), Annada Shankar Roy I.C.S., Dr. Jnan Majumder (doctor and social activist) related to the family of Suren Banerjee, and Professor K.P. Chattapadhya (grandson of Bidyasagar). Muslim students were only four or five in each class, mostly from the middle class (government servant and professional families). We had Maulana Akram Khan's (President of the Bengal Muslim League) grandson in the school --

interestingly his father was a communist leader. In spite of all the odds, some of the Muslim students were able to compete successfully with others in their respective classes.

I want to give a flavour of the social and political conditions during the time we were in school, particularly for the post-Bangladesh generation. As school students we were exposed to the intellectual, cultural and political issues of the day, and at least in our school, there was close relationship and friendliness between Hindu and Muslim students. In the district towns, (Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur, which I used to visit during vacations) relationship between the two communities was even closer. Our family environment was a mixture of local traditions and ceremonies. For example, we would celebrate Muslim religious functions and at the same time attend the Bengali 'Nababarsha' and halkhata functions and visit the dance and other cultural functions for the religious ceremonies of the Hindu community. We would also visit houses of Hindu friends and they would come to our houses.

Influenced by family environment and school, we became regular readers of newspapers, magazines and books of the time (e.g. Statesman, Jugantar, Swadhinata and monthly magazines Bharatbarsha and Basumati and humorous weekly Sachitra Bharat). We also listened to Radio news and musical programmes (All India Radio-- Calcutta Station). The most popular programmes were the football commentaries (particularly between the Mohammedan Sporting, East Bengal and Mohan Bagan clubs) and 'Anurodher Asar, and Pankaj Mullick's 'Gan Shekhar Asar'). My father--a member of the Mohammedan Sporting Club -- took me and my brother a couple of times to see important games, which were exciting. We also used to clandestinely hear the Azad Hind Radio, which often carried the voice of Subash Bose (broadcasting first from Tokyo and later from Rangoon). We used to buy books from the bookshops near our school and also from the People's Publishing house at 144 Bankim Chatterjee Street, off the College Street. I remember sometimes going for a glass of cold coffee (frankly I did not quite like it) at the Coffee House opposite the Presidency College and near that bookshop. The Coffee House was a popular and fashionable haunt for students, writers and intellectuals.

The Bengal Famine of 1943 took place in front of our young eyes. I could daily see the unimaginable sight of emaciated people in search of food looking into the garbage bins in street corners to get anything eatable. Most of these people had moved from nearby rural areas in search of food -- they were physically in no condition to work, even if there were any for them. It was a shocking sight, which I would not ever forget, and never wish to witness again. I remember my mother and many others cooked rice and chapattis for distribution to the hungry in our locality. At about this time Shilpacharya Zainal Abedin who was a teacher at the Calcutta Arts College drew his famous charcoal sketches of hungry men and dogs struggling for scraps of food from garbage bins at street corners.

In 1944, the daily Swadhinata, an anti-fascist leftist newspaper started its publication. Being very young and liberal in outlook, and concerned about the German and Japanese atrocities in Europe and Asia, some of us were reading this paper. We even contributed small sums from our 'tiffin money' to help the paper and our names were mentioned in the front page of the first issue of the paper. On the paper's first anniversary, Ziaur Rahman, a medical student who used to distribute the paper to our house every morning in Park Circus as a volunteer, took me and my brother to the paper's 8 E Decker's Lane office in the Chowringhee area of Calcutta to attend a modest function. I was excited to sit on the floor with Muzaffar Ahmad (a founding member of the Comintern and a leading leftist in India), Jyoti Basu (the Chief Minister of West Bengal for two decades), Somnath Chatterjee and other eminent politicians and writers. Ziaur Rahman became a doctor, joined the army medical corps and rose to the rank of a Colonel. While posted as the Principal of the Sylhet Medical College in 1971, Pakistani army officers took him away from his home one morning from the breakfast table. He never returned.

In late 1945, the Bengal provincial elections took place -- it was crucial because of the discussions on the imminent transfer of power from the British. In Jalpaiguri (now in West Bengal) where I happened to be, my maternal grandfather Khan Bahadur Abdus Sattar (then President of the district Muslim

League) was seeking the League's nomination. The other candidate was his brother-in-law, Nawab Musharraf Hussain. I remember the League nominating committee's arrival at the railway station and their being met by the local dignitaries and two large decorated elephants of the Nawab. The team was composed of Suhrawardy (then general secretary of the provincial Muslim league), Nurul Amin and Mohammad Afzal. The team met in the afternoon and interviewed the candidates and chairmen of union councils and secretaries of union Muslim league. It was done systematically and democratically but in the end the Nawab, who had mobilised (by his own buses and trucks) a large number of supporters for the occasion, received the nomination.

After the elections, my father took me to see the proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. The mostly marbled building was majestic with large columns and the main chamber was round and beautiful. From the visitor's gallery I watched the debates and verbal duels punctuated by humor of the giant parliamentarians--Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, Nalini Ranjan Sircar, AK Fazlul Huq, Shuhrawardy, Shamsuddin Ahmad and many others.

In 1946, we got involved in the strikes and demonstrations for freeing political prisoners. We went on strike, marched four miles to the Bengal Provincial Assembly building and vociferously demanded that Mr. Suhrawardy, the Prime Minister come out and talk to us on the subject. He did come out and address us, standing on top of a car with a microphone in hand. He promised to review the case of all political prisoners imprisoned by the British and to gradually release them unless other serious charges were pending against them. Indeed a large number of political prisoners were soon released. I remember meeting in the assembly grounds and shaking hands with several of our heroes of the 1933 Chittagong Armoury Raid who had been released a few days earlier from the Andaman Islands after serving long term imprisonments. I was excited to meet Ananta Singha, Ganesh Ghose and Ambika Chakravarty about whom we had read so much in a book ('Chattagram Astragar Lunthener Itikatha' by Kalpana Dutt).

Until 1945 and the communal riots later, Muslim and Hindu students shared similar ideas in matters of independence of India as a whole and getting rid of the British colonialists. The Muslims were, however, divided amongst many parties and opinions (some with affinity with the Congress), and success in the elections for the Muslim reserved seats were by no means the monopoly of the All India Muslim League. The grievances of the Muslims over not being given the fair share in terms of jobs and other opportunities were growing even in the Muslim majority province of Bengal. Domination in jobs by the Hindu community, and their advance in all respects created resentment among the Muslims who started developing a separate identity of their own. These feelings were mainly in the urban areas; in the rural areas the two main communities generally lived peacefully until about a year or two before the partition of India in 1947.

In 1946 a Cabinet Mission was sent to India by the British Labour government for resolving Indian independence issues. The Mission visited Calcutta and Lord Pethick Lawrence, leader of the team stayed with Barrister J.C. Gupta (they were college friends in England) who lived in our area on Circus Avenue. I remember one day going to that house to meet Barrister Sadhan Gupta (son of J.C.Gupta) who was blind. I was impressed by the furnishings and the library in the house. The cabinet mission failed in its attempt to make all parties agree on a federal Indian government, in which three groups of states (A, B and C) would have most powers except defense, foreign relations and currency. At this time Suhrawardy, then chief minister of Bengal and Abul Hashem, the Bengal Muslim League General Secretary attempted with congress leaders like Sarat Chandra Bose (elder brother of Subash Bose) to have a United Sovereign Bengal comprising of East and West Bengal, with Calcutta as the capital.

I attended a meeting in support of this move at the house of late Sir Nasim Ali, first Muslim Bengali chief justice of the Calcutta High Court. When Suhrawardy and Abul Hashem approached Jinnah about the United Bengal idea, Jinnah stated he had no objection if Congress agreed. But, the Congress did not. In spite of all the past myth, in recent times evidence of the sense of reason of Jinnah's on issues of India's integrity and secularism while ensuring the just demands and rights of the Indian

Muslims are coming to light. Perhaps the time has come for an objective and fresh look at the political history of India in the twentieth century.

The leftist parties who stood for the co-existence of various communities in India were unable to stem the tide of communalism on either side of the divide. According to them, the conflicts were arising out of the class struggle and the use of the communal card by the politicians to perpetuate their political influence and economic power. They even alleged that many of the communal riots were due to instigation by the politicians to serve their narrow party and self-interest. Unfortunately the ideals of the Indian National Army (led by Subash Chandra Bose) for India's unity and for forging a common struggle against the British fizzled out in the communally charged atmosphere in which they returned in 1945. Soon the members of the INA themselves split themselves along communal lines. The British 'Divide and Rule' policy created further misunderstanding amongst the communities in forging a common position for India's independence and the future shape of the country.

In mid-1946, I attended a huge public meeting in Calcutta Maidan (Garer Maath) near the Octorlony monument addressed by Jinnah. Shah Azizur Rahman, general secretary of the All Bengal Muslim Students League introduced Jinnah in a moving speech. Jinnah specially commended Bengal Muslim league's solid success in the 1945 elections in the context of the indifferent results in most other provinces. He said that Bengal alone had a strong Muslim League government while in the only other province in India, which had a Muslim league government (Sind), it was tottering. The North West Frontier province had a Congress and Punjab had a Unionist Party government.

After a few months, the Muslim league declared August 15 as the Day of Deliverance. Meetings and processions on that day were followed by widespread communal riots between the Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta. We were confined to our homes, often without food and could not sleep at nights due to disturbing noises and persistent fear of attacks from nearby areas. My brother and I would sometimes go round shops in our locality and bring home some fruits, vegetables or eggs. One day while I was standing near the gate of our house on Lower Range and my father had just crossed the street to go to a departmental store, a jeep drove by and fired automatic weapons killing two innocent people. Since we had a single storied house, at one point we had to move for a few days to my uncle's flat in a high-rise building on the Circus Avenue. We could not go to school for many days.

Meanwhile some tension arose between the Hindu and Muslim students in the school, who until then were very friendly to each other. My close friend Amit Roy lost his father (who was one of the editors of the Calcutta Statesman newspaper) at the hands of Muslim goondas near the Chowringhee area. He would not talk to me after that. Despite the incendiary circumstances, my friendship with the Hindu students continued and it was with great sorrow that in August 1947 I left the only school I ever knew and my old friends. To this day, that is after more than fifty -five years, I feel very close to my school friends from Calcutta with whom I try to remain in contact and meet them at home or abroad whenever possible.

India was partitioned in August 1947 along communal lines, with two Muslim majority parts at two ends becoming Pakistan and the main body of British-India becoming India. There were many, including Gandhi who were unhappy about it and tried their best to keep India united. Gandhi advised the Congress that Jinnah be accepted as Prime Minister of India to save the country from partition. Recent researches indicate that Jinnah, who was secular in his political outlook, was willing to maintain the integrity of India under a Federal Constitution, as long as the Muslims had their political and economic rights satisfied equitably. At one point, poet and Congress leader Miss. Sarojini Naidu had called Jinnah an 'ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity'. British Government documents released under the thirty year rule for publication and Maulana Azad's book-'India Wins Freedom' published twenty-five years after his death give the impression that the rest of the aging Congress leadership (including Nehru and Patel), who suffered imprisonments over a long period of time were impatient to settle the issue and get into power, if necessary at the cost of division of the country.

On August 10, 1947 we reached the Goalondo Ghat by train and then took the slow but comfortable British IG&RSN Company's large steamer called the Rocket to Narayanganj. From Narayanganj to Dhaka it was a short road journey, but the beginning of a long next phase of our life in a new environment, and a new country.❖

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