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MY EARLY DAYS

I was born in 1939 at Sialkot, a flourishing city in what was then known as West Punjab. Ours was a fairly wealthy Punjabi Hindu Brahmin family, who lived in the upscale area known as Greenwood Street. The family continued to live in a rambling old three-storeyed house, although my father had constructed a brand new modern house next to the old house. The new house was quite a landmark in the area, mainly because it was connected to the existing old house by a high bridge that spanned the street. A large private ground fronted the old house, which had a stable for the horse and carriage at one end and a barn for the two cows at the other. Here also was a garage for the station wagon that my father had bought from a British officer, who was leaving for England after serving his tenure. In the centre of the ground were swings for us children and our friends to play.

As a child, I remember going for rides in a *tonga*, which was drawn by a sturdy chestnut-brown horse and driven by our old retainer, Paayi, a *sardar* with a salt-and-pepper beard. If the horse came across a ramshackle hut along the way, he would start neighing and kicking and halt in his tracks, creating quite a panic among us. I often felt petrified and would anxiously wait for him to calm down. Otherwise he was a fairly mild creature, who would allow our younger brother to run under his belly and in and around his legs without kicking up a fuss.



My father—Om Prakash Sharma



My mother—Janki Devi Sharma

Our father was a manufacturer of sporting goods, including cricket bats, hockey sticks, and footballs. His workforce was comprised mainly of Muslim skilled craftsmen, as well as three invaluable retainers—Paayi, Prem, and Babu, who was Prem's younger brother. His clientele were mainly British citizens. Besides supplying his sporting goods to the British soldiers stationed in India, he also exported a large part of his goods to England during the days of the British Raj. The close business ties my father held to these British soldiers led eventually to a more familial link: in fact, the new house my father had built was inaugurated by the chief British officer whom my parents had once invited for high tea in the house's so-called "Drawing Room." That was the only room to have been hastily furnished for the occasion with sofa sets, tea tables, and tapestries imported from England.

The rest of the new house remained unoccupied and unfurnished, with all the imported furniture, chinaware, tapestry, and lighting remaining unpacked in cases in various rooms. Perhaps there was a sense of foreboding of what was soon to come.

My mother would speak sometimes of how I almost had my right foot amputated when I was barely five months old and how I was fortunately saved from spending an entire lifetime as a cripple. My right ankle had developed a boil that had turned septic. Her mother-in-law suggested that the local barber be called in to give it a simple nick and cut to clean it up. My mother recounts that when that day came, every family member, unable to bear the sight of the barber's razor glistening in his hand, left the room. Meanwhile, my mother was left alone to stoically hold me, a screaming infant, in her arms, while the barber made the incision and scraped away at the tissue and bone to remove the infection. He explained that he had to do this to kill the worms, which could be seen wriggling around in the pus. He then applied some disinfectant to the wound. Even after days, the wound continued to ooze and refused to heal.

My mother then took me to the Mayo Hospital in Lahore, where a group of enthusiastic young interns gathered around us. It was wartime then, and there wasn't much room in the hospital. But seeing my mother's plight, one of the interns said that by sheer luck there was a bed available in the crowded hospital, where they recommended that my right foot be amputated without further delay. My mother said that she alone could not take such a major decision without consulting my father. She thanked the intern and made good her escape.

She returned to Sialkot and, as luck would have it, a well-known Bengali surgeon had just arrived in town. I was soon taken to his clinic. He examined the wound and gave my mother the assurance that my ankle was nothing to be alarmed about. Apparently, a splinter of the bone had been inadvertently left inside by the barber, which was what was causing all the trouble. He then very efficiently removed the splinter and put a plaster

cast on my foot, leaving a small hole in it to drain out the fluid. I learned to walk and ride a tricycle while still wearing a plaster cast, which ran almost up to the knee of my right leg. The wound soon healed, leaving just a rather ugly scar, one which is still visible to this day on my right ankle.

I was a thin and dark child. The simile my mother sometimes gave me was, “You were as dark as the back of a *tava*.” The matter of my foot mercifully, and perhaps providentially, not being amputated proved a huge relief for everyone. It would not only have been painful for them to observe but also a matter of some future concern to have a dark, skinny girl with a physical handicap.

In the wake of Partition in 1947, when the Hindu-Muslim riots erupted, my father’s employee, Rashid, told my father one night that rioters were planning to burn the areas around our house. Heeding Rashid’s advice to leave our house, my father sent us to the bungalow of our family physician, Dr. L. C. Dutt, a place situated in the relatively safe zone of the Cantonment. From the bungalow’s terrace, we could see spirals of smoke rising from different quarters, which were alarmingly close to the street on which we lived.

One day, our father was strolling on the terrace and gazing at the burning city when he spotted a man in the street pointing a gun toward him. This naturally got my father quite unnerved, and he quickly came down from the terrace to conceal himself from the gunman. Rashid, who sometimes came to visit us in the Cantonment, told our father that he and his people could no longer ensure our safety in the bungalow and advised my father to get his family on a train leaving for Jammu until things settled down. After saying this, Rashid managed to get tickets on a train that was scheduled to leave Sialkot in a few days. Our father meanwhile went back with him to the old house to collect some belongings.

The trip, however, was not to be!

Rashid came to us the evening before the train was set to leave and told my father to cancel the journey, as there was a rumour circulating about that a mob was planning a bloody massacre along the train's route. After much thought and on the advice of the good doctor and his wife, our father decided to move us all to Jammu via a different route to a place where my *Mamaji* lived. Hedo Uberoi, a close friend of my father, very generously offered one of his cars, along with a driver, to bring us to Jammu. Our three servants followed in a tonga as soon as they possibly could, with a few trunks containing some of our belongings.

On the road to Jammu, the car stalled, and the grown-ups had to get out to push it. Fortunately for us, it got going right before a rowdy band of sword-wielding Muslims, who had been hiding in the bushes, came out screaming and began chasing the car.

On reaching Jammu, we stayed for almost a month with our *Mamaji*. In the past, we had spent some good times visiting him and his family during our holidays. He would take us and our cousins for a swim in what was a fairly large pond. We would take along with us a basketful of small mangoes, tied in a piece of cloth, which we would then dip into the water to keep cool. Once the mangoes had cooled, we would feast on them to our hearts' content. Jammu held good memories for us.

A week later, the news reached us that a convoy of tongas had been massacred. Our father went to the hospital where all the wounded had been taken, but he did not find any of his retainers—Paayi, Prem, or Babu—so he returned quite crestfallen. However, we learned the next day they had somehow managed to escape the attack and had made it safely to Jammu.

Since my father did not want to overstay his welcome at his in-law's place, he decided to take us to Amritsar where the family's *kul guru* had his *ashram*. So, we joined a group of families who

had hired a bus to make the trip to Amritsar. Since there were not enough seats to accommodate everyone, the passengers, with the consent of the driver, removed all the seats, packing whatever baggage the families had into the empty spaces. Dhurries were then spread out over trunks and suitcases, so everyone could have a place to sit. Someone's grandfather, in his wisdom and foresight, had filled a bag with roasted gram and peanuts, and during the journey, whenever anyone felt hungry, the old man would give them a fistful to eat.

When the bus reached the banks of the River Ravi, which was about sixty kilometres from Amritsar, everyone was horrified to see that the river was flooded. All the elders had to get out and walk across the river, while the children were ferried across in the bus, which, with its lighter load, was now able to reach the other side of the shore. Once there, everyone unloaded their baggage, and our group joined a convoy of moving humanity. The next river had to be crossed by walking across a two-foot wide bridge without any kind of railing that one could hold onto for support. This was such a fearful experience for some women carrying babies that quite a few of them, in sheer panic and exhaustion, let the screaming babies slip out of their arms and fall into the raging waters.

When a family managed to get any mode of transport—a bullock cart, a tonga, or a jeep—once they forded the river, they would move on. I have a hazy memory of us sitting in a bullock cart, trying somehow to take cover from the heavy downpour. I also remember our little sister Tuti, who must have then been about six months old, clapping her hands gleefully at the heavy drops of rain splattering over her face. Further along the way, our hearts were warmed to see a row of villagers with pots of chapatis, daal, and water, which they kept warm with wood fires to feed the tired and hungry convoy of refugees. Had it not been for the

collective effort of these kind-hearted village folk to serve those of us in distress, many would have probably starved to death from hunger and thirst.

On reaching Amritsar, we all bid our farewells and each family left to make arrangements to further journey to the towns and villages where their relatives lived. But for us, the kul guru's ashram became our home for some months. While we were lodged inside a room of the ashram, we became acquainted with several other families who had taken refuge there as well. Space being a constraint, some of them had put up tents on the grounds of the ashram. Everyone had to cook their own food over makeshift fires as the ashram could not feed so many. At night, some good Samaritans from the town would come and hand out blankets to those who needed them for the night. Such scenes were witnessed even on the streets of Amritsar, wherever fleeing families had managed to pitch tents in the parks or wherever they huddled in some corner of the town's footpaths. I also recall that one of our father's relatives was seen selling roasted gram and peanuts in town to those who had the money to buy them.

I don't quite remember how long we stayed at the ashram; it may have been a month or so. One day, our father told my mother that he had somehow managed to charter a Dakota plane to fly us to Delhi. On arriving in the capital, we checked into a rather run down hotel, ironically named Regal Hotel, in what is today known as Paharganj. From the balcony of our room, we could look down on cars, buses, and pedestrians, negotiating their way along the busy street.

One afternoon, as he was standing on the balcony of the hotel, my father spotted a cousin of his in the street below. He shouted out, "Yograj, Yograj!" and waved his white hanky to attract his cousin's attention. Yograj stopped in his tracks and looked around

and up to see who was calling out his name. After seeing my father in his trademark white *salwar-kurta* waving at him, he came up to the hotel. The chance meeting led to our moving out of the hotel and into the railway quarters at Subzi Mandi, where Yograj lived with his wife, Rakho, and sister, Bimla. Although their quarters comprised just two rooms and a kitchen, there was a fairly spacious garden enclosed within it where we could play around. I do recall there were one or two banana plants growing in it, apart from some shrubs and flowers. So there we were, eight members of our family and three of theirs, cramped up in just two small rooms. But they were happy to have us, and not once did they make us feel that we were overstaying our welcome.

During this time, Rashid came from Sialkot to visit us in Delhi and brought a few of our belongings with him. He suggested that my father go back with him to Pakistan, probably because he could quite easily pass off as a Muslim. He assured him he would do all that he could to help my father bring some of the family's wealth back that had been left behind. Our father took him up on the offer and going straight to his bank in Sialkot, withdrew all his jewelery, along with whatever savings he could safely bring back with him. But he left the keys of both houses with Rashid.

It was during this time—January 30, 1948, to be precise—that Mahatma Gandhi was shot while coming out of his evening prayers at Birla Mandir in Delhi. The whole country moaned and wept. Songs came out almost overnight on the life of Gandhi, but the one that became probably most popular was one sung by Mohammed Rafi, “Sunō Sunō ai Duniyawalo, Bapu ki yeh Amar Kahani.” My father, who was quite patriotically inclined, immediately went out and bought the double-record set and kept replaying it on the gramophone over and over again until

we would beg him to stop! His obsession with this record, along with those of K. L. Saigal (which he had brought back from his trip to Pakistan), lasted quite a few years.

After spending about six months with our relatives in Delhi, it must have dawned on Papaji that we were overstaying the hospitality offered to us. One of my father's business managers, called Mulkhraj, who had settled in Jullunder after the Partition, came to see us, and he advised my father to move to Jullunder and start his sporting business afresh. To this day, I still don't know what must have influenced our father's response to this proposition. Instead he asked Mulkhraj to go to a nearby hill station, called Mussoorie, to look for a place where he could take his family for the summer. Mulkhraj scouted around the hill station and came back to inform him that he had booked a big bungalow called Dil Bahar (which means "celebrative heart" in Hindi) in Happy Valley.

So, packing our meagre belongings, we drove up to Mussoorie. It was raining heavily when we reached the outskirts of the hill station, from where we had to take a ride in hand-drawn rickshaws pulled by five natives, to reach Dil Bahar, which would become our home for the next twenty or so years.

Arriving at Dil Bahar, we were taken straight up to the bedrooms and put into the beds. Our mother covered us with quilts, warmed by hot water bottles that had been thoughtfully placed out on a table by the *chowkidar* of the bungalow. The next morning, we woke up feeling excited to be in such a new and interesting place. We went about the house, exploring it and going from room to room. We discovered shortly thereafter, the house contained twelve rooms and eight bathrooms. Much to our delight, there were two playgrounds—a large one at the back of the house and another fairly spacious one that ran along its side and frontage.

Bebeji, our paternal grandmother, promptly converted one of the smaller rooms into a temple. She covered one wall completely with holy pictures and installed a small wooden temple as a sanctum to hold the statues of the principal gods and goddesses, a *Shiva lingam*, and an *aasan*. This small room could also be accessed by a wooden staircase that went up to it from the ground at the back of the house. After her morning and evening *puja*, she would perform *aarti* and then take the first offering of food, cooked in the kitchen, up to the gods before serving it to the family.

Our father meanwhile settled into a life of early retirement while he was still in just his mid-thirties. Although people were initially rather cool to his presence and kept aloof, suspecting that he was a Muslim man who had eloped with the daughter of a Hindu Brahmin family, their speculations ended when they discovered he was really a Hindu who had adopted the mode



Our father always wore the traditional dress of Pakistani men—
a white salwar-kurta with an achkan.

of dress favoured by men in Pakistan. Eventually, he went on to become a prominent and popular figure in Mussoorie's rather uppity, affluent sophisticated society.

Once we got accustomed to the new environment, our mother, who was concerned that we were missing out on schooling, enrolled us into an English-medium school, the Convent of Jesus and Mary, which was about a twenty-minute walk from our home. Before leaving for school, we would quickly go to the temple, get down on our knees, and touch our heads to the ground before the gods in their sanctum. Bebeji would then pour a spoonful of *charanamrit* into our cupped palms, which we would drink. We would then rush out of the temple, put our shoes back on, and head off for school.

We would reach school at nine o'clock in the morning and come home by four in the afternoon. In due course, the compound at the back, which the chowkidar insisted be called the "kirket ground" because it was used for the sport (the Nawab who owned Dil Bahar, but now lived in another grander house further up the hill, presumably played cricket with his lackeys when he lived there), grew into a beautiful place, with flower beds running along its four sides. On its terraced fields, which led from the road above the house, there were apple and apricot trees and a variety of vegetables grown by our mother. On the lower field, a sturdy branch of a beautiful apricot tree held a swing with a wooden plank as its seat. The walls on three sides of the house were covered with creeper vines of Dutch roses and passion flowers. In the flowerbeds running at the base of the walls grew clutches of nasturtiums and pansies; marigolds and dahlias dominated the tiny flowers growing beneath them. Our mother had a "green thumb," as they say, and Dil Bahar was a riot of gardening colour for the better part of the year.

In addition to an extensive garden, my mother had several pets, including lovebirds, pigeons, goats, hens, and even a baby deer. There were always four to five dogs of different breeds wandering around, whom we used to protect the house from leopards that would come down from the snowy peaks during the severe winter months. The house evolved into a kind of fairyland for us, changing its outward appearance as the seasons changed from spring to summer, from monsoon to autumn, and from autumn to the onset of snow in winter. Life took on a different rhythm from what it had been in Sialkot.

Being a fairly prominent member of Mussoorie society, our family was at the forefront of greeting Indian and foreign dignitaries, who visited our hill station and who were usually feted at one or the other of its two leading hotels, The Savoy and Hakmans. Thus, it was that when Jawaharlal Nehru visited Mussoorie, he was felicitated at Hakmans.



The family (seated behind) at a reception to welcome Jawaharlal Nehru at Hakmans Hotel



My mother (in white *sari* at left) at the function to welcome His Holiness The Dalai Lama at Mussoorie

My father had an affinity for men and women in white or saffron robes. *Sadhus* travelling to and from the Himalayas were a familiar sight at our bungalow, where they would rest awhile or stay for a few days, and it was this that distinguished our bungalow from many others in town.

I first had the privilege of paying homage to His Holiness the Dalai Lama when he left Tibet in 1959 to seek asylum in India. The government had accommodated him at Birla House in Happy Valley, while the refugees who had escaped with him were put up in nearby houses. Soon after, leading citizens of Mussoorie arranged a reception to welcome and honour His Holiness at The Savoy Hotel, an event to which our whole family was invited.

Down the years, my family also had a few other encounters with various dignitaries. The Mussoorie ladies' society, which did

social work to benefit the poorer sections of people in the nearby villages, coaxed my mother one year into joining their ranks. For the inauguration of one of the society's projects at Bhatta Falls, my mother, along with some of the ladies in the society, escorted Indira Gandhi around the village where the project was underway. Another memorable moment in my family's history came when His Highness Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian emperor, graced our town. The last direct descendant from the line of the biblical King Solomon, he was felicitated at a lavish banquet in his honour at The Savoy.

Altruistic by nature, my parents held an open house for most part of the year. Our mother took care of everyone's needs, not only looking after the sadhus, sages, and their disciples who arrived at the bungalow but also after the visiting relatives and our school friends who would occasionally drop by. She taught me the value of believing that our focus in life should be only



Indira Gandhi being accompanied by my mother (centre) to Bhatta Falls

on the positive aspects of our experience; the negative aspects, she told me, should be ignored. My father was an active member of CARE Australia, a global humanitarian organisation that helps the poor and needy. He was the organisation's Indian representative for several years, and in this capacity, he worked on distributing milk powder, syrup, and cheese to the poor from the villages in and around Mussoorie.

An impressionable young schoolgirl, I came under the influence of Christianity at Waverley—Convent of Jesus and Mary. The school had a fairly sizeable chapel on the premises, with marble bowls on either side of its entrance, into which we would occasionally dip our fingers and make the sign of the cross before entering our classes. The annual concert in December was marked by piano recitals, singing, and short plays revolving around Christmas themes. When I was in the ninth standard, the annual concert was based on Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. Because



My father (centre) with my mother next to him, distributing milk powder to the villagers

I was the tallest among the girls in my class, I was selected to play the role of Jesus with my long hair curled up in ringlets that fell to my shoulders. Even at that young age, the role filled me with awe, and I felt a physical change in my posture and carriage.