

## My Memories - Dadi and 1942



Surjit Mansingh

Surjit was brought up in many different places in India, went from Delhi University into the Indian Foreign Service, and subsequently joined her husband in academics, shuttling between India and the United States. Now a semi-retired professor with two grown-up sons, she lives with her Himalayan cat, music, books, and walks in Bethesda, Maryland, USA.

**M**y Dadi lived with us for the last years of her life when my parents and I returned from two years in England and were reunited with my three elder siblings. She was, in fact, my father's *bhua* (father's sister) who had adopted him when his own mother died shortly after his birth in 1904, and was known by us as *Beji*. She had been widowed some time in the 1930s in a bizarre incident of robbers mounting one night to the terrace where she and her husband were sleeping to tear the jewellery off her arms and ears and throw her husband down to the hard street below. This was in the small village of Kallar, about 40 miles from Rawalpindi (in present day Pakistan). I never heard my father speak of that village with any affection, but did listen to him declaim with loathing on its regressive social customs to my historian husband and myself.

*Beji* and her doctor husband had had no children of their own and probably did not trust her itinerant brother to look after an infant. I met my father's elder siblings only much later and know nothing of their early pre-Partition lives. My father was brought up to be a doctor too. He graduated from Amritsar and then went to the University of Birmingham in England. He joined the Indian Medical Service, was commissioned in the Indian Army, and was serving as a Captain with Eastern Command in 1942; that is the first year of which I have any

clear memory, turning five years old then as I did. At that time, the headquarters of Eastern Command was stationed in Lucknow from October to March and in Ranikhet during the summers. Lucknow was already a city and Ranikhet remains to this day a small relatively unspoiled town; both were in the then United Provinces (UP), and are now in Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal respectively.

My earliest memories are of the beautiful cantonment in Ranikhet, listening to stories about roaming leopards as well as their coughs at night, gathering apples, or just sitting in a tree and gazing at the magnificent peaks of the middle Himalaya—Nanda Devi, Kamet and Trisul. Much of my reading during my teens was of mountaineering expeditions to these and other peaks, not to mention Jim Corbett's *Man Eaters of Kumaon* set around Ranikhet.

*Beji* was not a sympathetic person. She had suffered a stroke and was more or less totally paralysed, except for her biting tongue, as my mother often told me later. I do not remember anything *Beji* might have said to me but I do have a vivid picture in my mind of an elderly lady in white *salwar-kameez* and draped head seated rigidly in a chair set in the garden in the afternoons when my brother and I returned from school on our ponies to Rookwood Cottage in Ranikhet. It was a sweet little slate-roofed

cottage, without electricity, set at the edge of a hillside forest in a garden that also had an apricot tree in which my brother and I spent many enjoyable hours. I remember being given a new skipping rope for my birthday that we used along with the old one to make a hammock in the tree; our weight was too much and it broke, depositing us in the potato patch! Perhaps *Beji* witnessed the incident and scolded my mother, as was her wont.

Justly or unjustly, I associate *Beji* with one of the rare occasions on which I was “punished”. I offered my pony *gurh* (molasses) after dismounting, as usual, and licked the lump of *gurh* myself in pauses as the pony licked and chewed. To this day I do not make much distinction between animal and human, but I do remember being rebuked for this “unsanitary” behaviour and locked up in a bathroom for a period of time. The punishment, which may or may not have been instigated by *Beji*, did not cure my habit of sharing food with my pet animals!

I have no recollection of *Beji*'s death and attendant religious rites; my rational and “modern” father probably spared me that experience. But I do know she was not with us on our car journey from Ranikhet to Lucknow in August 1942. Eastern Command had been put on “alert” and ordered back early to winter headquarters because launching of the Quit Indian Movement by the Indian National Congress had the British running scared — very scared indeed, as recent research has revealed. The British equated the Quit India Movement with the 1857 Uprising (Mutiny) or worse and retaliated with more than the equivalent ferocity of 1858. As a child, I knew nothing of this, merely the fact that we were driving back to Lucknow much earlier than usual, in our Morris 14 bought in England the year I was born, and the winding road was blocked in many places by landslides caused by monsoon rains, so that we had to camp somewhere overnight. I

remember that my father's manservant was named *Videshi* (foreigner) and had somehow procured or shot a chicken that he roasted over an open fire for dinner — whether his or ours escapes me now. But I remember my mother's irritation with his frequent displays of being “sophisticated” that is, Anglicised. More than 60 years later one still meets domestic servants in Delhi who have served *angrez log* (white foreigners) and affect scorn of Indian employers!

What I remember most vividly about that unusual and frightening journey is driving v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y along the one paved street through a town — most probably Shahjahanpur, also in UP, which was a province with a deep rooted and active nationalist movement and therefore civil disobedience, not necessarily non-violent, in 1942. I remember seeing crowds massed on either side of the road and hanging out of the buildings on either side; they were armed with bricks and sticks. I remember wondering aloud why my father was not in uniform and why he did not stick his arm with the red band of IMS officer out of the window, and being told to keep quiet. I remember the tension in our car as no one was sure how the crowd would behave. Would they stone the car despite its obviously Indian passengers? Was there an armed convoy behind us? I remember sitting in front in someone's lap, putting my hand on the gearshift, and actually having it slapped! No one was ever slapped or beaten in my family, so the tension must have been high indeed. For whatever reason, we got through Shahjahanpur and the rest of the drive unharmed and reached our house in Lucknow late that night. It was hot, very very hot! ❖

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