Youthful memories of the Punjab of long ago

Dr. Joginder Anand

Joginder, an unholy person born in 1932 in the holy town of Nankana Sahib, central Punjab. A lawyer father, a doctor mother. Peripatetic childhood - almost gypsy style. Many schools. Many friends, ranging from a cobbler's son (poorly shod as the proverb goes) to a judge's son. MB From Glancy (now Government) Medical College Amritsar, 1958. Comet 4 to Heathrow, 1960.

Long retired. Widower. A son and a daughter, their spouses, five grandchildren, two hens (impartially, one black, one white) keeping an eye on me as I stand still and the world goes by.

I was a teenager when the Punjab was carved, north to south, by an English lawyer called Sir Cyril Radcliffe. He did not do it of his own volition. The politicians of the then India agreed to the carve-up. Little did they know of the butchery that would follow - the natives would carry the art to heights never witnessed before.

It was then, that many lost their childhood. They were hurled in to adulthood.

The earliest that I can remember, perhaps when I was around three years of age:

Street vendors, wearing a kurta and a dhoti used to carry small earthenware (clay) models of boys, girls, cows and other farm animals. These were very often brightly coloured. I looked at them, sometimes put them in a corner and forget all about them. Sooner or later they would break in to pieces and be discarded. Dust unto dust.

The vendors were, I guess, very often the manufacturers (I use the term as its etymological derivation indicates, not in the modern sense of a mega industrial complex. It was a cottage industry). Perhaps, these gentlemen hawking the wares were of the Ghumyar (potter) community?

Talking of Ghumyars. They had their donkeys to carry the larger pots that they made. These animals would be let loose to eat what they found. Grass? Weeds? They never seemed to get lost. I guess it would have been difficult to steal the donkey. As you can see from what follows.

At around the age of fifteen, at a loose end (because the schools and colleges, originally shut because of summer holidays, remained closed because of the post-Radcliffe disturbances), we, that is a group of us friends, went for a walk. We saw a donkey grazing. Would it not be a good idea to hitch a ride? Yes, it would. One of my friends did manage to swing himself atop the protesting animal. But when I attempted the feat, the hind-legs of The Beast smashed in to the pit of my stomach and I was floored. Surely, I had known that the donkeys kick with their hind legs? Yes. But surely you know that a teenager takes chances - when he has suddenly grown up, physically.

With hind-sight it was lucky that I did not have a full stomach (or it might have popped), nor, in those days when malaria was rife, did I have an enlarged "malarial spleen" which could have ruptured. Well. I live to tell a tale or two.

Returning to the toddler times and upwards.

The Monsoon rains, and sometimes the Winter rains in January, would provide ponds of water, sometimes large enough for us to make paper boats. I suppose everyone knows 'how to'. If you don't, just fold a square piece of paper twice, fold down one side of the finally folded scrap, stick two thumbs in, pull the paper apart, and it is your boat. We would make a few

boats of varying sizes and sail our flotilla. Then, scrape a channel from one margin (or coast) of the pond and watch the boats sail down and run aground (or beach, though in land-locked Punjab, where none of my contemporaries had seen the see, the term beach was only in English story books.

(We did have English story books, with pictures. Mary had a little lamb. Jack and Jill went up the Hill to fetch a pail of water.)

Then we learnt to make paper aeroplanes. Gliders, to be more accurate, even though we never knew the term "glider". A rectangular sheet of paper, folded to hive off a square. The square was folded to make the body of the glider, the tail being made of the remaining strip off the original sheet. Hurled it up in the air and watched it gliding gently down. These gliders were, perhaps, the earliest competitive game for me.

Forward to 1940 or 1941, as there is a link. At that time, Japan was still at peace with the "Allies". India, being then part of the British Empire, was on a trading relationship with Japan. The propaganda from the Indian government and Indian industry led us, the purchasers of goods, to believe that Japanese goods were "tinny", "shoddy". However, my father bought me a toy ship made in The Land of the Rising Sun. You filled up its tank with water to make it submersible. There was a wick dipping in to a small reservoir of *Sarson da Tel* (mustard oil seed = seed of Brassica compestris). You lit the wick. The flame heated the water, producing steam which somehow propelled the boat forward. I plead ignorance of the precise mechanics.

Another piece of Japanese wizardry in toys was a tank, you know what the British described then in recruitment posters as the "modern cavalry". There were tank regiments which were called cavalry regiments. My little tank would make its way up an incline of 40 degrees, making a rumbling noise and shooting sparks from a gun. Both these toys came from Anarkali Bazar, Lahore. It was then, to little children, the heaven on earth. We knew nothing of Hamleys of Regent Street London. I assume that the Gora Sahibs' children in India had their toys sent over from Hamleys. Neither I nor any other Punjabi children ever knew or ever met any Gora children.

The games we played

Ed. Note: Based on a request from a reader, I have asked Dr. Anand to describe the games he and his friends used to play. These games are still around, though perhaps with some changes; Dr. Anand's descriptions adds an element of historical continuity and authenticity to these games.

Gooly danda

We would select a tree branch, shorn of leaves, smooth. Length depended on our height. Perhaps 24 to 30 inches. Occasionally, if we were not very confident about our hand-eye coordination, we would use a flat piece of wood, perhaps 1.5 inches wide. This was the *Danda*.

Next was the tricky bit. A segment of a tree branch, may be 4 inches long, either end slimmed down with a "Tessa" (a chisel with a handle. Imagine a claw hammer, with the claw replaced by a chisel, again set at an angle of about 45 degrees. This (Oriental) tool used by every carpenter in the Punjab in my time) sometimes to a point. This was the *Gooly*.

Then we dug a *khuttee* – a small depression. The gooly was placed across it. You held one end of the danda in both hands, the other end slid in the khuttee, touching the gooly in the middle. You were then the danda-man. Your opponent stood opposite you at a distance chosen by your opponent as an estimate of how far you would be able to heave the gooly. As

the gooly soared heaven-ward, the opponent raced to catch it in the air. If he did, you were out, as in cricket. If the gooly landed, the opponent tried to throw it at the Danda which was left across the khuttee. If the danda made contact with the gooly, you were out.

Gooly danda was such a simple game. It cost practically nothing. It was a game of skill. The spectators had free entertainment. There were no "bookies".

A thousand pities that this game has been displaced by cricket.

Buntay

Marbles. All the marbles were coloured, except one large one, which used to be retrieved from a broken soda water bottles.

There were two versions – possibly more,

A small round hole – *khutee* – was dug in the earth. Two rival players would stand at an agreed distance from this hole.

They would roll the large marble towards the khuttee. Whosoever rolled the marble in to or nearest to the khuttee would take the first turn. He would roll the coloured marbles towards the khuttee. Those that entered the khuttee were bagged by him.

Then he would take aim at one of the coloured marbles with the large colourless one. If he made contact, he would capture the coloured one. If he did not, the turn would pass to the rival.

Thus it went on till the coloured marbles were all bagged.

In the second version, you played the game sitting down, the coloured marbles on the ground and you aimed at the coloured marbles with the big colourless one from a distance of about nine inches. The marble was shot by being despatched from the tip of your index finger which was suddenly released from a grip of your other hand.

Hockey

Hockey was known when I was very young. And we knew it, it was played by teams eleven a side. We also knew that the best hockey sticks were made in Sialkot, as were the balls. But these were costly.

We used to get someone to break off a branch from the *Tahli* tree (Dalbergia sissoo), known in Urdu as the *Sheesham* tree. Naturally, we preferred a hook at one end but we did without elegant shapes. As for the ball - a small stone or a walnut, rags wrapped around it to form the ball. The mother or sister would sew the rags. You give the ball a degree of longevity – seldom more than a game or two.

We played barefoot. No one wearing a shoe, even a canvas shoe, would be allowed near us.

We did not have proper goal posts, or Ds, or lines. Nor did we observe the rule of eleven a side. Of course, the game on the school playground was always played by the book. But NO shoes.

I think I was eleven before I had a proper hockey stick of my own. A second hand one for an anna (16 annas = one rupee) or two. But I still remember it. It had such a spring in it. “Elastic”, we called it.

Badminton

Although not as costly as tennis, badminton was still not easy for the poor or the middle income people. Sometimes one had two racquets, sometimes just one. In the latter case, a

piece of cardboard was a substitute. If there was a net, we would tie the ends to bamboo poles. If there was no net, a string tied to the bamboos with a bedsheet slung over the string served the purpose.

If the shuttlecock lost its feathers, we would take a piece of cork from a bottle, glue to it feathers of various sizes found in the garden. Unfortunately, this home-made shuttlecock was never much use though it provided on-lookers with some hilarity at the expense of us *Kalay Sahibs*.

Tennis?

Perhaps the boys at schools like the Central Model School Lahore played it. We didn't. Grownups did play it, in clubs. All in whites and tennis shoes.

Cricket?

No.

Football?

No, we knew that it was played in Calcutta.

Kabbadi

Now this was a game that everyone loved.

A square piece of ground, a line drawn in the middle. The opposing teams, clad only in *Kachhas* (underpants) lined up on opposite sides. One player would take a deep breath - as deep as possible, run to the opposition domain, shouting "*Kodi, kodi, kodi, kodi"* non-stop, attempt to touch one player of the defending side and run back without being grabbed.

If grabbed, he must go on struggling to escape back home with his inspired breath intact. If he was obliged to take another breath without escaping home, a point was lost.

To make it more difficult to be caught, the players would oil themselves with *Sarson da Tel* (Mustard oil).

An excellent game, provided head butting in the stomach is avoided, and you don't play after a full meal.

Kushti (Indian wrestling).

Credited with strengthening literally all the muscles, it is perhaps the exercises that really strengthen you. The wrestling was carried out in an *Akhaara*. The ground is dug up, and soft. Sometimes, specially in dry and pebble strewn areas, the earth was replaced by sand.

Hide and Seek

Kotla chhpaki Jumay Raat aaee ay. Jehra pichhay vaikhay oh dee shaamat aaee ay.

This rhyme means that there will be hell to pay if the player whose turn it is to seek opens his eyes and sneaks a look to find where the others are hiding.

Jumay Raat is Urdu for Thursday, *Veerwar* in Hindi or Punjabi. Interesting that the rest of the rhyme is in Punjabi.
