

Preface

When the much-loved, globally acclaimed ‘*Bhajan Maharishi*’ Hari Om Sharan, requested me to write the story of his life, I felt humbled, honoured, and a bit nervous as well. I had known him closely for many years as an extremely simple, guileless singer with an enchanting voice. I had always seen him in a white *dhoti* and *kurta*, carrying his weatherbeaten *harmonium*, and a sling bag of books to the *satsangs* where he was invited to sing. I used to follow him from house to house, take down the lyrics of his priceless bhajans, learn to sing them, and revel in the love for the Divine which he could ignite so effortlessly in each heart at every gathering, big or small. Praise and adulation did not make the smallest dent in his childlike wonder and graceful acceptance of the inevitable attention showered on him after every recital. That is what endeared him to me. “*Prabhu ke naate tumhara bhai* (your brother by divine decree),” is how he described our bond.

By now, he had recorded 40 cassettes and 20 albums, received the Sangeet Peeth Raseshwar Award from ‘*Sur Singar Samsad*,’¹ was gifted a ‘Gold Disc’ in recognition of

¹ A Bombay-based cultural organisation founded in 1947 by Shri Brij Narain for promoting both established and new artistes in the fields of classical music and dance.

the unprecedented sales of his renditions from HMV, and had millions of fans the world over. Plus, he was the only singer of devotional music whose concerts were always housefull. Would I be able to live up to the faith he had in my ‘wordcraft?’ However, “Only you can do this,” was his final statement and so our eventful journey began. The long weekly sessions were pleasantly punctuated by the aromatic tea his loving wife Nandini ji made and my titbits which he enjoyed with gusto. I would read out each chapter to him and move ahead only after he nodded his approval. When I read out the final lines of the last chapter, his brimming eyes assured me that I had not failed him. It was an evening which glowed with the warm awareness of having come to a fulfilling close of an awesome experience. Soon after, the Sharans left for a concert tour to USA where he breathed his last on the 17th of December, 2007. I never saw him again.

A fact sheet may tell you that he was born in a Bhumihaar Brahmin family at Lahore on the 26th of September, 1932. But it cannot tell you how he was ‘reborn’ under the vigilant eye and impeccable tutelage of his Guru. It cannot share the anguish of his search for his parents, his mystic experiences in the Himalayas, or the amazing story of how someone fondly called ‘*Brahmachari ji*’ became the globally revered Hari Om Sharan ji. His songs, especially his *Hanuman Chalisa*² have millions of views on YouTube. These and more, are the riveting milestones documented in this volume.

The celestial saint, Narada, has said in his *Bhakti Sutras* that

² A 40-couplet hymn in praise of Hanuman (the monkey God), a true devotee of Lord Rama.

kirtan is one of the nine major ways of expressing devotion (*nava vidha bhakti*). All saints of Bharat have also reiterated that in a world speeding to chaos because of stress overload, this is the only easy and infallible method to achieve lasting peace. Listening to Hari Om Sharan sing is like flowing in the gentle embrace of a meandering river. You revel in the majesty and variety of creation. You do not get stuck or stagnate in the clutches of material attachment to a possession or a person. You fill every hollow in your path with your abundance and a giving that comes naturally, seamlessly. Most importantly, you move at your own pace, but continuously, towards your Source — that infinite ocean of consciousness of which you are a minuscule, but meaningful, speck.

Shailaja Ganguly

ONE

A New Beginning

At 17, you desperately need someone to belong to ... a frisky pup whose wagging tail almost falls off when he spies you turn the corner, a shy sweetheart whose smouldering eyes hide a million secrets, a friend who thinks you are invincible, a sister who can neither get along with you nor do without you, a father who growls at every wrong move you make, or a mother who stays up late till you return home. Yes, someone! Anyone who makes you feel loved and cherished! But at that desolate moment, staring at the mystical blue of the Ganges at Haridwar, young Hari Sharan belonged to no one.

On a hillock to his left, was the shrine of *Mansa Devi*³, the wish fulfilling Goddess. She drew devotees from far and wide. But the teenager's spirit hit rock bottom when the *Devi* ignored his pleas to help locate his family. 'Maybe the great height of Her abode makes Her a tad hard of hearing,' he thought with some bitterness. Even the multitude of unmindful pilgrims all around him continued bobbing in the sacred river to wash

³ The Hindu Goddess of snakes. The word 'Mansa' means wish and the deity is known to fulfil the wishes of all Her sincere devotees.

away their sins. They were too busy to notice the lone teenager who had not eaten a single morsel since the previous night.

Hari had certainly not felt as spent or hopeless, when he first came here. In fact, he had fallen in love with the pilgrim city's unique spiritual ambience with its innumerable mendicants and sages. The ancient temples against the backdrop of the snow-capped sentinels were a visual treat. The awesome medley of chants and temple bells was nectar to his ears. The fresh flowers and incense emanated a heady fragrance. The shimmering waters of the Ganga were aglow from the light of the numerous, floating *diyas*. All these sensory delights tugged at his heart strings and he felt a greater proximity to his beloved God. He was sure that the Lord would help to reunite him with his family. He even quipped to himself, 'My beloved Lord would never disappoint a 'Hari' who sought succour at Haridwar.' Haridwar literally means 'the gate leading to Hari or God Himself.'

Hari Sharan's God had ensured a warm meal and a resting place for His nomadic ward when he first arrived on the state transport bus from Punjab, a fortnight earlier. Carrying just a sling bag with a shawl, a book of bhajans, and the Bhagvad Gita, the well built youth had scoured the narrow streets for some shelter. The sounds of the *tanpura* drew him to the modest premises of the 'Bhola Giri Ashram.' It was one of the many sanctuaries a city like Haridwar offers to itinerant *sadhus* or spiritual seekers. The *sannyasi*, Bharti ji, who managed the *ashram*, noticed the young lad. Though he had not donned the ochre robes of the renunciate, something about this young man's soulful gaze, his dignified bearing, and his courteous

speech touched a chord in Bharti ji's heart. He invited Hari to camp at the ashram for a few days. Hari gladly accepted the offer.

An air of sanctity pervaded the clean and simple interiors of the ashram. Hari was especially touched by Bharti ji's genuine warmth and called him '*Babaji*.' The ashram had little cubicles for each resident. He saw one sannyasi washing his *kamandalu* while another one prayed. Yet another ochre robed sadhu kept watch over a kettle placed on the wooden stove. On seeing Hari, the sadhu's deep-set eyes took in his earnest face. Then he remarked softly, "Looks like the lad has already tasted his first sip of nectar." He was not wrong. His intuitive vision had gone beyond the obvious and seen the bhakti that had already taken root in the young man's heart. Hari instantly felt at home among these unworldly people. He was blissfully unaware of all the miracle-milestones that the Almighty had lined up for him. All he knew was that his rumbling stomach enjoyed the *prashaad* of *khichdi* shared by everyone, after it was first offered to the deity. Later, while thinking about how he would resume the search for his family the next day, he fell asleep.

The initial days just flew past. The thrill of a daily dip in the Ganga gave Hari some badly needed solace. He imagined being cleansed of all his trespasses, of not just this life, but of innumerable past lives. Years ago, growing up in Lahore, he recalled staring at a portrait of Lord Shiva (who had let the legendary river 'Ganga' ripple down to Mother Earth from His tangled locks). He had wished then, for an opportunity to take a dip in these holy waters. Now, he was finally here!

Often, after his bath he would sit for a while on the steps

leading towards *Har Ki Pouri*⁴. Sometimes, he would walk further up towards *Neel Dhara*⁵. Here, the Ganga is a mesmerising combination of awesome power and languid grace. For hours, he would either gaze at the magnificence Mother Earth had spread out before him or scan the hundreds of devotees flitting past, hoping to see at least one familiar face. But fate continued to conspire against the distraught young man.

One evening, Babaji noticed a pensive Hari caressing the tanpura.

“Do you sing?” he asked.

“I just hum a little, now and then,” Hari murmured.

“Come on, let’s hear something; I’ll play the tanpura for you,” Babaji coaxed him.

The bhajan that flowed from Hari’s lips was like an anguished cry from a heart that was desperately hoping that God was still on his side.

He sang —

*‘Jo Tum Todo, Ram
Main Naahin Todun
Tum Sang Todun
To Kaun Sung Jodun ...’*

(‘O Lord, even if You choose to snap Your connection with me, I will never let go. For if I were to sever my tie with You, who else can I bond with?’)

⁴ Literally means, ‘the feet of Lord Hari’ and it is a famous ghat on the banks of the river Ganga in Haridwar.

⁵ A spot on the Ganga ghat in Haridwar known for immersing the mortal remains of saints into the river in a ritual called ‘Jal Samadhi.’

Moved by the depth and natural melody in the youngster's baritone, the misty-eyed Babaji hugged him. "You must learn to play the tanpura. That will help enhance the skill and sincerity you have been blessed with," he advised. But Hari Sharan's mind was churning with more grave concerns. 'Are my parents and sisters alive? Will I ever see any of them again? When? Where?'

When he lay down that night, the bizarre events of the past few weeks flitted before his mind's eye like a painful reality show. He recalled repeatedly trudging the entire expanse of the refugee camp in Delhi, hunting for his family members. Daily, many buses and trucks arrived with more victims of the Partition⁶, uprooted so rudely from their homes in the 'newborn' Pakistan. Hari would rush from one vehicle to another, scouring faces, and asking a million questions. But there was no news of his precious family. For a while, his hollowed insides drew comfort from the company of some *udasin* sadhus camping near the Ferozepur border. But their slightly boisterous manner of speech and barrage of questions put him off. He felt alienated in his pain. The only one he could really pour his heart out to, was Krishna, the charioteer God, who adorned the front cover of his well-thumbed Bhagvad Gita.

In fact, Krishna was the reason he had gone to Brindavan. That was the very ground his Krishna had walked on, thousands of years ago. Hitching a ride with a good-natured

⁶ During 1947, when India won its freedom from the British, they divided it into two nations — India and Pakistan. Millions got displaced as they crossed the border to reach the relative safety of the religious majority they belonged to. This led to the worst communal riots in the history of the two nations.

truck driver, he headed for that sacred spot. He intended to question his favourite God, why such unfair things should happen to someone who believes and trusts in Him. But at the famous temple, all he felt was an overwhelming joy. All his recrimination and resentment vanished. As he gazed at the idol of his beloved God, only love flowed from his eyes, and a hymn gushed forth. He instantly realised that the Lord does know best and that bhakti is always unconditional.

Watching Hari, a young devotee was totally enchanted by his soulful rendition. This boy worked in a granary in the town of Kaithal, Punjab. Hari told him that he was all alone. So, the eager boy insisted that he come and stay with him at Kaithal for a few days. Confused as to his next move, a heavy-hearted Hari Sharan accepted the boy's invitation.

Hari instantly took a liking to the picturesque town with emerald fields stretching endlessly. There was a little dirt lane over which a stray bullock cart rattled past now and then. He was charmed by a wizened banyan with a huge, natural hollow, carved in its middle. The tree was situated on the bank of a secluded pond. An overpowering silence hung in the air. A strong desire to sit and meditate in the hollow of the ancient tree came over Hari Sharan. Swiftly, he fashioned a broom from the leaves and branches strewn around and swept the insides of the banyan clean. Stepping in, he sat cross-legged, his back erect, his body facing the pond. He closed his eyes in contemplation and gratitude for the bounty spread before him. Soon, his worry abated and his pure spirit merged into the divine perfection for a few immortal moments.

"Excuse me, do you plan to spend the night here?" The sudden query cut into Hari's trance and jolted him back to the

present. An old peasant, with his palms respectfully joined, was peering at him quizzically.

“Yes, I intended to; this is such a peaceful spot,” Hari replied.

“But, but ...” the villager hesitated.

“Yes *Dadaji*, what is it?” Hari prodded him.

“We have often seen a python escape into the crevasses of this tree. If you like, you can rest in that changing room used by people who come to bathe here,” he said, pointing to a long dormitory-like structure overlooking the pond.

“Okay, I promise to shift there at nightfall,” Hari assured him.

Still befuddled by the nonchalant youth’s response, the old man shuffled away.

Word about the strange visitor spread through the village grapevine. Caring women from Kaithal, bearing food, began to drop by the banyan tree. Fuelled by their curiosity about him, they asked Hari millions of questions. After a couple of days, Hari had had enough. Quietly slinking away to the bus station, he had boarded a bus to Haridwar. Once more, he had hoped that someone from his kith and kin would miraculously turn up there.

It was Hari’s 15th day in Haridwar. On the previous night, Babaji suggested yet again that he learn to play the tanpura. But Hari just nodded weakly. Babaji was completely unaware that Hari had been gripped by a dark cloud of despair all evening. He had felt sure that all his loved ones were dead and that he would never see his family again. After a torturous night that seemed to crawl on endlessly, Hari ran and ran till he reached his favourite beautiful spot at Neel Dhara. The river, the temple, and the distant hills had all seemed so welcoming,

when he first came to Haridwar. He had spent several hours in their majestic company in the past fortnight. But today, he felt bereft and alone. As his deepening despair began to blot out the mid-morning sun, he felt that the gushing current was only echoing his anguish. This immortal river seemed like a rude contrast to his unshed tears. He felt that the only way out was to seek permanent refuge in the lap of his Ganga *Mata*. He jumped into the water.

The mighty river enveloped his limbs. Hari began to sink deeper and deeper with clenched teeth, a ballooning chest, and eyes shut tight against the inevitable. But someone up there had other plans for His disheartened devotee. Just before he released his clamped breath and let the water take over, he felt a powerful pair of arms grip him around his waist and tug him upwards. His chest felt as if it would burst; his hands and feet staged a weak protest. But the rescuer who had an iron grip did not intend to sacrifice this strapping boy.

The samaritan dragged Hari's unwilling frame with determination till they both reached the shore. He laid the boy flat on his back and pumped his chest to expel any water that he might have swallowed. All through this bizarre drama, Hari kept his eyes tightly shut. A medley of emotions — consternation, confusion, shame, and gratitude flooded his dizzy head till he felt his shoulders being shaken gently. He opened his eyes to see the kindest face that had ever crossed his path. Hari stared at his saviour for a long while. The tall and well built sannyasi was dressed in ochre and wore an ochre cap covering his bald head. He smiled compassionately at Hari and then inquired gently, "Now, what made a strong, young man like you do a silly thing like that?"

Patting Hari's arm affectionately, the old sannyasi sat beside him and waited patiently for his answer. His warm manner made it easy for Hari to tell his story. Out tumbled everything — the grief, the frustration, and the deep sense of failure over his inability to locate his family! He also gave vent to the sudden anger towards his beloved God who had let him down. Finally, he acknowledged his mortification that flouting his own deep-seated values, he had tried to 'escape' by killing himself.

The sadhu waited patiently for Hari's outburst to subside. Then, he put a strong arm around Hari's damp and slumped shoulders. As they sat quietly for a few seconds, Hari felt the warmth of his protective concern seep in.

Finally, the old man began to speak. "*Beta*, this life that you were about to throw away, is a precious gift given to you by our Maker. He never ever makes a wrong move. Whatever happens is a part of His divine plan. Each one of us is here for a purpose. We must probe relentlessly and seek His grace and guidance to help us find that purpose. What right do we have to snuff out something we did not create in the first place? Sometimes, life feels very unjust and you want to end the misery somehow, but that is very wrong, beta. These are the little examinations that God poses to test our faith in Him. You must learn to tackle problems with all the strength and skills at your command. Learn to accept that some circumstances are not within your power to change. That is when miracles begin to happen in the classroom of life. Who do you think sent me here to bathe at this time of the day? It is the same God who you thought is no longer your friend."

Every word that the gentle stranger spoke seemed to go straight to Hari's heart. 'Yes, this amazing sage was making

perfect sense. What on earth had possessed me to take such a foolish step? Would my parents ever forgive me if they came to know? What about my Krishna, who repeatedly exhorts Arjuna to get up and face the battle of life? What would He say? I must have gone crazy to give in to such an impulse. Thank God, this kind sadhu had been around. Was it true? Was it really my Krishna who sent him here to save me?' Hari's brain buzzed with this internal monologue. The sannyasi indulged him for a while, watching his changing expressions with a tender smile. Then he sprang to his feet, extended his hand, and said, "Come on beta, it is time to go home!"

Hari did not know where the sage was taking him. Why, he did not even know the stranger's name! But all that hardly seemed to matter. What mattered was that he had intervened in the nick of time and saved Hari from a tragic and premature death. Besides, had he not addressed Hari as 'Beta' so affectionately, as if he had known him for a very long time? Of course, the memory of his missing family still brought a lump to his throat. But walking beside this tall sadhu, with his fingers firmly ensconced in the comforting clasp of the sadhu's large palm, Hari no longer felt alone or uncared for. He also instinctively sensed that from this moment onwards, his world would change forever.

TWO

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Hari could not believe his eyes. Still holding his hand tightly, the sannyasi entered a familiar alley. They were now standing in front of the very ‘Bhola Giri Ashram’ that had sheltered Hari for the past fortnight! ‘Was this man a wizard or a magician? How on earth did he know where I was staying?’ Hari wondered. The sadhu knocked on the huge, wooden door and it was opened by Bharti ji. His calm face broke into a wide smile exhibiting his unconcealed delight. “Had your holy dip? I hope the water was not too cold,” he began and then, “Arre, where did you meet our Hari Sharan?” he asked, on noticing the young man, hesitating in the doorway.

“I found him in our mother’s lap and brought him along for some prashaad,” was all the information the stranger volunteered. Then, he turned to give Hari a reassuring smile. Hari felt his eyes smart as he smiled back in gratitude. How ashamed he would have felt if these calm *ashramites* got to know of his rash and impulsive deed! But how on earth did this amazing man know exactly how he felt?

Within a few minutes, tea was served in mud cups which lent the hot brew a delicious scent of the raw earth. Still a little

dazed, Hari sat on the straw mat till he felt someone tap gently on his shoulder. Turning his face, he saw Hari Giri ji smiling at him. By then, Hari had learnt that his benefactor shared his name. He also knew that the sadhu belonged to the same order as the members of the Bhola Giri Ashram and that Baba Bharti ji was his close friend. "Drink up your tea; it's getting cold," Hari Giri ji said gently.

Hari Giri ji's loving tone bore a striking resemblance to his Dadaji's soothing voice. In a trice, Hari's mind catapulted him to his abandoned home in Lahore. He remembered secretly sharing his adorable Dadaji's mid-morning tea during his school vacations. The self-control that had hitherto dammed his eyes burst, giving way to a rush of hot tears. Bharti ji instinctively stepped forward to comfort the boy, but Hari Giri ji held up a hand to restrain him. "Let the lad get it all out. He has been carting around this terrible burden for too long," he whispered. Though Hari heard him, he did not have the strength to thank his newfound ally yet again. All he could do then was just weep and weep.

Winter gave way to spring. Hari too healed slowly under the eagle eye of Hari Giri ji and the tender ministrations of the other sadhus who had all grown quite fond of him. Every evening, they would cajole him into singing the customary *aarti*, marvelling anew at the natural melody and deep yearning in his voice. Often, even passers-by got drawn listening to this gifted singer.

But Hari relied only on Hari Giri ji's repeated assurances, for the strength to face each new day. "Do not worry beta, you will certainly find them. Just pass this exam that the Lord is putting you through and see where He takes you," he would reiterate,

especially if he found Hari looking even a wee bit crestfallen. The sturdy philosopher-guide did not grill Hari Sharan even once, about his background or the cruel twist of fate that had befallen him. He was just content with offering the rock-like support that Hari needed.

Hari Giri ji kept the boy occupied in a variety of ways. He made him work in the ashram and told him stories about the different *mahatmas* he had met. Often, he asked him to sing, took him for long walks, and taught him *shlokas* or *dohas*. This helped to blunt the trauma Hari had undergone. Soon, the ugly images of hate and violence developed a few chinks, making way for happier recollections to seep in.

One sunny September morning, Hari Giri ji took Hari on a long uphill trek. Although he was quite stout, years of adhering to a rigorous and disciplined lifestyle had made him highly energetic and nimble on his feet. At times, Hari had to run to keep pace with his swift stride. Finally, they both reached the crest. Down below, the mighty Ganga was dotted with boats. On her banks was a clutter of man-made structures. Hari just flopped on the ground panting and drank in the clean, blemish-free blue of the open sky above him.

On turning his head, he spotted an incredibly beautiful bunch of purple wildflowers which sprang out from behind a boulder. "My God, this place is so peaceful! It reminds me of the *kabrastan* in Lahore, where I would hide from the world," Hari murmured. Hari Giri ji did not utter a single word. For the next three hours, not just lunch, but the entire world lay forgotten as Hari took his mentor through a whirlwind tour of his growing years. All his loved ones, hitherto hidden in the recesses of his heart crept out one by one, as Hari opened his album of happy memories —

“We lived in the heart of our *mohalla*. Our house had four rooms below and a lone room on the terrace where I kept my collection of kites. I loved drawing amusing faces on my kites and attaching long, flowing tails to their rear ends. This made them bigger and it was easier for me to trap the flimsy kites of my neighbourhood friends. Once trapped, they snapped and floated down during our ‘sky wars.’ I just loved papercraft and made cutouts of flowers and birds. I used to hang these all over the house with pieces of string. This irked my mother and *Chachi*. They also disliked my zooming around with my arms akimbo, pretending I was a plane!

“My Dadaji was my best friend. I slept in his bedroom and followed him around all the time. He used to smoke a *hookah* and I loved preparing it for him. He would be up at 4 a.m., chanting couplets from the Tulsi Ramayan in his fine voice. He often taught me these couplets, but there were two which he insisted I recite daily. One was —

*‘Kalyug Keval Naam Adhaara
Sumir Sumir Nara Utaheen Paara ...’*

(‘In this dark age, chanting the name of the Lord is the only source of strength and support. It is the only means by which human beings can hope to attain liberation.’)

The second one was —

*‘Siyaram-Maya Sab Jag Jaani
Karahoon Pranaam Jod Do-U Paani ...’*

(‘I join my hands in salutation; I bow to everyone because I have realised that the same Sita and Ram — the same divinity forms the core of every human being.’)

“I think he was the one who truly influenced me and turned my mind Godward. Ever since, I have always directed all my complaints, pleas, anger, and demands towards that Universal Father.

“*Chacha* was very fond of playing his antique harmonium. Since he played the keys using both his hands, he needed me to pump the bellows. The entire neighbourhood knew that I loved to sing bhajans. So, at every community *pooja*, I would be asked to render some bhajans. I do not remember what I sang. All I remember is partaking of the lip-smacking prashaad of *mohan bhog*.

“The teachers at the D.A.V. (Dayanand Anglo Vedic) High School, where I studied, were terribly strict. They would beat us black and blue for the slightest mistake, much to the indignation of my Dadaji. He simply could not understand the need for physical abuse of little children. I always scored high marks in Hindi, History, and in Drawing, which was my favourite subject. But I invariably got caned for doing poorly in Mathematics.

“I had two sisters, Jaywanti and Kusum. Jaywanti turned into a bossy ‘Mummy Junior’ every now and then. Kusum was much younger and easy to please with a little attention or a toffee. Both generally stayed out of my way. My cousin (my Chacha’s son) and I were buddies. We played and squabbled with each other. One day, while engaged in a mock wrestling match, we unknowingly ended up at the head of the staircase.

Before either of us realised what had happened, he was lying in a heap on the bottom step, bawling his eyes out. It was just an accident but to a nine-year-old, everything looks larger than life. Moreover, I loved my cousin a lot and just could not bear to hear him wailing like that. Panic-stricken and feeling immense remorse, I fled to my favourite hideout — the kabrastan. I had chanced upon it one day while trying to find a shortcut to reach home earlier from school. It was a very quiet place with an abundance of flowering bushes. The air always hung heavy with the sweet scent of innumerable roses. Right at the centre, was a special grave. It probably belonged to some important *Sufi* fakir. There were marble steps going down to the main resting place. On either side of the steps, were delicately carved stone grills. I would sit on those steps with my sketch pad to draw and paint those intricate designs. Far from the madding crowds of the local bazaar or the cacophony in our mohalla, I would steal forty winks or weave a million fancies, in the silence here.

“After my cousin’s fall, I sat weeping on those marble steps and finally dozed off. When I woke up, it was dark and now, the silence felt very eerie. I scurried home, still scared of the punishment that awaited me. But surprise, surprise! My worried folks gave me a hero’s welcome. My Dadaji and my father hugged me. My mother cried in sheer relief and my Chachi, about whose reaction I was most worried, fed me with her own hands!”

Hari Sharan’s eyes turned misty at the memory of that rosy evening. Hari Giri ji put a comforting arm around his shoulders and asked, “So, how did the communal unrest affect the family’s secure nest?”

Hari's face clouded over on hearing this gentle query. His voice lost its chirpiness as he relived those anxiety-ridden days —

“Our mohalla was like one large, extended family. Everyone was concerned with each member's safety. The first whiff of the impending Partition brought with it the initial spurts of hooliganism and mindless killing. So, our colony began closing its main gates to isolate our peace-loving habitat from the rest of the insane city.

“Before all this started, I used to spend a lot of time with Andrew, a Christian boy. His sisters — Seema and Clara, often helped me with my homework. I would also drop in on Gyanu (short for ‘Gyanchand’) because I was fascinated by the ancient gramophone he owned. He told me that the people whose voices emerged from the long-playing disc, were hidden within its black grooves! Naïve as I was, I believed him. There were Muslim boys in our group as well. What mattered was who was taller, stronger, or better talented than the others. I don't think anyone in our mohalla would have ostracised or victimised someone just because they prayed to a different God!

“But as the unrest outside deepened, that peace vanished and fear stalked every heart. The piteous screams, the crashing of buildings, and the acrid fumes of the torched dwellings, made us cower. We drew the coverlets over our heads from the fear. Running to buy some vegetables or other essentials when the curfew was lifted, felt totally bizarre, especially after such sleepless, terror-filled nights.”

“Hari, tell me honestly, has this tragic experience made you bitter about Muslims?” Hari Giri ji interrupted.

Hari shook his head vigorously saying, “No, no, not at all!”

He then added, "In fact, the man who finally helped my family escape to India was a Muslim!"

"Ah, what a wonderful way to discover that every individual is a human being first, and a Hindu or Muslim later, wasn't it?" Hari Giri ji remarked. He continued, "Fanaticism is a terrible sickness, while true faith breaks through all barriers to unite, not divide. A true devotee is one who can see the presence of the same God in all beings."

"You are right, Guruji. Our neighbour, Sheikh Shafi truly believed that. Shafi *sahab* used to teach me Urdu. Before beginning each day's lesson, he would make me chant the *Gayatri mantra*. He believed that this sacred, ancient chant is for the entire human race. But he also requested me not to tell anyone that he believed this!" Hari replied.

"Really? You were very lucky to have interacted with a human being who possessed such insight and vision," Giri ji said.

"When the unrest erupted, Shafi *sahab* was privy to the information that a secret convoy of buses and trucks was leaving for Delhi from the D.A.V. School. He urged my father to join this group so that we could be saved from all the terror and bloodshed.

"My father grabbed this opportunity. In the twinkling of an eye, he decided to leave behind his shop, his house, and his homeland. He decided to delete the past and start afresh as this was the only way out. He thanked Shafi *sahab* profusely and all of us bid him a tearful farewell. I could not take leave of my other friends because everything was so hush-hush and we had to leave in such a hurry."

"How did you get separated from the rest of your family?" Giri ji asked, almost in a whisper, to avoid interrupting Hari Sharan's train of thought.

“There were many trucks and all the people who reached there were being shepherded into them. I was put on a truck with some neighbours from our mohalla. When I protested that I wanted to travel with my family, I was silenced with a rebuke by the Gorkha driver. ‘Do not be a sissy at such a critical moment. After all, we are all headed for the same camp. You will be with your family soon enough,’ he said and that was that.” Hari’s face crumpled as he recalled that terrible turning point and his voice faded into a long silence.

The peal of a distant temple bell announcing the noon aarti, brought him back to the present. He then continued the narrative in a low voice. “Our truck took a diversion because we heard that some rioting was ongoing on our pre-decided route. After hours of fear and uncertainty, we crossed the bridge over the Sutlej River and arrived in a safe, trouble-free zone. I ran around wildly, searching for the other trucks that were to bring my loved ones. But there was no sign of them. ‘Don’t worry, they must have taken a different route. They will be here soon,’ many people pacified me. But that never happened. Their truck never reached our refugee camp.”

“Did anyone have any idea as to what could have befallen the rest of the convoy?” Giri ji inquired.

“Not really. But after a couple of weeks, there was news that a few trucks had reached Amritsar. But that too could have just been speculation or rumours. No one knew what effect such half-baked truths had on me,” Hari replied morosely.

“What about food? How did you manage that?”

“Oh, I must say that the Punjabis are a very kind-hearted and hospitable race.

“Every day, many people from the neighbourhood would

arrive at the campsite, loaded with whatever they could spare. But I was so dejected that I could hardly taste what I was chewing.”

“Naturally. When you are feeling sad, it affects every aspect of your life. How long did you stay in this camp?”

“Maybe a month and a half. Then I moved to Ferozepur Cantonment with a few others,” Hari replied.

“Ah yes, you told me about that, the day we met,” Hari Giri ji nodded.

Hari noticed Giri ji’s sensitivity gratefully. He had mentioned, ‘the day we met’ and not ‘the day I fished you out of the waters.’ With every word, with every action, this sage revealed how special he was. Hari Sharan began to revere him deeply.

“Guruji, I did tell you that I was in Ferozepur, but I didn’t mention that I worked as a billboard painter there.”

“Really? Now what made you do that?”

“That man was very talented and needed an assistant. I was fond of dabbling with a paintbrush. Penniless and at a total loss as to what to do next, I teamed up with him. For a while, I was busy and happy. But ...”

“But?”

“At the Cantonment, I heard that some refugees were in the camp at Delhi. That made me restless once again.”

“So, it was Delhi from Ferozepur, then Brindavan, and Kaithal. Finally, you came knocking on the temple gates here in Haridwar, am I right?” Giri ji asked.

“Yes Guruji. I did not find my family here either, but at least I found you,” Hari replied turning towards Giri ji with folded hands.

The sadhu patted Hari Sharan affectionately. Piercing him

with his intense gaze, he asked, "Tell me Hari, who is 'family?'"

Hari was stumped by that unexpected question. "Family means those who love and support you in every circumstance and in every crisis." But even as the words left his mouth, the canvas of his mind widened. He understood that in his own dark moments, it was Hari Giri ji who had given him a second chance at life. In Giri ji's words, God Himself had sent Giri ji as His emissary to that exact spot on that fateful morning! Which meant ...

Watching Hari Sharan closely, Giri ji saw the light dawn in his widening eyes. He smiled. "So, do you understand who is the One person who is within and without? Who is it that you can truly call your own through thick and thin? Who will manifest without doubt, if you only call out to Him in right earnest?"

"Yes, yes. I understand. Our closest relative, our dearest One is none other than God Himself," Hari Sharan replied and bowed down to touch Hari Giri ji's feet. When he lifted his head, his eyes were brimming over with gratitude towards a true teacher. Hari Giri ji had instantly driven home a truth that was simple and profound at the same time!

"Will you teach me *Vedanta*? Will you explain to me all that there is to know? Will you, will you?" Hari asked. His eagerness to be formally accepted as a disciple, made his voice falter and his knees tremble.

Hari Giri ji held him by his shoulders and lifted him to his feet. He then smiled to show his consent. Hari Sharan felt that his heart would burst with this new-found happiness. He had found his Guru.