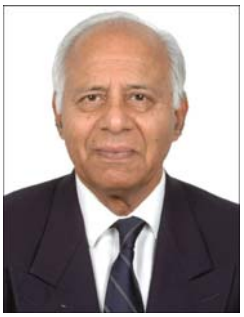
From Okara to Ludhiana, 1947



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 Brahme, *Planning for the Millions*.

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

Was it the 10th or 11th of September 1947? I am not sure.

Finally, in spite of the regrets expressed by our Muslim friends, my family realized that we had to move out of Okara, Pakistan, because of, as we then saw it, the gory events occurring in India. We felt that, if the Hindus across the border had not raped, killed and pushed out so many Muslim families into Pakistan, we might have managed to stay on in our homes even though we were not Muslims.

The Qaid-e-Azam had declared, soon after the formation of Pakistan that all the people of Pakistan would live in amity as equal citizens of the country. This, however, was in the realm of abstraction. On the ground, the undeniable reality was that unless non-Muslims moved out, there would be no room to accommodate the Muslim migrants from India coming to Pakistan.

As soon as an opportunity arose, my grandparents, my two sisters and I boarded a goods train bound for Ferozepur in India. (My parents had moved out of Lahore separately). The women and old people were inside the train compartments. The grown ups were perched on the top of a goods wagon!

Yes, it was hot both inside and outside, especially on top of the steel wagon but no one objected. After all, we were getting a chance of getting out alive from what we felt would become the cauldron of death. We were being driven out of Okara for the sins of people we had never set our eyes upon. Except for the one train that reached Okara loaded with dead bodies and raped and mutilated women, we knew very little about what the Hindus and Sikhs of post-Partition India were doing to the Muslims living in East Punjab and other parts of India. On our part, we would have stayed on quite happily in Pakistan. Now, departing from our hometown, nobody knew what would happen on the way. We could all be killed and the girls might be raped. Against this possibility, my wise grandmother had secreted a vial of cyanide in her dupatta, telling my sisters about it so that they could do what was necessary, in case she died before them.

This was the ultimate irony of our situation.

Fortunately, no one was butchered on the way, though every time the train stopped, we heard people shouting *Allah-o-Akbar* and wondered when the marauders would come with their swords and axes to put an end to our lives. Whenever shouts of *Allah-o-Akbar* sounded in close proximity, people tended to huddle together as if being close to each other would act like a shield, but as soon this threat disappeared, all of us withdrew into our private worlds.

When the train stopped at Raiwind, a major railway junction, every body was dying of thirst but no one dared to get down and drink water for fear of being pounced upon and killed. And some people were worried that the water on the railway station might have been poisoned.

Thoughts atop a goods wagon

We were on the top of the goods wagon for at least eight hours. What were my thoughts atop that goods wagon? Looking back after sixty-one years, I am not sure how much is actual recollection and how much I am projecting my later ideas on the past.

I wondered whether I would survive, but strangely, I felt no great anxiety. I thought more of what I would have to do if I survived with all my limbs intact. It was clear that I would have to start working on the immediate future and take my long-term plans more seriously. In a fashion, I had planned my day-to-day life on my own, ever since my father was sentenced to three years in prison following Gandhi's call to do or die, in 1942. I was then twelve years old, and there was no one to guide me. Of course, I had my grandfather, and he was a great source of education. But, he was essentially a distant figure with whom I could not discuss what to feed the cow or what provisions were to be bought from the market.

Atop the goods wagon, and wondering what lay in store for us, I could not but remember that till then, I had been a good but irresponsible student. I passed my matriculation at the age of fourteen – younger than normal. But in 1946, I had failed in my intermediate examination and would not have got my F.Sc. Diploma even in 1947. I would not have qualified to appear in the examination, because I would be too short of attendance to get permission to sit for the examination. This was a shameful record but while missing the mathematics, physics and chemistry classes, I had done other things, some of which I regarded as noteworthy accomplishments.

I had composed and recited poetry in Hindi and Urdu, made speeches in political meetings and taken part in debates in the English, Urdu and Hindi. I had organised huge demonstrations and held the college to ransom over an emotional issue. I had also led a march on the Davis Road and faced a *lathi* charge. I recalled how I had got exposed to student politics and unwillingly but inextricably become a teenage student leader. I had met Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Syed Hussein Ahmed Madani, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Dr. Syed Hussein (reputedly the man Jawaharlal Nehru's sister Vijaylakshmi wanted to marry) and many others. This had given me a lot of confidence: I was no longer in awe of the VIPs.

I had, on my own, at age fifteen, gone from Lahore to Delhi for a business transaction and then, with very little spare money, without telling any member of the family, gone, together with my friend Hashmat Ullah Quraishi, for a trip to Agra and Fatehpur Sikri and survived even when we ran out of money by sleeping, on an empty stomach, on the dirty overbridge of the Agra railway station and finally, borrowed eight annas (half a rupee) from a stranger to buy tickets to Delhi. On arriving in Delhi, I had washed my clothes, bathed and then when my clothes were dry, ironed my clothes and gone and borrowed some more money from my uncle, Chetan Lal, for a ticket to Lahore. Sitting on top of the train, expecting many unforeseen situations, I felt that this escapade had toughened me for what I may have to face hereafter.

Later, I had to be really tough to go like a shuttlecock between Multan and Lahore twice a week, to bring penicillin and insulin for the treatment my diabetic maternal grandfather who was dying of gangrene caused by the prick of a thorn in his leg. He did not survive but on his last day, he had blessed me with a long life and a glorious future.

Lastly, I had survived underground, for several months, on the run from the police.

Relief on reaching India

My reverie came to an abrupt end when the train came to the last lap of the journey but was still on the Pakistani side of the river dividing India and Pakistan. The train stopped on the Pakistani side and we could hear great commotion interspersed with shouts of *Allah-o-Akbar*. From the other side of the river, we could hear people shouting *Har Har Mahadeva* and *Jo bole So Nihaal*. We knew that if those shouting *Allah-o-Akbar* got their hands on us, we would all be cut to pieces; but we would be safe if we got past the bridge to the Indian side.

Between India and Pakistan, I was thinking of what life would be like if we survived and reached India. It was amply clear that at the age of seventeen, I would have to share the responsibility for resuscitating the family. At the point of these reflections, I had no idea as to whether my father or mother or which of my sisters or my adoptive uncle, Gautam Sarup, were alive and in what condition.

After what seemed like years of waiting with our hearts in our mouths, the train slowly moved forward, inch by inch, from the din of *Allah-o-Akbar*, into the realm of safety, as our train finally crossed into India. Whew – what a relief it was!

Being agnostics, we could not sit down and pray, like most people around us. Our relief, however, was no less profound.

Within minutes, we were served the usual Tandoor ki Roti and Manh ki daal and there was plenty of water to drink. Nobody asked how safe the water was. It was already late in the evening. We all went to sleep wherever we were. I will rather skip the story of my coming down with gastro-enteritis because it does not reflect well on my self discipline in the face of the temptation to eat Tandoor ki Roti and Manh ki daal.

Making-do in Ludhiana

Next morning, my uncle appeared out of nowhere. He had met some of his old congress colleagues, who told him to leave my parents, my two youngest sisters, and my brother in their care in Ludhiana and go looking for his parents and other missing relatives. My uncle and I left by the next available train for Ludhiana. At every station, we were fed and offered cold water, and generally made welcome. On the way, we could not help noticing that the railway track, on both sides, was stinking to high heaven. On inquiries, we were told quite casually that this was because the Muslims killed while on the way to Pakistan had not been buried properly. Their rotting flesh was producing this foul smell.

At one point of the journey between Ferozepur and Ludhiana, the train came to a stop on the wayside: it was neither a Railway Station nor a township. It had stopped next to a caravan of Muslims walking to Pakistan. There was a furious argument between the Battalion Commander of the Gurkha soldiers escorting the caravan, and the local Hindus and Sikhs who wanted to kill the Muslims. Luckily, the Gurkha officer held his ground, and the train moved on, leaving the Muslims safe in the hands of this courageous and conscientious officer.

When we arrived in Ludhiana, my uncle told me to go to his friend and Comrade, Tilak Raj Chaddha, who would tell me where my parents were. Soon it was confirmed that my father was alive. As I was walking down the Chaura Bazaar, I saw my father, looking literally like a skeleton, with his shoes down at the heels, his clothes all yellowed, and looking absolutely beaten. He was accompanied by an old friend, a renowned congress leader of Okara, Lala Anant Ram, who was looking even more bedraggled than my father was. Even before I asked him whether my mother and my sisters were alive, I inquired whether he had any money. He told me that since he had fed Anant Ram, who hadn't eaten for two days, he now had all of sixty-five rupees. I promptly handed over the balance of six hundred rupees left over from the thousand rupees I had taken when I went underground six months earlier. Only then did I ask him about the well-being of my mother and other members of the family.

The family members who had come from Okara had fared better than the ones who came from Lahore. My father had been interrogated for weeks on account of my involvement with the so-called Cheema Murder Conspiracy Case. The family as a whole had suffered psychologically from having had to look after the cremation of near relatives, living in a refugee camp, and seeing people lose their self-esteem, from day to day, in anonymity and deprivation in the refugee camps.

I have to acknowledge that my old friend Abdul Majid Khan continued to support my family even though he had become a bigoted Muslim Leaguer. When my family was in a refugee camp in Lahore, he continued to meet them and saw to it that the family had all the essential food and other necessities. Whatever our family was able to bring over from Lahore was largely because of his watching over our possessions in our home and our small tools shop.

The partition involving the abandonment of so many valuables was such shock for my father! He was a self-made man who had left his parental home after a confrontation with his father. He had often worked continuously for 10-12 hours. After leaving his parent's home, he worked first as a journeyman electrician, then as an accountant, and later as a Manager of a factory producing Cold Start Crude Oil Engines. From this job, he went on to became the Manager of M/s Modern Machines Ltd, which produced shells for the wartime industries and reconditioned Big Dietz Power Generating Engines.

He was quite incorruptible and therefore very independent. He would not tolerate a disrespectful remark from even his employer. One day, in the course of a discussion, the proprietor of the firm my father was working asked him to do something. As the owner, *he* wanted it done without any questions being asked. This was enough for my father to take offence. Noting his reaction, his employer expressed regret at having ordered him in this abrupt manner. However, my father was not mollified and left his residence inside the factory at the dead of night so that his remorseful employer could not prevent him from quitting.

He also was quite fearless. Whenever a relative was killed in the 1947 Lahore riots, he offered to go and find the dead body and organise the funeral. When his only sister's husband was killed at the Lahore railway station, trying to catch a train to Delhi, my father went find his body. When he couldn't find the body at the railway station, he went to the Mayo Hospital and sifted through mounds of dead bodies thrown out of trucks. Finally, against all hopes, he found his brother-in-law's body. Then, he persuaded a hospital attendant to accept the cost of cremation and promise to do the job with some sense of solemnity.

He was very bitter about India's Partition without any decision about the people already on the move, to and from Pakistan. He never forgave the Indian National Congress for the Partition of India. He also complained bitterly about the fact that even after the formation of the secular Congress government, in Gandhi's India, Muslims continued to be slaughtered openly, within a few miles of the state secretariat at Jalandhar. He also could not accept the fact that, soon after the attainment of freedom, political and ethical compromises were made by the very people who, earlier, had agitated for India's freedom.

Later, unlike his younger brother with whom he had gone to jail in 1942, he refused to accept the *Tamra Patra* (Indian Government's certificate for being a freedom fighter), even though it came with a handsome monthly allowance and free travel for life, for him and his wife or his attendant, by First Class, by any train from anywhere to anywhere in India. But I am digressing, taking a quantum jump in time.

Now we were reunited and physically unharmed, except for my three-year-old youngest sister, whose feet were swollen due to her fall from the bus taking the family from Lahore. Every body was thankful that she had miraculously escaped being crushed by other buses in caravan.

We firmly believed that pretty soon, we would re-emerge from our poverty. All of us were, therefore, determined to put up a respectable front in public by dressing as well as possible when venturing outdoors and also ensuring that our father would not have to take up any work that later, might conflict with the image he had before the partition. To begin with, we found a house, where a Muslim family had lived before leaving for Pakistan. Though wired for electricity, it had no electricity because we did not have the money to pay for the connection. What a great day it was when we got electricity! One of the first things we acquired was an electric iron, which enabled us to wear well-ironed clothes whenever we went out.

For some time, I had only one Kurta-Pyjama, which I washed and starched in the evening, and ironed to perfection in the morning. People even in our immediate neighbourhood could not know that I had only one pair of clothes. As far as they could see, I was always a perfectly groomed young man, always self-confident and ready to meet anyone as an equal. How were they to know that often, in the evening shift, from eight pm to four am, I worked as a milling-machine mechanic?

In the beginning, we did not have any beds or proper cooking utensils. Then one day, while rummaging through the house, we made a wonderful discovery. Not only did we find an earthen cooking pot but also platters and bowls to eat from. What is more, we also discovered a substantial store of dried *Arbi* (taro), which could be boiled and eaten in the earthenware bowls with chapatis.

During those difficult days, my mother was the family's heroine. She kept the house clean as a whistle, and in spite of so many difficulties, whenever the situation required, she producing a meal that could be served to a visitor without any embarrassment. Our house had only a hand pump for water. From this my mother, with occasional help from others, pumped huge quantities of water not only for drinking, washing and cooking of pots and pans but also for washing clothes and, at least once a day in summer, washing the floors.

We did not realise what a strain it was for her until she fell ill. Then, her work was taken over by my younger sister, Pratibha and Manorma who managed everything, while continuing their studies. Pratibha became the unacknowledged foster mother for the family, and has always been a great source of strength for all her siblings.

During the initial period, we had no stable source of income. Then, we stumbled upon a production system that seemed to sustain many women. They were participating in the production of Balaclava caps for a small unit. The owner of the unit agreed to give us this work on a part time basis. He gave us four dozen pieces of knitted material. We had to sew these together, make a gap for the face to peek out from and then sew the top and trim it symmetrically to look like a flower.

When we delivered these ready-to-market Balaclava caps, we promptly received a princely sum of three rupees for our labour. This was enough to buy flour, some cooking oil and *daal* to keep us going! This arrangement went on for nearly four months until we started finding other ways of earning a little more for the family.

I cannot end this Balaclava cap story without talking about the day when we had to buy some medicines for our mother. We asked the owner to give us eight instead of the usual four dozen pieces, so that we could make the extra money needed for the medicines. He refused. He said that we were refugees with no status or identity. In spite of this, he had trusted us with his knitwear. Why should he take a greater risk, he asked? The fact that we were living within twenty meters of his 'factory' was not an adequate answer for him.

Later, after a year or two, when we started making the machines for producing the very knitwear he used for making Balaclava caps, he asked for some credit (a few hundred rupees). When he reminded him about his refusing to trust us with four dozen extra pieces, he smiled a little penitently, and we gave him the credit he had asked for.

My activities in Ludhiana

My first agenda in Ludhiana was to cultivate the local politicians belonging to all the political parties. I realised they were the most well-known figures in the town and could get us access to everyone of importance. Of all these people, the Communists were the only group that had a well-educated cadre of workers and a systematic programme of action, which included indoctrination of the public through study circles and also a variety of peripheral programmes for recruiting fellow travellers and sympathisers. Even though I had yet to join a college for my undergraduate studies, I was admitted as a full member into their study circles, without anyone asking how old I was or what were my educational achievements.

At this stage, I had the good fortune of making friends with Iqbal Krishna, a voracious reader who was seldom without a Penguin or a Pelican Book stuffed into his pocket. We became very close friends because we complemented each other. While he was the intellectual who provided the ballast, I brought pugnacity in disputation, by presenting what he said with the required finesse and authority. We were always a challenge for the Communists who found it difficult to deal with us '*Royists'*, the followers of M.N. Roy. We were arch iconoclasts who tried to convince everyone that their Communist International had misled the proletariat by siding with Hitler and calling their joint adventure, the 'People's War'.

Through my association with Iqbal, I read many Pelican and Penguin books and also waded through the publications of the 'Thinkers' Library. I also got acquainted with the thinkers of the Renaissance era, whose writings were available in Ludhiana's Municipal Library. Besides these, I regularly read M. N. Roy's weekly, *Radical Democracy* as well as the Communists' *People's War*. I also started getting a free publication entitled *News & Views from the Soviet Union* from the Soviet Embassy. Taking advantage of my premature, fairly thick beard, I could and did pass off as a person in his early twenties and this, together with my grandfather's support, enabled Iqbal and me to set up the Ludhiana Rationalists Study Circle when I was only eighteen years old!

I do not remember how I got to know a kindly officer of the Punjab Civil Service. I am ashamed to say that I cannot recall his name. He quite unselfishly helped me with any problem I had with the local administration. He was the one who got me the permit for my elder sister, who had to go to Allahabad to join her husband, to travel out of Ludhiana. Like almost everyone else, he too thought I was a graduate, and let me walk in and out of his home and discuss anything that bothered our family or me. His intervention enabled our family to take the first big step out of the poverty. I did not tell him how badly off we were. None except Iqbal and some others knew that we were in difficult straits.

Yet, we never lost hope – we had great faith in ourselves.

Sitting On a magic carpet

It was a rather balmy afternoon in early November 1947. I was sitting on the ground on a *duree* (a cotton carpet), at the Jalandhar Railway Station waiting for a train to Ludhiana. Till then we had not been able to secure a formal order for the allotment of the house we were occupying. We had no stable income. In spite of this, I did not feel despondent. After all, my father, my younger brother and I were quite able-bodied, and at least my brother and I were willing to undertake manual labour without feeling small. Therefore, there was no reason why we should accept defeat at the hands of adverse circumstances.

While I was sitting peacefully, humming a couplet of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, I saw Vijay Pal Pandey, once my class fellow in the Dyal Singh College, Lahore, coming up to me, looking like death. As he sat down next to me, I asked him what was ailing him, quoting John Keats: "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms, alone and palely loitering?"

He heard this quotation with a morose expression, and asked me as to what made me so perky? I told him it was the fine weather, the recollection of Faiz's poetry, and the fact that I was physically well. And, just this moment, having feasted on *Chana-Bhaturas*, I did not have a care in the world. I felt that I was sitting not on a *duree* but on a magic carpet that would transport wherever I wished. Given all this, I was willing to forgive the world for its injustices and indignities.

As if determined to break the magic spell, he asked me as to how much money my family had. I countered this by asking how his family was placed. Pulling a long face, he told me that they had not been able to bring much from Lahore. They were surviving in their ancestral home near Jalandhar Railway Station by selling the milk of the two buffaloes they had managed to bring over in early January 1947. As for cash, their family had no more than twenty thousand rupees.

"What, then, is worrying you?" I asked. I told him that my family had no cash, and practically no income except what I made as a milling-machine mechanic, and what the family could earn by trimming for Balaclava caps. We supplemented our food by getting buttermilk from Vijay's uncle who, as the librarian of the Ludhiana Municipal Library, had taken a fancy to me.

However, I knew – just knew – that our future would be much brighter because we had a positive attitude and were willing to put our hand to anything that seemed promising.

Epilogue

I divide the migrants from West Punjab (now Pakistan) into several distinct categories. There were those who had money but no longer had the prestige they enjoyed in their old villages, towns or cities. They had till then never experienced the challenge of survival. They were the worst off because they did not know how to deal with the challenges of anonymity survival the circumstances had forced upon them.

Equally badly off were those whose personal tragedies were too overwhelming to let them settle down to a new life. I recall the travails of one old man who just could not get over the fact that he was saved by a Gurkha escort and brought to India, only an hour after he himself had put his wife and his daughters to the sword to save them from rape and slaughter at the hands of the Muslim marauders. Lest such barbarism be construed as the characteristic only of Muslims, I quote below the incident narrated by Satish Gujral, (younger brother of I. K. Gujral, who was India's Prime Minister 1997-1998), from the book *Lahore, 1947*:

> "This made me unwilling to witness slaughter on the Indian side. The worst among these was the attack on a Muslim girls' hostel in Amritsar. The inmates were stripped and forced to march in a procession through the Hall Bazaar, the town's main market. There these girls were gang raped and subjected to the most perverse treatment that any sadistic imagination could devise, before being murdered."

The best off were the people who felt that this was a great chance to start afresh, without the burdens of their past, with new and varied opportunities to test their mettle. They refused to be stymied by the dilatoriness of the government. When the Ludhiana Engineering establishment told the refugee entrepreneurs that the Industrial Estate allotted to them could not be electrified because there were no cement stakes to carry electric lines, they got together, somehow laid their hands on wooden stakes and prepared everything to lay out the electric line to their Estate.

In Punjab, Haryana, and many other regions, agricultural prosperity was ushered in by displaced farmers and entrepreneurs of West Punjab (now Pakistan). This phenomenon of the Punjab migrants becoming the harbingers of new ways of working and living can be traced in practically all the states of India. Freed from the constraints of their erstwhile business and social associations, these migrant entrepreneurs went unabashedly into new and untried businesses with a sense of adventure. Nothing was now taboo. Nothing was above or below them. The need for survival and betterment became their

guiding principle. This led to their finding not only new avenues of livelihood but also exploring how greater profitability could be achieved by introducing new ideas into conducting old activities. This challenged even those who were old established entrepreneurs and forced them to adopt new ways to meet the challenges from their unconventional competitors.

I recall the behaviour of one the most well known cloth retailers in Allahabad's Civil Lines. He usually kept sitting where he was and told his customers to look around to see if any piece caught their fancy. He was shocked when his new competitors started spreading their wares even before those who, without the money or the will to buy, had strayed into their shops.

I must finish this narrative by telling the story of wholesale grain merchants of the Katra area of the old city of Delhi. The refugees spread out their mats on the pavements in front of their shops, bought or borrowed one or two bags of grains from them, sold these by the seer, at the price at they had got them from the merchants and went away quite happily at the end of the day. The merchants were foxed; how could these refugees make any money? One morning, a big merchant condescended to ask one of them how they were surviving. He was astounded to find that while these people made no money on the grains, they were happy to save and sell the bags in which the grains were sold to them. This way they made few rupees on every bag salvaged! ❖
