

My paternal Sikh-Christian-Muslim family



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This family saga has been set down after considerable research. The oldest member I have consulted is Joe Massey, my late mother's youngest cousin. He is now over ninety years old, and lives in Mississauga, near Toronto. Thankfully, his memory is still very good.

Great grandfather and his times

My father hailed from a family of Jats of the Mall clan from Gurdaspur. In the 19th century, about half of the people in Gurdaspur were Muslims; the rest were Sikhs and Hindus. The Sikh Jats were faithful to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who was a fellow Jat of the Sukerchakia *misl* (military group) of Gujranwala, which is now in Pakistan.

The Sikh Empire was based in Lahore. Though the ruler was a Sikh Jat, the vast majority of the inhabitants were Muslims. However, I must stress, it was a largely secular state with all religions treated with absolute equality. Ranjit Singh had only one eye (*Yuk chasm gul*) on account of small pox; in fact, his face was marked with dark spots, like my *Chacha* (father's younger brother) Hidayat. Ranjit Singh famously declared that he had only one eye because the Almighty wanted him to look on all men with one eye as equals. His trusted Foreign Minister was a Muslim named Fakir Azizuddin, who refused to be bribed by Lord Auckland, the British Governor General. Auckland was surprised how a Muslim could be so loyal to a Sikh king.

The situation changed after the fall of the Sikh Empire, after which the Sikh Jat rulers of Patiala and Jind upheld British rule.

At this time, some Jats became Christians. All Jats who converted to Christianity were called *Massihi*, followers of Jesus the 'Massiah', the prophet who cured the sick). The name *Massihi* soon became Massey.

Sardar Kharak Singh, my great grandfather, became a favourite of the British governors. In the mid-19th century, the colonial agenda was to move Sikhs into western Punjab, where there was a marked Muslim majority. The British trusted the Sikhs more than any other community in India. The Sikhs were not particularly into 'high culture'; they were more into war, alcohol, womanising and agriculture.

Many Sikh Jats were allotted lands in western Punjab. This meant that the landowners were Sikhs, and the *kumhis*, landless labourers, were Muslims. The lands were allocated to British favourites in what were called the 'Canal Colonies', i.e., districts such as Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) and Montgomery (now Sahiwal). These districts, thanks to the new British system of canal irrigation, became the breadbaskets of the entire British Empire. `

Sardar Kharak Singh was an extremely wealthy landowner. He went shooting with the British Governor of the Punjab, and spent his money in the *kothas* (whorehouses) of Hira Mandi in Lahore. It was the old Sikh story: women and wine.

I have consulted Major Iqbal Singh, a former Cavalry officer on this subject. He is older than I am, and still alive. He has told me many stories of that period. His family – Sardar Hukum Singh, Sardar Udham Singh, *et al* – were the big *zamindars* of the Montgomery area. The Partition destroyed them as it destroyed us, though we were not in the same league. Mind you, they got some lands allotted to them in East Punjab but they were no longer a patch of their former grand selves. In any case, *zamindari* was soon abolished in India, and Major Iqbal Singh's family never regained its earlier wealth or prestige.

Grandfather and his times

My grandfather was Bhagtu Mall, also known as Chaudhry Bhagat Singh. My father once told me that my grandfather told him during the First World War (1914–1918): 'Son, if you were older, I would have prevailed upon the *Laat Sahib* (Governor) to make you an army *affsur* (officer).' In those days, the King's Commission was not available to Indians. Indian officers held the Viceroy's Commission, which was a high honour and far beyond the scope and authority of today's Junior Commissioned Officers. Only sons of *zamindar* families were given the Viceroy's Commission.

My grandfather Bhagtu was also an *ayaash* (lustful, womanising spendthrift). He was not an alcoholic but an incorrigible drunkard.

In 1925, he was invited to a wedding. Duly attired as a 'Chaudhary', he rode off on his beloved mare. As usual, there was much drinking and eating; Sikhs do not eat beef but devour roasted chicken, partridge and pork. And, as usual, there was heavy drinking and *rundi-baazi*, women provided for important honoured guests.

And, as usual, Grandfather Bhagtu got drunk. His hosts asked him to stay the night, but being a headstrong Sikh, he insisted on riding home. The mare knew her way home but somehow took fright. The theory is that she trod on a snake or a wild boar, and that disturbed her. In any case, she bolted. Grandfather, perhaps half asleep, was thrown, and his left foot got caught up in the stirrup. His fall caused the mare to panic. She galloped, dragging her rider behind her. His body was ripped to bits. Eventually, his foot detached from the stirrup. The mare came back to her stable without her master.

Next morning, stray fragments of his body were recovered. Thus ended Chaudhry Bhagtu Mall. By the time of his death, he had sold or mortgaged most of his land and squandered the proceeds. What land was left was inherited by his eldest son, my father.

In those days, it was no mean task to send a telegram (*taar*) to convey the news of my grandfather's death. My father in Lahore eventually got the telegram.

I must tell you that though my father was the eldest son, he was not the first-born. My grandfather's oldest child was Lajwanti, a formidable woman whom we called 'Aunty Lajjo'. She was a handsome, well-built *Jatti* (female Jat). At the early age of 14 or 15, she had been married off. She had only one son, George. His children and grandchildren are still in Sahiwal (Pakistan) and I'm in touch with them.

My father was the oldest child. He was named Mubarak, meaning Welcome! His father surely welcomed him. In that feudal society, it was important to have sons. Daughters, like Aunty Lajjo, were married off and went to their husbands; they became a part of their husbands' families. My father's younger brothers were Inayat and Hidayat.

In other words, my father his brothers had Muslim names, and his sister had a Hindu name, though they were all Sikh Jats. This was common practice in some of the Sikh Jats of the old

pre-Partition Punjab. Hence, boys had names such as Iqbal Singh, Mehtab Singh, Aftab Singh, Nawab Singh and Farid Singh. I have yet to work out the reason for this.

My grandmother, Mrs Bhagtu Mall, was even larger than her daughter Lajwanti, my Aunt Lajjo. Grandmother could speak only Punjabi and rudimentary Urdu; no English. She could read and write Gurumukhi. The well-meaning American missionaries in Montgomery helped her after she was widowed; in gratitude, she became a 'Bible Woman' and helped the missionaries, who could not speak Punjabi.

Hindu and Sikh widows in those days were badly ill-treated by their in-laws. (Muslim widows could remarry; in fact in Muslim societies, it is a recommendation that one should marry a widow; the Prophet's first wife Khadija was a widow). Hence, the only people who gave Hindu and Sikh widows succour and *panah* (refuge) were the Christian missionaries.

My Grandmother gave these widows hope.

However, let me relate the following incidents, which throw some light on the thinking and behaviour patterns of the Jats in that era.

During the school holidays, in the 1930s and 1940s, my brother Derek (who died in 1955) and I were packed off to the Chak 29 (our village, watered by Canal Channel 11-L), where we were rather spoilt by mustard oil massages, lessons in *kushti* (wrestling), fried quails and partridges, *parathas* and *halvas*. There were riding and shooting lessons. Also, because we spoke English (we were at Saint Anthony's School in Lahore, which produced General Jagjit Singh Aurora and, much later, Tariq Ali and Mian Nawaz Sharif), we were highly regarded.

One day, in the village, three men came with a young man in to see Grandmother. They had come to ask for my cousin Parkash's *rishta* (hand) in marriage. Parkash was my favourite cousin, daughter of my *Chacha* Inayat, who was a well-known *shikari* (hunter). (She died many years ago.) Grandmother cross-questioned the young man and his father. She was informed that the young man had passed his Intermediate examination, in those days called the FA. After finishing his teacher's course in a couple of months, he would become a teacher.

Grandmother was not impressed. She said, rather sharply, "I am not interested even if he became a Headmaster. Tell me: How much land does he possess?" The *rishta* was turned down. Parkash and my other cousins (Gughi and Dolly) were hiding behind a curtain, and sniggering at the young man's discomfort.

The point is that education and degrees, and even money, meant little if there was no land in the family. Hence the Punjabi adage: *Paisa te aanda-janda hey. Zamin rehndi hey.* ('Money comes and goes. But land is permanent'.)

(Mark Twain, who apart from being a celebrated writer was also a notorious gambler, once advised his acolytes: 'Buy land boys. They ain't making it anymore.' Methinks, that Twain, who had travelled in India, was actually a Jat.)

There's another story about my grandmother. The time was the winter of 1943, when I was eleven years old. Grandmother, then an old woman, was sitting cross-legged on her *manja* (stringed bed), peeling potatoes. There was a knock on the *angan* (courtyard) door. In entered two imposing Sikhs with flowing beards and *kirpans* (swords carried by Sikhs as a matter of right granted by the British). She immediately recognized them, lowered her head, turned slightly away, and covered her head with her *chunni* (dupatta). They were cousins of her late husband, who had died in 1925.

They remained standing with their hands on their swords. Respectfully, they said that they had come to enquire after her health. She nodded without daring to look into their eyes. They left without ceremony, having ascertained with their own eyes that their *Behn-ji* was well.

Later, I asked cousin Parkash who these mysterious, dangerous looking men were. She told me very quietly that they were from Grandmother's *susral* (father-in-law's family), and had travelled many miles from Gurdaspur and Ferozepur to check on her welfare.

I saw, with my own eyes, an old widow woman behaving like a new bride. In fact, when I recollect my past, I remember my own mother, following the local tradition of never addressing my father by his name, even though she was very Anglicised, having studied at a convent school).

My father and his times

When 'John Massey', my father, finally got a King's Commission in what was the Royal Indian Air Force, his name was specified as Jesuald Mall Massey. Jesuald is from the Spanish 'Jesualdo', meaning 'Christian soldier'. My father had to become a Roman Catholic in order to marry my mother. The Roman Catholic priest (a well-fed and huge Belgian named Father Prudent) christened him with that somewhat inappropriate name.



John and Mary Massey on their wedding day in Lahore, 1931, at the Empress Road Catholic Church.

My father was no 'Christian soldier' in the Spanish-Crusader sense. I have here with me in Wales his Commission from the King Emperor of India who was 'Defender of The Faith'. In other words, the Christian Faith. Even Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs who were granted the King's Commission had to accept the British Emperor as the 'Defender of The Faith'. Hence, men such as Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Musa Khan, Ashgar Ali and even Zia-ul-Haq (all King's Commissioned Officers) had to accept the British King as the Defender of the Christian Faith. This fact is carefully suppressed in today's India and Pakistan.

My father did not want to live in the village but wanted the *Lambardari* to 'stay in the family'. So, he gave the *Lambardari* to Chaudhry Hidayat, his younger brother. Hidayat was a drunkard, and became *Lambardar* of Chak 29 in Chichawatni tehsil only because my father gave him his



My uncle, Chaudhry Hidayat, wearing his turban, welcomes the British District Commissioner and his wife to my uncle's Chak (village) in tehsil Chichawatni in Montgomery district. Mid 1930s.

land without thinking about it for even a single minute. As a boy, I was often taken to the Chak, and told by my *Chacha* Hidayat: 'This is all yours. I have no son.' He was grateful to my father for having donated the *murabbas* (a *murabba* is 25 acres of fertile, irrigated land) to him. His tenants, all Muslims, respected him because he treated them fairly, and did not rape their wives and daughters, which was the norm for other *zamindars*. In those days, there existed what the French termed *droit de seigneur*. The landowner had the right to a landless peasant's wife or daughter if she caught his lustful eye. Sadly

and tragically, this still exists in South Asia. Less so, possibly, in India; but quite usual in Pakistan simply because feudal lords still have great power there.

Chacha Hidayat had five daughters at the time. I was close to Gughu and Dolly, who are both now dead. They became Muslims, married Muslims, and, sadly, ended their lives miserably.

When *Chacha* Hidayat's wife died, much after the 1947 Partition, he married a much younger woman, who produced a son. He is Chaudhry Shahbaaz, who is now the *Lambardar*. In order to retain his land in an Islamic state, Shahbaz, a Sikh, became a Muslim, and married a Muslim woman. Shahbaz has a son, who is in touch with me, so the *Lambardari* my father gave away passes on within the family.

When my father visited his younger brothers, they would keep standing in his presence until he insisted that they sit down. This was termed *ijazat* (permission). Even the thought of them smoking *hookahs* (hubble-bubbles) or speaking out of turn in his presence was out of the question. By the same token, my father always treated his elder sister most respectfully and would stay standing till she said: '*Bhai Mubaraka, bey-ja!*' ('Brother Mubarak, sit down'). The 'a' at the end of his name indicated a touch of affection.

What little I know of shooting is thanks to *Chacha* Inayat, my father's younger brother. Chaudhry Inayat never drank. But he chased women relentlessly.

He first drilled me in correctly cleaning and properly oiling his guns. Only later was I allowed to actually shoot with a gun. It was a great day for me, in 1944, when I was twelve years old, to accompany him on a wild duck shoot in the freezing Punjab winter. It was on the banks of the river Ravi, and it was COLD.

Luckily, I managed to bag two *murgabis* (wild ducks). *Chacha* Inayat then thought that I had some possibilities. He had already brought down over a dozen in flying shots. After Partition, he managed to get a *murabba* in Multan, but foolishly sold it for a song and moved to Karachi. His second wife was actually his young niece Sardara. I remember her as an attractive young woman. She recently passed away in Karachi. Her granddaughter Maira Khan is now a TV actress in Pakistan.

In winter, other favourite shoots were wild boar (*jungli-soor*) and *nil-gai*, also called *nil-ghor*. There is some controversy about the animal's zoological category: some people regard the predatory animal as a cow, others say it is a horse. Sikhs loved the wild boar, and have a memorable recipe for wild boar pickle (*soor-da-achhar*). To this day, I get my Sikh friends in India to send me wild boar pickle; those who have not tasted it have not lived.

My father died in Delhi, February 9, 1992, in the arms of his grandson Vijai Vir Singh Nair, my sister Doe's son. He was buried in a select New Delhi cemetery. The pallbearers were his son-in-law Vijai Kumar Nair (a former Commander of an Independent Armoured Brigade and now a recognized Defence Expert), his grandson Vijai Vir Singh Nair, Colonels Dang, Dogra and Malhotra, Major Kohli and Havildar Harish, the senior orderly of Brigadier Nair.

Whenever I visit Delhi, I lay flowers at my father's grave. He was not a particularly wise or calculating man but the Almighty had been kind to him. He lived a very long life in good health possibly because of the blessings of his long dead Mother. He died with some money and a lot of goodwill.

My mother died in Ambala Cantonment before he did, on October 2, 1982. She was regarded as the mother of the *risala* (cavalry regiment) simply because her son-in-law was the commanding officer of the regiment. Her body was followed by all the officers and *sowars* (armoured corps troopers) to the Catholic Church in Ambala Cantonment, and later to the cemetery. The church was jam packed as representatives of other regiments also attended the

funeral. I salute the Indian Army, and particularly the Armoured Corps (formerly the Indian Cavalry) for treating my parents with decency and dignity.

When my parents died, I was struggling in distant London.

Epilogue

'Massey Estate', my family's property in Kasumpti, near Shimla, is now owned by a lady of the Stokes family of Kotgarh. The Stokes are of American descent. Many years ago, a Mr Stokes, an American, married a girl from the Simla hills, and produced a large family. It was he who started the apple orchards in Himachal Pradesh, which now supply most of India with apples.

The former 'Massey Estate' is now worth crores of rupees. When I was last in Simla as a Visiting Professor at Himachal Pradesh University, the present owner met me at the Green Room, Simla's main club. She was delighted to meet me. She said, 'Professor Massey, so happy to meet you, the son of *the* great Massey Sahib of Simla'.

This is my life. My sizable patrimony in the Indian Punjab (Himachal Pradesh was created only later out of the Simla Hill States) was sold off because my father could not manage the estate on account of his old age. And the Partition of 1947 made me lose my rightful property in West Punjab, now in Pakistan.

Later, I bought a house plot in Rajdhani Enclave near Delhi but that was a dead loss. I still have the deeds, in Hindi, certifying my ownership, signed and stamped by the Tehsildar of Ballabgarh-Faridabad. It means NOTHING.

When I was last in Delhi, I spent hours looking for Rajdhani Enclave. The whole area was covered with factories and railway yards. There was no Rajdhani Enclave. It transpired that a certain crooked Member of Parliament, a Mr Hoda, had collected millions from Indians living abroad in the UK and Canada and, as the Cockneys say, 'done a runner'. He had bribed the local officials to issue 'genuine certificates of plot possession'. Neither Hoda nor the 'important officials' could be traced. Since I do not have the time or energy to wrestle with Indian bureaucracy, I have framed my Delhi land deeds to remind friends that Non-Resident Indians and Indians with foreign citizenship must beware of buying real estate in India.

Now, I am content in Wales with a few acres once owned by the family of Clive of India who looted India. The chickens have come home to roost. ❖

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