



GULZAR

FOOTPRINTS ON

ZERO
LINE

WRITINGS
ON THE PARTITION



TRANSLATED BY RAKHSHANDA JALIL

FOOTPRINTS ON

ZERO LINE

WRITINGS
ON THE PARTITION

GULZAR

TRANSLATED BY
RAKSHANDA JALIL

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI

To Dina, my birthplace in Pakistan

Contents

Author's Note

POEMS

Zero Line

ज़ीरो लाईन

Dina

दीना

At Dina...

दीना में...

Dhaiyya

ध्या!

Millstone

एक ही चक्कर लेता है चक्की पर रखा उम्र का चाक!

If Possible...

अगर ऐसा भी हो सकता...

A Knock

दस्तक

Bhameri

भमेरी

Bullet

साफ़े को सर से परोती हुई गुज़री गोली

A Scene

मन्ज़र

Karachi

कराची!

Toba Tek Singh

टोबा टेक सिंह!

Silence at the Border

सरहद पर ये सकता क्यों है?

Neighbour

पड़ोसी

Compatriot

हम वतन

Zindanama

ज़िन्दां नामा

Eyes Don't Need a Visa

आँखों को वीज़ा नहीं लगता

Ramzan

सुनो, इस बार भी रमज़ान के दिन थे!

Ghazal

ग़ज़ल

TALES

Crossing the Raavi

Two Sisters

Kuldip Nayar and Pir Sahab

LoC

Two Soldiers

Partition

Fear

Smoke

Rams

The Jamun Tree

The Scent of Man

Search

Over

P.S.

A Dialogue: Gulzar and Joginder Paul on Partition and Their Fiction

Translator's Note: Rakhshanda Jalil

Notes

About the Book

About the Authors

Copyright

Author's Note

I HAVE WITNESSED the Partition. I have experienced the Partition. Standing on Zero Line I am still watching the trail of Partition. Seventy years have passed. Time has not been able to blow off the footprints. I don't know how long it will take for them to sink into history and be the past.

Rakhshanda has been kind to compile this work on Partition. And Shantanu, my able editor, has been kind to conduct the notes with his baton very well.

POEMS

Zero Line

Walking up to Wagah with measured steps
When I came to stand at the Zero Line
My shadow fell in Pakistan!
The sun was behind me
And my Abbu was standing in front
He saw me
Resting his stick on the ground
He smiled and said,
 'When I had left my body there
 I came back home, Punni!'
Abbu used to call me 'Punni'.
'I had hoped you would come,
For you had not received the news of my death
I knew you would come to bid me farewell!'

Startled, the moment paused
He tapped the ground with his stick
Stretching his hand, he said:
'Come, let us go to Dina!'

My friends who had come to receive me at Wagah
Held me by the hand and took me to Lahore
In the din of the city no voices came back to me
But I could see a trail of silence
That led to Dina.

It used to be a qasba once
With a tiny cardboard railway station
Not all trains stopped there
Those were the days of the war
Only trains carrying soldiers stopped there

I would run to the station whenever I spotted the smoke
Abbu used to return with goods for the hatti.

There was just a bazaar
And a track lined by banyan trees
It's still there
And a madrasa where, sitting on a piece of sackcloth,
I would write on my wooden board
That alley exists still –
Which opened into the fields
I caressed those walls on which
I used to write in Urdu with a piece of coal.

I hoped someone would hold my fingers
And teach me to spell every syllable correctly
But no one came –
Perhaps I had left him behind at Wagah
So I returned –

I am back at the Zero Line
My shadow whispers from behind me,
'When you give up this body
Come back to your home
Your birthplace, your motherland.'

ज़ीरो लाईन

नपे क़दमों से चलते चलते वाघा पर...
मैं ज़ीरो लाईन पर आ कर खड़ा था जब
मेरी पछाई पाकिस्तान में थी!
मेरे पीछे था सूरज...
मेरे आगे मेरे अब्बू खड़े थे
मुझे देखा...
छड़ी टेकी ज़मीं पर
मुस्कराये और बोले
‘वहां जब मिट्टी छोड़ रही थी...
मैं अपने घर चला आया था, पुन्नी!’
मेरे अब्बू मुझे ‘पुन्नी’ बुलाते थे
‘मुझे उम्मीद थी तुम आओगे पुन्नी,
कि मेरे अंत की तुमको ख़बर पहुंची नहीं थी!
यकीं था आओगे मुझको विदा करने!’

बस इक वक़फ़ा ठिठर के रह गया था
छड़ी को खटखटाया फिर ज़मीं पर
बढ़ा कर हाथ बोले
‘चलो दीना चलेंगे!’
मेरे अहबाब जो वाघा पे लेने आये थे मुझको
पकड़ के हाथ मेरा ... ले गये लाहोर मुझको
वहां के शोर-व-गुल में फिर कोई आवाज़ कानों में नहीं आई
मगर सन्नाटे का इक रास्ता था जो दिखाई दे रहा था
वो रास्ता ‘दीना’ जाता था...

बहुत छोटा सा क़स्बा था, कभी वो
बहुत छोटा सा ग़त्तों का बनाया एक स्टेशन था
वहां सब गाड़ियां रुकती नहीं थीं
मगर वो ‘लाम’ के दिन थे

वही रुकती थीं जिनमें फौजियों के डिब्बे होते थे
धुआं दिखता था गाड़ी का, तो दौड़ आता था स्टेशन पर
उसमें अब्बू हट्टी के लिये सामान लेकर लौटा करते थे...

बस इक बाज़ार था
इक 'टाल्हियों' वाली सड़क भी थी
वो अब भी है
मद्रसा था जहां मैं टाट की पट्टी बिछा कर तख्ती लिखता था
गली भी है...
वो जिसका इक सिरा खेतों में खुलता था
वो दीवारें टटोलें, कोयेले से जिन पे उर्दू लिखा करता था

मुझे उम्मीद थी कोई मेरी उंगली पकड़ लेगा
मुझे हिज्जे सिखायेगा
मगर कोई नहीं आया...
मैं शायद छोड़ आया था, वहीं वाघा पे उनको
मैं लौट आया...

मैं जीरो लाईन पर आ कर खड़ा हूँ
मेरे पीछे मेरी पछाई है, आवाज़ देती है
वहाँ जब मिट्टी छोड़ोगे...
चले आना तुम्हारा घर यहीं पर है
तुम्हारी जन्म भूमी है! वतन है!

Dina

I had set out from Wagah
Playing Stapoo and jumping over
Roughly drawn squares on the ground
Crossing the bridge over the Jhelum in a steam engine
From Kalowal I emerged behind Mangla
To the city of Dina, near Kurlan.
I was born there.

Scouring alleys, searching for pebbles in drains
Waving my writing board, a schoolbag slung around my neck
I had stopped for a while
Beside the mill as it went clank-clank.
There was commotion
A crowd had gathered to watch
Two hennaed rams lock horns.
Whose horn would break first?
I scurried away, hiding through the legs.

Filling my pocket with ripe neem berries
I suddenly found the gilli I had thrown at the tree lying on the ground
A squirrel must have hidden it!

My house was at the turn of the alley
Fearfully, I knocked at the door
An old man pushed the rusty door open
And looked at me with disbelief
He looked like my twin
I handed over my bag and came away
'I will come again,' I said
'I am going to watch the rams fight...
'Just an alley away!'

दीना

मैं वाघा से चला था
ज़मीनों पर खिचे ख़ानों में
‘सटापो’ खेलता और पार करता,
धूएँ की गाड़ी में ‘जहलम’ का पुल गुज़रा
मैं ‘कालवाल’ से ‘मंगला’ के पीछे की तरफ़ निकला
जहाँ ‘कुर्ला’ से लगता शहर ‘दीना’ है!
वहाँ पैदा हुआ था मैं!

मैं गलियाँ खोजता, नाली में कंचे ढूँडता,
लहराता तख़्ती—और गले में झूलता बस्ता लिये
ठहरा था थोड़ी देर,
कुक कुक करती चक्की पर
वहाँ मजमा लगा था
और इक हल्लड़ था लोगों का
कि दो मेहँदी लगे दुम्बों ने सींग अपने जकड़ रखे
थे आपस में!

किसी का सींग टूटेगा!
मैं डर के भीड़ की टांगों के नीचे से निकल आया
पक्की नीमोलियों से जेबें अपनी भर रहा था जब
अचानक पेड़ पर खोई हुई गिल्ली
ज़मीं पर मिल गई मुझको
गिल्हरी ने छुपा ली थी!

गली का मोड़ मुड़ते ही मेरा घर था
बहुत डर डर के दरवाज़े पे दस्तक दी
किसी बूढ़े ने ज़ंग आलूद दरवाज़ा धकेला
बड़ी हैरत से देखा मुझको बूढ़े ने
मेरा हमशक्ल लगता था!
मैं बस्ता रखके लौट आया

‘मैं फिर आऊंगा’, ये कह कर
‘दुम्बों की लड़ाई देखने जाता हूँ...
‘मैं पिछली गली में हूँ!’

At Dina...

She was a big girl
She had pulled me behind the door, holding my schoolbag
And stolen the lump of clay
Nibbling at it, she had smiled at me
Planting a kiss on my cheeks, she said,
'Give me this clay
I have to layer my slate with it and write a name.'^{*}

'She must be pregnant!' my mother told me.

I was possibly six years old then
I am fifty-six now
Still pregnant with her memory
I still remember that girl!

दीना में...

बड़ी सी एक लड़की थी
मेरा बस्ता पकड़ के, और दरवाज़े के पीछे खींच कर मुझ को
मेरे बस्ते से इस ने गाचनी मिट्टी चुराई थी
कुतर के दांत से वो मुस्कराई थी!
मेरे गालों पे पप्पी ले के बोली थी
'मुझे दे दे ये मिट्टी!
'मुझ को तख्ती पोत कर इक नाम लिखना है!'
'वो कोई हामला होगी!' मुझे माँ ने बताया था!

मैं शायद छे बरस का था
मैं अब छप्पन बरस का हूँ
मैं अब भी हामला हूँ याद से उस की
वो लड़की अब भी मुझ को याद आती है!

Dhaiyya*

It has taken me seventy years
To return to Dina and touch the dhaiyya
How much have I run in the wasteland of Time
How long have I played hide-and-seek!

An old picture of the railway station
The smoke from the engine hovering mid-air
Its colours had begun to fade
And standing at one of the doors of the train
Was my Abbu.

The picture was beginning to flake off
When I reached the dhaiyya
The board was still there at the station
So was the name
But what once appeared on its breast
Now seems to be written on its back
Behind it stretches, lost, the railway track endlessly.

Moving through the silent film of my past
The alley from which I had emerged
Still lies there like a snakeskin.

In these seventy years
Even the throat of the water wheel has run dry
The water has settled deep inside the sand
And the well sits, its mouth agape.

There was a pond ahead of Daata Chowk
It used to lie with the sky on its chest
It too has closed its eyes
Filled them with earth.

My madrasa was a primary one
Sitting in the sun on a piece of sackcloth
I used to read my primer
Now, it is a high school
With benches!

A ragged tree stands some distance away
Somewhere there the master used to make me bend over like a rooster*
The old tree bends, trying to place me
Both of us have the same question:
'It's you, isn't it?'

How desolate the past becomes
How desolate becomes childhood
Only a whiff remains, a dampness
Like descending into a basement...
Sleep overtakes you in basements.

ध्यूया!

सत्तर साल लगे हैं मुझको
'दीना' वापस आकर ध्यूया छूने में
कितना दौड़ा हूँ मैं वक्त के वीराने में
कितनी लम्बी आँख मिचोली खेली है!

बहुत दिनों की चिपकी हुई तस्वीर थी एक स्टेशन की
कुछ बीच हवा में ठहरा हुआ इनजन का धुआं
पीली पड़ने लगी थी अब रंगत उसकी
ट्रेन के इक दरवाज़े में जो खड़े थे, मेरे अब्बू थे

दीवारों से चिपकी हुई तस्वीर प्लास्टर छोड़ रही थी,
जब ध्यूया पर पहुंचा मैं
बोर्ड तो है स्टेशन पर अब भी
नाम भी है...

सीने पर लिखा रहता था पहले उसके
अब लगता है जैसे बोर्ड की पीठ पे लिखा है
उसके पीछे दूर तलक बेसुध पड़ी है रेल की पट्टी!

माज़ी की ख़ामोश फ़िल्म से गुज़र रहा था
गली जहां से निकला था मैं
वहीं पड़ी है जैसे मेरी कैचली रखी हो
सत्तर साल में
कुक कुक करते करते पन-चक्की का गला भी सूख गया
रेत के अंदर जा कर बैठ गया है पानी
मुंह खोले बैठा है कुआँ

'दाता चौक' के आगे इक तालाब था पहले
आस्मान सीने पे रख के लेटा रहता था
उसने भी आँखें बंद कर लीं
आँखों में मिट्टी भर ली है

मेरा मद्रसा प्राईम्री था
टाट बिछा कर, धूप में 'केदा' पढ़ता था
अब हाई स्कूल है
बेंच लगे हैं!

छद्रा सा इक पेड़ खड़ा है दूर ज़रा
वहीं कहीं 'मुर्गा' बनवा कर खड़ा किया करता था मास्टर
बूढ़ा पेड़ वहीं से झुक कर
पहचानने की कोशिश करता है
'वही तो हो तुम...!'
हम दोनों कहना चाहते हैं?

कैसे वीरां हो जाते हैं साल पुराने
वीरां हो जाता है बचपन
फिर भी एक महक रह जाती है सीलन की
तह ख़ानों में उतरो तो...
तह ख़ानों में नींद सी आने लगती है!

Millstone

The millstone of Time goes around only once
Grinding everything fine in that one cycle.

To gather everything from one lifetime
And keep pouring into the millstone
All the stones, pebbles, marbles of one's childhood
To bring together all the knowledge, experiences, lessons
All the horizons desired along the way
All the fields harvested during the day
The gardens of star-filled nights
Were all put into the grinder.

The rosaries of day and night are coming apart
Perhaps, just a hands-width of life remains

I am returning to Dina where the millstone had started its cycle.*

एक ही चक्कर लेता है चक्की पर रखा उम्र का चाक!

एक ही चक्कर लेता है चक्की पर रखा उम्र का चाक
एक ही चक्कर में सारा कुछ पिस जाता है

एक हयाती में जो कुछ भी हासिल हो
सब कुछ जमा करना और उन्डेलते रेहना चाक में
नौ-उम्री के पत्थर, पिट्ठू, कन्चे, कंकर,
इल्म, तजुर्बे और नसीहतें जितनी बटोरी हों
शौक ने जितने उफ़क चुने हो चलते चलते
खेत दिनों के काटे जितने
तारों भरी रातों के बाग़ उतारे जो सब भी
डाल दिये चाक के अन्दर

रात और दिन की तसबीहें अब टूट रही हैं
इक बालिशत हिस्सा बाकी है उम्र का शायद!

लौट रहा हूँ 'दीना' जहां से चाक चला था!

If Possible...

If it were possible
To transfer my dreams to your sleep
And show you all that I often see

If that were possible
You would know that
I had taken you across the border to Dina
Shown you the house where I was born
Where all day long the sunlight
Pouring through the iron grill on the roof
Transformed my courtyard into a chessboard.

I had shown you those fields of mustard
Made you savour the raw yellow flowers
And a trail of banyan trees for miles
Conjured up jhoolas in the moist monsoons
The scent of that path
Perfumes my eyes
Whenever I traverse that dream.

I had also shown you the 'moving well' of Rohtas
Imprisoned in the fort all day
It would come to the village at night
They say...

From Kala to Kalowal I have flown with you on wheels
Pointing out wondrous sights over the Jhelum
Where boys float over the river on watermelons
And holding on to the turban of a sturdy sardar
I would bathe, bob up and down
Before a sudden strong current would startle me awake.

But all this is possible only in dreams
There are some political difficulties in going there now
It is still my motherland but it isn't my country anymore
To go there, I have to visit many offices of the two governments
Get my face stamped and provide proof of my dreams.

अगर ऐसा भी हो सकता...

अगर ऐसा भी हो सकता...

तुम्हारी नींद में सब ख़्वाब अपने मुन्तक़िल कर के
तुम्हें वो सब दिखा सकता, जो मैं ख़्वाबों में अक्सर देखा करता हूँ!

ये हो सकता अगर मुम्किन

तुम्हें मालूम हो जाता

तुम्हें मैं ले गया था, सरहदों के पार दीना में

तुम्हें वो घर दिखाया था—जहां पैदा हुआ था मैं

जहां छत पर लगा सरयों का जंगला, धूप से दिन भर

मेरे आंगन में शतरंजी बनाता था, मिटाता था

दिखाई थीं तुम्हें वो खेतियां सरसों की, दीने में, कि जिस के

पीले पीले फूल तुम को ख़्वाब में कच्चे खिलाये थे

वहीं इक रास्ता था 'टहलियों' का, जिसपे मीलों तक पड़ा करते थे

झूले सौंधे सावन के

उसी की सौंधी खूशबू से, मेहक उठती हैं आँखें

जब कभी इस ख़्वाब से गुज़रूं

तुम्हें रहतास का चलता कुँआ भी तो दिखाया था

क़िले में बन्द रहता था जो दिन भर, रात को गाँव में

आ जाता था कहते हैं...

तुम्हें काला से कालवाल तक लेकर उड़ा हूँ मैं

तुम्हें दरयाये जहलम पर अजब मन्ज़र दिखाये थे

जहां तर्बूज़ पर लेटे हुये तैराक लड़के बहते रहते थे

जहां तगड़े से इक सरदार की पगड़ी पकड़ कर मैं

नहाता, डूबकियां लेता, मगर जब ग़ौता आ जाता तो मेरी नींद खुल जाती

मगर ये सिर्फ़ ख़्वाबों ही में मुम्किन है

वहां जाने में अब दुश्वारियां हैं कुछ सियासत की

वतन अब भी वही है, पर नहीं है मुलक अब मेरा
वहा जाना हो अब तो दो दो सरकारों के दसयों दफ़तरों से
शकल पर, लगवा के मुहरें, ख़्वाब साबित करने पड़ते हैं!

A Knock

A dream knocked on my door early one morning
Some guests had come from across the border
Familiar to my eyes
Their faces known and read.

I helped wash their hands and feet
Laid out seats in the courtyard
Baked makki-roti in the tandoor for them
My guests had brought as gifts
Gur from past harvests

I woke up to find no one in the house
I touched the tandoor and found it was still warm
And my lips still sticky with the sweet gur

It was a dream perhaps!
Yes, it must have been a dream!

Last night there was shelling at the border, I hear
Last night, some dreams were killed at the border!

दस्तक

सुबह सुबह इक ख़्वाब की दस्तक पर दरवाज़ा खोला, देखा
सरहद के उस पार से कुछ मेहमान आए हैं
आँखों से मानूस थे सारे
चेहरे सारे सुने सुनाए

पाँव धोए, हाथ धुलाए
आंगन में आसन लगवाए
और तन्नूर पे मक्कई की कुछ मोटे मोटे रोट पकाए
पोटली में मेहमान मेरे
पिछले सालों की फ़सलों का गुड़ लाए थे

आँख खुली तो देखा घर में कोई नहीं था
हाथ लगा कर देखा तो तन्नूर अभी तक बुझा नहीं था
और होंटों पर मीठे गुड़ का ज़ायका अब तक चिपक रहा था

ख़्वाब था शायद!
ख़्वाब ही होगा!

सरहद पर कल रात, सुना है, चली थी गोली
सरहद पर कल रात, सुना है
कुछ ख़्वाबों का ख़ून हुआ था!

Bhameri*

We were all running
We were refugees
Mother had worn all the jewellery she possessed
My Chhoti, six years of age,
Had been fed fully and given milk
I had my bhameri and a top
Tucked in my pajamas
We were fleeing from our village in the night
We were refugees.

We had crossed a shrieking jungle of fire and smoke,
Running through burning vistas
Our hands tore through the intestines of a storm
Its jaws open wide, its eyes barking
Mother had vomited blood as she ran.

God knows when Chhoti's hand slipped from mine
There, that day, I discarded my childhood
But in the hush of the deserts at the border, I have often seen
A bhameri still dancing
And a top still spinning.

भमेरी

हम सब भाग रहे थे
रेफ़्यूजी थे
माँ ने जितने ज़ेवर थे, सब पेहन लिये थे
बान्ध लिये थे—
छोटी मुझे से—छ सालों की
दूध पिला के, ख़ूब खिला के, साथ लिया था
मैंने अपनी एक 'भमेरी' और इक 'लाटू'
पाजामे में उड़स लिया था
रात की रात हम गांव छोड़ कर भाग रहे थे
रेफ़्यूजी थे—

आग धूयें और चीख़ पुकार के जंगल से गुज़रे थे सारे
हम सब के सब घोर धूयें में भाग रहे थे
हाथ किसी आन्धी की आंते फाड़ रहे थे
आँखें अपने जबड़े खोले भौंक रही थी
माँ ने दौड़ते दौड़ते खून की कै कर दी थी

जाने कब छोटी का मुझ से छूटा हाथ
वहीं उसी दिन फेंक आया था अपना बचपन—
लेकिन मैंने सरहद के सन्नाटों के सहाराओं में अक्सर
देखा है
एक 'भमेरी' अब भी नाचा करती है
और एक 'लाटू' अब भी घूमा करता है—!

Bullet

The bullet wove its way through the turban
And the blood splattered on the wall
as though someone had spat a mouthful of paan
A shower of fire and gunpowder fell
Heads, torsos, hands flew in all directions, bursting
Like kernels of corn in a kiln
Reduced to ashes, a trail of firecrackers.

A stunned silence stood for a while
Someone could be heard whimpering
Standing quietly in one corner of the house
An oil-lamp kept quivering!

साफ़े को सर से परोती हुई गुज़री गोली

साफ़े को सर से परोती हुई गुज़री गोली
और दीवार पे यूं खून गिरा, जैसे कोई पान का कुल्ला कर दे!
एक बौछार सी फिर आतिश-व-बारूद की बरसी
सर, धड़, हाथ, गिरे चारों तरफ़ फटते हुये
भट्टी में जैसे चटकते हुये कुछ मक्की के दाने
सब के सब भूने गये एक पटाखों की लड़ी से!

एक सन्नाटा सा कुछ देर खड़ा सुनता रहा
कोई आवाज़ सिस्कने की सुनाई दी थी
घर के इक कोने में चुप चाप खड़ा
इक दिया कांप रहा था!

A Scene

The wind was cold, it was the 26th of January!
There was mist all around in Lahore –
The Raavi flowed past –
The court was closed and the British flag fluttered on the roof
The three of them stood leaning against the wall, motionless
The dawn could be heard breathing from a distance
They had to climb the roof and bring down the British flag that night
They were determined to change the attire of Hindustan
Zafar was on the flagpole when the bullet burst into his head
Drops of blood splashed all over the country.

The wind is cold and it is the 26th of January
There is mist all around
Floats parade on Rajpath, Delhi
And the Raavi flows in Lahore.

मन्ज़र

बड़ी ठन्डी हवा थी, और छब्बीस जनवरी थी!
फ़िज़ा में कुहरा था, लाहोर था...
दरयाये रावी बह रहा था...
कचहरी बन्द थी, और छत पे अंग्रेज़ों का झन्डा था
वो तीनों दम-बख़ुद दीवार से लग के खड़े थे
सुबह की दूर से सांसें सुनाई दे रही थी
उन्हें उस रात छत पे चढ़ के अंग्रेज़ों का वो पर्यम गिराना था
वो तीनों सोच कर आये थे हिन्दूस्तान की पोशाक बदलेंगे!
'ज़फ़र' बल्लम पे था, जब सर में यूँ जाकर फटी गोली कि
पूरे मुलक में छींटे पड़े उड़ कर...!

बड़ी ठन्डी हवा है, और छब्बीस जनवरी है
फ़िज़ा में कुहरा है,
दिल्ली में 'झांकी' चल रही है
लाहोर में दरयाये रावी बह रहा है!

Karachi

Kites hover over corpses in your city
In much the same way they do
In my city, on its crossroads.
When bodies fall
Prey to police firing
The vultures begin to descend

In this, our two countries
So much is common among the common people.

कराची!

तेरे शहर में भी तो चीलें
उसी तरह लाशों के ऊपर मंडलाती हैं
जैसे मेरे शहर के चौराहों पर
बन्दोबस्त की गोलियां खाकर...
 लोगों की लाशें जब गिरती हैं
आस्मान पर मंडलाते गिध नीचे उतर आते हैं

हम दोनों के, दो मुल्कों में
आम आदमी कितने मिलते जुलते हैं!

Toba Tek Singh

I have to meet Toba Tek Singh's Bishan at Wagah
He still stands there on swollen feet
where Manto had left him mumbling:
'Ooper di gurbh-gurbh di moong di daal di laltain.'

I have to search for that madman
Who would climb a high branch and proclaim
That he was God
And only he could decide which village would go to which side.

When will he descend from his branch?
I have to tell him
That the job of dividing and cutting is still in progress
That partition was the first one
Some more partitions remain!

I have to meet Toba Tek Singh's Bishan at Wagah
And tell him about his friend Afzal,
And Lahan Singh, Wadhwa Singh, Amrit behen –
All of whom came this side after they were killed
Their heads were looted with their belongings on the way

It's time to sacrifice Bhuri
No one will come for her now
And that girl who grew a finger's length every twelve months
Now shrinks by part of a finger year by year

I have to tell him
That not all lunatics have reached their destinations
There are many who still roam around on both sides

Toba Tek Singh's Bishan often calls me to Wagah, saying,

*'Ooper di gurbh-gurbh di moong di daal di laltain
Di Hindustan te Pakistan di durr phite munh.'*^{*}

टोबा टेक सिंह!

मुझे वाघा पे 'टोबा टेक सिंह' वाले 'बिशन' से जाके मिलना है
सुना है वो अभी तक सूजे पैरों पर खड़ा है जिस जगह मन्टो ने छोड़ा था
वो अब तक बड़बड़ाता है
'उपर दी गुड़ गुड़ मंग दी दाल दी लालटेन'

पता लेना है उस पागल का
ऊँची डाल पर चढ़ कर जो कहता था
खुदा है वो
उसी को फ़ैसला करना है किस का गाँव किस हिस्से में जायेगा
वो कब उतरेगा अपनी डाल से
उस को बताना है
अभी कुछ और भी दल हैं
कि जिन को बॉटने का, काटने का काम जारी है
वो बटवारा तो पहला था
अभी कुछ और बटवारा भी, बाकी हैं!

मुझे वाघा पे टोबा टेक सिंह वाले बिशन से जाके मिलना है
ख़बर देनी है उसके दोस्त 'अफ़ज़ल' की
वो 'लहन सिंह', वाधवा सिंह, वो 'भैन अमृत'
जो सारे क़तल होकर इस तरफ़ आये थे
उनकी गर्दनें सामान ही में
लुट गई पीछे

ज़बह करदे वो 'भूरी' अब कोई लेने न आयेगा!
वो लड़की एक उंगली जो बड़ी होती थी हर बारह महीनों में
वो अब हर इक बरस इक पोटा पोटा घटती रहती है
बताना है कि सब पागल अभी पहुंचे नहीं अपने ठिकानों पर
बहुत से इस तरफ़ हैं, और बहुत से उस तरफ़ भी हैं
मुझे वाघा पे टोबा टेक सिंह वाले बिशन अक्सर यही कह के बुलाता है

‘उपर दी गुड़ गुड़ मुंग दी दाल दी लालटेन...

दी हिन्दूस्तान ते पाकिस्तान दी दुर फटे मुंह’!

Silence at the Border

Why is everything so still at the border?
I am scared of this frozen silence.

This stork-like silence is very cunning
While standing on one leg
Meditating with one eye closed
It keeps the other open.

Cactuses of thorny voices sprout
At the slightest stir
On either side of the border.

In the deserts along the border
Even the wind moves holding its breath
And the sand blows rubbing its neck against the ground.

A stillness has descended on the border
I am scared of this icy silence along the border.

सरहद पर ये सकता क्यों है?

सरहद पर ये सकता क्यों है?

इस बर्फ़ीब सी ख़ामोशी से डर लगता है!

बगले जैसी ख़ामोशी मक्कार बहुत है

एक टांग पर खड़े खड़े भी

एक आँख से ध्यान लगाये,

दूजी आँख खुली रखती है।

जब भी कोई हलचल हो तो

सरहद की दानों जानिब ही

कांटेदार आवाज़ों के कुछ केकट्स उगने लगते हैं!

सरहद के रेगिस्तानों में

सांस दबा कर चलती है ख़ामोश हुआ

रेत, ज़मीन से गर्दन घिस कर उड़ती है

सरहद पर सकता तारी है

सरहद की बर्फ़ीब सी इस ख़ामोशी से अब डर लगता है!

Neighbour

As long as there is light in the house opposite mine
Shadows from that house walk about
On the wall of my room.

There is a wheelchair
It keeps getting pushed left or right
Two pet birds flying in that house crash against
my wall
A cage hanging there becomes a cage in my house.

God knows which window with bars closes
And creates a prison door on my wall
All the passers-by look like prisoners.

When the naked bulb moves and swings
People start floating in the air
A circus begins
And chaos reigns for a while.

Then the barred window opens
Another light is switched on
Two swaying shadows, clasped in an embrace, come to stand in the balcony
Perhaps they are looking at my house.

Sometimes it so happens
That smoke from that house casts shadows
on my wall
And then it seems
As though both houses are on fire!

पड़ोसी

जब तक मेरे सामने वाले घर में रौशनी जलती है
मेरे कमरे की दीवार पे
उस घर की पछाईयां चलती रहती हैं

इक 'व्हील चैर' है
धक्का खा के दाएँ बाएँ घूमती रहती है
उस घर की दो पालतू चिड़ियां उड़ती हैं तो मेरी इस दीवार से टकरा जाती हैं
उस घर में लटका इक पिंजरा, मेरे घर का पिंजरा लगता है

जाने कौन सी खिड़की बन्द होती है, जिसकी जाली से
दीवार पे जेल का दरवाज़ा बन जाता है
आते जाते लोग सभी कैदी लगते हैं

नंगा लटका बल्ब कभी हिल जाए तो
लोग हवा में उड़ने लगते हैं
इक सर्कस लग जाती है
कुछ देर गुदर मच जाता है

फिर वो खिड़की खुल जाती है
और कोई बत्ती जलती है
दो झूमते साएँ लिपटे लिपटे, बालकनी में, आके खड़े हो जाते हैं
शायद मेरे घर की जानिब देख रहे हैं

कभी कभी यूँ भी होता है
उस घर के धूँएँ की पछाईँ, मेरी दीवार पे पड़ती है
तब लगता है...
दोनों घरों में आग लगी है!

Compatriot

(For Ahmad Faraz)

At long last, the sun's hue has changed
At long last, you have smiled again.

Suppressing my hiccups for half a century
I have been waiting for you to look at me
And, perhaps, read what the parched tears have to say
For, the pain of separation is no less for me.

Every day, I have bowed my head towards your land
Every night, I have kissed your sky
The moon and stars you see lying on your roof
Are the same that bathe my courtyard.

The moon you have autographed time and again
And set afloat in the sky, night after night
I read your signature on it even today.

When the breeze wafts towards you
I tie a thousand gajras to its wrist
When clouds travel in that direction, I tell them
To soften their thunder and shower with respect.

You love your country, I know
I love it too, believe me.
There's a small difference, though, if only you understand
You *are* there, and I *belong* there.

हम वतन

(अहमद फ़राज़ के लिये)

बहुत दिनों में सही, रंग धूप का बदला
बहुत दिनों में सही, फिर से मुस्कराए तुम

पचास साल से मैं हिचकियाँ दबाए हुए
इस इन्तेज़ार में था, आँख उठा के देखो तुम
तो खुशक अशकों की तहरीर पढ़ सको शायद
कि मेरा दर्द जुदाई का तुम से कम तो न था

हर एक रोज़ तुम्हारी ज़मीन को सजदा किया
हर एक रात तुम्हारे फ़लक को चूमा है
कि मेरे चाँद सितारे तो आज भी हैं वही
जो छत पे लेटे हुए रोज़ देखते हो तुम
कि चाँद आज भी पढ़ता हूँ मैं उसी रुख़ से
वो जिस पे तुम ने कई बार दस्तख़्त कर के
फ़लक पे छोड़ दिया, रात रात उड़ता रहे

हवा गई जो कभी झूल कर तुम्हारी तरफ़
हज़ार गजरे कलाई पे बाँध कर भेजा
गए जो अबर कभी उस तरफ़, कहा उन से
वो लेहजा नर्म रखें और अदब से बरसा करें

तुम्हें अज़ीज़ है अपना वतन, मैं जानता हूँ
मुझे भी उस से मुहब्बत है, तुम यकीं कर लो
ज़रा सा फ़र्क़ है गर तुम समझ सको इसको
कि तुम वहीं के हो और मैं वहीं से हूँ!

Zindanama*

Ambling across the alleys of Lahore one night, the moon
Climbed the high ramparts of the prison
And like a 'commando' jumped into the cell, soundlessly.
The guards remained oblivious.

It had gone to meet Faiz
To ask him to write new verses.
The pulse of time has stopped
Say something
To make the pulse of time throb again.

ज़िन्दां नामा

चाँद लाहोर की गलियों से गुज़र के इक शब
जेल की ऊँची फ़सीलें चढ़ के
यूं 'कमान्डो' की तरह कूद गया था 'सेल' में,
कोई आहट न हुई
पेहरेदारों को पता ही न चला

फ़ैज़ से मिलने गया था, ये सुना है
फ़ैज़ से कहने, कोई नज़्म कहो,
वक़्त की नब्ज़ रुकी है
कुछ कहो
वक़्त की नब्ज़ चले!

Eyes Don't Need a Visa

Eyes don't need a visa
Dreams have no borders
Eyes closed, I cross the border every day
To meet Mehdi Hasan!

I have heard that his voice is injured
And the ghazal sits in front of him, mute
Her lips tremble
When he says...
"The flowers have dried in the pages of books
My friend Faraz too is gone, will meet him in my dreams perhaps!"*
Eyes closed, I often cross the border.

Eyes don't need a visa
Dreams have no borders.

आँखों को वीज़ा नहीं लगता

आँखों को वीज़ा नहीं लगता
सपनों की सरहद होती नहीं
बन्द आँखों से रोज़ में सरहद पार चला जाता हूँ
मिलने, 'मेहदी हसन' से!

सुनता हूँ उनकी आवाज़ को चोट लगी है
और ग़ज़ल ख़ामोश है सामने बैठी हुई है
कांप रहे हैं होंट ग़ज़ल के!
जब कहते हैं...
सूख गये हैं फूल किताबों में
यार 'फ़राज़' भी बिछड़ गये,
अब शायद मिले वो ख़्वाबों में!
बन्द आँखों से अकसर सरहद पार चला जाता हूँ मैं!

आँखों को वीज़ा नहीं लगता
सपनों की सरहद, कोई नहीं!

Ramzan

Listen, this time too it was during Ramzan
That I had come to Pakistan
My visa would not allow me to wait till Iftari
I came back to Bombay.

I have left a paper boat on the sea at Karachi
If the breeze changes direction some day
It might float this way
Or else,
On the day the Eid moon is sighted
Blow hard and push it towards me
I will be at the shore
I will meet you at the shore.

सुनो, इस बार भी रमज़ान के दिन थे!

सुनो, इस बार भी रमज़ान के दिन थे,

मैं पाकिस्तान आया था...

मेरे 'बीज़ा' में 'अफ़्तारी' तलक रुकने की गुंजाईश न थी

मैं बॉम्बे लौट आया।

कराची के समन्दर पे मैं इक कागज़ की कश्ती रखके आया हूँ

हवा का रुख़ कभी बदला तो शायद बह के आजाये

वग़ना चाँद निकला ईद का जिस दिन,

उसी को फूंक से तुम मेरी जानिब ठेल देना

मैं साहिल पर खड़ा हूँ

मैं साहिल पर मिलूंगा!

Ghazal

Some shadows are visible in the distance still
But neither time returns, nor they.

The autumn leaves that had fallen off the tree
Where have they gone swirling in the waters?

Let's spread durries and beat the dhol again
Adorned with mehendi let someone sing lyrical tappas.

Let's fly kites from every rooftop
Try out our skills across a common sky.

Let's play kabaddi on the border
And hold on to those who cross the Zero Line.

ग़ज़ल

दिखाई देते हैं, दूर तक अब भी साये कोई
मगर बुलाने से वक़्त लौटे न आये कोई

वो ज़र्द पत्ते जो पेड़ से टूट कर गिरे थे
कहाँ गये बहते पानियों में, बुलाये कोई

चलो न फिर से बिछायें दरियां, बजायें ढोलक
लगा के महंदी, सुरीले टप्पे सुनाये कोई

पतंग उड़ायें, छतों पे चढ़ के, मोहल्ले वाले
फ़लक तो सांझा है, उस में पेचे लड़ाये कोई

उठो कबड्डी कबड्डी खेलेंगे, सड़कों पर
जो आये अबके, तो लौट कर फिर न जाये कोई

TALES

Crossing the Raavi

IT IS a wonder that Darshan Singh did not go mad. His father died, his mother was lost somewhere in what remained of the gurudwara and his wife gave birth to two babies at the same time. Twins ... both boys! Darshan Singh did not know if he should laugh or cry. Fate had dealt him a strange hand ... taken away with one hand what She had given with the other.

It was being said that freedom had come or was coming, though it was hard to tell when it would reach Lyallpur. Hindus and Sikhs were surreptitiously making their way to the safety of the gurudwara. Shahni had been moaning in pain for the past few days and nights. Those were the last days of her pregnancy and it would be her first labour.

Every day, Darshan Singh would bring a new story about the riots. Every day, his father would comfort him.

‘Nothing will happen, son; nothing at all. Has any Hindu or Sikh home been attacked so far?’

‘But the gurudwara was attacked, Bhapa-ji. It has been set on fire twice.’

‘And yet you want to go and assemble there?’

Darshan Singh fell silent. But all around him, people were leaving their homes and gathering in the gurudwara.

‘It is comforting to be in one place, Bhapa-ji. There is not a single Hindu or Sikh left in our alley. We are the only ones here.’

One night, ten or fifteen days ago, the sound of Bhapa-ji falling down in the courtyard rang out; everyone woke up. Cries of ‘Jo Bole So Nihaal’ could be heard in the distance, coming from the gurudwara. Bhapa-ji had, in fact, heard the shouts and woken up, and gone up to the terrace. On his way down, he had slipped on the stairs, and the axe lying in the courtyard had smashed his head.

Somehow or the other, Bhapa-ji’s last rites were performed, and whatever little they possessed was stuffed in a pillowcase and the three of them had made their way to seek refuge in the gurudwara. There was no dearth of frightened souls inside the gurudwara. No wonder, he felt buoyed with courage. Darshan Singh would say,

‘After all, we are not alone; if nothing else we are close to Waheguru.’

Groups of young volunteers would work all day long. People had collected flour, pulses and ghee from their homes. All day and all night the community kitchen churned out meals. But how long could their provisions last ... the question haunted every heart. They were hopeful, the government would send some help.

‘But which government?’ someone would ask. ‘The English have left.’

‘Pakistan has been created but there is no Pakistani government in place yet.’

‘I have heard that the military is all around; they are taking caravans of sharanarthis till the border under their care.’

‘Sharanarthis? Who are they?’ Darshan’s wife asked.

‘Refugees.’

‘We have never heard these words before.’

A group comprising two or three families, who could no longer bear the burden of anxiety, decided to set off.

‘We are leaving. We have heard that there are trains leaving from the railway station. How long can we sit about waiting here?’

‘After all, brother, one has to find the courage. Waheguru will not carry us on His shoulders.’

Another quoted from the Granth Sahib to bolster his argument, ‘Nanak Naam is the ship; he who boards the ship will sail across.’

No sooner had some people left than a bubble of emptiness would form in their absence. But as soon as a fresh set of people came with news from the world outside, the bubble would burst.

‘Do you know ... a huge camp has been set up at the railway station!’

‘People are dying of hunger and eating stale food. Diseases are spreading.’

‘Five days ago, a train had passed by this way. There wasn’t space to keep a seed of sesame; people were packed even on the roof.’

The next morning was Sankrant. Verses from the Granth Sahib were being recited day and night. Shahni gave birth to her twins at a very auspicious moment. Of the two, one baby was extremely weak; it had little chance of survival but Shahni kept it alive through the sheer force of her umbilical cord.

That very night someone said, ‘A special train has come to get the refugees; let us go.’

A large mass of people set out from the gurudwara. It included Darshan Singh and

Shahni too who, though extremely weak, was willing to leave for the sake of her sons. The mother refused to budge.

‘I will come, son; I will come with the next lot. You leave with my daughter-in-law and my grandsons.’

Darshan Singh tried to dissuade her but the granthi intervened. The volunteers in the gurudwara too tried to bolster his courage.

‘Leave now, sardar-ji. One by one, we shall all go across the border. We will bring your mother with us.’

And so Darshan Singh set out. He put his two babies in a basket as though he were a street hawker who had set out with his family atop his head.

The train was at the railway station but there was no space inside it. People seemed to grow like grass on its roof.

People saw the weak and sickly mother and her newly born babies, pulled her onto the roof, and made some space for her.

After about ten hours there was a small rumble in the train. The evening was red, as though bloodied, its face livid and ablaze.

Shahni’s breasts were sucked dry. She would lift one baby away, then put the other to suckle. The bundle of two infants, wrapped in rags, looked like something that had been picked up from a garbage heap.

After some time, as the train slowly pushed its way into the night, Darshan Singh noticed that while one baby moved its arms and legs and even let out an occasional cry, the other was absolutely still. He thrust his hand inside the bundle and found it was stone cold.

When Darshan Singh burst into tears, the people sitting around him understood. They tried to take the baby away from Shahni but she seemed to have turned to stone too. She sat there with the basket clasped to her chest.

‘No, one doesn’t take milk without his brother.’

Despite everyone’s efforts, Shahni refused to let go of the basket.

The train stopped ten times, and moved ten times.

People made conjectures in the dark.

‘I am sure we have just crossed Khairabad.’

‘Surely this is Gujranwala.’

‘Just an hour more ... as soon as we reach Lahore, it is as good as reaching Hindustan.’

And in their fervour, they began to raise slogans.

‘Har Har Mahadev!’

‘Jo Bole So Nihaal!’

A wave seemed to ripple through the crowd as the train climbed a bridge.

‘It is the Raavi.’

‘It is the Raavi! That means we have reached Lahore!’

In that clamour of noises, someone whispered something in Darshan Singh’s ear.

‘Sardar-ji, throw your baby here; it will find its mukti in the Raavi. What good will it do taking it across the border?’

Softly, Darshan Singh nudged the basket away from his wife. And, in one swift move, plucked the bundle out and flung it into the Raavi with a loud cry of ‘Waheguru’.

The faint cry of a baby was heard in the darkness. Terrified, Darshan Singh turned to look at Shahni. The dead baby was clinging to Shahni’s breast. A bubble of noise erupted all around him...

‘Wagah! Wagah!’

‘Hindustan Zindabad!’

Two Sisters*

‘**M**ONI WOULDN'T let Loki's hair be cut till he was about a year-and-a-half or two.’ Soni was telling Salaam sahab this for the third time. ‘And once when I pointed this out to her, she said, “How can I cut his hair? He is a Sikh.”’

Salaam sahab could repeat the rest on his own.

And then one day, armed with a comb and a pair of scissors, Moni had herself sat down to cut his hair. And all the while she had kept looking at him from every angle.

Suddenly, when Soni had entered the room, she had said, ‘Look, Soni, doesn't he look exactly like the man who used to rape us every day.’

There had been a strange sort of madness in her eyes. It had scared Soni.

‘Don't be silly!’ Soni had picked up Loki and taken him out of the room. Soni had not been able to forget the look in Moni's eyes. A fear had crept into her heart.

Salaam sahab was driving the jeep. Soni was sitting quietly beside him. The driver was at the back. They were going from Kota to Alpha Nagar to find out if Loki was lying in some morgue, or whether he had been buried somewhere by the policemen. Salaam sahab knew all about Soni's life as though he had experienced everything himself.

When Moni and Soni had crossed the border and reached Amritsar, an entire city of camps had come up. Apart from the government-run camps, people would set up eight or ten tents in a row beside any empty stretch of wall. Forget about figuring out the borders between countries, you couldn't tell the boundaries of a city. Who had reached where? Clutching their young and old, sons and daughters, people were moving from one camp to another like dry leaves tossed about in a gust of wind. Many had managed to reach India holding on to their families and goods but, once here, somehow their fingers had slipped loose and they had been separated from their loved ones. No one knew how or where they had been carried away – such was the chaos all around them. Most of those who had managed to cross over with their valuables were now either looking for lost relatives or shunning those who had come with them. People who had lived for generations in only one city now came face-to-

face with maps of all the cities of India. They were trying to reach cities they had read about or heard of, or at best had written letters to someone from those cities. If they met a kind stranger, or a stranger showed sympathy, or someone held their hand on the way, they went along with that person.

The real names of Soni and Moni were Surjeet and Manjeet. Perhaps they were twins. Both wore kadas. Soni and Moni were travelling alone. They had got separated from the caravan with whom they had come till Amritsar. They had heard of Gurudwara Darbar Sahab. So, the first thing they did was to go there and bow their heads. They touched the shrine with their forehead, took a dip in the holy tank and sat down to eat in the langar. They tucked a roti each in their kurti; who knew if they would get something to eat in the evening or not. Close by, volunteers were distributing clothes as well as sheets, shawls and blankets to the needy. The sisters got dupattas to cover their heads and also something to sleep on and use as a covering.

It was not easy for two young girls, especially who had no family whatsoever, to live in the camps. Pretending to help them in the name of Waheguru, a volunteer took them to a burnt house of a Muslim in a deserted alley. He even tempted them, offering to give them the house.

The volunteer said, 'People are flooding in. I have saved this house. You can keep the two rooms on the first floor and my family will come and live on the ground floor.'

The girls ran away in terror. The burnt haveli was like the one on the other side where the rioters had held them captive. If that truck driver had not reached there, would they have been alive today? Who knows where they would have been? Or, what they would have been?

Both became a bit careful after that incident. But what could they do? A torrent of people was pouring in. And with every new surge, the people already there were being pushed backwards. There was no time to pause or stop.

The trains were all headed in the same direction till this point. There was only one destination: Amritsar. After Amritsar, there was the border – for those who wished to go back. Trains were heading out from Amritsar in all directions. There were buses too. And trucks as well. But these were only for those who had money in their pocket. There were no tickets in the trains. Many people simply got onto a train that

was the first to leave. The idea was to somehow get out of this city of camps.

After weeks of being jostled and pushed about, Soni and Moni also got onto one such train. God knows what was the station on which the train stopped and everyone spilled out. The people who had travelled with them, said: 'Don't stop here; change the train. You should travel further.'

They got onto another train and travelled on. They got off at another station where they stayed on the platform for a few days, and then moved on. The two sisters kept moving from city to city, changing courses like a train changing tracks.

Days slipped into months. They had reached India but they had still not found their destination.

Moni was often sick. Her face became pale. Soon, she began to vomit. That's when she realized the rape had stayed in her womb. There was no place where they could go for an abortion. Nor did they have the occasion to look for such a place. They were still travelling.

Moni would beat her belly and cry, 'I am rearing my enemy in my womb! What shall I do? It will die only if I die!'

It was hard to tell who was genuinely a sympathizer and who an exploiter. People had begun to stick together in groups. After spending a few days together, they would form a tight little cluster. And these groups preferred to travel together.

There was another kind of group travelling about; they were looting the sharanarthis and taking advantage of their helplessness.

Some volunteers were helping people get into buses on the pretext of taking them from stations and depots to refugee camps. Halfway through, they would extort money from the sharanarthis. Those who did not pay were threatened and told to get off the bus. Naturally, no one wanted to get off in some deserted place and fend for themselves. Someone would pull out the money they had stashed away in their waistband; others would offer their bangles and ornaments. Often, a fellow traveller would help out those who didn't have anything to give. The homeless are a compassionate lot. They had reached their country but they were still either muhajir or sharanarthis.

The refugees made a place for themselves inside Bundi Fort. Workers of the

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh were offering help and assistance to all of them. The saffron flag was flying on the fort after nine hundred years.

Several refugee families were living in the fort. An elderly lady from one of the Punjabi families, Bebe, recognized Moni's condition. By now Moni's belly had begun to bulge. There was no man with the girls. When Bebe asked point-blank, Soni lied; she said her family and Moni's husband were killed on that side. Moni was pregnant when the two sisters managed to escape in a truck full of refugees. Only the bit about the truck was true.

Bebe had nine sons; all of them had managed to escape with their entire families intact. And as luck would have it, they had managed to bring across quite a bit of their wealth too, although their house, land, livestock and immovable properties were all left behind. They were fortunate that no one from their family had been killed. Only their grandfather was left behind, who, virtually till the last minute, kept saying: 'All of you are going to come back. You wait and see; if Allah wills, this calamity too shall pass.'

He would take the name of Allah with the same ease as he invoked Waheguru.

Bebe would walk about the fort with her stick in one hand. Sometimes, her sons would tease her, 'Bebe, it seems as though you were the queen of this fort in some previous birth! Perhaps it was you who had this fort built!'

Tugging her dupatta tightly across her head, Bebe would say, 'Of course! And all these people are my subjects!'

Indeed, Bebe was like a queen!

One day she walked up to the turret where Moni and Soni had set up their temporary kitchen.

'How are you, beti? I see both of you going down every day. Do you go to the river bank?' The river ran close by. People had begun to call the settlement near it the 'utraai'.

'No, Beeji, we take up whatever work we can find in the village at the back.'

Moni picked up a canister and moved away. Soni kept talking to Bebe.

'What work do you do?'

'Anything, Ma, from washing clothes to scrubbing pots and pans, any kind of work...'

'Do you make any money?'

'They are poor people, Beeji; they don't need servants. But sometimes they ask us

to lend a hand with some odd job; or else sometimes they give us something just like that.'

'Where are you from back there?'

'Khorda zilla, Campbellpur. And you?'

'We are from Dera Khail Khan. It is not far from Attock. Cambellpur was called Attock earlier.'

Moni came back with the canister filled with water. As she set it down, she felt a sharp pain in her side.

Bebe instantly asked, 'Have you sprained your back? Come, let me rub it. You shouldn't lift such heavy loads.'

Then, looking towards Soni, she continued, 'I have been observing the way she is walking; I know she's pregnant. And that's why I have come by. Don't you have anyone with you?'

The two sisters fell silent. Moni's face was already pallid; it became more pale. Bebe understood.

'I have given birth to nine sons, my dear. I know every inch of a woman's body. I always wanted a daughter. But it wasn't Waheguru's wish.'

In a muffled voice, Soni spoke up: 'Your sons are with you? All of them?'

'Three of them are here with me. Two have moved on ahead. Twelve to fourteen miles farther away there is a village in Kota; it's called Alpha. I don't quite know if it's a village or a qasba. It's named after some Englishman. They have gone to look at some land there. We used to farm back there too.'

Gently rubbing Moni's tummy, she asked: 'Where is the father from?'

Moni's throat choked up; she couldn't answer. But Soni lied. 'He was killed in Khorda. Everyone was killed. We were saved by ... by a truck driver ... who ... who was coming here with some refugees.'

And Soni too choked up.

Tapping her stick, Bebe climbed down from the turret and was lost in the fort.

In the late afternoon, she returned. She said to Moni: 'Look here, my child, if a woman is carrying her husband's child in her womb she remains a suhagan, even after him. Here, wear this black thread around your neck; it's a gold-plated cowrie. Consider it a mangalsutra and wear it. You are a married woman, not a widow.' And turning an unmarried girl into a married woman, she went away.

A strange sort of hide-and-seek began between Bebe and Moni. Before coming

down the turret, Moni would peer to check if Bebe was strolling about. On her part, whenever Bebe would emerge from the western veranda, her eye would go straight to the turret. And in this hide-and-seek, one would always spot the other. Like all elderly ladies, Bebe would always offer some nugget of advice on the pregnancy or suggest some easily available home remedies. And she would always ask: 'Do you feel like eating tart things? Shall I ask my son to get you some tamarind?'

Moni would say neither yes nor no; she would just evade the issue.

Once, when Bebe was sitting with them in the turret, Soni finally asked: 'Why do you always enquire about tart things?'

'If a woman hankers after tart things, they say, she will give birth to a daughter. I never wanted anything tart. Needlessly, I used to keep sending for tart star fruit and tamarind and keep eating those.'

'But why, Bebe?'

'See for yourself ... I gave birth to nine sons. And the sons, in turn, had only sons. Our family is bereft of daughters. Never had any girls!'

Bebe's voice became a little muffled. She kept a hand on Moni's shoulder and said: 'Look here, Moni, if you give birth to a daughter, she is mine! I will raise her. I won't take her away from you but I will be her grandmother. You can say what you want! But if it's a boy, he's yours. I have enough! You can shower all your love on him.'

Bebe became teary-eyed. She got up and went away. Moni's heart too became heavy. For the first time, she moved her hand over her belly and smiled.

Soni felt very good.

The Englishman that Bebe was talking about lived about twelve to fourteen miles away from Bundi. His house was burnt down during the Partition riots. It was said that the same people who had raised the saffron flag over Bundi Fort had set fire to the Englishman's house. The Englishman was a big landowner; he owned about 100 acres of land in the village of Alpha. His workers and farmers were shareholders in his land. He had made this regulation himself and followed it. When British rule was coming to an end, he declared himself an Indian and began to claim the rights of an Indian citizen. People say that he would get up at night, mount his horse and inspect his lands – like the kings of olden times who would travel about their lands to find out how their subjects were faring. And how he loved his crops!

But he failed to survive the riots. His home and hearth, his livestock – everything

was looted. He could not bear to see his crops on fire. Like a madman he ran into the burning fields and was reduced to ashes.

Afterwards, while the land was liberated, the famers and workers fell out among themselves. They sold whatever they could claim as their share and ran away.

Punjab was not far away. The farmers and zamindars who had come from the other Punjab began to grab the land in these parts.

Two of Bebe's sons bought a large tract of land and set themselves up like the zamindars of yore. There was a broken-down old-fashioned haveli in the middle of the fields; they bought that too. Then they sent for Bebe to come and live with them.

When the news reached Bebe, she immediately went up to the turret. Tapping her stick on the floor, she declared: 'The two of you have to come with me!'

A new practice had started since the Partition: of getting a house by making a token down payment called pagdi. Those who had managed to get away from that side with some money were now renting houses by paying in hard cash. They would even get rid of old tenants.

Indeed, Bebe was the matriarch of a very big family. Her sons would give pagdi and set up houses in the villages along the fields. She was the head of this large clan. There was a lot of work to be done to cultivate the barren fields. Everyone was finding work. Bebe's sons got a house for Soni and Moni in the village and set them up as their tenants.

No matter where Moni was during the day, no matter what she did, she had to meet Bebe at least once every day. If, for some reason, she couldn't go, Bebe would come to their house, tapping her stick.

'You are sure to have a girl! The way you stomp your left foot when you walk...'

Bebe was convinced. It would be a girl. Moni's womb was filling up bit by bit. Sometimes she would get irritated and tell Soni, 'I will sell her to a pimp!'

'Give her to Bebe if you don't want her.'

One reason for coming away from Bundi with Bebe was precisely this. By now Moni had convinced herself that the baby in her womb was her dead husband's. It wouldn't matter what she looked like; after all, no one had seen her husband.

But Bebe was convinced: 'The girl will take after her mother. She will be even more beautiful than you!'

Bebe used the word 'beautiful' as though she had found it in a sacred book. 'She will cause no end of trouble to all my grandchildren,' she said and laughed.

The night that the pains started, Bebe sat beside Moni all night long. Someone had fetched an old midwife from the village. She was a decrepit old woman. She could barely see but she had the most nimble hands. She had experience on her fingertips.

Moni gave birth to a son...

Bebe's heart sank. Her eyes became moist. She said: 'Waheguru is still angry with me.'

Moni's breasts welled up so much that she forgot she was an unmarried girl. She used to look at her son with eyes wide open, wonderstruck, as though she were watching a miracle. God knows where the anger and hatred with which she used to once beat her belly melted away. The poison turned into nectar in her breasts ... or had she given birth to the blue-throated Shiva, who drank it all up!

Bebe would keep coming by to check on them. Her affection hadn't lessened. While she wasn't as well off as she must have once been, she brought a silver spoon for the newborn baby. 'When the first seed is sown in the fields, I will have your son's naming ceremony in the gurudwara,' she announced.

The subject of the name came up every day. One day, quite out of the blue, Bebe asked: 'What was your husband's name?'

Moni was already restless. She looked at Soni surreptitiously. Soni answered: 'Tirlok Singh.'

And instantly, Bebe said, 'That's it then! Keep that name. You will earn a place in all three worlds.'

Neither sister understood what this meant but both nodded their head in agreement.

Everyone began to call the boy 'Loki'. He had extremely thick hair and his eyes were a shade of grey. His features didn't quite resemble Moni but the thick hair made him look like a Tirlok Singh.

As Loki grew, so did people's attachment to him. Moni and Soni would work in the fields while Loki would play beside Bebe.

Loki's hair began to grow long. Bebe was very fond of braiding his hair and tying it in a bun on top of his head. When he began to walk on wobbly legs, she started taking him to the gurudwara. She would show him to her two sons who had had their hair chopped off.

Once, Soni laughingly whispered in Moni's ear: 'Cut his hair; he will get lice. All

Sikhs do.'

'He is a Gur Sikh,' Moni replied. 'Why should I cut his hair? And if I do cut his hair, Bebe will have my head chopped off!'

But then Moni did a very strange thing one day. She got a comb and a pair of scissors and chopped off his hair. She combed his hair this way and that and kept looking at his face closely. When Soni suddenly entered the room, she said, 'See, Soni, his face looks like him. Doesn't he look exactly like the man who used to rape us every day?'

There was a madness in her eyes. Soni was scared.

'You are mad ... go away!' Soni picked Loki up and went out.

Bebe saw Loki's hair cut short and turned her face away. She cried a great deal.

Soni tried to explain. 'God knows what got into her! The hair will grow back, Bebe, don't cry.'

All Bebe said was, 'Waheguru is angry with me.'

Moni didn't set foot near Bebe after this incident. But Soni could see the madness in Moni's eyes.

Moni would keep staring at Loki. The poor innocent boy would run to her crying, 'Ma ... Ma...'

And then one day all hell broke loose.

Loki's dead body was discovered in the well on the western field. Moni was nowhere to be found.

The police came. Soni was taken away for questioning. The thanedar sahab filed the report but did not allow Soni to return home. He was convinced her sister would come looking for her. She couldn't have absconded. And indeed that's exactly what happened!

Three or four days later a few policemen brought a hungry, emaciated, desolate-looking Moni to the police station. That mad frenzy was still in her eyes.

When Soni approached her, Moni pushed her away. The policemen dragged her towards the lock-up. All Soni could do was cry.

Eventually, the thanedar let Soni go, but where could she go? Once when she did go back home, all of Alpha Nagar seemed strange and distant. No one was willing to come close to her. Bebe refused to meet her. Two days later, when she returned to the police station, the thanedar told her that Moni had been sent to Kota Central Jail. She was showing signs of madness.

With just a dupatta over her head and a pair of slippers on her feet, God knows how Soni managed to reach Kota.

A window-like door opened in a gigantic doorway. A soldier stood on either side of it.

‘I have to meet the Jailor Sahab.’

‘What do you want from him?’

‘I want to meet my sister.’

‘Do you have an order or permit?’

No one let her enter. Sometimes the Jailor Sahab’s jeep would come out and then go back in. She could only guess that this must be the Jailor Sahab. She would come close, fold her hands and say, ‘Salaam sahab!’ and he would go back in. Jailor Sahab saw her at the same spot for several days. She would be sitting propped up against the wall, looking exhausted. He asked one of his men to bring her in. Jailor Sahab had his quarters inside the jail. He had only one servant, named Yusuf, in the house; his wife and children lived in Aligarh.

He questioned her when she came in, and that was when he understood that all this while when she had been saying ‘Salaam sahab!’ she had not been calling him by his name! Jailor Sahab laughed out loud. His name was Abdul Salaam Quraishi!

Soni was weak with exhaustion. Jailor Sahab asked Yusuf to bring her some water. Then he gave her something to eat. That evening when he sat in the lawn and heard her entire story, he felt as though someone had wrung his heart.

Moni was a murderer. He needed an order from someone higher up if Soni was to meet Moni. But after a day’s hesitation, Salaam sahab took this responsibility upon himself. He put Soni in his jeep and took her to meet Moni. He drove the jeep himself.

Moni was kept in solitary confinement. There was a veranda outside her cell. A woman constable went inside to tell her that her sister had come to visit her. But Moni refused to come out.

‘I don’t want to meet her.’

‘She’s standing outside.’

‘Let her.’

Soni could hear the exchange.

The constable came out. Soni went to stand beside the bars of the door. She peered inside. Moni was sitting curled up against the wall. She turned to look at Soni

and then slowly got up and came near the door. The madness hadn't quite left her eyes. With great patience, Soni asked her: 'Moni, do you know what you have done?'

Bitterly, she answered: 'Yes...' She paused before adding, 'He killed so many Hindus in Campbellpur. So what if I have killed one small Musalman?'

Salaam sahab was driving the jeep. He was travelling from Kota to Alpha Nagar with Soni. They were going to find out if Loki was still lying in some morgue or whether someone had buried him.

Kuldip Nayar and Pir Sahab

IT WAS a Friday, the evening of 14 August 1998, and I was travelling in a car towards Wagah border with Kuldip Nayar.

Nayar sahab has been doing this for years. He reaches Wagah in the evening of 14 August, along with some writers, artists and intellectuals; and during the change of guards when the flags of both countries are lowered, he and his companions raise slogans for Indo-Pak friendship. At midnight, when the date changes, they light candles to usher in the dawn of freedom.

It was a long straight road. Dusk was falling.

Nayar sahab was telling me, 'If this road were to continue in the same straight way, with no gate and no obstacle, no one to ask for your visa and no one to see your passport, and if I could return after wandering around Pakistan, what would I rob from that country? There is no shortage of robbers in this country, or that. There is no need for robbers to come from outside.' And then, after a pause, he continued, 'After all, that is my land too! A big part of me still lives there!'

There must have been a question in my eyes, for he said: 'My school is there, the madrasa I went to, my teacher Dina Nath and Maulvi Muhammad Ismail, my primer for "Aleph, Be...", my schoolbag – everything is there. My roots are there; I only cut my branches and brought them along with me...'

Nayar sahab's voice quivered. That day he mentioned Sialkot several times – where his home used to be.

'Uncles and aunts from my father's side had their houses close by. There was a huge open space in front of our house; it had no wall demarcating it as an enclosure. A little ahead, the other houses started. There was so much land that no one needed to grab other people's land. A large dense peepal tree stood on one side of this open space; it was closest to our house. There was a grave under the tree; no one knew who was buried in it. But our mother had dinned it into our heads that it was the grave of "Pir sahab".

'Mother used to put the vermilion used in puja on the tree and place a diya on the grave. After which she would wipe her vermilion-smeared finger on the grave. She

would offer the aarti to the tree, sending the light from the diya towards it, and then leave the diya on the crumbling edge of the grave. The same bhog that was offered to the peepal would be offered to Pir sahab. If something happened in our home that upset her, she would go and sit under the peepal, her back resting against its trunk, and talk to her Pir-ji. Sometimes she would cry too. And having thus lightened her sorrows, she would get up and come home. She would bring Pir sahab along. Thanks to her, Pir sahab could never find mukti!

‘During my examinations, I remember, she would tell me to leave the house only after bowing my head in obeisance at his grave. It could be examinations, festivals, sorrows or joys, small occasions or big occasions – Pir sahab was included in everything!’

Sometimes Nayar sahab uses very colloquial Punjabi words. Now he was saying, ‘If you needed an answer to something, Pir sahab would be asked. We never got an answer but Mother always received some signs. Sometimes she would even say that he had come in her dreams and given her an answer.’

We had reached Wagah.

The sun was setting. With great pomp and ceremony, the flags of both countries were brought down. There were a few people on that side and some on our side. Film star Raj Babbar joined us. Noted human rights activist and lawyer from Pakistan Asma Jahangir was expected to join them on the other side. But she couldn’t come as her government had imposed restrictions on her.

At midnight, all of us lit our candles. Some photographs were taken. Slogans of Indo-Pak friendship were raised. We came back, a lump in our parched and choked throats.

We were expected to return to Delhi the next day. But I wanted to go back to Sialkot. And so, I broached the subject again.

‘Nayar sahab, when your mother said she saw him in her dreams, did you ever ask her what Pir sahab looked like, about his face and appearance?’

Nayar sahab’s mood had changed by now. He smiled and said, ‘I started my career in investigative journalism. Of course, I asked her these details. And, indeed, I found him to be exactly as Mother had described him.’

‘Found him? Meaning...? You met him, that is...?’ I couldn’t quite find the words for what I wanted to ask.

But he smiled and said, ‘It was in 1975, when Mrs Indira Gandhi had declared the

Emergency in India, and several political leaders and intellectuals had been arrested. I was one of them. That day was also a Friday, 24 July 1975. I was imprisoned in Tihar Jail. I was told it was only a temporary confinement. I would be released in a few days, they said. When I asked who had ordered my arrest, the warden – without taking any names – simply said: “Madam.” A few days passed but when there seemed to be no sign of my release, I asked the warden if I could send for some of my books and papers. The kind man agreed and also arranged for a table and table lamp.

‘Gradually, as time passed and my hopes of being released began to dwindle, one day I asked him: “When will I be released?”’

I was silent, and Nayar sahab too looked at me quietly. We were sitting in the lounge of Amritsar airport. Suddenly, it struck me and I said: ‘Asked him? Who? Whom did you ask?’

Perhaps he was waiting for this question. He said,
‘Pir sahab.’

‘And...?’

‘He came to me in my dream. He had a long white beard and was dressed in a flowing green robe. Just as Mother had described him. I don’t remember if his head was covered or not...’

‘And then?’

‘He said I would be released by the following Thursday.’

‘Did he say anything else?’

‘Yes ... he said: “I feel very cold, son. Give me your chadar.”’

Nayar sahab laughed.

‘And your release ... I mean ... did it happen on Thursday?’

‘No. I was very restless all day on Thursday. It isn’t as though I was badly off inside the prison but I was anxious about Pir sahab’s promise. I don’t know why I wanted the dream to come true. As always, I worked till late in the night and woke up late the next morning.

‘That day was a Friday again, 11 September 1975. The warden came and told me that the orders for my release had come. Incredulously, I asked: “When did they come?” He said, “The papers had come last night but by the time I came on duty it was quite late. You were working at your table and you have told us not to disturb you when you are working...”’

‘I asked the warden loudly and clearly, “Yesterday? The orders came yesterday,

that is, on Thursday?”

‘A bit warily, the warden replied, ‘Yes ... did you have prior information?’ Happily, I told him, “Yes, I had been informed.”

That was not the end of the story. Nayar sahab continued, ‘When I told Ma about it, she said to me, “Go to Sialkot and offer a chadar at Pir sahab’s grave. He must really be cold.” Ma’s eyes were moist. I couldn’t go right away. Getting a visa wasn’t easy those days. Mother passed away in 1980 and it became all the more important to take a chadar for Pir sahab. By the time I eventually reached Sialkot, the entire area had undergone a sea change. Other people had come to live in what used to be our house. Several small shops had come up in the open space in front of it. In fact, there seemed to be a thriving market there. And I could not see the grave anywhere. I could only guess the approximate location of the peepal tree. But now there was neither the peepal nor the grave...

‘There was a shopkeeper whom I met several days in a row. He kept telling me that he had not seen a grave there. I was about to return when, one day, I met that same shopkeeper outside the market.

“Whose grave is it? Who are you looking for?” he asked me.

‘I told him, “It was a Pir sahab’s grave; my mother had great faith in him.” A bit sheepishly, he said, “Indeed there was a grave here; it was right next to my shop. We were refugees. All we had was the shop; it was a very cramped place. So, we removed the grave and took over the space so that we could live there.”

‘I came back. One day I went to the dargah of Nizamuddin Auliya and offered the chadar, the same one that I had taken with me to Sialkot.’

‘Did he ever come in your dream again?’ I asked.

‘No. Several times during difficult moments I have hoped that he would come in my dreams, that I could ask him things and he would give me answers. But he never came again. I think, like my mother, he has gone away. He too has found mukti.’

LoC

AFTER THE 1948 skirmish, the armed forces had more or less settled down for good along the Indian border. The barracks had become pucca and so had the bunkers. In the years leading up to 1965, it had almost become a tradition for armed battalions to come, settle down, only to be sent off again elsewhere. Life on the border had developed a rhythm of its own. Along with fiery rhetoric on both sides, the cross-border firing had become routine. In fact, whenever a minister came touring the area, it was normal for the forces stationed nearby to indulge in some firing. At times, they would enter some village and walk off with some sheep or goat; on such nights, there would be a feast at their camp. And when some civilians were killed, the newspapers got their headlines and the leaders got material for their speeches. The LoC crackled like a livewire.

When things got really bad in this mutual playacting, it would seem as though everyone had given up on basic courtesies and etiquette. Relations would turn cold. To bring the warmth back, both sides would indulge in some fireworks and blood would flow hot once again. Some soldiers would be killed on this side and some on that. The headlines would be all about the numbers: five killed here, seven there. Mere statistics.

The bunkers belonging to the two sides were not far from each other. And sometimes when someone sang a plaintive mahiya from the hillock on that side,

*Do patar anara de
Saadi gali lang mahiya
Haal puch ja bimaraan de...*

O Beloved
For once come to my lane
And ask how this sick man is faring

...a soldier from this side would respond:

*Do patar anara de
Pehre nahi hathde chana
Tere bhede bhede yaaran de...*

How do I reach you, beloved
Your wicked lovers
Have their guards all around you

The hillocks facing each other were barely a shoulder's width apart. If they could bend, they might even be able to hug each other. The muezzin's call on that side could be heard here, and the one from here could be heard there.

Major Kulwant Singh had once even asked his junior captain, 'Oye, didn't we hear the azaan just a while ago; how come it is coming again after half an hour?'

Majeed had laughed. 'Sir, it's coming from the other side! Pakistan time is thirty minutes behind us.'

'So whose azaan do you follow to pray?'

'Whichever suits me on a given day, sir!' He saluted and left.

Kulwant said to himself that there was something about Captain Majeed, for he had endeared himself so quickly. His smile spoke in such a manner as though he had known him since his childhood and grown up holding Kulwant's hand.

One night, Captain Majeed Ahmad sought permission to enter his tent. He had brought a tiffin box with him.

'What is this?'

'It's meat, sir, cooked in my home.'

Kulwant kept his glass at a small peg table and got to his feet.

'Oh? Why did you think of bringing this today?'

'Today is Baqreid, sir. This is sacrificial meat; you will have it, won't you?'

'Yes, yes, why not?'

Kulwant opened the tiffin box himself and said, as he helped himself to a piece of bhuna gosht, 'Make a drink for yourself.'

'No, sir. Thank you, sir.'

'Come on ... have a drink. And ... Eid Mubarak!' With a piece of meat in one hand, he embraced Majeed three times in the customary Eid greeting.

'There was a time when Phatto Masi used to make this with black gram for me. She was Mushtaq's mother ... they lived in Saharanpur. Have you ever eaten spicy

black gram with bhuna gosht?’

Majeed was about to say something but stopped himself. After a pause, he said, ‘My sister has made it.’

‘She’s here? In Kashmir?’

‘Sir, she is here but...’

‘But what?’

‘She is in Zargul ... on the other side.’

‘Arre!’ Kulwant was sucking at the piece of meat with his right hand, while with his left hand he poured a glass of whisky and offered it to Majeed.

‘Cheers ... and Eid Mubarak once again! So how did your sister send this across...’

Majeed looked a bit uncomfortable. Kulwant asked him sternly, in typical military style, ‘Did you go to the other side?’

‘No, sir, never! Of course not!’

‘Then?’

‘My brother-in-law is a lieutenant-commander on the other side. My sister came to meet him. She sent it across.’

Kulwant picked his glass and took a sip. He closed the tiffin box and turned to stand directly in front of Majeed.

‘How did you manage that? What arrangements did you make?’

Majeed remained silent.

‘What’s the bandobast that you have worked out?’

Hesitantly, Majeed said, ‘There are several people in the village below whose homes are on this side but fields are on the other. In the same way, there are several villages that side whose homes and fields are divided. And families too, as well as relatives.’

More than the words, it was Captain Majeed’s voice that sounded true. After a while, when Kulwant took out some more meat on his plate, Majeed continued: ‘The commander on that side is a friend of yours, sir! I read one of your articles and that is how I know.’

Kulwant Singh froze. Immediately, one name sprang to his mind, and when Majeed took that name, tears came to his eyes.

‘Mushtaq Ahmad Khokhar ... from Saharanpur.’

Kulwant’s hand trembled. He went to stand beside the window of the tent. Outside, some soldiers were marching across the camp, their steps rising and falling

in perfect unison.

Majeed spoke in a low voice, 'Commander Mushtaq Ahmad is my sister's father-in-law, sir.'

'What the...! Your sister is married to Naseema's son?' Naseema was Mushtaq's wife.

'Yes, sir.'

'Oye, you...' Kulwant blurted out, but could say no more for his throat was choked. He raised the glass, swallowing the lump in his throat.

Kulwant and Mushtaq were both from Saharanpur and had studied together at the Doon College. They had both trained at the Doon Military Academy. Mushtaq's Ammi and Kulwant's Biji were fast friends. Then the country was divided, and so was the army. Mushtaq went away to Pakistan with his family whereas Kulwant stayed on. And the two families never met each other again.

A few days later, Kulwant took a junior officer along and, far away from the camp, in the shadow of a hill, he contacted Mushtaq on the wireless. Needless to say, Mushtaq was taken aback; but after the initial surprise, the two friends exchanged the choicest abuses in Punjabi, so much so that their hearts opened up and their eyes began to fill up.

Finally, when they had both caught their breath, Kulwant asked, 'How is Phatto Masi?'

Mushtaq told him that Ammi had become very old. Her dearest wish was that she could travel to the shrine of the Sufi Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti and make an offering with her own hands. 'Day and night she pines for the fulfilment of her wish. But Rabiya can't leave the children to go with her. You don't know Rabiya...'

'I know Rabiya; she is Majeed's sister, isn't she?'

'How do you know that?'

'Majeed is my junior...'

'Oye!' There was another shower of expletives accompanied by more tears.

'Oye, look after him...' Mushtaq said in a choked voice.

And then the two decided that Mushtaq would somehow arrange to send Ammi to Wagah. From there, Kulwant's wife Santosh would come to take her to their home in Delhi. She would then take her on the pilgrimage to Ajmer and afterwards leave her in Saharanpur with Biji. They would spend some good time together. A great burden lifted from Mushtaq's chest.

And then one day a message came from Mushtaq ... Ammi's visa had come through. Kulwant fixed a date for Santosh to come to the border. All the arrangements were in place. He only had to inform Mushtaq.

But that very day the defence minister showed up at the LoC and displays of strength began on both sides. Kulwant knew that this squall would pass in a couple of days. So what if he was not able to make contact over the wireless? It was only a matter of going to the village down the hill and sending someone across with a message. Majeed knew how to do that.

Still, the nagging worry did not leave him. Santosh told him that Biji had taken to calling every day from the telephone at the post office. 'Phatto is coming, isn't she? When you go to Wagah, how will you recognize her? Shall I come with you?'

Majeed came with the news. 'Sir, the shelling from the Pakistani side has become very heavy.'

Kulwant was already feeling frustrated. He said, 'Let wretched Pakistan go to hell, what about Phatto Masi?'

On the first of August, Pakistani forces attacked Chambh and crossed the LoC. On the twenty-eighth of August, Indian forces captured Haji Pir. On that very day, 28 August 1965, in Saharanpur, Phatto Masi was cooking meat with black gram and Biji was boiling the black gram when the news arrived – eleven soldiers had been killed on the LoC ... one of them was Major Kulwant Singh.

Two Soldiers

PAKISTAN WAS created.

India was already there ... so there was nothing to create!

For both, the age of snatching and grabbing was on in full swing.

'I have given the inkpot; but I won't give the pen!'

When the pen was given, the nib was snatched away. One broke the slate, while the other tore the schoolbag ... just like schoolboys!

They had set out with hockey sticks. But they did not have a ball. And they could not see the goalposts. The umpire had retired and gone to England. So, what could they do? They began to fight...

It was the year 1965 ... the boys had grown up by now. So, they started fighting again. Many stratagems were adopted. There were more tears than blood.

There was no sign of the border. After all there is no wall or gate. The platoons of soldiers would often get lost while fighting each other. Some went off in a westerly direction; others in an easterly direction.

Somehow a check post was left deserted somewhere.

Only two people were left there. One was a cook; he was Indian. The other was a driver or something else; he was Pakistani.

Be that as it may, both were sworn enemies of each other. Why were they enemies? Neither had an answer to this. Except for a gun each, neither had anything else. They had some bullets, yes, for a gun without bullets is ... like a barren woman, isn't it? ... What could they do?

They fired their guns at each other for a couple of hours and then they became bored. The Pakistani was near the well and so he had control over it. But he did not have either a bucket or a rope to draw its water.

The Indian had control over the check post where he had food but neither a fire to cook nor water to drink. There were sacks full of potatoes. There was even a tandoor, though it was kept outside the check post exactly in the line of fire from the well which was under the control of the Pakistani. And the Pakistani was sitting in wait to fire from his vantage point.

When they became bored with the bullets, they tried to kill each other with words.

The Indian said, 'Bhootni-ke! Your army has left you behind, hasn't it? To die?'

The Pakistani lobbed a stone in his direction and broke the glass of a window.

The Indian screamed, 'You chirimaar! Why are you throwing stones? Have you come to fight with slings?'

After a pause, the man beside the well answered, 'You didn't go? When the rest of your soldiers fled with their tails between their legs? You would have saved your life if you had run away. Now there is no escape for you!'

The man inside the check post fired from his gun.

The reply came from the well, 'Why are you firing in the air? Use your tongue.'

'Why? Have you spent all your bullets?'

'No, I have plenty left. In any case, one is enough for you!'

And he fired a bullet too.

The man from the check post said, 'Why? Why are you wasting your bullets? What will you do when they are all gone?'

'I will get more.'

'From where? Will you get them from America?'

'You also get your guns and missiles from there, and on top of that you also take bribes from them, saale baniye!'

The man inside the check post lobbed a potato towards the man at the well.

The man at the well laughed out loud.

'A cook will always stay a cook! Fill your gun with potatoes!'

The man inside the check post asked in great surprise: 'How do you know?'

The man at the well laughed again.

'I was right, wasn't I? ... If you were a soldier, you would have used bullets, and not your tongue!'

'You seem to be a chirimaar yourself ... You are using stones to scare away the crows ... Am I a crow? ... Am I going to fly away?'

'If you fly away, I will shoot you down with my gun, roast you and eat you up.'

'Are you hungry?' The man inside the check post threw another potato towards the man at the well. 'Here, eat this potato.'

'Don't you have boiled ones? Send me some with a sprinkling of salt on them.'

'You people have already betrayed your salt ... now you want more salt?'

The man at the well was silent for a while; then he spoke in a changed tone.

'As though you have been true to your salt. You used to eat what we produced by dint of our hard work. In front of our eyes, you slaughtered those you used to call Amma and Abba ... you tore them limb from limb, you bastards! ... Traitors!'

There was a perceptible change in the tone of the man in the check post.

He asked, 'Where are you from?'

'Bhopal. And you?'

'Gujranwala ... near Lahore,' he answered after a pause.

'You people did the same ... You stripped them naked and paraded those you used to call your mothers and sisters. I had left my grandfather behind. You people didn't even spare the elderly. You tore him to shreds and then you burnt our entire neighbourhood to the ground.'

And suddenly a silence descended upon both.

After a long time, a voice came from the well.

'Listen ... do you have a rope or a bucket?'

'What will you do with it?'

'I want to draw water from the well; I am thirsty.'

'Yes, that's what the tappa says: *khu de kande baike pyaase mar gaye.*'

'You speak Punjabi?'

'Why won't I speak Punjabi? I am from Lahore! Do you understand it?'

'I was raised in Punjab! Why won't I understand it?'

'Have you forgotten your Bhopali?'

'How can I forget it? It's my mother tongue!'

'And Punjabi?'

He spoke in Punjabi and asked him, 'What's your name?'

'Arun Bakshi. And yours?'

'Bakhshi Asif Ali!'

In his excitement, Arun got to his feet holding the gun in his hand.

'Oye, you son of a ... You sister-*** ... Our names are almost alike.'

Asif fired a shot from his gun.

'Don't you dare swear at me, you mother***! I will riddle you with holes!'

The glass in the window burst. A shard hit Arun on his forehead and blood gushed out. The situation that had softened somewhat deteriorated once again. With great difficulty, Arun wiped the blood and tied a bandage.

Now Arun too took aim and sat alert. A pane in the window hung loose. No one spoke for a long time.

After a long pause, Asif's voice was heard.

'Ullu ke patthhe ... are you hurt?'

Arun did not answer. Instead, he crouched beside the window and tried to get a good shot.

Asif spoke up again. 'Oye, why have you gone quiet?'

When there was still no answer, he popped his head up and said, 'At least you should have said farewell before going ... I was...'

Arun fired a shot.

The bullet hit the pulley on the well, making the wheel turn...

Asif shouted: 'What have you done? At least take aim properly ... Now the rope and pulley have both fallen into the well.'

Arun replied: 'I will shoot your head off! Too bad I missed ... Asking for a bucket, the bugger! Want water, do you? I will drink your blood!'

'I'll see you, you cook! Let's see who is going to drink whose blood!'

'Bloody chirimaar!'

Once again, silence reigned. A kite flew across the sky. Its scream pierced the afternoon.

Neither of them spoke. After some time, smoke could be seen rising near the well. Arun could see it from where he crouched beneath the window. He tried to get up and craned his neck to get a better look but, still, he couldn't see too clearly. He spotted a helmet lying behind the sacks. He put the helmet on his gun and moved it up the window, as though he were getting up.

Asif called out, 'Cut out the act! The helmet doesn't move like that when it is on the head!'

Arun lowered the helmet.

'If you have the courage, put it on your head and stand up. I will pierce holes through you.'

'What's with that smoke? Who are you signalling to? ... You are in our territory. You will be caught.'

There was a short interval. The bitterness in Asif's voice had lessened somewhat.

'Let them catch me. At least they will give me something to eat!'

Arun's tone too changed a little.

'What are you roasting?'

'The potatoes you had thrown at me. I am burning a little grass and roasting them. Do you want some?'

Arun became thoughtful.

'Throw a few more,' Asif called out.

Arun was hungry too but how could he ask the enemy?

'We get packaged food ... there are kababs and salads and tins of cut fruit as well.'

'Oh come on, come on! Don't fly so high! We are not in the American army; we are both equally poor. I know what you get to eat. At least we occasionally get to eat meat; you people must be getting only vegetables. Ladies' fingers, brinjals, spinach and the blasted potatoes!'

'Are your potatoes done yet ... shall I give you some salt?'

'Throw it across.'

'You are going to eat our salt ... and be faithless to it?'

'Don't sprinkle salt on my wounds, kutte-kamine!'

This time, Arun laughed as he said: 'You love to watch our films, don't you? All our films always have this dialogue... Kutte-kamine!'

'Tell me, how is our Dilip Kumar?'

'I like that! How is he yours?'

'He is our Musalman brother and he was born on our side.'

'But you were not born there? So?'

'Even you weren't born there?'

'So?'

'So what?'

Both found themselves at a loss for words. Suddenly, the sound of a helicopter was heard overhead. Arun went close to the door and tried to open it a crack. He fired once in the air. Then he locked the door from inside. Asif too had heard the helicopter. He tried to make a guess. He heard the shot and asked, 'Hey, who are you calling out to?'

Arun did not answer.

The sound of the helicopter seemed to be coming closer.

The helicopter was landing. Its blades were making the trees bend. Asif and Arun became alert.

Arun asked, 'Can you see?'

'Yes, I can.'

'Whose is it?'

'I can't tell.'

'You should run away; or surrender. Raise your hands and come out.'

'You also come out. Raise your hands. Who knows whose is it?'

The sound of the helicopter came closer still. Arun unlatched the door.

Asif too sat on his knees, his gun at the ready. Arun loaded his gun and sat beside the door.

Suddenly a large parcel fell in the open space between them, and the helicopter began to climb back in the air.

Arun ran towards the parcel but Asif fired a shot. He rolled over and hid behind the tandoor. And when Asif came forward, Arun fired a shot. He rolled over and took cover behind the sacks lying in front of the check post.

Both had been hit by a bullet each. Arun was bandaging his shoulder. Asif was clutching his leg and groaning. Both were now out in the open. One was crouching behind the well, the other behind the tandoor. And lying between them was a parcel, wrapped in a black sack.

Both were panting. Both had their eyes glued to the parcel. Asif spoke up first: 'What's in it?'

'Who knows? Could be letters ... Or ammunition!'

Angrily, Asif said, 'Has your mother sent so many letters?'

Arun fired a shot. 'Don't talk nonsense!'

With a scream, Asif rolled over.

Instinctively, Arun called out: 'What happened? Where did it hit?'

'Your mother's ... skull!'

Arun laughed.

'Why are you laughing?'

'What did you think? That your mother had sent you a money order?'

After a pause, Arun said, 'What did you think? Postal packages come like this out here.'

Asif too laughed. 'Bugger...' And then he fell silent.

After a while, Asif repeated, 'Bugger...'

Asif now began to hum.

*What if I had got hit in my heart
You would have been left alone without an enemy*

*The loneliness would have killed you in the desert
You would have gone mad in this check post...*

Arun laughed and answered in a two-line verse:

*What will anyone do alone at the border
Without an enemy, it has no meaning, no purpose*

The sun was going down. The darkness was spreading. In the same metre, Asif said:

*It seems we are the only people left on this earth
Once we were one, now Time has made us two!*

And then Asif said, 'It is almost night. If you have a light, switch it on.'

'Are you scared of the dark?'

'I am not scared of you, but what if a snake or something comes out?'

Arun got up. He left his gun there. He tottered inside, brought a lantern and hung it on the veranda outside. Then he sat down ... right in front of Asif.

The sun went down.

Asif began to croon:

*Long are the sagas of borders
The soil soaked with blood
Heer's Ranjha is dead.*

And in reply, Arun sang:

*Long are the sagas of borders
The words of brothers hurt
They speak with bullets now.*

Partition

SOMETIMES LIFE leaps and bounds like a wounded leopard, leaving traces of its paws along the way. If you try and connect these traces with a single line, what a strange picture emerges!

It was sometime in the year 1984-85 that a certain gentleman used to write to me often from Amritsar, saying I was his brother who had been lost during the Partition. His name, I think, was Iqbal Singh and he was a professor at Khalsa College. After the first few letters, I wrote him a long letter explaining that I was in Delhi during the Partition, that I lived with my parents, and that I had lost no brother or sister during the communal riots of those days.

Despite this, Iqbal Singh remained convinced that I was his long-lost brother and that I was either unaware of the incidents of my childhood, or had forgotten about them. He believed that I was very small when, while travelling with a caravan, I had got separated. It was possible, he believed, that the people who had saved me and brought me to this side had never told me so; or, perhaps I was so grateful to those people that I was unwilling to consider any other eventuality.

I even told him that I was not that young in 1947; I was close to thirteen years old at the time. But no matter what I said, Iqbal Singh was not willing to listen. Eventually, I stopped answering. After sometime the letters stopped coming.

A year must have passed when a film-maker from Bombay, Sai Paranjpye, sent me a message. A certain gentleman from Delhi called Harbhajan Singh wished to meet me in Bombay. She didn't tell me why he wished to meet me but she did ask me some rather mysterious questions – the sort I didn't expect from her.

'Where were you during the Partition?' she asked.

'In Delhi,' I told her. 'Why?'

'Just like that.'

Sai speaks beautiful Urdu but her next question was in English. 'And your parents?'

'They were in Delhi too. I was with them. Why?'

She went on speaking for some time but I began to feel as though she were

drawing the curtain of English over our conversation; for she always speaks to me in Urdu, an Urdu that she calls Hindi.

Eventually, Sai burst out: 'Look here, Gulzar, the thing is I am not supposed to tell you but there is a certain gentleman in Delhi who thinks you are his son who was lost during the Partition.'

Now this was a new story. A month later I got a telephone call from Amol Palekar, the well-known actor from Bombay. He said, 'Mrs Dandavate wants to speak to you. She lives in Delhi.'

'Who is Mrs Dandavate?' I asked.

'The wife of Mr Madhu Dandavate, the former finance minister in the Janata government.'

'But why?'

'I don't know. But when can she call you, and where?'

I had nothing to do with Mr or Mrs Madhu Dandavate. I had never even met them. I was surprised. But I told Amol Palekar the timings when I take calls at my home and office.

The story was beginning to turn. I didn't even know this was a link in the Sai story but Amol, being an actor and a fine one at that, did a remarkable bit of acting and didn't give me any reason. However, I am certain that he knew the reason when he called me.

A few days later I got a call from Pramila Dandavate. She told me that a certain Harbhajan Singh, who lived in Delhi, wished to come to Bombay to meet me because he thought I was his son, a son who was lost during the Partition. I think it was the month of November, as I recall now. I told her, 'I shall be coming to Delhi in January for the International Film Festival. I expect to be in Delhi on the tenth of January; I can meet him then. Don't send him here.'

I also asked her who Sardar Harbhajan Singh was. She told me he had been the civil supplies minister in Punjab during the Janata government.

I went to Delhi in January and stayed at the Ashoka Hotel. I received a telephone call from Harbhajan Singh sahab's house asking when he could come to meet me. By then I had understood that he was some very respectable elderly person. The person on the telephone was his son. Out of respect, I politely suggested, 'Please don't put him to any trouble. Please come here tomorrow in the afternoon. I will accompany you to his residence and meet him there.'

I was surprised to find Sai in Delhi, and Amol Palekar too, and both knew about my next day's appointment.

The next afternoon, the gentleman who showed up to escort me was Harbhajan Singh's elder son. His name was Iqbal Singh.

Punjabis age but they don't show their age. Harbhajan Singh sahab got up and met me with great affection. I too touched his feet, as a son would. He introduced me to the mother, "This is your mother!"

I touched the mother's feet too.

The sons were calling him 'Daar-ji'. There were other sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren – a full-fledged family. And a large house too! This openness is to be found not only in the lifestyle but also in the temperament of Punjabis.

After the courtesies and formalities, food and drinks were brought in and Daar-ji told me where he had lost me. "There were terrible riots. Fires raged all around and, scorched in those flames, news and gossip reached us, but we stayed put. The zamindar was a Musalman and, being a friend of my father's, was kindly disposed towards us. The entire qasba knew that till he was there, no one could even knock on our door at an inappropriate hour. His son used to study with me in school. Perhaps his name was Ayaaz. But, still, we would be terrified when the caravans travelling from the hinterland passed through our qasba. We would quail from within. The zamindar would come and meet us every morning and night and bolster our courage. He treated my wife like his own daughter.

'One day, a caravan passed wailing and weeping so piteously that we spent the entire night standing at the roof of our house watching them go past. And not just us but the entire qasba was wide awake; it seemed as though that was our last night and the next morning would surely bring catastrophe. We felt as though we were being pulled out by the roots. It was as if this were the last of the caravans, and it was time for us to go. There would be nothing left after this. Like a traitor, I left my friend the zamindar.

'He would tell me every day, "Come to my haveli, live with me. Put a lock on your house for a few days. No one will touch a thing."

'We pretended to keep up our spirits. In reality, we were terrified. To tell you the truth, Sampooran kaka, our faith was shaken, we were trembling to our very roots. All the caravans went past our house. We had heard that if you managed to enter Jammu from Mianwali, an armed contingent would escort you on your onward

journey to the plains.

‘We left our homes as they were, open. To tell you the truth, our heart had made the call; it was time now to leave the soil of our homeland. It was time to go, to march onwards with two elder sons, a daughter who was then eight or nine years old and you, the youngest! It was a two-day journey to Mianwali on foot. We would find something to eat in the villages we passed through. The riots had taken place everywhere, in fact were still taking place, but everywhere the rioters had come from outside. By the time we reached Mianwali, our caravan had grown substantially. People from far and wide had joined us. It reassured us, son, when we saw others who were as dispossessed as us. We reached Mianwali at night. Several times in our journey, we had to let go of our children’s hands and, in a panic, we would call out to them frantically. There were so many others like us; there was always a commotion.

‘God knows how the rumour spread that there would be an attack on Mianwali that night. A bunch of armed Musalmans were expected to attack us. I have never heard such a silence of fear and terror. We set out on our onward journey in the night.’

Daar-ji fell silent for a while. His eyes were moist. But the mother was watching me silently, her eyes focused unblinkingly on me. There was no emotion on her face.

Daar-ji spoke softly, ‘And on that night, during our flight, God knows how we lost both our two younger children. If we knew how...’

He left the sentence unfinished and fell silent.

I can’t remember quite clearly, but at some point, some of the sons and daughters-in-law got up, others changed their positions.

Daar-ji continued, ‘We waited for a long time after reaching Jammu. We went to each camp and we looked at every arriving caravan. There were countless people. Sometimes entire caravans went towards the Punjab; others moved down to the plains to wherever they had their relatives. When we lost all hope, we too went towards the Punjab. Here too we searched in all the camps. All we had now was a search. Our children were lost; we gave up hope.

‘About twenty-odd years later a group was going from India for a pilgrimage to Panja Sahab. We too felt like going. We had thought of going back to see our home on several occasions over the past many years, but the good lady here would fall to pieces at the very thought,’ he said, gesturing towards his wife. ‘And then we had never quite shed our guilt about not having trusted the zamindar of our qasba. We

felt ashamed whenever we thought about it.

‘Anyhow, we made up our mind to go but before leaving I wrote a letter to our zamindar and to his son Ayaaz, and apologized for what we had done. I narrated our flight and described the state of our family and our two lost children, Satya and Sampooran. I had thought that perhaps Ayaaz might not remember us but the zamindar, Afzal, wouldn’t have forgotten. I didn’t post the letter; I thought I would go there and post it. I would be there for twenty to twenty-five days; if he wished to meet me, surely Afzal Chacha would reply to my letter. If he called, we would go, otherwise ... What is the point of digging up old graves? What would we find?’

Harbhajan Singh-ji sighed deeply. ‘The letter remained in my pocket, Punni-ji.* My heart refused to listen to me. We returned via Karachi and, on the day we were leaving, I don’t know why, I don’t know what made me do it, but I posted the letter. Without wanting it, I found myself waiting. But as the months passed that too stopped. I got a reply after eight years.’

‘From Afzal Chacha?’ I asked. He stayed quiet. I asked again, ‘From Ayaaz?’

He moved his head slightly and said, ‘Yes, it was the answer to my letter. The letter said that Afzal Chacha had passed away a few years after the Partition; the burden of managing the entire zamindari had fallen on Ayaaz. And a few days ago, Ayaaz too had passed away. When his papers were being looked at, this letter was discovered in a pocket of a shirt. Among the crowd of mourners, when someone who had come to offer condolences read the letter aloud, another man present there said that the girl mentioned in the letter had come all the way from Mianwali to offer her condolences. The girl was called and questioned; she told them her name was Satya. She said she had got separated from her parents during the Partition and now her name was Dilshad.’

The mother’s eyes were still dry but Daar-ji’s voice sounded full of tears again. ‘We took the name of the Guru and set out again. We met Dilshad there, at Afzal Chacha’s house. She remembered everything. But she couldn’t remember her house. We asked her how she had got separated from us. She said, “I grew tired of walking. I was sleepy. I went and lay down behind a tandoor in the courtyard of some house. When I woke up there was no one there. All day long I would look everywhere and then return to sleep in the same place. After three days, when the owners of the house returned they woke me up. They were a husband and wife. They kept me with them thinking someone would come looking for me; but no one came. I became a

sort of maidservant in their home. They gave me food and clothes and they kept me well. Then, after many years, maybe eight or nine years later, the master of the house performed a nikah with me and made me his wife. With God's grace, I have two sons: one is in the Pakistan Air Force, the other one has a good job in Karachi.”

Writers have the habit of asking strange questions, questions that are not really necessary.

‘Was she surprised to see you? Did she cry when she met you?’ I asked.

‘No, she was not surprised but she did not seem particularly affected either,’ Daar-ji said. ‘In fact, whenever I think about her, it seems as though she smiled every now and then as she heard us, as though we had come to narrate a story to her. I don’t think she felt we were indeed her mother and father.’

‘And Sampooran ... was he not with her?’

‘No, she didn’t even remember him.’

And the mother repeated what she had already said a couple of times earlier. ‘Punni, why don’t you believe us? Why do you hide from us? You have even hidden your name! Just as Satya became Dilshad, someone must have made you Gulzar!’

And after a while, she continued, ‘Who gave you the name Gulzar? Your name is Sampooran Singh.’

I asked Daar-ji, ‘Who told you about me? How did you think that I might be your son?’

‘You see, when we met our daughter after thirty to thirty-five years thanks to the Waheguru, our hopes were raised once again and we began to think that He might help us meet our son too. Iqbal read your interview in some magazine and he told us that your real name is Sampooran and that you were born that side, in Pakistan. And he launched his search. Yes, I have not told you yet that his name, Iqbal, was given by Afzal Chacha.’

The mother said, ‘Kaka, you stay where you like. You have become a Musalman ... that’s all right but at least acknowledge that you are our son, Punni!’

I gave all the details about my family to Harbhajan Singh and, disappointing him once again, came away.

This happened seven or eight years ago.

It is 1993 now.

After many years, I received a letter from Iqbal and a card for a Bhog with the announcement that Sardar Harbhajan Singh had passed away to his heavenly abode.

The mother had said that the youngest one must be informed.
And I felt as though I had indeed lost my Daar-ji.

Fear

HIS NERVES were stretched taut with fear and his knees trembled as he sat as though about to be seized by an epileptic fit.

It had been four days since communal riots had gripped the city. The curfew would be relaxed for a short while in the morning, and then again for a bit in the evening. As soon as the curfew was relaxed, people would hurriedly buy their daily essentials. Some others would quickly do a spot of killing and looting, start some fires, knife a couple of people, drop a few dead bodies and lock themselves in their houses well in time for the curfew. Hot gossip and hot blood flowed in a ceaseless stream in Bombay. Although the radio and television were making constant announcements that the situation was under control and the city was fast returning to normalcy.

To prove that the situation was back to normal, local trains had begun running till late in the night since yesterday. Most of the carriages were empty, but the lights running along the tracks provided for a flicker of movement in the darkness that had frozen for the past four days. The sound of a train rattling past momentarily dispelled the stony silence that had descended on the settlements on either side of the tracks and brought hope of life again. Yaseen could hear the train and when he sat up he could see. Tomorrow it would be five days since he had been missing from his home. By now the family would have given up waiting and must be out searching for him.

The day was about to end when his patience ran out. He reached Andheri station as soon as the curfew was lifted for the evening. The platform was deserted. But the train's arrival time was blinking on the indicator.

The train approached the station slowly, not in its usual style; it seemed as if it was scared, fearful, being cautious. There were a few people in the train, no more than one or two. He couldn't decide which carriage to get into. After all, the majority are Hindus. People were huddled in tight bunches of twos and fours. He kept standing on the platform and, just as the train was about to leave, leapt onto one of the carriages. He chose an empty compartment. Carefully, he looked around. There was

no one in it. Then he slunk into a corner seat on the last bench. He could see the entire compartment from here. He breathed a sigh of relief as the train gathered speed.

Suddenly, a head bobbed up in the far corner of the compartment. Yaseen broke out in a cold sweat. Once again, an epileptic fit seized his knees. He bent so low on his seat that if the other man were to come in his direction, Yaseen could hide under the bench. Or else, he could stand up to his full height and take a position.

The door was not far. But leaping out of a moving train spelt no other danger save certain death. And even if the train were to slow down, that man ... Suddenly, the other man stood up. He looked around. There seemed to be no trace of fear on his face. He must be a Hindu for sure; that was Yaseen's instinctive reaction. The man strolled over to stand at the other door of the compartment. His muffler fluttered in the breeze like a torn flag. He stood there, looking out, for some time. And then it seemed as if he was testing his strength against something. Yaseen could see him clearly from where he sat. The man appeared to be tugging at something, sometimes pressing, then raising, then pulling again. It seemed to Yaseen as though he was wrenching something out when suddenly the rusted iron door slid in its groove and shut with a loud thud.

It was good that Yaseen did not scream out, though the man himself had seemed startled by the loud sound. He had looked all around, and his gaze had lingered a little longer in the corner in which Yaseen was crouched. Yaseen became suspicious: What if the man had indeed seen him? Or else heard him? The man's strength put yet another fear in Yaseen's heart: if the two were to come face-to-face, would Yaseen be able to match him?

The man strolled to stand beside the other open door. The train raced through the deserted Jogeshwari station. Had it stopped, Yaseen might well have got off. But since this was part of the curfewed neighbourhood, the train had not stopped. A curfewed area was the safest; at least the police was there. And by now even the military had been called into the city. Khaki-clad forces could be seen in the riot-hit areas, as well as fully armed uniformed military men, their guns and rifles at the ready. But no one was afraid of the police. Crowds would throw stones and empty soda bottles without any restraint, and now even acid-filled bombs. If the police burst tear-gas shells at the crowds, people would cover their faces with damp handkerchiefs, pick up the shells and hurl them back at the police.

When the bakery in Sakinaka had been burnt – the one in which he worked – what had the police done? It had stood in the distance and watched the spectacle. People had fled through the narrow alleys to those garages where battered and broken cars stood with the paint peeling off their skeletal frames. They had run to hide among the cars to save themselves. There were eight or ten men. God bless Bhau; he had tugged the gamchha tied around Yaseen's waist and pulled him into the shop beside the tea seller's as they ran. Bhau knew he was a Musalman whereas he himself was a Hindu. Why had he run? Bhau told him that a crowd doesn't wait to ask one's religion when it is thirsty for blood. Its thirst can only be quenched with blood or fire. Burn! Kill! Destroy! Its anger is cooled only when nothing remains in front of it.

The rumble at the door startled him. By now, the man had shut both the doors at the far end of the compartment. For a long time, he kept staring in the direction where Yaseen was crouched out of sight. Once again fear gripped his head in its shackles. Why was the man shutting the doors of the compartment? Was he planning to kill him, leave his blood-stained corpse in the compartment and get off the train when it stopped at the next station?

The train was slowing down. Probably it was approaching a station. There was greater self-assurance than before in the man's gait as he began to approach him with slow, measured steps. Yaseen began to breathe heavily. He felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. He was afraid. His breathing grew laboured; he couldn't swallow the phlegm building up in his throat. What if he were to gag? What if he coughed suddenly as he crouched beneath the seat?

The train stopped at a station. The man coolly strolled over to stand beside the door facing the platform. He had one hand thrust in his pocket. Surely there was something in there: a pistol, or a knife? Yaseen thought of dashing across and jumping on to the other side. But by the time he could get out of hiding under the seat, the man would surely slash him in the stomach. Or, why the stomach? He could just as well slit his throat so that not a sound would emerge.

Yaseen peered out from the corners of his eyes. The man was looking out. The platform was silent; there wasn't so much as the sound of a footstep. Yaseen wished desperately for someone to show up. But who could tell who might come? A Hindu? Or a Musalman? Let there be another Hindu. He might be kind-hearted as Bhau was. How he had made Yaseen wear his janeu and taken him from the tea stall to his

room. Bhau had kept him for four days. He had said, 'I am a Maratha; I don't eat meat every day. If you want, I can get it for you. I don't know how good it will be. I don't know about halaal; in any case, things are so bad outside that vegetables are rotting in Andheri but there is no one to sell them. You can carry away as much as you want.'

And the radio was repeatedly saying that the city was slowly returning to normality. Trains were running. Buses too were plying in some areas. In the past four days, he had been very worried about his family. Surely, his family too was worried about him. His one big fear was: What if Fatima were to set out in search of him and reach the bakery? He could see the railway track from the room he was hiding in and he could also see some trains. But Bhau didn't let him leave.

The train moved with a shudder and Yaseen landed with a thump from the room to the compartment. The man was holding the train compartment's rod with his left hand and standing with great self-assurance. His right hand was still in his pocket. The train crawled for a bit and kept moving at a snail's pace. Why was the train not gathering speed? There could be no reason for it not getting the signal. There was hardly any traffic on the tracks. So far not a single train had come from the opposite direction.

The train kept crawling for a long time. And then it stopped on Bhayandar Bridge. The creek was under it, the same stretch of the sea from which, according to newspaper reports, bodies had been fished out.

Yaseen was feeling choked. It was impossible to carry on with that fear. And why was that man not taking his hand out of his pocket? It was clear from the look in his eyes that he was about to attack! What would happen when he did? Would he ask Yaseen to come out? Or would he pull Yaseen by the hair on his head, drag him out and put a knife at his throat? What would he do? Why was he not doing anything?

At that very moment, the man took his hand out of his pocket and once again began to test his strength. He was trying to close the third door too. Yaseen's escape route was about to get cut off. Beneath them lay the sea. If he were to jump, death was a certainty. His fear was reaching its limit. The cave was about to shut.

Suddenly, Yaseen leapt out of his hiding place. Startled, the man turned around. His hand went back into his pocket. God knows wherefrom the strength came to Yaseen.

'Ya Ali...' Yaseen said and lunged for the man. He held the man by his legs and

hurled him out.

Yaseen heard the man's scream as he fell ... 'Allah!'

Yaseen stood in his place. The train moved. Yaseen was surprised. 'Was he a Musalman too?' But having escaped from the clutch of fear, he was feeling as though he had returned from the maw of death.

That night he told Fatima, 'If I hadn't done so, what proof of being a Musalman could I have given him? Should I have stripped naked?'

Smoke

THE TALK had caught fire very slowly but soon enough its smoke had filled the entire qasba.

The chaudhry had died at four in the morning. By seven, when his wife, the chaudhrain, had regained her senses after a prolonged bout of crying, the first thing she did was send for Mullah Khairuddin. The servant was given strict instructions not to say anything to the mullah. After the servant escorted the mullah into the courtyard and went away, the chaudhrain took him to the bedroom upstairs where the chaudhry's corpse had been removed from the bed and placed on the floor. A pale white face draped in white sheets, it had white eyebrows, a white beard and long white hair. The chaudhry's face emitted an other-worldly glow.

The mullah saw him and immediately recited '*Inna lillahe wa innalillahe rajaoon*' and offered a few token words of condolence. He had barely sat down when the chaudhrain took out the will from a cupboard, showed it to him and made him read it. The chaudhry's last wish was that he should not be buried; instead, he wished to be cremated and his ashes strewn in the river which watered his land.

The mullah read the will but remained silent. The chaudhry had done a lot of good in the name of religion in this village. He was known to give equally to the Hindu and the Musalman in the name of charity. He had had a proper brick-and-mortar building constructed for the makeshift village mosque. What is more, he even had a regular concrete structure erected at the cremation ground of the Hindus. Even though he had been sick for many years now and confined to his bed, he had given instructions to the mosque authorities for the iftari to be made for the poor and the needy at his expense every Ramzan. The Musalman of the neighbourhood were devoted to him and had great faith in him.

Now, reading the contents of the will, the mullah was worried. What if it caused trouble? As it is, things were bad in this country: the Hindu had become *more* Hindu and the Musalman *more* Musalman!

The chaudhrain said, 'I don't want to have any religious ceremony. All I want is that arrangements be made for him to be burnt in the cremation ground. I could have

told Pandit Ram Chandar but I didn't call him because I don't want things to take a bad turn.'

But things did take a bad turn when Mullah Khairuddin sent for Pandit Ram Chandar and gave the following prudent advice: 'Don't allow the chaudhry to be burnt in your cremation ground, for it is possible that the Musalman of this neighbourhood might create trouble. After all, the chaudhry was no ordinary man. Many people were associated with him in different ways.'

Pandit Ram Chandar assured him that he didn't want any mischief in his area. Before the news got any further, he too would explain matters to some of his specially chosen people.

But the spark had been lit and before long the smoke began to spread.

'It isn't about the chaudhry or the chaudhrain; this is a matter of faith and belief. It concerns the entire community and religion itself. How dare the chaudhrain even consider having her husband burnt instead of buried? Is she unaware of the fundamentals of Islam?'

A few people insisted on meeting the chaudhrain. She spoke to them with great patience: 'Bhai, this was his last wish. The body is nothing but dust after all; burn it or bury it. Why should you object if his soul finds solace in cremation?'

A certain gentleman grew especially agitated. He asked: 'Will burning him bring solace to you?'

'Yes,' the chaudhrain answered briefly. 'Fulfilling his last wish will bring me solace.'

As the day progressed so did the chaudhrain's anxiety. The task she wished to accomplish with accord and agreement was becoming prolonged and protracted. There was no complicated plot or mystery or secret behind the chaudhry's wish. Nor was there a philosophy aligned to a particular religion or belief system. It was a simple, straightforward human desire: that not a single trace of him should remain after his death.

'I am till I am; I won't be when I cease to be.'

Years ago, he had said this to his wife, but who has the time to go into such matters in any detail in one's life. The chaudhry, however, had written it down in his will. Ensuring that his wish was fulfilled was, for the chaudhrain, proof of her love and loyalty. After all, it isn't as though one should forget all one's promises as soon as the person goes away.

The chaudhrain tried to send Biru to fetch Pandit Ram Chandar but the pandit

could not be found. His colleague said, 'Look here, bhai, we must put tilak and recite mantras before burning the chaudhry.'

'Arre bhai, how can you change the religion of a dead person?'

'Don't argue too much. We can't set fire to a pyre without reciting shlokas from the *Gita*. If we don't do that, the soul doesn't find release. And if a soul does not find release, the restless soul will trouble all of us: it will torment you and me. We are deeply indebted to chaudhry sahab. We can't do this to his soul.'

Biru went away.

Panna spotted Biru emerging from the pandit's house. He went inside the mosque and informed the congregation.

The fire that had almost died out flared up again. Four or five respected Musalman went so far as to announce their decision in unequivocal terms. They were especially indebted to the chaudhry; they could not bear to let his soul wander. They gave instructions for a grave to be dug in the graveyard behind the mosque.

By the time evening fell, some more people gathered at the haveli. They had decided that the chaudhrain had to be intimidated, the chaudhry's will had to be taken from her and burnt; without the will, what could the old woman do?

Perhaps, the chaudhrain had sensed this. She hid the will, and when people tried to scare and bully her, she told them: 'Ask Mullah Khairuddin; he has seen the will and read all of it.'

'What if he denies it?'

'If he places his hand on the Holy Quran and denies it, I will show it; otherwise...'

'Otherwise what?'

'Or else you can see it in court.'

That the matter could reach the court now became clear. It could even be that the chaudhrain would send for her lawyer, and the police, from the city. She could call the police and, in their presence, ensure that her decision was carried through. But what if she had already called them! For, how else could she put her husband's corpse on slabs of ice and talk with such self-assurance?

At night, news spreads like wildfire. Someone said: 'A man has just been spotted going towards the city on a horse. The rider had swathed his head and face with cloth, and he was seen coming out of the chaudhry's haveli.'

One man had even seen the rider coming out of the chaudhry's stable.

According to Khadu, he had not just heard the wood being chopped in the haveli's

backyard but had also seen trees being felled.

Without doubt, the chaudhrain was making arrangements for a pyre to be lit in her backyard. It made Kallu's blood boil.

'You cowards! A Musalman will be burnt on a pyre tonight and all of you will sit around watching the flames.'

Kallu leapt out. Killing and bloodshed was his profession, but so what? After all, faith too counts for something.

'Friends, not even one's mother can be dearer than one's faith.'

Accompanied by four or five of his comrades, Kallu entered the haveli by scaling its rear wall. The old woman sat alone beside the corpse. Kallu's axe sliced her head before she had time to react.

They picked the chaudhry's corpse and set off towards the rear of the mosque, where a grave had been dug. As they walked, Ramza asked, 'What will happen when the chaudhrain's body is found in the morning?'

'Is the old woman dead?'

'Her head has been split; she is unlikely to survive till morning.'

Kallu paused and looked at the chaudhrain's bedroom. Panna understood what was in Kallu's mind.

'Carry on, ustad; I know exactly what you are thinking. Everything will be taken care of.'

Kallu carried on towards the graveyard.

That night when the flames from the chaudhry's bedroom leapt up to touch the skies, the entire qasba was filled with smoke.

The living had been cremated.

And the dead had been buried.

Rams*

SACHETGARH is a tiny hamlet; it is on this side, in India. Sialkot is a large bustling town; it is on that side, in Pakistan.

Captain Shaheen is a handsome retired army man; he lives in New York. He runs a restaurant named 'Kashmir'. His office looks like a bunker at a battlefield. Its roof is festooned with a lattice of plastic leaves. Army caps hang on one side. Military-style boots litter the floor, and a uniform hangs on one wall.

Amjad Islam Amjad, a well-known Urdu writer and poet from Pakistan, had invited me for lunch to this restaurant. And Vakil Ansari had come to take me there. He is from that side but he keeps inviting all the Urdu poets and writers from this side. In this way, he indulges his great love for Urdu.

He had organized a celebration of the works of Gopichand Narang, an eminent Urdu litterateur from India, in several cities in America. He owns a hotel which is his source of income. Sardar Jafri from this side and Ahmed Faraz from that side have often stayed at his home. Vakil Ansari's favourite statement is: 'Life has been reduced to being like teetar-batair.' Or else sometimes, 'We are nothing but teetar-batair.' It is a very original statement. I have never heard or read it anywhere – neither on this side, nor that!

When inviting me to Captain Shaheen's restaurant, Amjad Bhai had said, 'If it's Eastern food you are looking for in New York, you won't find a better place than Shaheen's.' Amjad Bhai exercises enormous caution with his words; he does not call it Indian or Pakistani cuisine. In fact, he doesn't even call it 'Punjabi food'. Instead, he calls it 'Eastern food'. And he goes to great lengths to avoid the word 'Kashmir'.

But Captain Shaheen, like all army men, is a courageous man. With a laugh, he said, 'Both sides lay a claim over Kashmir. And that is why our restaurant is doing so well.'

For some reason, he had resigned from the army in a huff. But he is still proud of having served in the army. 'Had I stayed on for another month, I would have retired as a major, but I liked the prefix "captain" before my name.'

He had fought in the 1971 war. And as he told us, 'All the action had taken place

in Bengal during that war. 'There were only minor skirmishes along the Punjab border.' And he was involved in the action in a front in the Sialkot sector.

He had grown a slight beard now and, while talking, had the habit of constantly patting his moustache.

I asked, 'What is the one emotion that makes a man a soldier?'

'It's a matter of style ... the uniform has a glory of its own, and the cap spells rank ... everything combines to give a man a certain personality. There is no desire to kill another or take a life...' He laughed and then continued, 'Our fight – India's and Pakistan's – is hardly a fight. We fight like schoolchildren ... twisting an arm here or bumping a knee there, breaking someone's slate here or snatching the other's slate there, poking someone with a nib here or spilling ink on the other there. Do you remember how we used to run from school to watch the fighting rams? Surely you must have gone too?'

He seemed to be an extremely down-to-earth person. There was an incredible honesty in the way he spoke. I must have asked him something, because he said, 'In the beginning, even a soldier is scared but after you have fired two or three bullets, you feel neither fear nor panic. When bullets are fired, the air is suffused with the smell of gunpowder. At the front, that smell gives you a high. And if the bullets don't fly for a while, the spell can break. It isn't necessary for the bullets to hit anyone.' He paused, before continuing, 'If a man becomes familiar with fear, it doesn't remain a fear.'

I felt as though he was saying that it was simply a matter of becoming familiar with death at the battlefield. It will happen when it happens.

He went on, 'In the beginning, when we are being trained, and our knees and elbows get scraped as we crawl on the ground, we wonder whether we should continue in this job or quit. But when you commit a mistake and your brigadier shouts at you and makes you stand up and asks you, "Where are you from? Speak up!", believe me, the name of your village or your province doesn't come to your lips. You feel such shame!'

Perhaps, in the years ahead, that becomes a matter of honour for the soldier.

Captain Shaheen continued, 'Sachetgarh is a tiny village on that side, a village with a handful of houses. It had almost emptied out long ago, being so close to the front; those who had stayed too fled once we reached there. But it was necessary to inspect every house. If an area falls in your hands without a fight, there's always the

likelihood of the enemy having played some trick.'

Captain Shaheen also told us that there is quite a bit of difference in the temperament of the people on this side and that.

'It's the same Punjab, but both the civilian and the soldier on this side are aggressive, whereas those on the other side are more cool-headed. The farms and villages and fields on that side extend right up to the border. On our side, we set up our check posts or settle our villages at least 200 to 300 yards from the border. Small groups of about five or six soldiers patrol up and down the border on both sides. Sometimes they are so close to each other that one can light the cigarette for another on the other side.

'Most of the soldiers on this side are Punjabis, whereas on the other side you find mostly non-Punjabis. Yet the ones on this side usually call out and ask the ones on the other side: "Where are you from, bhai?"

'If it is a Madrasi, he usually answers in English; or else usually one gets to hear an Urdu-like Hindi. After gaining control over Sachetgarh, I was searching the houses along with four or five soldiers when, upon pushing open the door of a shed, we spotted a scared boy crouching in a corner. The soldiers called me, "Sir-ji!"

'The boy leapt and ran to hug me the moment I reached there. The soldiers pulled him away. I didn't know what to do. When I asked about his mother and father, he couldn't give any answer. He was terror-stricken and trembling. I told him to run away, but he didn't. I put him in the jeep and took him to the last check post. I gave him food, set up a makeshift bed on the floor and told him to sleep. I told the soldiers not to say anything about the boy to anybody. Strictly speaking, he was our prisoner of war. It was my duty to inform my headquarters and have him sent to prison along with the other captives. But there was something about his innocent eyes; I couldn't bear the thought of making him suffer in any way.

'The next afternoon, I took off my military badges and went to that same village. There was a field a short distance away from the village. In the distance, I saw an elderly Sikh washing his hands and face at a tube-well. I called out, "Oye, Sardara, come here!", and gestured to him to come closer. He came, wiping his face with the free end of his turban.

'I asked him, "You didn't go away?"

'With great surprise he said, "Where?"

'Everyone has left the village and gone ... why haven't you?

'He lifted his hand and taunted: "I had left my village on that side, with you. Have you come to take my fields now?"

"The sardar was looking angry. To pacify him, I said, "A seven- or eight-year-old boy from Sachetgarh has come to my side. His mother and father have possibly fled from this village."

"So?"

"If I bring him here, will you take him to his parents?"

"The sardar looked thoughtful. After a long time, he shook his head. "All right."

"I said, "I will come at five in the evening. I will bring him along."

'I had never seen such laughter bursting forth from behind such yellowing teeth. The sardar laughed as he said, "Let him go; take me instead. My village is on that side ... ahead of Sialkot ... Chhajra." And swaying all the way, he went back. Even the name of his village was enough to make him heady.

'I couldn't go that evening. Our commander had come on a tour of inspection and it nearly cost us our lives to keep that boy hidden. We had fed him and hidden him in the ledge above the control room. When the commander went to the control room, we whisked the boy away and hid him among the sacks in the storeroom. Everyone was terrified because what we were doing was a crime in the eyes of the law and if we were found out, several of us officers could get suspended. I seriously contemplated asking two of my soldiers to put the boy in a sack and throw him in the sardar's field. We were in mortal dread as long as the commander was there.

'Reports of the action in Bengal were reaching us; they were extremely discouraging for us. The Indian forces were supporting the Mukti Bahini, and Yahya Khan ... anyway, let it be...' He fell silent.

There was a long pause; the captain's eyes became moist. Finally, he said: "The next day too there was a great deal of movement of different armed battalions. The entire day passed in this manner. It was almost evening and the sun was about to set when I took the boy and reached the border. I was surprised to see the sardar waiting there for me. A small picket of four or five soldiers was with him. One of the soldiers asked me, "Are you a captain or a major?" We don't wear our stripes on the front but a senior officer is easy to spot. The man asking me was a captain or major too. I went up and shook hands with him. Then, I handed the boy over.

'He is from here ... we found him hiding in a house in Sachetgarh.'

"The officer asked the boy sternly, "So, boy, where are you from? Who are your

parents?”

“The boy looked scared again. He lifted his eyes and looked towards me, and said: “Chacha, I am not from here; I am from there.” And he pointed towards our side. “A little ahead of Sialkot ... I am from Chhajra.”

‘Everyone was dumbstruck.

‘I looked at the sardar. His yellow teeth were showing. He stepped forward and put his hand on the boy’s head. Eyes brimming with tears, he asked, “Really? You are from Chhajra, are you?”

‘I shouted at the boy, “So what were you doing here?”

“Tears flowed from his eyes. The boy answered, “I had run away from school to see the fighting.”

Captain Shaheen was telling us, ‘Believe me, both of us army men stood in front of that boy like two foolish headmasters. And our faces were looking like those of rams.’

The Jamun Tree

‘G^{EO ... rg ... iiee!}’ A reedy, shrill voice echoed from one end of the road to the other. George’s mother, Flora, was a middle-aged woman. She was dark of complexion but had sharp well-defined features. She was standing on the stairs and calling out.

‘Picks up his marbles and sets out as soon as the day begins. Come home ... your papa is calling you.’

‘Coming, Mummy. Let me finish this game,’ George yelled from the other side of the road.

Hearing Flora’s voice, Babu, who lived next door, stuck his neck out and winked outrageously at her. Flora smiled and went back inside.

Ahmed wiped the stickiness from his eyes with his fingers. He selected a small marble, positioned it in the crook of his finger with great style, twisting his lips all the while, and tossed it in the air. The big marble landed in the groove and the moment it found its target, the small marble too got into its groove, a bit like a timid mouse entering its burrow. Once again, Ahmed had won. George took out the last marble from his pocket, wiped it against his shorts and, with a last piteous glance, handed it over to Ahmed.

‘Never mind, beta,’ eight-year-old George was telling nine-year-old Ahmed. ‘You always win when we play unti and the marble has to be positioned in the crook of the finger. Try the other version with me – gutthi...’

‘Is that so? Let’s play now.’

‘Let Papa go to the office; I’ll come back later.’ George ran across the street and clambered up the stairs.

Ahmed tipped the contents of his bulging pocket on his palm and sat back, resting his back against the jamun tree. He separated the good marbles from the bad, put them in his mouth to wet them and rubbed them till they gleamed; then, he put them away in his potli.

The clock tower struck seven.

‘Hurry up, Amma, I’m getting late for school.’

‘Here, beta, here ... take this,’ Amma said, putting two-paisa worth of gur sev in Nikka’s pocket.

‘Hey you, Nikka! What about the marble due on you!’

Nikka stopped in his tracks, petrified. He looked at Amma for help.

‘Let it go, boy. Let him go to school,’ Amma said, fiddling with her basket.

Ahmed stepped forward and grabbed Nikka’s schoolbag.

‘You won’t listen, will you,’ Amma said as she reached out for Ahmed while Ahmed lunged for Nikka’s pocket, grabbed a couple of gur sev and popped them into his mouth.

Amma held Ahmed by his shirt and said, ‘Come with me to Dinu ... You good-for-nothing wastrel ... You start troubling all the kids in the neighbourhood from morning.’

‘Leave me, you old crone, or I will break your leg! Let go ... Let go of me ... or I will break every bone in your body!’ Ahmed screamed.

‘Come with me to Dinu ... he will fix you!’

‘What can Dinu do to me?’

‘Is that how you talk about your father? Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?’ Amma rapped Ahmed sharply at the back of his head. Several marbles bounced out of Ahmed’s pocket and rolled onto the street.

‘You old hag! You crone!’ Ahmed picked his marbles hurriedly and ran away.

‘You bastard, you mother-f***, come here!’ Standing in front of his shop at the far end of the street near the clock tower, Dinu the ironsmith called out to his son. This was Dinu’s special form of address. Dinu would begin his shower of abuses from early morning itself, starting with bastard and ending with mother-f*** and sister-f***. He was about forty-five years old and had a slight stoop. Wearing a cane cap on his head, a khaki military-style vest on top of a filthy lungi, he would struggle with the iron all day long. In the evening, after he had finished his work, when he would sit on the cot outside his shop, Mehmood would fill the huqqah and keep it beside him. Hanif and Akram would press his feet before they took leave for the day. Dinu would clear the snot from his nose and wipe his fingers on his lungi. Soon, Mehmood would lock the huqqah and cot inside the shop and go away while Dinu would come home, reciting ‘*Alhamdo lillahe rabb-ul alimeen*’.*

Dinu had been living in Fasih Building for over twenty years. Once upon a time,

Basanti used to sell her flowers under this very jamun tree. And Dinu used to fix horseshoes at the crossing on the same road. Dinu and Basanti were in love with each other. When the tall and blue-eyed Basanti, with her basket of flowers atop her head, used to walk past the crossing, the muscles in Dinu's arm would bulge and, with a loud expletive, he would hammer a nail hard into the horse's hoof. Basanti would glance at him, smile and move on.

Then, Mallik of Sabzi Mandi gave 500 rupees to Basanti's father, had a nikah performed with her and forcefully took her to his home. No one could do anything in the face of Mallik's wealth – not the law, nor the force of Dinu's hammer. Basanti came to Fasih Building and, from Basanti, turned into Malkani. In the past twenty years, Dinu had grown from one who fitted horseshoes into a full-fledged ironsmith. And on the same spot beside the road he had set up his own shop.

Sardar Sohan Singh lived above Dinu's shop; he ran a moneylending business. He was full of grievances against Dinu: one that Dinu started pounding his irons early in the morning and ruined his sleep; the other, that Dinu uttered the filthiest of abuses in the loudest possible voice. He had aired his grievances against Dinu with nearly every inhabitant of the building but never to Dinu.

'Now, tell me, what if he turns around and swears at me?'

But once when Dinu swore at his son, Nikka, Sohan Singh flew into a rage. When he cooled down somewhat, Dinu asked, 'Sardar-ji, which bastard abused your son? I will fix the swine who even lifts his eyes at these children.' Sardar Sohan Singh fell silent.

Tannn ... tan. ... tann...

Gajju turned around to look at the clock tower. It was striking ten. He put his child's medicine in his pocket and began to walk faster. He saw Sardar Sohan Singh standing in front of his shop. He thought of changing tracks and going over to the other side but Sardar-ji had seen him.

'Jai Ram-ji ki!' Gajju came close and folded his hands in greeting. Sardar-ji nodded slightly in response.

'Gajju, your second instalment...'

'I will give it next month along with the next one, huzoor; my son has been ill...'

‘All right ... here, take this charpai to the jamun. And call Mirza-ji; ask him to bring the chessboard along.’

Gajju placed the charpai under the tree and went to fetch Mirza-ji.

Noora, Mohan, Babu and Kallan were playing cards, sitting on a charpai. One of the cards had frayed so much that a piece of thin cardboard was being used in its place.

‘It’s a heart and not a club.’

‘Does this look like the face of a king to you?’

‘It looks like your father’s.’ Mohan flew into a rage.

‘Must be your mother’s.’ Noora also got enraged. He threw the cards down and got to his feet.

‘Noora, do you want to play marbles?’ Ahmed called out from the other side of the jamun tree.

Now they were short of one hand. The game stopped. Mohan’s hands were busy shuffling the cards.

‘There ... Iqbal is coming. Call him over.’

Iqbal’s eyes were glued to the jamun tree. He waved his hand.

‘So, huzoor, what is going on?’

‘Yaar, we were playing cards but Noora ran off. Come and have a game with us.’

‘I can’t, huzoor, I have to distribute this huge bundle of mail.’

‘Come on, yaar, you can do that later. It isn’t as if you deliver the mail on time daily.’

‘Oh no, huzoor, I will lose my job if the government comes to know.’

‘Oh come on, sit down, how will the government come to know?’ Mohan held Iqbal by his hand and made him sit down on the charpai.

‘Iqbal, is there a letter for me?’ Mirza-ji asked, tossing a pawn in one hand.

‘No, huzoor, there is one for Lala-ji.’

Lala Lekhraj, who was explaining a move to Sohan Singh, got to his feet.

‘Watch out, save your white, Mirza-ji.’ Sardar-ji twirled his moustache and looked at Mirza-ji. Mirza-ji was engrossed in figuring out his next move.

Tann-tann-tann...

By the time the clock tower struck twelve, life under the jamun would be in full

swing. All day long there would be a hustle and bustle under the tree but the afternoon was by far the busiest time. Children would return from their schools and come running here to play marbles or langar. The labourers, who returned from their duty at 3 or 4 a.m., would wake up and, after their meal, would settle down for a game of cards or chausar or chess. Others living in Fasih Building too would come here in search of some shade, telling stories and gossiping. While some of the older ones would sit at one side engrossed in discussing politics.

'Well, Congress or Muslim League ... the goal is freedom,' Vaid-ji would say decisively.

Jaichand would elaborate. 'That's true, Vaid-ji! The first thing to do is to get rid of the goras. The rest we will decide. After all, we are brothers. We will fight but we will come to a mutual understanding.'

'Ji, sir, after all, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are brothers,' Sardar Sohan Singh would agree.

Lala Lekhraj would sit silently and listen. Often, he would simply walk away. He worked at a senior level at the Ganesh Mill. Among the labourers he would often be heard saying, 'Bhaiyon, if the English want, they can put an end to all those people who speak against them. But they don't say anything. They ensure everyone has food and clothes and a roof over their head. What is wrong with them?'

Nikka, Veera and Shoki would climb the tree. They would dangle the langar on the paan-seller's shop. Sometimes, when the string slackened a bit, the stone would hit the Lala's bald pate. Startled, he would sit up.

The boys would break into peals of laughter.

Several times during the day, a screeching voice would emerge from the stairs in front of the jamun and stretch from one end of the road to the other.

'Geo ... rg ... iiee!'

'I am here, Ma!' George would shout back.

Babu would look towards the stairs and wink outrageously at her. Flora would smile and go back inside.

And sometimes, fed up of the heat of the furnace, Dinu would pick up his huqqah and, wiping his nose with his lungi, come and sit under the shade of the jamun. Some children would gather around the Chinaman as he made his rounds selling his Chinese fabrics and tease him.

'Chini chacha, chu-chu, Chini chacha, chu-chu!'

By the time evening fell, the hustle and bustle would die down somewhat. The children would return home. The excitement of chess and chausar too would abate. Amma would gather her wares back in her basket. The sound of the temple bells would hang heavily in the air.

A nameless sadness would spread over the jamun tree. The leaves would begin to droop. The long, sturdy branches would rest on the two facing buildings, like a father's protective hands. Many children had grown to maturity under this jamun tree that stood solemnly, hiding thousands of secrets in its bosom.

When 1947 came around, the chess game between Sohan Singh and Mirza took an ugly turn. Communal riots erupted. Streams of blood sprang forth and splattered across the face of the jamun tree.

Homes began to be looted. Dinu's corpse was thrown under the jamun. Someone said, 'He is a Musalman!' Another said, 'Burn him so that he goes to hell!' A third began to chop off branches from the jamun tree and pile them on top of the corpse. Another brought things from Dinu's house and flung them over him. A tin box fell on the dead man's chest and all the marbles tumbled out.

Someone was pulling Ahmed's dead body by the leg and throwing it on top of the blazing pyre when he stopped suddenly. Everyone gathered around.

'What is it?'

'It's Nikka.'

'Burn him quickly before Sohan Singh finds out.'

The people from Fasih Building cut down all the branches on their side and burnt two more corpses.

Dead bodies kept burning and the branches of the jamun kept getting chopped. And the goras were defeated.

The Scent of Man

AS THE palm tree began to grow upwards, it took its shadow up with it. For, it would get burnt if it were to stay on the ground.

The palm had grown upwards so that it could peep into the valley. It wanted to know where the smoke rose from every day and spread all over the valley. It could see the trunk of the smoke but not its roots.

When the kite sat on its branches with a piece of meat between her claws, the palm asked, 'Phuphi, where does this smoke come from?'

'From the basti of human beings.'

'What are they burning?'

'Human beings.'

'Who is burning them?'

'Human beings.'

'Why are they burning?'

The kite had no answer to this, nor any proof.

Again, smoke billowed out from somewhere in the valley. The kite simply said, 'Aadam-boo ... The scent of Man,' and flew away.

The palm clamped its nostrils. The smoke carried the scent of Man.

The smoke rose from Lal Chowk. Anmol had a shop there. He didn't do anything wrong, yet one day he was ruined. Two terrorists entered the house in front of his shop and began to shower bullets blindly in all directions.

He was amazed. How do the terrorists get here? No one knew. Where do they come from? Again, no one had a clue. They had AK-47s and countless ammunition, bullets, grenades, rocket launchers and so on. There were police on all sides. Then how did they manage to get past with all this?

Sometimes it seems like all of this is a performance. A drama is being staged and the terrorists will be shot dead when it reaches its climax. Sometimes two ... sometimes four ... a couple of soldiers or policemen too get killed. And sometimes some innocent characters as well.

Anyhow, that is what happened. In the beginning of the play itself, a few innocent

passers-by were killed. Anmol escaped through the back door of his shop.

Then the military reached the spot. They entered Anmol's shop and made it their vantage post. They began to lob shells at the house in front of it. The house caught fire. A few bombs were thrown at the shop too. The entire neighbourhood emptied out. After a seventy-two-hour exchange of fire, the terrorists, by now hungry and thirsty, were shot dead. The corpses of innocent pedestrians were taken away and the bodies of the slain terrorists were dumped on the road.

Anmol was devastated. There was nothing left in his shop so there was no reason to lock it. He left everything as it was and sat at home.

Someone advised him: 'Write to the government. You will get compensation.'

The local leader reasoned with him, 'Are you mad? It isn't a question of one shop; it concerns all of India and all of Pakistan. We shall have to prove that these terrorists had come from Pakistan.'

Innocent Anmol didn't quite understand. He asked, 'Sir, who should I write to in Pakistan?'

The leader laughed. 'First let us gather evidence.'

A neighbour tried to explain. 'For sixty years both countries have only been gathering proof.'

'What will they do with all the proof?' Anmol asked.

'When they sit down for a dialogue, they will play a game of cards with it. There, that's my proof ... that's yours.'

The palm tree became sad. Listlessly, the kite swooped into the valley. She had grown accustomed to the scent of Man. She was forever searching for it.

Several days later when she returned to perch on the palm, the tree said to her: 'Phuphi, your wings are coated with dust.'

'Yes, I have travelled a great distance.'

'And your eyes are filled with amazement and exhaustion.'

'Yes, I have seen some truly incredible sights.'

Before the palm could ask anything else, she spoke up.

'I saw heads without torsos, whose eyes were wide open ... and torsos without heads which people were preparing to burn.'

The local leader informed them that Pakistani forces had attacked the border last night and beheaded five of our soldiers, and taken their heads away.

‘But what will they do with the heads?’

‘They will keep them in a cupboard like evidence.’

‘And what about their torsos?’

‘Our government is asking for the heads so that the torsos can be identified. All the torsos have the same sort of uniform and the bodies have no identifying features whatsoever.’

‘Surely their pockets would have the photographs of their wives and children? Or maybe a letter from their mother?’

‘No, nothing at all. They cut their pockets too and took everything away.’

True to his name, Anmol said something quite priceless. ‘When the two countries sit together for a dialogue, is it possible that they bring the heads and we carry our torsos. We can fit the two and find out who the people were.’

The neighbour said, ‘There is no need for that. Once the men have enlisted in the army, they are only a number. On which day, in which place, how many were killed ... no one asks who was killed.’

Two days later, the local leader came with the news that all five torsos were being burnt. Because the proof had changed and it had been established that on that night the Pakistani terrorists had worn Indian uniforms and infiltrated into our side. Our soldiers captured them, beheaded them and threw the heads across the border.

The neighbour asked, ‘But what is the proof that those corpses are of Pakistani terrorists? And only the uniform is of the Indian army?’

The local leader smiled. ‘This is the greatest thing about our investigation. We have found out that the thread used in stitching those uniforms is from Pakistan.’

In utter vexation, the palm shed the leaf on which the kite had perched.

The palm leaf lay on the ground and kept getting drier and drier. God knows what annoyed the wind one day; as she swept and cleaned, she blew the leaf and flung it into the valley below. The palm looked from up above and saw a part of it entangled in some wire, dangling in the valley.

Anmol’s shop was completely burnt. All he had was a small house. He and his wife

lived on the first floor, and a cow lived downstairs. Anmol opened a shop in the ground floor and tied the cow outside. In a few days, someone untied the cow and took it away. Or perhaps she herself ran away along with her rope and peg. Anmol searched everywhere for her, in homes, neighbourhoods, pastures, in the hope that he might spot her somewhere.

The neighbour asked, 'Any clue? Any proof?'

'No trace of her hooves, no sign of her rope!'

'She may have gone across the border.'

Anmol sighed and said, 'If I hear a burp from that side, I might get a proof.'

'Burp? Who...' The neighbour was about to say more but he stopped.

One night, again, there was a lot of gunfire. Somewhere far away on the border some bombs fell too. A lot of smoke rose in the valley. The palm stayed awake all night.

A lot of Indian soldiers, carrying a lot of guns, were climbing a hill. Pakistani forces were firing at them from the top of the hill. The Indian squad took shelter behind some bushes and dispersed. Some explosions were heard on the check post at the top of the hill ... and then their forces too dispersed.

The local leader announced, 'The Indian forces have captured the Pakistani post ... they have found a great deal of ammunition and guns.'

'Whose?' Anmol asked.

'Pakistan's ... they had Chinese markings,' the local leader answered with complete assurance.

'What does that prove?' the neighbour asked.

'Our guns have American markings.'

'We had one proof,' the local leader told them, 'but that has slipped from our hands.'

'What was that?'

'There was a corpse!'

Both Anmol and the neighbour looked up at the leader.

'There was firing from both sides, and our platoon was still climbing the hill when one of our officers lobbed a grenade and reached the check post at the peak all by himself. The Pakistani forces had abandoned it and fled by then. But they had left behind the dead body of one of their comrades.'

Saying this, the leader fell silent.

‘Then?’ they asked.

‘Our officer, the one who had reached the top, was a sardar.’

Again, he fell silent.

This time, the neighbour asked: ‘And? What happened then?’

‘Morning was about to dawn. The sound of gunfire had died out. There was utter silence. And the sardar stood at the check post all alone. He turned the corpse around. There were no stripes on the uniform but from his appearance the man looked like an officer.’

Everyone was quiet.

Then the local leader spoke up, ‘Meanwhile, a Pakistani soldier, with his hands raised in the air, came and stood near the check post.

‘With his gun aimed at the Pakistani soldier, the sardar asked: “Surrender?”

‘After a moment’s pause, the Pakistani soldier said: “No! I want permission to carry back my friend’s dead body.”

“Who was he?”

“Habib Ali ... my childhood friend and our officer. I can’t leave him here for the kites and crows.”

‘Our officer looked closely at him and said: “Don’t worry. We will bury him with full military honours.”

“Please allow me to take him. I will take him to our village, I want to bury him after offering a proper namaz-e janaza.”

‘The sardar stayed silent for a while. Then he said: “What is the proof that you will do so?”

‘The Pakistani soldier snapped back: “Look here, you are a sardar and I am a pathan. I have no greater proof to offer!”’

The palm stood silently in the morning light. It could hear the shriek of the kite as she circled the skies.

Aadam-boo ... The scent of Man...!

Search*

THE ENTIRE suitcase was opened at the Delhi airport. It is all right till they simply rummage through clothes, but when male police officers pick up bras and wave them about before putting them back, a tremor runs through one's body. Would I hide grenades in my bras? When they picked up my lipsticks and began to examine them closely, I said: 'These aren't bullets; they are lipsticks. Keep them. Use them in your rifles if you can.'

The shameless fellow bared his yellow teeth and said, 'The days of the two-bore are long gone, memsahab; nowadays you get them with a hundred cartridges.'

The lady police officer with him had possibly caught my tone. She said, 'We have to be extra careful on a Srinagar flight, madam. Come ... come this way.' She took me for a body search towards a curtained but half-open cubicle.

I was on my way to Kashmir – in search of my roots. Even though I am not a Kashmiri. I knew that my parents had gone to Kashmir after their wedding for their honeymoon. By the time they returned, I had been 'conceived'. My birth had begun!

'On a houseboat floating on the icy waters of the Jhelum, on a carved walnut bed, when two souls had, for one resplendent moment, become one and given birth to a new life...'

In a very poetic manner, relishing every moment, Ma would narrate the stories of Kashmir to me, her stories about herself and Papa. She would say, 'He didn't know how to ride a horse. So, a table would be brought close to the horse. Papa would climb on top of the table while the syce would push the horse close to the table and Papa would mount. Still, five times out of ten, he would fall!'

Papa would remove the newspaper hiding his face and object, 'Don't lie; I fell only once.'

'And what about the time you tore your precious trousers?'

Ma was from Lucknow and Papa was from Kolkata.

'That's because the table had fallen; I didn't fall.'

'And when you fell on top of the syce?'

'The horse had run away; what could I do? Anyway, stop it ... when I take

Shonali, I will show her.'

Ma would draw a long breath and mutter, 'When will you ever go to Kashmir now? It was only those days that we could go every year. Buds don't burst into flowers anymore; only shells do. Skulls split open day and night out there...'

It must have been 1981 or '82. Or perhaps it was '82 or '83 when I was studying in school. I would get angry listening to the news. Who do the Pakistanis think they are? Grabbing my Kashmir from me like this? I thought of Kashmir as though it was my personal property.

Ma would tell me, 'We used to have a Kashmiri servant; he was just a young boy. We would employ him for the entire month when we went. His name was Wazir ... Wazir Ali. Sometimes we would stay at the houseboat, and sometimes at the Oberoi Hotel. At the Oberoi, we always chose to stay at the Annexe where the front lawn had two chinar trees – two large, stately, healthy trees. To me they always looked like a king and his queen, surveying the Dal Lake with their hands folded across their chests, while the rest of us stood on the lawn like their servants! They were both very self-respecting – one Jahangir, the other Noorjehan!'

Ma was really a poet. But all she ever wrote was a diary.

I reminded her, 'You were going to say something about Wazir...'

'Yes ... he used to put you in a pram and take you for a stroll in the evenings. One day we got worried as he was gone for a long time. He set out looking for you.'

'Who?'

'Your papa ... Arun Bannerji. He too was gone for a long time. When he returned in a taxi, there you were, with your pram and one other Kashmiri man. Wazir wasn't there. When I asked about Wazir, he looked angry. He put you in my lap, flung the pram in the veranda and called out to the Kashmiri who had accompanied him, "Murti Lal!" He took out some money and gave the man fifty rupees.

'The fellow was a talkative sort. He said, "How could you trust a little girl with that man? What if he hadn't gone home? What if he had run away with her?" With a toss of his hand, your father asked the man to go, and he went away.'

'My price was just fifty rupees?' I cut in, just for some fun.

'Fifty rupees was a lot of money back then.'

But I was interested in knowing where Wazir had taken me...

'He had taken you to his home, to show you to his grandmother. He was an

orphan. His parents had been buried in an avalanche. Their bodies were never found. Wazir was on duty at the hotel for several nights in a row. And so, whenever his grandmother got angry, he would lie that he had got married and even had a little girl. It was only because of his grandmother's bad temper, he would tell her, that he never brought the child home.'

I quite liked Wazir from what I heard of him; he seemed like the hero of a story. And his story seemed straight out of a fairy tale. It seems like that even today. All fairy tales are born in Kashmir and, when it snows, they come down to the plains. Sometimes I wonder if indeed he had run away with me, would I have been raised in Kashmir? But I didn't like the idea of being separated from my parents. So, I asked, 'Did Wazir never come back?'

'He did; he apologized profusely. And we employed him again, but we never sent you with him ever again.'

We used to have an album in our house. It had a lot of old photographs but Wazir was not in any of them. There were photographs of my childhood, shot in Gulmarg, Yuzmarg, Pahalgam and Chandanwari. They looked like illustrations from a fairy tale.

I was in college when I asked Ma, 'Shall I go to Kashmir during these holidays?'

'Don't you read the news? Watch TV? Don't you know the chaos that has been unleashed by the Kashmiris?'

I was still in college. There was a cricket match and Kashmiri young men raised anti-India slogans. Several Sikhs had joined them too.

Another incident happened at about the same time. Terrorists abducted a minister's daughter. I was about to quip, 'They must have taken her to show her to their grandmother', but Papa's angry face held me back. Papa was pacing the room. Suddenly, he turned around and roared, 'They are making compromises upon compromises. They are releasing terrorists who have been caught. What would have happened had she been the daughter of an ordinary citizen? It wouldn't have made the slightest difference to anybody. There would have been some announcements, that's all. Do such things not happen during times of disturbances? After all, so much happened during the Partition.'

Ma asked, 'Why don't they reach some sort of understanding with Pakistan? After all, they are behind all this.'

For the first time, I heard my father say, 'Our people are no less responsible. To

stay in power, both are bent upon shearing the sheep endlessly.'

I didn't quite like it. I don't know why I had a sense of ownership where Kashmir was concerned. Neither Papa was from there, nor Ma. Still...

At about that time, a good-looking Kashmiri young man had come to Papa's office in search of a job.

Papa asked him, 'Where are you from?'

The poor thing answered in a low voice, 'I am from Kashmir, sir; I am a Kashmiri. But I am not a rioter. I am not a terrorist.'

Papa turned him away gently. 'I don't have a job for you right now; you can come back some other time.'

I knew that was not true. Papa didn't want to get dragged into an inquiry. Those days the police would keep a strict eye on Kashmiris who had come down to the plains and taken up residence. And why just Kashmiris, people would refuse to rent out homes and spaces to anyone with a Muslim name.

Once, when Papa was in hospital, I had gone to see him. There, our Dr Basu had raised the subject of my marriage. I was in my final year and had already joined the *Hindustan Times* as a reporter. When Ma asked me if I was willing to get married, I had said, 'Yes, I will ... as long as he takes me to Kashmir for my honeymoon.'

'Kashmir? Now?' Papa made a gesture with his hand as if to say, 'Forget it!'

He could say no more. In any case, he was not allowed to speak much.

I said to Ma, 'You have always said that my life began there.'

Papa waved his hand in the air and went away. For ever!

Now, after so many years, I was going back in search of my roots. My heart was bouncing in my chest like a rubber ball when the plane landed at Srinagar airport. The moment I set foot outside the airport, I came across a sight I had not seen anywhere in India.

My first thought was: Had the war begun? Had Pakistan attacked us? On the streets of Srinagar, I could see more Indian troops than Kashmiris. Tanks, trucks, guns, check posts, bunkers on every road, armed guards at the mouth of every alley.

The bus that took us from the airport stopped thrice on the way to Srinagar. Thrice, rifle-toting soldiers entered the bus. They looked in every corner. They poked and prodded our bags.

'Whose is this?'

‘What is inside this?’

Then they got off. The bus moved on.

I was already feeling suffocated. When the bus was stopped for the third time, a soldier looked at me with eyes that seemed to rape me and asked, ‘Where are you going?’

I didn’t like his use of the word ‘tu’. I asked a bit aggressively, ‘What do you mean by where I am going?’

He made a sound like a long ‘Huunnn’ and got off. I thought he possibly didn’t know English. No one in the bus budged.

I was looking for an ordinary sort of lodging and hoping to find some place near Dal Lake. If I had the money, I would have stayed at the Annexe of Oberoi Hotel.

The Dal Lake was covered with a thick layer of algae; rotting green vegetable matter was choking the water. A few houseboats could be seen but they were standing near the shore, like scared culprits. Wasted, desolate, tumbledown, as though they would rot away and sink in the waters where they stood, and be buried.

Time and again, my eyes would well up. Each time, I would rub away the tears irritably. I was cursing myself. Which Kashmir were you talking about? Where is the engraved walnut bed? Where ... and my throat choked up. For a long time afterwards, I didn’t hear my ‘normal’ voice.

No one was ready to keep a girl in a lodging house or a hostel. My English could not help me, nor could the *Hindustan Times* identity card in my purse. It seemed most inappropriate to take the help of the police or the military. The moment you mentioned them, a remote look came into people’s eyes.

Khalil put my luggage in his ‘auto’ and said, ‘You have come alone, memsahab; no one will give you a place to stay. Kashmiri people are very scared of Indian troops. They take away people and then...’ He paused, then added, ‘They are never seen again. God knows which lake they get lost in.’

The anger inside him manifested in the roar of the ‘auto’. I didn’t know where he was taking me. He spoke incessantly. Perhaps he was burning the diesel inside him. ‘No one is going to give you a room in any hotel. It will just provide the army an excuse to raid the premises. They will capture the owner and take him away. If the owner is old, they will take his young son or son-in-law or nephew, anyone, instead. Their eyes are set on the youth of Kashmir. They are bent upon destroying everything...’

His voice was getting louder. Suddenly, he stopped his 'auto' in an alley and turned towards me.

'What do you people want? What do you want from us? Leave us to our own fate, Be'n. Now even our greenery has turned red...' And his voice became like mine.

I sat there, covering my face with my palms. Never before had I felt so ashamed of being an Indian.

Khalil picked up my suitcase and entered his bua's house. She was his father's sister; she was middle-aged and seemed to be living alone.

'You stay here, Be'n. Stay with my bua. I will come every morning to take you wherever you want to go. Don't go alone anywhere.' He turned and went away, wiping his eyes. God knows why. He went away without saying a word about money or rent.

But I didn't stay put. I explained to Bua and set out. Their alley was not far from Dal Lake. I walked along the shore and reached Oberoi Palace. Its gate was shut and a barbed wire was strung along its walls. Perhaps they had shifted the entrance. I lifted the barbed wire and entered the premises. Some birds fluttered their wings and said something to each other; a few flew off to perch on another branch. They were alert. Slowly, carefully, I climbed towards the palace.

Sheets of tarpaulin hung from the ceiling to the floor of the verandas leading off the main gate. The hotel was shut. A segment of troops was living in one part; they had set up their own kitchen. A mustiness had settled over the verandas. I had to cover my nose with a handkerchief, such was the overpowering odour. The Annexe was shut. The lawn was littered with filth. And the two chinar trees stood with their heads bowed, their gaze lowered and hands folded – like slaves. Their shoulders had stooped. Both looked old.

Feeling suffocated, I returned to Bua's house. She had spread out a bed for me on the mezzanine floor.

I woke up to the sound of children's chirpy voices. For the first time since I had come here, a happy sound reached my ears. I got up and opened the rear window.

There was a graveyard right behind Bua's house. Children were playing hide-and-seek there. Strewn among the old tumbledown graves were countless new ones, covered with mounds of fresh earth. Perhaps this was the safest place for the children to play!

When I came down I couldn't find Bua. Water had been drawn for my bath; and

there was a towel and soap too. I am not used to bathing with cold water but this was not a hotel, after all.

Gingerly, I first wet my body with my hands, letting my skin get accustomed to the water. It was icy. Gradually, I began to pour it over myself. And as I did so, the water became like a dress. The moment I stopped I felt cold. So, I kept bathing and kept pouring water over myself. All my sorrows were washed away.

Bua had a young son; his name was Aziz Ali. He had been learning computers when he was taken away by the police. It was alleged that he had met some Pakistani. That was nine years ago; there had been no news of him since. Every time corpses fell in an 'encounter', Bua would go to see the bodies. Sometimes, she went to the police stations, sometimes to the mortuaries. When she heard of some place where prisoners were kept, she went to look for him there too. She had been to all the prisons in Kashmir. But she had kept her hand on the lambent flame of hope. She was not willing to give up. Her eyes had run dry but, still, she cried.

I said, 'Bua, perhaps he has gone to Pakistan. Or maybe they have taken him to Tihar Jail.'

'Where is that?'

'In Delhi.'

Bua's face fell but I couldn't bring myself to say that perhaps her son was dead.

One day, just before dawn, the entire neighbourhood was surrounded and cordoned off. Military trucks were positioned in all directions. Two searchlights were mounted on two trucks. An announcement was made on a loudspeaker directing all the residents to come out of their homes and assemble in the graveyard. All the houses would be searched. Within minutes, frightened-looking people came out of their homes as though they had rehearsed this drill many times. The sun rose. Soon it was noon. Hungry and thirsty people sat in their places without the slightest fuss or protest. The search operation continued.

I finally gathered my courage in the afternoon. I went up to the colonel and spoke to him in English. He allowed me to take Bua home as she was nearly collapsing with hunger and thirst. By the time I returned after escorting Bua home, there was suspicion in people's eyes. And a certain contempt and distance too.

Scared, I went and sat in a far corner.

By the time the drama enacted by the military police finally got over, it was evening. People began to return to their homes. When I got back, I found a lock

hanging on Bua's door. And my belongings, including my suitcase, were kept beside the door.

I dragged my luggage and reached the road. I sat down on the esplanade built along the edge of Dal Lake. I felt I had lost everything when a passer-by stopped and asked, 'Where do you have to go, memsahab?'

I tried to smile. 'I want to stay in a houseboat for one night.'

'There are no guests in houseboats now, memsahab. There are no houseboats left. There is one man, though; he lives in the houseboat he owns. It's his home.'

'Where?'

He pointed and said, 'There ... that is Wazir's houseboat.'

'Whose?' I got to my feet in a rush.

The stranger said, 'The man's name is Wazir Ali. He is an old man.'

'Will you take me there? I will request him, plead with him ... I am sure he will allow me to stay ... it's only for a night, after all.'

A little surprised and also somewhat half-heartedly, the man agreed to take me. He picked up my suitcase. 'Come, memsahab. But let me tell you he doesn't keep guests. In any case, no one comes any more. And why just guests...' He talked as he walked along. 'Even the birds that used to come from Russia and God knows where have stopped coming to this lake.'

I don't know why I was so hopeful that this would be the same Wazir Ali. The same Wazir who had abducted me when I was an infant. Or rather, I had wished that he had taken me away.

But it wasn't him. It turned out to be someone else. In any case, he agreed to let me stay in his houseboat for one night. He even made a bed for me ... on the floor. There was no carved bed in sight.

The next day I returned. I came back to the airport. Three times. At three places. My entire luggage was opened and checked. My bras and panties were whisked and inspected minutely. The sight of it made my breasts ache. Everywhere there were two queues, two cubicles. And the way the women officers touched me during the body search, it seemed as though they were lesbians. All of them. In the third cubicle, when they made me take off my shoes and socks, one of them asked me as her hands roved over my body, 'What's this?'

'It's for my period; I am having my menstrual cycle.'

At about the same time, I heard a familiar choked voice from an adjacent cubicle.

‘Who is there?’ I asked and almost pushed my way into the cubicle. Bua was standing in front of me. She held a ticket for Delhi in one hand. Her waistband was open. Her salwar lay on the floor and her shirt was tucked above. She was speaking in a rasping voice, taut as a tightly drawn rope, ‘This is the only place left to search ... go on, search it.’

She saw me and became nearly hysterical.

‘Which country have I come to? Is this my own country?’

She collapsed on top of her fallen salwar.

I could hear Khalil’s loud voice.

‘What do you people want? What do you want from us? Leave us to our own fate, Be’n. Now even our greenery has turned red. Even the grass that grows on our earth has become red.’

Over

BUJHARAT SINGH had got so used to speaking on the wireless that in the normal course of events, when he finished speaking, he would always say, 'Over!' We were standing near him. He said to us, 'You can pull up that cot and sit. Over!'

We pulled up the cot. Gopi whispered to me, 'What kind of name is Bujharat Singh?'

I shrugged. 'That's his name, what can one say?'

Bujharat Singh had been talking on the wireless for a long time.

'Get four sturdy men to sit on his back and let him run. He will be set right. Over!'

He waited for a response from the other side and then said, 'Tie a rope around his legs, use a stick and make him run. Make sure he runs at least two miles. Over!'

There was another pause while he listened. Then he said, 'It won't do any good starving him. He will only die. You talk such nonsense. Over!'

He was making these suggestions to help get a maddened camel under control in some distant check post. Gopi and I sat patiently on the other side of the lantern.

We were at a small check post in the middle of a desert, about 40 km from Pochina. We had come to Pochina, on the border of India and Pakistan, to shoot a film. It is a beautiful village. The houses look as though they have been made with crayons, like a drawing in a child's painting book. Even the check post is a kutcha house of bricks plastered with mud. There are two barrack-like rooms. A square alcove has been cut into one of the walls; a soldier in full uniform stands in it with a gun resting to his side. It seems so unnecessary. All the others stroll about in their shorts and vests, or sit in the sun, giving each other a massage with mustard oil, or else they are busy doing squats. When our heroine came, the poor things had to put on clothes and comb their hair. Our director found this location after a rigorous search. You can stand anywhere, look in any direction, all you would see is a vast undulating desert. And the wind constantly caresses and smoothens out the wrinkles in the sand dunes.

About two furlongs from this check post there is a block of cement: on one side of it is written 'India', and on the other, 'Pakistan'. Such blocks of cement are placed

after every two furlongs; in between there is an empty barren stretch of land, sand and loose dirt and a few scraggly green bushes that sheep and camel keep tugging at.

The animals are at liberty to roam on either side. You can't tell anything about state or religion by looking at them. As a matter of fact, you can't tell even from looking at their masters. But at least one can interrogate them; you can't do that with the animals...

We were given permission for three days. We could set up our tents. However, there was a problem. The boys could go here or there behind a mound to answer the call of nature; the girls were a worried lot. There was a makeshift latrine of sorts but it had no door, nor even a curtain.

'We go to the desert for all our needs. The sand serves every purpose. Where will we get so much water out here?'

'So where do you get the water for drinking and cooking or bathing?'

'There is a pipeline, sahib-ji, but it's controlled from Jaisalmer. There is always a shortage by the time it reaches here. So, we have to send for water tankers. That way the contractors are happy as they make money too.'

We had set aside one tent for the girls. We got our water from bottles as we had a sufficient stock of Bisleri. Our heroine, whom we called Dimpy-ji, had fired many bullets on the screen. But she had never fired real bullets from a real gun. She asked the soldier standing in the cut-out in the wall, 'Does it have bullets?'

'Yes, it does.'

'Can I see?'

The soldier stepped down. Dimpy-ji put one foot in the groove in the wall and clambered up. In front of her lay an empty desert ... like an exceedingly beautiful bedcover spread out on the ground.

Far on the right were two green trees; they were khejri trees, and squatting close beside them were some houses.

'Who lives there? Over there?' Dimpy-ji asked, gesturing in the distance.

'Those houses belong to the goatherds.'

'Is it a village?'

'Well, you can say it's a village of sorts.'

'What is it called?'

The soldier looked around a bit sheepishly. Several soldiers had trailed the heroine and were now standing in the doorway. They were all smiling. There was a senior

among them; he said, 'It has no name. Everyone calls it Pochina's Tail.'

A scratchy laugh ran through the crowd. A row of teeth glittered like a line drawn by a chalk.

Dimpy asked the senior, 'Can I fire this gun?'

He answered a little hesitantly, 'Yes ... yes, you can.'

'But what if someone fires back from that side of the border?'

'No problem ... we use a bullet here or there by way of greeting.'

'Really? What if I fire two shots?'

A smile was pasted on the face of every soldier.

The senior replied, 'It is a signal to allow someone who wants to cross over from our side to do so. If they wish to send someone over from that side they too fire two shots.'

Another line was drawn by the chalk. Everyone smiled yet again, their smiles frozen on their lips. Dimpy-ji fired a salute towards the check post on the other side.

The sound of the shot echoed in the empty desert and floated across to the other side.

Gopi Advani was standing beside me. Suddenly, he trembled. His lips quivered and his eyes became moist.

'What happened?' I asked.

Sheepishly, he said, 'Nothing. Sindh lies on that side ... my village.' And he went outside.

Several people in the unit tease Gopi by calling him 'Gopi Baby'. He is a very emotional person. His eyes well up when he talks about his mother. He is from Sindh. After Partition, he had continued to study in a school there for three or four years. Things worsened when the muhajirs from India reached Sindh. And so he had to flee. Today, suddenly upon seeing Sindh so close by, his eyes had welled up.

Nobody saw him for the rest of the day. At night, he was not to be found in his tent either. When the director asked about him, I came up with an excuse. 'He wasn't feeling too well; I have told him to go back to his tent and rest.'

But I was worried. What if he had gone over to the other side?

He wasn't to be found the next morning either. It was only the day after that I finally met him in the afternoon. It turned out that he had indeed set out for the other side. But he had barely travelled some distance when he got lost.

As he told me, 'The desert looks the same in all directions. You climb one dune

and the dune facing you is exactly the same as the one you have left behind. There was only one thing to do: look out for my footprints and return. But when I turned to look, they had disappeared. I was really scared. Thank God, Salman showed up.'

'Salman?'

'Listen, I am telling you, when the desert began to heat up, it seemed as though it was getting angry at me. "Why are you messing up my bedcover? Pick up your footprints and leave!" It is so vast, and I am so small. I took off my shirt and wrapped it around my head. After some time, I heard someone singing. Somewhere far away someone was singing a maand: "*Padharomaare des...* (Come to my land...)." I couldn't see anyone. I unwrapped the shirt from my head and began to wave it about. He spotted me from God knows where, because when I saw him he was standing on the dune just above my head. He was riding a camel. He said: "*Kithapiyo ache, sain?*"

'I can't describe how I felt when I heard these words spoken in Sindhi in the middle of that desert ... as though my mother had picked me up and placed me on her lap! He had asked me: "Where are you coming from?" I answered: "Pochina." He made me sit on the camel behind him and we sped off.'

'Where did you go?' I asked. 'Sindh?'

'No, we went to a village called Miyan Jallarh. It is behind Pochina. That's where Salman's home is.'

'So where is he from? Here? Or there?'

According to Gopi, Salman was on the run from the other side. He had killed a rival there and run away to find refuge in Miyan Jallarh. And then, three years later, he had married the woman who had given him shelter. Now he has two girls from that woman. They are growing up.

'He didn't go back?' I asked.

'He goes back ... to meet his beloved ... the same girl over whom he fought and killed. She is married now. She also has two children.'

After a pause, Gopi continued his story.

'When I told him I am from there, he immediately said: "Come, I will take you there. I will show you your village and bring you back." For a minute I was tempted; I wanted to go. I said: "Now? At night?" He said: "Arre, sain, I can forget the way but my camel never does! She will go all the way and stop at the same door each time."

"Whose door?" I asked but it was his wife who answered: "He has a woman there also ... at her door! Across the border!"

“You don’t mind?”

“I have told him ... bring her here. The two of us will stay together.”

Our borders are amazing places. What we read in the newspapers would have us believe that a line of fire has been drawn. And a river of blood keeps flowing.

It was the next day when our hero, Binna-ji, said to me, ‘Yaar, I can’t make do with this rum; arrange for some whiskey, even if it is Indian whiskey.’

We had heard about a village ahead of Pochina from where Indian whiskey is smuggled into Pakistan. And in exchange, silver comes from the other side. The police check posts have monthly meetings. The supervisors on both sides meet. How many sheep have come this side; how many camels have been caught that side ... all this is accounted for. And arrangements are made for the return of the animals that have strayed. And sometimes in the evenings the two sides sit together over a meal and drinks.

Gopi and I were sitting at one such check post on the border that evening ... with Havaladar Bujharat Singh. He had finished his conversation about the camel on the wireless. He had also given the order for the whiskey on the wireless. Now he was talking about a letter from his home.

‘I tell you, she is a fool ... she has gone mad. She writes anything that comes into her head. Am I supposed to defend India or fight over her two canals of land that have been grabbed by the zamindar. You know, the border is wide open; the enemy can sneak in at any time. The government has created nuclear bombs, but what has it done for us? Even a matchbox costs one rupee!’

Bujharat Singh’s bidi had gone out. He pulled out a bit of straw from the charpai, poked it into the top of the lantern and used it to light his bidi. He pulled on it a couple of times but the bidi went out again. At about the same time, as Gopi used his lighter to light his cigarette, Bujharat Singh smiled and said, ‘Wouldn’t our lives be better if we had a lighter too! We can’t light our bidi with a nuclear bomb, can we? Over!’

P.S.

Insights Interviews & More ...

A Dialogue: Gulzar and Joginder Paul

On Partition and Their Fiction



Translator's Note

Rakhshanda Jalil



A Dialogue: Gulzar and Joginder Paul on Partition and Their Fiction

Poet, author, lyricist and film-maker Gulzar and writer Joginder Paul have creatively visited their experiences of the Partition over and over again. Here is a dialogue between the two about the Partition they witnessed and the scars that it left on their literary endeavours. The discussion was moderated, transcribed and translated by Sukrita Paul Kumar.

On the Partition of India, 1947

Joginder Paul: At the time of Partition, we had no home of our own and lived in a rented place. The landlord was forever after us to increase the rent to Rs 15, something we could not afford. Times were difficult and we were very poor. I was doing my MA and didn't have a job. In hindsight, I would say I didn't leave behind any home in Pakistan. The idea of a home materializes only if you have a house. In fact, the house our friend got us in Ambala was quite comfortable and I worked for the dairy that he helped us open. Of course, the bloodshed I saw, the suffering all around, could well have been avoided. But then experiences of the blackest of tragedies vary from person to person.

Gulzar: Perhaps it has something to do with the age at which one witnessed Partition. You were doing your MA and must have been mature and sensible enough to contain it all. I was too young. My house was already divided, half of us were there and the rest here. Some had migrated – a process that had begun at the end of 1946. My father was stuck on the other side of the border while we had arrived here in Delhi. We were at Sabzi Mandi which was among the worst riot-affected areas. Sabzi Mandi, Sadar and Paharganj were terribly affected when the riots started. These areas were very close to our school. For me the riots were terrifying. We did not know what was happening, why it was happening. All we knew was that India was going to be divided. We saw people being killed and it didn't make any sense.

I remember a small incident. In school, there was a boy leading our daily prayers each morning – in M.B. Middle School, Roshanara Bagh – and right in front of me I saw a sardar dragging this boy tied with a rope, pulling him towards Roshanara Bagh. People peeped from their windows and doors but nobody came out. The roads were totally empty. When we asked him where he was taking this boy, he gave his reply, 'I'm sending him to Pakistan!' Soon he came back, down the same road, with a blood-soaked sword in his hands, almost triumphantly. Oh the horror of it! People want to know how I reacted to this. Did I cry? No, I didn't. You know, out of horror, a silence settles inside you. That is what happened to me.

Joginder Paul: Thankfully, we are dealing with this question today – more than half a century later. I wouldn't say I did not experience the horror that surrounded me then. You know what, I laugh at my stupidity today when I think of how I went by the political slogans of those times. A young man of twenty-three, and fed on the speeches of our local leaders, I actually believed as we crossed the border that I had achieved something by successfully bringing my family to what we should perceive as our country! But then where was our home? Even though I had no home as such even before Partition, what was wrenched away was my sense of belonging. After all, I had lived all my life in the same mohalla of our old city – on the right a chachi, a dadi on the left! When the front door of our house would be locked, I would jump from one roof to another, jump into the inner courtyard of our house and go to sleep. Even with my mother away and the door locked from outside. I belonged to the whole mohalla and the mohalla belonged to me. It is that feeling that I missed. Even today when I think of it, I believe my roots lie there. That apart, I must say that we were part of a slogan-fed mess. I blame our leaders for not planning the settlement of people who had to migrate...

Gulzar: My reaction remained buried within me for a very long time. I said I didn't even cry, but I wonder, should I have just wept, cried it all out? I was completely horrified by what I saw – half-burnt bodies on the streets, broken chairs and beds thrown over them. Even then the whole body wouldn't burn. I remember someone saying, 'Liaquat Ali Khan is coming!' And people began to clean up the mess

frantically...

Joginder Paul: Where was that?

Gulzar: Sabzi Mandi, here in Delhi.

Joginder Paul: Our experiences then must be very different!

Gulzar: I saw how they started to pick the bodies off the road, scrape them off the road with spades ... half-burnt bodies, corpses all around stinking away, and then, truckload of bodies going away. If I had cried, and cried enough, I may not have written at all. For twenty or twenty-five years I used to have nightmares, waking up in the middle of the night horrified, afraid to go back to sleep lest the nightmares returned. That fear settled in me. I think writing it out helped. The purging happened slowly, not in a gush. I took my time and did not write about it all at once. I may not have written short stories if it had happened that way. I took my time even to get a hold over my medium of expression.

Joginder Paul: Fortunately, we were picked up and taken into a military camp ... and, under military watch, our train came to the Indian side of the border and I suddenly saw all the suffering around me. We were kicked around and insulted for a while because we were totally dependent, we had nowhere to go, nothing to eat. Our relatives also feared we would settle with them permanently if they gave us shelter...

Gulzar: On the other hand, all our relatives coming from across the border were assured that Sardar Makhan Singh's house – my father's house – was available. The house in Sabzi Mandi became a sort of refugee camp. From morning till night each one would narrate his or her story, of what they witnessed, of tragedies shared and stories of how they managed to survive and arrive.

Sukrita Paul Kumar: Were you a refugee yourself or did you come earlier?

Gulzar: I had come earlier, but half of our family was oscillating. In fact, I too kept coming and going. We'd go to Dina and come back.

Joginder Paul: I too witnessed a lot of bloodshed that I never got over.

Gulzar: Camp scenes all around, schools closed. There were two very big camps close by, Kingsway and Chandaval. My father would send us to work there, 'Go boys, go and work there.' I remember one expression of his that really helped us. Paul bhai, I'd like to share that with you. Everyone was bitter with the Muslims and hated them, cursing them for their misfortunes. But my father kept a calm head. He'd say, 'Bad times are here! *Pralaya aa gayi hai!* It'll pass ... *Lang jayegi!*'

Sukrita Paul Kumar: How old were you then?

Gulzar: I was eight or nine years old. You know, I think it was those words of my father which helped keep our minds clean. He was coping with the tragedy with that perspective despite having lost everything at the time. We worked in the camps and that is where I saw incidents that slowly seeped into my creative expression and became stories later.

Most of my father's friends were Muslims and he continued to be friends with them. One of them, the son of his friend from Dina, was staying with us 'as a brother'. His name was Allah Ditta.

Sukrita Paul Kumar: I read somewhere that Manto, perturbed by how neighbours were killing each other in the riots, went and asked a close friend whether he would kill Manto if the riots took place in Bombay. His friend reflected for a moment and, angry with how members of his own family had been killed in the north, replied, 'I think I might!' I believe this was what finally made Manto decide to leave for Pakistan.

Joginder Paul: I don't think it was that simple...

Gulzar: I don't think that triggered Manto's decision to leave India. He never lost faith in communal harmony. He left because he would have thought that in this madness, this man, or any other, might actually kill me. Just out of madness!

Joginder Paul: Yes, madness of course. But I also know that he was very conscious

that he was writing in a language that was going to diminish this side of the border while Pakistan had claimed it. There was not much of a chance for Urdu in India. That he would get a sympathetic readership across the border was a big attraction. He thought he would be heartily welcomed on reaching there, but that never happened.

Gulzar: Then again, while there was a lot of movement of people across the border on both sides, a strong, lingering thought echoed in the minds of most: 'We will come back home.' They thought, 'For how long can this madness go on?' Hardly anyone felt that their refugee condition meant having to leave their homes forever. The general feeling was, 'Okay. Pakistan has been created. So what? We'll go back to our homes as soon as the confusion subsides.' This registered in my child's mind very clearly.

Joginder Paul: You are right. My father didn't want to go to the camp at all, and believed that ultimately we would be coming back to the same house. But I'd like to point out that most of us didn't understand the Muslim point of view sympathetically, at that time at least. They wanted a distinct society for themselves. Not temporarily, but permanently. Through political administration. Their leadership certainly desired that, though the common man had his doubts. Personally, I was, of course, bitter that I was being forced to migrate. We should be able to live together naturally, I thought. But today I wonder, under the circumstances, would the Muslims think that to be 'natural'? I remember, for instance, the Ahrar Society in the Punjab, at one point, believed in living collectively. But they too changed their minds later.

Gulzar: I believe the politicians swayed the minds of the common man. While Muslims killed Hindus and Hindus killed Muslims, they saved each other too. I feel, just as today, in that eruption of 1947 too, religious fundamentalism took over. Also, it became a gory game of vengeance. You've done this to us, we'll do worse!

You know, Partition was like the blast of the Supernova, its pieces kept smouldering on, alive, hot. But we must remember that the so-called original eruption too did not come out of the blue, accidentally. There has to be some

background to it, whether instigated by the British or whatever. Somewhere something had been simmering over time. In 1905, the Banga-Bhanga movement failed so badly, the Bengalis just did not allow the British to divide Bengal. But in 1947 they managed to divide it. That only means that the winds that started to blow in 1905 fanned the idea of Partition and kept the fire burning. In the same way, in 1915 the Ghadar Party movement started. Rash Behari Bose joined and then Bhagat Singh and so on. The final eruption takes time. It waits for a ripe moment.

Joginder Paul: My Bhabhoji (mother) would allow my Muslim friends to sit and eat with me in our chauka, the kitchen, from the same plate, but the moment they left, she would throw the plate in the fire for cleansing, to purify it. That was the background. The Muslims were well aware of this reality. They watched it and, I'm sure, somewhere, resented it too. Now, I'm talking about a very humble human being, my mother, who actually wanted Hindus and Muslims to live together peacefully, who accepted our friendship and knew full well the lasting nature of that relationship.

Sometime ago, I wrote a story, 'Dera Baba Nanak',* about a madman who came along with us to this side of the border. We didn't know whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim. Just at that time there was a Muslim caravan going to the other side, to Pakistan, and I saw the same person who came with us, now going with that caravan, back to Pakistan!

Gulzar: Yes, I have read that story.

Joginder Paul: I wanted to perhaps depict the complicated psyche of the times. It was not simple at all. We were getting so easily swayed. While there were all those slogans about Hindu-Muslim unity, what we witnessed was just the opposite. The actual blending of the two communities had just not happened, it seemed. I used to ask myself: Why did the talks between Jinnah and Jawaharlal fail after what seemed a complete agreement between Jinnah and Gandhi that there should be one country, one society? Was the leadership so interested in power that what was arranged earlier was abandoned so easily?

Gulzar: That is precisely why I forgive the common man. I don't see communal prejudices there. It was the struggle/greed for power that led to communal disharmony. Talking about Manto, bhaisaab, what I find so interesting about him is that he never makes you angry. The appeal is so human. He gets under the skin of his characters, underlines the hatred all around, but remains utterly human. Even his 'Syah Hashiye' displays empathy for humanity. As an author, Manto seems to laugh at the absurdities spawned in the name of religion.

Joginder Paul: After all, why is Ashfaq Ahmed's 'Gadaria' regarded as an all-time great story? Because the author in this story captures a total time-frame, the past as well as the present that evolves from it. It acquires a classical demeanour precisely because it is not just playing up the drama or the gesture of the moment, it is suggestive of a past, of an entire history of Hindu-Muslim relations.

Gulzar: Take the stories of Krishan Chander and Manto. Both great writers of the same period, but see the difference. When you read Krishan Chander, you feel the blood on your hands, the smell lingers for a long time. But with Manto, you don't get stained with even a drop of blood, though the hatred experienced all around is as sharp as a knife – and that is totally human, isn't it?

Joginder Paul: Precisely. That's what I am trying to emphasize. Something that seems absent on the face of it, lies unseen and hidden somewhere. Everything was not all right between the two communities. Indeed, the violence and the barbarism of the bloodshed or the bizarre fate of the women can never be justified. But it would be naïve to say that all was well between the two communities at the time of Partition.

On the impact of Partition

Gulzar: We must go back to the borders and see what new grass has grown on the other side. I think that's what I have done in my stories 'Over' and 'LoC'. I find a beautiful new life flourishing there all over again. From 'Raavi Paar' and other stories, I moved on to another phase. For the human being, I believe, nothing remains the same forever. You may become two countries but life goes on...

Joginder Paul: To me the stories that came later, much after Partition, came as strange metaphors. For instance, in the story, 'Panahgah', the woman who had been a victim of rape, abduction etc., lands up in a camp where suddenly she receives a lot of love, care and sympathy. And as the doctor, and others, nurse her, she suddenly bursts out, 'My son, tell my people, I too have finally reached Pakistan.' This is when she is still in India. But for her this is home and home is Pakistan. 'Pakistan' itself then becomes a metaphor.

I would say that in a way the problem has become deeper, denser. The weaving together of communities that ought to happen is, unfortunately, not happening, for various reasons. The fabric of society is not being woven the way it should be.

Gulzar: Paul saab, one minute – the problem you seem to perceive between Hindus and Muslims is actually not among the common people of these communities. It's the leadership...

Joginder Paul: Political intervention may be the cause.

Gulzar: It is, in fact, created by the politician.

Joginder Paul: But that is a matter of reasoning. What I am saying is that even at that time, thanks to the politicians, the rift was instigated, accentuated, nourished. By himself, a human being – Hindu or Muslim – desires connection and concord.

Gulzar: A refugee who came from that side is the prime minister here, and a refugee who went from this side is the president over there.* I've often said that the circle is now complete. We must move on. My stories are taking me forward. Only when those splinters fly a little, old times come back all over again. The fear awakens... like my story 'Khauf'.

Joginder Paul: A very justified fear and worry. But the problem we face today must be addressed. Are we all – Hindus and Muslims – living together? We have had over sixty years of freedom, an opportunity to undo the divisive tendencies and build an inclusive society. Have we managed to do that? In one of my stories, 'Sukoonat',

there's someone building a house over a graveyard and another man, encouraging him, says, 'Go ahead, build the house. We have sent all the corpses to Pakistan, haven't we?' There's a frightening posture behind such a comment. I have perhaps unconsciously given expression to it. We have to realize the magnitude of the dilemma. I don't think we have made a genuine effort towards creating a unified society. I see a plethora of problems resulting from this. We need to have a clean, honest state of mind. The very basis of hatred needs to be rooted out.

In fact, Gulzar bhai, I like your stories because they present sincere doubts. The very issues that you look upon with doubt in your stories, you seem to be taking as resolved now...

Gulzar: As I said, when I am amidst those splinters that fly up now and then, I get fearful too. That is not a constant phenomenon. While you say that society is not being knit together, I really believe that the process is very much on. For instance, the Muslims of India are proud to be called Indian Muslims. The Muslim is happier with his association with India. In fact, even from Pakistan, there are many artists and craftsmen who are flourishing in India with great ease.

Sukrita Paul Kumar: Both of you, as writers, have been portraying a very basic humane concern for togetherness. Your discomfiture with the hostility, insecurities and fear that emerge from the occasional rioting has come out in your writings.

Gulzar: Yes, my work 'Kharashein' belongs to a certain phase. In stories like 'Over' and 'LoC', I do perceive a process of growth from the earlier period ... This shift has come into my writings from society. It is not imaginary. As the experience of life changes, so does the writing. Today, Gujarat may creep into my writing. So can Afghanistan or Iraq, which are so much in my consciousness today. I believe that the India-Pakistan border is much softer now, and while that huge phenomenon of history called Partition has taken its toll, the process is cooling off. Things are stabilizing and we are getting more open-minded.

Joginder Paul: Undoubtedly there has been a desire for fellowship, and even at the time of Partition that togetherness was not lost. Its basis was changed, though.

Perhaps the idea was that we could come closer together if separated, if Pakistan was created for those who wished to have it. Today, that desire to live harmoniously together is still present, but then society gets what it deserves. Unless we learn to reconcile contradictions, the situation cannot be resolved. To love and be together and yet remain distinct and different, if you please.

Gulzar: I agree that the process of coming together between the two communities has been so slow that it may appear as if there has been no progress at all. But I have experienced the progress. For example, forty years after Independence, I felt gloomy and did not see much change; at fifty, I saw a silver lining, and today, after sixty years, I feel confident that we are moving forward because today's common man is far wiser. He cannot become an easy victim to the designs of the politician.

Joginder Paul: I like the note of hope in your voice. But, you know, freedom demands responsibility and Independence proves to be dangerous if we do not take on the responsibilities. In our case I have reasons to believe that we have not been encouraged to train ourselves either through education or religious morality to carry out the process. Unless there is conscious planning, we are damned...

Translator's Note

Rakhshanda Jalil

A brief conversation at a literary festival led to the planting of a germ of an idea that eventually yielded – a little over a year later – the book you hold in your hands today. Given that 2017 marks the seventieth year of the annus horribilis that was the Partition and given, also, that several of Gulzar Sahab's stories and poems, not to mention his cinematic oeuvre as a director, scriptwriter and lyricist, circle back to the Partition, it had seemed to me that it might be a good idea to cull out his short stories and nazms that dealt – specifically or obliquely, directly or indirectly, partly or wholly – with not just the act of severance, called appropriately enough taqseem or batwara in Urdu, but also its consequences. Several phone conversations and email correspondence, fostered in no small measure by a great deal of able assistance from our editor Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri, has resulted in this rather handsome volume called, appropriately enough, *Footprints on Zero Line: Writings on the Partition*, a collection of thirteen short stories and nineteen poems and extracts from an interview with the veteran Urdu writer Joginder Paul, moderated by his daughter Sukrita Paul.

Reading the contents of *Footprints on Zero Line*, in no particular order, perhaps you will feel as I did when I first read this selection that, for Gulzar Sahab, the Partition is not merely an act of severance, a historical event located in a certain time and place; for him it is an *opus de profectus*, a work in progress. The partition of 1947 seems to rise above its time and circumstance and speaks to him, and not just once or twice but, to borrow a metaphor from cinema, as a 'voiceover'. This initial impression is reinforced when one takes into account this volume in its entirety. In story after story, Gulzar Sahab revisits what has been left behind, sometimes through dreams, sometimes in actual fact, occasionally through a retelling or a remembrance. Sometimes he re-examines the consequences of the Partition – consequences that range from the political to the emotional and psychological. And it is in his keen grasp of the consequences of Partition that you see the sharp political understanding behind the poet's eye. The old adage 'the personal is political' acquires a new meaning

when you read a story such as ‘LoC’ or ‘The Scent of Man’, or a nazm such as ‘Bhameri’ or ‘Eyes Don’t Need a Visa’.

Let us first look at the poems included in this collection. Here, we find ourselves faced with a peculiar dilemma: should we respond with the head or the heart? In Gulzar Sahab’s poetry, images are as important as content. He cloaks his poetry in a many-splendoured robe of words – words that have a mesmeric spell of their own. As a reader, and especially a critical reader, you have to wrench yourself away from their insistent, inward pull to look again at the image; once out of that tilismic enchantment, you look at the beauty of the image conjured up by the play upon words. It shines through the many layers of meaning in all its crystal clarity, its freshness and poignancy. My experience, both as a reader and translator of Gulzar Sahab’s poetry, tells me that is when, maybe, you reach the core of his poetry, feel its rawness and its allure in a way that is almost tactile. That is also the point when, perhaps, you have prepared yourself to feel the full import of the nazm. The taste of last year’s gur on one’s lips, the sight of boys floating on watermelons on a river, the memory of a little boy with a schoolbag slung from his neck scouring the alleys as he searches for pebbles in drains, the haunting loss of a little girl whose hand slips from her brother’s as they flee for their lives across a newly demarcated border, the thought of leaving behind a paper boat on the sea at Karachi in the hope that one day, when the winds change, it will find its way to India ... it is images such as these that say far more than any set of words – no matter how beautifully put – ever can. However, since these images are as fragile as they are evocative, they are just as difficult to translate.

It is a truism much acknowledged that translating *any* Urdu poetry into English is a task fraught with peril for, quite apart from the differences in literary culture and sensibility, there is also the matter of syntax and natural pauses peculiar to Urdu but alien for the English reader. And so, more often than not, what is incredibly beautiful and tremulously evocative in the Urdu original can come across as clumsy and pedantic, if not outright banal in its English translation. And when the images, motifs and symbols are culled from the minutiae of memories and real, lived experiences, they become all the more personal, even idiosyncratic. The challenge then is to carry the image, like a quivering will-o’-the-wisp, cross the barrier of one language, and

attempt to tiptoe into another language and literary culture with at least some of its suggestiveness intact. It may be unfamiliar, even startlingly new, to the English readers, but that seldom matters; what does is its ability to conjure up a sight that moves both the head and the heart. And that is what Gulzar Sahab does in poem after poem as he takes his reader by the hand and draws them into a world that is highly individualistic and yet welcoming.

Dina, the home of his childhood, the one he left behind, figures in several poems, as does the experience of going back to Dina, be it through dreams or memories, save for that one time when he actually does go back – seventy years after leaving. The closest he can get to describing that experience is through a game he played as a child: *Dhaiyya chhoona*, in which a predetermined spot (agreed upon by all the children playing the game) had to be reached and the player had to touch that spot, however briefly, before running back:

*It has taken me seventy years
To return to Dina and touch the dhaiyya
How much have I run in the wasteland of Time
How long have I played hide-and-seek!*

Other bits of flotsam and jetsam, washed ashore by the tide of memories, find the most poignant expression in the poems chosen here: the rustic toy bhameri that a little boy had once tucked in his waistband as he had fled through a dark night, leaving his childhood home forever; the top he had once played with that has been turning ceaselessly in his mind ever since; the big girl who had once stolen a lump of clay from his schoolbag, nibbled at it and planted a kiss on his cheek; the wall on which he used to write in Urdu with a piece of charcoal; the little wooden stump he had once thrown on a neem tree laden with plump neem berries; the madrasa in the village school where he used to sit on a piece of sackcloth as he memorized his lessons; and many more besides. The millstone of Time goes around only once, as he tells us in one of his poems, grinding everything fine in that one cycle. Gulzar Sahab has poured a lifetime of experiences, memories, dreams and desires in the grinder; the result is a fine dust of memories that settles over this collection like sepia-tinted

particles glimmering with wistfulness and hope.

Then there are the images: of a child playing Stappoo and jumping over roughly drawn squares on the ground as he crosses the bridge over the Jhelum in a steam engine and reaches Dina, where he was born; of going to the border to meet Manto's Bishan from 'Toba Tek Singh' who is still standing at no-man's land, his feet swollen, his mind unable to comprehend the enormity of his loss; of country paths redolent with damp earth and moist swings hanging in the rains; of sending a soft breeze, with a thousand gajras tied to its wrist, as a gift to a friend and a fellow poet across the border; of standing on Zero Line with the sun behind him and his shadow falling in Pakistan; of Abbu who used to call him 'Punni'; of being made to bend over like a rooster as punishment by the schoolmaster; of crossing the border, time and again, with closed eyes for:

Eyes don't need a visa

Dreams have no borders

Coming now to the short stories, here Gulzar Sahab comes out of the thicket of memories and allows himself to think with both his head and his heart. The stories included here cover the gamut of the Partition experience, from the harsh brutal reality of the gory events of 1947, to the wars that were fought between India and Pakistan, to the communal ill-will and mistrust that was bequeathed as a bitter legacy of the batwara, coming up to the consequences of that ill-will that continue to be felt most acutely in the state of Kashmir. Taken together, these stories throw the clearest, strongest light on the long-term consequences of the events that unspooled from 1947. The long shadow of Partition has never found such a searing yet deeply empathetic depiction in contemporary Indian writing by any living writer.

Gulzar Sahab differs from the 'Partition generation' of writers such as Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander in many ways; for one, he has the benefit of hindsight and the luxury of introspection. He is not interested in chronicling the events that led to the division of the subcontinent, or putting them in neat labels of 'cause' and 'effect', or even apportioning blame. Instead, he wants to peel back, layer upon layer, the silence that had settled upon the lives of those most affected by the

event. And it is this unpeeling of those long-held silences that he does in story after story in an attempt to make sense, retrospectively, of the horrors of the Partition. Also, the respite of time allows him to examine not just the gruesome acts of 1947 and its immediate aftermath with some measure of dispassionate enquiry, but also the consequences. Thirteen or fourteen years old at the time, he has had a long time to mull over the memories, to view and review in his mind's eye all that he heard or saw, to go over the experiences of others he heard or overheard, to attempt to understand the narratives of loss and trauma his young mind was unable to process at the time. Time, the great healer, also lends perspective, and it is this perspective that makes his writings on the Partition so different from that of his predecessors.

'Crossing the Raavi' is short and sharp, relying on its brevity for its sting. With a few deft strokes, it recreates the havoc of those panic-stricken days of mass migration and the terrible human cost of the madness that engulfed ordinary men and women. 'Two Sisters', an extract from a forthcoming novel, tells the story of two sisters, brutalized and rendered homeless by the Partition, drifting like dry leaves from town to town, till they settle down in a place far removed from home, and attempt to rebuild their shattered lives only to find that the seed of despoiling can only yield a bitter harvest. The subject of raped and abducted women has cropped up in many Partition stories. Manto, perhaps, put it best when he asked: 'Whenever I thought of those abducted women and girls, all I could see were swollen, distended bellies. What would happen to these bellies? Who is the owner who lies stuffed in these bellies: India or Pakistan? And what of the nine months of labour? Who would pay the wages – India or Pakistan? Or would it all simply be put in the account of cruel Nature? Isn't there a blank column somewhere in this ledger?' (*Khuda ke Liye*, Manto). In 'Two Sisters', Gulzar Sahab tells us about two such numbers in this blank column.

A sweet story about the veteran journalist Kuldip Nayar changes the mood from despondency to hope; it reminds us that the bonds of shared living are stronger than the hurts and betrayals of history and the arbitrary drawing up of boundaries. In 'Over', 'LoC', 'Two Soldiers', and 'Rams', Gulzar Sahab takes us to the border, and again, in his characteristically humane manner, shows us how humanity may be challenged but can seldom be snuffed out totally by larger, geopolitical forces. The

personal and the real, never far from the surface in much of Gulzar Sahab's writings on the Partition, reappears in 'Partition' to testify to the lengths people are willing to go to believe that their loved ones are merely lost, not gone forever. Make-believe is as much a part of coping as mistrust, as we find in the next story, 'Fear'. Possibly set in the Mumbai of present times – the Mumbai scarred by communal riots – this story reminds us of the communal hatred that is as much a legacy of Partition as is Independence, and how it simmers beneath the surface of normalcy.

The hope and faith in pluralism and syncretism that suffuse Gulzar Sahab's writing with a luminous glow is missing in 'Smoke'. A dark story, it leaves a question in its trail: does individual will have no place before the collective will of the mob? Drawing upon his own childhood in the Sabzi Mandi neighbourhood of Delhi, 'The Jamun Tree' recreates a neighbourhood poised on the brink of disaster as the ill winds of communalism tear asunder the social fabric of ordinary lives. 'The Scent of Man' and 'Search', two of the hardest-hitting stories in this collection, are both about Kashmir; both show how the situation in Kashmir is a consequence of the Partition. The stories also reiterate my impression that for Gulzar Sahab the long-term effects of the events of 1947 are a work in progress. He takes no sides and steadfastly refuses to look for heroes and villains; he simply wishes to show the horrific toll of a tragedy of such immense proportions on human dignity.

While much ink has been spilt on the political and historical implications of the Partition, relatively little has been written on the human aspect of this momentous event in the recent history of South Asia. Gulzar Sahab corrects this anomaly and, with this collection, addresses an old wrong. In foregrounding the stories of ordinary people – be they the foot soldiers who fight the real wars on ground zero or writers and journalists looking for answers and closure – against the hegemonic, larger narratives of nationalism and patriotism, he is showing us where the possibilities of healing and redemption might lie: with the ordinary people themselves!

July 2017
New Delhi

Notes

Dina...

Fuller's earth is mixed with water and the paste is used to 'paint' a writing slate afresh; pregnant women are also said to have a craving for its sweet taste.

aiyya

A popular punishment for schoolboys was to bend over, put their hands through their knees and hold their ears; the punishment was known as 'murga ban na' for a person doubled over like that looked like a rooster.

In this children's game, a predetermined spot (agreed upon by the children playing) must be reached and the player must touch it before running back; it has led to a commonly used expression 'dhaiyya chhoona', meaning to touch something, however briefly, before coming away.

llstone

Gulzar Sahab had visited Dina, now in Pakistan, on 12 February 2013.

ameri

A rustic toy.

ba Tek Singh

While the first line of this ambiguous statement from Saadat Hasan Manto's famous short story 'Toba Tek Singh' may be dismissed as the gibberish of a madman (though many have taken it as an iconic pronouncement on the madness that was the Partition), the second line, roughly translated, means: 'Let India and Pakistan be damned!'

idanama

Literally, the story of a prison.

as Don't Need a Visa

Reference to a famous ghazal by the Pakistani poet Ahmed Faraz, sung by the ghazal singer Mehdi Hasan: '*Abke bichhde to shayad kahin khwabon mein milein / Jis tarah sookhe huwe phool kitabon mein milein*' (Separated again perhaps we shall meet in our dreams/Like dried flowers found in the pages of books).

o Sisters

This is an extract from a forthcoming novel called *Two* due in November 2017, to be published by HarperCollins.

rtition

They addressed their son Sampooran as Punni. Here, the ji has been added as deference to a person of Gulzar Sahab's stature. The mother, on the other hand, does not add ji when she addresses him as Punni later in this story. She also uses the more informal 'tu' when addressing him.

ms

The original title is 'Dumbe', plural for Dumba, which is a kind of sheep or ram with a large, fat and round stub of a tail; dumba is also used metaphorically to mean 'fat'.

e Jamun Tree

The second verse of the first surah of the Holy Quran, it is one of the verses most commonly repeated by Muslims in their lives, in a variety of situations, to invoke the infinite mercy of Allah, the Lord of the Universe.

rch

This story is dedicated to Humra Quraishi.

Dialogue: Gulzar and Joginder Paul on Partition and Their Fiction

'Dera Baba Nanak' was first published in English in *The Little Magazine: Looking Back*, vol. II, Delhi, 2001; later included in *Favourite Fiction: 24 Stories from South Asia*, TLM Books, Delhi, 2005.

At the time of this dialogue, Manmohan Singh, born in Gah in Pakistan's Punjab, was the prime minister of India, and Pervez Musharraf, born in Delhi, India, was the president of Pakistan.

About the Book

The Partition of 1947 has influenced the works of an entire generation of writers, and continues to do so. Gulzar witnessed the horrors of Partition first-hand and it is a theme that he has gone back to again and again in his writings. *Footprints on Zero Line* brings together a collection of his finest writings - fiction, non-fiction and poems - on the subject. What sets it apart from other writings on Partition is that Gulzar's unerring eye does not stop at the events of 1947 but looks at how they continue to affect our lives to this day.

Wonderfully rendered in English by well-known author and acclaimed translator Rakhshanda Jalil, this compilation marks seventy years of India's Independence. It is not only a brilliant collection on a cataclysmic event in the history of our nation by one of our finest contemporary writers, it is also a timely reminder that those who forget the errors of the past are doomed to repeat them.

About the Authors



Poet, author, lyricist, film-maker, and screenplay and dialogue writer, Gulzar is one of the towering figures of Indian cinema, culture and literature. Both in India (now in Pakistan), his career in cinema took off as an assistant to film-maker Bimal Roy.

A stalwart of Indian literature and one of the finest poets in Urdu/Hindustani, he has a number of poetry and short-story collections to his credit. He has published two volumes of his translations of Rabindranath Tagore's poems, *Baaghbhaan* and *Nindiya Chor*. He is also one of the finest writers for children in the country.

He is recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Padma Bhushan. In 2008, he was awarded an Oscar for his song 'Jai ho' in *Slumdog Millionaire*. He received the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 2014.



Rakshanda Jalil is a writer, critic, and literary historian. She has published over fifty academic papers and essays. She runs an organization called Hindustani Awaaz, devoted to the popularization of Hindu-Urdu literature and culture. Her books include a translation of fifteen short stories by Intizar Husain entitled *The Death of*

Sheherzad (HarperCollins, 2014) and *The Sea Lies Ahead*, a translation of Intizar Husain's seminal novel on Karachi (HarperCollins, 2014).



TALK TO US

Join the conversation on Twitter
<http://twitter.com/HarperCollinsIN>

Like us on Facebook to find and share posts about our books with your friends
<http://www.facebook.com/HarperCollinsIndia>

Follow our photo stories on Instagram
<http://instagram.com/harpercollinsindia/>

Get fun pictures, quotes and more about our books on Tumblr
<http://www.tumblr.com/blog/harpercollinsindia>



First published in India in 2017 by Harper Perennial
An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* India

Copyright © Gulzar 2017
Translation copyright © Rakhshanda Jalil 2017

P-ISBN: 978-93-5277-057-1
Epub Edition © August 2017 ISBN: 978-93-5277-058-8

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Gulzar asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved under The Copyright Act, 1957. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins *Publishers* India.

Cover design : **Saurabh Garge**
Charcoal Sketches : **Gulzar**

www.harpercollins.co.in

HarperCollins *Publishers*

A-75, Sector 57, Noida, Uttar Pradesh 201301, India
1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF, United Kingdom
2 Bloor Street East, Toronto, Ontario M4W 1A8, Canada
Lvl 13, 201 Elizabeth Street (PO Box A565, NSW, 1235), Sydney
NSW 2000, Australia
195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007, USA