

How I Found Out About the Impact of Partition



M. P. V. Shenoi

Shenoi, a civil engineer and MBA, rose to the rank of Deputy Director-General of Works in the Indian Defence Service of Engineers. He has also been a member of HUDCO's advisory board and of the planning team for Navi Mumbai. After retirement, he has been helping NGOs in employment-oriented training, writing articles related to all aspects of housing, urban settlements, infrastructure, project and facility management and advising several companies on these issues. His email id is mpvshanoi@gmail.com.

I was born in Mysore, where I lived till I left the place after graduation in 1956, in search of a job. In 1947, the impact of the Partition of India was negligible in Mysore. There people were more concerned about the fate of the State, their Maharajah in the new political set up.

The first exposure I had to the Partition that was accompanied by mass displacement of Hindus and Muslims, in which more than one million people were killed, was a small incident that happened in my uncle's residence. I was thirteen years old then. A refugee Hindu family had arrived in sleepy Mysore. They had made their way into the drawing room of my uncle's house, who was fairly affluent. He was also an inactive member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

The refugee family wanted some help. Some members of my uncle's household, especially his grown up son, who was an active member of RSS wanted to help. However, other family members were opposed, and some were neutral. My aunt was sympathetic but did not want them anywhere near her home. The older members were completely against the idea. My uncle wanted to help but only through the local RSS. In any case, he had some doubts whether the refugee family's story was genuine.

The story the refugee family narrated had gruesome elements. They were confined for days in their small town house, witness to burning, killing, etc. Then they had somehow reached a nearby camp, travelled on the top of a train, hungry and anxious, and finally made it to a camp in Delhi.

From this camp, they had ventured out on their own. In my uncle's house, one or two women of the refugee family wept copiously. One young man was aggressive and asked repeatedly why the Hindus of South India were mute spectators, not wanting to share or help in the difficult times of their Hindu brethren from North India. My uncle gently persuaded them to leave, with a promise to give them shelter initially at a RSS *shaka* (branch) office and then help in rehabilitation. Ultimately, they left the house. For me, it was a very emotional meeting that left a deep impression.

The next time I got a glimpse of the effects of Partition was when I had taken a job in Delhi, and was in Karolbagh, New Delhi. In the 1950s, this newly developing colony had attracted a large number of South Indians who worked in the Central Secretariat, many of them single. To cater to their needs a number of South Indian Eating Houses had come up

there. I was single, lived in a *barsati*, and ate in a mess, which used to be known as CHAMI mess (Swamy Eating house).

A young South Indian, in his twenties, always dressed in immaculate white, came to eat there. He was reserved, had a melancholy look, ate quietly, and left. I tried to befriend him but without success. Then I asked my one of my older friends why the young man did not laugh or take part in youthful gossip and encourage friendship. After the young man had left, my friend told me that the young man had deep wounds from a ghastly family tragedy.

Before Partition, the young man's father was working in a bank in Lahore. When Partition happened and riots broke out, his father and mother were butchered, and his younger sister was carried away. My friend did not know how the young man made it to India, and how he got employment.

After a year or so, I did not see this young person in the mess for a couple of months. I found out that that young man had suddenly disappeared. His office had no clue. Someone guessed he might have gone and joined Shivanand Ashram in Rishikesh. Someone else remarked going to Rishikesh might help the young man in getting over his depression, and finally getting some peace.

Later I went to Punjab on posting, and spent the better part of my working life with Punjabis, many of them refugees from West Pakistan. Many of them would tell me the life they had over there, the assets they had left and of the anxious days they had spent in camps like in Kingsway Camp, old Delhi. It appeared to me that they were mostly from towns, professionals, traders etc. I had a feeling that Hindus were more concentrated in towns, engaged in white collared occupations and Muslims in rural surroundings. Being curious, I read the late Khushwant Singh's novel, *The Train to Pakistan*, and some other write-ups. But they lacked personal touch.

Epilogue

I always wanted to hear personal experiences, and had perhaps a desire to see them in black and white as a record of the past. Once I became acquainted with this website (www.indiaofthepast.org), I persuaded my friend Pran Bhatla and his sister Mrs. Bimla Goulatia to write down their memories, available [here](#) and [here](#). Recently, I came across a news item that someone else is collecting the personal experiences of Partition in a serious way and has had considerable success.

Politicians, super, major and minor powers play great games of division, hate. Common men suffer, like in Palestine, India, paying a heavy price, helpless and for no fault of theirs. Sometimes, future generation may not know what tragedy hapless victims went through and how individual families bounced back on the slender rope of HOPE. I feel awe when I read them. That is my gain. ❖