

Lahore and Alwar – 1947-48



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Lahore

I was a student at Lahore in early 1947. While large parts of India were suffering from communal violence, starting with the great Calcutta killings of 16 August 1946, Lahore was singularly free from it. Until, all of a sudden, riots broke out on the morning of 4th March 1947, and soon took a virulent turn. My hostel warden advised us to go home until the situation became normal.

My hometown Alwar, a Princely State at that time, was some 400 miles away, and a long rail journey to get there was considered unsafe. Instead, I went to stay with my uncle in Balloki. (*Editor's note: This uncle was Veena Sharma's father. See her story for details about Balloki, and her family's escape from Balloki.*) Balloki, a canal township alongside river Ravi, was serene and peaceful, a total contrast from the turbulent Lahore.

I was there on June 3, 1947 when the morning newspapers announced that there would be an important broadcast on All-India Radio that evening. The colony in which my uncle lived did not have electricity and no one there had a radio. After making several inquiries, I found out that a home some four miles away had a battery operated set. Since this house not accessible by a motorable road, I decided to walk there accompanied by Mohammed Ali, my uncle's orderly, even though it was not quite safe to walk at that time.

There were three broadcasts that evening. After listening to them, I felt as if our entire world had changed. We Indians would really be free and

that too within just two and a half months' time! It appeared unbelievable. Our experience until then had been of hopes being raised and then being belied. This time it was surely not going to be so. The sun of freedom was within sight.

But there was another side of the story too. The land on which I was standing would not be mine any more, and the thought was painful. I started getting torn between two conflicting emotions. I wanted to know how Mohammed Ali, a simple Muslim who was going to be citizen of the proposed Pakistan, felt. He had not understood what the radio said, as it was all in English, which he did not understand. I had first to tell him what I had heard before getting his reaction. He was pensive, and then said haltingly, "*Sahib, Mulk ka batwara nahin hona chahiye*" (Sir, the country should not be partitioned). The words have been ringing in my memory all these sixty years; I wished that Jinnah, who claimed that every Indian Muslim wanted Pakistan, could hear them.

In those days, in the undivided Punjab, the educational institutions used to close for summer vacation in early July and reopen in mid September. However, in 1947, soon after June 3 announcement, it was decided to close them down, leaving the timing of reopening uncertain. Now I had no reason to continue to live in the Lahore area any longer. I rushed back to Lahore, collected my books and essential belongings, leaving the rest in my hostel room, and took the evening train for Delhi, on way to Alwar. The journey was unsafe but I could not avoid it. As I locked my room number 14 in the hostel, I was

fully confident that I would be back in Lahore in or about September, regardless of whether the city would be in India or the proposed Pakistan.

Alwar

After all these tumultuous weeks in Lahore and its environs I expected to find Alwar peaceful, rather dull, where I thought I would engage people with my stories and experiences in would-be Pakistan. But, Alwar was buzzing with numerous activities connected with the coming events. The city was witnessing a steady inflow of displaced persons from the riot-infested areas of West Punjab; interestingly I myself was mistaken for one by fellow passengers in the Delhi-Alwar train when they learnt that I was coming from Lahore. These were the ‘early birds’, mostly from northwest Punjab, who foresaw trouble and moved out before the situation worsened, probably with the hope that they would return soon – but they never could. There was a similar inflow from Sindh a little later, and brought in a 20-year old Lal Krishna Advani, who then lived in Alwar for next ten years, as stated in his autobiography.

As I remember it, an atmosphere of mutual hate and suspicion was building up in Alwar between the two major communities, who had so far lived mostly in peace with each other.

I found that the Alwar state government was looking upon the coming 15th of August not as the date of India’s independence but of the lapse of British Paramountcy over the Maharaja, who would become a sovereign ruler of an independent kingdom. Such thinking was spearheaded by a coterie around the Maharaja headed by his recently appointed Dewan, whom I heard delivering fiery speeches inciting people against the national leaders who were on way to assume power in Delhi. I heard ordinary people saying that the *dhoti-topiwalas*, i.e., the Congress party, cannot rule the country.

I felt then that the Maharaja had abandoned his basic *dharma* of looking after the welfare of all his subjects, irrespective of caste and creed, and assumed the role of a protector of Hindu interests. It became a common sight, never witnessed earlier, to see a paramilitary force named Samant Infantry bullying citizens, telling them that the State belonged to Hindus, and all others were second-class citizens. During

morning and evening walks, I heard such stories again and again from people narrating their experiences in hush-hush tones. The progressive and patriotic elements started getting isolated and looked at the turn of events helplessly. The atmosphere was gradually becoming suffocating for them. Were we reverting to the Middle Ages, I often wondered? I did not experience such events in my life at any other point in my life, except, to some extent, thirty years later during the Emergency (1975-77).

August 15, 1947 came and went. In Alwar, India’s tricolour was not hoisted on any public buildings. It could be seen only at the office of local Praja Mandal, a local affiliate of the Congress party, or inside a few homes like ours. The Alwar administration insisted that the State had acceded to Indian Union in respect of only three subjects, viz., Defence, Foreign Affairs and Communications. Further, the arrangement was in the nature of a pact that did not make Alwar a part of India. What would one who lived to see freedom all these years feel?

My worst memories of those days are of the communal holocaust Alwar suffered. Alwar city had a very visible and polished Muslim community, and some of my best teachers and close friends were Muslims. They all disappeared without bidding any one of us good-bye. We do not know what their fate was except of one who was the State’s Army Chief. There were rumours that he was killed while trying to escape. So, I was greatly pleased when some months later I bumped into him in Connaught Place in Delhi. “Where are you Sir?” I asked him. “Don’t you know?” he said pleasantly, “I am now Pakistan’s Deputy High Commissioner to India.”

An activity that became common in Alwar at that time was *Shuddhi* (purification). It was a euphemism for the conversion of Muslims into Hindus. One could see it going on in street corners. A barber would shave off most of the head of the person undergoing *Shuddhi*, leaving behind a *choti* (tuft of hair), which would mark him as a Hindu. Then, the man would be forced to smell and lick a piece of rotten pig’s bone, an act that would be taboo for a Muslim. Finally, a revenue department official, who was standing by, would issue him a *Shuddhi* certificate. This would enable the convert to reclaim his land or

property that had been confiscated – under what law, I could not know.

I have a vivid recollection of two persons who underwent *Shuddhi*. One was our family compounder, Munshi Khan who became Munshi Ram, although we kept on calling him Munshiji both before and after his change of faith. One morning, I was waiting for him to come to dress an injury that I had suffered. But Munshiji, normally punctual, did not come that day. Soon, I got word that early that morning he had joined a convoy leaving for Pakistan, leaving only a memory behind.

The forced conversion of a prominent Muslim couple was much more sorrowful. He was renamed Ram Singh and his wife became Sushila Devi. A murderous gang gathered in front of their prestigious mansion, and threatened them until they agreed to consume *Ganga jal* reverentially – which would mean that they had become Hindus. Later, when our family went to them to give them emotional support, we felt that their situation was truly pathetic. At their suggestion, we agreed to take them to our family garden for Janmashtami celebrations. Sushila Devi accompanied us enthusiastically but her husband backed out at the last moment, muttering, “*Main aata zaroor, par meri tabiyat thik nahin hai, agle baar zaroor aaoonga*” (I would surely have come but I am not well; next time I will surely come). In March 1948, after the administration of Alwar was taken over by the Government of India, they took back their original names.

Yet another series of events was the demolition of the city mosques. I saw two such acts. The demolition started with some gangs using their hands amateurishly to break down the mosques. Then, police jeeps arrived with some labourers carrying iron rods to help complete the task. The crowds witnessing these events relished them but I felt anguished. Perhaps today nobody in Alwar remembers that 60 years ago the Nangli circle near the Collector’s residence, a major landmark in the city, was the site of the prestigious Nangli-ki-Masjid.

Towards the end of January 1948, I went to Delhi to try to find out what should I do about my University examinations, which I had been scheduled to take in Lahore in 1947. No one in Delhi had any answers. Meanwhile, the Delhi-

Alwar trains had been suspended, which made it difficult for me to return to Alwar. In search for a ride back to Alwar in an official vehicle, I went to the Delhi residence of the Dewan of Alwar, who was also a member of the Constituent Assembly, nominated by the Maharaja. I found him lecturing his audience on his old theme of how Gandhi and other national leaders were harming the country. Events sometime take a turn when you least expect them to do so. While I was listening to him, the news came that Gandhiji had been assassinated. The fate of India changed – and of Alwar, too.

A few days later, on February 7, 1948, the All-India Radio news at 9 pm – the main way of getting official national news in those days – began with the report that the Maharaja of Alwar was suspected to have a hand in Gandhi’s murder, and that the Maharaja and his Dewan were under house arrest in Delhi. My parents, who were loyal to the Maharaja, were shocked; my mother prayed for him.

I was lost in mixed feelings. Alwar’s isolation from free India, which had been tormenting me, had come to an abrupt end. The Indian flag was hoisted on the State secretariat in mid February 1948. We felt that we were a part of free India at last, though the delay was just six months, which is not a long time in the history of a nation.

While the Maharaja was still detained in Delhi, Sardar Patel suddenly visited Alwar. Some of us expected that he would angrily criticise Alwar’s behaviour since August 1947. But, no, he was easy and full of humour. He said children some time make mistakes, and it was for parents to correct them. He said he was sure the people of Alwar would henceforth be dutiful citizens of the great country. All the tensions that had built up in my mind since my return from Lahore in June 1947 melted within moments.

After a few days, the Maharaja was honourably exonerated. However, the 173-year rule of his dynasty over Alwar had ended. Alwar State was merged with the States of Bharatpur, Dholpur and Karauli to form Matsya Union with Alwar as its capital. Matsya is the name in the Mahabharata of the kingdom in which the Pandavas hid themselves during their *agyatwas*. The Mahabharata had fascinated me since childhood and I felt thrilled. So many dramatic changes in a matter of days! And a year later

Matsya itself merged into Greater Rajasthan. Alwar, a capital city for 173 years, became the headquarters of a non-descript district. Some felt sorry but this was a minor price to be paid as a part of the move to creating a strong united India.

Epilogue

I regard the days between my return from Lahore in June 1947 and hoisting of national flag over Alwar in February 1948 as epoch making in the life of the nation. All the ugly incidents reported above which tormented me during this period got rolled into history. Our reversion to a culture of the Middle Ages was short lived.

The Maharaja of Alwar, now in his nineties, lives a normal life in a modest bungalow in Delhi. In retrospect, I feel that he was more sinned against than he sinned. He just got caught in a flow of events, one after the other. When the wheels of history move, one cannot be sure how harshly or otherwise, they would grind.

It goes without saying that I did not return to Lahore, as I expected to do, in September 1947. However, I did go there 52 years later by the first Delhi-Lahore bus when it was launched in March 1999. In Lahore, I went up to my room number 14 in my college hostel. Of course, it did not have my lock on it any more! A young Pakistani, my grandson's age, living there, who had been briefed about me before I knocked at his door, received me warmly. He presented me a bundle of books in lieu of what I had left behind in the room. I felt that I could call it quits.❖

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