

My Memories of Delhi 1947-48

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J was a little more than seven years old on August 15th, 1947. At that time, my family lived in Daryaganj in Delhi. My memory of India's Independence Day is of sheer euphoria. I remember a feeling of great joy. Even at that age, I could sense that some very important event was taking place.

I remember walking with my family and neighbours to the grounds of *Lal Kila* (Red Fort), a fifteen minute walk just before midnight on 14th August to hear Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru address the nation. I found it difficult to keep pace with our group of eleven as they seemed to be floating not walking. All of us were talking and laughing at the same time. I remember hearing of freedom, Ram Raj and how ancient Indian glory will be restored. All around us I could feel sheer elation as our group was jostled by an increasingly larger numbers of almost raucous crowds. Our group sat down on grass nearly 1,000 yards from the rampart where we could see and hear Pandit Ji.

We were a group of free Indians, not Hindus and Sikhs. I remember Pandit Ji speaking with emotion and unfurling the Indian tricolour. I saw the last time the British Union Jack being lowered at *Lal Kila* with thousands of Indian citizens rejoicing all around me. Pandit Ji was cheered almost every two minutes with repeated slogans of *Hindustan Zindabad* (Long live Hindustan).

We all stood at attention on the rendering of Indian National Anthem. I shared with my family and friends the pride of being a free Indian as if I had single-handedly won freedom for all of us. Once the celebrations were over, I almost fell asleep on the walk back in spite of loud slogans ringing in my ears.

I thought that as India was free, we would all live in peace and harmony. It was a very short lived dream. I remember a new type of feeling around me. A strong rumour overtook the feeling of harmony. A few nights later, we learnt that a large group of Muslim hoodlums who lived across the main street in Daryaganj was planning to attack a predominantly Hindu and Sikh community on our side of the road. As we were one of the few Sikh families in the community, the expectation was that my father would lead the effort of protecting women and children in our neighbourhood.

He was considered all the more eligible for this role as he owned a licensed gun. My Papa Ji was a trained Barrister, who had shifted his office from Peshawar to Delhi in 1942, and thus my immediate family did not face riots connected with the Partition. Ours was a typical middle class, well educated family. Our neighbours were also well educated; one of them became a partner in a leading firm of chartered accountants in Delhi. I remember joining the whole family and neighbours at the roof of our house with my father holding a loaded gun, perhaps for the first and last time in his life.

We lived on the second floor of a building that had four flats and common roof. Some of our neighbours - men, women and children - joined my family as we were the only group with a gun. I remember being very nervous as the night progressed. Sensing my unease, my mother helped me to become a part of the defence team by handing over a cricket bat. I can even today feel the strength and power I felt that night with that bat in hand as if I could protect my family single-handedly.

As it happened, the night passed without incident. Later, we learnt that the Delhi Administration had switched the *Thanedar* (local police officer) earlier that evening at the Daryagunj Police Station who had encouraged the hoodlums, and the new *Thanedar* ensured that no disturbance took place.

I remember that a few days' later Hindu and Sikh mobs attacked peaceful and neighbourly Muslim residents across the street at Dr. Aruna Asif Ali's house. The mobs came out brandishing blood smeared *kirpans* (knives) with which they had killed innocent and God-fearing people.

I also heard sad stories from several relatives who migrated from Western Punjab and who trickled in to our home as refugees. I remember my Chacha Ji's family (uncle, aunt, their three daughters and two sons) and host of cousins (six) join us. We shared meals, slept on sheets on the floor and thanked God that they come across the new borders safely - but with little else. I remember all of us pitching in cooking, waiting to use bathrooms, making beds. Generally we kids enjoyed it as we had so many cousins to play with. One by one over a two/three month's period, our relatives left our house to make a home of their own.

The only sad part was that after a week, with my cousins at home, I had to go to my English medium school, when I could have been playing at home. I do remember cutting school. Life at school continued as before, except for the new found arrogance of a few of my class mates who would defy English teachers. Even if I would have liked to emulate them, I would have been severely disciplined because my parents would not have tolerated such behaviour. I remember being told on more than one occasion that freedom does not include a right to be undisciplined.

Another sad memory of that period I have is of the brutal assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of peace. His funeral cortege passed close to our house, with millions of Indian grieving. Again, this was an occasion for our neighbours to gather on our roof top as there was only a road, old brick wall of Delhi Gate and a hockey field between our roof and the road on which Gandhi Ji's cortege passed on its way to what became *Gandhi Ghat*, only a ten minutes walk from our house. A group of twenty five family members and friends, some crying bitterly and some in shocked silence, saw the procession slowly move past us. Late that evening, my family and friends walked to look at the slowly simmering pyre, though we kept some distance away.

Epilogue

These incidents made me realize that freedom was earned and needed to be protected at any cost. This impression was forming in my mind from the day my father, an eminently mild mannered man, stood on the roof of our house with a loaded gun. The sight of Hindus and Sikhs brandishing blood soaked *kirpans* and the assassination of the non-violent apostle of peace. As an adult, I have wondered as to why Indians of different religious denominations killed each other while continuing to pay obedience to the British who created that division.

I do and have not ever believed that free Indians - Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs - should have turned their guns and knives on remaining British, but bemoan the success of "divide and rule" policy which Indian politicians have continued to practice much after attaining independence. With continuing bloodshed periodically in India, I wonder if we have learnt any lesson from the riots of 1947 and clashes thereafter. Mahatma Gandhi's assassination seems to me to be another example of how India's independence did not teach us the very weapon that won us independence. Can we live as one free nation with equality for all Indians?