

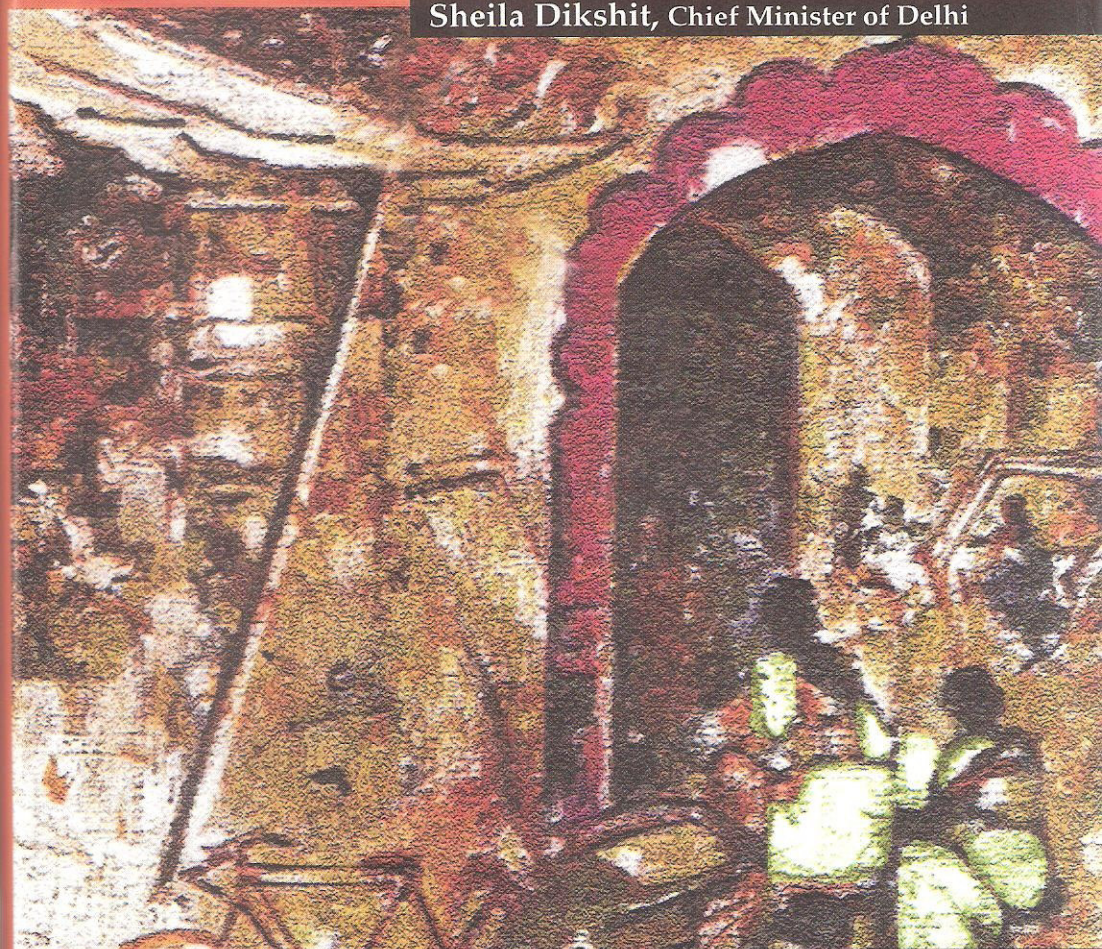
Abdul Rahman Siddiqi

Smoke without Fire

Portraits of Pre-Partition Delhi

Foreword by

Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister of Delhi



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SHEILA DIKSHIT
Chief Minister

FOREWORD

The author Abdul Rahman (Kathuray) Siddiqi belongs to the rare, vanishing breed of authentic Dilliwallas, born and brought up in Delhi. I-Ie was 23 at the time of Partition. Siddiqui belongs to Dilli Punjabi Saudgran community migrating from Panipat under Shah Jahan (1627-1658) to settle mainly in Delhi as a tradesman. Quite a few thousands of them have made this city their permanent homes since partition.

His book "Smoke Without Fire: Portraits of Pre-Partition Delhi" is an exquisite combination of a photographic memory and a creative, imaginative mind. It takes us into the nooks and crannies of the city alleys largely unexplored. The book also unfolds the story of a typical Delhi family; of its joys and sorrows, births and bereavements.

The main title of the book "Smoke Without Fire" symbolizes the sheer anguish of migration and his smoking pile of memories chocking the mounting sights within.

I hope the book would serve as a vital literary link between the two neighbouring countries.

(SHEILA DIKSHIT)
CHIEF MINISTER: DELHI

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Dedicated to

Delhi

The Soul of Our Sub-continent of Harmony

& to

Karachi

Independent Pakistan's First National Capital

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And finally to the City itself, the Muse behind all my humble creative effort.

Salaam Dilli!

Abdul Rahman Siddiqi

Chapter 1 Childhood Reveries

Ek chhappar hai shahar Dill Ka
Jaise rouza hou Sheikh Chilli ka!

This city of Dilli is either like a thatched cottage
Or the mausoleum of Sheikh Chilli The proverbial braggart

Gardishe Range Chaman hai mah.-o-sal Andleeb

'The cycles of change in the garden of life are the measure of the awareness of the bulbul's (nightingale's) passage of time: of months and years'. So said the immortal Ghalib in a verse of untranslatable beauty.

The same could be asserted of a child who would know and feel the difference between hot and cold winds as much as between the pangs of hunger and the joy of a full stomach.

Memories of changing weather-winter, the summer and barsaat (the rainy season)-though blurred and mixed up in detail through the years-stay like a hoary vision.

Winters in Delhi-especially through mahawat (the wet spell, December to January)-though severe, had a particular charm of their own: the warm, quilted, often flea-ridden, half-sleeved double-breasted vest; all the hot, spicy foods such as brain and nihari curries; tea topped with thick layers of malai (full cream); chapped hands that would burn like flames and bleed when stretched upwards or sideways; short days and long nights. "Through the long winter nights, we would always have a biscuit or a rusk or two placed under the pillow to eat should we happen to wake up in the middle of the night, invariably hungry.

The shade of the setting sun on the corner of the eastern

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side wall, up on the open rooftop opposite the dalan (the all-purpose living, bed and drawing room) fascinated me endlessly. Shortly past high noon, a small triangle would form in the corner of the side wall adjoining the main parapet wall and grow larger and darker as the sun went down. By the Asar Azan (call to evening prayer) the side wall would be completely dark. The winter rain and the chilly winds accompanying them drove us indoors. The rolled-up canvas curtains, hung from the eaves of the dalans, were rolled to shelter the open, doorless dalan from the rains and the winds.

How exciting it was to sit around the stove alive with flaming coal--gossiping, story-telling, shelling and consuming huge quantities of roasted peanuts!

A curse for babies and old people, the winter rains and winds provided loads of fun for the young and the youthful. But babies would catch cold, developing pneumonia, suffer and sometimes even die, withering away like flowers caught in the dry and strong autumn winds. The old coughed and cursed in spite of all the heavy winter clothing, closely pressing their arms across their chest.

I remember my grandfather (Haji Fazal-ur-Rahman)-Abbaji, we called him--having probably his first bath in three months at the end of February. He would get one of the grand-children to scrub his back and enjoy the sheer fun of it. It was so oily and smeared with thick layers of accumulated grime that our hands would slip as we rubbed it up and down. To our protests over the ordeal Abbaji would laugh heartily. 'That's what you deserve, shaitans (devils). That's your punishment for not being dutiful enough to your elders!'

At the end of the bath, he would give us an anna each (1 / 16th of the pre-partition Indian rupee). That would be nothing short of a fortune for us to buy our favourite delicacies--biscuits and chocolates and the desi mithai (Indian sweets) from Shamman Halvai--that we longed for but never could indulge in enough to satisfy our longing.

Our house had a gular tree planted in the middle of the small courtyard. Almost every summer morning, the gular trees would bring lots of women, mothers, sisters, aunts,

grandmothers, maidservants flocking to our house, holding little babies in their arms. The sap from the bark of the tree, white and thick like full cream milk, was supposed to help babies suffering from sore. mouths. The Women would hammer the tree trunk with a brick or a stone pestle to break the bark, let the sap trickle and apply it to the mouth of the suffering baby. During summers, particularly when the tree would be in full bloom, Women from all over the neighbourhood would literally swarm into the courtyard,

The tree was supposed to be the abode of some fearsome djinns and ghosts. Our house maid, Shakuran, was reputed to have had some sort of a psychic or spritual link with the djinns. They would take hold of her and possess her head every now and then to drive her into a state of sheer frenzy. When that happened she would sit right in the middle of the courtyard, her hair dishevelled, looking almost like the deserted weaver bird's nest – her eyes upturned to show the whites only and her mouth foaming like a slab of Washing soap. She would bash her head against the tree trunk and let out weird, guttural sounds. For us children her hysterical fits would, at once, hold much fear and fun.

My one fond and vivid memory of the gular tree pertains to the third night (diva) lamp of the Divali festival. We were told that on the third diva of Divali, at midnight, a flower blossoms on the topmost branch of the tree, surpassing even the most powerful electric bulb in dazzling radiance. Anybody who saw the flower blossom would be king one day.

With quilts tightly wrapped around the three of us--Zohra, Usman and I--would sit and wait for the magic flower to blossom at the midnight hour, our eyes glued to the topmost bough of the tree. Invariably however, We would all drop off to sleep before it did, missing our only chance to be king.

Divali held a strange fascination for us. There were so many stories and superstitious attached to it. The festival was supposed to be a special occasion, the prime time for Hindus to settle scores with their enemies. They would engage the services of SUE (shit-eating) jadugars to devise the means-amulets and incantations and all the other forms of kala jadu (black magic)-

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to destroy their enemies. The widest known and feared would be the legend of the clay handi (saucepan) full of all kinds of filth and shit. It would come flying all the way to land in the middle of the courtyard of the enemy and explode with a bang to hurt, even kill, the inmates. Shakuran would claim, on oath, to have actually seen one in her village. 'It came, like a huge bird and exploded with such an ear-splitting bang and force as to shake the whole locality like an earthquake' She would go on to describe in detail the grim fate of the inmates of the house thus hit. 'They were never the same again, their bodies bristling with running sores, full of pus, like lepers', and itching terribly all over ...'

The bulbul was yet another gift of the winter-and a most pleasant one too. It was the bird of the winter. It fascinated me, with its dark grey head, check grey-and-brown plumage and the bright red speck underneath its tiny tail. It would chirp and sing and flutter merrily while warm and in its element. The moment it caught a chill, it would puff out its plumage and, in no time, wither away with its tiny legs up. The passing away of a nightingale was trauma, we would bury it in the flower bed in a corner of the courtyard Sorrowfully with tears in our eyes. That was winter, eagerly looked forward to and enjoyed while it lasted, except through the rainy and windy spells.

Early summer had a charm of its own-warm during the day and cool through nights. Around the end of May and thereafter, all the way through June and July. the temperatures soared and soared. The city might have been hell itself, now lashed by the blazing siMoom-like 'lu' winds-now so sultry and suffocating that it would be hard to breathe. Mother never forgot to put a raw onion in my coat pocket when I went to school. It was supposed to be the best antidote for sunstroke. Green mango crush would be spread all over the straw-plaited hand fans and sprayed over those down with high fever from a sunstroke.

Through the long, hot summer afternoon, the mohallah (neighbourhood) would be practically deserted. Elderly people would retire for a siesta and would not stir out of their homes before the Asar prayers. Only hawkers-especially ice and fruit

vendors--would do the rounds of one lane after another, chanting their wares. Interested customers would briefly come out, buy the stuff and return to the safety of their homes.

High summer noons would be the best time for the hot blooded young to stir out of their homes and take to the deserted lanes to indulge in horse-play-kissing and hugging and massaging each other's private part. They would place themselves behind any available cover-half-open doors, vestibules and even unfrequented open spaces-and indulge passionately in kissing, pushing and pulling one another, with their trousers on, or half-way down. However, if they were ever caught red-handed, there would be hell to pay.

Conspicuous amongst the visitors through the long summer afternoons were the Singhi-walian (women with conch shells) They were all from Rajasthan and Gurgaon-all young and full-bodied with upthrusting bosoms. They wore imitation ivory bangles all the way up to their elbows, big nose-rings and ear pendants. They were dressed in red tight-fitting blouses with yellow spots and flowing skirts. As they ambled from one lane into another, chanting 'Singhi-lug walo Singhi-lug wills', some of the big boys followed them, making lewd gestures, mumbling 'lagwa-o-ji' (would you oblige). The truly shameless ones would pull their trousers half-way down and show their small pricks in full erection. The bold Rajasthani females did not really seem to mind the pranks so long as the urchins kept their distance. Anybody who dared to get funny with them did it entirely at his risk. The Singhi-walian were strong and sturdy women and could bring anyone down with a single blow of the hand.

The Singhi-walian were supposed to cure high blood pressure, apoplexy. epilepsy and only God knew what else. Besides applying conch shells to one's bare body which they blew like a horn, they would also apply leeches to draw all the contaminated blood from the patient's body. They would stick the leeches to certain specific points of the patient's chest and back and let them stay there for an hour or so. To be sure, the leeches would suck blood, swell to many times their size and then drop off, being too heavy to stay on in their place any longer.

The intervening period between high summer and the

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outbreak of the monsoon rains also brought swarms of locusts every second or third year. The locusts would be everywhere-up on the walls and ceilings, down on the floor. They would come like thick clouds, covering the entire sky. We all hated the swarms; but some liked the taste of the pickled ones.

At the height of summer, soaring temperatures would hit 108°-110° Fahrenheit in the shade. May and June were the worst months, allowing little respite or comfort inside or outside the home. It was like hell everywhere. Inside the pucca (solid or permanent) flagstone paved or tiled-wall houses, measuring 80 to 120 square yards, it was like a brick kiln: the walls and the floors exuded, in the evening and through the better part of the night, all the heat absorbed through the day. And there was no electricity only hand fans: one would flap them up and down to stir the air until our hands went numb and we fell into a fitful sleep.

There was no electricity in the house until I was six or seven years of age. Kerosene hurricane lanterns and lamps were lit at night. Big farshi punkhas (ceiling fans) or hand fans were used for breeze. Well watered khas-tatties (chicks) were placed at entrances of rooms for extra cooling. Some of us would prefer to retire to the tehkhana (basement) which would be cooler and darker.

Streets and lanes were lit by the municipal lamp-lighter, who would come before sunset every afternoon without fail. He carried a bamboo ladder and went from one street lamp pole to another, standing the ladder against the wall, climbing up, removing the shade, cleaning it of the overnight soot and lighting the wick.

For the children of the mohallah, it was even greater fun, an absorbing sight we would eagerly look forward to and watch intently. We would greet the lamp-lighter with raucous chants of Chiragh Aladin! Chiragh Aladin! The lamp-lighter enjoyed the chorus. At times, however, he would pretend to be angry, catch hold of the first boy within his reach and smear his cheek with the lamp's overnight black.

'You little bedmash (naughty fellow),' he would say with a smile, 'you asked for it, so now you have it too!'

We would break into our raucous chorus once again.

Chiragh Aladin, Chiragh Aladin!. The lamp lighter would smile back: 'Alright, just wait and see what I do next time. I would twist your ears till they bleed. Just Wait and seei!.

What made the heat worse was that it brought prickly heat-a web of red sores covering our bodies, particularly the back and the chest. It would be infinitely Worse in the case of the babies and infants, who would weep as their mothers and sisters gently rubbed the affected parts to sooth them. The well-to-do would use English prickly heat powder, while the poor used the paste of the baked Multani clay as a soothing balm. The Multani clay soothed While it was still Wet. It would dry soon In harden and flake and form layers upon layers of dried paste lo pierce the tender skin like needle points.

Summer evenings would offer some relief after the long hot clay. The municipal Water carriers would come two or three times between the Asar and Maghrb (call to morning prayers) to sprinkle Water through the by-lanes. The first spray of Water would raise dense vapours from the scorched floor of the flagstone-paved lanes, the second and third would cool it off awhile presently to release whiffs of damp, humid vapour in no Way pleasant to one's senses.

The street scene used to be quite a feast for the eyes. It offered a vista of activity of brisk business in cold drinks and ices. The vendors would chant their Wares siren-like to attract customers. The qulfi walls vending the malai ki baraf (full-cream ices) was about the most popular. He had a porter to carry a huge, bulbous pitcher covered with lal qand (red cloth), have it off-loaded at a fixed point, and went on to chant rubri, malai ki baraf. He did not have to wait for the customers, who came flocking to buy, and he helped them to their favourite ices served in small zinc and clay cylindrical tubes sealed with kneaded flour.

The sherbet walls was yet another attraction. He had his mobile outlet, a small pushcart, festooned all over with bits of glazed, coloured paper and lal qand, little silvery and golden globes hanging from the brocade-covered top of his pushcart. The man had a long, flowing White beard and a face fairer and more freckled than a Europeans l-le would neither hawk nor chant his wares, just stand by his pushcart and Wait for the customers, who came to him unsolicited to have their favourite

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drinks from the array of bottles-red, green, purple, white, amber and yellow-neatly arranged inside. A whole block of ice lay flat, slowly melting away releasing a whiff of cool fresh air every time a gust of the hot wind would blow over it. It was so refreshing. He had plenty of crushed ice wrapped up in a length of coarse coir rag to preserve it from melting and ready to serve the customers with their favourite drinks.

Young and old alike jostled to help themselves to the iced delicacies. Among the children were those with money to pay for the dainties-eats and drinks-and those without any or enough money. They would greedily and enviously watch others eat and drink, quite often drooling round their mouths. Maybe the sherbet Walla would give them an ice cube or two or the dregs of the leftovers?

The near-blind Hindu ice peddler carrying a wooden box either under one of his arms or on his head was yet another attraction. He wore thick pebble glasses and a dhoti. His ices, mainly in three different flavours-lemon,falsa, mango—would be neatly wrapped in thick lint to keep those from melting. Unlike ordinary ices, his would be crisp and hard. He would pare and slice the hard, frozen lump with a knife, emitting a faint, rasping sound. Kind and generous to a fault, he had quite a few defaulters among his young clients: boys who would enjoy the ices on credit and rarely honour their debts.

End of July would see the sudden gathering of thick, dark monsoon clouds followed by thunder claps and lightning. A sharp drizzle would follow and soon develop into a lashing rain. In no time the narrow and quite often choked drains would be overflowing to inundate the lanes with ankle, and at places, knee-deep swirling, brown water, often with bits of human and animals (cats' and dogs) faeces floating around.

I remember my father, a stickler for cleanliness, riding in a doli (litter) borne by two kahars (porters) to pass through the flooded streets. Most others would choose to take off their shoes, hitch their pyjamas knee-high to cross the inundated street, admonishing the urchins at play splashing rainwater, and telling them to behave.

For street urchins-after the insufferable summer heat and the eruption of fiery prickly heat up and down their backs and

other parts of the body-it was a fine day They would block the sewers to pool the water in the lanes and dip to their hearts' content-some only sparsely covered, some stark naked-splashing and floating and playing games. The blocked sewers flooded the streets to make them practically impassible.

The sawan-bhadu (rainy months) were at once a blessing and .1 curse-a festive and feasting season and also one of sudden outbreaks of epidemic, like cholera and gastritis. People would gorge mangoes and spicy curries and kema-parathas (minced meats and ghee-soaked breads) only to suffer from indigestion and its attending complications. But eat they must, regardless of the consequences.

Oh, how the appetizing smell of keema-parantha still tickles my nostrils!

Young girls, in rainbow-coloured dupattas, would merrily swing as it drizzled on the swings suspended from tree branches in the courtyard. Each would try to fly higher than the other, to touch one or the other branch of the tree. They would look like so many butterflies as they swung up and down and sound like so many songbirds as they sang and sang to their heart's content.

Apart from the changing seasons, my earliest childhood memories shadowly converge around the snatches of harmonium music that wafted form our neighbourhood on a summer night.

The sound of music ebbed and swelled before dissolving into the air. On a still, windless night it came flooding through loud and clear. It stirred me in a strange manner and I loved it. If there was anything in the world I wished to learn and fondly dreamt of mastering one day as a grown-up, it was how to play the harmonium. The lows and the highs of the music, with and without words, acted like a bal~a lullaby that put me to sleep in no time.

I could trace my love of music back to the little gramophone my Uncle had presented me after my circumcision. I had been over five years old and still uncircumcised-something unusual.for a family and a society where children were circumcised either soon after or within a year of their birth.

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Being the youngest at that time, I had been a spoilt child, not easy to handle. Mother doted on me, much to the chagrin of the big brother, Usman; Zohra, getting to be a young woman, could not care less; Usman almost hated me. When in a temper, he would go beside himself and beat me hard. On one or two occasions, I remember, he slapped me on both cheeks so hard as to leave his fingerprints -and was duly punished for that by our father.

As I gained in years, circumcision could wait no longer. My father and mother did not know how to go about it. One of the paternal uncles, the kindly Chacha Ata ur Rahman allayed their fears, told them not to worry and leave everything to him. I remember the day set for the slaughter. I was scared stiff and hid myself in the small kothri (box room) underneath piles of thick quilts stored away for winter. The ruse did not work for everybody knew every nook and corner of the house; and Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman would not have the least problem locating me.

'Come on,' he said. 'It's just nothing. I promise you that' I leapt out of the quilt like a jack-in-the-box and took to my heels-Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman behind me. He laughed as he chased me from one room to another until he caught hold of me. I kicked my hands and feet hard as he carried me in his arms to the courtyard. Shamsuddin Nat (the barber--a circumcision specialist) was already there sitting on the wooden ckowki (settee) placed in one corner of the courtyard.

I screamed and kicked harder to release myself from the iron grip of my uncle. I must have hit and hurt him in the process; but he would not let me off. Instead, he went on laughing and telling me that it was nothing. Shamsuddin Nai joined him in holding me tight. They dumped and pinioned me on the wooden settee. Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman held my legs while Wahid Ali, my father 's personal attendant, firmly gripped my hands to immobilize me completely. There was nothing I could do except yell and scream, tossing my head helplessly sideways.

Shamsuddin took out his razor blade, rubbed it up and down his open palm to sharpen it, recited 'Bismillah' and went

for my wee-wee. With a single stroke of his sharpened razor, he finished the procedure. 'Look here flies away the golden sparrow [Sone ki chirya ur grail. That is all' I felt sharp twings of pain and saw a trickle of blood around my groin. The barber applied some soothing balm and powder to the wound and gave me something to drink as a tranquillizer. The healing was pretty quick. A scab formed on the third or the fourth day, the pain was almost gone. Itching, at times too strong to bear, followed.

One day Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman came grinning hugely. 'You sure are a brave boy Now that you are a pucca (complete) Mussalman, there is a reward for you! He turned around and picked the large toy box he had been carrying. It was big, bigger than any toy box I had seen. He went on to open the box and out of a heap of protective tissues, brought out a dainty round machine. 'Do you know what this is?" He asked me. I had seen nothing like it before and kept staring at it and my uncle in sheer bewilderment. "Well, it's a gramophone-and a real one too-for brave children like yourself' Then he proceeded to unfold a couple of small envelopes and produced two tiny 'records' from those. I could hardly believe what I saw.

'Chacha mian, Chacha mian, are they truly real? Will they play? I asked, unable to contain my surprise and joy any longer. 'Oh yes. As real as anything could be. Just wait and see!' The sight of the machine simply thrilled me. It was such a lovely machine: pale green, with sketches of children at play—blowing their trumpets and bugles and beating their drums-painted all around it.

He Went on to place the small round disc on the turntable, wound up the machine, carefully placed the 'gharhi' (sound box) on the disc and let it play Music filled the air. It was so exciting and the song so wonderful. Later, I would know that it was a recording of the blind singer Master Muhammad Hussain's popular song for children.

"Bibi dholkz' ree

Tujhko gene ke hairani

Tabla tem bhai-bhateeja

Sarangi teri devrani
Bibi dholki ree..."

(Poor dholki-drum (small drum] doesn't know how to sing. The tabla (big drum) is your brother-cousin, the sarangi is your sister-in-law, Bibi dholki ree.,.)

The last line of his song was 'Muhammad Hussain ka gana sunkar jalsaun main bulwana-Han, Han, jalsaun main bulwana' (After enjoying Muhammad Hussain's song, invite him to music parties). His two songs about the plight of the 'table' drum not knowing how to sing and another about the strange marriage of karela (bitter gourd) and bhindi (okra) coming in to dance turned out to be super hits. I heard them again and again until the disc got rusty-badly worn out; and instead of the sound of music, produced an ear-piercing, grating hiss.

Alongside the sound of music humming in my little head also echoes the 'hoo-ha' of the pigeon-flier, Usman Khabba (the Left Hander). His rooftop almost straddled ours, offering us a full View of his pigeon loft and of him calling the birds in and out, waving a flag-like length of cloth. He had, God knows how many pigeon a whole flock of them, enough to cover a sizeable portion of the sky as they fluttered, flapped and flew up and away and back home, responding to the gaming calls of Usman Khabba.

And what a fascinating spectacle it was to see the flock fly away and back at the command of the flier. How could the pigeons, mere birds, find their way back home after flying so far away from their loft? As for me I was not allowed to go unescorted even up to the end of our own haveli. And rightly so, for I would have been unable to find my way back home. And here were the pigeons, mere birds, flying away and homing back.

Besides his trained pigeons and pigeon-flying expertise, Usman Khabba was also known for the goat fights on the eve of Baqra Eid, when goats, sheeps, cows and camels were slaughtered to commemorate the great sacrifice of Hazrat Ibrahim (Abraham) who offered to slaughter his own son, Hazrat Ismail in complete submission to God's command. Appreciating Hazrat Ibrahim's resolve to sacrifice his dear son,

Ismail, Allah Almighty had a goat sent just when Hazrat Ibrahim was about to put his sharpened knife to his son's jugular and cut it off.

Usman, the Left Hander got a pair of strong, malodorous uncastrated he-goats days before Eid, trained them to lock horns with any challenger and fight to the finish. It used to be such a gory sight. While neither of the two animals got killed; each ended up with a broken horn or a wounded eye bleeding all over. Usman challenged anyone to come and lock horns with his uncastrated monsters. Some dared and accepted the challenge, to the huge joy of the mohalla wallas. The thrilling spectacle of a fierce goat fight-the challenger's monsters on one side and the defencer's on the other-would be a real treat to watch.

Usman Khabba was my hero, my vision of someone in command of birds and beasts. He also had a robust physique exuding such strength and power even as he walked. And here I was, so weak and helpless. I could not even fasten my pyjama top after a pee. I could still vividly recall myself standing by an open sewer after a pee, waiting for someone to come and fasten my pyjama top.

'Kind sir, would you please tie up my pyjama strings? I would beg someone passing by The elderly person would look at me with a pinched smile before proceeding to fasten the pyjama top. He would look all the way down the open pyjama top at my private parts to make me blush to the roots of my hair. Smiling impishly; the elderly passerby would tell me how to tie up pyjama strings and stop pissing by the wayside.

Perhaps my first exposure to shame and dependence! It would haunt me for the rest of my life in one form or another alongwith quite a few other equally haunting memories to remind me of my helplessness.

I had been too frightened to sleep by myself. I just couldn't sleep without the physical touch of my mother's breast. She breast fed me for almost four years. There would hardly be a night when I would not wake up in the middle, probe for her breast and go to sleep again as soon as I would get hold of my favourite one without necessarily a feed.

Yes, I had a favourite one, too; and would always probe for that only-never settling for the other. The nipple of one of her breasts, my favourite one, happened to be somewhat disfigured. One of the children had bitten it hard to cause an infection and the resulting disfigurement. I called it kana, or 'the one-eyed'.

There used to be a big joke attached to my infatuation with my favourite breast. One night, my mother had to go on an urgent call from one of my aunts in the throes of her labour pains. My mother knew how churlish I would be on waking up in the middle of the night after probing for my favourite and not finding it. She told my eldest sister, Zohra, to sleep beside me and let me go for her breast in case I woke up in the middle of the night.

As was my wont, I woke up and sought my favourite. No sooner did I touch my sister's breast than I screamed. 'This isn't it. This isn't it', and was wide awake. My sister got up with me. 'Where is Ammo (mother)?' I demanded. Startled at first, Zohra broke into a loud laugh. 'What a shaitan you are. What a perfect badmash. She exclaimed. 'What is the difference between one breast and another? just tell me what.'

'But I want my kana one. Only my kana one!' I protested. There was quite a scene before I went to sleep again. Zohra laughed and laughed as she tried to pacify me. Next morning she told mother the whole story; much to her amusement.

'Fancy that, what makes him so infatuated with the bad one, I find hard to understand. But a child is a child after all! How can one argue with a child?'

Then she would turn to IIIQ and scold me in the language only mothers can employ-a quaint mixture of love, affection and admonition. 'You are a big boy now. Even the Shari 'at would not permit a mother for breastfeeding a boy as big you. You should be sleeping by yourself like any other boy of your age. And no more of breastfeeding and breast holding. Understand! '

There could be nothing more depressing for me than the prospect of sleeping all by myself. 'I won't, I won't ...' I protested, weeping, unable to say anything more than 'I won't, I won't, I won't ...'

Mother took me in her arms, kissed my cheeks and hugged me close to her breast. 'Alright, alright, now stop crying and behave!' She breastfed me until I was about five.

I don't remember exactly how long it might have taken to persuade or force me to sleep by myself. But it had not been easy. It took all sorts of persuasion, tricks and threats to wean me from my one baby addiction. Mother first had a string of hair from her head tied around her nipples to frighten and keep me off. Then she applied some quinine mixture to leave a nauseating bitter taste in my mouth; and that worked. Soon afterwards, a small charpoy-khatoli (cot), with brightly painted legs and strung with the best of niwar (thick cotton tape) was procured and placed next to mother's. It was so close that I could not only easily reach for her and touch her breast but also shift to hers if I happened to wake up in the middle of the night for one thing or another.

My father, Sheikh Mohammad Siddiq, was a civil lawyer with a thriving practice. He would be in his office till late at night, normally working on the next day's brief and returning home about midnight. We would be fast asleep by the time he came about midnight. But on Saturday or holiday evenings, he would be back at about eight/ nine p.m. to find us all wide awake and waiting for him and for the 'goodies' (fruit of the season, seekh kebab, Shamman Halvai's Sweets, etc.) He would not forget to bring these for us. A father was never expected to come empty-handed: he must bring something for the children to eat and enjoy. And my father always saw to that.

As he would enter the long doorway leading to the house, I could hear the sound of the loose flag-stones rise and fall with each step. I-le would be all the time reciting verses from the Holy Quran as he walked towards the door and gave a knock before opening the door and entering. We all said 'Salaam' to him and he would return our greetings. He would take off his working dress, change into a kurta-pyjama, say a good word or two to mother, stroke our hair and pat us on the cheeks and ask us as to what We had been doing with ourselves through the day.

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In the meantime, mother would spread out the dasterkhawan (meal cloth) and serve the food. We all ate from the same two or three dishes served in highly tin-polished deep rakabis (copper plates). Father ate his food, sitting like all of us. However, while we sat cross-legged or with just one knee raised and the other tucked underneath, Usman sat with both his knees drawn up. He would always like to make a show of his adherence to what he thought was the correct Islamic way of life in dress (ankle- high pyjamas, etc.) as well as eating manners. As a young teenager, he behaved and acted as a dedicated practicing Mussalman more than his age would warrant.

When the dinner was over, mother would bring for father his hoolcozh. She would first cleanse and freshen up the hookah, fill the bowl with tobacco paste and light it up with a red-hot coal briquet. Father would take a few puffs at the hookah with a long, winding pipe and a silver mouthpiece attached to it, cough and say a few words of appreciation to mother. 'Aaj hookah, buhat umdo taza kiya hai' (Today you have freshened the hookah beautifully well).

I loved to see father smoke and hear the bubbling sound of the hookah. It fascinated me; yet the I could not wait for him to tell rest of the story he had left unfinished. 'Phir kyo hue, Abba? (Then what happened, Abba?) I would ask to draw his attention to the unfinished story

Oh that: Well which one was the last I told you'

'Abdul Karim ke joote,

'Abdul Karim ke joote

I replied excitedly.

'Oh, yes, Abdul Karim ke joote!

'Shall we go over it again ...'

"No, not that again. Ali Boba Cholis Chor (Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves).'

"Alright, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.

It's interesting, Isn't it?"

He would prime the story with a long prayer for our happiness, prosperity and long life. Then he would go on with the story spelling out each name and event slowly in so soothing a voice that before he was half-through the story. I would fall

asleep. Having made sure that I was fast asleep, he would gently lift me, carry me to mother's bed next to his, and lay me down there.

We were five in the family by the time I was four or five-latter, mother, Zohra, Usman and myself. I happened to be the 17th child. Between Zohra and Usman, the third and the fourth-born did within a year to two of their birth. Besides us in the house, there was Shakuran, the maidservant, an all-purpose 2-13 year-old young servant Abdul and Masoom Ali, the outdoor man. He would come quite early in the morning and leave after the Maghreb prayers. Besides doing the bazaar, Masoom Ali also took me out for an airing to the Company Gardens. Quite often he would carry me on his shoulders. I enjoyed the ride enormously, urging and spurring him on like a horse. Mother would give him a silver rupee every morning for the bazaar--groceries, meat and sundries for the day, including an anna (1 / 16th of a rupee) or two anna piece (1 / 8th of a rupee) to buy me things--sweets, a balloon or an odd paper toy or something like that. At the day's end, every evening Masoom Ali would give a detailed account of the day's spending--debiting not less than one-fourth of the total of purchases made for me. Eight pice (two Annas) for eatables, two for this, three for that and the rest for the other.

'Have some fear of Allah, Masoom Ali', mother would exclaim. How can a child of four consume eatables worth two annas? I won't believe it."

'Ape (Madam) you may find it hard to believe. But that's nothing but the truth. And I'd swear to God by it. You just don't know how stubborn and demanding he can be. He'd just not listen to me once he would want to have something and demand it there and then. And he has a voracious appetite

'Alright, alright. That's enough. Don't you say anything about the child's appetite? Allah saves him from the evil eye of persons like you ...

And that would be the end of the hassle. That Masoom Ali was an incorrigible penny-pincher remained beyond question. Everybody, mother more than everybody else, knew it too well. But he was also reliable and trustworthy and above all, he took

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good care of me. Short of penny-pinching, he had been true to his salt.

Mother did all the cooking and housekeeping herself, with Shakuran and Abdul on hand. Shakuran had been with us since before my birth. She was a widow from a village in the Badayun district of Uttar Pradesh. Her only son 'Iddu'-so named for he was born on an Eid day-worked as a coolie at the railway station. He would have no end of trouble with his job and would have his work pass--a brass badge-taken away from him every now and then for one act of indiscipline or another. That would bring Shakuran beating her forehead and crying for help to father. Iddu himself would be there, sitting on the floor, his face buried between his knees in shame. Sometimes he would take to hollering and bashing his head against the wall. Father would tell him to behave and say a word or two of comfort to Shakuran.

'Tell him to behave, Bust, I won't be going out of my way help him all the time. Understand".

Shakuran would break into an endless litany of prayers for father's long life and the prosperity of the family. Tears would stream down her cheeks in a steady cascade, mingling freely with the mucous from her runny nose. In 1930, my father contested the local municipality election and won by a thumping majority against his own uncle Haji Abdul Razzak. In response to his uncle's vigorous election campaign--pamphleteering, wall-chalking and posters at every vantage point-my father came up hardly with one or two posters. One of the posters proclaimed in bold letters 'Chacha-bhatije ki mili-bhagat: paraphrased, it meant 'fixed fight between uncle and nephew'. Collaboration under the garb of confrontation. That was about all, as much as I could recall. Never would he allow his election agents and advisers to come out with a single rude remark against the old man.

Such was the nephews respect for the uncle. And the uncle, for his part, was the first to congratulate the nephew on his thumping victory.

It was during my father's tenure as Municipal Commissioner that electrification of the mohallah took place and the kuccha (unfinished) stone-surfaced streets of the

mohallah were paved with flagstones. He had two consecutive terms of three years each as the Municipal Commissioner and had the whole face of the mohallah changed during his tenure. In the meantime, my uncle, Abdul Khaliq, happened to have a daughter as the firstborn. The birth of a baby girl as the firstborn would hardly be considered an auspicious event. It would arouse more pity than joy, more sympathy than felicitation to the parents and the rest of the family. Baby girls were said to grow up like cucumbers-so little today, so big tomorrow. The question of a suitable match would start worrying the family even from the first day.

My grandfather desired the baby girl engaged to me. Everybody except perhaps my father, jumped at the idea. Could there be anything more ridiculous than a match made between a boy of five or six and a girl just born? A week or ten days after the birth would be the aqeeqa ceremony of the baby, that is, the first shaving of the hair of her head. The old man suggested it be combined with the engagement ceremony, thus killing two birds with one stone. Eat your dates and earn merit too (Hum khurna, hum sawab). I was dressed up like a little bridegroom (a brocade waistcoat is all I remember) and given a nipple (baby mother) with a gold disc and chain to put round the neck of the baby bride. After the baby girl's head was shaved, her hair was placed and tied in a silken kerchief and handed over to one of the ladies present-most probably her Nani (maternal grandmother)-together with the baby.

'Bismillah!' Everyone said as the baby changed hands.

The old lady then asked me to come and put the gold chain around the baby's neck.

Ao, Mian. Ao bismillah kar k chain apne dulhan ku pehna du (come and put the chain on my bride). I didn't quite know how to go about it until my mother gently pushed me and told me to go ahead. Since I did not know how to handle the chain, she helped me with it. There was a round of applause and best Wishes expressed for the happiness and long life of the little bride and the groom. My uncle-turned-father-in-law gave me some toys and a set of colourful kites complete with a spool of two kinds of thread, the plain white one (Sadi) and the _thread

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sharpened with crushed glass powder to give it with a razor sharp cutting edge to play with (manjha). And that was the end of the ceremony.

Not long afterwards, I came down with typhoid. Dr. Yusuf Ali Khan, LMS, incharge of the local municipality hospital at Lal Kuan and a close friend of my father's, came to see me and, after examining me, went on to prescribe some mixtures and pills. He thought the fever would 'break' within the next couple of days or so. It did not, causing much worry and anxiety to everybody. My father then decided to consult Dr. Ram Bihari, MBBS-the Zarigra (club-footed) doctor. Ram Bihari apprehended typhoid. 'While there is no cause for worry' he said, 'the malady would run its course. It could be just a couple of weeks or a couple of months, depending on so many factors'. He advised complete rest, regular medication and diet-nourishing, but very, very light (shorba-pizulka) curry and chappati!

Despite Dr. Ram Bihari's treatment and personal attention, the fever would not go down. The temperature continued to vary between 101 F and 104 F until I was completely laid up. I lost both my appetite and weight. On top of that, I became very irritable. Father and mother both had been extremely worried about my condition. My nani (maternal grandmother) had no faith in doctors and their coloured concoctions. She suggested some hakims. My father respectfully disagreed with her 'Amma, he is being looked after by the best doctor in the city. The rest is in the hands of God. Let's all pray for his early recovery' he said.

The fever went on and on. It had been a month or so already and still it would not go. Sometimes the temperature shot up high enough to make me delirious. My mother lost all her cool and patience. She had an argument with father, insisting on consulting some man of God to beg him to pray to Almighty Allah for my recovery. She believed in the healing touch and power of amulets and relevant verses from the holy books more than all the other recipes and nostrums. Who knows! I might be in the grip of some vicious spirit, the victim of someone's evil eye. What was wrong, after all, in consulting some men of God anyway? The Imam-ji (chief cleric) of the mohallah was

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reputeid to be an expert in Writing some Quranic verses With Illflrolt water on chinaware plates. The plates thus written on Watt* then Washed and the wash was given to the patient to drink. '

Hp the Imam-ji came and saw me, felt my pulse, examined my eyes and told my mother not to worry. 'By Allah's grace and command, he will be alright. I will write up some plates with saffron water for the boy to drink and an amulet for him to wear around his neck. I would also recommend black seed fumigation two or three times a day to drive the evil spirit away however, what is even more important is for you to have all the branches of the gular tree protruding into your courtyard Ripped off forthwith. I am afraid some evil spirits possess the tree. The branches are like the hair of their heads where reside all their powers'

My mother, from behind the curtain that hung between herself and the maulavi sahib, thanked him and promised to do as told. The calligraphed plates and the amulet arrived soon for me to drink up and wear around my neck. The branches of the old gular tree were lopped off and I had to go through the black seed fumigation two or three times a day. Those would choke me, sting my eyes and made them watery. No matter how much I protested and yelled, there was no escape from the ordeal.

The fever still persisted, bringing one doctor after another, one hakim after another and one man of God-siyanal-maulavi-after another. One day I was so bad and delirious that my father collapsed under the Weight of mounting anxiety. Even the tall and thin Dr. Ram Babu, the third doctor consulted In a row, admitted there was little he could do to help; it was a ruse of typhoid, gone bad, and there was nothing for it but to wait and pray even more than looking for a doctor's prescription.

Then, suddenly. a miracle happened and I was on the mend. Unce I started recovering, I did not 'take long to regain my normal strength. My appetite returned with a vengeance. There would hardly be a time of day and night, hardly a reasonable gap between one meal, one bite and another, when I would not

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be hungry. I had gone quite bald and must have looked funny, for people laughed as they saw me. My little baby-bride, now about a year or just a little less, was brought to me every now and then. I would gently stroke her cheeks and cup her chin to make her laugh with a gurgling sound.

In thanksgiving to the Almighty; a feast was arranged for orphans from the orphanage nearby. They were all boys between the ages of 10 and 12. I was seated on a wooden divan (chowki-the same used for my circumcision) in the middle of the courtyard as biryani-pulao was served to the orphans. They ate ravenously stuffing their mouths with helpings as big as my fist.

Having gorged their food, they stood up and prayed for my long life. Then they broke into a raucous, sad song reflecting the pathetic plight of the orphans-something absolutely out of tune with the joyous occasion. But there it was and who would dare stop them. The words were: 'Huaie jab se man beep hamse juda, hamari khushi ka chaman lut gaya, Yatimon ki faryad sun lijiye ye gham ki kaharni hai sun lijiye, (Listen to the orphans' tale of woe and distress. Ever since our father and mother departed, the orchard of our joy lies devastated.)'

The most enduring and loving memory of my nearly three-month-long illness was my nani, who kept visiting me every day. She would come every afternoon, carrying two boiled potatoes stashed carefully away in the folds of her dupatta. She would come close to my sick bed, her lips moving in silent prayer, verses from the Holy Quran, and blew them all over my face. Then she would look to her right and to her left to make sure that nobody was watching and, while reciting the holy verse with her breath, she would mash the potatoes, sprinkle the mash with salt-and-pepper and feed me gently and slowly.

Oh, how I relished the mash and how eagerly I waited for my nani to come and feed me. The taste of my nani's boiled potatoes is still palpable on my palate. Potatoes never tasted so good before or since.

It did not take me long to kick my sick bed off and get back on my two feet, as active and playful as ever.

Not long after my recovery, I was admitted to the masset --

A children's maktab (school) for boys and girls under 10. Beeviji (pronounced bijje) Sultan's house was situated at the end of a by-lane, like a narrow and dark tunnel. It was covered from twirl to end by overlapping, lean-to portions of upper storey houses, one almost nailed into the other, leaving hardly a niche or two for sunlight to enter. At high noon, the sun would sneak into the black hole of the cul-de-sac to light it up for a while.

During the rains, rainwater would pour incessantly on points less covered, almost like a torrent. Within no time, the lane would turn into a lake with an endless array of puddles. As we waded playfully through the mess, our clothes were all soaked and spattered with mud. At the end of the golf (lane) adjacent to Beeviji Sultan's house was a basement cellar with a low, black steel door. It was called khilafat. The very word filled us with awe and fear. Khilafat conjured up for us a djinn or ghost. As I would come to know over time, the place was the mohallah headquarter of the Khilafat Committee of the early 1920s. It was a sort of secret place, a hideout for the mohallah khilafat Workers to hold their secret meetings in support of the Turkish caliphate and against British Imperialism for dismembering Turkey after the First World War.

Our lady teacher 'Beeviji Sultan-in her late 40s-was lean, tall and dark, a person of formidable presence. Her house, as Well as her school, was a narrow shell of a house overshadowed by the sprawling tamarind tree of a neighbouring house. Its tangled branches arch over its small courtyard. The tree was the abode of an old langur with a long tail and a black-and-drown face. We were at once very afraid and also very fond of the monster. Afraid, because he was supposed to use his tail as a slingshot to hurl stones at onlookers when in a temper; fond, because he never hurt us. On the contrary; he amused us a great rival, hopping and skipping from one branch of the tree to another, making funny faces. Some of us still believed him to be a djinn-a malevolent spirit to frighten and punish naughty girls and boys.

Beevi-ji Sultan would constantly play on our fears and threaten to get the langur to go for us and bite us unless we behaved We all sat in a small room some 9x10 feet square, po-

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ring over lessons opened at various chapters and verses of the Holy Quran. We swung our bodies as we recited, recited, to produce a shrill cacophony of dissonant voices-some very childlike, others slightly maturer and not so childlike. Beevi-ji Sultan sat in one corner of the dalan with a thin bamboo stick in hand, long enough to reach for every delinquent either dozing off or staring at some moving object on the wall (may be a gecko) or someone stretching his /her neck out to catch a glimpse of the langur. The moment Beevi-ji Sultan eyed the delinquent, her long bamboo stick would descend on his /her head with a gentle rap. 'You so-and-so! Attend to your lesson or get ready for the Worst.'

She conducted the class like an expert orchestra conductor, with unerring attention to every single note played by his band. She would know exactly who was reciting what and check him/her for the slightest slip of the tongue.

It was amazing how, with about 15 to 20 of us around, reciting different chapters and verses all at the same time, she would know when and where one of us might have gone wrong and hasten to correct with a rap on the head or the shoulder, or with a severe reprimand.

In a corner of the dalan sat a boy or girl pulling the rope attached to a huge farshi (ceiling fan) to make it move back and forth for a watt of breeze. We all took our turns at punkha pulling, very exciting at first, but soon turning into hard labour, that lulled us to sleep only to earn a rap on the back with the long stick. The lady had no scruples about using the students as domestics for various household chores.

I remember Mariam-a big girl of 10 or 11 and the oldest amongst us. She looked like a grown-up woman, her tiny bosom starting to strain against her thin muslim kurta. Her bosom fascinated me and I would love to steal a glance or two at it every now and then. Mariam had already finished her first reading of the Quran and was now revising it. She could, therefore, be taken off her lessons and used for various household chores-kneading the flour, grinding the fresh masala (spices / onions/ garlic, etc.) baking chapatti, even

cooking. Among the boys, the relatively sturdier ones would be used to collect water from the municipal hydrant in the nearby lane and carry it back home.

We had a sort of recess, a 20-minute break for refreshments. bijji Sultan had her own home-made cookies for sale. She would encourage--almost force us to buy rather than bring anything from our own homes. As we dispersed at the end of a day's work, we all broke into a chorus greeting, wishing the lady teacher her throne of gold-and-silver. It ran thus:

Beevi-ji, Beevi-ji, Assalam Alaika
Hamari chhutti ka wakhat
Tummaara Sona-Chandi ka Takhaat
Beevi-ji, Beevi-ji Assalsm Alaika...

(It's time for us to go home. Wish you a gold-and-silver throne, salam to you, Beevi-ji, salaam to you!) The end of the day's schooling was the best part of the day. More than attending to our lessons, we looked forward to the day's end.

The distribution of Eidee on the eve of Shah-i-Barat, Eid and Baqra Eid were occasions most eagerly looked forward to. The Eidees were glazed coloured sheets printed on a deep green or bright red base set off by letters of gold and silver.

The message carried a fervent prayer for the long life, happiness and prosperity of the recipients. The text ran like this:

Zindigi ki bahar dekho tum,
Aisha Iailo-Nahar Dekho tum
Shab barat 'Eid ho ya Baqra 'Eid
Daima sad hazar dekho tum

(May you see life's springtime. And happiness by day and by night. Be that Eid or Baqra Eid. May you enjoy all those in perpetuity for a thousand years!)

How we loved and cherished and lovingly caressed the smooth, creamy surface of the coloured sheets, I have no words to describe. Clutching them protectively, close to our brats, we carried them home, chanting 'Beevi-ji, Beevi-ji. Assalam Alaika...'

The Beevi-ji too would be as happy perhaps even happier. her made a good profit on the sale of the greetings sheet, Costing her half a rupee a dozen to bring her a net profit of one anna or more per sheet, priced at an anna and a half or six pice.

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Yet another big occasion-at once joyous and sad-would be the Khatumd-Quran ceremony of one of us finishing all the thirty chapters of the Holy Quran. The graduating boy or girl would come to the maseet dressed in his /her best dress and accompanied by their mothers and sisters. They brought cardboard boxes or wicker baskets full of sweets for distribution among the follow students. A trayful of sweets covered with a red, gold-laced cloth was brought especially for the Beevi-ji. The finishing boy or girl would recite a verse or two from the Holy Quran along with a home-grown prayer 'Ye Satta-ru, Ya Aleemu, mujh bandi/bande ka dil apni taraf khol de ' (Almighty Allah, I pray you open my heart towards thou ...) the gender Banda (boy) or Bundi (Girl) would change accordingly in each different case.

I remember the khatum-i-Quran ceremony of Sughra-the fairest and prettiest of the girls. Although still a little girl, she affected the mature deportment and mannerism of grown-up women. She had a way of rolling her eyes up and down and sideways conquettishly and was always smiling. She attracted me enormously Sughra's Khatum-i-Quran ceremony was easily the most impressive such ever. Sughra was dressed like a young bride-expensive brocade garments and all the jewellery that she, still a child, could manage to hold. Her mother and two sisters were dressed as gorgeously Each held her nose up and head high in the air like a princess to impress us all. They not only brought loads of pistachio lozenges pista ke loz- the most expensive of the sweets, but also some expensive garments and some gold-plated silver jewellery. We got almost double the normal portion of sweets handed out on such an occasion. Sughra went through the normal drill of reciting verses from the Holy Quran and praying to Allah to lay her heart open to enlightenment and knowledge. Her mother and sisters helped her take a morsel or two of the sweets. Beevi-ji kissed her on the forehead and prayed for her long life and happiness.

We all looked and marvelled at Sughra's good looks and good luck as she, together with her mother and sisters, prepared to depart. My heart hammered as I waited for my turn to say goodbye, but it never came. She would not so much as say a few words of farewell to us and left unceremoniously—almost in a huff. Such arrogance, such vanity! I was so hurt, so moved;

maybe I also shed a tear or two. Others must have felt more or less the same.

I must have been just about halfway through the Quran when Sughra left the maseet. I was probably about seven or eight; and did not feel quite at ease amongst the girls who outnumbered the boys by a substantial margin. It would be time for me to shift to an all-boy maktab and my parents saw to that. My father would have me go to a primary school, but my mother insisted on my finishing the Quran first before being sent off to a primary school. And she saw to it that everything went the way she wanted.

So, from Beevi-ji's maseet I shifted to the Imam-ji's maktab located in the main mosque of the mohallah. Imam-ji was also the Pesh Imam---the prayer-leader--of the mosque. He was a fine looking man in his late 30s or early 40s-tall, fair, with a delinquent, shiny black beard. He was a stickler for discipline and absolutely ruthless when it came to dealing with a delinquent. He would put the miscreant in chains, after a second or third warning. And if the wretched fellow would still not behave, he would put him into the bucket used to draw water from the well, lower him half way down into the well and let him stay there suspended until he prayed for mercy. Such was the awe of the Imam-ji that even the toughest nuts would crack in no time.

Imam-ji had an assistant under him, a young maulavi called bhai-ji, with a scraggy, almost pubescent beard, and very sharp, piercing eyes, stabbing us like sharp knives. A mere glance from him would leave us paralysed with fear. He taught us the first ten or twelve chapters of the Quran while the Imam-ji taught the rest to the last 30th siparah (Quranic chapters). In my group were children between six and eight under the young maulavi. The advanced section, taken by the Imam-ji himself, had boys ranging between the ages of seven and twelve (maybe more).

Imam-ji's maktab had a setting and environment totally different from Beevi-ji Sultans maseet. Firstly, there were no girls around and secondly. the homely atmosphere of the maseet was completely missing. Neither were there such welcome distractions as the tamarind tree with the old langur atop, nor the mystifying Khilafat basement next door. The maktab was a

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strange and unfamiliar world under two tyrants-the Imam-ji and his assistant.

Even on my first day the maktab frightened me to the marrow of my bones. In a corner of the classroom, I saw a boy in chains around his hand or feet (I do not exactly recall). He was cross-eyed and had a pockmarked face with a strange, defiant smile playing all over it.

The sight of the boy in chains in the corner simply horrified me. I would presently come to know about the boy; the cross-eyed called 'Sheeda', a terror for the mohallah boys-even older and stronger than him. None would dare cross his path. Imam-ji must have seen the fear on my face. 'For good boys like yourself, there is nothing to be afraid of. It's only shaitans like him who suffer for their misdeeds.

After the first few uneasy days, I settled down to life in the maktab. I found it much more interesting and exciting than the one at the maseet. I suddenly felt grown up. Abdul Malik was the first person I made friends with. I-Ie was just about my age and at the same siparah as I was. He was fair of face and extremely attractive. Much to our great relief, 'Sheeda', the cross-eyed, was soon expelled from the rnaktab. The Imam-ji gave him up as one beyond redemption and told his father so. He was indeed setting a bad example for others to follow and bringing a bad name to the maktab. It was such a relief not to have Sheeda the cross-eyed in chains rooted to his corner, devouring us with a fixed stare, a strange, sardonic smile playing all across his face.

In due course, Imam-ji's maktab would throw open to me the doors of an entirely new world. Abdul Malik and I were fast friends already, Presently I came to know others-Mana, the actor and the cinema buff; Ahmed, the loud-mouthed braggart always talking of his family wealth, but otherwise very amiable; and Nawab, a hafiz having already committed quite a few paragraphs to heart. Of all of them and others, the most interesting and fascinating was Pilpilee. He might have been about eleven or twelve-the oldest amongst us and full of life's intimate secrets.

Every now and then Pilpilee would assume a mysterious air to leave all of us bursting with curiosity about a certain

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'secret' Which, he said, he would disclose one day and practically initiate us into, 'Just Wait and see. And mind you, you have to be very brave to take it.'

One day, after the maktab, Pilpilee offered to take us to a certain spot in the mohallah. Have you ever encountered a—ghost or an evil spirit?' he asked. We shook our heads, utterly bewildered. 'Do you believe in ghosts?' We did indeed, having heard all the stories about them without ever having seen one.

'Follow me then he said', I will take you to Jhout to let you see everything for yourself' Jhout was a blind, narrow alley--easily the narrowest and the darkest in the mohallah--that WEIS like a divider between two streets of the mohallah used for the disposal of all kinds of household garbage, rotten, putrid food, soiled clothes, broken bottles and suchlike. Housewives and servants would toss the stuff into a blind alley and let it pile up to make it quite impassable.

Once or twice a month municipality sweepers would come to collect the stinking pile in large cane baskets and carry it away. The pile stank so foul that even the sweepers would stuff their noses with the loose, hanging end of their pugrees (a type of tuban). There would be no question of anyone using the place except for street urchins playing their funny games or pedestrians suddenly unable to hold it, relieving themselves, their noses covered with one arm to avoid the foul stink.

We were soon in the Jhout, skirting around the edges of huge garbage piles of litter from end to end. Pilpilee stopped at a point. 'Afraid?' he asked.

Indeed we all Were: my own heart was beating like a drum. We held our noses, for the stink rose like a dense vapour. The kind of deep silence pervading the place was broken by the rustling of the wind that forced its Way through, like it would through a tunnel. There was sudden stirring underneath the rubbish pile, with huge, big rats racing around our feet. It was simply horrible, like a nightmare.

Pilpilee stared hard at us to paralyse us with fear. 'These are only rats to look at. But who knows what they really are. Ghosts can appear in all sorts of different forms and shapes. I told you to be brave, didn't I? And don't be afraid while I am

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around' I-Ie paused for a while before starting to talk again. 'Now you must all be wondering about the big secret, I promised to disclose. Well, here you are!' Without another word he untied his pyjama top and let it drop halfway down. We could hardly believe what we saw. His wee~wee must have been at least twice the size of ours, certainly mine and Abdul Malilk's. We had been stripping before one another to see whose might have been bigger than the other 's, each stretching his to cheat the other.

'Well', Pilpilee went on, 'If you ever come by a ghost or Pichal-paree-the evil witch with her toes turned backwards-don't you ever hesitate to strip. That's the only way to chase the ghost away. Otherwise you'd be in trouble. Nothing frightens a ghost more than the sight of your organ. Understand!'

In spite of the overpowering stink and rats scurrying around our feet, and the piles of garbage and the wind rustling eerily thought the jhout, it frightened and fascinated me at the same time in a strange way. It reminded me of a silent English movie I had seen with Abba jan about some doctor experimenting with himself, turning into a beast and running amok.

We all admired Pilpilee for his sheer daring and courage. 'It's nothing," he said with a casual air. 'We have ghosts right in our maktab. I know of one of them at least. I may tell you all about it soon. One thing at a time. Understand?

There was nothing that Pilpilee did not seem to know about the most intimate secrets-about sex-between men and women and amongst boys. 'One had to be very old", he would say 'to get to know women and do it' with them. Women could be really nasty and impossible to handle. 'None of us is yet old, strong and clever enough to know about women anyway We should not even think of them, not to speak of having anything to do with them. But, boy; oh boy! They are the real thing." He would go on and on to cast a sort of a spell on us. However, I had never known him ever to go out of his way; use force or threaten to get anyone to do anything they would not like to do. He might have been more of a braggart than a bully. He impressed me with his superior knowledge of life's intimate secrets. I-Ie told us about Imam-ji's young assistant, in his early 20s. He could be really dangerous and would stoop to any dirty

tricks do anything to satisfy his lust. Then, much to our utter horror and disbelief, he would go on to tell us how, one day in winter, he asked Pilpilee to come over to him and massage his legs gone Stiff With cold. He was covered all over with a thick blanket. He told him to put his hands inside to massage his legs, Lo and behold! Can you imagine what I find there? His organ in full erection! So hot and stiff. I was shocked and hid back never mind", Bhai-jee said. "Go, ahead, hold it and rub It up and down gently. I like this. Oh God! How nice. Go on, don't stop." You see now what sort of teachers we have? Lmam-ji la one thing, but his assistant is quite another ...'

pilpilee's tales were my first exposure to the secrets of life. presently, I would see more of it. One of the city cinemas was showing a popular movie, Baghdad ka Chor' (The Thief of Bahgdad) featuring Master Shiraz--someone from our neighbouring mohallah, the Kupoun Wallan. Mana, the cinema buff, had got three tickets-two for himself and the escort Bashirudding, and the third for a friend. He wanted me to go with him and insisted upon it. "Don't worry, I'd go myself to your Amma jan (Mother dear) and beg her to let you come with us he Said and Went straight to mother. After much canvassing and Coaxing be did manage to bring her round. "Amma, 'he said, we'd have uncle Bashiruddin with us. And you know what a fine man he is.' That settled the matter and we proceeded to the Elphinston Cinema where the movie was being shown.

Baghdad ka chor turned out to be 'double fare' (ek ticket main du mazai) sort of tamasha. I can vividly recollect the double fare, screening the movie together with the Zinda Natch-Gana (live song and dance Show), featuring the famous Miss Gulzar. There were three of us – my self Mana and our chaperon Bashiruddin, reputed to be a pious, nimaz-parhezager (practising) Muslim who wouldn't much as go past a cinema ghar, not to speak of actually seeing a movie. But there he Was, actually taking us to a double fare!

The movie did not seem to interest Bashiruddin. He sat through it quietly hardly ever saying a word. After half-time, however, as soon as Miss Gulzar appeared on the stage to perform, Bashiruddin suddenly came to life as if by an electric

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current. As Miss Gulzar pranced and danced on the stage, Bashiruddin went into raptures of excitement-cheering, clapping, hopping up and down in his seat. He would shake me by the arm saying, "See, see. This is the real stuff. Not the movie.'

Catcalls and yells followed the end of the first number. All those in the third (Royal) class enclosure found themselves much better placed during the live song-and-dance interlude than those in the second and first-class enclosures. And all third-class wallas yelled for Mina Gulzar to appear again and again. Only Mana and I, and maybe some others like us and in our age group, felt bored by the prospect of the movie being delayed and yet another dance number inflicted upon us.

Patrons were obliged and Miss Gulzar made a second and a third appearance in the midst of rapturous applause. Bashiruddin went on clapping like a child, even making catcalls and blowing wolf Whistles like the others. He went on to thump his thighs excitedly and kept chanting 'Wahl Wahl', nudging me hard saying 'See, see. This is the real stuff.

At the end of each dance number, as Miss Gulzar would sail back into the wings, she would turn the head coquettishly at her admirers, as if inviting them to come and join her in the wings. The second half of the film resumed after what looked like an eternity of uneasy waiting for the two of us. Bashiruddin sat through the second half absolutely dumb and still. 'Funny old man! Saint at home, shaitan away from home!' Mana commented while recalling the experience after the show.

Cinema (the bioscope, as it was then called), one of the most powerful single influences in my formative years even as a mere child (age 5-6), boy and youth, remained my one constant favourite. I had been to silent movies with my Khalu (maternal uncle) Abbajan and once or twice with mother and others in the family. How well I remember the atmosphere inside the cinema house! On either side of the main screen, there used to be two side screens projecting the dialogue in Urdu script; in a corner of the third-class enclosure sat the tabla player and the harmonium master, providing background music to go with the running scene. What a thrill it would be to sit next to the harmonium master and admire him play the harmonium in the

Dark-his eyes unblinkingly focused on the main screen and fingers faultlessly hitting across the keyboard, in tune with the nature of the scene.

One movie was Raja Harish Chandra at the New Royal Cinema and the other a Charlie Chaplin 'comedy' at the Gaiety Theatre. Raja Harish Chandra, except for the gorgeous costumes action and sword fight shots, was a bore. The Chaplin movie was great fun. The scene showing him hogging shoes like roast beef and shoelaces like spaghetti, made us hold our sides with irrepressible laughter. Unlike the Indian movies, it had its own music and there was no harmonium master in the pit.

Alam Ara was the first talkie, followed by a near flood of talkies hitting the cinema. The few I remember included Yahudi ki Larki, Sitamgar, Bhala Shikar, Gul Bakawli, Laila Majanun, Shirin Farhad, Toofan Mail, etc.

One of the talkies that I saw with mother and Usman, was a seven-part serial Hatim Tai-all screened in a single session-lasting some five or six hours, with two or three intervals. Starting at 9 p.m., the movie would end in the small hours of the morning. The main role of Hatim Tai was played by one Babu Rao Pehelwan. Husn Banu played the princess, Husn Ara, almost her namesake. The princess Husn Ara set Hatim Tai tasks to accomplish as the pre-condition to their marriage. Those were the famous Seven Love's Labours of Hatim Tai. How thrilled and excited we would all be to see Hatim Tai overcome all the daunting challenges thrown in and obstacles raised through his hazardous journey by djinns and malicious magicians with the help of three simple words. 'Ya Allah Madaal' (Help, oh God!). He would loudly chant his prayer, and the prayer would be answered instantly. The djinn's head, cut clean with a single stroke of Hatim's blade, would soon be rolling on the ground like a split watermelon. Mountains and rivers would split apart to give safe passage to the hero. Hatim would be journeying from one strange land to another, scaling great mountains, sloggng through sprawling deserts and struggling against giant waves in choppy seas. At the end of each stage of his journey he would come across a young and stunningly beautiful fairy. She would instantly fall in love with the Son of Man (Adamzaad)

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and beg her father, the chief of the fairy land (Parisian) to ask Hatim Tai to accept her hand in holy matrimony. Hatim would consider the proposal on one condition only, that the marriage would be consummated only after the completion of his mission.

For days together afterwards, we would keep talking of Hatim Tai and his adventures. How could he do all that? The djinns and the fairies and the wizards were all men and women behind their masks. But what about the deserts and seas and the mountains?

'All camera tricks' Usman would tell us with such an air of authority. He would hardly ever miss an opportunity to impress and show off his superior knowledge.

My childhood reverie is akin to images on a movie screen: some are like shadows on a magic lantern going round and round in slow motion, some are less shadowy than others, and yet others are vivid and palpable and warm.

Could there be anything more protective, more comforting and smoothing than dozing off at a mother's breasts, lips wet with the mother's milk and the baby's angelic smile all around the doll-like face?

Chapter 2

Ballimaran

Haveli Hissamuddin Haider-Mahal Sarai

I remember Ballimaran more as a potpourri of heady scents and odours--some pleasing, others not so pleasing, even nauseating. It had been and remains the heart of the old city. However, its infinite variety of smells, changing after every few yards, still tickle or stink in my nostrils. The first to assail a sensitive nose would be a mixed vapour of pharmaceuticals and raw hide, with a faint fruity touch. Raw hide would, by far, be the strongest, pharmaceuticals next in strength-varying from mild to strong.

Sheikh Abdul Ghani's was about the largest raw hide-and-skin shop in the city, located in a corner not too far away from the Ballimaran nukkad (entrance). Next to that was Yasin Jurrah's (surgeon's) and almost abutting that, Haji Muhammad Ishaque's medicine mart at the end of a long, winding vestibule-like corridor. '

As you moved further down the busy street, raw hides would gradually give way to the salty, appetizing smell of hot curries and chapatties. The chapattiwalla sat at the extended front of Hafiz Hotel, with a huge basin of dough and a blazing tawa (griddle) before him. He would flatten the dough into a perfect chapatti shape, toss it up in the air, before catching it in his raised open palms and turn it over on the baking plate. He would go through the act, softly humming some film tune, almost like one in a trance, quite oblivious of his surroundings, a plantain leaf bidi stuck between his lips.

The shoe merchants dominated the first half of the bazaar (they still do). The Swedeshi Shoe store was (and still is) the

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largest shoe shop. The owner was a khadi-clad, pucca nationalist Mussalman-the first perhaps to refuse marketing the popular foreign-mainly British (Dawson) and patent Italian shoes. He wore a Maulana Azad chin tuft and was probably the same height but fuller-even somewhat corpulent. The middle of Ballimaran was the hub of some of the best-known and noted Muslim lawyers of the city-my father Sheikh Muhammad Siddiq and uncle Sheikh Zikrur Rahman, being two of them.

The smell would now change from those of raw hide, patent leather shoes and curry-chapatties to those of printing ink and lithographic plates with a liberal mix to the fruity touch. The Jayyed Barqi (electric) Press was the largest Muslim-owned printing press in the old city. The owner, Hakim Zaki Ahmad concerned himself more with hikmat, Desi/ Unani (medicine) than with the printing works, leaving the latter to his manager and foreman. He was a practising khandani (dynastic) Hakim, devoting most of his working hours in the morning and afternoon to the practice of medicine. The clatter of the printing machines and the thud of the lithographic plates being loaded and offloaded were heard far outside.

Facing the Jayyed Barqi Press was the Municipal Primary School. From there issued forth the constant hum of voices of students in their classrooms. Adjacent to the school was Abid Manzil, named after its owner-a propertied rais (landlord) of the locality. Although privately owned, it served as the community centre for the area. Most large mushairas (poetry readings) and quite a few meetings of the working committee of the All-India Muslim League were held there. I first saw Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the midst of his admirers and associates outside the entrance of Abid Manzil sometime in 1937 or 1938.

There was a motley of shops beyond the printing press: of tar-kashi (silk thread), including one with a steam iron and a pressing table for pressing the rumpled top of the new Turkish caps to give them a clean, razor-sharp outline, Mahmood Hotel (tea shop), Nazir Panwari's (the paanwalla) and Usman's milk shop, etc. Mahmood Hotel was the talk-shop of the bazaar. Two placards hanging outside the shop read: 'Jiski masti hai lghzish un

se pak, Chai aisi shsrab hai piaray. And 'Bada che naushi, chai benaush' (Tea is the only Wine which intoxicates Without getting one drunk. So why drink wine, when there is tea!)

Nazir Panwari's was about the fanciest shop in the bazaar. He had a large golden framed gleaming King-size Wall mirror placed at the back of the shop for his customers standing around the shop front to see and admire their full reflections in the mirror--a facility generally unavailable at home. They would simply love to catch a glimpse of themselves while putting the paan into their mouth and lighting their cigarettes. While most glanced furtively at themselves in the mirror, avoiding inquisitive eyes, others looked long, almost lost in self-admiration. Caught in the act, they would have to face the rllusic--the taunts and jibes of the loud-mouths congregating round the shop, some with an eye for boys and the guts to make bawdy remarks and recite coarse verses, like:

Ban Sanwar ke bam pe aye nakar aye maha ru!
Dur raha hun main tujhe mari nezar lag jai gi!

Don't you appear on the balcony, all dressed and made-up, my moon-faced, sweetheart, lest my evil eye hurt you) Nazir panwari's gleamed like a jeweller's shop. The silver-plated lime paste and kattha (calcheau) containers were spotless, without the usual mixed red-and-White splashes. He would apply the lime and kattha paste to the paan leaf with such finesse as not to leave a smear on the gleaming containers. Nazir and like him, his adopted son and heir Siddiq, Were always neatly dressed, summer or winter.

Beyond Nazir's shop the air and the smells changed completely. Strong and appetizing smells from the shop of Shamman Halvai and the cookhouse of Khalif Nihariwalla, would simply overpower one's nose and drive away all other smells. Shamman's were a strong mix of the buttery scent of Desi ghee and condiments-cardamoms, cloves, pistachio, from and almost an impossible potpourri of several others from the variety of sweets daintily arranged in polished copper trays. In the morning, the sweet smells were smothered by the spicy vapour of puri-kutchori and curried potatoes served with pickled mango and red carrot slices.

Khalifa's nihari was the last word for that highly spicy Dilli

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dish. Its mouth-watering thick gravy, the huge slices of tender, boneless beef served with goat's brains and bone marrow brought nihari lovers flocking to the Khalifa's shop from the four corners of the city. Nihari, a favourite winter fare, was taken in the morning for breakfast with piping hot tandoori nans.

Just a little beyond the Khalifa's shop was the akhara, the Wrestlers' turf, emitting a strong smell of mustard oil. Every winter, Shamman would play host to famous pehelwans-Hemeeda and Bholu and many others. They wrestled and exercised on the akhara turf-their bodies smeared and aglow with mustard oil and the soft clay of the upturned akhara. The pehelwans-young, middle aged and old-would make an attractive spectacle for the people around. Their well-oiled bodies shimmered and biceps rippled with the slightest movement of their arms. We all admired and eagerly watched them and dreamed of being like them one day.

A few yards past the akhara, the Unani Dawa Khanas, were herbal medicine shops. A heady scent of herbal medicines- aniseed, licorice, cloves, cinnamon, saffron, cardamom pervaded the air. One particular aroma blended into the other to create a sort of a heady aura--partly miasmatic, partly intoxicating. The attars-dispensing chemists and practicing hakims in their own right--could be seen grinding and mixing their herbal concoctions. Their apprentices and patthas sat well inside the shops, pounding and compounding various medicinal ingredients in mortars.

The Haveli of Hakim Ajmal Khan (Sharif Manzil), after the name of the famed political activist and Khilafat leader, lay at the intersection of Ballimaran and Gali Qasimjan. There was an old mosque in a state of sad disrepair. It was where Ghalib lived and died. His famous verse 'Masjid ke Zeit-e-Sayyo Khrzrabat Chaiye ...' (Let there be a tavern in the shadow of a mosque) bore eloquent witness to the quaint juxtaposition of the House of Allah and a wine-bibber's tavern!

Beneath the mosque was a timber stall. Beyond the mosque was yet another motley of shops dominated by carpenters with their tools-saws and drills and hammers and nails and planes. A faint smell of wood shavings pervaded the air. The main

bazaar of Ballimaran virtually ended there. it got narrower and a good deal more winding and crooked to look more like a side street than a bazaar. Small grocery. paper-kite and paan shops dominated the business side. The largest perhaps was the bicycle repair shop which also let out bicycles on hire.

The Charkha Walan--a narrow, winding lane sat at the end of Ballimaran--was a predominantly Hindu residential area with just a few small convenience stores. Hindu houses exuded a peculiar lentil, mainly urad ki dal, smell. Charkha Walan was famous for two things--the Madrass-i-Suiemanya of Maulana sawati and the private harem or brothel-house of Sardar Dewan singh Maftun, the redoubtable Sikh editor of the weekly Riyasat.

Maulana Sawati was from distant Chharbagh, a village in the princely state of Sawat in the North West Frontier Province. He ran his Madrass-i-Sulemaaya to prepare students for the Munshi Fazil (Honours in Persian) and Adib Fazil (Honours in Urdu) examinations of the Punjab University. In his mid-50s or late 40s, he looked like a type-cast character from The Arabian nights: an almost perfect replica of the Old Man of the Sea. With his scraggy beard, turbaned head and oval face, he would fit into the description of a low-ranking retainer at a small princely court or a quack selling aphrodisiacs in a souk of the Arabian nights' Baghdad. Nothing would change his strong Pushtu accent, whether he spoke Urdu or Persian.

Once, when returning from his home, where he had gone on vacation, he brought a young girl as his wife--perhaps in her teens or early 20s. 'Life so far away from home (which he called mall: or country) can be so lonely. I needed a companion and, by Allah's grace, found one. Her father, too, had been all too happy to wed her to someone like myself, who could take good care of her', he would say in support of the match. The girl, very fair and robust, did all the household chores from docking to dusting and massaging the old man's body and pressing his head after school. Except for the part of her face above the nose, she would be covered all over. Maulana Sawati's students ogled at the girl: some would even try to attract her attention by discretely clearing their throats and elbowing her as she went past them.

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Sardar Dewan Singh Maftun was a sikh afvaiy formidable presence. Hirsute like any Sikh, he was unusually fair (peach-and-crearn and richly freckled) of face. The man was a terror to the princely states-especially those around Delhi, like Patiala, Kapurthala, Jind, Alwar, Pataudi, and so on. His investigative reporting and exposes regarding the personal lives of the rulers--their escapades and orgies, excesses and atrocities against the ryot-would thrill his readers and terrify the panoply of princelings and potentates around.

Although an ethnic Punjabi and Sikh, Sardar Maftun might have been a Dilliwalla and through and was widely recognized and respected as such. He had a vast circle of friends and admirers, ranging from the city's aristocracy to the proclaimed and much-feared goons and badmashes. They were as much his friends and hangers-on as hirelings. He was supposed to have had direct access to the Angrezi Hukkams (English Sahibs) of the city and could even call on the Viceroy at short notice. As the editor of the city's most powerful Urdu periodical, the weekly Riyasat, the Sardar was invited to official receptions where he would rub shoulders with the high and mighty of the land. He was not just an editor-publisher but also a man of letters in his own right, and his autobiography Naqabil-I-Faramosh (The Unforgettable) was the bestseller in its day and after.

Beyond the Charkha Walan lay Delhi's historical red-light area-the Chawri Bazaar-a watershed between Ballimaran and the rest of the city. As a schoolboy some five years later, I happened to have glimpses of Chawri Bazaar While on my way to school-The Anglo-Arabic High School, Darya Ganj I remember the grotesquely powdered and rouged faces of the prostitutes, seated in their first-floor kothas (balconies) on my Way to and fro from the school. And that would be the end of Shahjhanabad, the Delhi of Mughals--the'Quila (Red Fort) on the one end and Chandni Chowk on the other. From Chandni Chowk branched off Delhi's famous 'Koochas'-its maze of narrow lanes and bylanes that the poet Zauq would compare to painter's canvasses.

Haveli Hissamuddin Haider, easily the most prosperous residential area of Ballimaran, was also known as 'Punjabion ka

Phatak, after the Dilli-Punjabi Saudagar community representing the majority. almost 99 per Cent of the Haveli's residents. The Punjabi Saudagars-abbreviated to Punjabis-were a class by themselves. They would own and adopt much of the Delhi culture without completely disowning their Punjabi lineage. Hence the appellation 'Dilli-Punjabi Saudagar'.

Migrants from Punjab, they took to business and thrived-unlike the vintage Dilliwallas who traced their phantom lineage to ex-princes or their offspring and considered any kind of work below their princely status and heritage. They lived off the meagre rentals from their small family trust properties and the meagre government hand-outs and pensions. Pressed hard for money, they would do odd jobs (like calligraphy) for a while to earn enough to get by the next few months and return to their daily chausar (dice), shatranj (chess), gossip, routine while their savings lasted.

There was not a lane or a by-lane where one would not find chess players and their backers absorbed in the game, blissfully oblivious of the world around. Not so the Dilli-Punjabi Saudagars, minding their stores even on holidays. 'Death and a customer can come at any time', they would quote the saying and follow it quite religiously. They were counted amongst the best safaid posh (white-clad) gentry of the city, and vied with the Hindu in affluence-business and real estate.

Haveli Hissamuddin was their fortress. They had their residential areas in other parts of the city too, like Phatak Habash Khan, Baradari Nawab Wazir, off the city's main fruit and vegetable and grocery market, Khari Baoli and some other places away from the city centre like Pul Bangesh, Bara Hindu Rao, etc. Ballimaran and Chandni Chowk were, however, the hub of their community. While Chandni Chowk, with large shop fronts, was the centre of their retail business, Sadar Bazaar was largely a wholesale market of relatively small shop fronts and large interiors and warehouses.

While the Punjabi Saudagars mixed and interacted freely with the 'Hindustanis', that is, native, non-Punjabi Dilliwallas, they formed a close knit community. They would not encourage, and even actively oppose, inter-marriage outside the

community"-the so-called Qaum Punjabiani. Others outside the quam were addressed as Hindustani. While adopting the local (Delhi) culture, language and dress, they would jealously guard their Punjabi identity and strive to leave their stamp on everything they owned and adopted with respect to food, language and dress.

The Punjabi shalwar-a proud heritage from their forefathers-"resisted the lore of the Delhi tight chooriders or seedha (straight-cut) pyjamas. Unlike the vintage wide-bottomed, copious and flowing Punjabi shalwar, however, the Saudagar brand would be noticed for its customized, narrow bottoms, well above the ankles, in keeping with the Islamic injunction and called sham' i pyjamas. Among the top garments, even the Hindustani' sherwani was adopted only with certain modifications. The number of buttons, for instance, was in certain cases increased from the usual seven to eleven or twelve of a smaller size.

Women, mainly the elderly ones, adopted Delhi's traditional dress, mainly the lattha (tight-fitting long cloth) chooridar pyjamas and white Muslim kurtas. Young girls would, however, wear shalwars and a coloured variety of cotton dresses. Silk would be for the newly-wed brides or for festive occasions only like Eid and Baqra Eid and, of course, during weddings.

Their womenfolk, in strict purdah and sparingly exposed to the wider world, spoke a language with a fascinating mixture of typical Delhi Urdu and any number of Punjabi words and expressions thrown in. It formed a veritable peach melba of such creolized expressions such as pinda, gore-chitta, Allah-beli, etc. The Punjabi Maseet--Punjabi for 'mosque'-was refined to mean a children's maktab--a sort of Quranic kindergarten and Allah-beli used for the Hindustani Khuda of Allah Hafiz. Their accent, without a trace of Punjabi, had a sound and flavour of its own to make it quite distinct from the local. Unlike the native 'Hindustani' Dilliwallis, the Punjabi Saudager women hardly ever made up their faces. Lipstick and face powder would be anathema-the ultimate in brazen female shamelessness and couquetry They would not even use missi (desi lipstick) and did not know much about face creams, except glycerin for chapped hands and faces, used mainly during winters

They had, nevertheless, immense love for heavy gold ornaments--their one and only great passion and special status symbol--and were amply provided for by their menfolk--parents, in-laws, husbands, brothers, etc.

Only gold would be as good as gold: the rest was junk. Silver ornaments were looked down upon and derided as the hallmark of dire poverty. These would hardly ever be touched. The same went for glass bangles, and except for young, unmarried girls, none would ever wear them.

Married women, particularly those over thirty, would shun loud colours and gradually switch over to white. They were 'full-time housewives, mothers, daughters and sisters attending to household chores for the family--especially cooking in which they really excelled. Even the rich and wealthy would not hire a khansaman (cook) for cooking. Only chapatties were left to the Chapattiwali to bake.

Mahal Sarai or the Royal Caravan Sari was the best-known part of Haveli Hissamuddin Haider, also known as Qutub Ganj, after the name of my great-grandfather Haji Qutubuddin, a leading Muslim merchant of Delhi. The history of Hissamuddin Haider is, at best, apocryphal. According to the local folklore, Hissamuddin was a dignitary attached to the court of Bahadur Shah Zafar. Om' house (240-A, Mahal Sarai, Haveli Hissamuddin Haider, Ballimaran, Delhi) was only a part of the once sprawling mansion (or haveli) of my great grandfather Haji Qutubuddin. With the passage of time, as the family grew, the mansion was partitioned to form four independent houses. My grandfather, Haji Fazalur Rahman, lived in one of the largest of the four houses. Ours was the second largest, followed by the one next to it where one of my widowed phoopies (paternal aunts) lived. The fourth northern portion--an upstairs apartment--was occupied either by a tenant or one of the family at various times.

My grandfather's portion of the mansion had three storeys and a basement. The top storey was called te-maazila (three floors up) and the basement, the tehkhana. The tehkhana originally served as the retiring room for the afternoon siesta during high summer. When I saw it, it might have been abandoned as a retiring room and used as a junk-yard. Yellow, non-poisonous

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snakes nesting there would steal into the main house every now and then, especially during the rainy season, to our unspeakable horror. In spite of the reptiles-snakes and lizards, not to speak of spiders spinning their cobwebs and giant bats flapping notwithstanding-the tehkhana had an enormous fascination for us children. We played all kinds of games-hide-and-seek and treasure hunt-in and out of the tehkhana, unmindful of all the warnings and admonitions.

The courtyard of the house was at a split level, comprising a lower and a higher compound. The higher one was reached by some four or five steps. In the middle of the lower courtyard was a swimming pool-shaped flower bed. It looked like a small jungle, being largely untended and neglected. During the rainy season it became the breeding place of all kind of pests-scorpions, centipedes, chameleons, snakes, swarms of hornets, wasps, flies and mosquitoes. Everything-from vegetation to vermin-grew wild in the flower bed.

During the life time of Haji Qutubuddin, the place, known as Haveli I-Iaji Qutubuddin, was one single whole--it was said to be the only one of its kind throughout the locality. The old man ran thriving businesses, ranging from textiles to weaponry. He was wanted by the British for supplying arms to the rebels during the 1857 mutiny. The British ordered his arrest and trial by a military court. However, before they could lay their hands on him, he fled the town together with his family and took refuge among the ruins girdling the city.

According to popular folklore, the British, after storming the town and establishing their writ there, occupied Qutubuddin's Haveli and set up a military court there. The court was presided over by one Colonel Brown. Ghalib made a mention of it as quoted by Ralph Russel and Khunshidlal Islam in *Ghalib: Life and Letters* as follows: '... from our lane, to that house of the merchant Qutubuddin, on the other side of Chandni Chowk where the wise and capable Colonel Brown had his headquarters'

Asadullah Khan Ghalib, the poet, was produced before this very court for trial on various charges ranging from drunkenness and gambling to aiding and abetting the mutineers. When asked by Colonel Brown about his religious faith, Ghalib answered: 'I

am half Muslim', leaving the colonel wondering, 'And what do you exactly mean by that?' he asked.

'Well', Ghalib went on to answer, 'I consider myself half Muslim for I drink but i don't eat pig'. The answer amused the Colonel and after a few more questions, he let the poet go.

Over time, the Haveli was partitioned into four different portions-each accommodating a family. Ours was the portion next to grandfather's-the main and the largest part of the old Haveli. A partition wall stood between grandfather's and our house. A small communicating door in the middle of the partition wall joined the two portions. My father, Sheikh Muhammad Siddiq Vakil (pleader) was a successful civil lawyer. My mother, Rehmat Bi, recognized as a beauty, was thoroughly illiterate. I was the fifth child in the family Two children born between my sister Zohra and brother Usman, had died. Another lo four or five were born after me. Of those, only one-my younger sister Saeeda--survived.

When I woke up to the little world around me, as a child of five or six, my grandfather and grandmother were still alive. I still remember grandmothers face, pockmarked or ravaged by acne in her youth, and dark. She was big-"bigger than most women around--and very, very formidable, not the sort of grandmother who indulged her grandchildren. Just the same, she indulged me, every now and then giving me a piece of tender mutton out of the curry saucepan still on the stove, half-cooked or a bit of sweet she would always keep handy for children when she was pleased with them, but she hardly ever hugged or kissed me. My grandfather might have been a slave to her. Not to speak of miscarriages or stillborns, she had borne him six sons and three daughters. He addressed her traditionally as siraji ki ma (Siraj's mother), after the name of their eldest son sirajuddin my Taia-the senior-most uncle.

A small stone tablet still adorns the top of the entrance of Mahal Sarai, reading Qutub Ganj-after the name of my great-grandfather-Malikul Tajjar (Prince of merchants) Haji Qutbuddin. Yet another place, a thriving wholesale cloth market just outside Bazaar Ballirnaran, in Chandni Chowk, Katra (Bazaar) Qutubuddin, known after him, formed part of our

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ancestral real estate. The Katra, still thriving as a wholesale cloth market, is now called Katra Subhash-after the name of Subhas Chandra Bose-the maverick leader of the Indian National Congress and the one who, as a fugitive from British India, during World War II, raised and commanded the Indian National Army (INA) manned by the Indian prisoners of war (POWs) in the Japanese camps.

Haveli Hissamuddin I-Iaider, like any other big mohallah of the city was a warren of twisting lanes and bylanes, some little more than five or six feet wide, to make it difficult for two persons to walk abreast. Most lanes carried quaint, exotic names after some local flora and fauna like the Moolsri (flower) Walli Gali, jaman (black berry) Walli Gali, Neem walli Gali, Imli (tamarind) Walli Gali, Khfrki (hatch) Walli Guli. These interconnected with the mohallahs of Lal Kuhn and farash khana, Chatta Abdul Razaque, Chatta Ibrahim, named after some important personalities of the locality. Some were known for historical or traditional connections, like the Pather Walli (stone-breakers') Gali, the Saudager Walli (merchants) Galt, and so on.

The Haveli stood divided between two social strata, two classes each with little in common with the other, except the neighbourhood. In sharp contrast, the elitest Mahal Sarai stood in glaring contrast to the slummy Kupoun Walan (skin jar makers') mohallah, inhabited mainly by the dregs of the society-altogether a wild lot of drunkards, drug addicts, pimps, vagabonds, hardened criminals-but all skilled and semi-skilled craftsmen. They excelled in kite-making, skin-jar manufacturing gold-and-silk thread embroidery and a variety of other odd arts and crafts. Their womenfolk were also known for their relatively free ways and coquetry. Once their menfolk were out, and they were done with their household chores, they would station themselves behind the coarse gunny-bag curtains at their door, peeping out. They would give smiles to young men going past their houses, even make lewd gestures. If and when caught by their menfolk in the act of making eyes or smiling at passersby, they would receive a sound thrashing by husbands, brothers, fathers, close relations. They would scream and cry to attract everybody's attention and sympathy. But such hardened beings

were these women that nothing would keep them away from their free ways for long. They would return to their uninhibited ways soon after. Isn't there an old proverb, that while you can't break a mountain, you can't break its stony touch and substance (Jabal begardad jabbalat name gardad)? Young boys of Mahal Sarai were advised to avoid Kupoun Walan as far as possible. Their men were all supposed to be perverts and qoondan and women little better than whores.

But, like the lily on the dungheap, Kupoun Walan had its own good souls too. There was Sheikh Imamuddin, a deeply religious man and a Hafiz-i-Quran. He knew his Quran by heart-and led the travil prayers in the local mosque during Ramzan. Allah Almighty had blessed him with a voice so sonorous and soulful that it would bring people even from Mahal Sarai to offer their travil prayers behind him.

Mirza Sharifuddin, known for his gift of fortune telling and palm-reading, was another. His fame had spread far beyond the confines of Kupoun Walan. The pick of the city's gentry would invite him to their havelis and mansions for palm-reading and foretelling their future.

As for Khalifa Muhammad Ishaque, well, who in the World would not have seen his name engraved on so many small marble slabs on the front elevation of practically every building Worth the name? His name was interwoven with a Persian couplet, which read: Be fazli Khualawanad-i-Neel Riwaaque: Bina Kara Manzil Muhammad Ishaqae (By the blessing of the God of the Blue Heavens, this building was founded by Muhammad Ishaque') The beauty of the couplet flowed from the mutually rhyming words "Ishaque' and 'Riwaque!' (Although, critics like Sheikh Ata-ur-Rahman, advocate, questioned that the two words 'Ishaque' and 'Riwaque' did not rhyme at all. He would insist that 'Ishaque' must change to 'Shihaque' to rhyme with 'Riwaque!')

Yet another famed character of Kupoun Walan was Master Shiraz, the popular hero of magical extravaganzas and action thrillers like Chiragh Ala Din, Baghdad ka Chor (The Thief of Baghdad), Husun ka Chor (The Thief of Beauty) Jadui Bansri (Magic Flute) and others. Shiraz was distinguished by his thick-

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set, well-muscled body, thick curly hair, long sideburns, a thin, somewhat red voice in glaring contrast to the rest of his physiognomy. He would come from Bombay (now Mumbai) to stay with his relations for a while once or twice a year. His homecoming made splashes not only in Kupoun Walan but also in Mahal Sarai and much of the rest of the old city.

His fans would come flocking to have a glimpse of him and hear him tell all the amazing stories about his cinematic adventures. Master Shiraz would sit on a string charpoy outside his modest ancestral home near the municipal hydrant. He was invariably dressed in a tight-fitting black shirt set off by rows of white enamel buttons on his shirt front and sleeves. His tight-fitting shirt moulded his firm body so well that one could see the rippling muscles.

Bursting with curiosity his fans would ask him all sorts of questions about his cinematic adventures--the flying carpet, the genie of the lamp, his floor-to-ceiling somersaults and all the moon-faced fairies he consorted with in paristan-the Land of Fairies. They would also be inquisitive about his serious love affair-especially with Miss Gauhar-heroine of most of his magical movies. Master Shiraz would listen to and answer their questions with the utmost patience and no less pleasure.

'Films', he would state somewhat philosophically 'are but an optical illusion, Nazar ka dhoka. It's all camera tricks. The movie camera does it all. In fact, when you see me vault from the floor to the ceiling, I might be only going through motions like one doing my skipping exercises. You see me flying on the magic carpet, I would actually be sitting against something called back projection, which you would not understand. The camera does it all. It's all camera tricks.'

While talking of Miss Gauhar and his other heroines, however, he would sometimes blush or answer with a naughty wink, 'That is very, very private. Very, very secret!' During one of his normal annual visits home, he was not his usual self. His admirers and friends did not miss the sad expression writ large across his face. They wondered what the matter could be to have made the hero's face look so dark and sad. 'What's the matter, Masterji?' they could not help asking

him after a while. Master Shiraz must have himself been waiting for someone to ask him just the question, to get it off his chest.

‘What could one say!’ He would respond with a deep sigh. ‘It’s a cruel and merciless world. There are no friends, only foes and ill-wishers and charlatans and cheats-I have been the victim of a big fraud ...’

Then he would go on to tell his tale of woe actually punctuated with repressed tearful sobs and sighs. What happened was that his producer had not paid him his dues for three whole months. There would be a limit to everything; and Master Shiraz could take no more of it. So one day he told the _producer off: ‘Either pay me my dues here or I quit!’ The movie Jadui Bansari (Magic Flute) was then practically half way through its course. Master Shiraz was the hero of the film and his quitting the movie at that stage would have ruined the producer and the movie. That was Master Shiraz's best chance to demand his pound of flesh and get away with it. Whether out of real paucity of funds or outright meanness, the producer blandly told him that he was down and out at the moment, and unable to meet his demand forthwith. So if he must quit, he may do so. The producer’s bland reply stunned poor Master Shiraz. He needed the money badly and would have been quite willing to settle for half of it for the time being. But the producer was out to cut him off to the last penny.

‘Nothing doing’ He said. ‘Either wait till the completion of the movie or get lost’! And that was the end of the affair! Master Shiraz had to quit.

The wily producer got another to stand in for Master Shiraz for the second half of the movie. He improvised a scene wherein he used a magic wand to change the face and figure of the hero and used the duplicate for the rest of the movie. ‘That bastard would not give me even a penny Just imagine!’ Master Shiraz would say in a tear-choked voice. His admirers heard his tale of woe, sympathized with him and abused the producer to their heart’s content.

Like the Kupoun Walan, noted for their shady characters, Mahal Sarai had its darker side too: underneath the layers of respectability existed heaps of moral degradation and obscenity.

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The contrast between the real and unreal, virtue and vulgarity, the painted mask and the stark ugliness behind it, could not have been more glaring. It was one thing being a respected elder of the mohallah on the surface and a real Satan underneath. There was Shahji, for instance, a venerable old man-maybe in his late 40's, maybe in his early 50's-efor that would almost be the wrong side of the average life span. He was the model of virtuous perfection: a nimazi-parhezgar, a stickler for his regular Roza-Namaz regime, Ramazan fasting, Zakat dispensing, abstemious and God-fearing. And yet all his virtues and abstemiousness were little more than a facade. Out of sheer respect for his age and years, as much as for the sake of the good name of the mohallah, most people would talk but little of his escapades. Who did not know all about his homosexual deviations? He had married twice and divorced as many times. Luckily, he had no children. It was common knowledge that he was not good enough for women; not so much out of any physical deficiency as due to some strong psychological and emotional aberration. According to popular folklore, there was not a place under the sun where he did not have a heartthrob-a mashouk pansy boy. He might have been the proverbial bagla bhagat-the sanctimonious stork fair outside, dark within-a veritable embodiment of the Hindi verse: 'Tun Ujla, mun maila, Bagle jaisa bheis, Tujh se tu kaga bhalh-Jiska bahar-bhitar ek', etc. 'The ravine---black, outside and black within, is better than a stork-white outside, black within'. He was a pucca loundebaz or sodomite.

Absolutely the opposite of Shahji was Sheikhji (that was how everybody addressed him). He, too, had an infatuation for young boys, but only of the passive sort. Most young boys of the mohallah, except for the real badmashes, would shun even the old man's shadow and skip out of his way as soon as they laid their eyes on him. 'How are you, son?' he would affectionately address the lad passing him by The next thing the unwary victim knew was that the old man had his arms around him to hold him in a tight vice-like embrace. He would reach for his private parts, grab and fondle them, whispering all the time: 'My honour is in your hands (mere izzat tumhare

Haath main hai!) That was to make the boy keep his mouth shut Sheikhji held and fondled him.

He was known as an incurable babasia-an anal-obsessive mite. In the evenings, he was often seen in the Company Gardens frequented by oil-masseurs--the champiwallas. The champiwallas, besides being expert masseurs, also knew several other ways to please their customerse--generally older, middle-aged freaks--either way whether in an active or a passive mode. Sheikhji had a couple of his favourites and confidantes and used services. He was known all over the mohallah for his addiction. However, once again, as in the case of Shahji was little anybody could do to right the wrong. It was not the question of an individuals honour, but also of the prestige of the entire locality. So they would rather keep a silence and talk about it confidentially in whispers. a shame, what a. perfect shame. Just look at him indulging that at his age, with one foot in the grave already and this other on the banana skin Doesn't he realize that one day not to far off he would find himself face-to-face with Almighty Allah? Then what would he have to say in his defence? May Allah pardon us all. It's simply horrible. Isn't it?'

Then there was Sheikh Abdul Wahab-a prosperous businessman, now retired. He had been a widower for many. many years and never married again. His offspring--a daughter and two sons--were grown-up and lived their own lives, perhaps praying secretly for the old man to die, leaving them all his wealth. Apparently, they had little to do with their father; much the same could be said about the father, who would not like to be bothered by his would-be inheritors. He cared more for his friends and visitors than for the offspring.

He lived all by himself in the upper storey of his house. It was known as Sheikh Sahibs Bala Khana (Sheikh Sahib's upper storey). Sheikh Abdul Wahab was a stickler for clean and good living. The upper storey house was easily the best maintained single place in the entire locality It was full of flower-pots neatly lined along the walls and suspended from the eaves. It would always be so nice and cool there. Even through the worst of the Delhi summer, it would be a welcome retreat from the searing

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hot winds and soaring temperatures of May and June. Up on the open rooftop were placed Wooden chowkis, arranged next to one another to make a large enough area to seat some 40-50 people at a time. On summer nights, wooden divans were covered with snow White sheets spread tight without a crease anywhere, along with a generous provision of bolster cushions for the guests to lean against and relax. After 'Isha' (last late evening prayers) prayers, Sheikh Abddul Wahab's friends and visitors would come flocking to his Bela Kham for an hour or two of polite conversation. A huge hookah with a long, Winding pipe stood in the middle for the hookah smokers to have a puff or two and let it make the rounds. For cigarette smokers, too, there was a generous supply of Scissors-a rather inexpensive but popular brand of the day placed in a silver box Special brand smokers would, however, bring their own stuff and religiously stick to that. No offer of a free smoke would make them change their own brand for another-no matter how expensive.

At least twice a year, once in summer and once in winter, Qawwali concerts were held and eagerly looked forward to by the Sheikh's circle of friends and acquaintances. Sheikh Abdul Wahab, a much-admired and respected man in the locality had his rough edges too. He would not be at home to visitors for one or two days in a Week. He would then literally shut himself up in the house, to the exclusion of all else except for his old servant and life-time companion, Mazhar. Mazhar might have been valet, housekeeper, cook all rolled into one. 'He had been with him for as long as one could recall.

What the Sheikh would do during most of his self-imposed quarantine, nobody exactly knew. He did meditate and pray and recite his favourite Quranic verses. He may have also indulged in magical incantations. Not a leaf would stir at his place; not a sound could be heard from there. Then suddenly; just before midnight, the silence would be broken like a sudden cloudburst. Sheikh Abdul Wahab would be heard shouting at the top of his voice, spouting a chain of the choicest imprecations--quite a few of his own improvisation, hardly ever heard before. All the good souls of the rnohallah would touch

their ears in a gesture of penance and say tauba, tauba. They would, however, strain their ears to hear and enjoy his novel swear words and obscenities. Allah alone, knows the secrets cradled in a man's heart and soul. What drove the Sheikh to that pitch of madness was hard to understand. Maybe it was the sudden onrush of the anguish and frustration accumulated within him through his long spell as a widower. Maybe it was the Satan within him, struggling to break out of his chains and force his way out with demonic energy. Allah alone knows. The fact remains that none in this world is either a perfect Satan or a perfect saint: each has his / her share of both. Take the case of Sheikh Sirajuddin-a quieter and gentler soul would be hard to imagine. He appeared to be the sort of man who would not hurt a fly, but in money matters, he would be utterly ruthless and unrelenting, worse than a Jew (Yahudi). He would lend money at high interest rates, pawn the needy person's-man or woman-property, ornaments and other valuables for a song and make sure, by hook or crook, to foreclose the deed. There was not a soul in the mohallah who would want to have anything to do with him ever. Everyone cursed him for his evil intent and crass dishonesty. 'May Allah ruin him and his progeny for all the excesses he has committed against innocent good folks in need,' they said of him behind his back.

Perhaps the most colourful character of the locality was Sheikh Mumtazuddin, noted for his love of women. He was both admired and derided for his audacious handling of low-cast women-domestics, female construction workers, stone-breakers, loaders working alongside their men.

Sweepers and their females-wives and daughters-enjoyed a status far, far beyond their lowly profession. They were known and addressed as Halal Khauris and Halal Kliauris (men and women of honest living). One could imagine what life would be without the sweepers, mostly their females working for purdah households. There would be only one latrine for the whole household, averaging six inmates. And the latrine (pakhana or riliit-house) was used both for urinating and defecating. Even a single day's absence of the sweepers could turn the latrine into a stinking gutter. Young women going through their menstrual

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cycles or “periods” would not know Where to dispose of the used rags (sanitary pads of the latter day were unheard of).

During high summers and at the height of rainy weather, when stomach disorders, loose motions and diarrhoea would be rampant, mainly due to over-eating rich foods and mangoes, things would become truly desperate. Sweepresses were begged to come twice a day through this month (du-waqti) to clean up the mess at twice the normal wages.

Halal Khauris were valued not only for doing all the dirty work but also for embodying a quaint combination of therapeutic and romantic qualities. A close embrace with a sweepress was considered good and frequently practised for the treatment of anaemia and eczema-of course, more out of sheer lecherousness than anything else. There would be cases of older people taking advantage of the occasion. They would embrace sweepresses and hold them tight in their arms in spite of the loud protests from the women. ‘Minn Bas Mimi, Bas! That’s enough. Now please let go of me.’

Sheik Mumtazuddin had a special way with sweeper-women and at one point, almost lost his heart to Gabbu’s young daughter Chunnu. Chunnu, the young newly-wed daughter-in-law of Gabbu, the senior sweeper-woman in the mohallah, was quite a sensation. She had a wonderfully well-rounded figure likened to a morni (peacock), as she walked with a swinging gait, a basketful of overnight soil precariously balanced, almost swaying on her head. Young and old alike had been mad after her; but she was no Nakti Bashiran or Jannat (two shameless sweepresses of the mohallah) and wouldn’t let anyone so much as touch her. With the bulging basket of shit resting on her head, who would dare touch her anyway? Somebody did dare to be funny once, only to have the bulging shit hamper emptied on him in full view of everybody and to their huge joy. The victim had stood there, stunned, for a while before suddenly bursting into a gallop, shedding the filth all along his flight path as he ran and ran.

Sheikh Mumtazuddin went beyond the threshold of a therapeutic embrace; and at one point, he almost lost his heart to Chunnu Gabbu read all that in the eyes of the man dripping

with lust and lechery. She stopped bringing the girl with her to Sheikh Sahib's house. The gentleman waited awhile until he could wait no more.

One day, he stopped by the place-tucked away in a corner of the _lane-where Gabbu and her family used to rest and eat. He didn't quite know how to ask Gabbu about her missing daughter-in-law. Gabbu looked at him as he stood still before her. 'Salaam, Mian, Can I do anything for you ...'

'Where is Chunnu ...' He spelt with a painful stammer.

'Oh that', Gabbu quipped, 'I knew it was coming to that, Mian. But you know it is just not possible. For you the girl is yet another plaything. Tonight the adornment of your bridal bed, tomorrow Worse than your jooti (footwear). So please, forget about it. Even sweepers have some honour and dignity. However, if you have any blood deficiency or skin problem, I am at your service ...' and that was the end of the affair.

No matter how lecherous Sheikh Mumtazuddin might have been, it was hard to imagine him chasing someone as misshapen, snub-nosed and notorious as Nakti Bashiran. Only, Bashiran would not stop talking about the Sheikh Sahib giving her a glad eye: 'He actually caught hold of me one night around the nukkar (street comer) and went for my breasts. She would go about telling everybody without a trace of shame. The mohallah housewives accepted her as a shameless hussy and encouraged her to come out with her exciting stories, enjoying them hugely.

Nakti Bashiran was known for two things: her excellent vermicelli and unrequited passion for men. Her home-made vermicelli would be like silk thread-long soft and fine and delicious. She had been several times divorced—perhaps widowed once--and married as many times. She would, unashamedly and unhesitatingly confess to her one pressing need for a man. 'Without a man, life is too unbearable a burden for a women. Baa,' she would go on to tell mother, 'no matter what the world might say, a sinner like me can't do without a man!'

She stood out for her short height, a flat nose pierced with a nose-pin, a tattooed mole in the middle of her chin, and missi (antimony)-smeared lips. She would place a forefinger

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conquettishly to her nose every time she spoke. There had been several stories about her nose being pinched in the middle. She insisted it was by Allah's will and that she was born with it. But those who knew better would attribute it to a jealous husband who, in a moment of uncontrolled rage, had slashed it with a razor blade. A nose, cut or chopped or punched and caved in, would be her one abiding mark of eternal shame and disgrace. And that was what was got from a jealous cuckold, beside himself with rage over all the stories about her escapades.

He was probably her first lawfully-wedded husband-owner of a small corner kiosk in the mohallah dealing in groceries of everyday use. Before he kicked her out of his house, he beat her and Went for her nose with a razor blade, to leave it bleeding profusely.

For fear of more punishment from the man in an uncontrollable rage, Bashiran decided never to cross his path. She left her old mohallah and moved into ours. Her nose healed but was disfigured forever. And who would bother if she ever had one that was Whole and in one piece?

She had not been in the mohallah for long when she boldly announced her marriage with the kacchi (a vegetable vendor) who would go about from lane to lane hawking his wares. Besides being much older than Bashiran, the man had a goitre to give him a repulsive look. Bashiran was least bothered by thin; she would settle for any man agreeing to take her.

'What does a woman have to do with the looks of a man? All that she wants is a man and a rnan alone,' she would tell mother with a pinched, naughty smile.

'Allah have mercy on you, Bashiran. What kind of a shameless woman you are!'

Mother would quip, to Bashiran's manifest amusement.

As far as I can remember, Bashiran took four or five different men as husbands while living in our mohallah. Whether the man she paraded as her husband had been even lawfully married to her or just cohabited with her was itself very doubtful. Another woman half as bad and notorious as Bashiran would have been physically thrown out of the mohallah. But Bashiran was tolerated mainly because of her excellent vermicelli and partly for her frankness. 'What's wrong with a

proper nikah? And all my marriages were performed according to Shari'at. Why should you have any doubt about that? There is no shame in Shari'at.'

Yet another girl--reputedly out on the loose and 'available'--was Jannat. She must have been barely 14-15, pock-marked but with an excellent figure--a full bosom rippling underneath a coarse cotton shirt, and without any inhibitions. I got to know of her much later, when she had been already married, gone into purdah and apparently settled down as a housewife without changing her wanton ways. No amount of beating and thrashing by her husband would make a better person out of her. She had no children, and as rumours would have it, even her husband eventually accepted her for what she had been, and would not only connive for her loose and free ways, but had actually set her up in business.

One day; in one of his unusually expansive moods, my brother Usman spoke of his 'liaison' with Jannat but suddenly changed the subject. 'You fool!' he retorted. 'Well, what good would it be to tell you anything. You just won't understand.' He put his chest out as he talked. 'But for God's sake, don't go about telling it to everybody or I'll give you a sound thrashing. Understand?' Thus he Warned me, the proud look across his face suddenly yielding place to shades of fear.

There would be none to beat my friend Yarneen in making up to Women. Once he recognized one for a sport, he would go for her at the first available opportunity. His one and only advice to me: 'If you want to have a woman, go for her breasts—and she will be yours' The question was: who would bell the cat? To act like Yarneen, one must be Yameen himself.

There were other girls, too, in the mohallah known for their free ways and secret liaisons with boys. As a 12-13-year old, I came to know one was Mashallah Ian. She would give me a smile whenever she ran into me around a street corner. But I could never muster enough courage to address her. I would live to regret that, and quite a few other such opportunities, for the rest of my life.

Chapter 3

A Marriage, Birth and Death in the Family

Zohra Apa Bannu, my eldest sister (also the eldest child), was married at 14-15 years of age. It had been a big event-in fact the biggest event in the family. There was so much to do: so much to buy; bridal suits and jewellery. special clothes for everybody else-men and women in the family domestics down to the sweeper woman and her young daughters and daughters-in-law. There was hardly any bazaar shopping involved in the complex business, since most of the vendors would come to the house with their wares and purchases were made at the doorstep.

Everyone concerned-the bazzaz (peddling cloth merchant), the darzan (seamstress) gold-silver smith, the shoe-vendor, jooti Walli an old, sickly woman with dry, dishevelled hair-the halvai (Confectioner), the perfumer, with all his exotic attars (perfumes) and toiletries, all came to our house to take orders and bargained with smiling faces and sugary canvassing in the choicest idioms used and understood by housewives. 'Begum Sahiba, never mind the price. This is all for free, a gift from humble folks like us to the bride and the groom. Dare I quote, what to speak, demand a price for the thing? You may please quote your own price, it's all yours for the asking ..." Bargains were thus made with much finesse, and hardly any haggling. Sitting beside mother, I would thoroughly enjoy all the activity and fun. I loved looking at the gorgeous bridal trousseau embroidered with gold and silver thread and richly-sequined to reflect all the colours and light of a rainbow

At night, when my father would come home after a hard day's work at his legal practice, my mother had everything

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spread out for him to see. Velvet-covered, ornate jewellery boxes were opened for him to see and admire. At a time like that, Zohra, the bride to be would make herself scarce; Usman, pretending to be too busy with his studies, sat in one corner of the dalan or family room, grandly oblivious of the activity around. I sat glued to mother's shoulder, watching the exciting proceedings.

My one fond dream, one ardent desire had been to sit astride the richly caparisoned bridal horse behind the bridegroom through the baaraat (the wedding procession). Traditionally, that would be the privilege of the young children of the groom's family only. But, as an importunate child, I would not take no for an answer. My mother spoke to father about my insistent demand. He saw nothing wrong with it. 'He is a child after all, and this is the first wedding in the family. You may simply convey this to the groom's mother. She would be only too pleased to accommodate and oblige'

My mother would rather have him speak to the groom's father. Matters of such high importance, she said, must be settled between men. Women must be kept out as far as possible. She prevailed on him after some argument. My father spoke to the groom's father, who gladly acceded to the request.

There was still some time—a few days or a month—to go before the wedding. Since the good news about my ride on the bridal horse was confirmed, I could hardly wait for the big day to arrive. I would pester mother day after day sometimes even several times a day, about how far away we still were from the wedding day. 'Allah be my protector, beta (child)', she would protest. 'Why can't you just wait, like everybody else'?

As the wedding day drew close, the tempo of activity heightened to a feverish pitch. Wedding cards were printed. I could only admire the colour and the silken touch of the cards, still unable to read the script. The bespectacled Muhammad Din Nai (the all-purpose, traditional barber-cum-home delivery man) came with his old, tattered, discoloured register containing the names and addresses of all the biradriwallas (community members). It was for Muhammad Din to write the names and addresses of the invitees in his neat handwriting—like excellent

calligraphy-as well as deliver them to the addressees. He had set up a sort of temporary office in the doorway with a low wooden desk, pen holders and inkpots, all neatly arranged on a piece of old, worn out durrie. I watched the bespectacled man admiringly as he Wrote address after address-I wondered when I would be able to write and write as well as he. I had a House painter paint my name in golden colour on top of my little tin book case, as follows: 'ABDUL RAHMAN BA QALAM KHUD'. Usman had a big laugh when I proudly showed him the script. 'Bloody idiot! Do you even know what 'Ba Qalam Khud' means? It means "With your own pen". Did you Write it yourself? Did you? You can't even write a single word, you fool'. His words left me in tears.

A couple of days before the wedding, the bride-to-be, my Sister, was retired to the small box room, shut out from all the discolouring dust and sun. She was given a yellow cotton dress to wear to match with the colour of ubtan (yellow gram paste) used as the best face and body cleaning lotion. Besides family members, only some of her sahelis (best girl friends) were allowed access to her. The proceedings were at once fascinating' and bewildering for me. I would keep pestering my mother with all kinds of questions. Her one stock reply would be: 'It's not for children to bother at all about these things. You'd better get on with your own games and things'

Usman took hardly any interest in whatever went on. He was in his late 12th or 13th year, already getting .a light hairy upper lip and trying hard to look superior to his years. Father concerned himself little with the preparations other than as the paymaster. He would, every now and then, get closeted with mother to discuss the nitty-gritty and give her a piece of his mind against wasteful expenditure.

The day before the Wedding, the mehendiwalli (women with the henna paste) came to apply henna to my sister, caged in the box room. The henna paste was kneaded into her palm, the palms were folded to stay like that until the colour blossomed. It was also applied to the soles of her feet. Some of her best companions n round also had their hands and feet dyed with henna. They lay stretched flat on their backs, unable to open their henna

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filled palms or let the soles of their feet touch the floor lest the mehndi paste came off before colour bloomed and firmed up.

The mehndi night was full of fun and festivity. The bride's maids-sahelis-danced and sang to the beat of the tabla drum. Firoza, one of the best-known domnis (courtesans) of her time, was also there with her troupe--her aging mother and others-to perform for the guests. She danced and sang the traditional wedding songs to the hearty applause and generous bail (tips) from the appreciative audience. Dinner was served around midnight-qorma, biryanf, sher mal and kheer (rice pudding). The guests ate to their heart's content.

Outside the house, a shamiana had been set up for the male guests. My father and Usman were there to receive and look after the male guests. I stayed in the zenana (women's quarters) glued to my mother's shoulder. 'For God's sake, why can't you go and stay with your father and brother?" she would tell me off irritably every now and then. Nothing would make me budge. I would press even closer to her.

After dinner in the zenana, there was to be a special show for the selective few staying back. Much as my mother would have me go either to the mardane (men's quarter) or to bed, I would hang on. She did not know what to do. The domnis waited to get on with their show-the main attraction of the evening programme. Then an elderly domni, Firoza's mother, walked over to my mother and said. 'Ape (madam), it's okay. He is only a child yet, too young to understand these things. It's alright, I suppose. We should get on with the show!'

Guests were also getting to be impatient, discreetly pressing for the show to start. My mother fixed me with a hard stare. 'Shaitan What a bad boy you are! ' she said. I must have gone through some awkward, funny motions in response to make everyone laugh. The elderly domni was ready for the show and would not wait. She first sang a song. I could hardly follow. However, I would come to know it a few years later. It happened to be one of the popular love songs portraying a woman courting her lover (husband). The opening line was 'sayyan teri goudi main, gainda ban jaongi (Darling, I would blossom like a marigold flower in your lap). And then another and yet another. In one

song, the love sick woman addressing her husband/ lover says, Ju main huti raja baila, chambelia, liput rehti raja teri bangle par. Najar lagi raja ters Bangle par (My darling, had I been a baila or jasmine Creeper, I would have hugged the boundary walls of your bungalow.)

I now forget the words of yet another brazenly bawdy song. 'The theme portrayed a woman challenging her man to dare come to the bed to be taught a lesson or two in the art of love-making. And that went on and on. I held fast to my post—my mouth and eyes wide open in sheer bewilderment. The ladies around would not giggle, but nudge one another stealthily to drive a point.

As the singing ended, the elderly domni sat down to catch her breath and everyone applauded her. She immediately took an aromatic richly tobacco-laced paan to refresh herself. She stuffed the paan expertly into one side of her mouth to make the cheek bulge. Performing so well at her age was no mean job. And that was not the end of it. The real show was yet to come, for which everyone waited impatiently. I was sleepy. My mother wished nothing more than to see me go to sleep before the real 'private' show would get underway. It was a re-enactment of the sohag raat (the wedding night) scene. Firoza's mother went to the lavatory carrying a small basket. She came back after a few minutes-her face wreathed in telltale smiles. She was going to play some games. She winked at the guests and some of the saucy ones amongst the guests even winked back. Then she came over to my mother for her permission to start. My mother looked at me--my eyes heavy with sleep, but still open. The domni with a wave of her hand, beckoned my mother to forget about me. The show must go on! And it did.

The domni started from one end of the dalan, going from guest to guest, raising the lower end of her kurta to unveil something to leave the guests aghast and unashamedly pleased and excited at the same time. She would wait for a while before moving on to the next guest. She would leave the guests giggling, some half covering their eyes in mock shame; some would be bolder, not just looking at the unveiled object but actually touching it. It was a stuffed, cloth penis dangling from

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underneath her shirt. She would go from guest to guest raising the lower edge of her shirt to expose the organ, much to the feigned embarrassment of other onlookers.

'T:mbo, tauba. What a shameless hussy She has neither the fear of God nor any worldly shame. Be gone, you shameless hussy Be gone!' While uttering the words in mock anger, they would not for a moment look away from the object of their feigned outrage. The domni, encouraged by the unmistakable interest of some of the onlookers, would invite them to touch it. 'Go ahead. Touch it. After all, it is only a dummy. Just see how stiff it is.'

She would push the dummy up until it very nearly touched the cheeks of the guests to leave them blushing to the roots of their hair, but without averting their gaze from the thing.

I must have gone to sleep while the show was still on. The next day was the big wedding day I dreamed, both asleep and awake, of myself astride the bridal horse. The wedding was an elaborate but as dignified as affair as one could be in the community. While there would be all the festivity and jollity befitting the occasion, much of the tawdriness seen in typical Delhi (Hindustani) weddings was scrupulously avoided. No cheap brass bands, no rows of kahars (porters) accompanying the bridal processions with head loads of dowry--pots and pans. The Punjabi Saudagar Community. while assimilating the Delhi language and culture, still retained their exclusive community norms and customs and jealously guarded them. Nothing in the world would persuade them to abandon their Punjabi connection and sobriquet. Financially better off than the Muslim community as a whole, the Punjabi Saudagars did tend to view others with a certain amount of commiseration, if not outright contempt. They would address them as Hindustanis, almost as members of an inferior race.

Usman and I had green brocade sherwanis, tailor-made for the occasion, and fancy caps-his a comparatively sober gold-threaded, mine a gawdy richly sequined one. Father and mother, as the bride's (as opposed to the groom's) parents, wore ordinary, everyday washed clothes. I was to go to the bridegroom's house, not far from ours, to sit astride his horse.

All dressed up, I waited impatiently for someone to come and take me with him. It was well past sunset, and the baaraat was already late by an hour or so. While delays would be normal on an occasion like that, they would cause anxiety just the same. Everyone wanted to know the cause of the delay.

My father went to see things for himself. He came back presently to inform us that the Punjabi Youth League volunteers had arrived to picket and block the baaraat route. They demanded the parents on both sides either to pay the ta'awan (penalty) for exceeding the limit set by the League for dowry jewellery or face the consequences. The groom's father, irritable and not a little pompous and headstrong-even somewhat supercilious-would have nothing to do with the protestors. 'Let one see what mother's son dare come in my way? Who the devil do they think they are? Shahar Kotwal (the city police chief)? This is too much. Pure gundagardi (downright goondaism) and I won't have it!' He thundered and threatened call the police.

He was obviously taking matters too far; and the mohallah elders realized that. After all, the Youth League protesters were no other than their own children. Above all, whatever they were doing was exactly according to the conditions laid down and approved by general consensus.

There was no question whatsoever of getting the police to Intervene. It had never happened in the history of either the Community or the mohallah and they were to ensure it did not happen then., They tried hard for a compromise, counseling the Youth League volunteers to avoid any show of force, and the groom's father offering to settle for a fraction of the penalty as a symbolic gesture of accommodation and compromise. But the gentleman would simply not hear of it. 'Whatever for? Who are they to lay down the law and force others to obey? There can be no compromise on matters of principle', he went on to argue endlessly and say the same thing again and again.

The Youth League volunteers, out of respect for the elders, agreed to withdraw some of their demands. They did, however, need something for face-saving. Rebuffed, they went on to picket the route of the baaraat. The bridal horse, gorgeously dressed,

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stood by in a corner neighing and farting at the same time. There was no getting the groom's father to relent, if only to let the baaraat procession through. Hard as nails, he stayed as uncompromising as ever. To make things worse and practically let them get out of hand, some of the young bloods of the groom's family climbed up a number of abutting rooftops and balconies and started pouring water on the people down below. One or two more reckless ones even jettisoned a couple of whole surahis (earthenware flasks) full of water to drench some to the skin and hit quite a few others right on the head leaving them bleeding.

There was such a rumpus in the entire mohallah as to make everybody rush to the scene of disturbance. Finally, my father intervened-the last thing he was supposed to do from his traditionally weak wicket as the bride's father. He was a lawyer, after all, and duty-bound to tell the groom's father, his semdhi (brother-in-law), to stop the ugly rumpus (toofan-e-badtammizi) then and there, say a good word to the volunteers and pay some token money to settle the matter.

The Word of the lawyer had the desired effect on the headstrong man. He agreed to behave and follow my father's advice. It was not before the late evening Isha prayers, however, that complete calm was restored. The Youth League volunteers lifted the picket and the barricade: the injured were given first-aid and the wedding proceedings resumed minus the bridal horse. The owner of the horse would not agree to let the animal for a late-night procession. Maybe he had some other engagement or reasons of his own for his categorical and final 'no' to all the pleadings of the groom's family.

It broke my heart-shattered the fondest dream I had through the six-seven years of my life. My mother and all the other ladies in house kept sitting on edge throughout the tense goings-on outside. The bride-Zohra, my sister-sat stock still in a corner, her head painfully bent (at a good 90 degrees), face behind a long veil, forehead, neck, ears, nose, hands and feet all loaded with heavy jewellery. without moving a muscle. Some four or five young ladies, her intimate friends, kept her company. Unlike the bride, however, they enjoyed all

the freedom of movement-to yawn and stretch their legs and walk up to the latrine to ease themselves, and relax with a word or two amongst themselves.

Then came the good news that the palki and kahars (palanquin and porters) had arrived to carry the bride to the groom's house. My father was already in the doorway to escort the bride and help her get into the palanquin. My mother, together with some of my aunts, walked up to the bride and, fighting back their tears said;

'Uttho, beti uttho, tumehe Allah ki saprad, tumehe Allah ki amanat (Get up, daughter. God be with you)." They helped her to get up and then escorted her slowly to the door, reciting verses from the Holy Quran all the time. I hung on to the edge of my mother's shirt (kurta), Watching the proceedings With bewildered eyes. Ladies from and outside the family. all purdah-observing, stood around, their faces only partially veiled, tearfully wishing the very best of luck to the bride. 'Dudho nahau aur putoh phaluh (Bathe in milk, prosper and bear sons and grandsons), 'Sada Suhagarr raho (Forever stay happily married)'. They all invoked traditional prayers to bless the bride.

As my father proceeded to lift and carry the bride in his arms to the palanquin, my mother and aunts followed him, sobbing, each beside herself with emotion, Zohra threw her arms and around father, mother and others one after another. 'Enough my father put in. 'It's getting late. We must bid her farewell He recited Bismillah (In the name of Allah) and helped the bride get into the palanquin.

The most striking feature of my father's face had been his eyes large, bright and Wide-spaced. They were red and inflamed, with unshed tears. The image and the memory of his large eyes stay imprinted on my mind. He eased the bride into the palanquin and told the kahars to move on. My dream of the grand ride astride the bridal horse was shattered once and for all.

Saeeda, our youngest sister, was born just a few months after Zohra's marriage. Much as my mother would have wished the child to be yet another boy my father got what he might have actually wished for. He was so happy and loved the baby girl. He would cradle her in her swaddling clothes, in his arms

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and carry her joyfully around. He would address her as 'my little pet, my little angel ...'. He really doted on her; and as she gained in strength and size, she became his most favoured plaything. Every morning, as soon as the baby girl was awake and breastfed by my mother, he would take her in his arms and bounce her up and down. As the baby giggled and gurgled and shrieked, the old man joyfully laughed with her to expose his lower jaw with two middle teeth missing. He wore a denture to bridge the gap while going out to work. My mother would soak the denture in a glassful of water every night. The sight of the denture inside the glass greatly thrilled me.

Everyone in the family and outside, watching father's growing attachment to the baby girl, had a taunting remark or two to make. Although father must have been still in his late 30s, he was looked upon as an old man and the baby-girl as the 'Burhape ki oiled (old-age off spring) After her it's only Allah and Allah alone (Iske baad tu bas Allah hee Allah!). So his inordinate love is perfectly understandable!'

Saeeda's birth appeared to have squared the family; we were a happy foursome--two boys and two girls! Zohra, already married, seemed to be getting along pretty well in her new home. Usman, a year or two younger to Zohra, was doing his school, I was about to finish the maseet and would be joining a boys' maktab soon to complete my reading of the Quran. Master Altaf Hussain, our private tutor, came home every evening to give tuition in Urdu and English.

We were a happy little family just about the happiest in the larger milieu of my uncles and aunts. My father's practice kept a steady pace without exactly thriving. He had been extremely scrupulous and choosy in accepting his briefs--nearly always on the side of the aggrieved party. He made a name for himself as an unusually able and honest civil lawyer. No hanky-panky. No badmashi! His one normal working day extended from morning to midnight. When awake, once in a while, I could hear his footfalls, as he walked through the doorway, reciting some Quranic verses in a low voice. He loved to exercise in the morning. On the rooftop of the house there were a pair of clubs to swing back and forth and a wooden bar he used for his push-

ups. I loved to see him swing his clubs-up and down, back and front. Those were too heavy for me even to lift, but he wielded them with such perfect ease. He had a lean and athletic body. Whenever he had time in the evening, he would go and play tennis at the YMCA club in the Company Gardens. Occasionally, on a holiday he would like to fly kites and let me hold the taut string of the kite already up and erect in the air. The feel of the string and the soft twang faintly heard from the high-flying kite taut on the string simply fascinated me.

On holidays, my father took us---Usman and myself---out for a morning walk all the way to Kashmiri Gate, via the Company Gardens, past the railway station and beyond the Lepers' Bridge (Koria Pul). It used to be such a thrill. He would buy us butter and cream at Keventer's and pastries at Davico's. We returned home laughing and happy. I carried the pastry tray in hand like a much-coveted prize. The faint fragrance of the pastries inside the tray tickled my nose and my palate. I could hardly wait to get back home and eat it all up!

We went past the ochre-Washed municipality building. That was where my father had his municipal commissioner's office. I did not know what it meant to be a municipal commissioner; I could hardly pronounce the Word. But it sounded so impressive, so weighty. Sometime, later on, I would come to know that it was an elected office which my father had contested and Won against his own uncle Haji Abdul Razzak. The nephew spent not a fraction of the money his uncle had during his election campaign. He had just one or two posters printed and pasted on the Walls in and outside the haveli. One of the posters, my mother told me, carried the slogan 'Chacha bhatija ki mili Bhagat! (Uncle-nephew's fixed fight). The slogan underscored the covert collaboration; and understanding between the two, regardless of the election fever and campaigning.

Of middle height, father was altogether a handsome man-wheatish colour, large almond-shaped eyes, a trim moustache and thinning hair neatly brushed back. He would often recite couplets in a pleasing, sonorous voice. Two of his favourite couplets, as I would come to know later, were in Persian. One was:

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Reftam kt khar uz po kasham
Mehmal nikon shud uz manar,
Yak lamha ghafal gashtame sad sala
Raham dour shud!

(I left the caravan for a moment to pull the thorn out of my foot and lost my way for a hundred years.) The other was:

Ahista bargge gul hefeshan bar mazari man,
Bas Nazuk Aast Sheesha-i-dil dar-kanar-I-man

(Shower flowers gently on our grave, the mirror of our heart is extremely fragile.)

He had been a sensitive' soul. And I would often see tears streaming down his handsome face during the Qawwali sessions at our home or while reciting the Holy Quran after his prayers.

I would feel so proud of my father as I looked at the municipal committee building. On top of the building stood out what looked like a bamboo pole. 'That's the hooter you hear every morning and evening' Father would tell us. The municipal committee hooter was called ullu (owl) by all of us. Facing the municipality building was Queen's Garden and opposite, the Ghanta Gher (Clock Tower). My father would tell me something about Victoria, the late Queen of England and Empress of India. We passed through Chandni Chowk, jauntily holding our butter-and-cream cup and pastry tray Usman would keep a somewhat sullen posture through –our walk. He did not seem to be much interested either in what father said or in the things around. Father would very often affectionately dismiss him as a young adorn bezor (misanthrope), an angry brat.

Life with father might have been a bed of roses: all colour and fragrance, all joy and happiness: He loved us all. He was as effusive in love as he was explosive "in anger. When in a rage, he would grit his teeth and menacingly brandish his fists. I saw him once throw something at-"my mother in a mounting rage. My mother was quite a seamstress, although completely illiterate. She read her Quran by rote without ever learning her Urdu alphabet. She was an excellent cook and an accomplished housewife. She carried her pregnancies so gracefully and

patiently that she would be hardly ever noticed until at a far advanced stage.

Zohra had gone to live with her in-laws. Usman seemed busy all the time with his school work and Saeeda, about a year or two old, was father's favourite. She would scream and crackle as father bounced her up and down. She was quite like a doll, which could open and shut its eyes as she was sat up or laid down. Despite his apparent preoccupation with his lessons, Usman was not doing too well at the school. There had also been some disquieting reports about the company he kept, and father seemed quite upset about it. He would talk to him every now and then in strict privacy. Mother, too, was not very happy with Usman. She would often complain to father about his odd or outright rude behaviour.

Then father suddenly took ill. It all started with a slight cold and fever. He consulted his friend Dr. Muhammad Yusuf, LMS, in-charge of the local municipal hospital. He dismissed it as a common cold, maybe with a touch of malaria. But the fever persisted. Father took it all in his stride, without in any way compromising on his daily routine—from home, to office and office to hatchery (the local court)—and back home about midnight. He was losing weight, anyone could see that. He also had long and severe bouts of coughing. They were particularly bad through the night. We were all getting very, very worried about his condition.

In view of father's worsening condition, Dr. Yusuf advised him to consult one of the seasoned Bengali doctors in the city. There were Drs. Ram Babu, HC. Sen, Ganguli and the club-footed (langra), Urdu-speaking Dr. Ram Bihari. Ram Babu suspected tuberculosis and suggested an X-ray of the chest. One day, I saw grandfather come to our house and whisper something into my mother's ears. Her face went white, like chalk. 'Ya Allah, Ya Allah, oh my God! Have mercy', she mumbled and almost fainted. My grandfather's deeply wrinkled face twisted to look like a skein of wool. Mother was in a state of deep shock. Father was suffering from 'tubedique' (tuberculosis) - the long, languishing disease without a cure. He had been X-rayed and was found to be in the advanced third stage. Subsequently, our family servant Wahid Ali told me and Usman

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all about it. We were both thunder struck. 'Is he going to die?' Usman asked abruptly.

'You should never talk like that,' Wahid Ali admonished him gruffly. 'Never talk like that. This is inauspicious, besides being rude. Yes, rude because young children of your age are not supposed to ask such questions. Do you really wish your father to die? Do you?'

Usman's face went livid with anger, but he swallowed it and shut his mouth tight. Wahid Ali might have suddenly realized his own mistake. He must have hurt the boy with his abrupt remarks. His face presently softened into a faint smile. He went on to stroke Usman's head, who recoiled in anger. 'Now, now, my dear boy', Wahid Ali pleaded, 'Let's all pray for the quick recovery of Babu-ji. Inshallah (by God's grace) he would soon kick off the charpoy and get back on his two feet. Just wait and see!' Usman would not respond to the servant's solicitous apology. His face remained taut with anger.

The fever would not leave father and he also kept losing weight. Soon, he was completely laid up, unable to go to his office. Relatives, friends and well-wishers dropped by to see him in ever increasing numbers. Amongst the doctors and hakims visiting him, I could still recall the handsome faces of the mustachioed Dr. Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari the tall, thin and skeleton-like Bengali, Dr. Ram Babu, and the robust sherwani-clad Hakim Zaki Ahmad. Dr. Ram Babu was generally referred to as the 'Angel of Death'. He was sent for only in the case of an extreme emergency, when the disease was far too advanced and the patient was almost on his death bed.

Among the relatives, grandfather would come morning and evening, to sit beside father's bed and talk in whispers. He would every now and then undo the strings of his cloth pouch (Wallet) and press some money under father's pillow. He would ask mother if everything was alright with her. Mother wept and wept in response. Father would simply look at us, his large eyes brimming with silent tears."

Among my paternal uncles, Taia Zikrur Rahman was a lawyer like my father, with a thriving practice. He took criminal cases only. He died before I was old enough to remember faces.

I could vividly recall, however, the face of Chacha Ata-ur- Rahman, a kind and affectionate person, quite different from my senior uncles Sirajuddin and Azizur Rahman. Unlike Chacha Alaur Rahman, a regular visitor, the two last-named would come only once or twice a week. Taia Aziz ur Rahman had a face I still find hard to describe. I don't know whether it was Cruel or kind, or just bland, without a tangible expression. Taia Siraj face lit up every now and then with a broad smile, he would even guffaw sometimes to make his pot belly ripple. The Chacha Abdul Khaliq, my would-be father-in-law, was quite unpredictable in his behaviour. Yawning most of the time, he would suddenly break into a sort of loud and shrill laughter, almost like one gone mad. My phoopies Mariam, Mubarak and Amaina from father's side, and khalas (maternal aunts) Ahmad Nissa, Muhammad Nissa and Fatima Bi (mother of famous Tibet Snow, Allahwallas of Karachi) from mother 's, also dropped by quite frequently.

My nani (maternal grandmother) would come practically every day in the afternoon between the Asar and Magreb prayers, much in the same manner she had come to pray for me and feed me with her- spicy mashed potatoes when I had been down with typhoid. She would go straight to my father's bedside, mumble certain Quranic verses under her breath, blow those over him, touch his forehead to gauge his temperature and give him a few words of good cheer before joining mother. Father would sit up in bed, out of respect, while nani was there.

Amongst the rest of the familial crowd of visitors, the one and the only face that stands out above all others is that of my maternal uncle-the owner of one of the largest general merchant shops in the city. We called him Abbajan. He must have been about my father's age, Wore a long coat (a quaint cross between a standard Sherwani an English morning coat). Such a kindly and affectionate man I have never known In my life. He would come always with a basketful of fruits, Sweets (even chocolates from his own shop) and medicines prescribed for father, which were otherwise not easily available. He would come and sit by father's bedside and talk. Hard of hearing, he would use an ear horn as he talked. He was married

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to my senior most maternal aunt, Ahmad Nissa, and was very friendly with my father.

My only maternal uncle (Mamun) Abdal Khaliq (Chacha Abdul Khaliq's namesake) was also one of the regular visitors. He loved to do things for father. Father was also extremely fond of him. Mamun Abdul Khaliq stammered badly in fact, so badly that his eyes would, at times, seem to pop out and his face got all puckered up with the effort. He was the sole custodian and caretaker of our family gramophone (with a bright red horn and chromium-plated wooden box). None could so much as dare touch the gramophone. Mamun Abdul Khaliq kept it locked in a cupboard out in the courtyard. There we could only see the machine without ever touching it. He would "bring the machine to the dalan where father lay, put the contraption down on the floor with a great deal of care, dust it, fix the horn, turn it gently towards father, place the disc on the turntable, crank the machine, turn it on and put the stylus gently on the disc to play.

Ever since father had taken to bed, Mamun Abdul Khaliq would come at night, every time with a new record (disc) to play for father. He would bring each new disc 'on approval' from Maharaja Lal's, next to Majestic Cinema. 'On approval' meant subject to the approval of the customer. He could play it any number of times and return those to bring yet another 'on approval', before he would actually buy one. The dealer, a victim of the all-pervading slump, like everybody else, would be only too glad to give quite a few discs 'on approval' before actually selling one.

One night, Mamun Abdul Khaliq brought a disc cut by the famous Bhai Chaila. The singer had gone all the way to Rangoon (Burma) to record his songs at the HMV Recording unit there. The wordings of the song, as I would come to know later ran as follows:

'Birha key yeh kaisi legi barchi, han lagi barchi, han lagi
Barchi, mora chain geyo mari neend gaye'

(Stabbed by the dagger of love, I lost my night's sleep and heart's content).

The song brought tears to my father's eyes.

An extremely sensitive, soft-hearted person even otherwise, father had become even more so during his illness. He wept quietly as he heard the song.

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As the number of daily visitors-friends, relations, doctors and Hakims-increased, father decided to shift to his office in Bazaar Ballimaran. The first floor office was situated in our own ancestral property, part of a nonsaleable family trust, known as Hajra Bi Trust, after the name of my grandmother.

The shifting from the restrictive, curtained environment of the house to the relatively free and much less congested atmosphere of the office did a world of good to father. His temperature stabilized between 99°F and 100°F. He spent a good deal of his time sitting up in bed rather than lying down most of the time. His appetite improved. He read his newspapers, received visitors and seemed to enjoy their company. We were all so happy in the family Mother believed that her prayers were being answered.

Only Usman would not seem to partake of our revived hopes and happiness. Usman's grapevine, Wahid Ali, had himself heard Dr. Ram Babu tell grandfather that much as he would like himself and everybody else to hope for the best, he did not see any real change in the condition of the patient. It was just a temporary relief, as he saw it. When Usman told me all this, my heart sank. 'Is that really so, Bhai? Is it really so bad?' Usman nodded. I-le looked twice his age, and his face bore traces of deep anxiety and distress as he talked about father's condition. He had also seen father's X-ray and all the ghostly images that he could hardly make out had frightened him so much.

Dr. Ram Babu's report and the X-rays had left Usman very; very perturbed frightened and sick with worry. 'What if father died? We would be completely ruined!'

'We have little else to fall back upon except for the Chimney Mill property at the suburb of the city. There would not be much in the bank after all the money spent on the treatment ...' Usman would go on and on with his tale of woe. He did not expect much from grandfather. Amongst the uncles, only Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman was kind and generous, like Abbajan. He was already doing the best he could. But how far and how much longer could he? He had his own problems arising from that back breaking slump badly hitting his own business. There was

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hardly any business worth the name. Shops were open and well-stocked but there were few customers.

I could hardly follow much of Usman's prognostications. just the same, they frightened and depressed me beyond Words. I prayed to Almighty Allah for father's early recovery. The orphan image was wholly unbearable:

‘Yatimaan ki faryad sun lijiye,
ye gham ke kahani hai, sun lijiye;
Huey Ian ma-baap hamse juda,
Hamari Khushi ka chamat lut gaya.

(Just listen to the wailing of the orphans. The garden of our happiness lies desolate since our parents departed.) I would feel dizzy; there would be darkness all around.

After a few weeks or so of relief, father's condition took a turn for the worse. His temperature shot up and the coughing fits become more persistent and violent. I could see the big vein across his forehead get larger and thicker. The circles around his eyes deepened and his cheekbones stood out to cave in his face. Such was the state of despair that even grandfather (Abbaji) wished for the ordeal to end soon. Another TB patient in our area-even younger than father-had died already. ‘Here is one dead already after a brief ordeal while the other lingers on and on. Allah's ways are indeed inscrutable!’ Abbaji would be heard saying sometimes in utter despair. His behaviour during the advanced stage of my father's illness seemed uncharitable, even insensitive. We all feared father was never going to recover from the accursed disease-the so-called white scourge. TB was incurable, in the early stages: father's had already advanced to the point where even the best Bengali doctors in the city”-Ram Babu, H. C. Sen and Ganguli-without giving up, wouldn't sound too hopeful.

Dr. Ganguli, the one incorrigible optimist, would always try to cheer up everybody ‘He should be up and around soon with all the wonder drugs we now have and we trying on him. Even more than medication, however, a change of climate should do him a world of good. I admired Dr. Ganguli for his looks. He was always so well dressed, tall and slim, with a pale but strangely luminous face. He wore gold-rimmed glasses and

always had a word of good cheer or two for everybody. He would often stroke my cheeks and tell me to go to school without wasting more time. "You're a big boy already. You must go to school and become a good lawyer, like your father' I loved him for his kindly words and gentle looks.

Dr. Ganguli recommended Dr. Tandon's sanatorium at some hill station-Bhawali-near Nainital. Dr. Tandon was a specialist and his sanatorium had been a place of repute for the treatment of TB patients. Abbaji would listen to Dr. Ganguli's advice, quietly nodding his head somewhat uncertainly.

He would let out a deep sigh as soon as the doctor was gone. 'Easier said than done. Does he realize what it is going to cost? Treatment at Dr. Tandon's sanatorium is no joke. If the disease is really as incurable as they think, why go to all the trouble and expense? What's wrong with Delhi? Han?'

Mother wept and wept when she came to know of the matter. Father knew it already. It did not seem to have come to him as a surprise. For who would know Abbaji better than his own son? Not that he could not raise money enough to bear the expenses of the journey from Delhi to Nainital and the treatment at Dr. Tandon's sanatorium. What worried him was that with all the money gone, what would be left to us all after he was gone.

Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman did, however, take on grandfather and give him a good piece of his mind. "What sort of father are you, Abba? Your own best son is seriously ill and instead of bothering about his life, all that you have to worry about is money, money. money. We are not all that badly off financially, after all, are we? If you find it hard to find the money, I and Abdul Ghaffar (Abbajan) will manage it somehow. But Bhai Siddiq (my father) must go to Bhawali as advised by Dr. Ganguli'

Abbaji relented. 'Alright, alright', he said, 'it will be as it should be. And so long as I am alive, I will bear all the expenses' So it was all arranged. Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman went over to Bhawali to arrange things at Dr. Tandon's. Since there was no room available at the sanatorium itself, a cottage was hired nearby for the family to stay with father. Father, along with mother, Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman, Wahid Ali and myself travelled

all the way by train to Nainital and from there in a dandi (litter) to Bhawali over a four-five mile trek.

The rented cottage--a two-bedroom affair--happened to be situated close to the local graveyard--hardly the place for someone as sick as my father to be staying. For want of a better alternative, however, one had to make do with it. Hardly a day would went by when a funeral or two would not pass by the cottage on the way to the graveyard.

Much as mother and Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman would try to keep it from father, he would come to know of it somehow. He would either catch a glimpse of the cortege while relaxing out in the verandah in his easy chair with long armrests, or get to know of it at the end of the day from Wahid Ali as part of the daily report.

It had become most depressing for all of us. 'Aaj with, kal hamari bari hai!' (It's their turn today. it'd be ours tomorrow) Father would often quote as he saw a cortege pass by. He would also be heard humming his favourite Persian couplets sometimes. The cottage had been rented for two months. By then, Dr. Tandon would also be able to advise about the future course of the disease and the treatment and we could leave soon after. We spent two somewhat hectic months at Bhawali. While Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman and Abbajan alternated between Delhi and Bhawali--each spending a week or ten days at a time--others came for a day or so to stay and left, wishing father an early recovery. Usman also came to be with us for a few days during his summer vacations. He spent most of his time with Wahid Ali, accompanying him to shop at the small nearby market for groceries or staying closeted with him in his small servants quarter.

Father's condition showed little improvement. His temperature rose and fell between 99°F and 101°F, hardly ever normal. Mother would spend most of her time in the kitchen cooking, or in the bedroom making father's bed, changing the linen, feeding him and praying, with hardly any time to rest. Father saw her and told her to be brave of heart. He would talk in whispers, stroking her head more like a father or an elder, than a husband.

Father seemed pretty fed-up with the tedium of life in Bhawali and insisted on an early return to Delhi. He said so to Dr. Tandon during one of the latter's house calls. The doctor did not seem to have much objection either. He had a well-known lawyer as his patient and did not have to argue with him or tell him something he would not already know about his own condition. Soon, we were all back in Delhi and back to father's office, which he preferred to the curtained environment of the house.

The doctor advised complete rest and fewer visitors. Mother set herself a little place in father's dressing room in the office. She would come to the office in a doli around 11'o' clock in the morning with food specially cooked for father, strictly according to the doctor's instructions. She would spend the rest of the day there---praying most of the time or sitting by father's bedside, after serving him lunch when there would be no visitors around.

Father looked at mother and sighed deeply. She was in the pink of her health, robust and barely 33-34. Mother's eyes were always full of tears. No matter how hard she would try to suppress her sobs, her whole body would go into huge convulsions every now and then. Father would stroke her gently on the cheek or on the head to comfort her. The number of visitors outside the family declined as the disease got prolonged. As for the family only Abbajan and Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman kept up the routine of daily visits in the morning before going to the hosiery factory and coming back in the evening after the day's work. Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman had been tender of heart, a trait largely missing from father's family. They would seem to take life and death in one and the same stride. Since death is the irreversible end of life, why make such a fuss about it? The strong family trait notwithstanding, Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman did have a soft corner for father.

Usman had been in a state of high nervous tension. He became very close to Wahid Ali-his one and only confidante. The two were often seen with their heads put together, engaged in confidential whispers. As father's personal attendant, Wahid Ali would know more about father's condition than all the

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doctors thought and said about it. He would keep Usman posted about it. The traces of blood in father's sputum had increased significantly and Wahid Ali could vouch for it since he had to clean the used spittoons several times a day. Father would leave it neither to mother nor the sweeper to have anything to do with his spittoon. He felt bad about everybody getting to know about his condition. Spitting blood was almost the worst thing that could happen to the patient, leaving little hope for recovery.

Wahid Ali's alarming reports would leave Usman between states of extreme depression and a blinding, overpowering rage. He took to offering his daily prayers with a great deal of devotion and punctuality. After each namaz, he would tearfully invoke Allah's mercy and help to make father well. He pledged to become a true Muslim for the rest of his life-grow a beard, observe his Ramazan fasts and never miss a namaz. He would not so much as smoke (he had already taken to smoking tobacco-aniseed-laced cigarettes secretly) and abstain from all kinds of bad habits--once father got well.

Wahid Ali took him to a spiritualist, a man of God known for having miraculously cured even some of the most hopeless of cases. Usman told me about the visit and how deeply the man of God impressed him. A day or two after the event, he came back home late in evening in a state of high agitation. He would tell me nothing until a couple of days or so later, about what he had been up to. 'Do you know where I might really have been the other day?' He put it to me and left me staring at him for an answer. "Well, I went all the way to Shidipura-our community's graveyard outside the city.

'Shidipura-whatever for?'

'To make a sacrifice'

'What kind of sacrifice?'

'Of a black rooster'.

The thought left me cold with fear and curiosity.

Then he went on to tell me about his and Wahid Ali's visit to the man of God. They had told him all about father's condition. The man of God listened to them very carefully. He advised Usman to slaughter a black rooster with his own hands at some isolated place outside the city and bury it there. 'By

God's grace,' said the man of God, 'the sacrifice would help father get well in no time. Only make sure to purify yourself, through proper ablution, before putting the knife to the rooster's throat... 'He went on to quote certain verses from the Holy Quran to be recited during the exercise.

While he would accept nothing in return, it was customary to put an eight anna piece in a small tin nailed at the entrance of the holy man's quarter-which they did. Usman looked very relaxed after getting it off his chest, 'I do hope Allah would Accept and answer the sacrifice!'

Father's condition showed little real improvement, however. The temperature kept fluctuating between 100°F and 102°F. One day, mother asked me to accompany her right up to the main gate of the mohalla on foot-something rather unusual. She would commute on foot only through lanes closely placed within a few yards of our house. Venturing as far out as the main gate of the mohalla on foot would be practically unthinkable. Her request left me wondering. She could see the look of bewilderment writ large across my face and assured me that she would tell me all about it later on.

We undertook the journey between the Asar and Maghreb prayers. She wore her burqa and told me to stay close to her. She was in a state of great agitation and I could see it. 'You keep your eyes and ears open and tell me exactly what you may see and hear on your way back and forth. Understand? Don't you miss anything

We moved out of the house. Mother was reciting prayers all the time. We had barely walked a few yards or so when I saw a woman beating her son with her worn out footwear and wishing him to drop dead there and then. 'You accursed scoundrel', she cursed, 'You'd be better dead than alive. You have made life hell for me ...' We went on with our odyssey until we came to the row of shops along the Bara Maidan. There, amongst others, sat the fruit and vegetable Walla cursing his stars. 'All my stuff, all the fruits and vegetable have gone completely rotten, like a dead corpse. Not a buyer since yesterday. Who is going to get it off my hands? Damn the slump! Poor people like me would be better dead than alive!'

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Then came a beggar with an ailing child in his arms. The child was running a high temperature. It was so high that one could feel the heat without exactly touching the child. He begged us for a pice or two for the boy's medicine. Mother fumbled for money she was carrying in her cloth pouch. Pressed an anna piece into my hand to pass it on to the beggar. Her hand was ice-cold as it touched mine. 'Let's go back home/ she whispered and turned back. 'Enough is enough'

We were back home soon. She looked utterly distraught and broken down. She took off her burqa and asked for some cold water to drink. She gulped the water down. 'Allah be our protector. It was all so horrible. All those utterances about death, above all, the beggar's son. His body might have been like a furnace. Even I could feel the heat.'

And then she lapsed into a deep silence. All the words she had heard, all the signs she had seen hardly held any hope or promise. She would tell me nothing, but I could see how distraught she was. I must have outgrown my years as the son of a terminally sick father and a deeply distraught mother in total despair.

Even more than mother's deep agony and anguish, Usman's irrepressible rage and fury against man and God, made a deep and indelible impact on my mind. His last hope shattered to pieces after the failure of his sacrifice ritual. The sacrifice brought about not the faintest improvement in father's condition. One day in front of me, he cursed and cursed God! 'God' I he turned, 'Was all a hoax, a charade, a dhoka-sab bakwas (all nonsense)'. In mounting rage he would raise and brandish his fist skyward and keep cursing.

Father's condition took a turn for the Worse. He could hardly open his eyes due to Weakness. We were strictly told to stay back home. Zohra had also come from her in-laws to stay with us. Usman had lapsed into a stolid silence-his face puckered, almost distorted with anger. Zohra, poor thing, would go about asking me and Wahid Ali about father's condition. Wahid Ali told her to pray. I could add little to what Wahid Ali said..

One cold February morning, while we were all still in bed, half asleep, there was a knock at the door. Zohra was first to jump out of the bed, bolt towards the door and open it. It was

grandfather outside. He entered the house wailing. 'You have been orphaned' he said through his tears. 'Your father is dead'

'Orphaned'. A terrible word. Zohr broke into a loud scream and hugged grandfather frantically. Usman was quiet as ever. I was stunned. Grandfather wept unrestrained. Usman rudely spurned grandfather as he proceeded to take him in his arms. His hands bunched up into fists and he burst into aloud protest.

'Orphan, orphan, orphan ...' He shouted at the top of his voice. "I would not have it. I would not have it." A sharp spray of spittle spewed from his mouth as he spoke. Grandfather withdrew from him, almost frightened.

'Allah have his mercy on all of you', he mumbled as he turned to go back to the door.

'Allah, whose Allah? What Allah'? Usman exploded, 'Damn Allah, damn the world'.

Once grandfather was gone, Zohra and I sat huddled together like a bunch of homeless outcastes under a cold open Sky, pressing closer for life-giving warmth. Only Usman stayed away. He stood in a corner of the dalan looking up and down and sideways, cursing, his "fists clenched;

Not long afterwards, maybe an hour or 'half-an-hour or so lriter footsteps were heard from the doorway `followed" by approaching, muffled 'voices 'Here they come", said Usman and proceeded to open the door. Only two of them, Chacha Ata--ur-Rahman and 'Abbajan were there; They' hastened to take us in their arms and 'kiss us on the cheeks. 'Sad, very. very sad. But such was the will of God. And man is so helpless He cannot but submit to fate!

Usman wrenched himself free from the embracing arms. He stared back into their faces, unblinking. There was fire in his eyes. 'Patience, son; patience. You must pray for your father 's soul to rest in peace. Allah bless-his soul.' Usman would not look away. He kept fixing them with a fiery stare. I stood rooted to the spot, not knowing what to do.

'Well', Chacha Ata-ur-Rahmanfwent on to say. 'Your mother, along with the other "ladies, will-be here -soon. So you'd better leave." Only Zohra can stay- on." They left, patting 'us on the cheeks and telling us to pray -to 'Allah to bless father's soul!

Usman dashed forward and caught hold of the hands taking mother's bangles off. Bangles were the sole evidence and symbol of the suhaag of a happily married woman, with her husband alive. The husband dead and gone, she must shed all the evidence, all the symbols of her marital status.

Usman pounced upon the women-a demonic force, making them all scream and scramble like a flock of pigeons before a cat. Her profound, heart-breaking grief not withstanding, mother suddenly came alive, hit Usman full across his face and screamed. 'You Shaitan, you badmash, what are you up to? what are you doing here in any case? Get out of here or I will kill myself!

Usman was left stunned, paralysed, "Mother, mother ..." speech deserted him.

'Margai teri maa (Dead is your mother),' Mother yelled through the flood of her tears and told him to get lost without another word. The ladies stood in a corner of the dalan, stupefied, 'Allah be our protector. What the world has really come to! Just look at the boy. He must be utterly mad'

Usman withdrew, gnashing his teeth in an uncontrollable rage. He swore and swore at God and the world.

A day or two after father's death, The Statesman carried on one of its inside pages, a short news item headlined! 'A Nationalist Passes Away' Usman read the item, showed it to me. 'What does "passing away" mean?' I asked. 'Died, what else? idiot.'

What a terrible word. It stung my ears.

Mother went into her prescribed over four-month quarantine period--liddat. She would not stir out of house or see a man's face, except of close blood relations (first cousins, etc).

Her bare wrists looked even whiter without her gold bangles. The number of mourners declined as the days went by They would come and sit by mother for a while before taking leave. The visits, however, went off very quietly, calmly and with a great deal of dignity.

No loud wailing or weeping, no breast-beating, no overt sympathizing. The ladies would come, sit close to mother, tell

her to beg for God's mercy, recite a prayer or two and leave as quietly as they had come.

I too would try to spend as much of my time sitting close to mother as I would be permitted; I must have been going on nine, and quite a few of the ladies would observe purdah in front of me-even if only a light or one-eyed one. A nine-year-old was, after all a nine-year-old, especially in the day and age when children grew up so fast and would get to know of things even those twice their age wouldn't have known in the past! It was best to be on one's guard. You never know who might do what and when and to Whom.

Not long ago, a 10-11 year old boy of one of the mohallahs had run away with a girl of about the same age, or even younger, without a trace. May Allah keep everyone under His protection! Usman would stay out for most of the day and come home well after the Isha payers. His matriculation examination was not away too far away. He was supposed to be busy studying jointly with one or two of his friends. He hardly ever spoke to anybody, except Wahid Ali, his one close confidante. Zohra would come from her in-laws once or twice a week to spend a day or two with us. Saeeda was an infant yet, barely two or three. She would chortle and laugh unaware of anything.

'Amongst the close male relations, only Abb ajan and Chacha Ata ur Rahman-especially the former-would come to visit us fairly regularly. They would also do their best to cater to our needs and bring groceries, fruits and things of everyday use. One day much to everybody's surprise and disbelief, Taia Aziz ur Rahman-hardly ever known for any concern and sympathy for his dead brother's family-called. He sounded very affectionate and loving, much to our amazement. He stayed with us for a while--mother staying in the box-room all the time in strict purdah. She would not even appear before her late husband's real brother-a 'na mehrem After all, anyone of a marriageable status with the widow would be out of bounds for the widow.

Taia Aziz stayed for a while talking to me, since nobody else was at home and mother could not even talk during her iddaat period, according to the Quranic injunctions that a 'na

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mahram' could not even hear her voice. Before taking his leave and wishing mother Well through me, Tala Aziz left a bottle of sherbet as a small gift for the family. Mother would Wish to say a polite 'no' through me, but uncle Aziz would not take no for an answer.

Bhabi (sister-in-law), he said, addressing her through me, There is absolutely no harm in this, please accept it. I refuse to take "no" for an answer. It's not for you, Bhabi, but for the children. Do please accept it as a humble token of affection for my late brother's family ...'

And the matter ended there. Barely some two or three days later, however, came the news of my aunt (Taia Aziz's wife) kicking up a row over the event and roundly scolding her husband. 'You had no business to have gone at all to that Raarcd (widow) and shower all your love and affection on her. She is not only pretty but also an extremely crafty woman who knows how to get men into her snare.

Now, while the two words raand and randi stood poles apart in meaning, they sounded identical phonetically. One little slip of the tongue and "raand" (widow) would sound like 'randi' (prostitute). And that was how it was reported to mother, to shake the very foundations of her being. She was stunned beyond Words. That all this should have been happening even before the shroud of the dead had stained and discoloured, distressed all of us unspeakably. What more lay in store for us in the future, God alone knew.

Usman was furious. 'Haramzadi' He yelled, swearing at Taia Aziz's Wife. 'Randi randi, randi, chhinal you, you a whor?' Words poured from his mouth in a torrid stream. The corner of his lips were white with froth, 'I'd go and kill that haramzadi 'Allah ke waste (for God's sake) Usman don't you make life more burdensome for me than it is already. Just leave me alone". .. Usman clenched his teeth and fists. 'Very well, very well, he shouted. 'Only I am to blame for all this mess-even for father's death. I am the real sinner, the real criminal ...' He suddenly choked and stormed out of the house, dissolving into tears.

Life after father might have been one long rdeal, one

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unending horrible serial endlessly going on and on. After Taia Aziz's episode, even Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman would come to visit us only once in a while. He was still very kind and affectionate, but he, too, would be afraid of all the wagging tongues-more for mother 's than his own sake. He would never come empty-handed and always brought one thing or another-some fruit or fresh, hot jalebees from Shammam Halvai's. Sometime, he would even quietly leave some money with me to pass on to mother.

Abbajan came practically every day in spite of everything and looked after us as best as he could. As for grandfather, he undertook to give a fixed monthly allowance for household expenses. Since father had pre-deceased grandfather, we had no legal title to grandfather's property; and the monthly rental coming from father's property was hardly enough to meet the household expenses.

Usman appeared for his matriculation examination a month or so after father's death. He fared badly in the exams and failed, much to everybody's deep disappointment. It was not so much disappointment for him as he had already anticipated the result. Just the same, he was furious, almost raving mad. He would curse God and men; God for having snatched father and men for having failed him in the exams. The heavens seemed to have fallen for him.

Chapter 4

The Shop

H.S. Fazal-i-Ilahi & Son was the largest general merchant store in Chandni Chowk-nearly halfway between the Fathepuri Mosque and the Red Fort. Established in 1900 or thereabouts, it was known for the large variety and range of goods offered-all imported, 'Made in England' stuff. Haji Fazal-i-Ilahi, the father of Abbajan, my maternal uncle, was known throughout the merchant community of the city for his good luck and thriving business.

He attracted a large clientele of 'gore log', mainly British soldiers-Tommies garrisoned in the Red Fort. The old man would touch nothing desi or country-made, even accidentally Everything (except Darjeeling Teas-Lopchu and Orange Pekoe grown, picked, blended and packaged in India by British planters) carried the distinctive label 'Made in England' Thus, even the Indian-grown teas were the product of British companies under European management.

The letterhead of the firm carried the legend 'From Needle to Elephant'. And thereby hung a tale. Every time an angrez (Englishman) customer would jokingly ask the old man what exactly he meant by 'From Needle to Elephant', he would promptly produce a clockwork elephant, wind it up to let it move its trunk up and down, to the huge delight of the customer. 'He is salaaming, you, Sahib' the old man would quip, and was admired for his ready wit and cleverness.

The First World War came as a godsend to H.S. Fazal-i-Ilahi & Son. A whole shipload of merchandise from Germany consigned to the firm was declared enemy property and the firm was allowed to take delivery free of cost. Thus, the firm

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flourished and grew by leaps and bounds all through and until Well after the war. The British Garrison at the Red Fort was greatly reinforced. There were British troops all over and they all made a beeline for Fazal-i-Ilahi's. Cheeses and sardines; biscuits, chocolates, jams and jellies; leather goods-hold-alls, suit and attache cases, saddleries-there was nothing that the firm would not offer to British clients. The arzugrez log (English people) loved to shop at Fazal-i-Ilahi's not only for the large variety and assortment of goods available, but also for the hugely amusing jokes the old man would ad-lib and improvise at the spur of the moment. He would have a quick explanation for everything. For an expired, flaking and perforated cigar, his explanation would be: 'Sahib, the holes are made specially to let the bad smoke out and only the good smoke inside. Understand?'

For expired "puffed" tins of Polson's and Lord's butter, his simple explanation would be: 'Sahib, This is 100 per cent Wilayati All Made in England. Nothing desi. Well, you may have another, if you don't like this one' He would be ever so obliging, leaving the gore (white) sahib wondering whether to pull up the wily merchant or simply laugh it off. There would hardly be an occasion when he would not laugh it off or dismiss it with a swear word that the merchant would hardly understand. The firm was the envy of the merchant community of the city and they all marveled at the good luck of the Haji. Wasn't it true when God bestows, He bestows beyond count and reckoning?

When Haji Fazal-i-Ilahi died, the war and the war time boom was all but over. Gradually, the number of British soldiers at Chandni Chowk dwindled to a fraction of the lively war time crowd. And those who might still be there would not be half as generous with money as the wartime patrons. Fazal-i-Ilahi's only son, Abdul Ghafar (Abbajan) inherited the business. He had all the experience he had gained at the feet of his father, but not half of his good luck. He was also hard of hearing, and would use an ear-horn-a shiny, metal cylindrical device with a perforated base and a curved tubular attachment-for better hearing. The firm was still the largest and best known general merchant's store in the city; but there was a good deal missing

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in the person of the late Fazal-i-Ilahi, with his lucky star in the ascendant and quaint sense of humour ready to please his Wilayati Sahibs.

To make matters worse for Abba jan, Fazal-i-Ilahi's only son the first phase of the post-war Great Depression had just begun. The word munda (slump) was beginning to obtain wide currency in the everyday business idiom. There was no joy left in business with the customer becoming more and more stingy and fussy; and the shopkeeper, for his part, getting to be more and more frustrated and irritable and the broker, more and more mean.

Such indeed had been the depth of the slump that a normal whole day's sale could be counted almost on the fingertips. The few Indian customers dropping by would be haggling so much over annas and pice as to leave the shop attendant owner in an awfully nasty temper and the customer grumpy almost abusing the former under his breath. At times, Mamun Abdul Khaliq, my maternal uncle and the next man in importance to the owner, would be so annoyed as to be outright rude to the customer and tell him to get lost. Not infrequently he would even refuse to sell an item in stock and displayed in the shop window. Mamun's simple answer to the customer wanting to know the price, would be: 'Not for sale!' That could lead to heated arguments-the seller, strangely enough refusing to sell and the buyer, insisting on buying.

The ill-tempered exchange would acquire a strangely comical ring when it happened to be between a Bengali or Madrasi, or someone not so well versed in Urdu and Mamun Abdul Khaliq or one of his assistants-each speaking his own lines, not quite understood, and even misunderstood by the other. At the highest pitch of the ill-tempered, testy dialogue, Mamun would tell his assistants Idris or Ghais to tackle the malingerer. As for himself, he would simply look the other away muttering angrily.

Abba jan would show little interest in the proceedings-being absorbed, as usual, in his sprawling, red cellular cloth-bound ledgers. At the end of all the haggling, at times he would look over his half glasses and, with an interrogative wave of his hand, would want to know as to what might have been going

on.. ‘Nothing!’ Mamun Abdul Khlaiq would return nonchalantly, "The usual stuff. Haggling for nothing. Shopping just for the heck of it without a penny in his pocket. Farting (more than actually shitting, as it were. How can a down-at-heel, impoverished-looking bookha (hungry) Bengali like him even dare think of English jams and jellies. They can hardly afford simple del-chews! (lentil and rice), what to speak of such expensive English dainties ...I Typical desilog ..." How much of Mamun's explanation Abbajan could even fully hear, not to speak of following, was left open to question. He would only shake or nod his head uncertainly and get back to his ledgers.

A limerick reflecting upon the state of the bazaar had gained wide usage in the business circles. Paraphrased, it ran thus.

The Bazzar is sluggish
The shopkeeper foolish
The customer broke
The broker thievish.

Even the white sahibs, the gora log from the Fort, had become quite a rare sight because of their depleted ranks and diminished purses, with little money to throw away: above all, due to Gandhi ji's political agitation and sudden hartals (general strikes). Every now and then, those Congress wallas would hit Chandni Chowk, raising slogans of Inquilab Zindabad (Long live Revolution), Mahatma Gandhi ki jai, Angrez Sorkar Murdebed (Down with the English rule). Their rallies were yet another blow to trade after the slump: they did offer some excitement, nevertheless, and if nothing else, helped vary the tedium of life and sheer monotony of the sluggish market.

Meanwhile, I was shifted from Imam-ji's to the Sunheri (Golden) Masjid's maktab and placed under the care of Abbajan. The shop and the mosque thus became my windows to the outside world. The Masjid was situated at an elevated plinth (first floor) some 12-14 feet above the pavement. From the terrace of the mosque I could see the Fountain and the Majestic Theatre right in front. Huge coloured hoardings painted with the faces of heroes and heroines of the movies showing were a feast for my eyes. As I walked up and down the mosque terrace memorizing the Quran, I couldn't help stealing sidelong glances

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at the colourfully painted billboards. I loved movies, and thanks to Abbajan had already seen quite a few.

It so happened that the masjid was located almost at the junction of four cinema houses of the city. They were the Majestic, Gaiety (later Jubilee), Picture House and the New Royal (Later Moti Talkies). I had been to all those on different occasions, mostly with Abbajan, also once or twice with my parents. In addition to the hoardings at the Majestic, pushcarts used for advertising the movies showing at various cinemas were on the move through Chandni Chowk and could be seen practically at all hours of the day much to my excitement. The terrace of the Simheri Masjid was the best place to watch the roadshow.

The shop gave me a larger View of life. I sat next to Abbajarfs gaddi (owner's cushioned seat) with the wooden blue oil-painted cash box in between. There was no furniture. No tables or chairs: everybody sat on the floor covered with a chequered sheet spread over a durrie or coir matting. In the middle sat my maternal uncle, Mamun Abdul Khaliq, Abbajan's brother-in-law (wife's brother). Next to Mamun Abdul Khaliq sat two shop attendants--Idris and Ghais--while Tirkha, the only Hindu odd-job man, sat outside on a stool. A bidi-addict, he would hold the lighted bidi in the hollow of his palm to smoke, lest he be seen by the Mian Sahib. He would gulp the smoke, which would make him cough and his eyes pop out.

Mamun Abdul Khaliq, in his mid or late 20s, stammered-and very badly too. He would choke on certain words so badly at times that his face would pucker up and go red with the effort. That made communication between the two-Abbajan, with a hearing problem and Mamun Abdul Khaliq with his speech handicap-sometimes difficult and practically impossible. It would turn so bad at times that Abbajan would simply give up making a point in disgust and leave Mamun Abdul Khaliq swearing under his -breath. Mamun was always very fluent with expletives and swear words, and loved to bandy them about quite freely.

Mamun's second love after swearing, was English. He would not miss an opportunity to show off his command of the language. He had studied up to the middle standard and could

business- nor an adequate supply of fresh stocks left, Abbajan ought to have to reduced the shop front from three to two, even a single section. Only the concern for the loss of goodwill would not permit him to do so. 'What would the world say: H.S. Fazal-i-Ilahi going bankrupt' And the mere thought of what the world would say mattered and weighed more than the reality of cutting his losses.

Abbajan sat on his wool-lined gaddi, one leg stretched, poring over his long account books bound in red cellular cloth. The books, when unfolded, would be no less than a yard long. Except for short breaks while attending to a customer or lmgaging in brief chit-chat with his neighbour, Rehmani, or retiring inside for lunch, he would be poring over his ledgers, his crescent-shaped steel-framed half glasses sloping down the bridge of his nose. I wondered what was there in the books to engross him so much and for so long. Beside myself with curiosity. sometimes I would ask him what was there in the long books to keep him so busy all the time. 'Kwacha Chittha? (annual profit loss statement invariably on the minus side) he would respond with a wry smile. I would hardly know what that really meant but would leave it there for fear of a reprimand from Mamun Abdul Khaliq. He would not have children pestering elders with their silly questions and would devour me with an angry stare if I ever dared to speak to him or to Abbajan, unless spoken to.

Abbajan's longest breaks from the shop would be when he would go to Sunheri Masjid, just about a furlong or two away to offer his Zuhr, Asar and Maghreb congregational prayers. Two or three times a day he would leave the shop to make water. That would be quite aritual. He would ask for the ketli (kettle) before getting up to go to the narrow, stinking by-lane across the main road behind the Chartered Bank building. Idris, the senior shop attendant would go inside, fill the old, blackened rusted kettle with water and hold it for Abbajan to take and carry. The little walk was good exercise for him and he seemed to like it. Without much vehicular traffic or too many pedestrians, Chandni Chowk looked so big, so spacious. There were hardly any cars, only tongas driving at a leisurely pace.

read-and also perhaps-follow the headlines of The Statesman, the most widely-read English language daily Above all, he could read the labels of all the packaged and bottled goods 'in or out of stock' That would also be his one stock reply when he would fail to follow an English-speaking customer. In case the customer asked too many questions about the market of a certain item, Mamun Abdul Khlaiq would parry it with a simple: "Made in England". I say, "Made in England"...' And when he would still fail to convince the customer, his final reply would be 'out of stock?

As for Abbajan, while attending to an English customer in Mamun's absence, he would turn his ear-horn towards him, trying to follow him as hard as the could. 'Well, Saab, it is good. Very good, very good Midin Englaand Luckily however, most Sahibs knew their Roman Urdu, which they would press into service once English failed. When an unusually fussy Sahib took to arguing and saying, 'Well, so-and-so Saab yeh sub to theik hai magar mal ta bohat stale-well, purana maloom hota hai ...'

'No, Saab, no. New, very fresh and Midin Englaand Bargaining would thus go on and on.

As for Marntm Abdul Khaliq, when he failed to convince the 'English' customer and strike a bargain, he would abuse the maligner in the typical pet bazzari jargon, hard to follow for a stranger, hugely enjoying himself. Occasionally. however, some smart customer would catch him in the act and give it back to him in Urdu. 'Ap bahat battameez maloam hota hai. Aisi gandi gali nikalta hai ...' (You have no manners at all. You use such dirty language.)

Abbajan used to fart quite a lot. Before breaking wind, however, he would look around to make sure that he was not being watched or heard. Then he would raise one side of his hip to ease the wind out. While he only felt the impact of the breaking wind, others also heard the bang. Mamun Abdul Khaliq would turn his face to the shop attendant, give a wry smile and hold his nose. I would laugh, too, quite uncontrollably earning a scowl from Mamun and Abbajan.

H.S. Fazal-i-Ilahi had a three part frontage--about the largest of any shop in Chandni Chowk. Since there was not much

I loved watching things and people while sitting at the shop. The tramway line was just about three yards away from the shop front. Trams would come at their fixed times. I could hear their clang and throb from quite a distance. It was such a wonderful sight.

There was always one thing or the other happening in front of the shop. Two or three Hindu arthis (funeral corteges) would pass by in the course of a single day. Unlike a Muslim funeral procession-so impressively solemn and quiet-a Hindu arthi would be quite a loud affair. Those shouldering the 'arthi' chanted 'Ram Naam Setya Hai-Ram Naam Sutya Hai' (Ram's name is truth) and briskly, almost joyously, jogged along.

Every time an arthi would pass by the shop, Mamun Abdul Khaliq would stick his neck out and spit three times out at the pavement. Then he would recite some Quranic verses and tell me to say 'Finnare uus Saqqar...' every time I happened to see an arthi. 'You know what that means?' And without waiting for me to answer, would go on to volunteer the information! It means 'Ja beta jahannum mai (Go to hell, my boy!)'. He would stammer so badly on the word 'jahannm that he virtually seemed to choke.

'You must never forget to recite the verse whenever you see an arthi, or the ghost of the dead man would chase and catch hold of you.' He would leave me cold with fear. I knew the Hindus burned their dead and had heard quite a few stories how the burning ghat was haunted by ghosts.

Mamun Abdul Khaliq was quite a character by himself" full of life and jollity. I-Ie was also very fond of singing. He kept an old harmonium inside the shop which he could hardly play but fingered its keys just the same when Abbajan would be out of the shop.

The middle of October marked the beginning of Gulabi farm-the Pink Winter-the herald of a long festive season. First the three day Ram Leela festival would turn Chandni Chowk into a veritable carnival with the colourful Ram Leela sawaris, processions grandly passing through the bazaar for three days running. Ram Leele celebrated the return of Lord Rama from his long, 14-year banbas (exile into the forest) in fulfillment of the wishes of Rani Kaikeyi, one of his step mothers.

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There would be three sawaris-each more gorgeous than the previous one. Lord Ram, Mai Seeta, Prince Laxman and Prince Bharat, the Monkey-King, Hanuman and a host of other characters-heavily made-up and armed with bows and arrows, in their full regalia, rode on splendid richly painted Chariots in the midst of loud cheers and applause from the crowd gathered to enjoy the show.

I'd love to watch the Ram Leela safaris each day-to the obvious annoyance of Marnu Abdul Khaliq. 'You must never do that. It's a sin to watch ...' As he admonished me thus, he would, himself, steal glimpses of the show of the day and enjoy it too.

Then came Diwali. The shop was not be the best place to watch the real show, lasting three consecutive nights. There was the chhota diva (small lamp), the middle, the third and the final diva. The largest of the improvised toy shops were set up between the Fathepuri mosque and the Clock Tower. Except for a few large Hindu shops of perfumers and halvais-profusely lit up--there would not be much to see up to the Fountain. From the Fountain all the way through the esplanade, the electric goods shops were all brightly lit up with fancy multi-coloured, blinking electric bulbs. It was only after I was in my teens that I, together with my friends, would have real fun during Diwali, stealing toys from behind the improvised curtained stalls.

After Diwali, the Burra Din (Christmas) offered the best and the most exciting time. Preparations for it started even before the Ram Leela and the Diwali festivals-the X'mas card walla Sahib-would come to the shop to book orders for X'mas cards. HS. Fazal-i-Ilahi specialized in a large range and variety of X'mas cards and placed large orders for them.

My brother Usman's services were specially acquired to deal with the Wilayati Sahib (straight from London). Mamun would pronounce London as 'Lundun' and raise his clenched fist, swaying it back and forth to symbolize a phallus in full erection and laugh under his sleeve as he did so. I wouldn't know exactly what he meant by the gesture until much later. Since Abbajan would not trust Mamun for his English, much to the latter's

annoyance, he would get Usman as interlocutor in his place. 'How could that chit of a boy be a match to me in business English?' Mamun fumed. He would rather not show off though. After all, Usman was his own nephew. Above all, he was a 'matric-fail', which put him in a higher category educationally; than a middle pass. Usman's one big advantage, as far as the English was concerned, was that he attended the prep classes at Deb Sahib's Cambridge School for a few months. He knew when to say and when not to say 'Good morning For Mamun Abdul Khaliq and many others like him, ' Good morning' was taken and used as the one standard form of greeting (like Assalam Alaikurn), regardless of the hour of the day Also, he knew when and how to say 'How do you do?' and 'How are you?" He also knew some pieces and verses from his English prose and poetry books and used them, much to the delight of the X'mas card Walla sahib.

The X'mas card walla sahib's red and white face looked like an unpeeled turnip. He was invited to dinner at Abbajan's house where some of the choicest Delhi dishes-qorma, biryani, seekh kebab, shub-degh, and two or three types of different curries - were served. The hot spicy food would make the guest's eyes water, but he enjoyed it just the same and ate heartily.

'Like venison, like venison"-very special', Mamun Abdul Khaliq would interject as the X'rnas Sahib helped himself to a piece of meat from the qorma dish.

'Is that really so? Well, which one of you is the hunter?'

Mamun was left staring for want of an answer.

'It's simple mutton', Usman would hasten to interject, much to Marnurfs embarrassment. Mamun, poor fellow, thought venison meant only the best kind of meat. He had heard the word somewhere. It sounded good and he liked to use it.

Abbajan would sit and eat quietly through the meal. After very mouthful, he would wipe his curry-stained fingers on the dastarkhawan spread on the floor carpet. Once or twice he would turn to Usman and tell him to ask the X'mas Sahib if he liked the food. Usman would repeat the question to the guest.

'Oh, delicious, excellent. Thank you ...' He would respond

as his eyes watered and nose ran. 'The most interesting part of your Delhi food is that you can hardly talk while eating it. Only one thing at a time: either eat or talk. The two don't go together. is that right?'

Hospitality over, the man would come straight down to business. 'Well, Sheikh Sahib, what's your order for the year?" With Usman acting as the principal interpreter, much to Mamun's obvious annoyance, the conversation would go –on till about midnight, when Abbajan would quote a certain figure. 'It's a pitifully small order, only one thousand cards! It's nothing! ' 'No business!' Mamun would put in, unable to restrain himself and longer.

'You know, there is a slump, sir!' Usman would go on to explain.

'I know exactly what you mean. It is no longer like the good old days. Alas! All good things must come to an end!' The English Sahib would regretfully agree. He would light a cigarette. Abbajan would take out a paan from his silver paan-box, and put it daintily into his mouth. Mamun would excuse himself for a while and go to the lavatory to smoke. Usman would keep acting as interpreter between the two men-Abbajan and the English Sahib, talking of the good old days when the late Haji Fazal-i-Ilahi would order not less than ten thousand cards for the season.

The Englishman would go on sadly to recall that when he first .came to Delhi in 1910, he was still in his late 20s, now he was in his late 50s and was about to retire. This would, in all probability. be his last trip to Delhi. A younger man had already been designated as his successor. He would fondly recall his encounters with the late Haji Fazal-i-Ilahi-the wittiest and the most colourful old indian he had ever known in his life. Although without any formal schooling, the old man had acquired a certain mastery and command of English that would be the envy of many a better educated Indian.

He had, in fact, invented his own fancy brand of English, and would converse in idioms only.

'I could still recall at least two or three of his most favourite idioms' the X'ma's walla Sahib would tap his forehead with his

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index "finger to revive his memory. 'Ah, yes, one was "God helps those who help themselves", another: "Might is Right", a third one was "Self Praise is on Recommendation". His favourite idiom was, "Honesty is the best policy", and he would never tire of repeating that any number of times. There were quite a few others too, I can't exactly recall. It seems ages ago. And then he would go on to give me-the Urdu equivalent of the idioms. And very good ones too. Let me think Oh, yes Himmati-mardan madad-i-Khooda". "jis ka lathi uska bhains" and "Apne mun Mia Mitthu"-quaint! Are not they?'

As business slumped, the number of anti-Sarkar rallies and hartals boomed and that might have been the last straw on the camel's back. We at the shop reacted to the rallies each in our own Way. Abbajan would peer over his glasses and with a sardonic smile remark: 'Fools Do they really think they would be able to overthrow the Sarkar with these silly tamashasi' For Mamun Abdul Khaliq, myself and the shop attendants, the rallies would be almost exciting, like an action-filled movie thriller. Overexcited, they would stand up to have a closer view of the demonstration, 'Just you look at the dhoti-parsed', Mamun would say, pointing to small, funny-looking loin-clothed Hindu. protester. 'Just look at him. How he is jumping and prancing. Doesn't he look like a monkey in a museum cage? Ulla ka Pattha (that son of an owl!).'

Rehmani, the hardware merchant next door, would come to have a word or two with Abba jan, 'Mian, do you see what I see? Is this how they think they would be able to throw out the government? Just a pack of idiots! The mighty British government on one side and this bunch of idiots, on the other. Quite a fight between the ant and the elephant'.

Abbajan would turn his ear-horn to Rahmani, bring it closer to his ear for better hearing and nod his head uncertainly. 'What can one do to make them see sense? These Gandhi ka Chelas (Gandhi-ites) have taken leave of their wits!'

For as long as the demonstrations had been confined to anti-government slogan raising and oral threats, it was alright. A posse of some half a dozen policeman would go along with the demonstration right up to Kotwali, where the rally would

normally disperse after a final, frenzied outburst of anti-Sarkar chanting.

Some of the more violent of the demonstrators would be apprehended by the police and put in the lock-up for a day or two. That would be the end of it.

Shortly afterwards, however, the demonstrations took a more violent turn. The demonstrators started burning the Union jack and effigies of the British-John Bull. Some two or three shops selling English cloth were also raided and ransacked. One day a mock funeral of Brandi ki Bottle (Bottle of Brandy) was staged at a huge rally right in front of the shop. The demonstrators set fire to the cortege, demanding an immediate ban on the import and use of spirituous drinks of all kinds.

On this one point at least there had been complete unity between the Hindus and the Muslims. The mob turned quite violent, forcing the police to resort to a mild lathi-charge, causing a terrible melee and stampede. Quite a few demonstrators were seen with bleeding heads. Abbajan told Mamun to board up half the shop until peace was restored.

'This is too much, completely insufferable. What are they really up to these goondas? There is going to be trouble all over. None would be safei' Abbajan, for once, looked really alarmed and his fears were hardly ill-founded. After all, he was easily the largest stockist of 'Wilay.ati mal' (English goods) in Chandni Chowk. He and his late father had been truly proud and vocal about the fact that they dealt only in imported stuff. 'Made in England .only'. The old man's (Haji Fazal-i-Ilahi's) one proud boast all along had been that he would not touch anything 'desi' (native, Indian) even with a barge pole. What was there to guarantee that the shop would not be the next target of the demonstrators' fury? He had never so much as thought of having the shop insured. in fact, he had been averse to the very idea of an insurance policy. It was little more than a hoax.

The insurance agent was ridiculed, dubbed and shunned as the Angel of Death. Muhammad Ahmad Insurance walla was one such person, hailing from Mahal Sarai itself. Although nobody from the mohallah ever took an insurance policy, everybody seemed to enjoy the right to ridicule Muhammad

Ahmad as and when he so wished. The man, indeed, was quite a character himself, tight-lipped and self-possessed, hardly ever losing his good humour even in the face of the most unwarranted provocation. 'Never mind' would be his one stock phrase after 'mention not'-perhaps two of the few expressions of English he could use with ease and fluency. He was very proud of his English. 'What is English all about, after all, beyond saying "Sorry", "please", and "never mind" and "mention not". All this "nouting" and "verbing" is little more than mere bakwass (nonsense). No Englishman would ever bother about it.' In a period of such acute slump and horribly sluggish business, an insured shop gutted would be worth far more than one with no business. There had been several reported cases of insured shops destroyed by fire and the insurance holders being generously compensated by their insurance companies.

Muhammad Ahmad represented the Australasia Insurance Company (established in England). Australasia was a big name-so big that few people Wouldn't know what it really meant or how to pronounce it correctly. One day, Muhammad Ahmad took courage in both hands and approached Abbajan with a proposal to have his shop insured.

"Mian, these are very, very bad times and the worse is yet to come. You never know what might happen tomorrow. jub zindag ka kuchh bharosa nahin, to phir aur kis cheez ka bharosa! (When nothing else is safe, how can life be safe?)"

Mian listened to him much more attentively than he would normally have. The situation had been undoubtedly getting from bad to Worse. There were any number of reasons to convince Abbajan of the Wisdom of taking out a fire insurance policy and as many number of grave doubts about the honesty and credibility of the insurance companies. These would be practically impossible to deal with when it came to the actual settlement of the claims, raising a thousand queries and hurling any number of insults at the policy holders before settling for half the claim.

Like everybody else in the trade, Abbajan shared all those fears and misgivings and expressed them to Muhammad Ahmad, 'Please drive all those apprehensions out of your mind, Mian. Those are absolutely unfounded. Australasia Insurance

in no "bloody" Indian company. It is a pucca English company headed by an Englishman, Mr. Ralli (O'Reilly). Don't you have any Worries, any misgivings about the soundness and reliability of the company. We believe in the motto "Honesty is the best policy" and observe it too in practice.

Abbajan nodded his head uncertainly 'Well I don't really It now. An insurance walla is an insurance walla after all, just as it lawyer would be like another lawyer and a businessman like another businessman. You see, birds of the same feather.

'You are absolutely right, Mian, but do please trust me. Allah has not made all five fingers alike. Do you think I would have been the one ever to come and get you in some shady. hanky-panky deal. Let Allah be my witness. There can be nothing farther from my mind than to harm you or hurt your interest.

Muhammad Ahmad did, in the end, manage to persuade Abbajan to take a fire insurance policy.

Mamun Abdul Khaliq did not approve of the deal. His disapproval was more out of his known personal dislike for the parson concerned than for the policy itself. He and Muhammad Ahmad had been childhood friends turned-rivals as young men. They had both been to the same school, finishing up to the middle and leaving school together. Thereafter, there had been is complete parting of Ways-Mamun joining H.S. Fazal-i-Ilahi & Son and Muhammad Ahmad, living as a sort of jobless young man looking for a job in vain, until joining the Australasia Insurance Company as a commission agent. Much as he boasted of his being on the company's senior staff, nobody believed him.

Everybody knew and recognized him as a compulsive braggart-a windbag showbaz (pretender) and dismissed him as such. Nevertheless, he did carry the company's business card for anyone to see and judge for himself. The card read: 'Mr Muhammad Ahmad--»Commission Agent. The Australasia Insurance Company (established in England), etc. etc.' The card itself was enough to serve as his passport to success and a rare distinction few in the mohallah enjoyed. And Muhammad Ahmad would not miss an opportunity to wax eloquent of his British connection. It was no mean achievement to have anything to do at all with a British company.

Working for a company headed by an angrez might have been the height of achievement. Only Babu Idris, the authorized and salaried salesman of Lipton Tea, did not only compare with but actually excelled Muhammad Ahmad in status. But while he was in his late 40s and on the verge of retirement, Muhammad Ahmad would barely have been 30 yet. So, by the time he would be the older man's age, he might well be in a higher bracket-pay and stature-wise-than Lipton's man.

Unlike Muhammad Ahmad, Mamun Abdul Khaliq neither carried a business card nor could he speak of his British connection. That was bad enough. What made it worse was Muhammad Ahmad's increasing snobbishness and the way he would assume airs and bandy his 'never mind', 'mention not' and 'beg-a-pardon'-type English, much to the discomfiture of his old friend. Every now and then he would tell Mamun Abdul Khaliq what a mess he had made of his life by joining H.S. Fazal-i-Ilahi as a shop attendant. There was nothing to it in the long run. 'You end up where you start. There are hardly any prospects.'

It was like rubbing salt into one's wounds, and Mamun Abdul Khaliq felt the sting. He knew that more than sympathizing with him, Muhammad Ahmad might actually have been making fun of him, the upstart, the mean little fellow that he was ...'

After the insurance policy had been 'sealed signed and delivered', Muhammad Ahmad was not seen for quite some time. Abbajan sat reflecting over it. He looked quite unsure of himself. 'Allah knows best if it was right or wrong ...', he muttered to himself. I-i.e. looked at Mamun Abdul Khaliq for a word of comfort-something he would do only rarely. Mamun cleared his throat, quite unsure whether or not to say anything. 'Well what do you think of it?' He went on to put it directly to Mamun Abdul Khaliq.

'What could one say; Mian?' Mamun said. 'You know what kind of man Muhammad Ahmad is. Even if there be nothing wrong with the insurance policy itself. Muhammad Ahmad hardly the right fellow for an honest deal. He is so

untrustworthy. I would never trust him even if he were all gold ...’

Abbajan let out a deep sigh once again, and that was where the matter ended.

Amongst the few of his frequent visitors to Abbajans’ shop (besides my late father) were another two of his brothers’-in- law. One, Muhammad Siddiq Bari, was a fair-complexioned, tall man with a chin tuft and, the other, Ismail Allahwala was a bespectacled, clean-shaven and portly gentleman dressed in Homespun khadi. They were also my maternal uncles--khalus--like Abba janmonly; not as close. I knew them by face and name and, except for such traditional respect as children were told to show to their elders, I had little to do with either.

They were both businessmen, but while Khalu Siddiq (my father's namesake) had all but retired, Khalu Ismail was still as actively engaged as ever and, in spite of the slump, supposed to be doing better than most others. Khalu Siddiq was more of an aristocrat and cynic. He drove all the way to the shop in his own private buggy. Khalu Ismail, on the other hand, came by tramway or walked. Married to three real sisters, the three men, besides being brothers-in-law, were also good friends. The shop H.S. Fazal-i-Ilahi & Son-was their favourite rendezvous point for an occasional (once or twice a week) exchange of views. In distinct contrast to his good looks, Siddiq Bari was a born skeptic and a man of few words. He would always see something wrong at the bottom of everything.

"What’s that good for? Utterly useless!" would be his instant comment about everything and everyone. He seemed to have no use for this world and did not particularly care for the next. His pet phrase was ‘Bas wohi masal hai (As the saying goes).’ He would be under no compulsion to complete his sentence and invariably leave it half-way through.

‘Hartal today, hartal tomorrow, It is all so awful. No business! No peace, no customer, no nothing; one day is like the next day’ `

Thus would go on their desultory talk for some time-maybe an hour or so, after which they would disperse—each with feelings and looks characteristic of his own: Siddiq Bari,

with his constant sardonic expression shadowing his face, Ismail Allahwalla with his bland face and stony eyes looking twice their size behind his powered glasses, and Abbajan returning to his sprawling red cellular-cloth-bound ledgers after wishing, them Khada Hafiz.

Yet another visitor to the shop, who made an abiding impression on my mind was the ear-cleaner. His professional appellation kun malia meaning the one 'dirtying the ears'-e was just the opposite of his trade of ear-cleansing. He would impression on my mind, was the ear-cleaner. His professional come to the shop once a week-every Friday around 4 pm sharp. Dark, almost black, his face gleamed with an oily Parrot-Boot polish-like finish. He sported a trim, almost dandy moustache and wore a maroon velvet cap, smeared thick at the edges with hair oil absorbed over months and years of constant use and would first greet Mian with a most polite 'adab arz' instead of the conventional Salam Alaikum and wish the same to Mamun Abdul Khliq before getting on with his job. Abbajan would move a little from his seat, lean towards the ear doctor and let him proceed with the job, which he would begin after reciting the "Bismillah" aloud. His only instrument was a miniature scalpel, the size of a small knitting needle. He would introduce; it first into one and then into the other ear, work it up and down inside, gently reciting 'Bismillah' all the time. Much to my complete astonishment, he would scoop out a whole ball of wax from each ear, place it on his thumb and show it proudly to Abbajan. 'See, Sir, all this muck, enough to turn even a man with perfectly good hearing deaf.

Seeing the big ball being scooped out of Abbajan's ear, I would wish my own ears polished clean by the man but dared not say it because of the sharp reprimand it would have instantly brought forth from Mamun Abdul Khaliq who considered the man a hoax.

'He is nothing but a trickster and a cheat with a sleight of the hand. Like a card sharper he carries all the scruff up his sleeve and passes that for the real stuff from inside the ears. He can even be dangerous and do much damage to your eardrum. You see ...'

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'But how? How could he do that in full view of everybody? How could- anyone with a pair of eyes ever miss him bring the stuff from up his sleeve instead of the ears? That would be sheer magic, and so the man must be a magician to do all that'. My mind buzzed with all kinds of unanswered questions. The cleaning job done, Abbajan would pay the man an anna or a large two-pice copper coin-- adhnana or half anna with an engraving of the King or the Queen. The man would salaam, pray for his long life, happiness and prosperity before taking leave. I would feel a sudden itching in one of my own ears, fingering it briskly to soothe it. Perhaps my ears also needed to be cleaned; I determined to get that done when I grew up.

The shop might well have been a sort of magic lantern for me with its silhouettes and shadowy figures going round and around. Abbajan, Marnun Abdul Khaliq, the two khalus (Siddiq and Ismail), the Ram Leela processions, Diwali, the Hindu arthis Christmas, all the protest rallies by the Congressites-they would all intermingle with the cinema push-carts displaying huge coloured posters of the movies showing, to make a bewildering collage of the city life.

I could still vividly recall a rally organized to welcome Gandhiji. That was the first time, I think, I ever saw him in real life. He walked at the head of the rally himself, greeting the passers-by and the tamasha-watcher with both his hands and an unfading smile plying around his lips. I wondered if the man could ever really scowl or make a wry face or look angry, even if he wished to. Nothing could be farther from his expression than anger and ill humour.

The slump was showing definite signs of ending and business seemed to o picking up. Chandni Chowk, itself, was getting to be busier, fuller and livelier every day. Instead of unruly and hastily organized protest rallies and ensuing lathi charges, there were better organized and more orderly processions staged to welcome the visiting leaders. Rumours about the end of the Angrezi Sarkar came crowding in thick and fast. Freedom was said to be not too far away.

I imagine I also saw Jawaharlal Nehru through one of the

rallies. Unlike Gandhi, he rode on some sort of a conveyance-maybe an open buggy or astride a horse. A strikingly handsome young man, just the opposite of Gandhi.

Chandni Chowk was emerging as the centre stage of India. The shop was a look-out and vantage point, from where I could watch what Rahmani Abbajan's next-door neighbour described as the 'Guzrik ka mela'-a kind of Passing Show or in the ornate language of Dilliwalla, a 'Vanity Fair!'.

However, things at the HS. Fazal-i-Ilahi remained much the same, even a little worse. Abbajan and Mamun Abdul Khaliq were also beginning to lose patience with one another. Mamun, a young man in' his late 20s, would seem to have had enough of it. He looked visibly off-colour and frustrated, especially since his erstwhile friend Muhammad Ahmad, the insurance agent, had successfully negotiated the fire insurance deal with Abbajan. It was time for him to venture out into the wide world and find himself something more worthwhile and rewarding than to go on rubbing the seat of his trousers and sitting and swatting flies at the shop twelve hours a day.

In retrospect, I could call the shop my first school, my first window to life at large outside the narrow walls of Mahal Serai, combined with the triangular world of Mahal Serai, Chandni Chowk and Sunheri Masjid. My single fond dream was to be someone like Abbajan and have a shop of my own in Chandni Chowk. Although I would hear a lot of despairing talk about the munda (slump), the sluggish market and all the business problems, nothing fascinated me more than owning a shop of my own in Chandni Chowk and seeing the endless procession of exciting things staged from morning to evening.

Chapter 5

The Silver jubilee

Nineteen thirty-five marked the completion of twenty-five glorious years of the reign of King George V and Queen Mary

It was the year of the Silver Jubilee. Abbajan said it was going to be as big and propitious an event as the Delhi Darbar of 1911, the year when the firm of HS. Fazal-i-Ilahi 8: Son, had been established, He looked rather happy for a change and hoped the event would mark the end of the terrible slump. Business would be back to the golden days of the Delhi Darbar and luck would smile once again on the shop. Marnun Abdul Khaliq was also happy and quite excited, if only at all the festivity and tamasha linked with the Silver Jubilee. 'Shouldn't we also do a bit of show-shah, Mian?' Mamun suggested. 'After all, everybody else will be doing so. It's as big an event as one could be.' Mian responded with a body language typical of himself, waving his hands in the air uncertainly to give a sort of a go-ahead, more precisely to say 'Do as you please!'

Mamun got the right signal and proceeded with the job of getting the shop up. Strings of paper, the Union jack, were procured and hung up all along the shop front. A coloured portrait of King V and Queen Mary was hung on the eve of the shop front. An old antique table, lying somewhere in the shop interior was ferreted out dusted, polished and placed in the middle of shop floor and adorned with bottles of assorted sweets and toffees, biscuit tins, exquisitely painted, beautifully labeled and packaged chocolate bars and boxes were neatly arranged on top of the table to relieve the drabness of the shop front. Mamun eyed the arrangement-left, right and centre-approvingly before turning to Abbajan for an appreciative word

or approving nod. Abbajan gave the ensemble a casual non-committal look without saying a word.

"Well, Mian?" Mamun couldn't help asking.

'Theek hai, (looks OK)', he said blandly without a touch of excitement.

'The killjoy!' Mamun mumbled under his breath, and almost felt like turning everything topsy-turvy and returning those to their old shelves.

The Silver Jubilee celebrations were, nevertheless, on. And who would not enjoy all the festive colours and lights and the crowds surging all over Chandni Chowk? The city was agog with excitement. All the shops between the Red Fort and the Fatehpuri Mosque had their frontages extended to display all the fancy things they had in store. Strings of coloured bulbs were hung out on the shop front to make Chandni Chowk live up to its name-the Bazaar of Lights. Prominent among the extended shop fronts were copper and brassware and halvai confectionery shops. Metalware on display polished bright, reflected myriads of light bulbs, enhancing their brilliance manifold. The halvais had been truly ingenious and innovative. The famous Ghantawalla had put on display whole confectionery models of the Taj Mahal, the Jama Masjid and the Qutub Minar, to the great admiration of the people.

For three days and three nights of the Silver Jubilee celebrations, the gay blades of Delhi thronged Chandni Chowk, feasting their eyes on the vistas of lights and colour between the Fatehpuri Mosque and the Red Fort. A festive occasion was, after all, a festive occasion and a king was a king-Mughal or English hardly made any difference. The tamasha-loving people jostled shoulder to shoulder to let themselves go and enjoy the shows to their heart's content. Women would also find themselves a place at buildings with balconies overlooking the bazaar to have a full view of the festival sights and sounds.

For me, the Silver Jubilee had in store, perhaps, the first big shock of my life. What happened was that all the school-going boys had been given vouchers worth some four or eight annas to buy themselves anything they liked for the amount from the stalls-mainly eateries set up at the Silver Jubilee mela at the

Company Bagh. Since I had not started school yet, I had no voucher, like some of my other friends. I was looking for someone to help me get the vouchers and presently ran into one who showed me a purple paper flag adorned with a crown. 'There you are!' he said, as soon as he came to know of my problem. 'The flag is the real thing. This is what you call a voucher. It's the real thing. It would buy you anything to the value of half a rupee. As your friend, I would charge you only two annasi' I went running back home, emptied my small money box, counted one-pice, two pice and a one-anna piece to make up two annas and Went back to give the money to the rascal for the purple paper flag.

In the evening, I went out to the Silver Jubilee fare at the Company Gardens along with Abbajan. I had proudly pinned the flag on my shirt front for all to see and envy 'Where did you get that?' Abbajan asked. I told him the whole story. Your friend must be a cheat!' Abbajan turned around and told me brusquely, 'These flags are for free. They Won't buy you anything. You aren't school going yet and those vouchers are only for school boys!'

I would not believe Abbajan. How could someone as good as my friend ever cheat me like that? Matin and I lived in the same lane and knew each other pretty Well. Although We had not been close friends, we liked one another. He went to the local government primary school, much to my own envy and admiration. Idreamed of going to school like him one day soon. How could he ever cheat me? My uncle must have been mistaken, 'and I told him so. He smiled Wryly. 'Let's see', he said. 'We will soon find out who is right and who is wrong. You may try your luck at any one of the stalls at the Company Bagh. They have set up a special Silver Jubilee Bazaar there for schoolboys. You could buyanything there, from sports goods to all kinds of your favourite food in return for certain chits or coupons the government has issued to all bonafide school boys. Just Wait and see for yourself. We are not far from the Company Bagh.

As we passed through Chandni Chowk, we found ourselves in the midst of throngs of tamasha-watchers, enjoying the sights

and sounds of the gaily-bedecked bazaar. Strings of fancy, multi-coloured electric bulbs hung on extended shop fronts, exhibiting their best wares for sale. The Clock Tower in the middle of Chancni Chowk wore clusters of fancy electric bulbs from top to bottom. The bulbs were already on but would not show, for the sun was yet to set.

One of two Municipal Committee water bowzers drove up and down the bazaar, sprinkling water to settle the dust and cool the place off. For the fun and tamasha-loving Dilliwallas, even the sight of the water tankers was an object of much excitement and love.

‘Exactly what are we celebrating, Abbajan?’ I asked.

‘The Silver Jubilee of King George V. Why?’

‘What is Silver Jubilee?’

‘Twenty-five years of his reign’.

‘Who is King George V?’

Well. The King of England and emperor of the world!’

Where is England?

Far, far away across the seven seas. You’ll know all about it when you go to school’

‘When will I go to school?’

‘This year, Inshallah. After the summer vacations. You must work hard to qualify for Class V. They will give you a test and you must get through it for admission into Class V!’

Class V! It was like a dream. My one dearly-cherished wish. ‘Allah Mian. Dear God! Grant me my wish’ I said to myself.

To the left of the Clock Tower was the Malka ka Bagh (Queen's Garden). In the middle of the garden stood the bronze statue of Queen Victoria, the King’s and mother. I had often passed it by with father on our way to and back from Kashmiri Gate on a Sunday or some other holiday. We entered the Company Bagh area through the huge wrought iron gate. The ochre-washed Municipal Committee building stood before us-it looked very much its old self. Its colour wash had either faded or peeled off.

The old hooter- a bamboo pole on top of the building called the owl (ullu)-was quiet and dumb, as always. Precisely at seven o’clock every morning and at nine every evening,

however, the hooter would come to life and break into an owlish wail to announce the beginning and end of the day. Hence the sobriquet: 'owl'. If ever the "owl" failed to hoot and wail, people would wonder-even worry-why? For such had been the orderly pace of life under the Raj that anything going wrong With the 'set official procedures would leave people wondering and even worrying somewhat.

Beyond the Municipal Committee building lay the sprawling Company Gardens-a red gravel pathway in the middle divided the gardens into two almost equal halves. The gravel path would be strewn with pine needles dropping off the tall pine trees on either side. Both sides of the gardens were full of merry-makers celebrating the Silver Jubilee of the king-Emperor, sitting thousands of miles away and a wilayat they had never seen.

Further down the main gravel path was the Gol Bagh-the flower garden enclosed by well trimmed hedgerows to keep it off limits to the visitors. Around the flower garden had sprung up a cluster of make-shift stalls and kiosks-mostly eateries, along with a smattering of other shops offering sports goods, decorative glazed paper sheets, flags, bunting, etc.

As soon as we entered the shopping area, Abbajan nudged me tenderly and asked me to go to a shop and put my flag to the test. I wanted him to come along with me but he insisted that I go by myself, 'It's your flag and your luck. Why should I come in between? No, you should go yourself while I will keep close watch to see how it goes. I will come to your rescue if there is any problem."

'With my heart thumping with fear and expectancy I strode slowly towards one of the first cheat (savoury) shops.

'Please give me an anna worth of dahi baras.' The shopkeeper looked at me and asked if I had money on me. 'No, but I have this!' I answer, pointing proudly to the white and purple paper flag pinned on my shirt front. 'But that won't buy you anything, son. It's just a paper flag to pin on your shirt. Where are your coupons?"

I looked alternately at Abbajan and the shopkeeper in sheer despair, stunned. My uncle stroked me gently on my back and

patted my cheek. 'Didn't I tell you your friend was a brazen cheat: a pucca badmash?'

Blood raced to my eyes. I was beside myself with anger. I could have killed my friend there and then. I swore at him under my breath. 'It's alright, bete ...' my uncle said in his soothing voice. 'The World is full of such badmashes and you should always be very careful While dealing with them ...'

Then he said 'sorry' to the stall-keeper. 'The poor boy has been cheated of his good money by one of his friends, you see. Please give him whatever he Wants' I asked for mixed aloo-chhole (potato-boiled gram) chaat. The stall-keeper went on to mix and toss the stuff for me.

'Son', he said, addressing me. 'You heard what your uncle said. Always be very careful. Always be on your guard against your so-called friends. The World is full of such rascals and badmashes', he said as he handed out the chaat to me in a leaf cup.

'Now sit and enjoy it and leave the rest to me', Abbajan Went on the comfort me. "I'll take care of your friend. I will see his father, if necessary."

As the sun set, lights came on to transform the surroundings into an ocean of radiance alive with multi-hued waves, like diamonds reflecting the colour of a myriad electric bulbs-"red, orange, blue, green amber and blazing white. Abbajan and I leisurely walked between rows of improvised stalls. A small carnival equipped with manually operated wooden roundabouts, merry go-rounds, swings, etc. had sprung up across the Burra Field--the playground facing the Harding Library. Snake-charmers, acrobats and wrestlers had a corner to themselves, each performing to the huge delight of the spectators.

The main attraction of the celebrations would be the magnificent fireworks display in the sprawling park at the far end of the Company Bagh. In times to come, the park would come into limelight as the camping ground of the Khaksar Movement of Allama Mashriqui, a Cambridge Wrangler-turned-militant and anti-British protester. It was subsequently named Azad Park after Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, President of the All-India Congress in the early 1940s.

As the sun set, flares shot up, stabbed and criss-crossed the sky above, exploding thunderously before disintegrating into a blaze of colours forming irregular shapes, like an abstract Painting come alive. Every time a flare would explode, I would cheer and clap, much to the amusement of Abbajan. Nothing would please him more at the moment than to see me enjoy the spectacle to my heart's Content. I had all but forgotten the sordid flag episode and let myself go.

Abbajan managed to squeeze us into a corner commanding it good View of the centre of the park, where stood the fireworks dummies ready to be lighted. Military bands played to entertain the spectators and set the scene for the final, fiery display. suddenly the park shook by the thunderous sound of a flight of khatangas (rockets) soaring high into the air, making the ground shake. I pressed close to my tncie as fear gripped me uncontrollably.

'Don't be afraid, bete! It's nothing. It's only the beginning and there is a lot more to follow'. What followed was truly amazing. Whole flaming portraits of the Taj Mahal, the Lal Qila, jama Masjid and the Clock Tower. It went on for a good one hour or so, with brief musical interludes by military bands. What the military bands played none understood but everyone seemed to be enjoying the music just the same. A free tamasha must always be enjoyed. As for the Silver Jubilee fireworks display, it might easily have been the greatest show on earth, enjoyed and appreciated by all.

The climax of the show came with the lighting up of figures-the last on the specially-improvised platform. As those were set ablaze to reveal the portraits of King George V and Queen Mary, military bands struck a strident tune to bring those seated in the special enclosure to their feet. It was the British national anthem, as I would come to know later. At that time, even my uncle did not know what exactly it might have been.

'Send him victorious
Happy arid glorious
Long to reign over us
God save the King'

Those were the words I would find in my English primer at school.

The fireworks' display over, my uncle suggested we might hire a tonga for a ride around the city. I simply jumped for joy. What else could be more exciting than a tonga ride around the illuminated city? We walked over to the Fountain just outside the Park. The Fountain might have been the city centre between the Fatehpuri mosque and Red Fort, and was a very busy centre. The Majestic Cinema right in front, Gaiety Theatre, Picture House and the New Royal Cinema not too far away. Facing the

the Sunheri Masjid, the Kotwali (Police Station) and the Shrine-Gurduwara Sisganj Sahib-perhaps the biggest such after the Amritsar Golden Temple and Punja Sahib at Hasan Abdal, now in Pakistan. Legend has it that when Nadir Shah King of Iran, captured Delhi in 1739, he ordered a General Massacre-Qatl-e-'Aam--to avenge a reported murderous attack on his troops by some city vagabonds. The Shahbarah grapevine was said to have been mainly responsible for the bad news. What happened was that some junky or junkies in bhang-incluced dotage, bragging about the courage of the Dilliwallas, made fun of Nadir Shah and his fauj (army). 'What does he think? He is just nothing. Little more than a fly or a mosquito between my fingers and thurnb Another went several steps further and claimed that some brave Dilliwallas had already killed some of Nadir Shah's faujis (soldiers) in a hand-to-hand sword fight.

The rumours, as rumours do, took to wings and were all mad with black fury and ordered (Qatl-e-Aam)-General Massacre-for three days running. With his naked sword in hand, Nadir Shah stood at the terrace of the Sunheri Masjid to watch the gory sight, which went on for a full three days and nights. It would stop only when Nadir Shah returned his naked sword to his scabbard. "Shamat-i-'Amali ma surat-i-Nadir grift, (our own misdeeds were visited on us in the person of Nadir).'

Abbajan and I had just hit the main road around the Fountain next thing we when we heard someone call-'Mianji, Mianji.' The next thing we knew, a tonga pulled up beside us, 'Mianji,

Salaam'. The tongawalla greeted my uncle. Vlrrey, Abdullah ...' my uncle responded. 'How nice to see you. We were taking ourselves for a ride around the city ...'

'Well, well,' he went on, after a close look at Abdullah's tonga. Your horse looks like a bridegroom's wedding horse and your tonga like the buggy of some Nawab Sahab. So, you too are celebrating the Jubilee?' Abbajan said.

'Thank you, Mianji. A king is after all a king, whether he is here in Delhi or across the seven seas in wilayat. A king is king. And Allah is the king of kings, Allah Badsheh. Come, Mianji, Please be seated and how are you, my young friend?' he asked, stroking me gently on the cheek.

Abbajan helped me get into the back seat of the tonga and sat next to me. Abdullah tugged at the reins and urged the horse on. We drove at a slow trot. What with the throngs of jostling merry-makers around blocking the road and Abdullah's own eagerness to let me see as much of the Jubilee tamasha as possible, he drove the tonga at an easy pace.

Shops on both sides of the esplanade were brilliantly lit up with strings of fancy little bulbs, like twinkling stars. The gorgeously illuminated toy shop near the New Royal Cinema and the facade of the Picture House stood out amid the somewhat faded lights beyond Dariba-the narrow busy Jewellers' Bazaar leading straight to the northern gate of the Jama Masjid. Little oil lamps burnt outside the Jain and the Gauri Shankar temples. It was just about the most poorly lit part of the esplanade, soon to yield place to the vista of blazing lights the Lal Qila (Red Fort) offered. Its domes, turrets, ramparts and the sprawling pink Wall might have been the Milky Way itself descended on earth.

Abdullah let out a deep sigh as we enter Tahndi Sarak-the illuminated Fort boundary wall running all the way along it. He mumbled something to himself and then, turning to my uncle, said, "Mianji, Allah alone is eternal; the rest is just a passing show. Everything in time, only Allah abides, hain na? (isn't that so)'.

Abbajan said, 'Yes Abdullah, who should ever doubt that? ,just look at the Qila! What is a Qila without the king? No better

than a horse without a rider! ' They both lapsed into silence as I looked at the Qila and enjoyed the vast vista of light that it was.

On our right was the parade ground covered with a huge shamian Joyous sounds of merry makers inside-soldiers all-shamiana (tent) issued forth in a sort of a cadenced swell. As we approached Edward 's Park (Yadgar) my uncle broke the silence. 'Beautiful, isn't it?' he said, gently patting me on the shoulder. Tiny coloured bulbs hung from the tree branches and garlanded the hedgerows.

'Would you like me to stop by here for a while, Mianji, to let our young friend see the lights?

'Not exactly Abdullah. If we have to go all the way to Ruseena (present day Raisina), We might as well keep going or it would be too late. The boy is already sleepy So you'd better keep going and hurry'.

'As you wish, Mianji!' Abdullah answered, whipping the horse gently on the haunches to goad it into a gallop. On the other side of the Yadgar stood the imposing Jama Masjid. There were no lights, except for the usual beacons on its minarets. Faiz Bazar (Darya Ganj), further down the road, Wore a somber appearance, with just a few shops open. The spectacle disappointed me. 'What is all this, Abbajan? No lights, no life?'

'Just wait a while. We will soon be in Raseena--Nai Dilli--there you'd see the real out. " We drove past the dilapidated Delhi Gate called the Khooni Darwaza (Bloody Gate) Ah!' Abdullah sighed. 'It was here the princes were shot by the Angrez at Ghadar time. What a tragedy! Fancy that! The pampered princes being dragged into the streets and killed in cold blood by the Angrez!'

Jaga dil lagan-i-ki dunya nahin hai
ye ibrat ke ja he tamasha nahin hai

(The world is not Worth losing one's heart to. It's no tamasha, but a place for sorrow and penance.)'

Abdullah recited the verse, but I could hardly understand or follow what he meant until I was older and heard others recite it.

The road all along Turkoman Gate and the city wall was dimly lit up only by the street lamp posts. It was very quiet there. My uncle and I sat quietly as Abdullah hummed some

tune under his breath. After a while we saw, at a distance, an array of twinkling lights. 'There we are That's Raseena. That Lat Saab lives there!'

As we moved on, the lights became brighter and brighter until We were right in the middle of the blazing vista. This is 'K-nat Peelace' my uncle told me, pointing to the circular bazaar around. Right in the middle of the bazar was a garden-also a circular bounded by a chain-link fence. Military bands played from an elevated stand in the garden. Tommy goras thronged the garden, dancing and capering and frolicking. They were all in a festive mood drunk-as Abdullah remarked. My uncle told Abdullah to pull up and park the tonga in a corner. He would stay there -for a while to go an round and enjoy the sights and sounds of Connaught Place.

'Be very careful, Mianji', Abdullah said, sounding a note of warning. 'I know these Tommy haramzadas very well, driving them up and down day after day. They can be very rude and rough-even normally and especially when they are dead-drunk! Only the other day'. Abdullah went on, 'there was a hell of a rumpus-almost a head-on collision between two groups of Indians and goras ...'

'Thank you Abdullah, thank you very much indeed. We won't be long and keep ourselves at a sale distance from those firungis (foreigners). We will have more of your story on our Way back.'

Abdullah eased the tonga into a corner at the nearby tonga stand. There were hardly any cars around, only bicycles and tongas. The tongawallas, seated in their vehicles seemed to be hugely enjoying the pranks of the drunken sods in the park. I saw a tommy balancing a bottle and yet another a glass on his head and dancing: a perfect balancing act.

As we got off the tonga, Abdullah lovingly patted his horse on the haunches and said something nice to the animal. The horse snorted and pawed his forceps gently, as if responding to his master in loving words. We stood in a corner of the park to enjoy the show. There were quite a few Indians some of Whom had even joined the Tommies in dancing.

'Look at these shameless fellows? Abbajan said. Just look at

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them. It's one thing to see a tamasha from a distance but quite another to be a part of it and make a tamasha of oneself' The bands played on and on as the Tommies and the handful of Indians danced and capered to their tune. We stayed there for a while, maybe half an hour or so. Abbajan did not seem to like it very much, and his mood seemed to have changed suddenly 'Shall we go?' he said, 'I think we have seen enough, haven't We?' More than the music and dancing, I liked the hustle and bustle, the- sheer gaiety of the occasion. But it was getting late thing, so we quietly walked out of the garden towards the tonga stand.

Abdullah sat dozing in his seat. Abbajan touched him gently on his shoulder to wake him up. Abdullah woke up with a start. 'Are you through with it all, Mianji? What about our young man?'

'It's okay Abdullah. Enough is enough. It is getting late. Let's get back home'

We got into the tonga and were soon on the move. As we settled into our seats, Abbajan asked Abdullah to continue with his story of the rumpus between the Indians and the Tommies.

'Only the other day' 'said Abdullah, sounding much pleased over Abbajan's interest in the story 'there was a hell of a rumpus outside Odeon Cinema. I was waiting for passengers-these very goras-to drive them back to the Fort where they are posted. The film had just ended when a number of Indians and goras poured out of the cinema, shouting and abusing one another. The only English Word I knew and could follow was "bastard",

"Bastard bastard" was heard clearly above the torrent of the foul words exchanged. A couple of goras suddenly hit an Indian and the Indians retaliated. All hell broke loose until the gora military police arrived and disengaged the two sides. There was some heated exchange between the military police and Indians. I am glad the Indians did not take it lying down and refused to be intimidated by the gora police. Finally the military police marched the tommies off.'

'What might have actually happened, Abdullah?

"Mianji, one of my passengers, an Indian, told me later on, that the Indians had refused to stand to show due respect to the British flag at the end of the show. The goras resented this and called the Indians all kinds of names-junglees (savages) and all that. And that led to the rumpus. Just look at the cheek of these rascals. Allah forbid, they think they are mightier than God!"

'Aren't they. Abdullah? Let's face it. They are the rulers, we are no better than slaves!' Abbajan said.

'When will they get out of India bag and baggage. Mianji?' Abdullah asked.

'What can one say? However, I do hope it won't be too long. You know, someone called Hitler in Jurmani (Germany) has emerged as a great challenger to England. Let's all pray for his success. Anyone will be better than these British tyrants'

Unlike Raisina and Chandni Chowk, the road all along the Ram Leela ground was only routinely lit up by street lights. As we approached Ajmer Darwaza, my uncle pointed to the silhouette of a spacious building to our left and said, 'That's going to be your school, the Anglo-Arabic. It's a fine school'.

The news excited me. I was no longer sleepy and looked hard at the darkened outline of the school premises to see and absorb as much as I could.

'Do you like it?' Abbajan asked. I nodded excitedly.

Our onward journey via Lal Kuan and Gali Qasirn ran all the way to Ballimaran was quite uneventful. No illumination, no festivity; it was like any other day. 'Bus, Bhai, busi' Abbajan told Abdullah as we approached the phatak-the main gate of the haveli.

Abdullah pulled up to let us get off. My uncle gave Abdullah two silver rupees he had been holding already in the hollow of his palm.

'There is no need for that, Mianji'.

'It's alright. Abdullah. Let me also share some of the pleasure!'

Abdullah grinned, took the money, thanked and salaamed my uncle repeatedly. He patted me on both cheeks. 'I hope our young friend also enjoyed the ride'.

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Abbajan told me to thank and salam Abdullah, which I did readily.

For us, that was the end of the Silver Jubilee of King George V I could call it my first brush with life as I stood on its threshold, waiting to go to school!

My next visit to Raisina, again with Abbajan, would be a few months later. The occasion was the sawari (state-drive) of the outgoing Viceroy Lord Willingdon on his Way from the imposing Viceregal Lodge to Nizrnauddin Railway Station, Lord and Lady Willingdon were to drive in state in their coach-and-six through Connaught Place to let the public-the loyal ryot of the Raj--have a look at the man who had ruled them for five years. Abbajan and I drove to Connaught Place in a tonga, left it around the Odeon Cinema and walked. The covered shopping arcades were already packed with tamasha lovers when We arrived, although the shahi sawari would still be a good half an hour or so away People had been generally kind and as they saw a ten-year-old with a 40-50 year old, they helped us find a place in a corner commanding a good View of the route of the viceregal pageant.

We waited impatiently for the sawari. An Anglo-Indian Sergeant on a phat-phut (motor cycle) soon appeared, storming down the road like a charging bull, waving people off the road. The road had to be kept clear of all traffic for the shahi sawari to pass through unhindered. I held Abbajarfs hand tightly; for fear of being swept off my feet by the crowd heaving backwards and forwards.

Presently we saw a phalanx of men in gold and Scarlet Uniforms astride black (chestnut) horses contening stately down the road. 'Here they come!' the waiting crowd chorused. There was much pushing and pulling from behind and the sides. I was practically trapped. My uncle helped me get out of the melee and move gently along.

As the phalanx of well-mounted riders got closer, the crowd broke into instantaneous clapping and 'hurrahs'! Behind the bodyguards was the viceregal coach-and-six followed by yet another phalanx of horsemen. The Viceroy and Lady Willingdon sat face-to-face, gently bowing their heads and waving to

erowd. Lord Willingdon Wore a White hat and an immaculately white uniform. Lady Willingdon was also dressed in white. The Viceroy had a kind, smiling face, which evolved deep admiration Within me. I fell to clapping too, beside myself with joyful excitement. 'You like all that, certainly!' Abbajan quipped, gently twisting my ear. 'It is so beautiful, Abbajan!' The smiling face of the Viceroy made a deep impression on my mind and has remained etched in my memory ever since.

We the Indians, especially the Dilliwallas, ar born tamasha-Watchers. We don't really care where, Why and by whom., so long as the tamasha is good and to our liking. Just imagine, hating the British on the one hand and cheering the Viceroy on the other!

For me, Lord Willingdon's farewell state-drive was like the grand finale of the Silver Jubilee just a few months before. And it had been a grand milestone too on my way to school. Only. there would be no coupons to swap for your favourite eats during the Silver Jubileei Alas!

It's said that misfortune never comes alone, one always stalking the other. After the brief spell of the Silver Jubilee boom, the slump set in once again to the utter despair of Abbajan. Since the Silver Jubilee, not a day would pass when there would be news of one or other shop going out of business or being gutted. Those insured could at least hope for making good their loss- even if not entirely to the owner's satisfaction-with the settlement of their insurance claims. Mounting cases of shops catching fire and being totally or partially gutted, had put the bosses of the insurance companies-particularly those carrying fancy English name like the Australasia Insurance Company-almost impossible to deal with. They turned out to be perfect cheats and bullies.

The fancy firework of the Silver Jubilee turned into fearsome, all-consuming fires reducing running businesses to ashes.

For some, misfortune comes and goes; for others, it comes to stay and it did come to stay in the case of Abbajan.

Sometime in 1936, fire broke out in the shop-the reputable firm of H.S. Fazil-i-Ilahi and Sons was reduced to ashes. The news was received one day in the small hours of the morning,

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just about the time of the pre-dawn Azan and fajr prayers .The shop chowkidar came running to the house, as much out of breath for all the running as for the state of shock he was in. Abbajan, already half awake in time for his pre-namaz ablution, jumped out of the bed to answer the frantic knocking at the door and opened it to face the hysterical chowkidar.

"Mian, Mian", he screamed. "The shop in on fire. Please hurry! Hurry! Hurry!"

Without a word, Abbajan ran to the shop in his clothes. To the frantic queries of my aunt, Ahmad Nissa, about the problem, the only Words he said Were: "Wait, wait. Stop shouting, for God's sake!" He and the chowkidar covered the odd mile or so to the shop, running all the Way as fast as their legs would carry them.

When they arrived at the scene, the fire was still in full blaze. A crowd of early risers stood by and Watched. Somebody had the wits and the goodness of heart to look for and find a telephone in the vicinity and called the fire brigade, The clang of the tum-tum bells was heard and the huge red-painted vehicles were soon on the spot, the steel-helmeted men busy with their hose pipes, fixing them to the Water taps to extinguish the leaping flames. The shop was already a smoking pile, however, by the time the fire was controlled and put out. 'Sub kuch jal ke rakh ho gays (All reduced to the ashes)', Abbajan moaned in deep despair.

' There was hope, however, in the midst of despair: the shop had been insured and the premium duly paid. The first thing to do in the circumstances would be to report the matter to Mr. Muhammad Ahmad. He got hold of the nouncing-and-verbing insurance agent man the same day and begged him to go the shop and see everything for himself and assess the loss. Mr. Ahmad listened to Abbajan attentively and told him not to worry. 'Ours is not one of those fake companies," he said. 'I shall immediately report the matter to the General Manager, IVlr. Raily (O'Reilley). Rest assured, everything would be all right ...'

That was the last Abbajan would see of Mr. Ahmad for the next few days or weeks. I-le went completely incommunicado.

Maybe he had left the city altogether for Shahadra across the Jumna Bridge or Mehrauli, the small township around the Qutab Minar. He was not to be found anywhere.

Dejected, Abbajan made bold to go and see Mr. O' Reilley himself at his office. Despite his long experience and dealing with his English and English-speaking clientele at the shop, Abbajan deeply feared to see the English sahib face-to-face at his office. It was one thing to attend to a sahib as a customer but quite another to see him at his office. Who didn't know how rude and hasty the sahibs could be to Indians as and when they pleased, especially in cases involving money. Left with no better alternative, he had to see him anyhow. He walked over to his Office outside Masjid Fathepuri one day only to be stopped and questioned by the Sahib's chuprassi outside. It was only after the chuprassi's palms were greased that he would let him into the office of the big Sahib.

Mr. O' Reilley turned to be an Anglo-Indian, not an Englishman as had been stated by the insurance agent. He appeared to be too absorbed in work even to raise his eye and see who was there to see him. After a while, however, he said gruffly, 'Yes?' Abbajan placed his insurance policy and papers before him. Without so much as a glance at the papers, Mr. O' Reilley said, 'So you are here to make good your losses. What do you take an insurance company for? Is this an orphanage to dole out charities to all the badmashes gutting their worthless shops and fleecing the insurance companies ...'

'But Sahib ...'

'None of that sahib-wahib stuff, we all know the likes of you very well ...'

In fact, insurance policies were being grossly misused and it would have been hard to deny that poorly stocked shops were burnt down after the payment of one or two premiums. It was said that a shop gutted was anytime worth more than a shop out of business. The long shadow of the Great Depression still lingered. Fewer customers and even less business.

'Well?' said Mr. O' Reilley after a while in a mounting rage. 'Where the hell is your insurance policy. Damn it ...' Abbajarfs hand shook as he passed the policy onto the sahib.

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‘Bloody fake. Completely fake. How dared you come to in me at all and face me with his forged document

‘But sahib ...’

‘Shut up and get out this very minute or I’ll call the polic .. chuprassi chuprassi ...’ he shouted at the top of his voice.

The chuprassi came in immediately ‘Yes, Sahib ...’

"Don’t you see for yourself, bloody fool ...' This man is a complete fraud. Get him of my sight. Just imagine. How wicked and these bloody Indians can be, a pack of rogues ...’

The chaprassi fixed Abbajan with a poisonous stare and was about to catch hold of him and throw him out physically when Abbajan walked towards the door, his head bowed and his whole frame shaking with sobs. The world went dark before his eyes.

The shop was a gutted pile-all ashes, with little left to salvage. With the slump still wagging tail its like a dying animals there would be precious little by way of goodwill the burnt out with luck.

But what would he, himself, be without the shop-his only high ground being his sole mark of identity. A shopkeeper without a shop would be little better than an aged bazaar prostitute thrown out of her kotha, all misery and miasma: the mangy bitch of the road.

Abbajan left Mr. O’ Reilly’s a deeply dejected and crestfallen man. What then must he do? The shop burnt down to cinders throwing the insurance policy back into his face as one completely fake. Suicide would seem to be the only way out it: only that would be gunhai-i-kabira, a grave and unpardonable Sin.

His mind might have been like a hornet's nest, the fierce and fiery insects stinging and biting deep into his skin. He seemed lost in a thick, thorny and dark tangled forest without a light at the end-his whole body stabbed by the gaint cactus; plants along the uneven path, leaving it bleeding in excruciating pain.

As the news got around, my father would not wait to go

and ask to let him take a look at the policy. Even at a glance, he could see a number of inaccuracies concerning the correct name of the firm, dates used, etc. to give the company enough excuse to create problems for the client.

Father pointed all that out to Abbajan and told him not to worry. 'I'll see to all that, Bhai Sahib. By God's grace Inshallah everything will be all right ...' He said.

He'd shortly address a strongly worded note to Mr. O' Reilly in his lawyer's language, demanding full and final payment to his client or else face him in the court.

I don't quite know exactly what happened in the meantime, but, shortly after, came the good news that Mr. O' Reilly had agreed to settle the matter out of court for half the insured amount whatever that might be. Khalu hugged and thanked father, overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude. Everyone else in the family was happy too, and full of praise for father.

Gradually; Abbaj an regained his wits and prayed for divine help. 'What had to be had happened. What was the use of mourning the loss of something gone for good?' As far the insurance agent, he would rather leave him to divine Wrath and retribution the invocation of divine help and justice calmed his shattered nerves.

Happiness and unhappiness are but two sides of the same coin-each is willed by God and there is nothing to it but to submit to the will of God.

Chapter 6

Off To School

In 1935, I turned over a new leaf of life, ending my long years in one maseet, one maktab after another. I went to school at the end of the summer vacations in October. Abbajan had already discussed and arranged everything With Khan Sahib Haji Abdul Ghani, a younger brother of my grandfather, a member of the governing body of the Anglo-Arabic School at Ajmere Gate. Haji Abdul Ghani took me to the school as it re-opened after the summer vacations. I was given a test, which I passed, and was admitted in Class V. It was a big jump for me and more than made up for all my wasted years through various maktab. I enjoyed being at school and did not fare too badly in class.

One day, after the morning assembly, our headmaster, Chowdhry Maqsood Ahmed (MA, Maths-a rare distinction for a Mussalman) announced the passing away of the King-Emperor, George V. The school would be closed for the rest of the day ‘as a mark of respect to the memory of the King-Emperor’, he told us and dismissed the assembly. He told us to go home and pray for the soul of the late King-Emperor.

The assembly over, we dispersed, more happy for the holiday than grieving over the death of the King-Emperor. I had only heard of him during the Silver Jubilee and had seen him in pictures on the covers of our Urdu and English primers. As we dispersed to go home, I saw our theology teacher talking to a group of students. The teacher was saying how happy he was over the death of the British king. It’s good that the wretched tyrant is dead. It’s a good omen, especially for us Muslims, the only true and real heirs to the Indian throne. We must all now pray and work hard for the restoration of the

Muslim rule in India. By Allah's grace and kindness, the day is not too far when the dream would turn into a reality. Only We must try in right earnest to be good Muslims and pray for Allah's infinite mercy ...'

The teacher's message and the tone in which it was delivered stirred me beyond words. The dream of the return of Islamic rule had, indeed, been one of our golden dreams. Beside myself with excitement, I went running all the Way back home until I bumped into Usman and his friend Barakat Ahmad on the Way. 'Bhai, Bhai' I yelled. 'The King is dead. Let's pray for the re-establishment of the Islamic rule.'

Both of them went into loud guffaws as they heard me. 'You bloody fool, you miserable idiot! What does the death of the King have to do with the return of Islamic rule? There would be a new king, that's all,' Usman retorted, much to my mortification.

Usman's curt remarks made me both bitter and sad. Couldn't he and his friend see the writing on the Wall for themselves? The king had died within months of his Silver Jubilee. Wouldn't that be enough to convince us of the British rule nearing its end? What a rise, what a fall! The sudden shifting of the scene from the festivities of the Silver Jubilee to the doom and gloom of the King's sudden death. Even if the return of Muslim rule was impossible, the end of the British rule could not be far away. As good Muslims, we could and should, at least, pray for that. Only Usman and Barakat and people like them would simply fail, or refuse to see the writing on the Wall and insist that the death of a king was as simple as one king succeeding the other. Would there be anything more absurd than to say: 'The king is dead. Long live the King? All their logic, all their wisdom would not stop me from hoping that the end of the British Raj and the advent of Muslim rule could not be very far.

I passed my Class V examination and was promoted to Class VI. There had been some problem or other concerning the headmaster, Chowdhry Maqsood Ahmad. That he had been a Qadiani, supposedly a deviant Mussalman, denying the finality of Prophet Mohammad, everybody knew and accepted.

Nobody was bothered about that as long as he kept his faith to himself. But the impression was somehow beginning to gain ground that he had been exceeding his limits. A number of students had been found with Qaudiani literature, allegedly provided by the headmaster in an effort to convert them to his faith. Right or wrong, the best thing in the circumstance would be to shift me from the Ajmeri Gate to the Darya Ganj branch of the Anglo-Arabic school. Several other students followed suit.

The Darya Ganj Anglo-Arabic school enjoyed a very high reputation, mainly because of its headmaster Mr. Muhammad Umar-an excellent teacher, able administrator and a strict disciplinarian. Away from the crowded area of the city, it was relatively free from the congestion and corruption of the interior of the city.

Headmaster, Muhammad Umar remains my ideal of an excellent headmaster anywhere in the World. Neat and clean like a hospital matron, he would always be impeccably dressed in a sherwani and a pair of crisply starched, narrow-bottomed, Aligarh-cut pyjamas. He wore a well-pressed Turkish cap and a scraggy Chinese beard, which gave him the sobriquet of 'Fichu' (perhaps after Sax Rohmer's popular character Dr. Fu Man Chu). 'The best parts of his physiognomy were his teeth-so dazzlingly white as to make an excellent ad for any toothpaste. Our own class incharge (VI-B) was one Rao Sahib-ea stolid, grim-faced man with a 'lean and hungry look'.

There were others, like the quiet, dour-looking Master Fatehuddin (English), Master Abdul Khaliq Qureshi (also English) and invariably having with bad breath; the ever cringing Master Abdul Lateef (History); the formidable Master Izharul Hassan Burney (science) the soft-spoken Siddiq Sahib (Maths) ; the absent minded but generous and kind Aijaz Sahib (Geography and English); the fair-complexioned, Maulvi Kafiluddin (Urdu) ; the nondescript Master Zia ul Islam Naziri (Urdu / Persian) Mr. Zulqarnain (Economics and fondly called Zullu); and Mr. Kirtiman Sharma (Maths).

'Zullu' was about the youngest of the lot--an incorrigible dissenter and a proclaimed non-conformist. He would wear a suit and necktie in defiance of the regulated sherwani-pyjamas.

When reprimanded for the umpteenth time by the headmaster for being improperly dressed, he replaced his favourite suit and necktie with an open collar shirt and half-pants: this ultimately cost him his job. Mr. Kirtiman Sharma was the only Hindu; teacher. He taught maths to Section 'A' of Class X. He had an excellent physique, somewhat thickset, but well-muscled and robust. He had a craggy face, bearing the marks of a full harvest? of acne vulgaris he must have had in early youth. Summer or winter, he would always be dressed in suit-and-tie, and as a Hindu, was forgiven for the deviation. Although he never taught our class, we respected and admired him for his looks and bearing.

From amongst the teachers, three influenced my youthful mind most: Maulvi Kafiluddin, Aijaz Sahib and Siddiq Sahib.

I liked the Darya Ganj Anglo-Arabic School, for I knew that I was to stay there for the next five years at least, until I matriculated. It was going to be my real crucible to shape my future life and career as indeed it turned out to be

From the Wider surroundings of Darya Ganj, the city unveiled itself. to my youthful vision like a picture book. There was something inexplicable subtle, enigmatic and mysterious about the very air of this part of the city, with all the ancient monuments and the ruins girdling it. There was the Jama Masjid with its domes and minarets and flights of stairs leading to the three grand entrances to the east, south and the north. Right in front of the Eastern Gate were the mazars (mausoleums) of the Sarmad and Hare-Bhare Sahib-the two revered saints - attracting votaries from the four corners of the city day and night.

Faqirs-some pretending to be dervishes-thronged around the two mazars and the foodstalls nearby-either soliciting or just standing by mutely; staring at the passersby and fixing them with red, bloodshot eyes. They were junkies, high on marijuana The air around Jama Masjid would exude the exotic, appetizing smells of varieties of cooked food, the spicy Delhi Shahi haleem, grilled liver tikkas (Kalaijee), seekh and shami kababs, fried savouries, full-cream kulfis and sherbets. A number of water carriers with bulging water-skins strapped to their backs,

jangled shiny brass cups to attract the thirsty and lend a musical touch to the setting. Bird-sellers, jugglers, conjurers, magicians and quacks dispensing aphrodisiacs-pills, potions and lubricants-dominated the space in front of the mosque. Acrobats, men and women from the neighbouring countryside, card sharpers and tricksters with a sleight of hand, were also there to entertain and fleece the people.

Situated, as it were, between two giant scrolls of history-the Lal Qila (Red Fort) on one side and the Jama Masjid on the other-the Anglo-Arabic Darya Ganj might have been my first real brush with the city outside the narrow confines of the mohallah.

Almost facing the Grand Mosque was Edwards Park-the Yadgar-in the everyday language of the city. In the middle of the Park stood the bronze statue of Edward VII on horseback. We would often stare blankly at the monster, Wondering what exactly it was doing there. Facing Edward's Park was the sprawling vista of the pink walls of the Red Fort all along the Thandi Sarak-the City Wall. A khai (moat), long and waterless, ran along the Fort's boundary Wall. The khai formed part of the bazaar language of the city's loafers-mainly sodomites. 'Look, you so-and-so you'd better do as I tell you or I'd drag you to the khai by force. Understand? Better be sensible and come on your own.

A narrow strip of road separated the Fort from our school playground--a grassless vista of rough, stony surface-not too far off from the Red Fort, where we played cricket. Behind the boundary wall of the cricket ground was the Purdah Garden-a walled, treelined, open space for ladies only. The rear entrance of the Purdah Garden was located on one side of our cricket ground, and we could see women (girls) wending their way to and back from the Garden via the narrow passage leading to its rear entrance. Some government bungalows were situated across the main road with low yellow-washed boundary walls. The father of one of our senior schoolmates, an engineer, lived there with his family. His two young daughters, in their teens like most of us, would go the Purdah Gardens practically every evening. I would eagerly wait and watch them pass through the narrow kuccha pathway to the Gardens.

My first year at the school had been a pretty bad one, perhaps the worst ever in my whole academic career. In addition to arithmetic, my one permanent headache-drawing-turned out to be yet another nuisance. The arithmetic teacher, Rao Sahib, was also our class incharge. He was from Haryana, a hard, flinty man with a Chinese-style scraggy beard and a thin, bony face. He wore his Turkish cap and was scarcely ever seen without it, except while going through his pre-namaz ablution. He was even more of a strict disciplinarian than the headmaster, in fact a tyrant, pure and simple. His one slap would keep the affected cheek stinging for hours and leave its fingerprints too.

One of the most traumatic moments of my first year at the school, which I can still vividly recall, happened after one of our terminal examinations. I had fared 'very badly in maths. One day after the morning assembly, Rao Sahib gave me what might have been the most shocking news of my life. 'Abdul Rahman, Suakir (swine). ZERO! He pronounced 'zero' with such fury and force, as to stun and fix me to the spot. The next thing I knew, was a resounding slap, leaving my cheek stinging for quite a while.

The vision of Rao Sahib announcing the forthcoming annual examination results and declaring me 'fail' haunted me like a vicious ghost. 'Should that be the case, I'd kill myself,' I vowed.

Apart from my faring badly at school, the city itself had been passing through a terrible spell of Hindu-Muslim tension and actual rioting in the aftermath of the deadly Shiv Mandir episode. The Hindu and the Muslim mohallas had turned into forbidden territories for each other. Rather than take the shorter route to school via Charkhe Walla and Chawri Bazaar-two mixed but prominent Hindu localities-I had to re-route all the way via Chandni Chowk, Fountain and Thandi Sarak.

The Hindu-Muslim question, already agitating our raw, youthful minds, came to the fore with a vengeance after an episode involving a student of Class IX or X of Ajmeri Gate Anglo-Arab ic school. His name was Munawwar Ali. He stabbed a Hindu sadhu who had forcibly occupied an open plot of land close to the entrance of Company Gardens. It was an open plot, government property, used by the Muslim strollers in and around the Company Garden for their post-sunset Maghreb

prayers without any let or hindrance for as long as one could remember.

Then came a Hindu sadhu one day, out of nowhere, together' with a large number of his chelas (devotees). He set up his Samadhi and claimed the place as the site of an ancient Hindu temple. This shocked and outraged the Muslim strollers. Some four or five of them formed themselves into a delegation and waited on the sadhu to persuade him to quit the plot. The sadhu wouldn't budge, insisting the plot had been the site of an ancient Hindu temple, the Shiv Mandir, named after God Shiva. It could not, therefore, be available to Muslims' for their Maghreb prayers.

As the news appeared in the local press, a number of senior citizens-Hindu and Muslim-intervened to bring about a peaceful settlement of this issue before it got out of hand. Much as the elders tried to persuade the Muslims not to make an issue out of it and the sadhu to withdraw his demand in the absence of any substantive evidence, it was all to no avail. Neither would the Sadhu agree to budge an inch from the samadhi nor would the Muslims settle for anything less than an immediate vacation of the plot. I had by then become quite an avid reader of the Urdu press and followed every detail of the Shiv Mandir. There were four Urdu dailies-Wahdat, Al-Aman, Watan and Tej. They made capital out of the episode, splashing it across their front pages day after day to make the Shiv Mandir case the rage of the city. One Friday, after the congregational Juma prayers in the Fatehpuri mosque, the Muslims staged a protest rally through Chandni Chowk. As they approached the Clock Tower, some Hindu hooligans pelted them with stones from behind the corner of Nai Sarak-a predominantly Hindu commercial and residential area. The processionists returned stone-for-stone amid sky-renting chants of 'Allah-O-Akbar' and 'Ship Mandir Murdabad A hand-to-hand scuffle followed, in which lathis and knives were freely used to account for a substantial toll of wounded, some less, others more seriously That must have gone on for a good half hour or so, before the police arrived and after a concentrated lathi-charge, managed to disengage and disperse the rioters.

'Forget the police. Fetch a tonga and take the holy man to hospital before he bleeds to death' The crowd jostled around the bleeding sadhu and the young attackers.

'The bastard! Imagine the cheek ...!'

The tonga and the police arrived presently. Two policemen took charge of the situation. They laid the sadhu on the front seat of the tonga. The policeman took the back seat to support the sadhu, who lay bleeding profusely practically unconscious.

'Drive on', the policemen ordered the tongawalla. 'Straight to the Juma'a Mosque municipal hospital', the nearest from the Clock Tower.

Munawwar Ali was handcuffed and driven in another tonga to the kotwali, oppsite the Fountain. The news of the gory incident hit the headlines of the local press the next morning. Muslims admired and marvelled at the courage of the teenage boy. Wasn't he a real Ghazi, a holy warrior? The next two or three days bristled with high tension. The sadhu was alive but still unconscious. On the fourth or the fifth day, he regained consciousness, much to everyone's relief. 'Thank God he is not dead or all hell would have broken loose?'

The disputed plot of land was cordoned off and a police picket established there. The samadhi and all its paraphernalia-conch shells, idols, bowls of sandal and vermilion paste that the sadhu used to smear the forehead of his votaries, while blessing them where removed. It was declared off-limits to Hindus and Muslims alike.

The Shiv Mandir case went on for months. The sadhu recovered, was discharged from the hospital over time and not heard of a again: he simply disappeared. Munawwar Ali with stood his ordeal with remarkable courage and fortitude and moreover with no regrets. Enterprising press reporters attributed to him statements hard to imagine and harder to believe of a teenager. Unafraid and unrepentant, he was reported to have said that in Allah"s path and for the greater glory of Islam, he would do it again if necessary. No sacrifice would be too great for Islam. In a news photograph he was shown on his prayer mat, offering prayers in his cell. 'What a boy! Just the stuff a true Muslim is made off.

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The Shiv Mandir case went on for months. The sadhu recovered, was discharged from the hospital over time and not heard of a again: he simply disappeared. Munawwar Ali with stood his ordeal with remarkable courage and fortitude and moreover with no regrets. Enterprising press reporters attributed to him statements hard to imagine and harder to believe of a teenager. Unafraid and unrepentant, he was reported to have said that in Allah"s path and for the greater glory of Islam, he would do it again if necessary. No sacrifice would be too great for Islam. In a news photograph he was shown on his prayer mat, offering prayers in his cell. 'What a boy! Just the stuff a true Muslim is made off.

Munawwar Ali was found guilty of attempted murder and sent off to a reformatory school. Anything harder would have triggered yet another round of Hindu-Muslim riots-far more serious than the one before. Besides, he was a minor yet and could not be awarded a harsher sentence-least of all of phansi-death by hanging, as the Hindu fanatics demanded. Communal tensions, bitterness and mistrust, however, persisted, going well beyond the 'Hindu pani, Muslim Pani' syndrome, the battle lines were drawn: quite a few neighbouring Hindu-Muslim mohallahas turned into virtual fortresses at war. To reach one's own home, one had to make long detours, avoiding the normal shorter routes through the Hindu mohallahas. Mutual mistrust and anger persisted; and hardly a week would pass without a binot-lathi fight. Lathis-dipped in linseed oil, and seasoned-quite often, metal-tipped, would serve as the main weapons. Nimble-footed young men, slim and wiry, were handpicked by ustads and coached in binot--skilled stick work to skip and dodge and hit the opponent to stun and maim rather than kill. Binot fights became an almost regular feature of the city life. They were at once a live tamasha, hugely enjoyed by the spectators as well as sort of a catharsis--a release of so much pent-up communal anger.

I managed to scrape through Class VI somehow and was 'promoted' riati pass to Class VII. It might indeed have been like getting out of a narrow and dark tunnel into a vista of light. Our class incharge, Aijaz Sahib had joined the school only recently, He held a Master's degree in Geography from Aligarh University He was tall, handsome and fair, with a peach-and-cream face and a trimmed moustache (much like the gentleman appearing on the Gillette safety razor blade wrappers). He came to the class dressed in his below-the-knee-length sherwani, always holding up its lower end with one hand, and a Turkish cap. He taught us english and geography.

For all the private tuitions I had during my pre-school days, my English had been quite a cut above the others, much to Aijaz Sahib's liking. He virtually adopted me as his ward. But for the kindly gentleman, Aijaz Sahib, I daresay my journey through Class VII might have been as dull and weary as the one through

Class IV. Under his guidance, I began to bloom and blossom gradually and even my maths, my one constant headache and pet aversion, improved-thanks to the maths teacher, Siddiq Sahib, who would graduate with us all the way up to Class X. How very lucky for all of us.

Aijaz Sahib was also the in charge of the cricket team. We used to play cricket at the rough and rocky cricket ground behind Purdah Gardens, not too far from the school. It had an unpaved pitch to make every ball a bouncer and hit an unwary batsman-at times quite badly. Aijaz Sahib bowled fast, without much of line or length, pitching close to the batsman. The ball would rise sharply to hit him unless he were quick enough to duck his head. He took pains at coaching me, but all in vain, and much to his anger.

‘The perfect sluggard that you are, you shall never learn cricket’. He would go on to curse me freely. much like a Delhi housewife, using more or less the same idioms.

The year 1937, as it Were, opened the doors of perception to my mind, Aijaz Sahib encouraged me to write for the English section of the school magazine. My first essay to appear in the school magazine was ‘Seasons of the ‘i/ear". It was a most exciting experience to see my name appear in cold print. Thereafter, I would be contributing practically to every issue of the school quarterly, both in the English and Urdu sections. I would hardly realize that writing would one day become my profession.

However, much as Aijaz Sahib would try to initiate me into the finer points of cricket, it would be in vain. I could never shape up in any department of the game; and, in spite of my absolute love for it, stayed hopelessly as the twelfth man, mainly responsible for the safe passage of the kit trunk from school to the playground.

In the only chance I had to play for the school XI, and that too as one of the openers, I managed to score two runs off the first ball. I missed the remaining four and the sixth had me clean bowled , much to Aijaz Sahib's mock anger, for he knew I could do no better. ‘Just look at the buddhu (idiot), how he swings his bat in empty air, as if flying doves. Bogus, utterly bogus and useless. He would die sooner than learn cricket.’ My cricket

had indeed been a sore disappointment for him. And yet he would accept me as an integral part of the team. 'Buddhu, remains a hopeless sluggard' and 'no power on earth could make a cricketer out of him'. He must be there, nevertheless, for whoever could imagine the team Without him?

One fine day in July; under a sky overcast with monsoon clouds and a steady light drizzle, the class went out picnicking to the Qutub Minar. We spent a lovely day climbing up the historical Qutub Minar; girdling around the Lohe ki Laat (The Iron Ashoka Pillar), trying to touch and join our fingertips for good luck, romping around the ruins of Rai Pithora temples, eating Keema-parathas and enjoying ourselves to our heart's content. Aijaz Sahib had none of the sombre school-masterly airs and was an excellent sport. His motto was: 'While in the class, learn, while at the playground, play' he would often say and fully live up to his words. At the end of a most exciting day we would pack our things and board the coach to return to the school.

On our way back to the city we stopped by the Safdarjang airport to meet a friend of Aijaz Sahib, a pilot. He happened to be a dashing handsome man in his flying kit. Aijaz Sahib and his friend had been together at Aligarh until their Intermediate, when his friend opted for flying while Aijaz Sahib proceeded with his higher studies and did his MA in Geography.

The dashing pilot looked a lot younger than Aijaz Sahib, although the two must have been about the same age. After the two friends had exchanged their spirited greetings, embraced and thumped each other on the chest and back, and sworn only as best of friends would, Aijaz Sahib proceeded to introduce the class to his friend.

"Welcome, my young friends, I feel so happy to have you all here with us this evening, Thank you, Aijaz, for giving me this wonderful opportunity It's always so nice talking to young blood A small aircraft stood beside the dashing pilot. It must have been one of those aircraft We would see every now and then diving up and down across the city skies. The skill with which the aircraft was flown and the daredevil feats it performed in the air would have the Dilliwallas wondering about the man behind the machine.

Well, here was one right before us. He told us quite a few things about flying and the types of aircraft flown. He took us round the hangar, explaining things, most of which went over my head. He hoped to be joining the newly raised Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) soon. He told us what a wonderful career RIAF offered to young Indians. 'Those of you with good eyesight, a brave heart must give themselves a chance in the air force;' he said good-humouredly. At the end of the briefings and the rounds, we were offered refreshments-tea, pastries and sandwiches-such a wonderful fare.

I fared well in my annual exams and moved up to Class VIII with Siddiq Sahib in charge. Much as I, in fact we all, missed Aijaz Sahib, we found in Siddiq Sahib an excellent teacher, especially for maths. He taught maths in a way all his own. It was nothing less than maths made easy; even for someone like me, who hardly had a head for -it. He liked me for my extra-curricular activities-especially my regular contributions to the school quarterly. He had neither the personal charm of Aijaz Sahib nor his sportive behaviour, but was always very relaxed, with a kind of smile playing around his lips. He was always neatly dressed in a Sherwani, and wore a trim beard and spectacles. Although a Punjabi, he was fully moulded into Delhi's cultural matrix and spoke chaste Urdu, with just the slightest touch of an accent. Much as he would have liked to appoint me the class prefect, my initial lukewarm response and subsequent 'no' to both surprised and angered him.

'You fool, much as I would like to raise you to high heavens, you choose to go down into the gutter. Why should you keep saying "no' to a good offer? I-low stupid of you' and the matter ended there. I still can't really explain the reason why I would say 'no' to this very generous and kind offer. In retrospect, I think, it must have been because of some negative impulse-within me-first to say 'no' to something good and then come to regret it. Siddiq Sahib also introduced us to what he called Rationalist Islam, as understood and expounded by Allama Iqbal in his book, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam. 'It would be too difficult for you to follow the book just yet. It's a highly philosophical work. You'd be able to follow it better

after your matriculation. For the time being, however, you must read Tulu-i-Islam. It's an excellent journal edited by Maulana Ghulam Ahman Pervaiz and perhaps the best guide to the Allama Iqbal's exposition of rationalist Islam!

We had a copy of the journal placed at the long table in the school Reading Room. However, much as I'd try to go through it, I found it hard labour, without much of a reward. I would just the same consider it my duty to look up the contents page of every issue, glance through it to have a rough idea about it, if only to please Siddiq Sahib.

Life at School from Class VII onwards, was smooth-sailing, even enjoyable. I was now in my mid-teens-physically and emotionally mature, more aware of the burgeoning 'sexual' (a forbidden word then) urge and burning desire to share it more intimately with someone. Close embrace and HP (hand practice) of the past would not satisfy me any longer. I would soon find myself in love with a boy named Q.

I wouldn't know exactly how to describe my feeling for Q a boy scout one year senior to me. I thought it was pure love something like for Majnu's for Laila, Farhad's for Shirin and Romeo's for Juliet. I believed I could easily sacrifice my life for him if ever the need arose. What with his uniform, his perpetual enigmatic smile, well-rounded calves exposed up to his knees from his knickers, and his overall deportment, lively and gay I lost my heart to him. Diffident and unsure of myself by nature however, I dared not muster enough courage even to approach him, let alone wish him, saying 'How are you?'

"Q", for his part, was always so cheeky and bold, with hardly a trace of shame or nervousness. He would be as much at home in the company of his own classmates as of those senior to him. I would simply yearn for a chance to say hello to him, but could not; perhaps he had read my feelings and was already laughing at me beneath his sleeve. Every now and then, he would face me with a broad smile--even give me a wink, or I might have simply imagined it. Every time he did that, my heart would go racing, face turning red and ears burning like hot irons.

My one silent prayer to God would be for an opportunity to get myself properly introduced to him. My prayer was soon

answered. On a day in July, as it rained and rained, we had the usual school holiday to go picknicking. A coach was hired to carry us to Okhla and the Qutub Minar, the favourite picnic spots on the outskirts of the city. To my unspeakable excitement, I found 'Q', my heart throb, sitting next to me in the coach-so close that our legs would be almost touching, enough to make me almost break into a cold sweat. 'Q' saw through my nervousness. He smiled to reveal a row of dazzlingly white teeth. 'Well?'" He said, and waited for an answer. 'Why are you so nervous? What are you so afraid of? It's all so natural. Don't tell me that you know nothing about these things. That would be a white lie.'

Of course, I knew a good deal about the close embrace and hand practice. It was, however, different with 'Q'. It was something much more than the purely physical. I thought I loved him and sought him as a lifetime partner. I would often dream of the two of us like Laila-Majnu in the midst of a sprawling desert: 'Q' astride a camel and I on foot, holding the reins of the camel, like sarban (camel driver), as we moved along.

'Q' went on to touch and pat me on my thighs. 'Ever get an erection? he whispered into my ear. I must have blushed deeply to make him see it. 'Alright, alright. Don't you get so worked up. We shall talk about it later. We have the whole day to ourselves. There is absolutely no hurry' The picnic went off very well. The weather alternated between rain and shine as we drove on from Okhla to Qutub Minar, ate and played and enjoyed ourselves. 'Q' and I stole as much time to ourselves as possible. We found ourselves a quiet niche somewhere behind the heavily wooded area of Okhla. As we sat close to one another, he would suddenly plunge his hand between my thighs. 'What's wrong with you? You aren't there!' On a sudden, uncontrollable impulse, I reacted furiously to his move and spurned his hand with a force that left him aghast.

'You so-and-so. You shameless badmash, what are you really up to?' And so on. Bewildered, almost stunned at first, 'Q' soon gathered his wits, smiled broadly to show off his gleaming white teeth. 'You're a bloody ass. That's all you are. Hardly fit for men's

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company. Go and get yourself buggered by hijras (eunuchs) for you're only fit for their company. In the course of that single day, I thought, I had come of age. That was the end of the kind of pure love and sentiment I thought I had for him

'If it was all about discharge, what made love so special, different from hand practice.'

In November 1938 Mustafa Kamal Pasha the ruler of Turkey breathed his last. It was a stunning blow to Muslim India. Even as the one who had abolished Khilafat in Turkey; he was still the most-revered single symbol of the Islamic world-its last hope for the triumphant return of the Muslim Umma ancient glory. After Kamal, who? Mr. Jinnah was there, but he was the leader of a slave nation. He could hardly replace Kamal,

Rehmate hain tere aghiar ke kashano per
barq girti hai tu bechare Mussalmanu par

(Oh, Allah, all Thine blessings are showered on aliens while the lightning of Thine wrath strikes Muslims' homesteads!)

Iqbal's Shikwa, already widely recited and sung by famed: Qawwals throughout the city aptly reflected the general mood after the death of Kamal Ataturk.

Delhi must always have its pantheon of heroes and martyrs as an essential part of its folklore. Now that Ataturk and Anwar Pasha were gone and the Khilafat Movement a thing of the past already, Dilliwallas must find some other heroic personage to remind them of Samarkand and Bukhara and Istanbul.

The sudden death of Ataturk revived the legend of the escapade and adventures of the Khairi brothers in Turkey during the First World War. They were said to have been in Istanbul at the time of an impending naval assault by the British Navy on the city then the capital city of Turkey and the seat of Khilafat. The Khairi brothers had received intelligence of the advancing British armada. Turkey did not have much to keep the warships at bay, except for her old and largely unserviceable shore batteries. The two Indians knew those would be no good against the British naval bombardment. The British would storm the city and take it without much resistance.

How, then, to stall their advance and force them to Withdraw without firing a shot? The two Khairi brothers"-Abdul Sattar

and Abdul Jabbar-had been living under the protective custody of the government ever since their return to Delhi after the war. Both held doctorates from Germany. They thought of a novel and ingenious plan. They would wait for the ships to come within visual range of the shore and then raise the yellow flags to signal the city in the grip of a bubonic plague and under quarantine. Their plan worked, the British made an about-turn and fell back.

I heard the two brothers (or was it just one?) tell us the story themselves when I, along with two or three of my friends, ventured to visit them without prior appointment or information. What encouraged us to visit them was their known love for younger people and willingness to talk to them about their aspirations and experiences.

The two brothers lived in a narrow and dark alley off Matia Mahal Bazaar facing the southern gate of the Jama Masjid. The lane rose steeply like a low hill. At the top of the lane was situated the Khairi brothers' home. I don't exactly recall whether the steep approach to the Khairi home was a staircase or a ramp. It would seem to go higher and higher just the same, and if you were not used to it you would soon be out of breath.

The two brothers lived almost incommunicado, offering little access or opportunity to strangers outside their own limited circle of friends and relatives. They would hardly ever move out of their home on the hill. (It would always remind me of Wuthering Heights!)

As much as I could recall and re-enact the setting through the mist of times, their home, rather, the part where we were received was an elongated room opening out on a small brick-paved courtyard commanding a grand view of the great mosque of Shah Jehan. From the courtyard, the mosque looked so close that one almost felt like touching its dome and minarets. It was a most wondrous view.

The Khairi brothers sat on the floor of the room cluttered with books. There was hardly any furniture except for a low writing desk and a number of old and grimy bolster cushions. I felt a shudder run down my spine as I saw the two brothers. I had never seen anyone like them in my life. They were bald all

over-sans a blade of hair on their head, face or eyebrows-like an egg shell. Both Wore thick pebble glasses magnifying their somewhat bluish eyes behind, well beyond their natural size. We took off our footwear-slippers and chapplis--“before entering the room. Awhite sheet, discoloured and dusty covered the floor. The powdery touch of accumulated dust was palpable underneath our soles. We hastened to introduce ourselves, naming our schools, classes, etc.

‘Well, what can I do for you? What do you want? What brings you here?’ One of the brothers said something to that effect. The other, behind his low desk, went on scribbling on at sheet of brown paper. We told him the stories we heard about their experiences in Turkey during Wartime. We Went on to ask” as to what might happen now that Ataturk was dead. Would that mean the restoration of the Khilafat and the revival of Islamic rule? The old man smiled-his lips sucked into the cavity of his toothless mouth.

He lisped rather badly as he talked. His speech was slurred and not quite easy to follow. Instead of answering our question. directly he went on to talk about revolution and the use of force to throw the British out of the subcontinent. He hated the British and would be willing to Welcome Hitler and Mussolini any time to get rid of the British. He was vehemently opposed to Gandhian nonviolence. 'No bloodshed, no independence He'd neither know of nor care too much about Mr. Jinnah. ‘Yet another actor in the Indian political drama. Yet another factor to deflect the public from the real thing, revolution. Yet another arm-chair politician.

The Khairis left a lasting impression on my youthful mind. It was one of extreme fascination, mixed with awe. Their hairless heads and faces had a ghostly air, something wholly strange, even Weird. The mantelpiece or shelf built into the wall in their elongated dalan had a number of skull-capped smoking pipes. The skulls (as skulls are) were as bald and hairless as those of the two brothers. I had never seen a smoking pipe like that before in my life and would not see one until several years later, when, as a young officer I happened to visit Turkey. The skull-capped pipes were there to pick up from any tobacconist shop in

Istanbul. We thanked the Khairis and begged their permission to leave. Their last words, as best as I can recall, had something to do with blood and iron. "Freedom, real and complete, from foreign rule and domination demands blood. It'd settle for nothing less than blood and iron. It is either a total war on the enemy and the usurper-or nothing. Blood-and-iron all the way ..."

At fifteen going on sixteen, I found myself with a downy upper lip and the first crop of stray hair around my chin. Once, while I was towelling after a bath, my mother or one of phoophies noticed the hairy growth under my armpits. 'Look at what he has under his armpits. Well, well, he is a man already' The lady exclaimed, unable to control her astonishment.

Through my five years, I would get to know not only the immediate surroundings of the school, but of places as far and wide as Okhla and Qutub Minar and the historical ruins in between.

Not too far from the Purdah Garden was Saraswati Bhawan, at the end of Meer Dard Road. Thenceforwards Faiz Bazaar (Darya Ganj), Khooni Darwaza (Bloody Gate, where Major Hadson shot the princes dead in 1857) the Kabuli Gate, Willingdon Pavalion, Kotla Firoz Shah, Purana Qila (Old Fort) both favourite picnic spots-sprawling vistas of green grass in the shadows of ancient ruins. Not too far from the Purana Qila was the Matkon Walla ka Mazar-the shrine of the Pitcher Saint on a high, rocky ground. One could see that from a rnile away, with all the whitewashed earthenware pitchers perched on bamboo tops. The pitchers were offerings made to the saint after the prayers of his devotees were answered. At eventide, by the failing light of the setting sun, they would look like so many skulls from a distance.

Except for a military camp in the vicinity; it was a huge jungle full of Jackals and foxes. The jackals bayed to fill the gathering darkness with a raucous cacophony of what the Dilliwallas interpreted as a verbal duel between their rival groups. One group chanted, "Pirdram Sultan hood (My father was a Sultan) and the other responded 'Turn che! (What's that to you?)" The racket acquired a weird ring in the howling

wilderness around. A shudder would run down my spine if we ever happened to return from Nizamuddin Auliya late after sundown.

At the entrance of the military camp. A fierce-looking, slit-eyed Gurkha soldier stood guard, holding a gun with a gleaming fixed bayonet. He stood almost rooted to the spot without moving a muscle, except when he would march a few spaces back and forth, stamping his feet on the ground before coming to a halt. It was such a sight to watch, at once fascinating, fearsome and funny. Yet another mile or so ahead was basti Nizamuddin, a place of pilgrimage for the city people. Outside the entrance of the narrow strip of road to the shine, stood an old structure blackened and brittle through the years. A photographer with his camera on a tripod stood there waiting for an odd customer or two to come by.

One road from Nizamuddin led to Okhla Barrage, a favourite fishing and picnic spot. The other straight to Mehrauli, where stood the lofty Qutub Minar in the midst of the runis of the temple of Rai Pithora. Together with my childhood friend and first cousin Muharnad Ilyas, I loved to walk all the way to Mehrauli, especially on a sunny winter day. We would saunter around Mehrauli-The Meena Bazaar, the Jharna, the Shamsi Talab and the Auliya Masjid.

Beyond the Auliya Masjid was a perfect wilderness-partly green and tree-lined, partly treeless stray patches of green here and there. The drab landscape would change suddenly as a densely tree-lined oasis appeared on the horizon. As we approached the oasis, it became so dense and thick with the clusters of mango trees around so as to form a sort of marquee-a shamiane to cut off the sun's rays, and plunge it into darkness even at high noon: hence the name Andheria Bagh-the Dark Garden. Andheria Bagh was famous for its mangoes and its maze-like narrow spaces through groves of trees. One could easily get lost there, going round and round until one had to cry for help for someone to come to one's rescue.

The year 1939 saw me grow from mid into my late teens, I had a fair View of the world around me. Precocious by nature my long trips to the school, occasionally in a tonga, but mostly

on foot served as an excellent window to the city's landscape. Clhawari Bazaar on the way unveiled the exciting spectacle of Women inviting you to their kothas, They were prostitutes seated or standing at their balconies, nodding their heads up and down and casting inviting glances at the passers by on the road.

Blushing to the roots' of my hair and quite a good deal frightened and nervous, I would still steal glances at the Women up in their balconies. Any time our glances met accidentally; the prostitute would smile hugely and seductively Wave a hand, inviting me upstairs.

What with my walks to and fro from the school and the company of my intimate childhood friends, I was far too mature and versed in life's intimate secrets for one going on 15.

Three days before my 15th birthday on 3 September 1939, While I was flying kites from the rooftop of our house, Mamun Abdul Khaliq came to our house in a state of high excitement. 'It's war (Jang chirr gays hai)!', he shouted at the top of his voice, even from the narrow vestibule entrance of the house. 'Burtania has declared war on Jarmany' What did he really mean? I could only half understand. How did a war being fought across the seven seas matter to us?

'What's World war?'

'It's a world war, like the last World war. Idiot!' Mamun returned in anger. 'What good is all your education when you don't even know what a world war is all about?' I didn't quite understand and must have looked lost.

'Well, a world War is a world War. Burtania on one side, Jermamy on other!

I wondered what it had to do with us in Delhi but I dared not ask any more questions.

'Ab maze aega (it would be real fun now!)', he said. "Burtania ki tu aisi tasi ho jaigi (Britain will be turned upside down!)

'Accha! (Really?)-' I exclaimed. Mamun gave a pinched sardonic smile. 'Yes! But why should you bother about it -at all? It has nothing to do with idiots like you!' And the matter ended there.

` While the war raged and Hitler went on making one conquest after another and Britain kept retreating, a popular

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limerick, ridiculing the British propaganda reports of their success could be heard across the city in everyday conversation. It went like this:

Fatha Birtin ki hoti-hai
Qadam Jurman ka barhta hai!

(Britain claims victory while Germany keeps on advancing).

While much of our own mohalla stayed practically unaffected, there was still a lot of excitement everywhere else in the city and at the school. Headmaster Mohammad Umar in the morning assembly said something about history repeating itself 'Yet another world war within just 20 years of the First World War is a real calamity. However, this might also be a blessing in disguise for us in India. I feel the war might well bring us close to our cherished goal of independence. This is as much as I can say as your headmaster. Let's keep our eyes and ears open. But I shan't allow anybody playing politics in school We are here to learn and leave to serve and make an honest living. That's about all. No politics in any shape or form ...'

Within just a few days of the declaration of war by Britain on Germany; Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, in a radio broadcast announced India's full participation in the war effort Addressing Indians, he said, 'Your deeds will be written in letters of gold (sic) ...' I happened to listen to that broadcast and his use 'of letters of fold' still rings loud and clear in my ears.

The Viceroy's announcement, made without consulting Indian leadership, mainly the All-India National Congress, stirred the city. After the 1937 elections under the 1935 Government of India Act, the Congress had its ministries in provinces except two--Bengal and Assam.

Delhi sat pretty much unaffected. Even more than the news of the war itself, what stirred the city was the strong reaction of the Congress to the Viceroy's (Lord Linlithgow's) announcement, about India being at war against Germany made without ever consulting Indians. The Muslim League, on the other hand, without exactly supporting the Viceroy's proclamation, encouraged Muslims to join the Indian Army would be their best chance to acquire the vital military denied to them since the 1857 ghadar.

The number of radio sets, until then a rarity in the mohallah, went on to increase. My brother Usman also bought one. For quite some time he would not know how to operate the set. He kept on fiddling with the various knobs, moving the needle back and forth until, he would catch the correct station-mainly Radio Berlin and BBC at the right time of the news on the short wave. The medium wave would not be much of a problem at all. It would come loud and clear and was used mainly for musical programmes and plays.

For us at school, the war might have been largely some sort of an AZZy‘Lr1iZa or Tilsim-I-Hooshrubah being enacted on the stage of real life, far from our shores. There was hardly any amongst us who had either not read both, in part or full, or, at least heard of them. There was excitement, such curiosity such fun in all the war news and stories.

The nationalist Urdu teacher, Master Kafiluddin (Kafil Sahib) was furious over the Viceroy's broadcast declaring India at war with Germany. The Viceroy had no right whatsoever to decide such highly important matters for India without consulting the Indians. However, he was not exactly opposed to the Muslim League's policy of encouraging the Indian Muslims to join the Indian Army. 'Once the war is over, these very people would be ready to take up arms against the British. It may not be ideally right, but is there anything ideally right or wrong in politics? In politics everything goes' He would say.

The Congress intensified its campaign against the Viceroy's proclamation without success. The British government turned a deaf ear to Congress' protestations. Worse still, the job-starved Indians flocked to the recruiting offices to have them enlisted as ordinary soldiers-sepoy at a pay of Rs.15 per month along with free clothing, rations, medical services and a pension on retirement. The Muslim League message was loud and clear, join the Indian Army' The Congress, on the other hand, would have the Indians boycott the army in protest over hustling India into the war without consulting its leadership. The Congress threatened to resign en masse from the provincial ministries unless the Government of India agreed to treat the Congress as a full and willing partner in the war effort. The government

turned a deaf ear to the conquerors protestations. True to its Word, the Congress had all its provincial ministers resign. The Muslim League was jubilant at the Congress" decision and decided to celebrate the occasion as The Deliverance Day.

The Muslim League called upon the Muslim to observe the day of Deliverance and Thanksgiving. One misty, winter morning in late December, we came to know of the great news at the school morning assembly 'Hogi, hogi/ chorused the boys with one voice. 'Hogi, hogi/ 'Let it be a holiday!' Whether Headmaster Muhammad Umar said 'yes' or 'no' I hardly remember, but practically all of us walked out of the school immediately after the morning assembly and were soon on our way to the Company Gardens to join a gathering of the Muslim Students' Federation. We walked all the way from the school to Company Gardens in high spirits, raised all the more by the bracing winter morning munching peanuts and parched gram and chanting Mr. Jinnah, zindabad, Muslim League zindabad That was my first exposure to the League-Congress (Hindu-Muslim) politics. At the Company Gardens we were joined by our friends from the Ajmeri Gate Anglo Arabic and Muslim students from various other schools and colleges. It had been more like a picnic or reunion of old friends than a political gathering, We spent the day gossiping, helping ourselves to all the spicy things (roasted chane-ki-dal soaked in lemon juice and mixed liberally with chilly poWder!) our little pocket money for the day could buy.

We knew nothing about Pakistan but we all understood its meaning-'The Land of the Pure'. There was such force, such attraction in the name itself than none of us ever bothered to find out it's really meaning: whether it was the name of a country outside India, like Afghanistan or something out of a fairy-tale book. The name had gained wide currency just the same and we all talked non-stop about it.

Barely three months later, in March 1940, the All-India Muslim League adopted the famous Lahore Resolution demanding Muslim majority areas in north-western and north-eastern India to become sovereign and independent states. Although the resolution contained not a word about Pakistan,

the Hindu press dubbed it as the Pakistan Resolution. It turned out to be one of their Himalayan blunders. No single factor helped to popularize the word Pakistan-until then little more than a mere abstraction-more than the anti-Pakistan blitz launched by the Hindu press. It fleshed up the abstract idea with palpable contours of reality. Chants of 'Pakistan' rose from every nook and corner of the city: Pakistan was now a house-hold word.

'Do you know what Pakistan is all about?' The only answer for most of us to the question would be: 'Must We know what Allah Almighty is all about? Nobody has ever seen Allah. And yet everyone believes in Him'. The answer-an impulsive response more than a positive answer-would leave the questioner aghast. Pressed further, the answer would be, 'Go and ask Mr, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. He is our leader. He knows what Pakistan is all about. He knows what is good for us. As for us, we only know the leader and the leader alone knows, all about that's good and what's bad ...'

What left Acchan Karkhandar and most others of his ilk wondering was whether or not Delhi would form part of Pakistan. 'Well, where else could Delhi go? Delhi is where the Dilliwallas are. Can fingernails be ever separated from the flesh? You just wait and see. What mother's son can sever Delhi from the Dilliwallas like two hearts within a Single body?'

Pakistan, a mere word, a mere notion until then, blossomed into a stirring movement. The All-India Muslim League had hardly a newspaper of its own in the city Even the Urdu, Muslim-owned newspapers like Wuhdat, Alumun, Al-Jamiyut, (etc.), owned and edited by the nationalist Muslims-were beginning to have second thoughts about Pakistan. To them, however, Pakistan, based on the division of the country was no answer to the problem of Muslim India. It was nothing but the implementation of the nefarious British policy of divide-and-rule.

However, the more the Hindu and the Muslim nationalist press wrote against Pakistan, the more the Dilliwallas turned in its favour. A distinct change came into evidence in the everyday life of the city The Iinnah Cap came into prominence:

exchange of Salaam and Wa alaikum-Salaam between Muslims by the roadside was observed more particularly than before. Mosques were fuller even on ordinary week days and full to capacity for the Friday congregational prayers. Masjid Fatehpuri in the heart of the city would be packed to the fullest, As for Jama Masjid, the narnazis spilled over to occupy the flight of stairs leading to the main mosque. The weekly Juma (Congregation) were quite like the Jumma't ul Wida congregational prayer towards the end of the holy month held once a year only: But now it was a weekly feature.

Even the Delhi eunuchs and cheap qawwals would come to support the movement and compose songs in praise of Mr. Jinnah-now Quaid-e-Azam-but cheap parodies in ridicule of Gandhi, The opening verse of one popular song ran follows:

jab Quaid-e-Azum zinda hain,
Gandhi ki tamanna kaun karey

(While the Quaid-e-Azam is there,
Why should anyone bother about Gandhi at all?)

Some over-enthusiastic people also wanted to grow beards but were actively discouraged by their friends. 'Leave the beards to the maulavis. Let them develop those weaver-bird nests, on their chins, Look at Mr. Jinnah and follow him. There is simply no place for those bearded fanatics in Pakistan-the Land of the Pure'.

Besides Mr. Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan, leaders of the Muslim opinion from all over India could be seen frequently along Chandni Chowk and Ballimaran. In the course of time we came to recognize the faces of Khawaja Sir Nazimuddin, Mr. Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy Nawab Iftikhar Ali Mtundot, Raja Ghazanfer Ali Khan, Sardar Aurangzeb Khan, Nawab Ismail Khan, Mr. Abdul Hashim (the blind man from Benga) and God knows how many others. Most of them would stay in Coronation Hotel-the hub of the visiting Muslim politicians. Others would lodge in the Maidens or the Cecil outside Kashmiri Gate, still others with their friends and admirers.

Pakistan was Istanbul; Pakistan was Mecca, Madina; Pakistan

was Hijaz-e-Muqqadas, Green domes and pigeons and peace and trees laden with dates and figs.

In the phenomenal rise of the Muslim League, especially after the adoption of the Lahore resolution, Kafil Sahib saw India headed for a bitter communal strife and division. 'This would be to nobody's advantage' and he said, 'Even if the Hindus and Muslims get what they want, they would have little to gain, as the country would go to pieces and the people suffer'.

Chapter 7

Winds of Change

Delhi in the late 1930s was coming into its own: it was waking up from its long post-Khilafat slumber.

Somebody would compare Delhi to the Chinese doll which would wake and sleep as you stood it up or made it lie down. For practically half a century after the Ghadar of 1857, Delhi had gone into a deep slumber, close to a coma. It woke up early in the second decade of the 20th century at the time of the Balkan Wars. The handsome, mustachioed Dr. Mukhtar Ahrnan Ansari led a medical mission to Turkey to help the Turkish war-wounded. Turkey lost the Balkan Wars against Serbia. Then came the First World War. Turkey joined Germany and Italy against Great Britain, France and Russia. Germany lost the war together with its allies, Italy and Turkey. This came as a great shock to the Delhi (Indian) Muslims, and stirred them out of their prolonged inertia. Although the Turkish Empire was lost, the Khilafat remained as the symbol of the Muslim power to give hope to the Indian Muslims; and they all hoped and prayed for the survival of the Khilafat.

The subsequent dismemberment of Turkey and the threat it posed to the Turkish caliphate (Khilafat) turned the city into the hub of all India politics. The Rowlett Acts, Jallianwalla Bagh and the Khilafat Movement agitated the city beyond anything. Mahatma Gandhi and the Ali Brothers-Shaukat Ali and Muhammad Ali-were the vanguard of the Khilafat Movement, the clarion-call and the battle cry presaging the thundering roll of the drums of a civil war, Delhi had never been so stirred, so agitated, so alive, so wide awake. The city and its people would be wide awake only when dreaming of distant lands of grand

sultanates and empires, of which the Ottoman Caliphate was the last living symbol. The bazaars and streets, the twisting lanes, hardly five or six yards wide, reverberated to the chants of the war song.

Boli amma Muhammad ali ki jan baita khilafat pe de du,
Sath hain bhai shaukat ali jan baita khilafat pe de

(Thus spoke the mother of Muhammad Ali, 'Go, my son go, lay down your life for Khilafat, Your Brother Shaukat Ali stands by you, go and lay down your life for Khilafat.)

Along with its people, every mohallah, every gali, the very walls of the city echoed and re-echoed the magic chants of the Khilafat. It was a quaint mixture of politics and poetry: of tamasha and reality and of comedy and tragedy. The gay blades of Delhi, the karkhandars, their prototypes -Acchan, Shadu and others would lend a lighter touch even to an otherwise somber event. The Khilafat Movement brought them and their city back to life. Their joyous involvement in the Khilafat Movement would not know what it might have been all about. Their visions of Turkey and Khilafat-i-Osmania might have been largely drawn from the Turkish cap and Turkish coat ensemble and the Istanbuli sherbet Walla hawking his brew around Jama Masjid. He would have highly polished metal-copper or brass-shallow bowls and a cylinder strapped on to his back. He would tilt the cylinder halfway down his back to make the sherbet, gurgling out of the nozzle attached to the cylinder. Even if pure delusion, the sheer euphoria and ecstasy spawned by the movement could not be denied. Mass rejoicing and jubilation would hardly ever depend on a sober understanding or a critical appraisal of a given situation. It came just like the smile across a baby's face. And then, suddenly it was all over exactly like a dream that melts away as one wakes up.

One day in 1922, Mahatma Gandhi, the supreme guide and mentor of the Khilafat Movement, announced the end of the movement after an incident of violence in the little-known Chauri Chaura tehsil of the Gorakhpur district in the United Provinces, to the utter shock and bitter despair of the Delhi-Wallas. They had pledged to lead the movement on the absolute condition that it would stay non-violent, come what may.

Although an act of mass violence, Chauri Chaura was hardly provocation enough for the Mahatma to abandon the movement altogether. A firm warning to the offenders would have been even more telling, without hurting the movement. The Khilafat dream thus shattered to pieces. Muslim Delhi was stunned and paralyzed and, once again, lapsed into the deep post-Mutiny coma. Much more than Gandhi ji's renunciation of the movement was the abolition, two years later in 1924, of the very institution of Khilafat by Mustapha Kamal Pasha-Turkey's new leader. The last citadel of Islam in the world turned secular. Istanbul, the seat of the caliphate, ceased to be the capital of Turkey signifying a complete break from the past.

Maulana Muhammad Ali would die in London; Shaukat Ali would all but withdraw from practical politics; Abul Kalam Azad, Hakim Ajmal Khan and Dr. Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari would engage in secular, nationalist politics of the All-India National Congress to replace the brave vision of the revival of Khilafat with the sordid secular, temporal political realities, the bete noire of Dilliwallas. So, until there would be someone to make them dream again of distant lands of Iran and Turan, of this 'stan' and that 'stan' outside Hindustan, they would go back to sleep. For in sleep alone would they have their cherished, life-long dreams come true, They would dream when wide awake, and dream they must, to live.

Between the mid 1920s and the mid 1930s, they slept and slept: no dreams, no visions, no illusions. Then came Mr. Jinnah, back home from his long exile in England, to galvanize the city and stir the Dilliwallas with the love of yet another distant land: a land that was not even there, which existed only in their dreams, hence was more real. Even their own beloved city Delhi, belonged more to the world of dreams and vision than one in brick and mortar. They would look at the city not as it was but as it might have been under the great Mughals. Shahjehanabad, the city that Emperor Shahjehan had built and one of his great grandsons- the last Light and Lamp of the Mughal Dynasty (Khandain-i-Mughalia ki Akhri Chhism-o-Chiragh) Bahadur Shah Zafer portrayed in his poetry as Ujra Diyar-the city in ruins, the requiem for the Lost Empire.

The post-Khilafat fitful sleep would yield place to ecstatic pre-Pakistan daydreaming: the long road to Utopia was thus paved once again with milestones of gold and silver, each heralding the approach of the destination. The Messiah from the Fourth Heaven had come and with him returned the dream of the Promised Land-Pakistan to create a wide awakening amongst the denizens of the historic city.

All that had been before my birth or early childhood and adolescence. The year 1939 ushered me from adolescence into youth: a new movie every Friday long walks up and down and around the city much talking and debating at the school, the stimulating lectures of S. Heen on his Marxist Utopia, all the exciting news of the war and independence after the certain British defeat, and a lot more. Like any other teenager, I felt the world had been created for me and was firmly underneath my feet and the sky well, it was not beyond my reach.

Niaz Fatehpuri, the editor-publisher of the monthly magazine *Niger*, Lucknow excelled in picking up things from English language, literature and history transcribing them into Urdu and presenting them as his own or under attribution to the original author. Through the medium of *Nigar*, he popularized such names as Darwin, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, Guy deMaupassant, Anatole France, Oscar Wilde, Khalil Gibraan-any number of those quaint names~hardly ever heard of before. Very few, if any would have ever so much as seen the face of *The Origin of the Species*, but there was no dearth of enthusiastic young men talking of evolution: of man being the offspring of the ape. As for God, since nobody could either prove or disprove his existence, what was the big idea in discussing Him at all?

My friend Suhelain, abbreviated to S. Heen, did not believe in conventional religion. It was one thing being a Muslim, but quite another being a mulla. "I am damned if I'd ever become one. It's all a hoax-all this clap-trap about religion and ethics, spiritualism and morality What do all these matter for one going about hungry and the naked? What good is all that mumbo- jumbo for the sick and the suffering? Religion is the opiate of the people.

S. Heen was a thin and sickly-looking young man with a face as yellow as turmeric. But when he spoke of the suffering humanity all over the colonial and the capitalist world, his face lit up with a rosy hue and his eyes glittered with an almost unearthly radiance. He was already immersed in the communist lore. While I would neither understand nor agree with his ideas about religion, I could not help being deeply impressed by his strength of conviction.

He would emphatically disown any similarity or comparison between the communist rejection of God and religion and what he called Niaz Fatehpuri's atheistic romanticism. 'Niaz is yet another petty bourgeoisie, little more than a literary dandy and a pirate at that: most of his works', he would spiritedly contend, 'are almost true copies and literal translations of Western writers no more!'

Much of what he said went over my head. My one and only real question would be: 'Don't you really believe in Allah and His Rasul?'

S. Heen would simply laugh it off. 'just wait and you'd find the answer yourself one day Allah and His Rasul have nothing to do with the affairs of men, Man is the master of his own destiny! The best thing would be for man and God to make their peace to let one another be!' That was how Barakat Ahmad, Usrnan's friend, would also argue and quote some English poet to illustrate their point. 'I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my ship, What business has God to do with my private life?'

The atmosphere of doom and gloom of the early 1930s was lifting. A spirit of rebellion, of a clean break from the past had overtaken the youth. One could see more clean-shaven, bareheaded young men parading the streets. A new collection of short stories *Angare* (Embers) had appeared and was promptly banned by the government. The ban aroused wide curiosity and a lively interest in the book, especially among the budding young intellectuals. It was passed on from one reader to another like a password, like a secret sign belonging to an underground cult. The anthology contained stories by Professor Ahmad Ali, Dr. Rashid Jehan, Sajjad Zaheer, Mahmuduzzafar

and others, It was such a radical departure from the romantic hogwash of the past. All the stories were set in the cultural and social milieu of Delhi and Lucknow. They projected the native Indian scenes, used local metaphors and themes in place of Turki ki Hur (Turkish Hour), Ahmm-e-Miser (Egyptian Pyramid), Darya-i-Neel (The Nile) and such other wholly outlandish locations and symbols. Professor Ahmad Ali's short story Hamari Gali (our Lane) had been an instant success depicting the scene in the narrow and twisting galis and kuchas of the city, though depressing was strikingly vivid and realistic. It portrayed all the filth and garbage littering the street, the stray cats and dogs under the extended shop front of the milk vendor's waiting to lick at the discarded earthenware bowls of milk and curd dumped by the customers into the open drain.

Emotionally it might have much the same outpouring of the spirits as seen at the height of the Khilafat agitation, only different in substance. The focus had shifted irreversibly from Turkey and distant lands to India and Indian independence. The British Empire was teetering to a fall. Alongside Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy the Soviet Union with its stirring message for the working and the downtrodden classes-'Workers of the world, unite you have nothing to lose but your chains', had fired the youth with a new spirit, Words like communism and socialism were gaining currency and becoming a part of the young people's everyday talk and languages. S. Heen, senior to me in age by five or six years, confided to me one day about his connection with the Party. It would be sometime yet, he said, before he would be accepted as a regular member of the Party. Nevertheless, he was allowed to attend its Weekly meetings as a progressive young man. "It is not too easy to be member. One must go through the mill before qualifying for party membership. The Communist party is like no other party. It's not confined just to this or that country or people but is universal in its revolutionary programme and message for the oppressed and the downtrodden of the world. It would one day establish heaven on earth. Just wait and see!"

Mr, Muqemuddin Farooqi, a senior member of the Delhi Communist Party; was helping S. Heen to get a proper party

membership only if he went seriously about it and worked really hard for the party. I remember Mr. Farooqi as a young man-clad in a spotless white khaddar sherwani and a cap of the same cloth, somewhat stylishly designed similar but not exactly to the Gandhi cap. He had his office or residential apartment almost next to the shop of Sheikh Muhammad Din (7) & Sons-dealers in leather goods, tonga accessories, cab tyres and saddlery, The shop, as far as I remember, belonged to Mr. Anis Ahmad Rushdie's (father of Salman Rushdie) family-his grandfather or father. Mr. Farooqi was the prototype of a young revolutionary intellectual-quiet, but with a face brimming with inner strength. He was said to have had a romantic affair with one Paren Barucha a communist firebrand from Eastern Europe.

The Shah Buh grapevine was also busy churning out stories predicting the end of the British Empire, The junkies of the Shah Barah had little to do with either the Congress or the league Politics. They had their own world, their own pipe dreams just the same-the dream of the rebirth of Khilafat once the British were gone. They dreamt of the bejewelled, gorgeously robed and grandly-crowned Khalifa adorning the throne inside the Lal Qila, and the junkies high on green-leaf (subz-pzztta cannabis) and transported to paradise, The end of the Angrez Hukumat did not appear to be far. And once the wretched infidel was gone, all would be well with the world.

As the old junkies of Shah Barah had their ecstatic vision of a drugged paradise on earth, the young of S. Heen's school had their hearts and minds burning with the desire to create a socialist Utopia in a free and sovereign India, It might be quite like the black squall-a Kali Ahdhie-suddenly hitting the city after a long spell of Windless, suffocating hot weather. It would uproot trees, bring down electric poles and make hoardings at the street corners, fly away like giant bats, And there would be such ghoulish and eerie whistling and screeching to make people plug their ears, lest their eardrums burst. Columns of gritty dust full of particles hard as stone would hit the eyes and force their way in to inflame them and make them water. While the windstorm blew, the city would cease to be a city and turn into a howling wilderness.

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Such was the stormy change, like a Kali Andhi overtaking Delhi, shaking it to its very foundations. The old order was simply crumbling while the new order looked like getting closer the chaos and anarchy-it seemed like a rudderless ship without a captain. The old order was cracking up slowly and inexorably but the new order was still out of sight.

In our Haveli Hissamuddin, even someone like Mr. Abdul Khaliq, a businessman through and through, came to be widely known as a dahria or an atheist. He was a devotee and almost hafiz (memoriser) of Diwan-I-Ghalib. He would recite any number of Ghalib's couplets, in an out of season, mocking at the reality of Hell and Heaven-parodying the waiz (Quranic teacher scholar) and praising wine. Mr. Abdul Khaliq would neither offer his daily prayers nor observe the Ramzan fast.

What sort of Muslim then was he? And he himself had the cheek to say: 'Look, did I ever claim to be a good Muslim? I admit I am a sinner, but I do try to be a good human being. You know how difficult it is for a man to become a good human being-a real insan, that is'. Then he would go on to recite one of Ghalib's couplets in support of his contention.

Baske mushkil hai har eke kaam ka asam hona,
admi ko bhi nussier nahin Insan hona!
(Not everything could be easily achieved.
Even man is not ordained to be a good human being!)

When somebody would ask him directly if he believed in

God, he would recite yet another Ghalib's couplet with a smile:

Ab to aram se guzarti hai
aqbat ki khabar Khuda jane!
(Life is not bad as it is, what happens in the
Hereafter, God alone knows!)

That was Mr. Abdul Khaliq, the businessman. His atheism or non-conformism drew its strength and inspiration from Ghalib. He was as much a rejector of God and Islam as Ghalib, Not a blasphemer by any chance or definition, but a free thinker.

The lawyer Sheikh Ata-ur-Rahman was even way ahead of Abdul Khaliq, He would stop at nothing to make fun of Islam. He hated the Arabs, their history and their faith. 'These Bedouin savages and barbarians! Who are they to teach us about God

and religion? Islam is more of a code, Din, than religion in the fullest spiritual sense of the term/ He was lawyer (Bachelor of Laws LLB) and held a BA (Hons) in Philosophy He was full of Plato and Aristotle and would go on to quote them ad nauseum. After a day's hard work at the small cause court (local kutcheri) he would hold his own court at his office in Ballimaran Bazaar when he did not have many a client to advise and just a brief or two prepare for the next day.

At the other end of the metropolitan spectrum was perhaps the last generation of middle-aged, old Dilliwallas, happy and content with their own world of tradition and dreams. They would let themselves be without either striving to resist the change or accept it. There were any number of poets, writers, plain and simple gossips, loud-mouthed Cassandras with nothing better to do than predict the end of the world and find much comfort in the saying 'Ap Mardam, Jehun Murdum (Once I am dead the world would be dead).'

The Hardinge Library at the far end of the Company Gardens, which I would visit every now and then, would be the rendezvous point of quite a few of the young intellectuals. At least two of them impressed me deeply One was a sherwani-clad, bespectacled young man with deep blue eyes sparkling from behind his glasses. He introduced me to Guy de Maupassant and quite a few other French writers. One could find him in the library every day and at all hours of the day that the library would be remain open.

The other would also be in the library at all hours. He must have been in his early or late 30s, short and with a distinctly bent back, He would be busy reading Tilasm-I-Hosh Ruba-volume after volume-and taking down notes all the time. He would scribble on the same sheet of paper several times over-writing and over-writing in a long hand, each word being as long as quarter or half a line. Not to speak of ever taking to anyone, they would hardly ever raise his head from work to look right or left, if only to rest his eyes.

Amongst the poets, I remember having seen the poet Bekhud Dehalvi and Nuh Naravi for the first time in Ballimaran, outside Sheikh Ata-ur-Rahman's office. Nuh Naravi was a small,

diminutive man, more conspicuous for his gnome-like build than anything else. Bekhud was of middle height and physique. He wore an unbuttoned sherwani and a bright red Turkish cap, Nuh Naravi also sported the same kind of dress. Unlike Bekhud who wore a white flowing beard, Nuh was clean-shaven, may be just bald, like the Khairi brothers.

What distinguished Bekhud from all others was his rosary with a thousand beads (Tasbeeh-I-Hazardanu.) He carried it night and day like a walking stick. He worked the beads up and down in a mechanical fashion even as he talked and swore. The poet was known as much for his poetry as for his devastatingly lashing forked tongue and his skill for improvising swearwords. His encounters with Sahil Dehlavi-another eminent poet of his day and age-were part of the Delhi folklore.

Sahil was a true scion of the Mughal dynasty. He was a remarkably handsome man with a face fair and freckled. He was paralyzed in the lower half of his body and could not walk. Yet he would be on the move most of the time in a man-pulled rickshaw or a wheelchair pushed by an attendant. I heard him on a number of occasions at the house of Khawaja Muhammad Shafi, Sahil had a rhythmical, low voice. He recited his poetry musically instead of flatly spelling out each and every word, I wonder how I am still able to recall one of his couplets word for word, which I heard him sing at the Khawaja Shafi's house. I was still in my mid-teens but the couplet and its musical rendering stays fresh in my mind. The couplet belongs to a complex genre of poetry called *mustazad*-literally meaning 'additional'-a smaller rhyming verse added after each full verse to enhance the uniqueness and the beauty of the composition.

Sahil's couplet went like this:

Khabar lay apne ja' me ki zamana hai, haya ka yeh
Na in be bakyan ka yeh
Jawani mai gariban-qaba ghammaz hanta hai
Dar-gul baz hanta hai

(Beware of your open shirt front; it's time for modesty rather than of the bold advances, In youth the front of your garment betrays you. See how the bud blossoms into a flower!)

Unlike Bekhud, loud-mouthed, fulsome in the use of swear

Words even naked obscenities-Sahil was quiet and introspective. He would hardly ever open his mouth, except to greet or return a greeting, that too in whispers, and recite his poetry on rare occasions only request. He was very aloof and would leave his house in a rickshaw or a wheelchair only at certain fixed hours for a round of the nearby Yadgar (Edward's Park) or the Company Gardens oft Chandni Chowk. Bekhud, on the contrary would be seen all over-at different places and different times. The hub of his movements was the Urdu Bazaar, facing the Iarna Masjid, where he should be seen always in company unstoppably counting heads and abusing someone or the other. Everybody would be afraid of his biting, scurrilous tongue. One never knew when it would start wagging. And once he let his tongue go, he would go on and on, throwing in one expletive after another, one juicy mother-sister F word after another.

Khwaja Muhammad Shafi's house was the hub of the city's literary life, in the best classical tradition. A literary luminary himself, he loved playing host to all the city and visiting poets and writers. To the young budding writers, the poetry sessions at his house provided an excellent platform to make their debut. As an accomplished connoisseur and critic of poetry he would size up each young poet, sift the corn from the chaff, encourage those with a real talent and dismiss other with a cutting but hardly ever nuking remark. 'Mian', he would go on to tell the errant young men, 'Har kase ra behere kare sakhtand'-God has created everyone for a certain specific task and function just as not every poet can become an ironsmith or a carpenter, not every ironsmith and carpenter can become poet either.

And that would be end of the budding poet for all times to come. While a good chit from Khwaja Sahib might not necessarily ensure the young man's success, a bad chit would generally toll the bell for him. Khwaja Sahib's haveli was supposed to be a nursery of young poets.

Gentle to the core, Khwaja Sahib had a biting tongue. There were few to excel him in the use of pun and alliteration. He also had a unique sense of humour-an inimitable blend of biting humour and prickly satire. One self-proclaimed disciple of

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Dagh Dehalvi-whatever his name or nom d' plume was-and a regular visitor to Khwaja Sahib's weekly gathering, insisted on a candle being placed before him in the tradition of classic mushai'ras, before he would condescend to recite his verse. The man was also half-blind, may be also half-deaf. Khwaja Shafi would always oblige the self-proclaimed sole-surviving disciple of Daghd Dehalvi, but instead of a wax candle, have a kerosene hurricane lantern placed before him when his turn came to recite. The poet had little more to offer than the verse of his own teacher, with only a change of word or line here and there to send the gathering into repressed guffaws and ironical encores (wah, wah, mukarrur, mukurrar). He would recite one of Daghd's famous ghazals:

Na rawa kahiyye, na saja kjahiyye
kahiyye, khahiyye mujhey bura kahiyye
(Go on, call me all sorts of names-good, bad and indifferent!)
He would simply reverse the order and recite as follows:
Mujhey bura – han han bura kahiyye
kahiyye, chain a rawa kahiyye chain o saza kahiyye! (Sic)

While the shocking corruption would not change the substance, it desecrated the beauty of the original. Such abuse of classical poetry would have been utterly unpardonable in any other case; but the self-styled Daghd's sole-surviving disciple was treated as an exception to the rule. Khwaja Sahib would quip, 'In par tu sou khoun bhi maf hain: Ek bechara ustad daghd hi kiya (He is could get away even with even a hundred murders. What does one poor Daghd matter!)' And the half-blind, half-deaf poet would go on and on misquoting and corrupting Daghd's verse as his own. Finally; he would recite one of his own composition. In the satirical chorus of 'wah, wah, subhan Alla was heard Khwaja Sahib's vibrant voice loud and clear:

Kalam-i-Meer samjhe our zubani Mirza samjhe
Maghar inka kha yeh up samihe ya Khuda samjhe!

(We understand the verse of Meer and the language of Mirza As for him Allah alone could follow his verse!)

'Wuh, wah, Marhaba' someone in the gathering would play on the word Marhaba (Great!) and change it into 'Mar-be-Haya (Death to the shameless!) And the whole gathering would into a field of saffron (Zafran zar) as the idiom went,

Hazrat-i-Hilal Chughtai age-wise was the seniormost in the audience. He must have been where in his late 50s or early 60s. As tradition went, the seniormost would be the last to be requested to come and recite his verse. Hazrat Khwaja Sahib would announce: 'Please allow me now to beg of Hazrat-i-Hilal Chughtai to come and grant us the privilege of hearing his divinely-inspired poetry, Look up heavenward and see for yourself the Crescent (Hilal) grow into the full Moon (Maha-I-taaban) Welcome, Hazrat-i-Hilal. All eyes be raised heavenward to see the Crescent develop into full moon.'

Hazrat-i-Hilal Chughtai was as modest as he looked. He would make no fuss about the lamp or the candle placed before reciting his verse. Rheumy-eyed, bald-faced and zombie looking, he would start leafing through the pale, twisted and torn pages of his Biyuz-i-Khus (book of verse), stop at a certain page and, after clearing his throat, would beg the audience's leave to recite. 'Bismillah, Bismilluh Inayat! Irshad!' They would all respond in one voice. A deep silence would follow. He would hum under his breath to set the tune before going on to recite his verse in a reedy voice matching his frail, specter-like frame,

(Ek Lakri tar ka saaz hai
 El teri or ek meri awaz hai)
 (A piece of a wood and a length of wire
 One makes my voice and the other yours!)

The audience would break into a deafening chorus of 'wah, wah' and encores after every couplet was recited. At the end of the first ghazal, there were loud and compelling requests for yet another, yet another, Like a blind man who would need nothing more than a pair of eyes, Hazrat-i-Hilal would readily agree, bow several times to his audience in thanks giving and go ahead to recite one of his 'latest' ghazals. 'Bismillah, Bismillah!' The poet went:

So raha hun mai qabar main, meethi neend
 Meri ankhun main hai jalwa-i0dildar mehboob

(Sweetly do I sleep in my grave. Inside my eyes resides the beautiful vision of my sweetheart).

A verse free of prosody-no metre, no rhyme, no radeef no quuha. Comical distortion of regular poetry But the audience,

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Khwaja Sahib himself foremost amongst them, broke into an unrestrained chorus of wah, wah, Subhan Allah!

'Allah Almighty has created each of us to play a certain role-only a certain role and nothing more. There are poets and entertainers. Both have a function to perform: the poet to inspire you, the entertainer to amuse you. Neither is superior to the other. The entertainer may even be one better for cheering your heart. We all know the idiom: Dil Ba-dust awur ke hajj-i-Akbarust. (The greatest haj is the act to cheer another man's heart) Tongue-in-cheek in the case of half-poets, or what he called 'neem shizir', Khwaja Sahib was invariably kind and affectionate to budding poets. A neem shair, he would say was even more dangerous than a neem hukim or quack. While a quack through faulty diagnosis and spurious medicine would kill or hurt a man-a mortal, after all, the neem shair kills or hurts poetry which is immortal. " In the case of young poets, if he ever for one failing to observe the correct meter or using a wrong or no rhyming Word, he would only say 'Mian, would you read it again!' and would repeat it once or twice until the poet saw for himself where he might have faulted. If he still couldn't, Khwaja Sahib would dismiss him with a cutting remark, like 'In se Khuda samjhe-God alone could make him see reason!')

The poetic readings at Khwaja Shafi's house represented the end of the city life least affected by the winds of change. He lived in his own chosen world of ornate semantics, verse and romantic vision. He would seem little concerned with, if not completely cut off from the rest of the world of the late 1930s, the harbinger of the humdrum but exciting era of change and discontinuity.

His father, Khwaja Abdul Majid, already in his late sixties and best-dressed old man of his time. Dazzlingly fair of face, he would be dressed in a starched, rustling, discreetly embroidered Muslim angarkha, summer and winter. During Delhi's severe winters he would put on a quilted, thickly cotton-lined vest underneath his angarkha. Come rain, come shine, he would come to Mansarovar Restaurant in Chandni Chowk for a light

hearted talk with his bosom friend Haji Abdul Razzaq, my grandfather's youngest brother.

The two were poles apart in appearance, bearing and behaviour. Haji Abdul Razzaque was dark and diminutive, quiet, and a pucca businessman. Khwaja Abdul Majid, with a mow-white trimmed beard, peach-and-cream face, was a little above medium height, prodigiously voluble and a master of expletives. When he would run out of his stock of pet swear words, he would improvise off the cuff, 'Tum, suley du-paise ke bisat tum kiya junu zindigi kia hai! (You so-and-so a bloody two penny-worth retailer what do you know what life is all about?)' He would tell his friend to his face, without ever provoking him. The businessman, normally a quiet and patient listener, would have his say too. 'Khwaja Sahib, do you know what happens if you chew instead of swallowing a quinine pill-it leaves a bitter taste in your mouth without doing as much good as when swallowed whole. Your obscenities are no better than chewed quinine!'

The two would laugh heartily at each other's naughty remarks.

I would often see the two odd men as they sat in their green-painted wicker chairs laid out especially for them on the pavement outside Mansarovar Restaurant, their one regular haunt. The only thing heard loud and clear was their hearty laughter-full of youthful vigour, belying their age. The words and remarks attributed to them are my own, based on the strong snatches of conversation I heard in passing and the kind of body language accompanying them.

Amongst others of the older generation, there was Mr, Abdul Khaliq Ashrafi, popularly known as Babu Ashrafi, Babu Ashrafi was a gentleman-at-large. Winter or summer, he would always be dressed in Western clothes, complete with a necktie secured by a faded golden tiepin and a Sola topee. He sported a toothbrush moustache, wore gold-rimmed glasses and always carried a silver-topped stick. He would walk straight, 'eyes front' without looking either to his right or left. He was also considered a renegade-even an apostate-rumoured to have converted to Christianity. His religious faith and belief

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apart, Babu Ashrafi was noted for two things-his long walks all the way from Ballimaran to Nizamuddin-no less than five to six miles each way and his intimate association with Khwaja Hasan Nizami, the keeper and the custodian of the shrine of saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya.

Now who was Khwaja Hasan Nizami? Was he a man of God or an agent of the Sarkar, just another man of the world parading as a sufi, a politician, journalist and writer? Whatever. He was a different person to different people-a rare combination of the mundane and ultra-mundane, of the idealist and pragmatist, of the real and fake.

I saw him many a time in Ballimaran and around Urdu Bazaar in the shadow of the Jama Masjid on my way to or from school. He sported a jet-black (dyed, of course) trimmed beard, long black hair pouring out of his black (or was it bottle-green) velvet conical cap, and streaming all over his back and shoulders. He wore a long black gown with a richly embroidered (in gold or silk thread) border and a green scarf around his neck. His small, narrowly placed, piercing eyes gleamed behind his spectacles.

Khwaja Hassan Nizarni was a master of Salees Urdu-the elegant simple prose of Delhi. He was known for his unhindered access to hukkam-i-bala-high officials, from the District Magistrate to the Viceroy-but an enigma, riddle to most people.

Khwaja sahib was one of the most popular personalities of the city He ran the affairs of the Dargah, the shrine of Harat Nizamuddin, as its custodian. The upkeep of the dargah was generously funded by ruling princess, Muslims and Hindus. The Nizam of Hyderabad was one of the foremost patrons of the dargah.

The dargah was as much a place of worship and deep reverence as of relaxation. Famous qawwals, from far and wide, would flock to the dargah to pay their musical tribute to the saint, On the 17th day after the Eid-ul-Fitr-the first Eid after Ramazan-the Dargah would be en fete for three days. Thousands of people from all over the country would congregate to pay homage to Saint Nizainuddin and his lifelong companion and devotee, Hazrat Amir Khusru. The 'Sattarwin

Sharif, as the 17th day of the Eid-ul Fitr was called, presented mixed shades of a huge public fare and a solemn pilgrimage, Fateh-khuwani-reaction from the Holy Quran-to bless the soul of the saint, night and day long qawwalis formed its main features.

Khwaja Hassan Nizami played host to all and sundry from his one tikkya adjoining the mausoleum, Delhi's Chief Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and other dignitaries would be invited to partake of the special langar bara khana of sweet and salted rice dishes-biryani and muttanjun-and listen to the qawwali music. Every now and then, even the Viceroy would grace the occasion with his presence.

The hub of the Sattarwin fete was the nearby Humayun 'Ibaber, where lay buried Emperor Babur's son, Humayun, the second in the line of the Great Mughals,

The desolate landscape of the tomb turned into a vista of rejoicing and festivity; holiday-makers of all age group-young, middle-aged and old-would be all over the place from up at the minarets to the interior of the mausoleum and out on the raised plinth, Kite-fliers thronged the lawns of the tomb, filling the sky-line With clusters of multi-coloured kites-flying them up and down and getting entangled in fierce serial battles. The Delhi karkhandars of the artisan class would spend three days and nights in and around the tomb hanging out, flying kites and enjoying their favourite kabab-paratha dishes.

Khwaja Hassan Nizami, his devotees, friends and staffers, saw to it that the fete went off smoothly and peacefully without any trouble. Although the Sattarwin was a Muslim festival, Hindus and Sikhs also participated freely Ostensibly a man of God, Khwaja Hassan Nizami was a man of many parts,-writer, politician, journalist and reputedly also a mole-a government agent. His politics would, however, be confined mainly to affairs of the Delhi municipality He published a popular weekly Munaadi (Proclamation). Babu Abdul Khaliq Ashrafi had something to do with the editorial side of the Weekly Munaadi had a strong pro-British bias and policy among the periodicals competing with Uaadi (Rumour) and Sunaudi (Hearsay) were rather prominent, None of them, including Munadi, Would,

however, stay on long enough to make their mark on the city life.

Khwaja Hassan Nizami, Babu Ashrafi, Mulla Wahidi and a few others of their ilk were the last of the post-Mutiny generation representing the pre-Mutiny Delhi in culture and tradition. They could see and feel the winds of change sweeping across the city and did their best to soften their impact before they grew into a cyclone.

Delhi was not like another city. It had a unique and unshared culture, a tradition of its own, inextricably woven into its traditional fabric and a sort of everyday routinism of its own. The city; in fact, was only the other name of its own peculiar societal and traditional norms. And once those two core elements fell apart, the city would be like any other city: in truth, a body without a soul.

But who can stop a river once it breaks its banks? Who can stand up against a cyclonic windstorm?

No matter what Khwaja Hassan Nizami and others of their class would do to stall the oncoming storm, there was little in their power to forestall it. Nature has its own way fulfilling itself; and once it comes into force, all the buffers, all the Windshields, all the road blocks would be blown away.

Delhi of the late 1930s stood poised for a change.

I matriculated in first division. The vision of a world war was still rather vague and blurred in my own mind. Raging far away from Delhi and India, it was, nevertheless, beginning to impact the life in the city. The Delhi-based government of India was already functioning on a war footing. New jobs were being created. Quite a few of my school friends chose to join government service instead of joining college. The Great Depression, afflicting the city since the early 1930s, was giving way to new jobs and opportunities. Delhi was emerging as a boom town.

I had half a mind to apply for one of the clerical jobs in the fast expanding department of Civil Supplies under one Mr. Mushtaq Ahmad Gurmani, its Director-General (yes, the same Mr. Gurmani, who, in Pakistan would become one of its principal power-brokers as Federal Minister and Provincial

Governor). I had even submitted a handwritten application of a clerical job on the advice and constant goading of one of my friends and first cousins, Muhammad Yameen. Mother was in no position to afford my college fees and expenses. The thought of joining government service as a clerk depressed me deeply—pushing me almost to the point of a nervous breakdown. I could still distinctly recall getting suddenly out of breath while climbing up the stairs of the civil secretariat on my way to the office where job applications were received. After every few steps, I would sit down on the stairs to catch my breath.

I yearned to join college but I knew mother could not afford it, and grandfather would be my last hope. One day I mustered up enough courage to go and broach the subject to him. He hemmed and hawed, painting a grim picture of his own poor finances. I sat staring into his face without saying a word. 'Alright', he said. 'I'll see what I can do to arrange your admission fees and initial expenses. But you mustn't expect me to go all the way through with your college fees and expenses, you see..

Something was better than nothing, I told myself and joined the Anglo-Arabic College as soon as grandfather paid some 100-150 rupees to cover admission and three months of tuition fees, plus the cost of text and exercise books in advance. I had taken History Persian and Philosophy along with English, which was compulsory. The long summer vacation was spent joyfully in company of friends—Gulzar, Mana, Sattar (the actor and cinema buff from my maktab and Sattar from schooldays). Gulzar and Mubarak had been known to me fairly well without being on close and intimate terms.

We would go to Jumna every morning, brushing our teeth with freshly broken neem twigs, spitting, talking and singing some of the latest film songs and dreaming of all the good things that the future held in store for us. The college opened at the end of July after the long vacations. We had some excellent teachers Professors Mirza Mehmood Beg, Syed Amjad Ali, Abbasi, Moosavi, Inam ul Haque and one newly arrived from England, Farooqi—a handsome young man with a crisp English accent. Professor Samad might have been a spitting image of

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George Bernard Shaw. Professor Chisti taught us Indian history. He was also the acting principal after Mr. Walker resigned in the Wake of student agitation against him. The only Britisher left was Professor Lorrimer-a Scotsman who would Wear an old weather-beaten warm three-piece suit even through Delhi's scorching summers.

I was beginning to settle down and take to college life when grandfather started raising too many questions about my college fees, leaving me completely frustrated. After putting up with his shilly-shallying for a couple of months or so, in deep despair I decided to quit the college. I didn't quite know what to do. I took to long walks-all the way from Ballimaran to Shahadra across the Jumna bridge to soothe my nerves and calm my agitated mind. The inbred mystical esoteric streak in me returned with a sort of vengeance. My good uncle, Chacha Ata-ur-Rahman had noticed the streak in me, giving me the pet name of Bhui Layyu-essentially an odd, meaningless word, but reflective of my mental state and condition, According to a mohallah grapevine, I had even turned into a jogi or mendicant. Whatever, I had made up my mind not to touch grandfather for my college expenses or for a government job. Instead, I decided to join the Oriental College (Madarsa-i-'Aliya) at Masjid Fatehpuri.

Chapter 8

Amongst Taliban and Pehelwans

Life at Madrassa-i-'Aliya, Fatehpuri, had a tone and tenor of its own. From the English medium Anglo-Arabic School and College, it might have been a quite bewildering shift for me. Instead of a regular furnished classroom, we had a sort of a verandah or corridor carpeted with coir matting and with low, flat desks as the only furniture. It was much like Beeviji Sultan's maseet, except that it was more open and spacious.

Also, instead of children, we were all grownups, in our teens or early 20s. It was a class of some 20 or more-almost all with pale, drawn faces and scraggy, pubescent beards. Jameel Pehelwan was the only exception. He was robust and athletic, a regular Akhara wrestler, as I would come to know soon. Hence the suffix 'Pehelwan' attached to his name. Almost ninety per cent of the students hailed from Sarhad, the North West Frontier Province, much in the same way as the Madrassa-i-Sulmania of Maulana Sawati. Madrassa-i-Aliya was a public school funded by the Fatehpuri Masjid Auqaf (Trust), unlike Madrassa-i-Sulemania which was privately owned and run by Maulana Sawati.

Maulana Mehboob Elahi and Maulana Fakhurul Islam, respectively took the poetry and the prose classes according to the prescribed curriculum for the Munshi Fazil degree. Poetry covered practically the Whole range of classical Persian poetry from Baba Tahir and Abul Khair to Rumi, Qa'ani, Naziri, Urfi and Hafiz. The Rub'iat-i-Omar Khayyam formed part of recommended extra-curricular reading. Modern poetry had no place in the syllabus. The most difficult, almost fearsome part of the poetry course was a classical work or prosody called

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Hadaïqu Balughrzt (The Tree of Erudition). It was gall and worm-wood to most of us. Much as I would try I could not go beyond a few pages before giving up in sheer despair. What prosody had to do with the sheer enjoyment and ecstasy of reading poetry I would find hard to understand. In the words of a great poet-whatever his name, poetry was not prosody He said.

Munna na danam faelatun-failat
Sher goyum bhatar as abi hayat

(I know nothing of metre and prosody Nevertheless, I say verse better than the Elixir of Life!)

All the long and intricate lectures on the long and the short metre (Bahre Khafif and Bahre Taveel) simply went over my head and left me puzzled.

But then there was Maulavi Masoom Ali, and others who could scan any given couplet just like that, without any problem. Maulavi Masoom, a Pathan from the NWER was the seniormost and the oldest amongst us. He must have been in his late 20s (going on 30) while the ages of the rest of us averaged between 17 and 22, He had been at the Madrassa-i-Aliya for the past six or seven years. He had already done his Adib Fazil (Urdu) and Maulavi Fazil (Arabic) and was halfway through his Munshi Fazil (Persian) to complete his 'tripos' in classical languages and literature. He was so proficient in all the subjects that he would stand in for either of the two teachers in their absence. Yet he would flunk at least once, if not twice, in annual examinations for each of the three degrees. He wanted me to teach him some English.

As was customary at the Madrassa, we addressed one another as Maulana or Maulavi so-and-so, I being no exception to the rule. Maulavi Masoom would always address me as Maulvi Abdul Rahman, with an unfailing impish glint in his eyes. "Hal-I-Shuma cheest?" (How are you?) He would invariably address me in Persian, as we were expected to converse in Persian as best as we could, 'Bisyar Khub' I would respond and then go ahead in broken Persian with a generous helping of Urdu thrown in between the sentences.

What puzzled me completely about Masoom was how someone as knowledgeable as he could fail in the annual

examination, I hesitated to put it to him; but one day I dared ask him the reason. The man smiled somewhat enigmatically 'Well, Well.' he said, 'You want to know the reason why I do not get through? Alright, here you are! Listen. The Madrassa offers me all I want, all I'd ever dream of and can hardly get anywhere else outside. He paused awhile before proceeding further and then, with a glint in his eyes, went on to add: 'What more could one expect from life than free living quarters, free food and a free launda (boy). Well, the Madrassa provides me all!'

'Launda, a boy Did you say?' I would interject in sheer disbelief. 'Yes, what else!' Masoom would respond with a naughty smile.

'Boy as a part of Ishq-i-Majazi or Ishq-i-Haqiqi?' I would ask him teasingly.

'A boy a real boy Not just a simili or metaphor but real with buttocks, like a pair of peaches ...' That would make me blush deeply.

'You're blushing already. Come on, Maulana Abdul Rahman. You must know that life is not all verse and poetry. life is life. Real and physical. Ugly and pretty. I am a Pathan, and more than anything else, a Pathan is known for his love of boys with buttocks like a pair of peaches. Pushtu poetry is a long paean in praise of boys' buttocks! Ever heard of Zakhm-i-dil?'s

I liked Maulana Masoom for his utter frankness, There was Masoom on the one hand, and Yazdani on the other: one, a clean-Shaven Godless soul lost to philosophy, the other a bearded typecast Maulana and a self-proclaimed sodomite, translating poetic metaphor into flesh and blood and using his dark cubby hole of a room for torrid love making. And there were some fifteen or twenty other like Zombies with tomes of classics under their armpits or at their low, floor desks absorbed in study.

The rough surface of the coir matting on which we all sat WOULD leave ridges on the sides of our feet as we sat cross-legged or with one knee drawn up and this other tucked underneath the hips there. Most of us were pale-faced and thin. Some with scraggy beards, others just getting to be downy up and down the cheeks.

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We discussed and disputed endlessly over huqiqat (truth, reality) and majuz (unreality and illusion), wuhudul wujud and wahul shahud, sufism and traditional religion, Ghazali and Ibn-i-Arabi generated the most animated discussion. Ghazali came to Islam via Kufr, more accurately skepticism. He had not been an unbeliever exactly yet he would not accept Islam as the last word, the last chapter in the evolution of religious thought. He would not accept the Shariat canon law as a complete code of conduct and an immutable body of law. He did not think it provided the answer to all our problems. In that, may be, he came perilously close to the Mu'talaza (the Dissenters). Without exactly rejecting Hazrat Muhammad as the last prophet of Allah and the Quran as the end of divine revelation and human cogitation, they refused to set limits to a creative human mind.

Ghazali agreed with the dissenters in essence until he would return to orthodoxy. Ghazali, amongst the Islamic savants, was a class by himself. His Writing offered a fine but often quite puzzling blend of the conventional and the unconventional, of dedication and Sufism, of Shariat and Tariquat.

Ibn-i-Arabi was simply fascinating, but hard to follow. Amongst us, Yazdani (I forget his first name) had been a great admirer and a passionate exponent of Ibn-i-Arabi. He stood at the highest peak of true and soulful sufistic thought, beyond which is only a deep abyss. 'His interpretation of the Quran and the Shariat sum up the true essence of Islam, its real soul and spirit ...' Yazdani contended.

'But he all but denied God, didn't he? His concept of Wahadul wajud led straight to pantheism, which is only another word for idolatry. How can the creator and the creature be one and the same!' Maulavi Masoom would counter Yazdani in his own deceptively gentle way. Much as I would tend to agree with Yazdani in my heart of hearts, Maulavi Masoom seemed to make a lot of sense.

Yazdani would dismiss Masoom's argument with a somewhat impulsive wave of hand. 'The truth is, Masoom Sahib, that you simply don't understand Ibni Arabi, particularly his concept of Wahadul Wajud. It has nothing to do with your own lyrical version of the oneness of the pot and the potter, of the real and apparent ,... '

'I don't think there had ever been indeed, ever shall be another one so completely wedded to the concept of the oneness of the God-or what you call monotheism-as Ibn-i-Arabi, He believed in God as the sole creator of the universe, the only soul force behind it s creation. Nothing either ever existed or exists or shall ever exist beyond God, La Majud Illal-lah! (Only God exists. Nothing else does) that's what Ibn-i-Arabi said and taught which is the same as the Kalimah-there is no God but God ..,'

Their classical hair-splitting would often leave me wondering and quite confused. Yazdani had a certain way of putting across his point of view: he also had a certain physical charisma and intellectual force of his own. His turquoise blue eyes would focus on you without moving as he spoke. And there was such magic in his looks as to hold you spellbound.

'You see/ he would proceed picking up the thread of the argument once again, 'Ibn-i-Arabi was an absolute genius-years, in fact, centuries ahead of his times. What he said and wrote was nothing but the truth and the truth only And truth is at once the simplest and the most complex aspect of life ...'

"That's true Masoom would interject, 'However, there is a limit to everything. To say that Ibn-i-Arabi believed and spoke of the oneness of God is little more than to prove darkness as light and a lawyer's argument as the whole truth.

'Ibn-i-Arabi and the oneness of God, Yazdani Sahib, just imagine, Masoom would intervene, 'Could there be any two things as far apart as that? Do you honestly think the two can even remotely intermix or go along together?

'I honestly do Yazdani reaffirmed. 'I honestly do and believe the two are but the two sides of the same coin. Ibn-i-Arabi's concept of wahadul wajud is nothing but an absolute re-affirmation of Wahadu la Sharik-La Majud Illal-Lah!-the absolute oneness of God without either a peer or partner. Isn't what the Kalima is all about? isn't it the very foundation of Islam?'

Masoom would look quite lost for an answer for quite a while. Then he would smile wryly and say: 'There are two types of arguments, Yazdani Sahib. One is Burhun-i-Qa'ate (Positive argument) and the other is Quat-i-Burhan (Final Argument): the

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killer of all arguments, in other words. It would take someone like you to prove Ibne Arabi's Wahadul wujud as a re-affirmation of Wahudu lu Sharik. Great isn't it?

And the matter would rest there, to re-surface again almost with the same old gusto and end in the same inconclusive way. Once we agreed to refer the issue to our two teachers-Maulana Mehboob Ilahi and Fakhru'l Islam: whether Ibne Arabi's Concept of Wahadul wujud a virtual negation of the absolute and unshared oneness of Allah, was close to apostasy or a re-affirmation of the oneness of God. Maulana Fakhru'l Islam the prose and history teacher, was the first to speak. 'Well,' he began, 'Ibn-i-Arabi is too complex-hard to understand, and even. harder to explain. He is close to the Khawarij (the Outsiders, Outcasts) in his approach to Islam. Frankly I have never taken him seriously All that I can say about him is that he confuses the Islamic liberal tradition for his own home-grown free thinking, approaching libertinism ...'

That was precisely what Maulavi Masoom must have been longing to hear. He gave Yazdani the crooked smile of the winner. Yazdani was not one to take it lying down. He looked straight into the eyes of Maulana Fakhru'l Islam and asked. 'Is that all, Maulana Sahib'?

'Well, yes, as far as Ibn-i-Arabi is concerned. As for my own view of Wahadul Wajud, it is based on Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi's interpretation of it. He denies the whole concept of wahadul wujud and does it with a great deal of authority Wahadul wujud, according to him is little more than illusion or, in his own description, Wahadul shahud, that is, only the appearance as opposed to the reality and truth. God is one absolute reality without a peer. None of His attributes can be either ascribed to or shared by anyone. He is the Creator and is not to be mixed at all with the creation. He is alone and supreme above human mind and understanding. He can only be felt ...'

Then he would turn to his colleague, the poetry teacher, Maulana Mehboob Ilahi, and request him to throw some light on the subject.

The paan-chewing Maulana Mehboob Ilahi's was a most interesting and colourful personality The aroma of the saffron-

laced chewing tobacco surrounded him almost like a palpable halo. He opened his faded, brocade tobacco-pouch, took a pinch or two of the condiments and put it into his mouth. He chewed the stuff for a while to swallow its crushed extract deep before speaking.

'There is little I can add to what Maulana Fakhrul Islam Sahib has already said. Nevertheless, there is always room for an honest difference of opinion-rather, interpretation or perception, particularly in the case of something as abstract and philosophical as the debate on Wahadul wajud and Wahadul shahud. ibn-i-Arbi is indeed too complex and erudite to lend himself to a single interpretation. I would rather leave him alone and out of our present discussion at least for the time being...' He would pause a while to "freshen his mouth" that is, to take yet another pinch of his aromatic chewing tobacco before resuming.

'I suppose you all know about Fariduddin Attar and his great mathnavi Mantaqut Tair. It's great poetic and philosophical masterpiece, A most incisive treatise on God and man and the equation between the two. It's truly a work of genius. It is the sort of book one might have read more than once without getting down to its real essence and depth. The kind of work to leave scholars admiring and still wondering about what it's all about.'

We all wished and begged Maulana Mehboob Ilahi to give us a gist of the work as he understood it.

'Let me first warn you against my own limitations-my own understanding of the work. It could be seen and interpreted in any number of diverse ways by each of us according to-our own measure of understanding. Yet the real message is loud and clear: beyond a shadow of doubt. God is something you can neither see nor touch nor explain in terms physical: He could only be felt. He is within all of us. It's only for the seeker to strive and find Him. Every creature of God is also a Godhead by himself, without in anyway being like Him. The trouble starts only when the Creature Vies with the Creator forgetting the brutal, immutable and absolute truth of his own mortality The mortal could be anything but God: nonetheless, each one of us cradles God within himself.

'Says Allah in the Holy Quran-Nahnu Aqbarba minu! Hablul

Warid (Verily I am closer to you than your jugular vein). Here the jugular vein is only a metaphor and not a physical organ to explain how close He is all of us and yet too far away like our own jugular vein, which we all know is there. Yet, how many of us have really seen it? How many? Tell me,' he repeated, with a kind of mock seriousness.

We begged him to give us a brief account of Attar 's Muntaqut Tair. Maulavi Mehboob Ilahi went on to tell us the story of the birds' heroic odyssey in quest of their king. It was a most fascinating story leaving deep and abiding impression on my mind-in fact-changing so subtly and irreversibly as to stay an integral part of myself for the rest of my life. Here is the story of the Birds' Odyssey:

'One day the birds of all feathers approached the wise (hoopoe) Hudhud-the wisest among them. They waited upon Hudhud (hoopoe) and asked him about their King. "Oh wise Hudhud, where is our King? Is he there at all? If he is, we wish to wait on him and make our obeisance to Him." '

'The wise Hudhud paused awhile before speaking.
"To be sure," said the wise Hudhud. "The king is there.

He lives in a big palace in the midst of a lofty mountain far, far away-beyond so many oceans and so many mountain peaks-almost impossible to reach. His name is Simurgh and he is beyond our reach. Far, far beyond our strength to reach." '

'But the birds insisted on flying all the way across mighty oceans and over lofty mountains peaks to find their king and pay court to him. Much as the wise Hudhud tried to talk them out of their impossible mission, they kept insisting until the wise Hudhud agreed to lead the flock to the royal Palace. He explained to them all the hazards, ups-and-downs of the journey but to no avail.

'The birds embarked upon their arduous journey soon afterwards. The wise Hudhud let the way Hardly a few days after the journey began, the nightingale was the first to drop out, followed by the woodpecker, the crane, the eagle, and so on. One after another, quite a few of the more persistent ones died on the way until just a handful were left of the many joining the flight. After the countless days and nights, they made their

destination and found themselves hovering around the great Royal Palace until they found their way in.

‘Once inside the Royal Palace, they found themselves in a great hall of mirrors. But there was not a soul inside. “Where is the King?” The asked the wise Hudhud. "Where is the King” “Right here!" The wise Hudhud answered. just look into the mirrors all around you and you'd find the King." The birds looked into the mirror-each to meet with his own image and reflection in the mirror.

There you are,” said Hudhud 'The King lives in each one of you. Each one of you is in fact the king. Only you have to strive hard to find him...' "

Maulavi Mehmood Ilahi finished the story with a smile. 'It's for you now to draw your own conclusions. Must we get ourselves involved in all these learned and largely didactic disputations about Wahadul wajud and Wahad shahud when the answer the only answers-lies within ourselves...'

Thus, as we discussed and debated the arcane and complex philosophical issues, the war raged with increasing fury The city itself was beginning to look an altogether different place, Air-raid shelters had already been under construction all along the Chandni Chowk as a part of civil defence against the coming Japanese air raids. If Calcutta could be bombed, Delhi would be the next target. But at the Mudmsswi-Aliya Fatehpuri, we had been so engrossed in our own fulsome debates about Wahadul wajud and whadul shahud, and the intricacies of Sarafo-Nuhave (grammar and prosody) and Ishq-i-Mijazi and Ishq-i-Haqiqi (temporal and spiritual love), that we hardly had more than a casual thought to spare for the war news.

In one of our poetry periods, a couplet of Hafiz generated a lively debate about Sufism and Islam. The couplet ran as follows:

Ba main sajjada rangin kun
Garat-peer-i-mughan khauhad
Ke salik be-khabr nubwad ze
Rah-o-rasmi manzil ha!

(Soak 'your prayer carpet with wine, should the guide so command, for the pathfinder knows all the customs and the rules the journey!)

One of the boys, a Pathan (I forget his name) banged his

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desk with an unfamiliar, rare passion. 'But this is downright kufr! 'Soaking the prayer carpet with wine and expecting his disciples to follow suit. Fancy that this is the height of kufr, of apostasy ...'

Maulavi Mehboob Ilahi, the poetry teacher, listened to the Pathan young man's harangue absolutely unperturbed.

'We are almost at the fag-end of our Manshi-Fazil course', he interjected, 'The final examination is barely three months away. At this advanced stage of our studies if we fail to understand the fine subtleties and nuances of Persian poetry it had been all a waste of time ..'

The young Pathan blushed to the roots of his hair, 'How many times Would you expect me to say that? Wine in our poetry is only a metaphor for spiritual ecstasy and the cup that holds it, is nothing but its reflecting mirror; the face or the complexion of the beloved we see in the mirror is the face of the ultimate Truth. Only everybody can't see it. One must be thoroughly absorbed, thoroughly immersed and engrossed in one's quest for the ultimate Truth the reality Haqiqat as opposed to Majaz.

That was how our classroom lectures and disputations would go on day after day to make us practically oblivious of the world outside, of the Japanese's lightening advance from Burma towards India. As for me, I came to believe in the perfection of life at the madrassa and enjoy it too. It was a unique combination of Haqiqat and Majaz of this and the other world. My attachment to Madrassa-i-Aliya and the change in my lifestyle and thought under its influence, left quite a few in the mohallah and the family wondering about what I had been really up to. Such had been the visible impact of the strange stories spun about me and my activities. According to some, I was trapped in the company of homosexual maulavis while quite a few others painted me as one not far from going out of my mind. When people wag their tongues, they don't know where to stop. According to one story I had turned into a 'jogi (Mendicant) or a jadugar (Magician). My own uncle Ata-ur-Rahman»-always so kindly and full of sense of humour had nicknamed me-Bhai Laiyya-a child, signifying my state of

waywardness and vacuity. It was his own handcrafted expression, outside any standard dictionary.

My one year at Madrassa-i-Aliya might as well have been something like the Birds' Odyssey in the quest of Simurgh-their King-the ultimate truth. I might have been more Or less in a state of suspended animation between heaven and earth.

Amongst my fellow students, Maulavi Jameel stood out for his excellent physique. He was a regular akharawalla pehelwan (wrestler) and a shagird (apprentice) of the well-known Khalifa Siddiq. I liked Jameel for his excellent physique and often complimented him on it. He was the quiet sort, always a good listener and very friendly and obliging. One day when I said something nice about his physique, he thanked me and suggested I too might join the akhara.

'You too have quite a nice body yourself. All that you need is to get it into proper shape!' He said and went on to feel and press my biceps, 'Plumb! You see, soft and plumb. Just touch mine and you'll see the difference for yourself'. He arched his arm to make his muscles stand out and ripple. I touched them, They were firm and supple, like tempered steel. I liked both their touch and shape and said so.

It is hard work all the way, Most of all, complete obedience and submission to the word of the Ustad. In the service of the Ustad alone lies success!' He went on to lecture on the great qualities of head and heart of this Ustad Siddiq.

'He is so different from all others. He comes from a well-to-do family. They trade in raw cowhides, and own a Shop in Cali Saudagaran, off Bazaar Ballimaran. I am sure you must have walked past the shop many a time. Why don't you come to the akhara one day and see things for yourself?'

It sounded like a good offer and I accepted it at once. 'How about tomorrow? We can go straight to the Akhara after the madrassa. It is almost next to Moti Talkies at the far end of the carnival ground. We have our evening Workouts from 4 pm onwards in winter and 6 pm onwards in summers.

Winter had already set in and the days were short. We finished at the madrassa about 3.30 pm. It was about 15 minutes' brisk walk from Fatehpuri to the akhara. I agreed to accompany him the next day.

We walked the length of Chandni Chowk and the Esplanade to make a left turn form Moti Talkies. We walked across the exhibition ground to reach the Akhara. It was a walled-in place. An old man, wrapped in a coarse blanket top to toe, sat coughing outside. He was the old Chowkidar, once a middle-weight wrestler himself, now an old, ailing man, Ustaad Siddiq had given him a kothri to live in and some pocket allowance.

As the old man saw Jameel approach the gate, he greeted him and then stared at me. He is my friend pehelwan-ji' Jameel said, reading the quizzical look in the old Inan's rheumy eyes. 'He would like to join the akhara if the Khalifa-ji would approved!' 'I see ...' The old man, still coughing proceeded to open the door, a narrow entrance on one side of the akhara. 'It's getting to be colder and colder!' he said, clearing his throat and spitting out a thick ball of phlegm.

As we entered the akhara, Jameel told me to wait for the Ustad-ji to come, while he himself went inside a mud-walled enclosure in a corner to change. It did not take him long to come out naked, except for a langar-the fig leaf of wrestler 's crotch-cloth, massaging his body with mustard bitter oil and rubbing it deep into his skin. I admired his well-muscled body glistening with oil massage,

'Khalifa-ji should be here any moment. He is very very punctual.' He had hardly finished when we heard the sound of jingling bells-somewhat faint at first, presently growing louder. "It's the Khalifa-ji alright! He is right here!" Jameel exclaimed as the bells drew closer. I wondered as to what the sound of the bells might have had to do with the arrival of Khalifa-ji. I would soon know the answer, as Jameel took me outside to receive the Ustad-ji.

Ustad Siddiq stood there with a pair of fattened goats behind him. The animals wore a string of bells around their necks. The bells jingled as the animals shook their heads even slightly I had not seen a healthier and more well-fed pair of goats in my life. They would seem to explode under their weight. They had so much fat that their meat would need no ghee for cooking.

Ustad Siddiq and his goats paired admirably well in physical opulence and weight. He must have been in his late or mid

30s-of medium height, a chest as broad as a marble Slab and biceps as rippling as a gold fish. He had a kindly look in his eyes.

Jameel hastened to introduce me to the Khalifa-ji, 'Welcome', the Khalifa-ji said, greeting me. He gave me a close, searching look. 'What brings him here?' Khalifa-ji asked Jameel- 'TO Sit at your feet, Khalifa-ji and learn ...' Jameel answered briefly 'You look alright. But, mind you it's a tough life all the way Calls for' strict discipline. Are you married?' Jameel said 'no' on my behalf-'That's good: for wrestling demands every ounce of your energy-Marriage and serious Wrestling simply don't go together! Come and join us tomorrow, if you will! Jameel Mian would tell you all about it.'

We went inside the akhara, Jameel took to doing his knee bends and push-ups to warm himself up. Ustad Siddiq Weill to the changing enclosure, returning after a while with 61 fig-leaf of crotch-cloth (langot), His bare body was smooth and Shiny. His breasts might have been two globes of flesh, with protruding nipples and his arms strong and well-muscled,

'Where is Prithvi?' he asked Jameel:

He should be here any moment now. He has just gone Out to the bazaar.'

Jameel had hardly finished when a tall young man entered the akhara. 'Salaam Ustad-ji, salaam everybody he said, greeting with hands joined Hindu-style. Without another Word he proceeded to the changing enclosure to re-appear presently-his body gleaming with youth and mustard oil, His WHS truly the body beautiful, all muscles and no fat. His thighs Were well-rounded, muscular and strong, Ustad Siddiq sat on the ledge of the small flower bed in one corner of the Akhara reading a newspaper, something absolutely unthinkable in a place like that. As I would come to know in due course, it was different with Ustad Siddiq who, besides being a fulltime wrestler, was also a political animal and a nationalist Muslim at that.

Prithvi walked with a soft, measured step towards the Khalifa-ji and without another word, proceeded to what looked like his daily duty-giving the Khalifa-ji a vigorous massage, He smeared the Khalifa's body liberally with oil and then went

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on to rub it vigorously into his skin. As the proceeded with the massage, his movements become brisk and resonant, with a 'rip roaring' sound.

Jameel in the meantime proceeded to upturn the akhara with a huge shahi (royal) spade. The soil somewhat hardened and packed overnight needed to be loosened up and softened for the next round of wrestling. Jameel started from one end scooping heaps of earth on his spade and feeding it back into the akhara until he reached the other end to finish the job. The with the flat and smooth back of the spade, he levelled off the dug-up earth to make it ready for the wrestling bout.

Prithvi had in the meantime finished massaging the Ustad who stood up and stepped into the akhara. He seemed to b having some problem with his back. I could see a fly or two buzzing up and down and around his back, causing it to itch tickle, Much as he would try to shoo the fly off, he could no for his arms were so muscle-bound that he could hardly bend them to shoo off the flies. Prithvi noticed that and hastened t shoo the fly off and gently rub the Khalifa's back to calm the itching and ticking.

One or two more of the Khalifa's apprentices dropped by in the meantime. They changed, sought the Khalifa's permission before stepping into the akhara. Presently Khalifa Siddiq started the wrestling practice, first taking each shagird individually then collectively to pin them down flat on the back. Some to hold of his thigh and legs, others twirled round his torso using the last ounce of their energy to pull him down, but to no us With remarkable dexterity for someone as heavy and muscle bound he broke himself out of their hold and pinned the down. They young wrestlers-pattahus-as they were called might have been so many chicks around the cock in the yard.

Prithvi stood out among the lot: he was tall, beautifully we muscled and remarkably nimble -footed. Khalifa Siddiq left alone to have a solo with him. Prithvi was virtually the Naib Khalifa, the second-in-command. He was a Hindu, proudly sported his head tuft (ohuti) and nobody would ever notice that In the akhara fraternity all were equal as Pif' Bhuis. They were recognized and respected only for their body beautiful and

mastery of the craft. They drank from the same cup and ate from the same pots. No 'Hindu pani' no 'Muslim pani'.

More young wrestlers dropped in to fill the place and after their typical wrestlers' greeting, 'How are you Pehelwan-ji, having the time of your life and so on?' they would change and get busy with their exercises-knee bends, push upon and club-swinging, It was so exciting a spectacle and I loved it.

As couple of young fellows busied themselves with grinding items almonds and coriander, cardamoms, and dried melon's seeds in huge, mortar-like pots before mixing them in a bucket of water to prepare thandai-the traditional wrestlers' cold drink taken after the gruelling exercises, Generally, thandai was liberally laced with bhang (cannabis) but never at Khalifa Siddiq's Akhara. His Akhara enjoyed the highest reputation throughout the cit-no bhang, no boys, no nonsense! After the evening workouts, when they sat over their drink, Jameel respectfully drew Khalifa's attention to me. 'Well, now that your friend seen some of our workouts, he should decide for himself whether he is still for it.

Jameel looked at me and I nodded my head in answer. Khalifa Siddiq smiled and, addressing his young cubs, said: 'Folks, I give you another young pirbhai and this time a pmhiz-likha (educated) Babu-ji'.

'Welcome, pehelwan-ji welcome.' They all chorused and hugged me hard, smelling strong of mustard oil and smearing my clothes with the soft clay of the akhara, I came to like them just the same, for their love and affection.

The sun was about to set: time for us to disperse. They took their cold bath under the hand-pump they sat around his bucket-ful of thandai, Prithvi, the senior most, served the beverage in large glassfuls first to the Khalifa-ji then to the others. They drank it up in large gulps and waited for the Khalifa-ji to leave first. They must all say Khuda-Hafiz to Khalifa-ji, He left the way he had come, the two fattened goats following him, He would walk back and forth between his home in Ballimaran and the akhara over a stretch of not less than a mile (or more) each way.

On a Friday two days' later, Jameel took me to the akhara

with a seer and a quarter of luddons, some joss sticks, the crotch cloth and a small bottle of mustard oil. After a brief ceremony Khalifa Siddiq stroked my head, and said affectionately 'Get rid of some of your long hair; wrestling and long hair don't go together. Then, addressing the yoLu1g wrestlers around, he said: 'Here is another of your Pir Bhai-look after him'. I decided to have my head clean shaven, like everybody else. It was the only way to keep it clean from the clinging akhara soil.

Among my Pit Bhuis, Prithvi intrigued me a lot. There were others too, like the Khalifa-ji's own nephew, Fasih and Habibullah alias Habbu known as 'phirki' (top) for his agility and quick movements. Prithvi, however, was only one of his kind. He might have been the typecast quiet man of the Western movies-strong like a bull and mute as a mystic in meditation, reminding me compulsively of old Gary Cooper (what an actor!) Above all, he was the only outsider without a home in the city while all others were from the city.

Prithvi lived in the akhara itself. He had come all the way from Rohtak to learn wrestling at the Ustad Siddiq's feet-to serve him and wait on him like a slave. His two brothers would come at the end of every month with a large tin of desi ghee for Prithvi and some presents for the Khalifa-the first pick of some fruits and vegetables from their fields and hand-loomed cloth, a product of their cottage industries. They were middleclass well-to-do zamindars, and their one fond dream and fervent wish was to see Prithvi, the youngest in the family to grow into a great wrestler. Every time they would come, they would bow their head low to the Khalifa-ji and sit beside him, pressing his legs and trying to humour him as best as they could in their own rustic way. They would discreetly enquire about Prithvi's progress and how soon would be able to complete his training in Delhi.

'He is doing fine. There is hardly anyone in his class to compare, not only in this akhara but anywhere else in the city'.

The brothers would listen to the Khalifa reverentially. 'We can never repay you for your kindness, Khalifa-ji. Nevertheless, how much longer do you think he might take to return to the village? You know we all miss him!'

'Take him now, if you wish!' Khalifa Siddiq would answer somewhat gruffly.

'We didn't mean that, Khalifa-ji. Pray forgive us, we are simple rustics. He would stay here for as long as you command. Who are we to have any say in the matter?'

They would beg the Khalifa's pardon and join their palms in a gesture of complete humility and submission. 'We are all your slaves, Khalifa-ji. We can never repay you for your kindness by taking Prithvi under your wings, Khalifa-ji...'

They would humbly beg the Khalifa's permission to leave, embrace Prithvi, wishing him the very best of luck and success and leave.

Prithvi's whole life was confined to the akhara and its immediate environs. He was busy 'serving' the akhara-sweeping it watering it, upturning and levelling it up several times a day He would leave the akhara only to make such purchases-match boxes, kerosene oil and candles, mustard oil. some milk or yoghurt from the small nearby convenience stores, Although Moti Talkies was within visual range of the akhara, the last and the only picture he had every seen with his brothers was a Hindu Dharmik (religious) film, Sant Tuka Ram or something like that.

Full-time, serious wrestling, he would often say was no less than praying and meditating. It called for complete devotion and dedication, 'co the exclusion of everything else. Of all the things grihasti (married life /matrimonial affairs) would simply not go along with wrestling.

Although Khalifa Siddiq was himself a married man, he was known hardly ever to have slept with his wife in the same bed-save probably for the wedding night. His father, Khalifa Umami-long since retired, in the wrestling parlance 'loosened his crotch-cloth'-had his charpoy placed between his son's and daughter-in-law's. According to a popular city story one night, the son, overwhelmed with the desire for his wife from his bed, extended one leg across his father's and had her over to his bed astride his leg. The girl was safely home when the senior Khalifa Umami had a fit of violent coughing and woke up with a start. Startled, the son covered up the girl with the blanket as best as

he could all over. However, he could do nothing to fill the empty bed of his wife. His father soon saw that, for himself, stood up and quickly walked out of the room. 'Son, an empty charpoy is the best place for ghosts and evil spirits to occupy' he said, as he left the room. The point was well taken by the son, and since that day he was believed not to have so much as touched his wife.

When relaxed and in a talking mood, Khalifa Siddiq would dwell at quite some length on the damaging effects of sex-in any form-on the health of a true Wrestler.

'The two just won't go together', he would insist, 'one little drop of dhat' (semen) contains as many 40 drops of blood. Just imagine, how many drops you'd lose after a full discharge. Whether it's with boys or with women or with your own hands, it's all alike-an evil habit all the same. Keep yourself as far away from it as possible.

Fasih, the Khalifa's own sister's son, his nephew, would simply laugh beneath his sleeve at the Khalifa's Warnings. 'You know/ he would often say when in an expansive mood, "I find little difference between him and his fattened goats. The only difference is that while the goats would make excellent qorma-curry when slaughtered and cooked in their own fat, he isn't even good for that, What good is pehelwan if it keeps you away from life's one great pleasure.'

Fasih was a known launde-baz (sodomite); it couldn't be that his own Mamun would have been unaware of that, only there was little he could do about it. For Fasih could be very blunt and cheeky at times. It would be best therefore, to avoid a direct, face-to-face confrontation with a character like that. What amazed everybody was that in spite of his own weakness, Fasih was as good a wrestler as anybody else in his own class of young wrestlers. He had 'an excellent physique-all muscles, not an ounce of visible flab or a tummy or bulges around the hips. In appearance, he was even more impressive than Prithvi, only shorter. He had mastered all the grips and holds and tricks of the trade, besides being exceedingly agile, daring and audacious.

It was said of Khalifa Siddiq that whereas he was like a tiger in his own akhara, he would simply chicken out elsewhere, The

reason why he had not taken part in any wrestling bout in spite of his admirable physique, strength and expertise. Even his first wrestling bout with one of a lesser kind-no match for him either in physical strength or professional expertise-was all but lost. He should have pinned the man down within just a few seconds of the start, but the bout went on for a good ten minutes or so without a decision. Every time Siddiq came on top of him, the plucky fellow broke out of the hold and would be back on his feet again, thumping thighs, challenging his revival to come and take him on. Siddiq did manage to pin him down in the end, and was declared the winner; but he was quite out of his breath, even wobbling-to prove he had shot his bolts-some-thing hardly befitting a man of his build and expertise. His rival hardly looked like an equal in outward appearance as real strength. Yet it would cost Siddiq a great deal of effort and time to get the better of him. His condition had thus cast a shadow on his victory. The future proved that no matter how well-built physically and professionally skilled, Khalifa Siddiq might have been, he was not a man fit for a good fight outside the four walls of his own akhara. A tiger at home, he would be little better than a jackal elsewhere,

Fasih acted as the proverbial 'gher ka bhedi' (grapevine) to spill the beans about his Mamun's private life. 'What good is all your manhood, all your manly power and 'dhut' if you can't even face a lesser rival in an open bout?' He would often comment, to leave me and other admiring him for his sheer frankness. Fasih's motto was: 'Pehelwani (wrestling) should add to the pleasures of life through good health rather than take all the joy out of life.

There was such a glaring contrast, almost an unbridgeable gulf between the views and the lifestyles of the uncle and the nephew. 'What good is health unless it helps you enjoy the good things in life? What good is marriage unless you have your wife sharing the same bed with you?' Fasih would go on and on, much to everybody's admiration. His utter frankness approaching impudence notwithstanding, he might have been the epitome of all the respect for the Ustad through the akhara exercises. He would go through his akhara routine, all the

prescribed drills religiously and run all the errands for the Ustad dutifully. He would see to it that he gave no cause for displeasure to his Mamun. The senior behaved much in the same manner, and except for an odd reprimand or two, every now and then, preferred to keep a discreet silence about his nephew's occasional misbehaviour.

Between Madrassa-i-Aliya Fathepuri and the akhara of Ustad Siddiq, I lived a sort of a double life-all the physical exercises on one side all the didactic disputations and grammatical hair-splitting on the other, I had little interest in the outside world, being thoroughly absorbed in my own little world of wrestling and erudition. The final Munshi Fazil examination was not too far. We had completed our courses of study and were about to go on pre-exam preparatory leave. Maulana Masoom Ali and another classmates-whose name I forget-made a joint study programme every afternoon between Zuhur and Asar prayers in Masoom's cubicle.

The days being too short and the afternoon taken up by the study session, I started going to the akhara in the morning. Since there would be fewer of us in the morning, We had more space and time for our workouts and chit-chat. Prithvi lived in the akhara and was always there, busy doing one thing or the other. I had been noticing a distinct change in his normal behavior for sometime.

One day I found Prithvi sitting and brooding in a corner, his jaws drooping in deep despair. He looked the complete reverse of his usual vigorous and energetic self. Not a trace of the usual glow in his eyes, which, though small and narrowly-spaced, were the best part of his looks. He sat with hunched shoulders-his clean shaven head between his knees. He looked a good deal older than his 18-19 years. A miserable wreck-and-ruin of the young Wrestler he was. He had been a quiet man to the extent of being dumb: would neither talk much nor encourage other to talk to him. There happened to be just two of us in the akhara at the moment. So I decided to have a word with him. 'Prithvi, my dear Pir Bhai, what's wrong with you? I am your friend, your Pir Bhai, maybe I could do something to relieve you of your anxiety Maybe?'

Prithivi sighed deeply as he raised his head to face me with his blank, lustreless eyes.

'What could I say Babuji and how? I really don't know. All that I know is that I have been bewitched. Some evil spirit is haunting me and bent upon destroying me completely' He took a deep breath and lapsed into silence. I waited for him to come around.

'Well?'

Another deep breath.

'She just wouldn't let me sleep in peace. The moment I doze off she appears once again in my dream to drench me through You know what I mean?' 'Drench you through? I see. Do you mean that ,,?'

'Yes isn't that simply terrible? At the end of all the hard work. The end of all of my brothers' dream to see me become a wrestlers, the envy of the entire community and the village.

'She is so beautiful, so Very beautiful I haven't seen anything like that in real life. You wouldn't have either, I am sure, She is like a fairy But a bad fairy at that. An evil, vicious witch. She comes, hugs me, kisses me, holds me tight in her arms until I wake up with a start, all wet, soaked through between my legs. My dhoti dripping wet with the juice of life. I wring the dripping wet patch hard to squeeze the last drop out and gulp it. But you know it is hardly a fraction of the full discharge to leave me limp and without even the strength to stand up for quite a while.

'I have that sort of dream too I said. 'Every young man of our age and mind has that sort of thing, It's nothing extraordinary Nothing unusual.

Prithvi's downcast face suddenly lit up with a strange glimmer of hope. His eyes shone and lips relaxed into a faint, reassured smile.

'Yes see, he went on, 'and this is strictly between the two of us. I can hardly help enjoying the dream while it lasts. It's such ecstasy such joy that one would experience only after winning a well-fought bout. Her very touch-witch or fairy I won't know-would send a thrill down my whole being. I'd wish the dream never to end. It's such a bliss, such joy But that is also the death of me as a young wrestler'.

'You see,' he would go on to speak. 'It's different in your case. You're not training to be a professional like me. For you it's little more than fun and relaxation. For me it's my whole life, my whole career. What will I do if I fail as wrestler? You are a Babu-ji; you'd go back to your books and after you finish here. I have only my village and my family to go back to and I don't have the face to show to anybody I'd rather be dead than face the humiliation, the sheer ignominy of failure ...' There was little I could do to put his mind at rest and preferred to say quiet for a while.

'Well, Babu-ji, tell me one thing. Do you ever think of getting married? I mean married in the real sense, not just in name like Khalifa-ji, but in the real sense. You know what I mean.

'I do indeed, once I finish my studies and settle down; I am sure you'd also do that like everybody else. It's so natural, after all.'

'Maybe I'd have to if only for want of a better choice. And that would be the end, once and for all, of my wrestling life. You see, woman and wrestling just can't go together. You have to choose one or the other. You can't have both.

My reassuring talk would do but little good to Prithvi. He would cheer up for a while, only to go back to his black moods. The dark circles underneath his eyes and the loss of colour in his otherwise gleaming face betrayed his inner anguish. It would not be long before everybody noticed the change in Prithvi. He appeared to be getting quite morose, his face losing its glow, body movements slowing down, and he would look quite lost most of the time. He might not exactly have been losing weight, yet he looked somewhat thinner. Even the perpetual smile around his lips seemed to be turning into a grin. Khalifa Siddiq also noticed the change in Prithvi's looks and body language. It could not be that the Ustad would notice signs of a progressive deterioration in his shagird and would not want to know the reason why I-Ie ordered him one day to speak up and tell him the truth. It was the Ustad's command and Prithvi had to obey. Sobbing like a child, he made a clean breast of the dark secret weighing so heavily on his whole being. 'I see,' Khalifa Siddiq said, 'Well, it's simply terrible. Once this sort of problem starts, there is no end to it. You seem to have had it ...'

While the rest of us would know nothing about what might have actually transpired between the two of them we could, nonetheless, see shades of anxiety appearing across the Ustad's broad forehead.

Towards the end of the month, just a few days later, Prithvi's two brothers carried on their routine monthly visit to offer their respects to the Ustad and know the progress of their brother. The wrestling season in the village was about to start and the visitors wanted Prithvi to take part in the middle weight bouts. They salaamed the Khalifa and waited for him to come and speak to them.

Prithvi was busy upturning the akhara turf and would not so much as look at his brothers. After a while, Khalifa Siddiq beckoned to them to follow him outside the akhara's four walls, something unusual. The visitors followed him like a pair of sheep. They stayed outside for a good half hour or so before coming back to the akhara. The two brothers looked so downcast, their jaws drooping. The Visitors waited for us to get through with our workouts before speaking to Prithvi. They went into a huddle and stayed like that for quite awhile.

They begged Khalifa Siddiq for advice. 'What could anybody do in a case like this? This is a truly treacherous malady and once it strikes a young man, he is good for nothing as far as full-time wrestling goes. The only thing he is good for him is to settle down, take a wife and have children. Of course, there is nothing to stop him from pursuing wrestling as hobby. But only as a hobby, not as a serious Vocation.'

Prithvi had already stayed in Delhi long enough to cost the family more than they could and would be able to afford for the future. And for how much longer, after all? It could not go on and on forever. The winter wrestling bouts for young wrestlers had already been arranged and Prithvi's name entered. Only he must fight to win, and win at all events. The first bout lost could mean the whole career ruined.

Khalifa-ji told Prithvi's brothers to take him back home rather than let him stay on in Delhi at such a cost. Especially at a time when, due to war, the cost of everything-from almonds and milk to mustard oil-was soaring by leaps and bounds.

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Night ejaculations and fulltime serious wrestling just could not go together.

So that was the end of Prithvi's career as a budding wrestler. He wept and cried like a baby when the Khalifa-ji told him to go back home and join the family. For that was the only course left for him to follow. 'Serious wrestling is nothing short of a war against natural physical urges and once you succumb to those, for whatever reason, you must loosen your langot (crotch cloth) and quit. There is no other Way out.

Prithvi wept and wept and folded his hands to beg the Khalifa-ji give a second thought, but to no avail. 'It's no use. I can't deceive your brothers. You're no good for this akhara. If you must still pursue wrestling, the best thing for you would be to get back to your village and join some akhara there. There is no dearth of akharas, after all!'

One day after a week or so, Prithvi prepared to leave. We all gathered together to bid him good bye. Khalifa-ji patted him hard on the back, as an Ustad would his shagird. He too looked deeply moved. After all he had taken such pains to train and initiate him into all the intricacies of the art of wrestling, a finely-balanced combination of the strength and expertise. He looked up to him as his true disciple. And now it was all over. The dream had gone sour!

After Prithvi was gone, things were not be the same in the akhara, at least as I saw them. The Khalifa-ji himself seemed to miss him as much as anybody else. He must have also missed the monthly visits of Prithvi's brothers and the gifts, an occasional hand-loomed shawl, a couple of seers of barley or millet from their fields, a whole pile of fresh homemade gurrh (brown sugar cake); above all, a large tin of pure desi ghee-half for the Khalifa-ji and half for Prithvi. Prithvi's two to three-year old apprenticeship had also given the akhara the reputation as centre of excellence of communal harmony and brotherhood. Khalifa-ji also personally missed the vigorous massage Prithvi gave him before and after the workouts. There was none to beat him as a masseur and the way he tempered strength with a soothing softness of touch all his own.

One day the Khalifa-ji spoke to me at length about the business boom the war had brought about in the city. I had

hardly expected anything like that ever to happen. But there it was, to take me completely by surprise. 'These days gold is raining down the city (ajkal to shahir main sauna bums rahu hui!) Babu-ji. Isn't that so?' He asked waiting for me to respond. I didn't know what to say He saw my embarrassment and went on to say 'You belong to a business community and can help Fasih to go into some profitable business.'

'But, Khalifa-ji, I know nothing about business. You know I am preparing for my Munshi Fazil Examination.

'Yes, I know that. But you could still help Fasih by introducing him to some of your businessman relations or friends and help him make some profitable bargain. I would give Fasih Rs. 500 to invest initially You know what I mean ...'

'I am not sure, Khalifa-ji. But I will try if you wish!'

Now the fact was that no two things could be as far apart as Fasih and business. He could barely read the newspaper headlines in bold type and hardly write anything beyond his signature. Fasih also realized that and told me plainly that he had no head or taste for business. 'But what should I do? The Khalifa-ji, wouldn't take no for an answer.

The next day Khalifa-ji brought a wad of fifty 10-rupee notes for me to take. 'That's a lot of money Khalifa-ji. I am afraid I am not going to take it. Please give it to Fasih'.

'Well Fasih will go along with you alright. All that you have to do is to introduce him to the right people, hand the money over to them to invest in some profitable bargain and leave the rest to Allah!'

'I am afraid, Khalifa-ji, I won't so much as touch the money It's such a big sum and I don't think I should take it. I am very very sorry; Sir!'

'You disappoint me so much. You know what it means to say "no" to the Ustad ...' Khalifa-ji looked really angry That, to his wrestler's mind was the height of impudence. Something utterly unforgiveable! I knew that would be the end of my akhara days, Much as I felt sad and sorry about the sudden anti-climax, there was nothing for me but to quit without formally taking the Ustad's leave. And just as well, as that would have only complicated matters. A day or two later, I happened

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to run into Fasih by the wayside. He greeted me warmly and congratulated me on my decision to quit.

'It is all to your good, he said.' I know my Mamun very well. He is a gentleman alright, but once he gets annoyed with someone, he can be very vindictive and miss no opportunity to settle scores with him. He could have done anything to you, from giving you cauliflower-ear like mine to breaking your arm or leg. You must thank your stars for getting away in one piece!'

Thus Fasih lectured me in all sincerity. Then, with an impish glint in his eyes, he winked at me and asked if I had ever been in an intimate relationship with a friend. I must have looked quite blank, to make him go on. 'Don't you look so utterly foolish, you know what I mean. Have you ever had a boy-one way or the other? You know, it's a fair bargain-give-and-take. If you haven't yet, you don't know what you may have missed. Try it now and remember me.'

So here was another Maulana Masoom; the world must be full of the likes of them. Imagine the games people play!

I left the akhara, to concentrate wholly on my studies. Maulana Masoom had been a great help, especially with such highly technical works as *Hidighul Balaghat* (The Tree of Erudition) and Jalaluddin Dawwain's *Akhluq-i-jlali*. He was a master of prosody could measure and break a verse into the right meter with great ease. Prosody had been my one darkest nightmare, and Masoom the best man to help me rid of that.

The final exams were just about a couple of months away. Time to submit the application forms along with the prescribed entrance fee, Rs. 20 or so.

In the pre-exams test held at the madrassa, I stood second in class. Everybody congratulated me. One of my classmates even composed a panegyric in praise of my performance in Persian. Both our class teachers were equally impressed. They recommended to the Madrassa Committee to remit my examination entrance fee earmarked for the top five in the pre-exam tests.

Maulana Masoom was perhaps the happiest as a close friend and one who had guided me through my studies. He said that he would miss me once I was gone, and wished me the very best of luck and success in the future.

I appeared for my Munshi Fazil examinations and seemed to have done well in all the papers except the last composition paper, supposedly the strongest side of my studies. Overconfident of my Persian vocabulary I chose a subject I knew practically nothing about. It was Suir-e-Kashmir (Excursion to Kashmir). I had hardly any knowledge about the Dal Lake, the Nishat Bagh and the 'K/zngree' the Kashmiris carried under their garments to keep them warm through their bitter winters. That was all I had heard about Kashmir, the rest was just verbiage. Having finished the exams, I waited patiently for the results. The results were published on the due date but my name was not there. No matter how many times I rummaged through the result sheet, the outcome was the same. I had failed.

What then must I do? I had lost a whole year already. All my classmates at the Anglo-Arabic had moved on to their second year. I left so deeply depressed, close to committing suicide. I could not even face my teachers and classmates at the madrassa. Maulana Masoom called on me at my house. Much against his own wishes and effort, he had got through the exam with a high second division. His problem was: what to do next? For he had passed all three examinations-Maulavi Fazil (Arabic), Adib Fazil (Urdu) and now Munshi Fazil (Persian). The first two he took two to three years to clear. The third he cleared even at the first go, much against his own wishes. He had been at the Madrassa for some eight years, enjoying all the facilities it offered. Luckily however, he had been promised a part-time job at the madrassa, along with his lodging and an honorarium or Rs. 50 per month to boot. What more could he have expected from life?

Additionally and, no less importantly as a teacher, he would exercise on his students, the power and authority he never really had in the past and pick a launda of his choice when he pleased. He would still, nevertheless, miss the sheer excitement and thrill he had in the past of cheating his teachers by choosing to fail of his own free will and deliberate choice. He would thus look at his 'unintended' success in the exams as a failure-the failure of free choice and personal freedom.

Masoom's statement both amazed and amused me. 'Well

that's what it's all about. One must take it all in stride I told myself.

Masoom went on to comfort me. For once he confided in me that he had never approved of my idea of abandoning college education of the madrassa primitive and time-worn texts. 'It's alright for us, with nothing better to look forward to but not for a young man like yourself. In a way I am glad you failed. This would put you to some fresh thinking. Go back to your college studies.

Masoom's lecturer raised my spirits. The only question was how to make up for the lost year. I spoke about my predicament to my brother Usman's best friend, Barakat Ahmad. He rebuked me for leaving the college at all, in the first instance.

'If money had been the only problem', he said, 'you could have applied for a stipend'. And he would have ensured I got it. 'Anyway it's no use crying over spilt milk. We must find a way Let me think ...' he paused for a while. 'Can you get yourself a UP domicile? That should not be so difficult, if you have a relative or friend in UR let's say Meerut Allahabad, or / the Intermediate Examinations allows private candidates to appear for Inter domiciled anywhere in UP.

It did not take me long to find that my own brother in law had a maternal uncle (rnamun)-Mr. Nizamuddin, a merchant settled in Meerut. He said he would write to him and felt sure of a favourable response. He wrote the letter, marked it 'Express Delivery' and posted it himself the very next day His mamun wrote back promptly to say that he would be 'delighted' to let me use their business address for any correspondence with the Allahabad Board of Intermediate Examination.

That raised my spirits and I hastened to write to the Registrar of the Board care of my Meerut address, requesting copies of the syllabus and prospectus. The relevant papers arrived at my Meerut address within a fortnight. Nizamuddin Sahib informed me immediately by return of post, advising me to come to Meerut and collect the papers personally The reply and the prospect of a train Journey to Meerut delighted me beyond words. I took the train to Meerut shortly reported to Nizamuddin Sahib at his shop at Sadar, introduced myself and would be via Messrs Nizarnuddin & Son, Sadar Bazar, Meerut.

Chapter 9

The Quit India Interlude!

The sense of emptiness and depression growing upon me since I had failed Munshi Fazil, was gradually leaving me. I was getting pre-occupied with my studies for the intermediate examinations. My personal finances also improved after I got a couple of tuitions. I felt a close, intimate link between the city and myself. My pace of work and living style had change more or less in tandem with the city's. The cityscape was rapidly changing. As the war raged on the Burma front, and politics stirred the home front, the city lived up to its full status as the capital of India. It was emerging as the main hub of all-India politics. Everybody who was anybody in Indian politics shuttled between his home city and Delhi to sense and see things for himself and find which way the wind was blowing.

The war was shaping up badly for the British, In Europe, Nazi Germany the world's best-trained and armed military power had caught Great Britain by the scruff of its neck, France, its major European ally together with Belgium and Holland, fell to the advancing Nazi storm troopers without significant resistance.

Within just about six months since the outbreak of the war in September 1939, the All-India Muslim League passed the Lahore Resolution, branded as the Pakistan Resolution by the powerful Hindu press. The resolution marked the first national milestone on the phantom road to Pakistan. It demanded the re-demarcation of the subcontinent on the basis of the Muslim majority areas in the north-west and the north-east of India "with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary".

Barely two years later, in February 1942, the 60,000-strong

British garrison in Singapore under General Perciva surrendered to the Japanese General Yamashita, The Singapore debacle forced Whitehall to send a high-powered mission led by Sir Stafford Cripps, Lord of Privy and leader of the House of Commons, to India to seek the Indian leadership's full support for Britain against the looming threat of Japanese invasion.

Cripps arrived in India in March 1942, to stay for some three hectic Weeks discussing with the Indian leadership-the Congress and the Muslim League-the modalities of the process involved in the grant of Dominion Status after the War. The All India Muslim League was largely supportive of Cripps' formula in principle, while the Congress, more especially Gandhiji! wouldn't look at it. He would settle for nothing less than full self-government for India's participation in the war effort only as an independent country He compared the Cripps' offer of dominion status after the war to something like a post-dated cheque on a bank about to go into liquidation. He wanted the British to 'quit' India forthwith and left it to the Indians to deal with the Japanese, "Leave India to God or anarchy" he declared.

The Muslim League, to the contrary, was not too unhappy with the Cripps' formula containing an 'opt-out' clause for the provinces on the basis of communal (religious) majorities. Their right to secede from the federation was recognized in principle, to the utter horror of the Congress. The Congress High Command under Gandhiji wouldn't hear of anything less than the immediate grant of complete independence to one, united India.

About that time, Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah had settle permanently in his home at (No. 10 Aurangzeb Road) New Delhi. He kept a close watch on the Congress and with a deft hand, trumped all its wrong moves. He encouraged the Muslims to join the army in ever increasing number. That would be the best and the most practical Way to form a large enough nucleus for trained Muslim officers and men to serve Pakistan when it came into being and further its cause in the meantime.

The Mission stayed for some two or three weeks in and out of the city Gandhiji would not budge an inch from his stand on self-government and settle for nothing less. His tone and

verbiage had assumed a violent vibrancy uncharacteristic of him and he stood poised for his war to the finish! Not even wild horses would pull him back from his course.

The Japanese pressed on to pose a direct threat to Bengal. Refugees from Burma and southern Bengal started trickling into the city to change parts of it into a ramshackle refugee hub with or without a roof over the head, Their concentration could be seen in front of the railway station, the Company Gardens and around the Fountain facing the city Kotwali (Police Station). In due course they turned into wayside spots to pick up Burmese girls and running business for the city tramps. Young loafers would be seen hovering around staring at the half-naked Burmese women with bursting or drooping exposed cleavages, hardly ever daring to touch them. The old, pucca, tradition-bound Dilliwallas, would, however mutter 'Lahul Wallah-invoking Allah's mercy and power to drive away the evil-and touch their ear lobes in a gesture of penance as they would go by the refugee haunts, Granted they are hapless, homeless, refugees still human being like all of us deserving help and charity But the truth is they have all but ruined the city Could this at all be anything like the city of our forefathers..."

The Japanese were banging at the doors of Bengal. Calcutta had come within range of the Japanese long-range bombers, It was getting to be clearer and clearer that the British were losing ground to the Japanese. Even Mahatma Gandhi, the great apostle of non-violence, seemed to be veering more to the side of the Japanese,

An array of Air Raid Precaution (ARPS) Shelters sprang up along Chandni Chowk, ARPS would soon turn into urinals and lavatories littered with filth. Unaware, pedestrians drifting into an ARP would find themselves stuck ankle-deep in the muck.

Side by side with ARPs, loudspeakers were installed at all the major street intersections, offering war news and songs to the general public. A sort of improvised radio station had been set up in a wing of the Hardinge Library pouring out all kind of propaganda, claiming phantom British victories in Europe and Asia and inviting young Indians 'to join the army and see the world'.

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The radio station pooh-poohed the 'Tongawallan Radio' by the karkhandars; nevertheless, it did throw open opportunities to job-starved local poets, journalists and announcers with a mike-worthy voice.

One of the popular songs broadcast repeatedly had been composed by the poet Hafeez Iullandhari (he would be the author of the Pakistan national anthem) and sung by the celebrated singer Iammu-Wali Malika Pukhraj. The song, composed in home-grown rustic Urdu of Haryana, one of the principle tap-roots of recruitment (bhurti), ran as follows:

Yeh aurousan-parousan chahe jo kahe
Main to chhore nu bhurti karayai rahi,
Moaan Itali hou Iapun mu! Germany
Main to teenu ka bhurta bnnayi rahi

(Let all these neighbours say what they might please I have recruited my son regardless/Whether it be Italy Japan or Germany / I have made a mesh of all the three.)

After the Great Depression of the 1930s and 'No Vacancy notices posted outside every office and place of business, the Indian youth made a beeline for the nearest army recruiting centres to remind one of Gandhiji's advice during the First World War, something to this effect: 'Yea seek the recruiting office and everything else shall come unto yea!'

Yet another factor to change the city vista was the influx of the American soldiers, in addition to the Indian soldiers, on leave, all over the bazaar, shopping. The Yankees came to the old city mostly riding in tongas. India Coffee House at the Fountain was their favourite rendezvous point.

They were taller and handsomer than the British tommies; and much better turned out. The faded olive green uniforms of the tommies and their soiled beret caps stood in most unflattering contrast to the shining uniforms of the Yankees and their smart side caps, worn at a rakish angle. The tongawalla New and Old Delhi. One rupee was the minimum fare, even for a ride as short as between the Fatehpuri mosque and the Red Fort. That was eight times more than the normal fare of two annas or even six pice, depending on the amount of

haggling and the tongawalla's need for a customer. Between Delhi and New Delhi, five rupees would be the normal charges and a generous tip to boot, from half a rupee (eight annas) to a rupee of sixteen annas. It contrasted sharply with the British tommies, who would haggle over single anna and pice and use foul language to boot. Tips were absolutely out of question.

The Yankess, were such a cheerful lot, always laughing and cracking jokes and patting the tongawalla from the backseat, taking over the reins of the tonga and driving it for a generous extra tip to tongawalla. Unlike the tommies, nearly always sodden with rum or something, the Americans did not drink too much and were always in their senses. They were fond of women and looked for them everywhere. In no time a whole mafia of tongawallas acting as pimps emerged, specializing in the lucrative trade.

They knew every nook and cranny of the city where the 'privates' plied their trade. The regular red light districts of the city at the Burn's Bastion Road (Gurden-Burden Road, in local parlance)-the new Chawri and Kath Bazaar were out of bounds for the troops. Kath Bazaar was, in any case, out of the question, being the cheapest (four annas upwards-maximum one rupee-for a throw) and a veritable cesspool of disease and insanitation. The Yankee influx and the economic boom in its Wake faced, however, a looming threat from Gandiji's ultimatum to the British to quit India forthwith. He could have the people hit the streets anytime he liked. He looked bent upon joining forces with the Germans and the Japanese to throw the British out at any cost. The news from the Far East was particularly bad-the British were in at disorderly retreat against the advancing Japan forces.

In August 1942, Gandhiji served his two-word ultimatum to the British: Quit India. Already on the warpath against the government ever since Viceroy Lord Linlithgow's unilateral declaration of war against Germany in September 1939 on India's behalf, the Congress responded aggressively to Gandhi's Quit India clarion call. Gandhi's battle cry would be 'Kareng ya Mareng' (Do or Die), in complete negation of his cherished creed of non-violence. The time was now ripe for India to rise in one

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body and throw the British out by political means if possible, by force, if necessary.

Gandhiji's Quit India Movement and its complete boycott by the Muslim League hastened the march towards Independence on the basis of Partition or the emergence of a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan. The Quit India Movement was one of Gandhiji's Himalayan blunders. He violated irreparably his one cardinal article of faith, non-violent passive resistance, to throw open the way to hell, proverbially paved with good intentions. The 1947 holocaust and the bloody break-up of the country might well have been the unintended consequence of Gandhiji's impetuous departure from his non-violent credo, even if only once.

Mr, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League kept a discreet silence and a safe distance from Gandhiji's violent campaign against the British. He might as well have been acting on Gandhi's own advice to him during the First World War, which was: 'Seek ye the recruiting office first and the rest would come unto you.' In any case, the Punjabi Mussalmans (PMs) and Pathans, scions of the classified martial races, were already swelling the ranks of the British-Indian army even without a policy directive from Jinnah. His political directive provided further impetus to the classified warriors to swell the ranks to the Group.

As the Japanese advanced at a lightening pace across East Asia and countries like Malaya, Singapore and Burma fell, political activity in the city shot up to a feverish pitch. Britain appeared to have all but lost the war to encourage the Indians to demand complete independence and tell Britain bluntly to get out. News of Subhash Chandra Bose-with the honorific 'Netaji' prefixed to his name-and the exploits of his Azad Hind Fauj and its battle-cry 'Dilli Chula' (On to Delhi) had raised the spirits of the Dilliwallas and made them dream of a brave future untrampled by the jackboots of the British tommy the one most hated symbol of British tyranny.

The cityscape getting livelier and livelier by the day; mainly because of the mounting influx of the Yankees and the economic boom in its wake, faced, however, a looming threat from

Gandhiji's ultimatum to the British to get out at any cost. The news from the Far East was particularly bad-the British had been in a disorderly retreat against the advancing Japan forces when Gandhiji launched his Quit India movement. The battle-cry he gave to his followers was 'Kurenge ya mumnge (Do or die)'. It was the opening of the most violent phase in congress's political history Throw the British out by any means, even by the use of violent force where necessary.

The British reacted forcefully to Gandhiji's ultimatum. They wouldn't have anyone do anything to affect the war effort even slightly They cast their net far and wide, banned the Congress, arrested their top leaders and put them in jails. Left leaderless and without any guidance, the people took everything in their own hands. They hit the streets in a massive display of mass fury-staging anti-British rallies, attacking stray British soldiers, raiding recruiting offices, boycotting British goods and shouting 'Death to the British (Burtania Murdabad!)'.

Chandni Chowk might have turned into some medieval battlefield-strewn with stones and brickbats all the way from the Fatehpuri mosque to the Fountain. The esplanade area between the Kotwali and the Red Fort was relatively clean and calm.

One day in the middle of August, mobs and the police clashed fiercely. A heavy lathi charge, stone-and-brickbat barrage, tear-gas shelling, a general stampede-demonstrators gone berserk, running hither and thither in utter confusion. The hub of the clash was the Clock Tower-the police force all around the Clock Tower, the mobs inside Nai Sarak-heaving back and forth like waves, unleashing their arsenal of stones and brickbats and then scurrying back into the street for shelter. An Anglo-Indian seargent astride a huge motorbike with a side-car came riding at great speed and pulled up near the Clock lower, almost face-to-face with the mobs congregation at the Nai Sarak entrance. He got a loud hailer and putting it to his mouth, ordered the crowd to disperse at once, 'I would count up to three and open fire after that without another warning'. He counted three. The mob would not budge and stood rooted to the ground. Shots rang out amidst desperate cries. 'Army

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mardala, Array mardala, (Oh, God, they are killing).’ About a dozen or so shots were fired.

The mob ran helter-skelter. Two or three bodies fell down and lay sprawled on the road, bleeding profusely. The ambulance, in attendance with a doctor, drove to the spot where the bodies lay. The doctor pronounced one of them dead on the spot. The body turned out to be that of a young man named Ismail from our own mohallah-the son of a poor widow, 'Poor woman, her son was her only support/ 'As you sow, so shall you reap!' commented an elder. 'How many times have I told them never to go anywhere near trouble. But they would just not listen. These fools, the young hot heads. There was a general mourning in the mohallah. The army had already been Called in and Chandni Chowk, together with Nai Sarak and surrounding areas had been placed under curfew. Special permission had, therefore, to be obtained from the local authority to carry Ismail's funeral all the way from Ballimaran 'Id Gah-some two miles away. The authorities agreed as a special case, with instructions to complete all the formalities within the next three hour curfew break.

Army pickets and posts sprang up all along Chandni Chowk and around, including the Nai Sarak and Ballimaran Bazaar. It was a composite force of the tommies and the slit-eyed fierce-looking Gurkhas. A single Gurkha soldier established himself on top of a building at the Ballimaran corner near the Islamai Sabeel (watering stall). He positioned himself behind his sand-bag, squinting down the barrel of his stengun. Completely desolate and deserted under curfew, the bazaars and streets would burst into life only during the curfew breaks. With shopping hampers and baskets dangling from their hands, people would sally forth from their houses, like so many prisoners, suddenly released to fill up the bazaars. Pavement stalls, vending fruits and vegetables sprang up-the vendors chanting their wares and selling them at any reasonable price offered. There was just no time for haggling. Mounds of potatoes, tomatoes, beans, turnips, carrots and fruits of the season-grapes, apples and bananas were there for quick

disposal. Even Shamman Halvai opened a part of his shop to offer puri-kachori, hot and fresh, to the gourmet. The curfew break might have been no less than a festive occasion in the beginning. However, as soon as people ran out of cash- specially the karkhandars working on daily wages-they started cursing the government and their political leaders all in the one and the same breath.

The curfew went on for quite a few days, with gradually decreasing durations until it was reduced to night curfew.

The Congress stood banned and its top leadership jailed. The Muslim League, for its part, had never been so active and stood by the government, and just as well. That was just what sanity and sound reason dictated. After all, how long would the people go on suffering. 'Damn the Congress. Damn independence. Imagine the khadi-clad Kangresswallus ever throwing the mighty British out of India. This is hardly the way only the Muslim League is following the right course There had been virtual turn of the tide against the Congress. Even those with a mere pretence of sympathy for the Congress started abusing it, much to the regret of people like Muhammad Ibrahim, Sheikh Muhammad Yusuf Ghari Walay (watch merchant), Bhai-ji Abdul Ghaffar and others like-minded nationalists of the mohalla. 'The British were winning their dirty game of divide and rule,' they lamented. 'We have nothing against the Muslim League, but this is hardly the time to rejoice ...'

The city was gradually limping back to normal when some rowdies once again hit the streets and clashed with the police around the Clock Tower. Apparently they were the Congress activists, but the nationalists and other saner elements in the mohallah were convinced they were government agents. How could the Congresswallas do anything when their leadership was behind the bars and the party itself was banned?

I vividly remember the day when a 24-hour long curfew was imposed once again. I happened to be out to see someone in the Jama Masjid area. As I turned into the Nai Sarak from Chawri Bazaar, I saw shopkeepers boarding up their shops. 'What are you doing here, you fool?' I heard somebody shout

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at me. 'Curfew has been re-imposed. Bhago, Bbhago ghar jao its (Run, run, get back to your house)'. Almost in the twinkling of an eye all shops were shuttered and the bazaar deserted, except for the odd pedestrians like myself, hurrying back home.

As I reached the end of Nai Sarak, I heard someone shout –at the top of his voice: 'Hey yup ...' And then a string of words which I could hardly follow but which sounded so rude and abusive 'Hey you (Hiyyup-as it sounded to my ears)-and yet another flood of abuse. I looked around in sheer panic, to see for myself who was shouting, I saw the barrel of a gun sticking out and aiming at me from beneath the jutting wooden board of a shop. Two blue eyes glowering me rooted me to the spot. A tommy sat underneath the board, brandishing his gun and then suddenly sticking it into my tummy I was paralysed with fear. 'Curfew curfew ...' The tommy shouted and that was the only word, I could follow in the midst of volley of abusive words. 'Go, go, run shoot Indians kutte ka baccha My blood pressure shot up immediately at what I heard. 'Kutte ka baccha (son of a dog ...)' I was beside myself with anger.

'You kutte ka bacha,' I shouted back, getting ready to die. What happened next, I found hard to believe, The tommy mumbled something smiled and deflecting the gun said 'go go, go, damn you!'

The memory of his enigmatic smile soon after his threatening frown stays with me as vivid as ever. I can hardly recall an expression as enigmatic as the one across the face of the British soldier.

Bhago, mare jaiga! (Run along or you'll die!)' He warned me for the last time, with a kindly look. The next thing I knew bolted like a dog with its tail between the legs and ran and ran for dear life.

War and the Quit India movement had been Britain's and Congress' Worst hour. Britain was retreating everywhere! The Congress leadership were all in jail. The Muslim League alone stood to gain. It thrived in the political vacuum. I heard a young and enthusiastic Muslim league leader-Muhammad Nauman-at a small gathering at the Anglo-Arabic College. Although I had been out of the college since I left it two years

ago, my ties with it remained strong as ever. I hoped to rejoin it for my BA after clearing my Intermediate Examination. Dressed elegantly in a double-breasted suit and tie, Muhammad Nauman deeply impressed me as he spoke in fluent English. His message was: 'Strengthen the hands of the Quaid. Pakistan is our destiny, our ultimate destination. We shall not rest content until we get our Pakistan it. It's the one, single resolve and dream of Muslim India. We shall never accept the hegemony of the Hindu bania.

'Pakistan,' Muhammad Nauman went on to say 'is an article offaith with Muslim India. We must and shall achieve it at all cost Words to that effect were delivered with all the force of conviction. His speech ended amid loud applause. It galvanized all of us, charged us with a spirit and excitement we had not known before.

My old collegemates were happy to know that I had failed in my Munshi Fazil examination and was preparing for my Inter from Allahabad Board. 'Come back to the college and the fraternity as soon as possible, We will all be waiting for you to rejoin the crowd. There is so much for all of us to do under the leadership of the Quaid',

So I was back on course. I was happy to be through with the claustrophobic Madrassa/Akhara environment and would be out of it once and for all.

I appeared for my Intermediate Examination in 1943 from the Meerut centre. For some three weeks or so, while exams lasted, I was on my own-a completely free man. I had never known such freedom in my life. I stayed in the hostel of Faiz-e-'Am Inter College-courtesy the principal, Sir Syed Ahmad.

He joined the army education corps and rose to the rank of Major. I made quite a few friends there One of them suggested a visit to the local Red Light area, the equal of Delhi Kath bazaar. 'All told, it would be for half a rupee or even less, Not bad at all for your money' I had a mortal fear of venereal disease, having read too much about in the advertisements appearing every day in the Urdu press, 'What about all those dreadful diseases-gonorrhoea and Atshak (syphillis)?'

'Well, the risk is there. But I know one or two clean ones, I have been to them more than once, Nothing ever happened!'

Temptation triumphed and I yielded. One evening, we Went to the Red Light area. The main bazaar was known as Valley Bazaar-too expensive for us to afford. In the corner of the main Bazaar, lay the cheap side of a narrow, dark and twisting by-lane branched off the main valley bazaar. 'There we are!' Mazhar said and gently pushed me inside. My heart was pounding like a hammer, my throat dry and palms cold and clammy 'Don't you be afraid, I would take care of everything. just follow me! I obeyed.

There was a row of hurricane lanterns on both sides of the narrow lane-barely five or six feet apart. By the pale, flickering light of the hurricane lanterns stood women in bright red and green and blue and yellow blouses-nodding their heads almost mechanically to invite the customers as they Walked past their stalls.

There were quite a few customers looking to their right and left, to make sure that they were not being watched' and recognized, as they walked past the row of stalls. Every now and then some would stop past the row of stalls. Some would stop by a shop to talk to the woman to settle terms and go inside if the bargain was made; if not, move on to the next shop and the one after the next. Hurricane lanterns moved in and out as a customer entered and the other exited the shop. A mixed overpowering smell of kerosene oil, cheap cosmetics and garbage, left stinking in corners, pervaded the lane.

Sheer excitement presently overcame my initial nervousness and fear. The woman in the red blouse on one side attracted me a good deal. She had a pair of small up thrusting breasts. 'How about her?' I said to my friend, unable to wait. 'Don't be so hasty you fool. Just wait and see. I will show you someone a lot better and well-behaved. You don't know how utterly mean and nasty they can be!

We walked through what seemed an endless succession of twisting lanes until we reached the end of the bazaar. My friend stopped by a certain stall and said 'hello' to the woman. The woman looked at him somewhat blankly I thought, trying to recognize him. 'Well, here is my friend. His first time. Be nice to him'. Then he turned to address me. 'Well, what do you think of

her? A little older, but very well-behaved. She would give a good time.

'What about you?'

'I can look after myself. My favourite is busy right now. I shall wait for her door to open.

He struck the bargain for me. 'Eight annas and the promise to give him a good time.' She took the hurricane lantern off the hook, beckoned to me to step inside and shut the door behind her. Without any ceremony she reached for my privates. 'You seem to be absolutely ready Well, come on then!' She said. I didn't quite know where and how to begin. She could see my nervousness. 'Your first time 'Yes'. I reached for her breasts, grabbed hold of them and took her in my arms. The next thing I knew was a violent surge of blood-my cheeks, my ear lobes, burning like ambers. I held her tighter and tighter without waiting to undress. She smiled and then broke into loud guffaws as my embrace loosened. I had been melting away already and she knew it. 'Bus! (That's all!)' She said through her laughter. 'The end of all the foon-fun (fuss!) Well, don't worry There is always the next time. Come again!'

She took a rusty tin mug off the top of an earthen pitcher, filled it with water, opened the door for me to leave and poured the water out right in the middle of the lane. That was to keep the diseases off. Blushing to the roots of my hair and with head bent, I stepped out of the shop, trying to avoid the stares from houses watching me leave the shop.

I hurried out of the spiderweb of lanes to wait for my friend on the main road. He joined me after a while, heard my story and reassured me with a few good words. 'It's always like that the first time. You'd do much better the next time.' I had had my bite of flesh-the first bite. Its acrid, bitter-sweet taste would stay with me forever ...'

Back to Delhi, I had all the free time in the world. I had fared reasonably well in the exams and hoped for the best. I resumed my tuitions-fetching me some thirty rupees a month-enough to meet the expenses of the daily routine of the coffee house and n trip to the Katch Bazaar once or twice a month. My cousin and childhood friend, Ilyas Kath, settled for Katch Bazaar mainly

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because it was the cheapest and also offered the largest choice of bodies anywhere in the city. What encouraged us to choose Katch Bazaar as our beat was the discovery that it was also patronized by one or two of our college professors. The dread of disease haunted us and we would never consummate without a condom, 'French Leather' (FL), as we called it. It used to be quite a job to go to a shop and ask the shopkeeper for the stuff. He would give us a long and wide-eyed stare. Imagine, just imagine mere children needing it! he would seem to say and palm it off like some contraband. We took our turns at buying the stuff.

The girls at Katch Bazaar could be so offensively rude-even violent. They would hardly give the customer a moment to relax. 'Do it quick and fast and get the hell out of here. This is no place for love-making. If you want to make love, go back to your mothers and sisters. Sala (wife's brother), hummi, wants to make love for eight annas.

The better-behaved ones might oblige you to touch their breasts for a consideration of an extra anna or two for 'milk-money'. In due course, however, we came to know two or three nice haunts and became sort of regulars. The pimps recognized us and behaved. 'Babu-ji, there is no place safer and cleaner than this in the whole bazaar. Don't you try another place even for a change. Understand? They would go on canvassing for Katch Bazaar and exposed the morals of some of our elders of the mohallah. There was a Haji so-and-so and a Hafiz so and so and the Sheikh Sahib so-and-so and Shah Sahib so-and-so to boot, sneaking into the Bazaar-their faces half covered with their shoulder cloth (angochhaa) or large handkerchiefs. We too good care never to run into them as far as possible. There were nevertheless, some accidental close encounters to make both the parties bolt off for shame. In the scramble, however, we would almost bump into one another while trying to dodge and skip out of each other's way in great hurry.

I cleared my Intermediate Exam and rejoined the Anglo- Arabic College. The College pulsated with the Pakistan movement. Our leader was Zahrul Haque (subsequently a judge of the High Court in Pakistan). Although he had just left college to join St. Stephens for his MA, Zahur still led the

committed ones in our group, like Arif (subsequently a lawyer), Muhammad Muslim, brother of sahid Ahmad Dehalvi, (editor of the monthly literary journal Saqi), Habib, Rafique, Kahalid Shamsul Hassan and several others. We made an excellent team of committed Pakistanis,

The war went on, gradually to turn in favour of the Allies. The German offensive against Russia had all but disintegrated; the Japanese advance on the Burma Front had stalled; America had joined the war effort in a big way. In fact, it was beginning to look more and more like an American than a British war.

New Delhi bristled with American soldiers. The India Coffee House opened a new branch-much bigger than the one in Old Delhi, at Scindia House along Queen's Way. Yet another restaurant--the Royal Coffee House--was also launched by one of my own old friends, Mushtaq Ahmad. The Americans had a way--all their own--of making friends and influencing people. They would say 'Hi' even to strangers passing them by and addressing them as 'Joe'. They were all so many Joes. The tommies were hardly ever seen around. They restricted themselves to their cantonments, unable to compete with the Americans in any way--looks, generosity or complete informality. They neither had the money nor the guts to spend it. They might have been unwelcome strangers in their own imperial domain. The Americans would have little to do with them--publicly at least--and the Indians ignored them with all the contempt they had accumulated through a hundred years of slavery. Even in the New Delhi cinema houses screening English movies, cinemagoers--especially those in the lower stalls--would not show due respect to the British anthem played at the end of each show. They would start melting away as soon as 'The End' sign flashed across the screen.

Once, in my presence, a couple of tommies tried physically to stop the Indians from slipping away as 'God Save the King' played. The word 'savage' stood out of their cockney gibberish quite clearly. The Indians--quite a few of them--pounced upon the tommies. The tommies--rum sodden, like always--lost their balance and fell down. 'Leave them alone, leave them alone, these bastards. They would soon be out of India with blackened faces!' Voices were heard as the lights came back on.

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A number of busybodies intervened to stop the Indians from going for the tommies, now back on their feet smoothing and outing their uniforms. 'Bastard-Sale ye upne upko samajhte kyu hnin? Rassi jal gai par bal nae gaya (Wife's brothers! What do they think they are. The rope burnt but the coils are there still!)

The tommies walked out of the cinema house, grumbling, staring at the Indians. India was free and independent already: the British might still be there, but the Americans were there too. And the Americans were just the opposite of the British. They were friendly and helpful and were absolutely free from imperial hang-ups.

A strong feeling was gaining ground that the Indians were no longer alone in their freedom struggle. America, the world's strongest single power, was on their side. To the mind of the typical Dilliwallas-the karkhandar-artisans and members of the lost princely tribe of the Mughal dynasty America had already told Britain off to quit India soon. 'Anyone, yaar, anyone would be better than these firangi brutes who killed our princes in such cold blood and who banished our dear old king Bahadur Shah from his beloved city Remember, yaar, God's staff may well be quiet (Khudu ki lathi be-awaz hoti hai) but it hits hard.'

Such was the upbeat mood of optimism among the denizens of the old city But there were others too, not half as optimistic but downright cynical and pessimistic.

'Mian, if you ask me, one is hardly better than the other. They are all of the same ilk. One surpassing the other in sheer ruthlessness and bestiality How can you expect any justice and fair play from those who drink wine and eat pig?'

About that time Old and New Delhi might have been two different cities-two worlds apart: one gone completely American, the other torn between the strong pulls of the past-overpowering nostalgia and revelling in the wartime boom.

Regardless of how the men outside their own homes abused the British rulers and manhandled the tommies, ladies in their homes, especially those over thirty and above, still nostalgically remembered the Malika (Victoria) and spoke of her day and age with such love and admiration. Victoria was their ideal. The unrivalled example of a woman's modesty and virtue (sharm-o-haya). Never in her pictures was she seen without her

head covered with a scarf and her shirt all the way buttoned up to her throat. And what a faithful, husband-worshipping lady she had been. After the death of her husband she would not so much as paint her lips or powder her nose.

It was because of her Womanly virtue and goodness that Allah showered His blessings over the reign. Hers had been the age of plenty Even something as little as a mere cowrie was worth more than an anna of the day A good, just, virtuous and honest monarch, it was said, would be nearest to Almighty on the Day of Judgement.

While the menfolk outside the four Walls of their homes were now wide awake and dreaming of distant lands and Utopias, the Wornenfolk within the shell of their homes were alive only to what had been, rather than to what would be. They did not know or care about what Pakistan was or would be like/ Why should one want Pakistan or anything like that while sitting comfortably in Delhi? How can any other land or city be ever better than Delhi?' They would simply wonder and often put in to the male members of the family.

My Nani (maternal grandmother) could not even imagine the British would ever quit India least of all be thrown out of it. What was wrong with the British? She neither had nor exactly looked for an answer. The one thing she cherished and held as clear as her own life was a single gold sovereign (asharfi) minted with the head of Queen Victoria. She had been given that by her mother-in-law as her 'moan dekhai'-the first unveiling of her face-as a young bride. The gold sovereign with Victoria's engraving was her most treasured heritage of the past: all the way through her long journey as a mother, mother-in-law and widow. Her one big consolation was that no matter what happened, Pakistan or no Pakistan, Victoria's gold sovereign would always stay with her.

Chapter 10

The War Ends

Anglo-Arabic College absolutely pulsated with the Pakistan movement. After Aligarh, the hub of the movement, Anglo-Arabic was the next dedicated centre of academic Pakistan movement. Nationalists like Abbas Ahmad Abbasi, the three brothers-Anis, Hanif and Hamid Hashmi-among the students, Professors Mirza Mahmood Beg, Inam ul Haque (turned a devout Mussalman later) and Samad Sahib among the teachers drew much critical comment and criticism for their lack of support for Pakistan. It was astonishing and no less puzzling, however, that most of our animated discussions about Pakistan would be devoid of any real substance about its shape and form as a state, its geography, its ethnic and cultural peculiarities.

The nationalists, including such eminent Islamic scholars and maulanas as Mufti Kifayatullah, Maulana Ahmad Saeed, Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, Maulana Abul Ala Maudoodi, Maulana Ataullah Shah Bokhar, to name just a few most eminent ones, had lost their hold on the Pakistan-inebriated masses. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the scintillating star of the Khilafat Movement and much-respected translator and commentator of the Holy Quran, was denounced by Mr. Jinnah himself as the 'Congress show boy'.

Bazaar Ballimaran, the hub of the old city resounded with chants of 'Leke rahenge Pakistan: Butt ke rahega Hindustan' The few nationalist Muslims still committed to one, united India, would do their best to make their pro-Pakistani friend, near and dears, wise about the horrendous consequences of Pakistan, Theirs was, however, little more than a cry in the wilderness.

'There is no turning back. It's a point of no return. It's Pakistan or Goristan (graveyard). Pakistan at all costs.'

The Anglo-Arabic College Student's Union was in the vanguard of the Pakistan movement. My friend Arif and I had been elected respectively as vice-president and General Secretary of the College Union. On quite a few occasions, we would call on the All-India Muslim League General Secretary; Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan, at his palatial bungalow Gul-e-Raana on Hardinge Road. Liaquat had named the bungalow after his beloved second wife, Raana Liaquat Ali. Liaquat was my idea of a perfect gentleman and a good and honest leader. He would always receive us warmly and affectionately. He was lavish with hospitality and offered us tea and things we loved and missed so much. He would paint an alluring picture of Pakistan as a land of promise for Muslim India. 'All of you young men are the real future of Pakistan. Pakistan would have everything to offer you-all the jobs and business opportunities, above all-the dignity and pride as honoured citizens of a free and sovereign state. You shall be the masters of your own life. Of course, you would all have to work very very hard, day and night to serve Pakistan and make it the great country of Quaid's vision ...' (sic).

He would go on and on to cast a sort of spell on all of us and make us dream so fondly of Pakistan. To the question of whether we would all have to leave Delhi after the emergence of Pakistan, he would respond with what seemed an uncertain smile. "Who knows? Remember one thing only that is, no matter where you might be after Pakistan-whether here in Delhi, as most of us would indeed be or in Lahore or Karachi-we could still serve Pakistan. For Pakistan is and shall be the only goal and the ultimate destiny of Muslim India, regardless of where one might be ...'

After our spirited encounter with Liaquat, we would return emotionally-charged and galvanized and brimming with the resolve to get Pakistan, even at the cost of our lives.

In the winter of 1944, we invited Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah to the college annual dinner. Arif and I, together with other office bearers of the Union, should have been part of the reception

committee to welcome the distinguished guest. Unfortunately, however, since the Union had been banned after a row we had had with the acting principal (Mr. Khurshid Chisti), we were deprived of our rightful place in the reception committee. The row had been over the continued brazen support of the principal for the favoured group we had defeated in the elections.

Dressed impeccably in his usual double-breasted, dark grey suit, the Quaid (at the Anglo-Arabic we were already addressing Mr. Jinnah as the Quaid) was the very picture of elegance. The healthy pallor of his face had a luminous veneer to remind one of a stellar heavenly body. He was in the best of form physically and in good humour. He climbed up the four or five steps to the stage with a firm and steady step and greeted the audience with a resounding Assalam-wa-Alaikum. Thereafter, he shook hands with the waiting senior professors and student members of the reception committee and was conducted to his ornamental, high-backed chair by Principal Chishti.

Nevertheless, my brief operatic feature, The Earthly Paradise (Firdousi-Zamin), was staged as a part of the post parental programme of light entertainment scheduled for the occasion. The theme of my feature centred round two angels coming all the way from heaven in the quest of the earthly paradise. After protracted wandering, they finally land in the lush green tennis lawns of the college. Beside themselves with joy they vociferate the famous couplet:

Agar Firdous bar ru-i zamin ust; hamin ust
Hamin ust hamin ust hamin ust!

(If there were a paradise on earth, it's this, it's this, it's this)

They play drew loud cheers from the audience, including Mr. Jinnah. He clapped briefly and smilingly complimented the principle sitting next to him. I hoped and waited eagerly for my name to be announced as the author. It was not, much to my bitter disappointment and anger. The Quaid had a tremendous personality making all others-Gandhi, Nehru and Azad-pale into insignificance before him. He also had a firm and resonant voice and fluency of speech to cast a spell on the audience.

He gave a detailed exposition of the Pakistan movement under the flag of the Muslim League. He called it Muslim

'India's onward march to freedom from the dual domination of the British and the Hindus'. And so on. He spoke at some length on the failure of the Simla Conference. He attacked Maulana Azad with unusual severity, calling him 'that show boy' of the Hindu Congress. He condemned the atrocities perpetrated on the Muslims in Hindu-majority provinces under the Congress rule. He highlighted the vast disparities between the Hindu and Muslim history, culture, language, dietary habits amid thunderous applause.

He summed up his speech, stressing the importance of hard work, discipline and character as the pillars of human personality and society. The cause and subsequently the state of Pakistan could best be served by people equipped with these qualities. And so on. As he ended his speech with a thunderous 'Pakistan Zindabad', we all stood up to give him a standing ovation.

The above reflects only some of my most vivid memories and impressions of that historic occasion. I lay no claim to historical veracity.

As the Quaid stood up to leave the hall after the function, Arif and I positioned ourselves close to the exit. As he approached exit, we stepped forward, greeting him with a nervous Assalam Alaikum Quaid-e-Azam. He shook our hands with a kindly glimmer in his eyes. His grip was as firm and warm as I had found it four years ago in the 1940s, when he had come to sit with us for a group photograph. Beside himself with emotion, Arif broke into a loud 'Pakistan Zindabad', making the Quaid smile. Discipline, young man, discipline!' he said as he walked away with a remarkably firm and unhurried step. No matter how hard the principal had tried to keep us away from the Quaid, we somehow managed to have a Word and a Warm handshake with him.

In May 1945, Delhi came alive with the victory celebrations after the Japanese surrender. Although there was not much overt enthusiasm about the occasion, there was nothing to dissuade the Delhi-wallas from missing a tamasha wherever, whenever and whatever it might have been. For them, as the idiom went, even a mass burial would be a tamasha. They had a tremendous

love of life sheer joie de vivre-overt cynicism notwithstanding. Nothing could be more expressive of their native exuberance than the wife telling the husband to go picnicking even if beaten, Thus went the verse: 'Chahe sayyan maro main melae main jaongi – andresi ki golain madrese main khaoingi-(Go on, my darling, beat me if you will. But go I shall, to madrassa and enjoy eating my favourite variety sweetmeat).'

Madrassa was the Tomb of Safdarjang outside the walled city on the way to Qutub, a popular picnic spot for the people during the rainy season. The victory celebration was no exception to the rule: it drew the tamasha-loving Dilliwallas in droves to see and enjoy the illuminations, the fireworks and the band displays, The Clock Tower, the flashpoint of police-public clashes during the Quit India movement just about three years ago, was bedecked with fancy multi-coloured lights from top to bottom, It looked like a Mimlr-i-Noor (Tower of Celestial Light) all over. Shops from one end of the Chandni Chowk to the other, right up to Moti Talkies (formerly New Royal Cinema), merged to make an endless, unbroken sheet of dazzling lights. Merchants extended their shop fronts and put on display the best of their wares. Metal and glassware shops were real eye-dazzlers. The array of highly-polished brassware-trays of various sizes, delicately perforated and intricately engraved, cuspidors, water jug and filters, spittoons, paandans (betel-leaf containers) and all kind of pots and paans shone forth too powerfully to let your eyes stay on them at all. The glassware shops had on display everything from tiny crystal glass pieces to huge chandeliers, each drop reflecting the colours of a rainbow.

The Ghante Wala Halvai shop looked more like a curios or a toy shop than confectioners. Models of the Taj Mahal, the facade of the Red Fort and the Jama Masjid were confectioned without missing a detail. At least that was how it seemed to the naked eye. Peddling vendors hawked their wares ranging from genuine pebble glasses (asli patthar ke chusme) to stone-and-timber digestive pills and potency nostrums and lubricants. Mard ko jawan mard or jawan ko qabil-i-fakhar mard bana-e-wala! (Transforms a man into a young man and young man into a real man). Chandni Chowk might have been one huge carnival,

It reminded one of the Silver Jubilee exactly ten years ago, except that the picture in my own vision lacked the spontaneity and the joyful spirit of the Silver Jubilee celebrations.

Among the women, one could easily spot a number of professionals (woman of easy virtue as they were generally called) from their heavily made-up faces and inviting looks. A gaggle of eunuchs also joined the throng hand-clapping, winking at people, nudging them and nodding their heads in unabashed invitation. It was almost a replay of the Silver Jubilee, except that there was no king as the focal point of the festivities. Nineteen thirty-five was the zenith of the British power in India ; nineteen forty-five was getting close of its nadir. The full and final exit of the British from India was just a round the corner. Britain had won the war and all but lost India--the pillar of its empire. People partook of the festivities more as free tamasha-no sensible man would ever like to miss--than as a part of the victory celebration.

New Delhi offered a different picture from the one seen in the old city while the fancy coloured lights so profusely lit up in the old city were all but missing in New Delhi. It might have been one needless vista of dazzling incandescence. It looked like the galaxy itself had descended from heaven to earth. The Americans--soldiers in uniform--jostled with the Indians in an uninhibited display of camaraderie and bonhomie. They had not the faintest shade of the British standoffishness and snobbery vis-a-vis the India. Ioyously drunk, they hugged and kissed the Indians and chanted 'Yankee Pasha Zindabad' Umrika Zindabad.

Had they a free choice, the Indians--the throngs in the street, that is--would have opted for American rule sooner than independence. After all, what was independence all about? The British would go and the Indians would take over the government. It would be little more than the browns and the blacks replacing the whites. As for the commonfolk--the peddler and the beggar and the porter and the tongawalla--things and people would remain much the same.

The victory celebrations over, the city returned to its old ways. Every day is not Sunday after all. The war had, however, changed the entire tenor of life i_n the city, Delhi had all but

ceased to be the Delhi of yore, whether in body or in spirit. The minions of yesterday had become the masters of today and vice versa. The traditional safed posh (white-at-tired) nobility of yore found it hard even to keep the dignity of their class, The city bristled with upstarts', the nouveau riche. They had been the ones dreaming of two square meals and not getting even one. But now they were rolling in wealth. Every one in ten or twelve would introduce himself as a government contractor, contracting for everything, from tents (and accessories like tent rings, pegs and ropes, poles, etc.) to hurricane lanterns, wash-boards, hard tack (biscuit shukarparu) boots and boot polish-everything under the sun. You name it,

Tullan karkhanidar of Kupoun Wallan, a daily wage-earner, had joined the ranks of the newly rich. Before the boom they had managed to eke out a bare living Working at a small silver-and-gold-leaf factory, He had also joined the ranks of 'government contractors' living in great style. He was always seen carrying a round tin of Carven-As in one hand and a matchbox on top of that-a recognized symbol. He would be a little evasive about the kind of materials he had been contracted for by the government. 'Everything, you name it. From elephant to needle!' He would jokingly declare, while flicking the ash off his cigarette. 'From Elephant to Needle', the legend printed once on the letterhead of the famous firm of H.S. Fazal-i-Ilahi had become part of the bazaar folklore.

Tullan's business secret did not stay a business secret for long. It was out soon, much to the shame and shock of everyone, especially the good people of the neighbouring Haveli Hissamuddin Haider, Tullan had turned 'procurer'-a pimp, supplying women to the Americans. Once the cat was out of the bag, Tullan boldly confessed, 'Yes, to Americans only None of these rotten tommies!' He stood up to his critics. 'Business is business, after all. What is so good about the one and not so good about the other. But I wouldn't so much as cast a covetous eye on our own women. They are all like my own mothers and sisters. I am only helping the poor bazaar girls That would be the end of the argument.

While most of Haveli Hissamuddin's nobility shunned Tullan and his kind, quite a few made up to him, even sought

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his company. He had hired a suite in Mehboob Hotel in Chandni Chowk. From there he conducted his business and received and entertained his guests. Booze flowed quite freely and every now and then there would be a music and dance party Tullan never allowed his hotel suite for the 'actual act'. He would only arrange for the girls to come at the appointed time to go with the waiting clients. He would not let even his best friends 'do it' there. There were the North-Western, the Gautam, Coronation and quite a few other hotels around Chandni Chowk serving as virtual brothels. Tullan had made arrangements with them for use by his clients looking for a place. The socio-cultural and economic landscape of the city had undergone a material change. 'It's no longer a fit place for the shargf mimi (the genteel) to live. One just wouldn't know who's who. Money and money alone would serve as the certificate of 'sharafat'... The good people would regret. But who can stop the whirlwind of change once it starts blowing? A blessing for the few, the war-time boom had changed the entire character of the city.

There were the Indian soldiers-perfect country bumpkins-shopping around Chandni Chowk and all kinds of people speaking strange, outlandish dialects-pure gibberish to the Dilliwalla's ears. They would behave in a manner at once unseemly and comical.

'This is the end of Dilli, Dilli is Dilli no longer, it's Dilli-e-Marhoom-the dead city of Delhi: the city that once wasi!'

'For what is Delhi all about?' One senior citizen would put to another and proceed to answer himself. 'It used to be an image, a dream, may be a mere illusion, And all that has shattered to pieces, This city just cannot brook, not to speak of service, a contact with reality It would be like the glass mating the rock'

My BA (final) results were out by early June 1945. I graduated with some distinction, standing third among the Muslim students, if only as a second divisioner. Having got my share of the monthly rentals from our family trust property my finances had improved considerably I applied for admission to St. Stephen's and was accepted for MA (history). My passage from Anglo-Arabic to St. Stephen's might have been the same

as between Old and New Delhi. St, Stephen's was cradled impressively in its new premises inside the University Campus, unlike the Anglo-Arabic cocooned in its original 19th century semi-Mughal architectural ambience. Most of the students on the college rolls belonged to the upper crust of the city. Quite a few of them hailed from the princely states. One of them was Karni Singh, heir-apparent of one of the Punjab states- Kapurthala or Patiala. Only a few, like myself, wore the traditional sherwani-pyjamas whereas the majority sported shirts and trousers in summer, and well-cut suits in winters-complete with the college necktie-maroon base, white stripes. The standard language used was English and, on top of that, the kind of spoken English little used or understood at Anglo-Arabic. For a while, I found myself quite lost in the new crowd. I would, however, soon get my bearings-the college lingo and the idiom and be one of the crowd, my relative lack of fluency in the college idiom notwithstanding.

The head of the history department and the dean of the faculty of arts, Delhi University was Dr. Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi, David Raja Ram was the college principal. Principal Raja Ram had a formidable presence: he was big, tall and fair. Clean-shaven, his face was either heavily freckled or pock-marked by a crop of acne vulgaris in his younger days. He lisped quite a lot-actually stammered-as he spoke. A thorough gentleman, his kindly behaviour more than made up for his speech problem.

Among the other professors associated with the history department were Mr, E. Kapadia from St, Stephen, Professor Bhandari from Ramjas (a Punjabi), Mollick (a Bengali) from Hindu College. Professor Kapadia taught us European Diplomacy; Bhandari taught political thought-from Plato to Marx and Russell, and Mollick lectured on the British Constitution. Dr. Qureshi taught us medieval Indian history (three papers), covering the Sultans and the Mughals. His doctoral thesis at Cambridge had been "Administration of the Delhi Sultanate", an excellent work on the subject. The book formed part of our curriculum. We had our classes held at the university campus.

Amongst other professors at St. Stephens were Professors Azhar Ali (Persian), Samuel Matthai (English literature),

Adieshiah (philosophy), Bose (philosophy), Bhalla (english), Major Close MC and Mr. Shankland from Cambridge (political science). Shankland took our British constitutional history tutorials.

In the rarified atmosphere of St. Stephen's, much of my passion for Pakistan and Muslim League evaporated for quite a while. The University was situated outside the city walls close to the Ridge, where the British had regrouped their forces for the final assault on the city in 1857. A bus service operated directly between the campus and New Delhi. Not less than four or five times a week I would go to New Delhi straight from the Hindu College, would join me at the Kashmiri Gate bus stand to proceed to New Delhi. We would get off the bus at the Odeon Cinema to walk over to the India Coffee House at Scindia House, on the Queen's Way. The Coffee House in the old city had closed down after achieving targeted promotional goal. New Delhi was now the hub of my outdoor, social life. It was full of life and activity. The Congress leadership-Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Azad-and all the rest of them had been released to raise the political tempo and temperature. Jinnah had consolidated the hold on the Muslim League during the prolonged (1942-44) incarceration of the Congress leadership. The Muslim League had emerged as the unquestioned third force, together with the British and the Congress. Mr. Jinnah had firmed up his grip on the balance of power, Nehru's boast that there were only two powers-British and the Congress-lay in tatters. On the string of his monocle lay the future of India (words to that effect), wrote a British journalist, Beverly Nichols, in his preposterous *A Verdict on India*.

The war ended finally in August 1945. The Japanese surrendered after the nuclear invasion and the doomsday devastation on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Victory against Japan soon after victory in Europe put the city through a heady inebriating and ecstatic spell. The public enthusiasm, was high. American GIs in New Delhi, garlanded up to their ears, shopped around Connaught Place and overcrowded the restaurants Wengers, and Nirula's being the top favourites after the India

and the Royal Coffee House. The Royal Coffee House, owned and run by my close friend Mushtaq Ahmad, for some time was even more popular than India Coffee House. Placed 'Out of Bounds for the American Troops' for lack of sanitation and poor service, it got from bad to Worse.

An Italian violinist played tea-time music at the Davicos-more exclusive and elegant than all the other restaurants. The violinist would accept chits from the 'Patrons', requesting certain number and oblige them readily and gladly. My brother Usman had seen Waterloo Bridge-starring Robert Taylor and Vivien Leigh. He loved all the Waltzes played in that movie. So, every time he went to the Davicos for tea, he would scribble 'waltz' on a slip of paper and get a waiter to pass it on to the violinist. The musician would acknowledge it with a low, courteous nod and oblige.

The Nirula's was famous for its lunches and dinners. Its lavish vegetarian thali (priced rupee and a half) was a gourmet's delight. Although it featured a fixed menu, you could, on request, have refills of your favourite item. Nirula's also ran a well-stocked bar.

The Anglo-Indian Club was yet another popular resort. It ran tambola sessions twice a week. The Western Court along Queen's Way also offered tambola weekly-years later, I would find the ambience at those two places faithfully replicated in the Hollywood movie-Bhowani Junction. The bulk of Bhowani Junction was filmed at and around Lahore Railway Station.

American troops were either leaving Delhi or in transit in ever increasing numbers. The New Delhi shopkeepers, restaurants, hoteliers, above all, pimps and procurers wondered what New Delhi would be like without the Americans. All the gaiety, liveliness, hilarity above all, business would be gone with them. Even the hijraas, (eunuchs), who had found favour with the GIS, and used New Delhi as their rendezvous point, were sad. Where else could they have hoped ever to find the friend of generosity and bounty after the Americans were gone?

New Delhi, on the whole, offered an intriguing chiaroscuro of joy and sadness at the level of the public. There was joy for

the British would soon be leaving and India would be free and sadness because the Americans were leaving already 'Oh, why can't the Americans be made to stay in Delhi?'

Unlike New Delhi, Old Delhi was full of the Indian Other Ranks (ORS) going from shop-to shop, one pavement stall to another, picking things, turning them over and haggling over petty annas-and-pice. Some of them would assume officer-like airs and try to be rude to the shopkeepers and vendors or the odd pedestrian accidentally bumping into one of them. 'Hey you bloody so~and-so!' they would shout before returning to their native Hindustani. While most would lump it up and get out of their way, some, the daring and desperate vintage Dilliwallas-the Karkhandars and layabouts-would react threateningly 'Abe sali, teri to aisi ki taisi, apne apko samajhta kya hai! (You, my wife's brother, who do you think you are? I will just sort you out!)' The angry rebuff would take the soldier by surprise, leaving him quite unsure of himself. He would mumble something and go away at a brisk pace.

Despite the 'Out of Bounds for Troops' placed right at the entrance, the Katch Bazaar was still the favourite haunt of Indian troops. They thronged the Bazaar even in uniform. The MPs on duty would let them go, after enquiring about and noting down their name and number. Maybe the MPS were under instructions to be lenient. After all, the war was over and most of the Indians were in the process of being de-mobbed already-or would soon be. They would, in any case, be of little relevance to military discipline and physical fitness. It was just as well therefore, to have their last fling at what the city had to offer.

The Katch Bazaar was now too packed and congested a place for us-my friend and I-to visit. Besides, as a Stephenian, I found it quite a bit infra dig to have anything to do with a place like that. Much to our delight, we soon 'discovered' that Katra Barain, right behind the southern gate of Masjid Fathehpuri (imagine, the centre of old Madrassa-i-Aliya) had a row of 'private' houses. It was expensive-Rs. 2 to five a shot-but much safer and better. The houses were located along twisting, maze-like, pitch-dark bylanes with overflowing drains and piles of garbage and night soil in every nook and corner.

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As for the houses, these might have been little more than 10 x 12 feet rooftops with an attached room to it and a curtained space for a lavatory-cum-washroom. A couple of young women (girls?) would either sit or lie on the string charpoys.

A tough-looking goon would stand guard over the place-smoking and chewing paan. The pimp would bring the clients to house to have a look at the maal (merchandise) and bargain with him. Single, the client would be invariably nervous, even vulnerable. The tough, often the gigolo of the older woman, would try to drive as hard as bargain as possible. The bargain made, the client would retire to the attached curtained space with a bare charpoy With the girl. In case the bargain fell through, the gigolo would not waitete to treat the client with the foulest language at his command and all but literally kick him out.

Form behind the curtain issued forth the muted voice of the girl in altercation with the customer. She was demanding the additional 'milk money' before letting the man touch her.

'What's all that' The elderly woman out in the courtyard would ask.

'Nothing, Bai, nothing. It's alright!' Complete silence followed. Barely a couple of minutes or so later, the customer emerged out of the room, fumbling with his pyjama string, very flushed in the face, eyes cast down, parched lips spouting some kind of gibberish, in anger or despair, or both. The girl, carrying the hurricane lantern behind him, was all smiles.

'How did it go?' The old woman asked the girl. The girl laughed unabashedly 'Ask him? Tell him to bring it next in a tea cup if he can't hold it even for a minute.' They would all break into loud guffaws. The client-a spent force, in total disarray-struggled with his missing trousers chord, hurried out of the courtyard into the pitch-dark winding staircase, missing a step and supporting himself with all his strength!

That was the Katra Barian-a 'private' brothel back-to-back with the ciiys second largest historical Fatehpuri Mosque named after Fatehpuri, one of the lesser queens of Emperor Shahjehan the Magnificent. Who in the city didn't know what went on at the rear of the walls of the grand mosque? Yet, not a voice would be raised against the sacrilege. On the other side

of the mosque, something as small as an alleged encroachment on a small pushtu (projection) abutting the mosque's boundary wall had led to a raising of communal-Hindu-Muslim-temper to a danger-mark in the city Seth Gaddudia, the Hindu Seth involved in the case, was exposed to all kind of threat and abuse by Muslim zealots. A plethora of wall posters and handbills appeared all over the city, accusing Gadudia of annexing a pushta of the mosque. Such had been the state of Hindu-Muslim relations in the mid 1940s, especially after the war, as to make something as small as an ember, explode into a raging fire. Communal bitterness transformed itself into anti-and pro-Pakistan debate and confrontation.

The battle-lines between pro- and anti-Pakistan forces had been firmly drawn even before the Great Divide, Partition. Even the Castalian fortress of St. Stephen's succumbed to the mounting onslaught of the India-Pakistan question. Our Dr. Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi, a proclaimed and committed Pakistani, would fail to see why his Hindu friends-mainly students»-felt so agitated over the issue. He couldn't think the emergence of Pakistan would in any way compromise the basic oneness and unity of India. Remember, India is nothing but unity in diversity He would go on to quote one of his stock aphorisms, encapsulating his vision and interpretation of the history of India under the Sultans and the Mughals,

Hafiza gar was! Khawai
Sulhe kum ba khas o am
Ba Musalma Allah, Allah
Ba Barhaman Ram, Ram

(Oh Hafiz, to attain communion with the Eternal Soul, say Allah, Allah to Muslim and Ram, Ram to Hindu.)

He would reinforce his scholarly argument with one of the best-known couplets attributed Hafiz. 'Pakistan and India, he would seem to think, would be the crowning practical expression of the sort of eclecticism seen under the Mughals-especially under Akbar the Great. As for Aurangzeb well Shivaji was there to correct the power balance.

Partition would in no way mean the partition of either the body or the soul of India. It would be purely an administrative arrangement sort of political re-definition of the subcontinent

to let the two communities live in peace and shape their lives in their own 'Indian' way. There would be no getting away from their Indian roots, no matter our one might think or do. And he would still be teaching at the Delhi University-his home and alma mater.

We moved up to sixth year in 1946. Stephenians by and large, took their studies much more seriously than those at other colleges. After all, there was the fair name of the college to protect-especially at the Master's level. Stephenians could top almost in all the subjects-arts and sciences. So, as a group, we all planned and programmed ourselves for hard work, each one of us trying to excel the other in the finals. My Very good friend, Gulzar Ahmad Khan (died 30 April 1999) had done his BA with honours in history Curriculum-wise therefore, he had been way ahead of me. I held a BA (Pass) degree only with history as one of my elective subjects, along with Persian and English. Gulzar was bright, without being particularly industrious. I worked hard to make up for the shortcomings as a BA (Pass) contender and spent a good deal of my time at the college and the university libraries.

'No matter how hard you might work, Abu, you would beat me by ten marks only in the finals Gulzar would often tell me. And that was exactly what happened: both of us obtained a high second division. I scored ten (very valuable) marks more than Gulzar, missing my first division narrowly

The year 1946 turned out to be easily the most defining year in the pre-Partition Indian history The War-time political slump and deceptive calm in the aftermath of the incarceration of the top congress leadership (including Gandhi and Nehru) and the ban on the party itself had yielded place to a massive resurgence of the deferred Independence movement. Britain's had been a pyrrhic victory loosening imperial hold on India, the jewel in the Imperial Crown. Divided irreconcilably on everything else, the Congress and the Muslim League were conjoined fortuitously in their opposition to the British and the resolve to throw them out of India at any cost, each pursuing their similar ends by different means, the immediate end of the British rule.

The British had realized that half measures, like the failed

Cripps's Mission conceding a dominion status to India under the British Crown would not do. It was too bitter a pill for the British to swallow but they had to, even as the last step to ensure an honourable exit. A high-powered Cabinet Mission led by Lord Pethick Lawrence, Secretary of State for India, arrived in New Delhi in April 1946 with the mandate to discuss the modalities of transfer of power with the Indian leadership. Braving soaring temperatures of a scorching Delhi summer, the Mission would produce a plan to set up a constitution-making body to frame the constitution for a united India, placed under groups, A, B and C on the basis of overall Hindu and Muslim majorities, Groups B and C included the Muslim majority provinces of Baluchistan, Sindh, Punjab and the NWFP in the north-west and of Bengal and Assam to the north-east.

The Plan was to be accepted unconditionally as a whole and it stood. It was accepted both by the Congress and the Muslim League. However, Nehru's one impulsive statement, (10 July 1946) that the Congress would go to the constitution-making body 'unfettered' by the terms and conditions of the Plan, ruined the whole plan. An infuriated Jinnah rejected the Plan and on 27 July the All India Council of the Muslim League formally revoked the League's acceptance of the Mission Plan. Mr. Jinnah had his followers relinquish their official titles and declared 16 August 1946, as Direct Action Day Thenceforth the Muslim League, in real, practical terms took the law into its own hands and did whatever it took-mass protest, street violence-in pursuit of their cherished goal of Pakistan and settled for nothing less.

The Viceroy Lord Wavell, invited the leaders of the two parties to meet at Simla in a final bid to save the Cabinet Mission Plan. Congress insisted on its right to nominate Muslims as ministers in the interim cabinet government; the Muslim League rejected it outright, leading to a complete deadlock.

After the failure of the Simla Conference, Viceroy Lord Wavell announced his plan for the formation of an interim government of 14-ministers-five each from the Congress and the League and four from the communities (Christian, Parsee, Scheduled Caste and Sikh) representing the minorities. He

declared that he would proceed with the formation of the proposed setup with the cooperation of both the parties, if possible, and Without it, if necessary Nehru rejected the proposal while Jinnah accepted it, in the hope that after Nehru's 'NO' to the proposal, he would be invited to form the government.

The Viceroy demurred until Nehru agreed to join as the interim prime minister. He appointed five Muslim Congress members, Ministers against seats meant for the League nominees only Jinnah reacted furiously to Nehru's entirely partisan, anti-League cabinet. Jinnah would never accept the right of the Hindu Congress to nominate a Muslim Minister.

August 16 was the day set as Direct Action Day. Of the four Muslim majority provinces-Bengal, Punjab, Sindh and NWFP-two, (viz. Bengal and Sindh) had Muslim League governments Whereas Punjab was under a Unionist/ Congress coalition and NWFP under Congress. Baluchistan was still a residency under an agent-general to the Governor-General.

The epicenter of the Muslim League Direct Action Day Was Calcutta, the capital city of Bengal. Hussain Shahid Suhrawardy headed the Muslim League government as the premier of the Bengal government. A dashing, debonair leader, Suhrawardy was admired and recognized for his audacious practical politics and good humour. He ordered a hartal in observance of the Direct Action Day decision of the League high command. The hartal led to pitched communal clashes and massive bloodshed, called the Great Calcutta Killings by the press. The gory episode set off an endless chain of fierce communal rioting reprisal killings throughout north-eastern and north-western India. The road to Pakistan was thus laid through a river of blood-the last thing anybody least of all the would-be builder of Pakistan, might have envisaged, even in his worst nightmares. Delhi stayed, by and large, out of the blood-soaked arena of communal mayhem approaching rank madness.

In October, the Muslim League agreed to join the government. Jinnah stayed out. He nominated his lieutenant and right-hand man Liaquat Ali as the senior minister and four others--Ismail Ibrahim (I.I) Chundrigar, Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan, Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar and the Hindu untouchable

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Jogindar Nath (IN) Mandal to join the interim government. Liaquat occupied the all-important finance portfolio. Jogindar Nath Mandal was Linnah's answer to the induction of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad as the law minister.

Apart from politics, which was getting bad to worse by the day the Dilliwallas were having the time of their life through the post-war boom. Those who could barely afford Hafiz Hotel in Ballimaran (where one could feed oneself to satiation for less than half a rupee) were flocking the Shahjehanpuri Hotel opposite the Fatehpuri mosque. The Shahjehanpuri offered authentic and exclusive Delhi dishes-curries and rices-biryani, and yakhni pulao, roghun josh, nargasi koftas, and passande (slices of highly spiced lightly chopped, curried meat) and seekh kabab and a large variety of other mouthwatering dishes.

The All-India Radio crowd would come all the way from New Delhi to Fatehpuri for a meal at Shahjehanpuri. There were such literary luminaries as the Bokhari Brothers (Ahmad Shah and Zulfikar) who gave All India Radio the sobriquet Bokhari Brothers Corporation (BBC), Iosh Malihabadi, Majaz Lucknawi, Saghar N izami, Krishan Chandar, N.M. Rashid, Meeraji, to name just a few whom I can recall. They would first stop by a local restaurant and-bar-Mansarovar or Lakshami, have a few drinks and merrily proceed to the Shahjehanpuri for a rich and hearty meal.

The owner, also the head cook of Shahjehanpuri, was a cynical old man in his 60s sporting a short beard with a profusion of grey and a perennially scowling face. It was hard even to imagine his face ever relaxed into a smile. He would eye his customers archly and respond to their greetings with a nonchalant mumble. He would personally take orders from the customers and tell them gruffly to Wait for their turn. No special consideration or favour to anyone. In business, there were no friends or favourites. Customers must know how to behave to be served well.

Shops at Chandni Chowk would remain open till late hours to cater to the droves of customers-especially Indian soldiers on their way back home or to the next posting. De-mobilization had already begun and anyone who happened to be passing through Delhi and having a couple of days or so to spend in

transit, wanted to do all the shopping over there. Who knows, it might have been one's last chance ever to visit the great city now that the war was over.

Major Bashir and Caption Yusuf, both army doctors, of our Mohallah had also been on leave from the front. On completion of their leave, they were required to report to the GHQ for further orders-in all probability their release. Major Salim Haqqani, the only one shuttling between New Delhi (CHQ) and Delhi (Haqqani Manzil, Ballimaran) as before, stayed in the legal branch at the GHQ throughout the course of the war.

One evening, I found my brother Usman in a state of great excitement. Captain Yusuf was coming to spend an evening with him and Sheikh Ata ur Rahman, the lawyer. 'You know what?' he said Captain Yusuf is coming with a bottle of whiskey ...'

'You mean sharab (liquor) '-I responded quite unbelievably almost shocked.

'Yes sharab. But, for God's sake, don't confuse it with the kind of 'thurm' Baama and those Kupounwallas drink.

'Would you drink it too?' I asked. 'Why Yes. What's wrong with it? He returned somewhat brusquely and then, suddenly changing his tune to a mellow tenor, said: 'Would you be a good boy and do something for me?' I stared at him, waiting for him to go on. He brought out a four-anna piece from his pocket and gave it to me. 'Here you are. Take this and bring four-anna worth of kababs from Sharfu in the evening. You know what I mean. How well sharab and kababs go together. Where is all your Persian poetry gone!' He went on merrily with a sudden glint in his eyes and naughty wink to follow.

Usman had a pad of his own-his own sanctum sanctorum, his library and baithuk (annexe). It was a small (6 x 10 or thereabouts) triangular corner piece called 'samosa' (a fried Indian patty), so-called after its shape and size. About 7.30 or so in the evening, Captain Yusuf, in uniform, came riding in a tonga. He carried a briefcase. He got off the tonga, paid a rupee to the tongawalla, who salaamed, thanked him profusely and drove off. Captain Yusuf climbed up the stairs to Usman's pad with a brisk step. As soon as I saw him arrive, I ran for Sarfu's to get the kababs piping hot straight off the grill. Sharfu was most obliging. He dressed the spit with the thick kebab paste,

threaded it round to make it hold and placed the spits on a tray of burning coal fitted with a hand operated fan. As his assistant operated the fan, Sharfu turned the spit several times over to give the kebab an even texture. Grilled to a turn, he took the spit off the grill, peeled sizzling kebabs off the spit with a deft hand and placed it quickly in a leaf cup, adding lots and lots of finely peeled, onion, green chilli, and green-mango lacings, and handed it over to me.

Lo Mian, lo, tum bhi kya yad karoge Sharfu ke kababun ko! (Take it, son, take it, you'd never forget the taste of Sharfu's kababs)'. Captain Yusuf had brought a bottle of Iohnny Walker, Usman four-anna Worth of Sharfu's kebabs and Sheikh Ata-ur-Rehman Vakil four garlands of jasmine to put around the neck of each of them and one around the neck of the bottle. I could easily recognize the Johnny Walker label, which I had many a time seen outside a wine shop along Queen's Road, off Khari Baoli on my way to Novelty Talkies. 'The legend, Johnny Walker: born in 1820, still, going strong' always intrigued me as much as the picture of the Englishman with the top hat and a Red Coat walking with a jaunty step. I had often wondered about Johnny Walker-who and where he might really have been, Born in 1820, he would have been one hundred and twenty-six in 1946.

The distant war ended, to sound the trumpet for another war-many times more fateful and lethal, waged in our own city and back alleys. Except for tribal wars, waged against the British up across the north-west Frontier, without political cover or leadership, the deadly Hindu-Muslim riots in the city were waged right under the nose of the seasoned political leadership on both sides. Whether by design or out of calculated indifference it hardly made any difference for the political leadership, and the mobs were like brittle, dried wood, soaked in oil, ready to explode into a mighty conflagration by a single matchstick.

Chapter 11

On the Eve

Post-war 1946 Delhi might have been the same as the pre-Mutiny of 1856: a period of mock merriment with lengthening shadows of anxiety all across the horizon. In 1856, while old king Bahadur Shah Zafar was in his late 70s and not too well, Delhi's gay blades went about celebrating their favourite fetes and festivals like the phool wazzlon ki sair (flower vendors' fare) Sattarvin sharif on the 17th Day of Eid-ul-Fitr at Humayun's Tomb, the monsoon picnics at Okhla Safdarjang and Mehrauli, besides the many family events like engagements, weddings, birth of the first male child, khame (circumcision), goat and cock fights, and so on. What made people hope for the best in the midst of adversity happened to be the prediction of a man of God about the end of the British Sarkar one hundred years after Plassey in 1757. The king had been reduced to the status of a miserable pensioner of Company Bulmdur (East India Company). His young queen Zeenat Mehal had been as much of a headache to him as a young wife could be to an old husband. The old king had been experimenting with one aphrodisiac or another to get back some of his lost manhood. Although little more than the king on a chessboard-Shah-i-Shutrunj-Bahadur Shah was still the legal sovereign of India. No state farmans (orders) and papers could be legal without the royal seal and stamp. What really mattered for the Dilliwallas was that the king-the shadow of God on earth was still there. That, alone, was enough for a people interested mainly in the frills and symbols the power-the fort, the throne, crown and the head that wears the crown, rather than the actual essence and exercise of power.

As for the real and ultimate power, it belonged to Allah

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Almighty alone, unshared and unchallenged, What was worldly power after all, other than a passing show, fading pre-sunset shadows a mere illusion, a mirage, as ephemeral as a reflection in a pool of water.

The mere person of the king was what really mattered for them. The king personified the city and the city was their identity the very essence of their being, their very soul. Pre Mutiny Delhi was still the city Shahjehan had built Shahjehanabad, Even if the state treasury had been virtually empty and the state authority had all but vanished, the Dilliwallas were still happy and free-as happy and free as any under the sun because the old king, the Shadow of God on Earth was still there.

In 1946 Delhi might have been much the same Unlike in 1856, however, rather than looking up to their old king for hope and happiness, they looked up to Gandhi and Nehru representing Hindu India, and Jinnah and Liaquat representing Muslim India. The last station on the Way to Independence more so to Partition-could not be too far away We all waited with hated breath for the outcome of the London Conference of December 1946. Jinnah and Liaquat returned from London as the winners; they had won the battle for Pakistan. Nehru and Baldev lost the battle for a united India. Gandhi was neither here nor there. He had practically sidelined himself close to the end of his long struggle for the freedom of one, united India

Delhi was throbbing with the kind of excitement and suspense seen through traumatic times, the worst and the best' of the season. Within the four walls of the historic Red Fort, officers of the Indian National Army (INA) were facing a court martial. They were the Indian army deserters who, as POWS in Japanese captivity had raised the INA to fight the British. Nehru and Bhulabhai Desai appeared as defence counsels for the accused. The selection of the Red Fort as the venue of the court martial was the C-in-C's (Field Marshal Auchinleck's) one egregious blunder. It lent the trial a symbolical dimension to remind the Indians, especially the Dilliwallas, irresistibly of the courtmartial of Bahadur Shah also Within the four walls of fort.

The Congress press opposed the trial tooth and nail: Dawn, as the Muslim League's sole organ, sat on the fence supporting those on trial, but opposing the Congress for exploiting it politically. All the accused on trial, including General (Indian Army's ex-Captain) Shahnawaz, the only Muslim, were nationalists and staunchly pro-Congress. The Muslim League had none to support and lost considerable political mileage as a result. They found one, lesser fry Captain Burhanuddin, also on trial, and pleaded his case. But before they could do much about it, the trial concluded. The accused were cashiered from service and set free.

At sweet two-and-twenty (as one of my friends and class fellows put it on my 22th birthday) I was having the time of my life. There was such a lot to look forward to, I had been full of Plato and Aristotle, and Hobbs and Rousseau and St. Augustine, Mills and Bentham and Marx and Engels. Political thought absorbed me more than anything else. Unlike most of my old friends and schoolmates, already married or about to get married, I was still a bachelor and intended to stay one for long, perhaps for the rest of my life. My friend Ilyas and I had found a couple of congenial pads in the narrow lanes inside Farrash Khana at the back of the main Red Light area and would go there every other week or so. There were three kinds of women in the bazaar-the cheapest 'penny-in-the-slot' type (take-hais) available for a rupee or two, the middle-class or 'privates' worth between rupees five and ten, and the high-class courtesans. The courtesans-called the dera-darnis-were mostly kept women. They plied their trade as singers and dancers but would confine themselves to one man at a time-even mother his children-while it lasted. Off business, they led a normal life, like any other domestic lady

I came to know one of them when, along with one of my friends, we went to engage her for a nightly soiree (mujra). As we entered her room, we found her absorbed in her after sunset Maghreb prayer. She was dressed in the same plain white clothes as normally worn by Delhi housewives. We sat quietly; waiting for her to finish her prayer, which she very soon did. She looked at us and raised her index finger towards us, telling us to wait.

Then, she raised her hands for dua'a before completing the namaz.

Having been through her namaz, she folded one corner of the prayer carpet to keep Satan away and, turning to us, said: 'Mi11n, THE/HfkEj6 ga, main abhi, (You must excuse me sir, I would join you presently)' She retired into another room and after ten to fifteen minutes, appeared dressed in bright, expensive clothes. She greeted us with a low, courteous bow and the usual aadaab arz, which we promptly returned. After a formal exchange of compliments and queries about one another's welfare, she proceeded to ask about the purpose of our visit. We spoke about the mujra, her fees and availability on a certain date, 'Rupees one hundred!' she said, with such a ring of finality in her voice as to leave no scope for bargaining. She made us paans and served those daintily on a silver tray Having served us first, she took one herself and waited for us to speak. We agreed. She said 'thanks'. Although she would not say so, we knew we must make an advance to close the deal. My friend took a five rupee note from his pocket and handed it over to her. She thanked us once again as she accepted the money without demur.

She left me wondering all the time as to how she could ply her trade as a Courtesan and a kept woman and still pray like a good and honest homespun Muslim woman at the same time. While taking her leave, therefore, I just couldn't help putting it to her. 'May I ask you something, madam, if you wouldn't mind?'

'Yes, please. By all means!'

"Once again, I hope, you wouldn't mind ..."

She looked at me, waiting for me to go on

'Well!' I brought out haltingly 'We were both surprised to see you offer your prayers with such devotion. How can one in a profession like yours-'

'Oh, that,' she interrupted. 'Well, what is so surprising about it? What has one's profession to do with one's faith? My profession has a place of its own, It has nothing to do with my faith. Can't a sinner turn to God if only to beg His forgiveness? Understand!' Her reply left me speechless. She was so right. 'I am sorry We both are really sorry We just couldn't suppress our curiosity' We apologized.

'It's alright. You are not the first or the only one. This has been put to me before also ...'

She said 'aadaab' and we greeted her back and left, Huma, for that was her name, was one of the prettiest courtesans I remember having ever seen and a most accomplished performer at that.

Between the University and the Coffee House and occasional Visits to the Bazaar- above all amid the feverishly mounting tempo of League-Congress exchanges-life might have been like a fast-speeding train. Lamp posts after lamp posts, fields after fields, stations after stations flashed past as one neared the final station with a sense of fulfilment and awe. Fulfilment for the destination was getting closer and closer and awe because we just didn't know what it was going to be like at the journey's end.

What kind of independence from foreign rule would it be at the cost of the oneness of the country? There was the gentle Maulana Abul Kalam Azad with his trimmed imperial beard, dressed in his elegantly tailored, home spun khuddar sherwani, untiringly warning the Muslims against the horrific consequences of Partition. There was the Premier of the Punjab, Sir Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana, stubbornly refusing to toe Jinnah's line. Khizar was tall and looked even taller still by his high-crested, crisply starched turban. He dressed in his typical Tiwana-cut sherwani pleated in the middle-a cross between a tailcoat and a regular sherwani. He headed the Congress- Unionist coalition in the Punjab, the heart of would-be Pakistan. Jinnah despised them both. He denounced Azad as the Congress 'show boy' and Khizar as a 'quizling'. And we, youthful Jinnahites in the vanguard of the Pakistan movement, echoed and re-echoed Jinnah.

Then came 1947 to step up the pace of change to a dizzy whirl. We had been busy preparing for our MA finals-scheduled for the third week of March. There was no getting away, however, from the political events. We read Dawn religiously every morning and memorized the juicy hand-crafted expression of the editorials of Mr. Altaf Hussain, its powerful editor. He would freely improvise such phrases as

'putting chilies to one's tender spot', 'six feet and several inches of complete idiocy (etc.) in respect of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and use equally offensive language for Maulana Azad. Translated literally into Urdu, most of Altaf's concoctions would be unfit for use in polite company Altaf was easily the most aggressive editor known to pre-Partition Indian journalism. Later in Pakistan, he struck much the same strident note, only in a muffled key.

Exit Wavell, enter Mountbatten in March 1947 to preside over the 'liquidation' of the British Empire with a set programme to transfer power. Innah, Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Liaquat, Master Tar Singh, Acharya Kirpalani, Azad and Suhrawardy hit the headlines of the dailies. The two Muslim-owned Urdu dailies-Anjum and Jang--together with Dawn-competed with the powerful Hindu-owned and edited press and competed very well.

Anjum-much older than Jang--was owned and edited by Usman Azad, one of my own Punjabi-Saudagar community Usman Azad was a brave heart in the fullest sense of the word: blunt, a spendthrift, unafraid of authority and a compulsive gambler, He had an overwhelming passion for horse racing and would not miss a single event at the Gymkhana (Club) races or the meetings under the Indian Race Club rules. Like every onfirmed racegoer, he lost more than he Won in the bargain, but he didn't give a damn for the losses. That was all part of the game: caution and thrift were last things he knew or cared for.

Mir Khalil-ur-Rahman, the owner-editor of the daily Jang, was just the opposite of Usman Azad. Hardworking, parsimonious, discreet, courteous, worldly-wise and hard boiled pragmatist, he combined good business with balanced journalism and would soon be a success story I saw the man cycling up and down Ballimaran Bazaar several times a day back and forth from various errands and appointments. Mir Sahib was a family man in the best and most traditional sense of the world. He was not known for any extra-familial interests or hobbies other than journalism. What to speak of races, even a lesser form of gambling was wholly alien, almost an anathema to him. He worked hard and his paper sold, first to catch up with Anjun, and then to beat it hollow.

The Jung-Anjum competition filled Ballimaran with a vibrance and activity quite unknown in the past. As the old hub of visiting politicians-and there had been so many of them-it might have been the best place to run into the editors of two. best-selling Urdu dailies, who had their residences and offices around.

A heady atmosphere pervaded the city. Great things were in the offing. Partition and the emergence of Pakistan was just round the corner, almost a fait accompli.

There was a growing sense of anxiety about the future of the city itself. The consensus was for its staying as the joint capital of Hindustan and Pakistan. For, how could Delhi, the seat of the Muslim rule, language and culture through centuries, go exclusively to Hindustan? Didn't Red Fort, the Jama Masjid, the Qutub Minar, Firoz Shah Kotla and the Purana Qila-not to speak of numerous other historical remains of the Muslim era such as all the dargahs, mausoleums and shrines around-make it a Muslim city?

End of March 1947, and I was through with my examinations. I had fared well and expected a good second division maybe even a first, with a bit of luck. The results would be out by the end of May and I had all the free time in the world, Reports of fierce communal riots from various places, especially Punjab, UR Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, etc. appeared in the press practically every day However, Delhi itself was calm, in spite of the pervading sense of expectancy and anxiety The road to Pakistan had been laid and would soon be paved, carpeted and marked with milestones. But at what cost? Nobody knew, but everybody feared it was not going to be as easy and smooth as expected.

Dawn was on the warpath. It carried, on its opinion page, a regular column named 'It shall Never Happen Again' The column recorded rambling tales of atrocities committed by the Congress ministries against the Muslim minorities under their rule. The widely and avidly-read column was supposed to serve as a grim early warning to the Muslims against a future Congress- dominated united India.

Although I had been primarily disposed towards taking up

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teaching as my lifelong profession, the hectic days on the eve of Partition drew me irresistibly towards journalism, so far denied to Muslims as a profession. Dawn had thrown open an excellent window of opportunity for young, educated Muslims like myself to take up journalism as profession.

My brother Usman, had already joined the Orient Press of India (OPI), the one and the only news agency owned and run by a Muslim-Mr, Syed Ahmad. It attracted young men, fresh from college and university to join it on meagre and irregularly paid salaries. OPI carried little status in professional terms compared to the Hindu-dominated Associated Press of India (API). It was a mark of distinction, just the same, for any young budding Muslim journalist. Dawn would, however, be the last word. It carried all the weight of Jinnah's and Liaquat's patronage and authority. The Dawn boys, professionally well under par compared to their Hindu peers, tended to look larger than life. They would miss no opportunity to put down the Hindu veterans at press conferences I had managed to gatecrash, and I was struck by their over-confidence, amounting to sheer impudence, They would boldly stand up to their senior Hindu colleagues, and where argument failed, shut them with some biting repartee.

Among the Muslim journalists I happened to see practically every day at the Coffee House were Zamir Siddiqi, Saleem Alvi and Ashiq Ahmad. The last-named was the staff reporter on the prestigious British-edited The Statesman. Ashiq Bhai, incidentally, belong to our locality and was known as Babu Ashiq by his neighbours. He was, in all probability the first and only Muslim to have been on the reporting staff of The Statesman. A thorough gentleman, he had a handsome, smiling face. It was said of him that he could see the Viceroy any time he liked.

Besides books, I spent a good deal of my time reading Dawn. I would memorise word after word, phrase after phrase, from Mr. Altaf Hussain's editorials, Pathan Joseph's popular column Over a Cup of Tea, and a newly introduced feature 'Tremendous Trifles' by M.M. (M.M. stood for Colonel Majid Malik, as I came to know later).

My friend Ilyas and I gravitated in the morning between

Spencer Restaurant at the railway station and the Coffee House in New Delhi. Once my mind was made up about taking up journalism as my profession, I felt so good, so full of life. I had such a lot to look forward to-all the press conferences, receptions and above all, writing for Dawn and getting my name into cold print. It all seemed so wonderful, so full of promise and adventure.

I had been yearning to call on Mr. Altaf Hussain and apply to him personally for a place in Dawn. How to go about it, I wondered. How to face the man whose very name would send shudders down the spine of even Gandhi and Nehru? I was so nervous, so unsure of myself. One day however, I decide to try my luck and call on him at his Sujhan Singh Park apartment in the posh Lodhi Colony without an appointment.

I took a bus from Ajmeri Gate to Lodhi Colony and drove to his house. It was a first floor apartment. I knocked at the door. Presently a young man-about my age, maybe little younger-opened the door. After the normal exchange of salaams, I hurriedly introduced myself to him and requested to see Mr. Altaf Hussain. 'I am Mr. Hussain's son, Ajmal Hussain!' he said politely and let me in. 'Please wait. I will see if he is free!'

He asked me to be seated on a sofa close by and went into the adjoining room. I waited with thumping heart. Hardly a few minutes must have passed when Mr. Altaf Hussain entered with a very brisk step. He Wore a shirt on top of striped, multi-coloured, tehbund (ankle-length sheet in place of the usual pyjamas). Of medium height, he was dark and from behind his glasses, his eyes, flashed like a flash of lightning-bright and piercing, and razor-sharp. 'Yes?' he asked, without a moment's hesitation. I hastened to introduce myself as best I could. Without further question, he said: 'Very well then, you may join us as an unpaid apprentice sub-editor before we can consider you for a regular appointment He told me to wait awhile, went into the other room and returned presently to give me a letter addressed to Mr. Mahmud Hussain, News Editor. He wished me the best of luck and that was the end of it.

I couldn't believe my luck at the successful outcome of the

meeting. I hadn't the foggiest idea what "sub-editor" meant. But it sounded so impressive, so weighty and substantial. To be sub-editor on the staff of Dawn! My God! How wonderful! I reported to Mr. Mahmud Hussain the very next day. He sat at a large table at the head of a staff of five or six, busy with their work in the newsroom. He was a very kindly Bengali gentleman in his early 50s. Speaking his English with a pronounced Bengali accent, he asked me a few questions about my academic background. Then he took me around the news desk to introduce me to his staff. There were Zuhair Siddiqui, Asif ul Haque, Sibti Farooq Faridi, Asrar Ahmad and Muzaffar Ahmad. He introduced me to each and every one of them and asked them to look after me. I was to start work from the following day on the morning shift.

The Dawn editorial offices were situated at the far end of a narrow, twisting lane off Faiz Bazaar, Darya Ganj. The paper did not have its own printing press, and was composed and printed at the Latifi Press in the main bazaar. It was such a thrill going to the Dawn office day after day afternoon after afternoon (mid-shift) and night after night, by rotation. My colleagues were all very kind and cooperative. They told me all about subbing-how to take or 'kill' a story depending on its news value, The use of various 'points', the taking; and headline in a single, or double column (or more), according to its importance; about its placement on the front or the back or inside pages. I had to use my own "news sense" to find the proper space for the story. Punctuation, paragraphing and paraphrasing were also essential parts of good subbing. A good 'intro'; summing up the gist of the story would be the sub-editor's best chance to use and improve his own writing ability.

Puzzled at first, I soon got to learn the ropes. We made a happy group at the desk. Zuhair was handsome, always smiling and pleasant; Asif was probably the eldest in the company with a tongue-in-cheek sort of mannerism; the paan chewing Faridi always had a fling at somebody else's cost; Asrar cupped his chin as he laughed. I was learning fast and enjoying it too.

The editorial staff, headed by Mr. Altaf Hussain and assisted by Ahmad Ali Khan and Muhammad Ahmad Zuberi sat in their own separate rooms. The big, paan-chewing Manzoorul Haque

was the chief reporter. M.M. (Majid Malik), the columnist, also had a small room to himself. He had been a full colonel in the Indian Army PR department under Brigadier Juhu and Colonel Desmond Young. He came to the office on certain fixed days dressed in his white army-cut tunic. He was a chain smoker a chain smoker.

I cut and chopped stories with a Hindu-Congress angle. I would even relegate statements by Gandhi and Nehru to inside pages. It was such a thrill. The teleprinter kept ticking all the time. Clumsy with my hands, I would often fail to pull the copy clean of the printer, leaving rough edges on top of the paper roll. The rough edges would get stuck in the machine and leave it unable to push the message up for a while. Those were truly heady days for me, divided between Dawn, the India Coffee House, weekly or fortnightly visits to back-alleys of the Red Light bazaar.

Out on the political stage, things moved on at a hectic, dizzy pace. Partition was like the indelible writing on the wall. In bold, blazing letters, it was almost a fait accompli: the Congress, even Gandhi, had accepted it almost as an act of fate. Jinnah was the winner, everybody else a loser.

Dawn splashed his statements and reports of his activities across its front page every day Dawn's was a single individual's effort against the powerful Hindu press, which would seem to turn pale in the face of Dawn's fulsome, vitriolic rhetoric. Much of the Hindu press had lost its clout after Mountbatten's declaration about transfer of power by June 1948. They lost their battle against Dawn's full-blooded offensive against a Hindu-dominated united India.

Absolute certainty about the emergence of Pakistan also gave rise to some equally absolute questions about its credibility as a functioning country and state, what with its albatross-like bizonal geography and India sitting in between. There were also questions about its economy language, culture and viability as an organic whole. These were brusquely and irritably brushed aside. We just didn't want to hear, least of all answer, all those awkward questions. Our one standard reply in each case would be: 'We will sort out all those once Pakistan comes into being. just wait and see!'

The one daunting question about the link between the two wings of Pakistan was presently answered by the Quaid in an interview to a foreign correspondent. He demanded a land-air corridor via India to link the two wings. Down carried it as its lead story in bold, block letters. The Hindu press also splashed it across its front pages, doctoring the main text here and there to highlight its obvious absurdities.

We were all so happy so elated over the Quaid's dramatic checkmate. I, too, was most excited and wished to know more about it. So I decided to go to Dr, Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi for an answer. He took my question lightly. He didn't think it should bother us at all. Under the internationally recognized Right of the Sealed Wagons, our rolling stock, with passengers and cargo, would be moving back and forth between the two wings without let or hindrance in 'sealed wagons, unbreakably padlocked!'

'Right of Sealed Wagons!' Never heard of it, It was nothing less than the rabbit out of the magician's hat. That information excited and intrigued me beyond words. It sounded so profound, so convincing, so original. I would not wait to take the first available bus from the university to New Delhi. I got off at Odeon Cinema and walked straight to the Coffee House at a brisk pace. Quite a few of my Hindu interlocutors, my Coffee House pals, were there in their usual places. 'Oh, hello, hello, Mr. Pakistani, what's the big news of the day? Your Quaid demands a corridor all the way through India. Fancy that!' They hailed me in their usual tongue-in-cheek style, I settled into my chair comfortably ordered a hot coffee with cream and chicken patties before responding to my Coffee House pals. 'So you don't seem to approve of the Quaid's demand. Tell me, what's wrong with it?' "Well?" they quizzed waiting for me to go on.

'You tell me first, what's so wrong or unusual about the Quaid's demand? I think it's perfectly logical and permissible under international law/ My response left them staring at me in unconcealed surprise and perturbation.

I went on to tell them about the Right of the Sealed Wagons protected under international law. The disclosure completely bowled them over. They had heard nothing of that kind before.

'Go and check it out for yourself with those who know better, should you have any doubt at all.

The Hindu press was furious over the Quaid's demand. But we, at Dawn, could not have been happier and more proud of the Quaid than ever. He would always have the last word in politics to get the better his critics, be it Gandhi, Nehru or Mountbatten.

In response to the question as to where I would like to stay after Partition, 'Why right here in Delhi. Where else? This has been our home for the past two or three centuries at least.

'Do you really think it'd be the same after Partition?

'Well, I don't really know. But I see no reason why it should be any different.'

And that is where the argument would stop, to leave me full of growing doubts. Much as we all hoped for the best, none would have a positive answer. The vicious chain of rioting since August 1946 had raised any number of questions about the prospect of a peaceful transfer of power.

I had been on the staff of Dawn for nearly a month, still unpaid, but learning my ropes. They put me on the night shift to get to know all about page make-up and the handling of the late news (stop press) and news flashes.

Our news editor, Mr. Mahmood Hussain, was happy with my work. He said he had recommended my appointment on a regular, paid basis. He was sure. Mr. Altaf Hussain would concur. 3 June 1947 was not too far. It was going to be a momentous day in Indian history. On that day the Viceroy Lord Louis Mountbatten, together with the Quaid, Nehru and Baldev Singh would go on air to announce the final transfer of power plan. The plan was at once the greatest triumph and compromise of Jinnah's uncompromising political life. It was virtually thrust on him, allowing him little room for manoeuvre. He had to choose between a partitioned Pakistan and unpartitioned India. Only three years ago, he had denounced Pakistan on the basis of a divided Punjab and Bengal-the two largest Muslim majority provinces of India as a 'truncated, moth-eaten, mutilated and maimed Pakistan? He said he would never accept the husk for the corn the shadow for reality. In the end, he had

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to eat his words and accept what was on offer without a choice, Partition of these two provinces, especially of Punjab, would be fraught with far-reaching consequences. It would be anything but a smooth and peaceful operation. Fires of communal hates, already smouldering in the Punjab, were ready to explode into a devouring conflagration any time.

On the evening of 3 June, we all sat glued to the radio sets-taut with excitement-waiting for the speeches. Much as we all had a reasonably good idea about the main theme of the plan-we still eagerly waited to hear it in the voices of the leaders ('life warm', as the Quaid would put it) from the All-India Radio. First to go on air was Mountbatten. He had been the supreme military commander and a generation younger than Jinnah and Nehru. He was about the same age-maybe a little younger-as Sardar Baldev Singh, the Sikh leader and the defence minister in the interim cabinet.

I heard the four speeches along with others without following them word for word until I read the texts the next day in Dawn. For the moment, however, what struck us all more than anything else was the resonant voice of the Quaid. He signed off his speech with a resounding Pukistan Zindizbad. There was such force, such magic in the two simple words, such power and courage of conviction, as to leave us all spellbound. Pakistan was now a reality-just round the corner-barely a month and a half away. It was hard to imagine, but there it was, without the shadow of doubt.

Nehru wound up his speech with a firm but less forceful Jai Hind. His entire tone through the course of the broadcast exuded more anguish than joy 'It is with no joy in my heart that I commend these proposals to you.'

Baldev was neither here nor there. He was heard with little interest and attention. There had been a lot of the Sikh scare just the same, especially the Sikh Nihangs (fanatics) going berserk in Punjab to ignite bloody riots. Unlike the vegetarian Hindus, the Jhatka-eating Sikhs were both martial and militant. They carried their bare, uncovered kirpuns (swords) as a part of their religious accoutrement and looked so fearsome. Jhatka was the way they would slaughter goats, with a single blow of the sword rather

than letting them bleed first Muslim-style, before chopping for meat,

Mountbatten sounded more like a supreme commander or a martial-law administrator (maybe an afterthought after my several brushes with martial law in Pakistan). He, too, was not very happy with the plan and Was quite blunt about his opposition to the partition of India. He supported the partition of Bengal and Punjab only as a logical corollary to the partition of India on a command basis.

In fact, none of the four leaders sounded either too happy or satisfied with the plan, Even Jinnah, the would-be father of Pakistan, expressed his reservations about the plan being a 'compromise' or a 'settlement'. His exact Words as printed in Dawn the next day were as follows: 'It is now for us to consider whether the plan as presented to us by His Majesty's Government should be accepted as a compromise or a settlement. On this point I do not wish to prejudge the decision of the Council of the All-India Muslim League which had been summoned to meet on Monday, 9 June.' This part of his statement provoked many lively, tongue-in-cheek debates amongst us on Dawn. 'Imagine, the Quaid being so modest. Who would dare oppose him in the League Council. Except for a madcap like Hasrat Mohani. Maybe also Abdul Hashim Khan of Bengal. Is it possible at all for anyone, even someone as strong as Suhrawardy and Nawab Ismail Khan to stand up to the Quaid at all? Nonsense! But why should the Quaid have deemed it necessary at all to look that modest?'

Our News Editor, Mr. Mahmood Hussain, reacted to the plan with a divided mind. His first reaction was to write. 'a lyrical' editorial in praise of the Quaid's achievement. He would, however, not approve of Pakistan on the basis of the partition of Bengal, his home province. Like any Bengali, he loved it more than anything else in the World. We discussed the text of the plan at length. We took exception to Nehru's observation about reaching the goal of a united India 'sooner than otherwise and then we shall have a stronger and more secure foundation ...,'

What on earth did he mean by that? Once accepted and implemented, partition of India would be forever. No question

of reaching the goal of a united India via a partitioned India. There could be scarcely anything more ridiculous. The real-politics of partition left no room for such idealistic fantasizing,

Just the same, Nehru could be forgiven for his pipe dreams-a romanticist and an idealist he had always been. Not so Mountbatten, He was still in absolute authority and no hair-brained idealist like Nehru, More than just announcing his partition plan, he had a much more crucial role yet to play in its actual implementation, His observations about the settlement of the “ultimate boundaries’ of the two dominions and his use of such expressions as 'the Indian consciousness/ 'Punjabi and Bengali-consciousness' raised many and eyebrow, wasn't he already throwing a spanner into the works? Wasn't he actually trying to sabotage Pakistan already?

Mountbatten also left open the question of the future of the princely states. What about the future of Hyderabad (Deccan) the largest and the most prosperous princely state under a Muslim ruler with a Hindu majority? What about Bhopal in the same category? Besides the importance of the two Muslim-ruled states for the future of Pakistan, the rulers of these states-the Nizam, Mir Usman Ali Khan and Nawab Hamidullah Khan-were also recognized as the leaders of Muslim India: the Nizam for his charitable words and Nawab Hamidullah for his statesmanship and negotiating skills. He had for a while acted as a go between for Jinnah and Gandhi, He also enjoyed the trust and the respect of the British and held the honorary rank of Air Commodore of the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF). Kashmir was yet another problem, a Muslim majority state under a Hindu ruler, a tyrant called Hari Singh.

The 3 June partition plan gave the princely rulers three options: to accede to India or Pakistan, or stay independent after the lapse of paramountcy Jinnah, the votary of constitutional-ism, accepted in principle, the right of the princely rulers to go in for anyone of the three options. Congress, on the other hand, rejected altogether their right to stay independent after the British were gone. They must either accede to India or Pakistan, depending on geographical contiguity and 'other factors',

The question of the future of the princely states provoked intense debate, How could a Muslim-ruled state like Hyderabad, with its own currency and agent-general sitting in London, ever merge with India? Hard to imagine. Physical geography, however, dumped both Hyderabad and Bhopal in the lap of India, a factor absolutely irreversible.

On 9 June 1947, the Council of the All-India Muslim League met at Imperial Hotel, almost opposite Coffee House, to ratify the 3 June plan. Much as I had been yearning to attend the historic occasion, I happened to be on the morning shift and could not make it. According to the API and Reuters messages received on the printer, there was quite a rumpus during the proceedings, Quite a few of the League members had abstained from voting at all. Some of them even opposed it tooth and nail. The man who really stood his ground was the poet-politician Maulana Hasrat Mohani. A midget of a man physically he stood tall and firm, to oppose, with all his strength, the acceptance of the plan on the basis of divided Panjab and Bengal. He challenged Mr. Jinnah to prove Who gave him the right to accept a 'moth-eaten' Pakistan. The whole of Muslim India felt cheated and betrayed and let down.

The short, frail man was physically pulled down from his stand by a number of League zealots. For quite a while, there was complete pandemonium, total chaos in the hall. Mr. Jinnah himself retired to an adjoining room for consultation with Liaquat Ali Khan and others,

Thereafter, he was reported to have asked the House in a tear-choked voice if they did not wish him to see Pakistan within his own lifetime. Frail and sick and exhausted by uninterrupted hard work and his one-man's burden, Jinnah was not in the best of health and looked it. The meeting ended in an overwhelming vote in support of the acceptance and the plan-a consensual rather than a unanimous vote.

Gnawing second thoughts about the Wisdom and rationale of Pakistan were beginning to assail our minds. My Hindu Coffee House pals, until then, held in ostensible awe of Jinnah's superior political strategy were beginning to see the chinks in the armour. Wasn't the League caught in its own trap already?

Wasn't Jinnah forced to eat humble pie in giving his unconditional acceptance to a 'moth-eaten Pakistan?'

The news from Punjab was not too good either. Khizar, the 'Quizling' (Quaid's expression) was still in the saddle as the premier; the Sikhs were on the warpath. Master Tara Singh, the Sikh leader, had unsheathed and brandished his sword outside on the steps of the Punjab provincial assembly threatening bloodshed if Lahore were awarded to Pakistan. After the Golden Temple at Amritsar, the Sikhs had two of their holiest shrines in west Punjab-at Nankana Sahib near Lahore and the Punja Sahib at Haripur. They also had plenty of running businesses and urban and agricultural real estate in Lahore and Rawalpindi. The Sikhs had a fair share of the agricultural lands in the colonized districts or Montgomery Multan, Sargodha and Lyallpur. They demanded the partition of the province on the basis of landed property and the location of religious places rather than on the basis of population. A most untenable argument, worthy of the proverbially Woolly-headed Sikh genius alone.

Lahore students, under the banner of the Muslim League, had hit the streets in protest against the continuation of Khizar's rule. They demanded his immediate resignation. The women's wing of the Muslim League also joined forces with the demonstrators. Begum Jehan Ara Shah Nawaz and Salma Tassuduq Hussain, along with several others, were arrested and jailed, Governor Ivor Jenkins put the city under curfew-in effect, under martial law. Dawn splashed the news across its front pages day after day. One of its Lahore-based reporters, Mian Muhammad Shafi, also incurred the wrath of the authorities and was thrown behind bars. Dawn was banned in Lahore, Priced at one anna (three were 16 annas to an Indian rupee), smuggled copies sold for one or two rupees each in Lahore.

Now a regular paid staffer of Dawn, I had a sense of self importance I had never before known in my life. I, too, had an active and crucial role to play in our onward march to Pakistan, picking or killing news out of the mass of messages received on the printer and by telegraph from our correspondents: giving

them a proper single or double column headline and writing up the intro and indicating their placement was no mean job. There I Was, doing it to the best of my ability and the increasing satisfaction of my seniors.

While the division of Punjab was accepted as a fait accompli, there was much debate about the future of Bengal. Bengali leaders, like H.S. Suhrawardy Abul Hashim Khan, Maulana Akram Khan and several others Were gradually veering round the idea of an undivided, independent and united Bengal. The Quaid himself would not think of Bengal without Calcutta. He would not oppose a united Bengal if it stayed independent and did not merge with India.

Dawn argued forcefully in support of awarding Calcutta to Eastern (Pakistan) Bengal on the basis of the Muslim contribution towards the development of the city Among several factors, Dawn also highlighted the role of Muslim fishermen in the promotion of the fishing industry The debate went on day after day In July Sir Cyril Radcliffe, the British judge, arrived to head the Boundary Commission, What could a judge have to do with a matter of such geostrategic and physical importance? It left all of us quite puzzled. However, the Quaid not only accepted but also welcomed the appointment of a British judge known for his integrity and impartiality The die was cast: it could be melted down, sooner than recast. Pakistan was an all but accomplished fact and had to be accepted as it was (and would be) Without more ado and hair-splitting. The Quaid and the Muslim League had won the War. Like Great Britain, however, they were up against the intractable post-war dilemmas and had to face them as best as they could.

Tension gripped the old city as trainloads of refugees from Punjab started pouring in. They set up their camps around the railway station and in the sprawling Company Gardens. Some had even occupied the Wavell Canteen built during the war for soldiers-NCOS (non-commissioned officers) and JCOs (junior commissioned officers) in transit through Delhi. Some of them-mainly Sikhs-might even have had their kinsfolk among the soldiers staying in the Canteen and joined them as their guests. In conditions as chaotic as these, who would care for strict

military discipline? Even the MP (Military Police) would either look away or give a mild warning to the trespassers. Hordes of Sikhs, armed with shining kirpans, took Chandni Chowk by storm. They were all over the place. Fury was writ large across their faces: their eyes were blood shot, spewing hatred. They were called sharan arthi-meaning one looking for shelter at the other's knees.

But the Dilliwallas called them sharnarthi-people out to create evil and mischief. We were all very afraid of them, Incidents of Muslim houses in Hindu majority areas raided by the Sikhs were also reported. Even from Phatak Habsh Khan and Baradari Nawab Wazir-strongholds of our own Punjabi Saudagar community some disturbing reports were received. Hindus were creating problems for their Muslim neighbours. Unlike Ballimaran, and the lanes branching off the main Bazaar, all other Muslim localities had a fair sprinkling of Hindu. Rooftops of Muslim and Hindu houses abutted at several points, to bring them literally within a stone's throw of one another. Quite a few of the Hindu families were playing host to their kin or friends from the Punjab.

Who could know when things might really get out of hand to encourage the Hindus and their Punjabi guests to come down on their Muslim neighbours? The situation was getting from bad to worse. Every day would be yet another day closer to Pakistan, yet another stage closer to 'doomsday' The road itself seemed to be moving even faster than the commuters: it left little time even for a short break to catch their breath.

By advancing the date for the transfer of power from June 1948 to August 1947, Mountbatten had taken all of us by surprise. We were not quite prepared for our journey to Pakistan in so abrupt and hasty a manner. We were not even sure if we really would ever have Pakistan as a country in brick and mortar. Our quest for Pakistan had been more in the nature of an image, a dreamland, a Utopia, an ideal worth struggling for, without the hope or the prospect of ever achieving it within our own lifetime.

For once, we thought of the frightening possibility of migration: of leaving Delhi-the seat and symbol of Muslim culture, art and architecture, and the city where lay buried the

bones of our ancestors. The curtain suddenly rose to unfold a tableaux of dumfounded players turned to stone. It had nothing of the gloss and glitter of the dream we had dreamt of, the vision we had projected on our mental screens of a wonderland with flowers blossoming and birds singing.

There was a deepening sense of disillusionment, of a raw awakening from a golden dream. What added to our frustration was the incident of a number of Delhi women going to 10 Aurangzeb Road in a delegation to call on Mr. Jinnah. It was soon after the announcement of the date, 14 August 1947, set for the emergence of Pakistan. It was the longest and the hottest day of the month (22/23 June). Delhi might have been like the seventh pit of hell. The women enthusiastically carried the green Muslim League flag, chanting "Pakistan Zindabad". They congregated outside the gate of the Quaid's residence, raising 'Pakistan Zindabad' at the top of their voices. There was no response from the house. They kept on chanting for a good 10-15 minutes before the Quaid's sister, Miss Fatima Jinnah, appeared in the portico. She looked quite displeased with the rally "Well, what is it all about?" She asked gruffly 'We have come to see Quaid and congratulate him for the achievement of Pakistan!' Miss Jinnah would not approve of it initially; but relented when the woman assured her that they would not take long. They were all very thirsty expecting Miss Jinnah to invite them inside or offer them a drink of water. No such offer. After a few minutes, the Quaid came out with his sister. Beside themselves with excitement, the women exploded into yet another round of 'Quaid-i-Azam Zindabad' and 'Pakistan Zindabad'. Miss Jinnah told them sternly to keep quite. 'Well?' the Quaid asked. What followed was a brief but bitter exchange between the Quaid and the women. In answer to the question about the future of the Indian Muslims, he said, 'those who could make it to Pakistan at all would be welcomed. Others would have to stay put in India. Pakistan cannot accommodate all of you. As for your sacrifices, they had to be made for Pakistan in any case, whether it could accommodate all of you or not'-words to that effect to leave the women stunned. The Quaid and his sister! Is that what Pakistan was all about? Those who

could make it to it would be welcome; others should stay where they were and look after themselves.

The atmosphere at Dawn also changed. Some of us were unhappy; others were not so sure. Mr. Altaf Hussain and his lieutenant, Muhammad Ahmad Zuberi were, of course, on top of the world. They had already started planning for the Karachi (Pakistan) edition of Dawn to be published simultaneously from Delhi and Karachi. Fancy that!

Mr. Mahmood Hussain did not look happy at all. He was apprehensive about the future of the Muslim minority in India. Rather than resolve the minority problem—the main object of Pakistan—it had only compounded it manifold in the ultimate analysis. Altaf had his daily meetings with Liaquat and, when required, with Jinnah, planning the Karachi edition. An advance party led by Muhammad Ahmad Zuberi would proceed to Karachi sometime in July to find a suitable place for the location of the various offices, and the acquisition of a printing press.

Even normally of an authoritarian nature, Altaf became more so after the acceptance of the Partition plan. More than an editor he started behaving as the chief executive of a corporation. Anybody he believed to be misbehaving, came in for a sharp reprimand, 'The door of Pakistan would be slammed on you!' he warned Asrar Ahamad, one of my best colleagues. Asrar was a somewhat left-leaning intellectual. Zuhair Siddiqi was yet another and so was Ahmad Ali Khan, senior assistant editor. However, both seemed to have escaped the Wrath of Altaf Hussain. As for the others, they suffered from a sense of grinding uncertainty about the future.

Had Mountbatten called Jinnah's bluff by foisting 'a moth-eaten and mutilated Pakistan' on him? Which of the two was the winner--Mountbatten or Jinnah? What would be in store for hundreds of thousands of Muslims left to fend for themselves in India? Our minds were full of questions. Would Dawn be able to run simultaneously at all from the two capitals after Partition?

There was much speculation about the shape of things to come and the kind and nature of India-Pakistan relationship. Would the communal hatred, at the root of Partition, continue

to poison the wells of India and Pakistan? What would be the shape of things to come between the two wings of Pakistan divided by over 1000 miles of Indian territory? Mr. Jinnah's demand for a corridor had already misfired. With the exception of some hectic debate initially, no serious notice was even taken of that. It was dismissed as yet another of those bombshells Jinnah would drop to give a fresh twist to settled issue, Could Islam alone serve as a binding force between two such diverse people as the Bengalis of East Pakistan, the Punjabis, Pathans, Sindhis and Baluchis of West Pakistan?

These were precisely the questions nationalist Muslims like Maulana Azad had raised against the very rationale of a country being created on the basis of religion. For all the whys and wherefores, all the nagging questions, the mood in the city was no different. Everybody seemed to be in a state of high tension and suspense. A 'moth-eaten' Pakistan held little promise for the whole of Muslim India. The Punjabis would have more than half of the Punjab and the Bengalis more than half of the Bengal. But what about the Biharis? What about Hyderabad and Bhopal? The Congress had simply ruled out the third option. The 3 June partition plan offered the states to stay independent if the ruler would so choose. It was living up to its old reputation of having things its own way The Muslim League (Jinnah) accepted the June 3 plan in toto and pledged to observe it as it stood. Not so the Congress, It had already donned the mantle of the British as the paramount power, the true heir and successor to the British. In other words, Pakistan seceded while India succeeded as the paramount power.

As the days flashed past and the D-Day-14 August-approached, suspense deepened. There had been much speculative debate whether the two states would have a joint or two separate heads of state. Liaquat would be the prime minister of Pakistan and there was little debate about that. Would Mountbatten be the joint governor-general?

Jinnah had never sought office outside the party He could best serve as the party president to help the Hedging state through its paces.

While he wouldn't agree to a joint governor-general, he suggested Mountbatten as the supreme arbitrator and sort of

super governor-general of the two dominions. Pakistan must, however, have its own governor-general too: Who would that be? Jinnah had been enigmatic about the final choice, leaving Mountbatten guessing. What Mountbatten would find hard to understand was how could Jinnah ever consent to play second fiddle, as a constitutional figurehead to the chief executive, the prime minister. If at all he was interested in office, he would rather be the prime minister of Pakistan with full powers than a figurehead governor-general with no power. The ideal thing for him would be to shun the trappings and the attendant burdens of office and leave himself free to act and serve as the father of the nation.

There had been a much-animated debate about his future role and status in the press and public. Dawn had been distinctly cautious and restrained, waiting for the final word from the Quaid. It came through early in the first week of July. Jinnah told Mountbatten that he would be the governor general of Pakistan. Dawn reacted to the news with unbounded enthusiasm. The reaction could not have been more divided among the members of the staff. 'So that was all the old man had been after: governor-general of his "moth-eaten" Pakistan-Pakistan ke betaj badshah-the uncrowned king of Pakistan ...'

Mr. Mahmood Hussin, our news editor, was simply fuming and fretting. I had never seen him so furious-so completely beside himself with rage. He used some of the choicest expletives for Jinnah. Pronounced in his typical Bengali accent, his outpourings shocked and amused us at the same time. He (Jinnah) knew and understood nothing better than absolute personal power and authority. Pakistan under him would be nothing but an authoritarian state. His outburst left young Jinnahites like myself, both depressed and puzzled. The seed of skepticism, sown in our minds after Jinnah's acceptance of 'moth-eaten' and 'mutilated' Pakistan, seemed to grow like the bean-plant in the fairy tale of Jack and the Bean Stalk,

Mr. Hussain might have been unduly unfair to Jinnah but he had a point, he had a case, even if not a wholly valid one. He was stressing only what he thought had been always wrong with Jinnah: his obsession with personal power and authority at all costs. He pitied poor Liaquat Ali, who, as prime minister

would be little better than 'a shoeshine' to Jinnah. The consensus amongst us, by and large, was also against the old man accepting any official position at all.

Although India was still one India and Delhi was its capital, the atmosphere in the city changed dramatically after Jinnah's appointment as the governor-general (designate) of Pakistan. Except for its physical boundaries, yet to be demarcated, Pakistan was, for all practical purposes, a separate 'foreign' country with its own governor-general, prime minister (designate) and capital. Delhi was my city no longer but the capital of India, where I would have little place as an ardent supporter of Pakistan-now a potential Pakistani. My Hindu interlocutors and friends would often ask me about my future plans, more precisely when I would be leaving Delhi. Delhi had virtually ceased to be our home. The mounting influx of the Punjab Sikhs and Hindus had created a sort of reign of terror in the city. Hardly a day would pass without one or the other news appearing about a communal clash-mainly Muslim-Sikh-over something or the other. Those of us-and there were very many in the city-who had always worn sherwani pyjamas as their standard day-to-day dress, now wore shirt-and-trousers, instead, while going out.

Even at St. Stephen's the showcase of Western dress in the academic world, I had worn sherwani-pyjamas throughout my two years there. We were all so used to our traditional dress and liking it too. I remember feeling so awkward-almost naked-in shirt-and-trousers (no jacket) in the beginning. Perforce, however, we had to discard our sherwani-pyjamas and adopt shirt-and-trousers for fear of being identified as Muslims even at a glance.

Police posts and pickets all over the chokepoint, like the Clock Tower-Nai Sarak intersection and around the Reserve Bank of India (etc.)-army patrols appeared all over the old city. It might indeed have been a replay of the 1942 Quit India Movement. Congress-inspired and Congress-led, the Quit India Movement had a common enemy and a shared threat to be faced by Indians-Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, alike regardless of their party affiliation. Not so in the 1947 pre-partition crisis: the

painful prelude in the parting of ways-the endgame. We had found the enemy within.

The British were on their way out to let the Hindus and Muslim have it out between themselves. The Muslims of the city felt overwhelmed by a crushing sense of isolation, of alienation, of an impending doom and banishment from the city they had once ruled. The Red Fort, the Jama Masjid, the Qutub Minar, the streets and bazaars, Urdu, the very sounds and smells pervading the city--all carried the indelible stamp of Muslim heritage. Yet, suddenly the very earth seemed to be slipping from underneath our feet, and everything tottering.

We were afraid. The elation over the achievement of Pakistan gradually gave way to ever-deepening uncertainties and the fear of the unknown. The very doors and walls were beginning to look strange and outlandish. The lane where the Dawn office was situated was a Hindu mohallah. We had never had any trouble on our way to and fro from the office; but now we were afraid, quite unsure of ourselves, not knowing form Where a brickbat might suddenly drop or someone might come out of the blue to kill us. The announcement of the separate governor-generals-Mountbatten for India and Jinnah for Pakistan-left no doubt about the two countries being two separate and, in all probability not very friendly states; and the subcontinent, a problem part of the world.

Professor I,H, Qureshi, an indirectly-elected member of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly had already left (or was about to leave) for Karachi for an informal session of the Constituent Assembly Mr. Jinnah would be leaving soon. Mr. Altaf Hussain had been on the move between Delhi and Karachi in connection with the publication of the Karachi edition of the paper. All arrangements had been made for the first issue of Dawn, Karachi, to appear on 15 August 1947, The masthead would carry the legend: Published simultaneously from Delhi and Karachi. Nobody even seemed to realize even faintly that partition would be the parting of ways forever. Would the twain ever meet? Maybe, yes, maybe no. Who knew! But just then, the future looked so bleak: communal violence, the Sikh factor predominating it, had all but undermined the dream of a peaceful transfer of power.

" The man most feared by us, the Muslims, was the home

minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Even in his press photographs he looked like man of steel, a statue in bronze. Such a hard, grim face, a furrowed forehead, eyes spewing hate, large protruding ears, a bald pate-the overall facial expression tended to twist into a permanent leer, untouched by the faintest pretence or kindness. Patel was the Congress' man of the hour: Nehru was all but a virtual nonentity in realpolitik: even Gandhi would shut up once Patel put his foot down.

The Muslim ministers of the interim cabinet were already packing their suitcases for their journey to Pakistan. Among them, Jinnah, Liaquat, Chundrigar and Mandal would be going as refugees for Nishtar and Ghazanfar Ali Khan, it would be a journey back home-to their respective provinces-NWFP and Punjab. For I.I. Chundrigar from Bombay and Jogindar Nath Mandal from West Bengal, Pakistan was a new country too.

Delhi would soon be the capital of a foreign country Hard to believe. But there it was-an irreversible fait accompli and there was no going back. What was done was done. Did it have to be like that at all? Did we ever think it had to be only like that and no better or worse? What was the big idea, after all?

Then came the news: Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, governor-general (designate) of Pakistan would be leaving Delhi for Karachi on 7 August.

The end! It might well have been the beginning of yet another part of the serial. Dawn, dated 8 August carried a short but poignant farewell statement of the Quaid under a banner headline. The concluding paragraph of the statement was addressed exclusively to the Delhi Muslims. It read:

'I bid farewell to the citizens of Delhi, amongst whom I have many friends of all communities and I earnestly appeal to everyone to live in this great and historic city with peace, The past must be buried and let us start as two independent sovereign states of Hindustan and Pakistan, I wish Hindustan prosperity and peace.

End of the message.

'The past must be buried?' Fine! Easy for those running away from the past; impossible for others condemned to live with it.

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Reaction to the Quaid's departure was one of utter shock and disbelief: we felt like children suddenly orphaned. There were those, committed Muslim League who whol pro-Pakistan, in a state of stupefaction, and others, the nationalists, who would turn round and say:

‘Didn’t we tell you so? It had to be like that in the end? After what had happened, the _dividing line between the Leaguers and the nationalists had, for all practical purposes disappeared. To the Hindu and Sikh fanatic, a Muslim was a Muslim, regardless of his political persuasion,

Shiekh Ata-ur-Rahman, advocate, with his characteristic sense of poignant humour and poetical satire went on receciting the following couplet from the famous Mathnawi-e Gulzar Nasim:

'Hui, hai mera haar legaya kaun
Hui, hui, mujhe dagh degaye kaun

(Woe betide one who stole my necklace: woe betide one who cheated me!)

The lawyer recited the verse with mixed accents of mockery and cynicism. 'You see, the one who flew, Zul-Jinnuh, means one with a pair of wings!' He would quip in his typical tongue-and-cheek style-without naming the Quaid. Usman and his friend Barakat Ahmad would behave much as the lawyer’s yes-men-they too, assumed the same lofty attitude 'We told you so!'

Mr. Jinnah’s departure sparked off a fierce round of communal rioting and killing. Mahatma Gandhi was still in Calcutta; Prime Minister Nehru had been practically sidelined by his home minister, Sardar Patel, the iron man of the cabinet, Sardar Patel was a pragmatist, a no-nonsense practitioner of Machpolitik, with no love lost for Muslims. He had been the driving force behind the Congress's approval of the Partition plan against the express wishes of Mahatma Gandhi and the compulsive vacillations of Nehru. Jinnah’s departure from Delhi gave the green light to the Hindu rowdies to go for the Muslims. Patel and his Home Ministry would simply look away.

Independence Day was barely a week away and the city was preparing to celebrate it in a big way, It would be a day of

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rejoicing, as well as one of catharsis of revenge against the Muslims. The Hindu toughs went about proclaiming to let the Muslims have it in the neck, It was time they paid for their contribution towards the partition of Bharat Maita. Sherwani-pyjama-clad Muslims would increasingly become a rare sight even in the old city. Ill-fitting shirt-and-trousers ensembles came more and more into evidence. We were all very; very afraid. The sight of the ferocious-looking kirpuns-carrying, dressed-in-black Sikh fanatics, the Nihangs, struck terror in our hearts. We avoided their fiery stares as best we could: like a pigeon in the face of a wild cat.

A Mohalla Committee was formed to discuss and initiate steps for local defence against mob attacks. A delegation led by some old nationalists called on Maulana Azad, the education minister. The Maulana was sad and heart-broken and looked and sounded so. He had warned the Muslims constantly against the dire consequences of partition; but nobody cared. Mr. Jinnah despised and denounced him even more than he ever had Gandhi and Nehru. Any Muslim outside the pale of the Muslim League and opposed to partition was virtually outside the pale of Islam: even an enemy of Islam as Jinnah saw it.

But now, Mr. Jinnah, together with Liaquat and most of the League high command-even the senior staff of Dawn-were gone to Karachi. And the Muslims had to fend for themselves. The Dilliwallas were in the eye of the storm. It was from their city that the battle for Pakistan had been waged and won, but the battle for their own security and survival had only just begun.

In that grave hour of terminal crisis, Maulana Azad emerged as an angel of mercy. He would comfort and talk to everybody who approached him. He tempered his reprimand with the promise of all possible help and advised them to bear their ordeal patiently. He was confident that with Jawaharlal being there as the prime minister, things would return to normal pretty soon. Sardar Patel was indeed very, very unhappy with the Muslims; but he was not a tyrant, and would do his best to ensure the safety of life, honour and the property of the Muslims. Nevertheless, there was no foolproof protective shield against

a mob gone berserk. He hoped that once the government was firmly in the saddle after Independence Day; the situation would stabilize.

Even though simple palliatives, in a desperate situation like that, his words were music to the ears of the people in distress.

August 14 happened to be the last Friday (Jumatul Wida) of the holy month of Ramazan. The mammoth Jumatul Wida congregational prayers were held traditionally at the jama Masjid facing the Lal Qila the Red Fort. Friday was (and in Indian still remains) the day for the release of a new movie. The move scheduled for release at Jagat Cinema on that fateful Friday Was 'Ilan' (Message) directed by Mehboob, the famous Muslim director. Jagat Cinema would not be more than a furlong from the mosque. Ilyas and I had planned to see the first show of the movie soon after the congregational prayers.

It was full house at the cinema. The movie was a 'Muslim social' with the theme song rhyming with 'Islam and 'Quran'. The movie had been set against the background of the Muslim middle class life and culture. The release of the movie could not have been more inauspiciously timed: on the independence of Hindu India as opposed to Muslim Pakistan.

We sat through the movie with bated breath. We were quite apprehensive of adverse reaction from the considerable Hindu audience-the angry boos or howls-even violence. Mercifully however, nothing like that happened. The movie was watched in almost complete silence: no excitement, no commotion whatsoever. During the interval, most of the fasting Muslims stayed in their seats and only non-Muslims went out for refreshment-still very quiet. I don't remember having ever seen, before or since, a cinema going crowd as quiet as that-and, that too, through the first show. A sherwani-Turkish cap-clad hero Surendra Nath, a dupatta-kurta-shalwar-wearing heroine Munawar Sultana, Aligarh, Quran, Islam and the theme song, *Insan ki tehzeeb pe ehsan hurnara*, all proclaimed strong Muslim themes.

Nothing could be more out of tune with the spirit of the (Hindu) India Independence Day

At the end of the movie, we dispersed as quietly as we had sat through movie. We did not wait to see how people might

react at the end. It was close to iftar (break of the fast) time; and since we were both fasting, we hurried back home-a good mile or so away from the cinema. 'My goodness, how awful to release a movie like that on a day like this. And none of those excellent Mehboob's movies either!' We talked as we walked at a brisk pace. It was actually supposed to be an Eid release, just a couple of days away. It would have been perfectly welcome and in the spirit with the occasion in Karachi, celebrating Pakistan's Independence Day. Not here in Delhi, the capital of Hindustan of Hindu India.

We felt quite lost as we almost ran to be back home by iftar time. We just about made it. After iftar and dinner, we would go to New Delhi to see the real Independence Day celebrations there. Old Delhi had little to offer. Bazaar Ballimaran bristled with Eid shoppers; but Chandni Chowk was relatively quiet, hardly anything to match the festivities and illuminations seen with during the jubilee Victory celebrations in 1945.

Unlike our usual practice of walking up to the Ajmeri Gate and taking a bus from there to New Delhi, we decided to hire 'a full' tonga exclusively for ourselves. We would rather not share it with other passengers (each paying his own fare) all the way to New Delhi for one whole rupee. The tongawalla also offered to bring us back to the old city; for half the fare, if we did not take too long in New Delhi. It was a good offer and we accepted it readily. Getting a tonga at all for our return journey was not going to be an easy thing. We told the tongawalla that we would be back by 10 o'clock and meet him at the tonga stand. The best and the most perfect arrangement, under the circumstances.

As expected, New Delhi was bright as a beautiful sunny day. Military bands played in the gardens. The shopping arcades circling Connaught place were full of joyous crowds-talking, laughing, chanting 'Jai Hind', hugging and congratulating one another. It reminded me of the farewell state-drive of Lord and Lady Willingdon around the Connaught Place eleven years ago in 1936. I had gone to see that as a child of 11-12 with Abbajan, my khalu (maternal uncle). The New Delhi of 1936 and 1947 might have been two entirely different worlds. The sheer abandon and gaiety of 1947 contrasted so glaringly with the

regimentation and discipline of 1936, No Anglo-India sergeants pushing the crowd back into line like a herd of sheep, no awe of the white man and his authority nevertheless, there was this disturbing feeling alien of being in one's own land. At the stroke of the midnight hour, India would be free: the Viceroy unlike his pompous predecessors, would cease to be the lord and master of India and become its most obedient and loyal servant.

As We move along the brilliantly-lit corridors, we rubbed shoulders with the jostling crowd, I wore a white khaddar sherwani, though I can't exactly say why, since it was not quite safe to be moving around in a sherwani-and that too on the independence of Hindustan. Maybe it was because of Ramazan, maybe as an expression and assertion of my Muslim identity maybe to pass for one of those khaddar sherwani-clad committed Congressite Muslim nationalists, maybe because I had nothing better to wear. Whatever be the reason, there I was, dressed in a sherwani. Suddenly someone came almost out of the blue, with a paper tricolour in hand. He stepped forward to pin it on my sherwani. On a sudden impulse, I spurned his extended hand. The paper flag dropped, 'No thanks, I still happen to be a Muslim Leaguer!' I blurted out, beside myself, with some untamed impulse to leave the young man staring at me in utter amazement. Without another word, he picked up the paper flag and moved on.

Ilyas was simply stunned by my impulsive action. 'You could not have been more foolish. What if he had slapped you right across your face or created scene for insulting the national Hag? You fool!' blurted out Ilyas.

And how right he was! I came back home absolutely crestfallen, India was free and we, as would-be Pakistans, were aliens in our own land-our own beloved Delhi,

Chapter 12

The Flight!

Back home, we huddled together in a state of high tension, waiting for Prime Minister Nehru's address to the nation to be broadcast from All-India Radio, at the stroke of the midnight hour. It came through as announced. Jawaharlal spoke in a voice at once anguished and elated. His use of the expression-'Tryst with Destiny' might have been a piece of poetic inspiration. For us, Muslims, however, trapped in our homes in old Delhi, it might well have been our 'Tryst with Disaster. It sounded like that, at least to my ears. India and Pakistan were now two independent countries. On the morning of 15 August Jawaharlal Nehru hoisted the tricolour from the main Lahori gate of the Red Fort. It was the 28th day of Ramazan, and a couple of days later would be Eid. A pall of gloom pervaded the Muslim mohallahs. I did not go to see the flag hoisting ceremony at the Red Fort- barely a mile away from our home. After the unpleasant encounter with the Hindu young man pinning the paper flag, I was afraid- too unsure of myself to feel safe to go out and join the crowds. On a day like that, and in the midst of a turbulent sea of humanity; anything could happen; discretion is always the better part of valour.

It was a national holiday on account of Independence Day: Dawn offices were closed, like every other newspaper's. There would be no newspapers on the 16th. One could go out and mingle with the crowd to celebrate the great day But who would either have the nerve or the strength to go out and join the celebrations? Besides, it was still the month of Ramazan and we were all fasting.

Dawn of 17 August had carried a detailed account of Nehru's

‘tryst with destiny’ speech in the Assembly. It also carried a description Chowdhry Khaliquzzaman rising with all the others in the assembly to salute the Congress flag-now the national flag of India, He took the oath of allegiance and loyalty to India as a member of the Muslim League parliamentary party in the assembly India was still India, not Hindustan, as Jinnah had mentioned in his farewell message.

Was Khaliquzzaman right or wrong in saluting the tricolor and swearing allegiance to India? I had mixed feelings. Wasn't he more courageous, nevertheless, than Jinnah and Liaqat by choosing to stay back and share with other fellow-Muslims the post Independence trials and tribulations? That put him at least cut above both: swimming and sinking together with those not electing or fortunate enough to go to Pakistan.

Thenceforth, nothing would be the same. Delhi was a divided city: divide between the Hindu and Muslim strong holds mohallas. The Hindus had, however, the freedom of the city and used it, too, as much as they pleased; the Muslims would venture out to their areas only like frightened rabbits sneaking out of their warrens, Tension gripped the city Not a day would pass without reports of stray Muslim pedestrians attacked by Hindu and Sikh hooligans-worse still, whole Muslim mohallas were raided and vandalized.

The editor Dawn of Mr. Altaf Hussain had already left for Karachi, The resident editor, Mr. Mahmood Hussian held the fort. He was a man in rage and vented it too. He would openly curse Jinnah and others. It was all for personal power and glory more than anything else that they had created Pakistan. He would never forgive them for dividing it up between themselves-one choosing to become the governor-general and the other the prime minister of Pakistan.

The city was burning. First to go up in flames were the suburban areas of Karol Bagh, Subzi Mandi, Pahaar Ganj, etc. The Bundhanis of Sabzi Mandi faced the armed Hindu/ Sikh vandals with superb courage. The army and the police on duty would simply look away as the Hindu hooligans went on a rampage-looting, torching homes, killing and torturing the inmates. We, in Dawn, worked quietly waiting for the good news

of our transfer to Karachi. None of us ever received the good news.

'The doors of Pakistan, it seems have already been "slammed" on us!' Asrar would often quip, recalling the stern warning of Mr. Altaf Hussain.

The real face of Pakistan was coming into evidence even before the country had formally come into existence. Quaid, before his departure from Delhi, had already told his many friends in the city 'from all communities to be loyal to their government'-the government of India, that is, Altaf would more or less, echo Quaid, in his own brusque and bossy language. Dawn itself, Delhi little else to choose, except to behave as a loyal opposition had paper, scrupulously avoiding the scurrilous idiom of the past. Jawaharlal was now the prime minister of India, Delhi the capital of India, and Dawn just one of the papers published from there: an Indian paper in the fullest sense of the term, its policy just could not be the same as of its Pakistani edition published from Karachi. After the first few editorials, reproduced from the (main) Karachi edition, Mr. Hussain started writing his own. Altaf's editorials, reflecting on India, carried the same pre-Partition strident tone and harsh language in respect of 'Hindu' India. Those could no longer be used by the Delhi (India) edition. It became a most baffling and paradoxical situation: one and the same newspaper appearing from the capitals of two countries, born out of implacable hatreds. Altaf Hussain and his boys in Karachi were too busy sorting out the teething problems of the fledgling Karachi edition to have any time or thought to spare for the Delhi edition. It was like an abandoned ship, left to sink or swim on its own. An odd telephone call or two a day between Delhi and Karachi was all the contact possible between the two editions. Still intact was the legend on the masthead 'Founded by Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah'. It looked too odd and out of place.

Quaid-i-Azam, who? And whose? Muhammad Ali Jinnah was now Governor-General of Pakistan and Lord Louis Mountbatten, Governor-General of India. The two shared little else other than a past full of rancour and bitterness, and an unfriendly parting of ways once and for all. Conditions in the

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city Were getting from bad to worse. The army had been called in and was out patrolling the city Although the shops were open, there were not many customers. The bazaars were deserted. Chandni Chowk wore a haunted look. Quite a few shops were only half open, for fear of some bad news or an actual eruption suddenly taking place to leave just enough time to board up the other half.

Unlike Chandni Chowk and Ballimaran, life inside the mohalla was becoming fuller, if not exactly livelier. There were invariably more people huddled together talking. In the midst of deep, all-pervading fear, they drew strength from each other's physical proximity: The main mosque Bari Masjid-had more namazis than ever. The mohallah shops, kiosks and stalls did roaring business. People smoked and chewed tobacco-laced paan a lot more than they would normally A mohallah defence committee was formed to meet any grave contingency.

The UOTC-trained Sultan Kathuria collected a number of yotmg boys, still in their teens or just a little over 20 and started training them like boy scouts. He assumed the command of the budding militia himself and designated himself as the Siphe Saalari Aala (commander-in-chief). These boys would be seen parading up and down Bara Maidan-the mohallah centre-several times a day. They would use the Urdu words of command introduced and adopted by the Khaksars of Allama Inayatullah Mashriqi-nge Zzurh (march on), chap-rust (left-right), hoshiar (attention), umm (at ease), qadam shuzmzar (mark time) dain mur (right about turn), etc. It was an amusing sight that entertained more than reassured the viewers. Naqi Bama, a busy-body (essentially a loafer), generally shunned by the mohallahwallas, suddenly became a most sought-after person. He boasted of close contacts with the local 'authorities' carried a pistol, even rode a government jeep every now and then. Widely distrusted, even despised, he was still feared. In a circumstance of such extreme gravity in which even a cat would challenge a tiger, the mere fact that he carried a pistol and rode a jeep would be enough to establish his credentials as someone close to authorities. Whether he was being used to spy on the mohallahwallas or to help them in their hour of trouble bore

little relevance: the fellow undoubtedly had some value, if only for want of something better. For the first time ever, people were contemplating, if not exactly planning, to emigrate to Pakistan. There would be little else to think of in a dire situation like that. Hamne mana keh Dilli main rahin kha ange kya (We might still choose to live in Delhi only if we had the means of livelihood). The verse rang more true, more relevant to the plight of the Delhi Muslims than ever.

Business was at a standstill, with no prospect of picking up in the near future: jobs already scarce would be scarcer still. Could there be anything stranger than feeling like a stranger-a perfect alien-in one's own home? The grim, unsmiling face of Sardar Patel with his broad deeply-furrowed forehead and bald pate appearing every day in the newspaper-including Dawn-struck one with awe. The Sardar was the central figure: Gandhiji was in Calcutta, he would not come even to join the Independence Day celebrations. Jawaharlal was neither here nor there. He hardly seemed to matter at all in the scheme of things. Maulana Azad, Rafi Ahmad Kidwai, Mufti Kifayatullah, Maulana Ahmad Saeed and other nationalist Muslims had problems of their own. Sardar Patel alone was calling the shots; and he was no friend of the Mussalmans, neither would he pretend to be one. As the Urdu proverb goes, 'the earth was too hard and the sky too far away beyond their reach. No safe haven, no sanctuary for Muslims.

The second half of August 1947, or the first fortnight of Independence, might have been a virtual reign of terror. News of bloody riots from the two Punjabs kept pouring in day after day Sporadic rioting around the city was escalating in frequency and in intensity. The dead of the right was periodically torn every now and then by violent slogans from the nearby Hindu mohallahs. Abutting the western side of our Haveli was Haveli Haider Quli Khan a predominantly Hindu locality from where were heard slogans of 'Han har Muhadev'-the Hindu battle cry like the Muslim 'Allah-0-Akbar' to terrify us. My mother, full of fear, would exclaim 'Yah Ilahi Khair (Mercy oh Lord!)'. She was deeply worried about my sister, just about 12 or 13. 'What's going to happen to the poor child. Mercy Oh, Lord.

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It was like that all over the mohallah. Mother worried more about the honour of their young daughters in the family than for their own lives.

September 4 was a Friday I would be 23 on September 6. I had promised a sandwich and hot patties treat to Ilyas at the Coffee House, followed by a visit to our favourite haunt at Farash Khana behind the Road (Red Light Area). There were a couple of girls we had almost made friends With. They really looked after us and we enjoyed being with them during our occasional forays. Both of us eagerly looked forward to the occasion.

I happened to be at the news desk together with Asiful Haque and others (I forget whom), busy subbing the stories. Around 3 pm, the teleprinter came alive with 'Flash, Falsh, Flash'. Presently headlines started to appear: 'Bomb explosion inside the Fatehpuri Mosque during the Juma prayers. Several wounded. City placed under curfew/ 'Good Lord, it has started. The war is on! ' We exclaimed, almost in the same breath, Details followed. Our shift was just about to end. We waited for the midshift to arrive.

The question was: what then must we do? Would it be possible at all to bring out the next edition? I don't exactly recall if we had any senior editorial staff in the office at that time, Mr. Hussain called presently to inform that he would soon be in the office and in case the midshift had arrived, the morning shift could go home. Asrar and Zuhair and Shams, the senior-most amongst us, decided to stay back and wait for Mr. Hussain. Asiful Haque and I left. We threaded our way through the narrow bylanes, afraid of bumping into some Hindu rowdies. The lane, however, was deserted. We made the main Faiz Bazar bus stop safely We waited for the next bus-Asif for the one for Kashmiri Gate, I for the other to Ajmeri Gate. Faiz Bazaar was completely deserted. The Khooni Darwaza not too far away from the bus stand, acquired a chilling aura of awe in the midst of surrounding emptiness and desolation. The boundary walls of Turkoman Gate behind us looked equally daunting. Asiful Haque's gatmt face broke into a pinched sardonic smile. 'You see ...' He wanted to say something but stopped short...

A couple of military trucks sped past us. Time stood still.

The bus was nowhere in sight. My bus was to come from the side of the old city; Asiful Haque's from New Delhi. My bus was the first to arrive. I would rather have waited for the other bus to arrive, too, than leave Asif alone, 'Don't be so foolish', he snapped and virtually pushed me into the bus as it came to a stop. Much to my own relief, however, I saw another bus approaching from the opposite side. I hoped it was Asif's. From the door of my bus, I waved to Asif, frantically pointing towards the other bus. And that was the last I would see of him in Delhi.

All the way from Faiz Bazaar to Ajmeri Gate was one unrelieved vista of dead silence and howling desolation. Except for the sound of the running engine of the bus and of the occasional horn blown around the corner, no sound was heard. There were two or three other passengers on board: all quiet and dumb. We exchanged stray remarks about the situation in the city getting worse by the day. Where and when is it going to stop? Nobody knew. We were afraid to ask the other about his identity-whether a Muslim or Hindu. We must all have been Muslims, just the same for the look of anxiety and fear we wore on our faces.

The bus stopped at the regular bus stop in front of Anglo-Arabic College. I got off. There was a police picket right across at the old decrepit Hanz Qazi. A policeman walked leisurely towards me. 'Don't you know the city is under curfew? Where have you to go?' 'Ballimaran, Haveli Hissamuddin Haider', I answered. 'Very well then, avoid the main road and take the bylanes as far as possible. Understand? I thanked the policeman and proceeded on my way back home via Gali Shah Tara, Lal Kuan, Gali Qassim Ian right into Ballimaran and haveli Hissamuddin Haider. The wooden gate of the haveli was closed. I knocked and immediately the door hatch opened. 'Come on in, we were all getting so worried about you!' First to greet me was Usman, along with quite a few others inside. 'It was such a mighty explosion. Absolutely ear-shattering!' Usman said about the bomb blast inside the Fatehpuri mosque, 'Absolutely terrible.' Ilyas was also there.

They all expected me, as a Dawn man, to brief them about the situation. 'A journalist indeed!' It sounded so good and

flattering to my ears. I went on to give them some account of the situation in the light of the assurances given by Jawaharlal Nehru in the Assembly then in session, 'Who is Jawaharlal Nehru? He is nobody Patel is the man: he is the government!' They all chorused.

'Any news of Gandhi ji? When would he be coming to Delhi?' 'Shortly, I hope!' I said.

'How shortly? Khak ho jainge hum tum ko khaber hone tak (we would turn to ashes by the time you get know of our plight.)' Some one recited a verse of Ghalib. Certain areas of the old city including the main Ballimaran, Chandni Chowk, Khari Baoli, etc. had been placed under 48-hour curfew. 'For two full days that is, we would be holed up here. Interesting. When there is no work left to do, play!' Someone remarked laughingly As we started dispersing, Ilyas crept close to me with an impish glint in his eyes. 'Well what about your birthday treat? 'It depends on the situation. Let's wait and see what happens during the curfew break.

A meeting of the Mohallah Committee was held at the Bari (main) Masjid the same evening after the Isha prayers. My brother-in-law (my eldest sister's husband), Muhammad Said, together with others, was the moving spirit behind the committee. Some 30 or 40 of us gathered in the mosque after the Isha prayers. 'What then must we do?' was the main question. The consensus was: 'No matter what happened we will not leave the land of our ancestors. We will live and die here. A defence committee was formed to look after the security of the area and to fight back in the event of sudden invasion. There were only four (or five) holders of licensed fire arms in the mohallah-the two brothers Usman and Ismail Shikari, Riazuddin Raja, Naqi Bama and so on. The two Shikari brothers each had a 12-bore double barrel, Raja had another plus a revolver and Bama also had a revolver. He promised all the help from the 'authorities' in a serious contingency While not much was expected of the youth force under Sultan Kaltharia, the self-styled Siphe Salar-i-Aulu, they were not be discouraged in any case. Major decisions taken at the meeting were roughly as follows: `

- (i) A group of four persons to keep watch at night on rotating basis.
- (ii) Abdullah, (Bullah) the ironsmith to make spears, knives and shovels to arm the adults;
- (iii) A codeword 'wu'az shru hu gia hai (The sermon has begun)' adopted to serve as wake-up call in case of an emergency at night.
- (iv) A delegation of elders to call on Deputy Commissioner Mr. MS Randhava to request for a police or an army detachment detailed for the local defence of the mohalla;
- (V) Storage of food stuff, wheat, barley and maize and all the other available dry items to last through curfew and deal with the inevitable shortages of fresh items- meat, vegetables, fruit, etc,

Around midnight (4-5 September, 1947) the dead of the night was broken by the deafening chants of 'Har, har Mahudev' from the nearby Hindu mohallah, It was terrifying, 'Ya, Ilahi Khair (Mercy oh Lord!)' my mother muttered, half asleep. The chants rose to a horrifying Crescendo.

It had begun: the terrifying prelude to exile, to flight.

Everyone in the house-mother, my youngest sister Saeeda, myself and the old maidservant, Shakuran, were wide awake, I got up to go out and see things for myself, There were quite a few neighbours already in a huddle at the maidan, My brother- in-law Said, C-in-C Mohallah force Sultan of the Mr. Abdus Salam BA (a former secretary of the Delhi Muslim League) stood around whispering-fear and anxiety writ large on their faces. 'It's on! they said. 'Allah alone knows where it might stop. Let's organize the night watch on a regular basis from now onwards. Let's do the best we can in the circumstances and leave the rest to Almighty Allah!'

The chilling 'Har har Mahadev' chants gradually subsided and then died out. It was time for the pre-dawn Fajr prayes and Haifz Muhammad Din, the muezzin, was calling the faithful to prayers. His voice was as vibrant as ever, without betraying the faintest trace of fear or anxiety 'Jallu Shanahul (Glory be to God!) we all said in one and the same breath and proceeded towards the mosque to offer prayers. The mosque was fuller than ever.

'Don't they say that Allah is remembered and invoked only in adversity'

The city being under curfew, there was no question of any newspaper being distributed. We had to rely on our radio sets-there were quite a few now in the mohallah-for the latest news. The city was reported to be calm, except for some trouble in the outlying areas-Karol Bagh, Sabzi Mandi, Bara Hindu Rao, Nawab Ganj, Pahaar Ganj, etc.-stray cases of where stabbing and arson were reported.

Next day would be Sunday-my 23rd birthday There would be a three-hour curfew break around midday to enable people make the necessary purchases. Ilyas called at my house around 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning. We discussed my birthday programme. Coffee was out of the question. Although New Delhi was not under curfew, it would be impossible to commute back and forth and also spend a leisurely hour or two at the Coffee House. 'What about the special part of our programme? he asked. We must make it somehow!

'Must we?'

'We must! What will be, will be.'

We agreed to meet a little before this curfew break the next day at Bara Maidan. In spite of all the trouble outside, there was a festive atmosphere inside the mohallah: the Bara Maidan might have been like the venue of a church fare or something. The weather was nice and cool, with an overcast sky but no rains. Small stalls of foodstuffs-mostly surplus war items like dried milk, egg powder, spaghetti, biscuits, macaroni, vermicelli and of course the hard tack, biscuit shakarpara, had been set up by some young boys. They must have been storing the stuff for sometime in anticipation to sell if for a profit. Fortunately for them, the curfew came and with it, the ensuing shortage of foodstuff. Normally the hard-nosed gourmets would not even look at the stuff on offer, but those were not normal times and anything easily available would be welcome. The butcher, green grocer and the halvai shops were closed. Babu, son of Usman Topiwalla (the cape maker) did good business during the curfew hours.

Young and old and children of a playing age were all over

the mohallah. The question on everybody's mind and lips was 'How much longer could all this go on? How much longer could we go on without work and business? There was no ready answer. No hope for things ever getting better. Pakistan and Hindustan were now two different countries: Delhi was the capital city of India and all the Dilliwallas Indians. Fancy that. Those in the vanguard of the Pakistan movement shouting 'Leke mhenge Pakistan, butt be mhega Hindustan (Pakistan we shall take, India shall divide!)' were now trapped in Delhi, India.

Pakistan was far away We all tuned in to Radio Pakistan, Lahore, for news, We were mesmerized by the soothing and reassuring voice of the newscaster, Mustafa Ali Hamadani (the prima donna of newscasters). Less than a month after the emergence of Pakistan and the eruption of serious trouble in the city the voice of Mr. Hamadani lost its magic. It would even annoy and enrage us at times: he and others-Jinnah and Liaqat-enjoying the safety of Pakistan while we were left alone to face the post-Partition trials and tribulations. While we still stood by our pledge to stay and never leave our city we were already thinking, if not exactly planning to migrate to Pakistan. After all, how much longer could one go on suffering and living in a state of grinding uncertainty and suspense. When you do not feel safe in your own home, where else would you feel safer?

Back in homes, housewives, daughters and sister went on with their daily chores»-cooking, minding the household, washing and mending clothes, taking care of children and praying for the welfare and security of their menfolk.

Mother would ask me about what was happening. Also what might be in store for all of us. Where was Pakistan? What was it like? Could we ever go there? All such questions, to which I had no answer other than a palliative, a 'hope without promise' 'Amma," I would say 'there is nothing to worry Everything will be alright once Gandhi ji is here. And he is going to be here pretty soon.

The festive atmosphere in the mohallah would last until the Maghreb prayers. People would go home to eat and come back again to join the crowd. There is such a feeling of safety and security in a crowd-especially of one's own friends and

neighbours. The night watch reported for duty after the Isha prayers and positioned themselves near the phatak, the main entrance. Tired after a hectic day full of suspense and anxiety most others retired for the night. That was the first day of the curfew.

I had been anxiously waiting for my copy of Dawn and was expecting to get it the next day Sunday during the curfew break. Kashfi, the old home delivery man, came with a bunch of papers immediately after the curfew break, without Dawn. The Statesman carried on its front page the news of vandalism and arson at the Dawn office. There were no casualties but the offices had been ransacked by hooligans and the building set on fire.

'My God!' I said to myself. 'So this is the end of the dream of Dawn appearing simultaneously from the capitals of the two countries, shattered in less than a month after Partition.' I had a strong feeling of deep despair for the loss of a job, and of relief for being spared the ordeal of threading through these back-alleys and bazaars to make it to office.

As previously arranged, Ilyas joined me the next day at Bara Maidan around 12, just about the time for the start of the curfew break. We were determined to have our 'adventure'. The municipality hooter, announcing the curfew break went off precisely at 12 o'clock, The Phatak was opened and we poured out into the main Ballimaran Bazaar like a beleaguered force after a long siege. The vendors were already there in full force, arranging and chanting their wares. Even Mahmood's tea shop and Hafiz hotel were open, so We first went to Mahmood's tea-shop for a kind of a high tea-with cake slice (plain sponge cake) and French toast. We had about two hours and a half at our disposal. Refreshments over, We went through Cali Qasim Ian to hit Lal Quan, turn into Rud Garran and threaded the twisting, narrow lanes to reach the back alleys of Farash Khana, our usual haunt, We climbed up the stairs of the right kotha and knocked at the door, As the door opened, we found the two girls with their mother. They were so happy to see us-their first clients since the curfew. 'Welcome, Mian welcome. Coming all the way at a time like this. I really can't praise you enough!' the elderly woman said joyfully She knew we were

all pressed for time. She looked at the girls and motioned them to change. 'They won't be long, Sir. Well, look sharp, girls, we don't have all the time in the world.

She let out a deep sigh. 'Who could ever have imagined a hard time like this? As for us, what difference would it make, whether we are Hindu or Muslim? We are what we are: as God made us, Neither this nor the other-simple Bazaar women. A randi (prostitute) is a randi, whether a Muslim or Hindu, huh! '

The girls did not take long to powder their noses and apply some lipstick and rouge. There they were, ready for us. They beckoned us to come inside the small room, with a screen in the middle to serve as a partition. On my side of the room was a window looking out at the row of opposite houses. I forgot to shut the window; and just as I was in the process of undressing, a man leaned his head out of the window on the other side and almost yelled: 'Even at a time like this, to be out sinning! Aren't you afraid of the wrath of God? This must be the limit!' Ashamed and shocked, I shut the window with a bang, The girl smiled.

From outside, shots were heard. Every now and then deployed troops fixed into the air to scare people off, Every time a shot rang out, a shudder ran down my spine. It was perhaps one of the most weird and rare experiences of my life: shooting on one side and 'romancing' on the other. Yes, 'romancing' was the very word we used for our forays into the magic world of the back alleys of the Road,

About a quarter of an hour in all and we were through: had had our fill. We had enjoyed 'romance' in the shadow of the guns. Great! We took our leave of the girls and their keeper, and paid her a ten-rupee note for both of us. 'Come again, if you can make it at all. It has been so nice having you here at a time like this!' The matron said while bidding us goodbye. We hurried back via the same bylanes and back alleys we had come through.

All the way we found people with their shopping hampers and bags hurrying back and forth between their homes and the shopping areas. There was still some time to go before the end of the curfew break. Full of mixed feelings of elation and fear, we felt people stealing glances at us as if they knew what we

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had been up to and where we had been. It was an uneasy feeling, like walking naked through and ogling crowd,

We were safely back home well before the curfew rang. We could not but marvel at our own bravado, our audacity We wished we could go on to Mehboob's tea shop for another cup of tea but he was already in the middle of shutting the shop. That was how we celebrated my 23rd birthday

I don't remember the city having known a single day of peace since the bomb blast inside the Fatehpuri mosque. The city stayed almost perennially under curfew: only the curfew timings and hours changed, depending upon the situation Rioting had spread throughout the city. After Karol Bagh and Sabzi Mandi, it had spread out to Darya Ganj and the area round the lama Masjid-Matia Mahal, Tiraha Bairam Khan, Chitli Qabar, the Old Chawri Bazaar, etc.

Although Chandni Chowk and Ballimaran, forming the hub of the old city were still relatively safe, the monster of violence was closing in, From the rooftop of our house, I could see the western horizon turning a flaming red in the evening. It would mix with the rays of the setting sun to create a strange aura of what might have been the lowest pit of hell: of the Red Planet. Our nights were stabbed with full-throated chants of 'Har Har Mahadev, Shouts of 'Allah-o-Akbar' played in a very low key manner, if at all. From our side complete silence was observed, in keeping with the orders of the Mohallah Committee. The curfew breaks were becoming shorter and less frequent. There was the military all over Chandni Chowk. Right on top of the Islamia Sabeel (Water stall) sat a slit-eyed Gurkha soldier behind sand bags, squinting through the barrel of his gun.

To make things still worse, unseasonal rains started. It poured day and night, only with brief lucid intervals. The All-India Radio news broadcast told us little about the real state of affairs. From the worst affected areas of the city some sort of a refugee exodus had already started. A refugee camp had been set up at the Old Fort (Purana Qila). Large-scale rioting was also reported from areas in lower Punjab, mainly Gurgaon. The Mewatis of Gurgaon-Muslims-tall and of tough peasant stock-were specially targeted by the Sikh refugees. Although

heavily outnumbered, they put up a brave resistance to the invaders. The army would simply look away as violent mobs ransacked their homes, raped their women, killed and maimed them. The survivors took the road to Delhi-on foot with head loads of baggage, or trudged in bullock carts loaded with all kinds of salvaged junk-pots and paans, bedrolls, string charpoys and all. At their heels was an endless mass of wailing women, weeping children, and weary menfolk on a long dusty trail in search of shelter. Some of the Mewatis sought shelter in our mohallah. They were accommodated anywhere on the open rooftop-in doorways, vestibules, stables. Some of them-mainly women and children-were accommodated under corrugated iron sheet awnings and a couple of small dormitories on the rooftop of the Bari Masjid (main mosque.)

As the ordeal of curfewdays lengthened, even the little excitement initially felt gave way to extreme fear and boredom. No work, no business and on top of all that, the ever-deepening, agonizing suspense and sense of insecurity Continuous rains made the ordeal all the worse. Water stood ankle-deep in most of the narrow lanes. Since all the sweepers-mainly women-were Hindus, they would either not show up at all or come only during curfew breaks and that, too, at two or three times the normal wages after a good deal of cajoling and coaxing. Heaps of garbage piled up in every corner. The municipal shit- house (Gown Gurhi)-garbage depot in a corner of Bara Maidan, remained untended for quite a few days, choked with the garbage piled up high, leaving little room for more. Rainwater carried bits of human faeces. There was grave danger and fear of an outbreak of cholera. Naqi Bama (now respectfully addressed as Naqi Chowdhry) used his influence with the municipal authorities and managed to bring a gang of municipal sweepers to clean up the place and carry away piles of garbage on a bullock cart.

Every night after Isha prayers, the Mohallah Committee met at the main mosque to discuss the situation. The plight of the Purana Qila refugees was also discussed. It was decided to help them with food and clothing as best as could be done in the circumstances. The mohallah people responded generously to

the appeal of the committee for old clothes and foodstuff. Several bundles of old clothes were collected along with milk, biscuits and egg powder. The permission of the DC (Randhawa) Was obtained to carry the materials all the Way to Purana Qila. Special curfew passes were issued and conveyenes (5 military truck) arranged for the operation. The charitable act raised the spirits and the morale of the people.

While nobody in the committee seriously took up The question of migration to Pakistan, it was gradually beginning to figure in the deliberations as the last option. Some families had actually been planning to leave on the quiet, regardless of their solemn pledge to stay on. While trains were not safe at all, planes for the various Pakistan destinations were available On a one~way charter, These planes (DC-3s), chartered by Hindu families from various places in Pakistan to fly them to India--mainly Delhi--would fly back from Delhi with Pakistan-bound passengers. We did get wind of this or that family g0ing about arranging their passage to Pakistan via chartered planes On airlines (BOAC was one and Seth Dalmia's fledgling Indian Airlines was another). Quite a few of the mohallah people would make a secret visit to New Delhi, lining up outside the airlines office. Since New Delhi was not under curfew, 'they would go there during the curfew breaks and stay there overnight until the curfew break the next 'day to return home. The first family to flee was that of the mohallah C-in-C's own by a secretyly-arranged chartered flight to Lahore, It came as H great shock to all of us. Thenceforth it would be practically everyone for himself and the Devil rake me hindmost. Although every night at the meetings of the Mohallah Committee pledges Were renewed to stay on, the mutual trust and understanding had forever eroded.

The situation in the city showed no sign of improvement The fires were getting closer and closer to the heart Of the City-Chandni Chowk and Ballimaran, One evening Jawaharlal Nehru went on the air to address the people of Delhi He spoke in English in a sad, tear-choked voice. Out of his 10-15 minute broadcast, one short sentence sank deep into my memory to stay for the rest of my life. Talking of continued communal

frenzy and madness in the city he said '... My cup of misery is full!'

'My cup of misery is full!' brought tears to our eyes-tears of sheer helplessness as much as tears of gratitude. Pitted against Patel, Nehru felt for us and would be ready to do anything within his 'power to alleviate our suffering.

After a couple of days, Nehru would himself come to Chandni Chowk to address and comfort the people of Ballimaran, the heartland of the old city. The news heartened us beyond description. He would be addressing us from the balcony of the Channamal Wala building adjacent to Katra Neel facing the Ballimaran Corner. From the various mohallahs and streets around, all of us gathered at the Ballimaran Corner near Islamic Sabeel around 2.30 pm Nehru appeared on the balcony precisely at 3 o'clock.

We broke into full-throated chants of 'Pandit Nehru Zindabad', 'Wazir-e-Azum Hindustan Zindabadi'. Nehru responded by waving his hand in greeting. His face reflected an unearthly angelic radiance. He did look somewhat thinner, but was agile and fit as ever. As our chants died down, a hush fell on the crowd. Our hearts pounded in anticipation of Nehru's address. Suddenly a slogan of 'Sur Sri Akul' stabbed the atmosphere like a sharp knife. The chorus rose to a terrifying crescendo. It was so completely demoralizing for the Muslims assembled at the Ballimaran Corner (Ballimaran ka Nukkar). Nehru, beside himself with rage, told the slogan-raising mob to shut up. Maybe there was some let-up, some lessening of the force, but it was still so aggressively loud and challenging as to strike terror in our hearts and cause a general stampede. Those in the front were the first to turn their backs and others follow suit, herd-like. Presently everybody was on the run: running like hell for dear life,

From behind sailed over our heads the voice of Jawaharlal: 'Mere Mussalman bhaioun mut bhago, koi khatra nahin, ruk jao.... (My Muslim brethren, don't run away stay on, there is no danger whatsoever!)' Not wild horses would pull the brave hearts of Ballimaran back. They run like hell, without once looking back. The buckle of one of my light brown Monk shoes snapped to

impede my pace as I ran. I tried desperately to shake the bad shoe off, but it hung on for quite a while before I could get rid of it. We were soon back in the mohallah, I had lost my shoe; one of my friends saw my shoeless foot and taunted; 'Abay o' joota char (Hay you shoe-shedding so-and-so)'. Throwing off or leaving one's shoes behind in a state of panic would be the limit of cowardice. (The stigma of 'joota-chor' would chase me for the rest of life. Even as a young army captain, some of my old friends called me 'joota-chor kuptan'-shoe-shedding captain). After a while, when calm returned to the area, I dared out of the mohallah to look for the missing shoe, To my utter surprise and no less amusement, I found the place littered with all kinds of footwear-'chapplies', wooden sandals, Salim Shahis, canvas and leather shoes. Such had been the state of utter panic and chaos.

Whether Nehru went on with his address after the mad stampede, I do not know. The aggressive Sikh sloganeering had completely undermined our morale. That might have been like the last straw on the camel's back, the illusory hope of staying on in Delhi, 'the land of our ancestors' seemed to be banishing into thin air.

Even the elements were set against us; it rained and rained. Heaps of night soil and garbage accumulated everywhere. All of us became sick and tired of rotten egg and milk powder, Stomach upsets and diarrhoea were rampant, and a cholera epidemic stared us in the face.

Parents could not wait to give their young daughters away in marriage to the first available suitor whom they would normally not even look at. Middle-aged widowers had a field day marrying girls half their age. Just a couple of appropriate verses from the holy Quran would solemnize the match. No wedding bells, no fanfare, no celebration, no mehendi, no baraat. The question would not arise.

My mother, like any other mother, had been extremely worried about my sister, Saeeda, hardly 13 or 14. 'Allah knows, what's going to happen to her? Can't you even find a suitable match for your sister? What sort of brother are you?' "But Amina, she is only a child yet/ I would say 'That is what you think. A

child indeed! You must be utterly blind and stupid to say that. Why she is a full-grown Woman. Only you won't see that!' Had she had her Way she would have given Saeeda to the first suitor. There had been one or two. But Usman and I put our foot down and saw that the proposal did not materialise" Saeeda, poor girl, had the worst of the bargain due to no fault of hers. Mother would not spare her even for something as little as sitting in a corner reading and, that too, after she was done with all the household chores.

'Just look at the Ustani Jee (the lady-teacher). Is that going to help her in any Way? Well, if she must read anything at all, it should be the Quran and the Hadith!' And then she would go into a furious trade against all Women-Allah's accursed creatures on earth. Saeeda, poor girl, suffered all that quietly like a dumb animal.

As the noose seemed to be getting tighter around our necks and trouble getting closer and closer to the heart of the city something happened to shock all of us. The younger brother of Imam-ji, the leading cleric (Pesh Imam) of the main mosque, molested a Mewati young girl from neighbouring Gurgaon, sheltering on the rooftop of the mosque under a corrugated iron awning with her mother, a widow. While the Widow happened to be away the maulavi made advances to the girl. The girl resisted the young maulavi with all her strength, but in vain, She had her clothes torn and parts of her body bruised in the process; but the maulavi was too strong for her, He had his way and was about to take to his heels Where the girl's mother came in. She was shocked and screamed for help to bring people rushing to the scene. The raped girl's mother had caught hold of the half-naked maulavi by his legs and would not let him go, no matter how hard he kicked around. The man Was caught red-handed. The girl was removed to the small room. By the morning the story was on everybody's lips. While most people felt truly shocked and deplored the event, some secretly relished it. They eagerly sought to know every detail of the case, The young Mewati girl was admittedly very attractive and coveted by many young and old. They compared her to a young, wild gazelle full of vigour and passion. If they had ever had a chance

like the young maulavi, they would have done what he had done. But now everyone cursed the maulavi and was ready to spit on his face.

His brother, the Imam, poor man, was unspeakably embarrassed and ashamed. He whipped him in full view of everybody and left it to the Mohallah Committee to punish him as they pleased. Some suggested blackening his face, putting him on a donkey's back and driving him out of the mohallah. The elders thought it would be too much of a tamasha at a time like that. They told him to leave the mohallah at the next curfew break and never to show his dirty face again. That was the end of the episode as far as the young maulavi was concerned but the story did make the rounds, getting fuller in bawdy detail as it was told and retold.

Shortly the question arose whether it would be right to let the young woman stay at all in the mohallah. Why could not she go with her mother to the fort relief camp, like others in the city? What was there to guarantee that what happened once would not happen again, to involve one of our own young men? It was the maulavi yesterday; it would be by one of our own young men the next day. Who knows what the world had come to! At this rate Doomsday could not be far. People seemed to have lost all fear of God! Tongues wagged; and who could have stopped tongues from wagging. There were as many comments, as many different stories as there had been different individuals—each with his or her own tale to tell.

Around the third week of the month, Phattak Habsh Khan, a predominantly Muslim locality off Khari Baoli, was attacked by Hindu hooligans during the curfew hours. The first curfew break after the attack, throngs of men, women and children padlocked their homes and made a beeline for Ballimaran, the only relative oasis of peace in the disturbed city. Almost all of them belonged to my own community of the Delhi Punjabi Saudagaran. They were tradesmen owning shops and business firms in Chandni Chowk and the Sadar area. Although fully naturalized as Dilliwallas, they retained their Punjabi roots even after a couple of centuries since their migration from Punjab.

It had been shocking to see them pouring into the haveli,

old men with heads untended, young men with faces unshaven, women even without their alupatta not to speak of the burqa. There were young girls, married and unmarried wailing and weeping, trying to cover their shame, with hardly anything to cover with. That might have been like the last straw on the camel's back: the end of all hope, all the strength left. They were promptly offered all the shelter and food and clothing. The question was: what next? Where do we all go from here? And there was no answer.

We all listened to Radio Pakistan broadcast from Lahore. Not a word about us, about our safety and future. Some food and clothing were being flown from Lahore and Karachi for the refugees in the Old Fort, Waiting for the next 'special' to Pakistan, but nothing about those holed up in the city lanes, streets and back alleys. Was that what Pakistan was all about? Was that the only reward for our sacrifices?

Then came the report of Gandhi ji's arrival in the city. With the mere arrival of the old man, things started changing in the city. We all heaved a sigh of relief. The old man did not wait to embark on his peace mission even a day after his arrival. He started addressing his 'jararthna' (prayer) meeting at the Ram Leela Grounds every afternoon. All-India Radio broadcast his speeches, rather sermons, every day. We sat glued to our radio sets trying our best to absorb every single word of his. He had a shrill, squeaky voice-'nothing of the orator or the spellbinder in him at all'-and yet he was listened to with rapt attention. Although his one constant message would be communal harmony; he did sound, at times, somewhat ambivalent to our ears. We were not quite sure whether he was supporting Muslims or condemning Hindus or condemning both. As he viewed the prevailing madness, both were at fault, both were equally to share the blame for the division of the country.

His sermons were preceded invariably by his favourite Ram Dhan-a hymn in praise of Ram and Rahim the one and the only creator of the world known by different names. They were said to be largely attended, only we could not muster enough courage to go all the way to attend personally. Nehru's Chandni Chowk episode and the stampede overtaking it was too fresh.

in our minds and deterred us from going all the Way to the Ram Leela grounds to have a glimpse of the Mahatma and listen to him in person.

Gandhi ji's (now everybody called him Gandhi ji or Mahatma Gandhi) presence in the city and his prayer meetings acted as a talisman, they cast sort of a charm across the city; and things started to look better than ever. Curfew hours became shorter and curfew breaks longer. The beleaguered people of the haveli started moving out to look at their shops, business places and offices, 'The butcher, missing for quite a few days, appeared one day with fresh mutton .The vegetable and fruitwallas opened their stalls or set up their wares by the roadside or carried headloads in wicker hampers, hawking. Even Shamman Halvai opened his shop to offer for breakfast hot fried kachoris served with spicy potato-bhaji and pickled pieces of carrot. Life was limping back to normal but there was little to restore the confidence of the people. Shops opened during the daylong curfew break (9 am 6 pm) but there were hardly any customers and the perpetual, lingering fear of a sudden eruption of violence persisted.

The exodus from the mohalla and the city, though still denounced, could be resisted no longer. There had been quite a few unpleasant incidents, enough to bring people to blows. On the one hand there were those fleeing the city and on the other, those resisting and blocking them one or two occasions the protestors would lie in front of the vehicle-car or tonga-to bar the way of the departing individual or families. There was no stemming the tide, however. Those who wanted to go and had arranged their passage, would go in any case, despite all the threats and protests. Most of those leaving still entertained the hope of returning as soon as circumstances would permit. The idea of leaving the city for ever would simply not occur to them. Not even in one's wildest dream could one have thought that the two countries would go to war within less than three months after Independence.

Much as my mother had been Worried about Saeeda, she wouldn't think of leaving the city just yet. Now that Gandhiji was there, she expected things to soon return to normal,

The question was the same old one. Humne mana ke Dilli mein rahain, khaenge kya! (Alright, we stay on in Delhi only what are we going to live by?) Dawn had ceased publication after its offices had been ransacked and been set on fire, There was absolutely no question of the fond dream of its appearing simultaneously from Delhi and Karachi ever coming true.

I had to find myself a new job in Pakistan. My brother Usman had been lucky to have found a job with Globe-a British news agency-as their representative in Lahore. He got me an air ticket for Lahore, along with one for himself dated 9 and 11 October 1947 respectively We planned to have mother and Saeeda over to Pakistan as soon as we found a house, My brother-in-law Muhammad Said, my elder sister and their family would be there to look after my mother and sister during our absence. So on 9 October, 1947, I reported to Safdar jang Airport to take the plane-my first flight ever-to Lahore, I had a steel trunkful of clothes and a bagful of books.

The plane a DC-3-took off around midday From my window seat I had a good View of Red Fort and Jama Masjid. I was too overwrought to have any definite feeling: I did not quite know if I was more relieved to get away from the troubled city in one piece or grieved over leaving the city where I had been born and brought up, It might have been a dream; but only the sort of endless dream the dead alone could dream.

Jawab kahe ka tha
Lajawab thi Dilli
Magar jo khiyal se dekha
Tu Khawab thi Dilli

(Delhi was without a peer indeed. On sober reflection, however, it was all but real: a dream only)

Dagh Dehlavi



Zakir Husain College

Down Memory Lane: Three Centuries of History

Heritage View



Text describing the college's early history and its role in education.



Text describing the college's growth and its impact on the community.



Text describing the college's achievements and its future prospects.

The Heritage Wall

The Heritage Wall

<p><i>Threshold of 18th C</i></p> <p>1790</p> <p>1792</p> <p>1824</p> <p>1829</p> <p>1844</p> <p>1857</p> <p>1859</p> <p>1864</p> <p>1877</p> <p>1924</p> <p>1948</p> <p>1979</p> <p>1975</p> <p>1983</p> <p>1986</p> <p>1991</p>	<p><i>Madrasa Ghaziuddin established</i></p> <p><i>Madrasa closes for want of funds</i></p> <p><i>Revived with support from the Delhi elite as a college of Oriental Sciences and Literature</i></p> <p><i>Delhi College engrafted onto the existing Madrasa</i></p> <p><i>Endowment of Rs.1,70,000 received from Nawab Itimaduddin</i></p> <p><i>College shifts to Kutubkhana Darul Shikoh / Residency</i></p> <p><i>Delhi College closed by British Military Authority</i></p> <p><i>Functions as a Municipal and later District School after Delhi returns to civilian authority</i></p> <p><i>College classes restarted. Affiliated to Calcutta University</i></p> <p><i>Delhi College abolished. Faculty merged with Lahore College</i></p> <p><i>Revived as Anglo-Arabic College. Affiliated to Delhi University in 1925</i></p> <p><i>Delhi College re-established</i></p> <p><i>Government of India establishes Dr. Zakir Husain Memorial Trust to manage the College</i></p> <p><i>Renamed Zakir Husain College</i></p> <p><i>Prime Minister Indira Gandhi lays the foundation stone of the new building</i></p> <p><i>Science Departments shift to the new premises</i></p> <p><i>Remaining Departments and the Office shift to the new building</i></p>
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Heritage View

College Timeline

College Timeline

Appendix I

From Madmszz Ghaziuddin in early eighteenth century to Anglo-Ambic College later, and then as Delhi College to finally emerging as Zakir Husain College in 1975, this institution of learning has had a unique identity nurtured over three centuries of a rather chequered history. Decade after decade, it has been asserting the need for imparting education of relevance. Be it in the domain of scientific knowledge or in asserting the value of the vernacular as the medium of instruction in the colonial times or the education of women, this institution has stood out as a progressive place of learning.

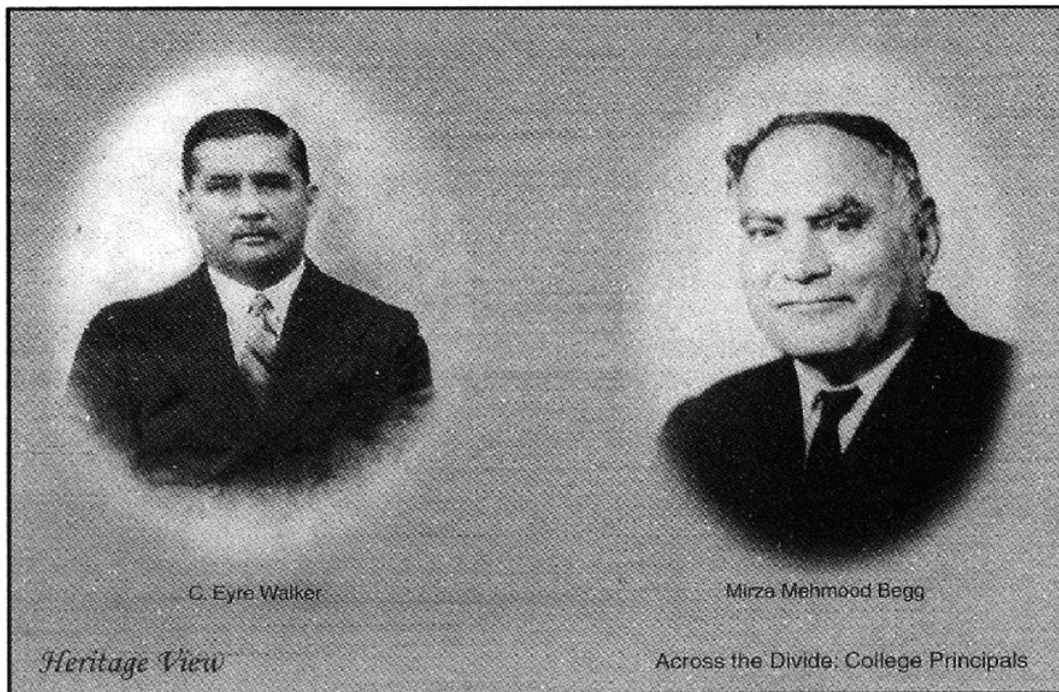
Zakir Husain College serves as a bridge between Old and New Delhi, not just through its physical location, but also in spirit. As the old Delhi College, it has lived through cultural and historical upheavals of great magnitude such as the turbulence of 1857 as also, the upheaval of 1947. What was referred to as the "Delhi Renaissance" by C.F. Andrews in the middle of the nineteenth Century had the old Delhi College in the center. This college played a very significant role in contributing to the development of Urdu language as a vehicle of modern ideas. In fact the Vernacular Society for the Translation of Scientific Treatises was set up for the translation of Greek classics and Persian works into Urdu.

When in 1935, the college suffered a financial crisis, such eminent people as Zakir Husain, Sir Gwyer, the Vice-chancellor of Delhi University Anis Ahmed Rushdie (father of Salman Rushdie) and Liaquat Ali Khan (first Prime Minister of Pakistan) associated themselves with the Educational Society to bring the college out of the crisis.

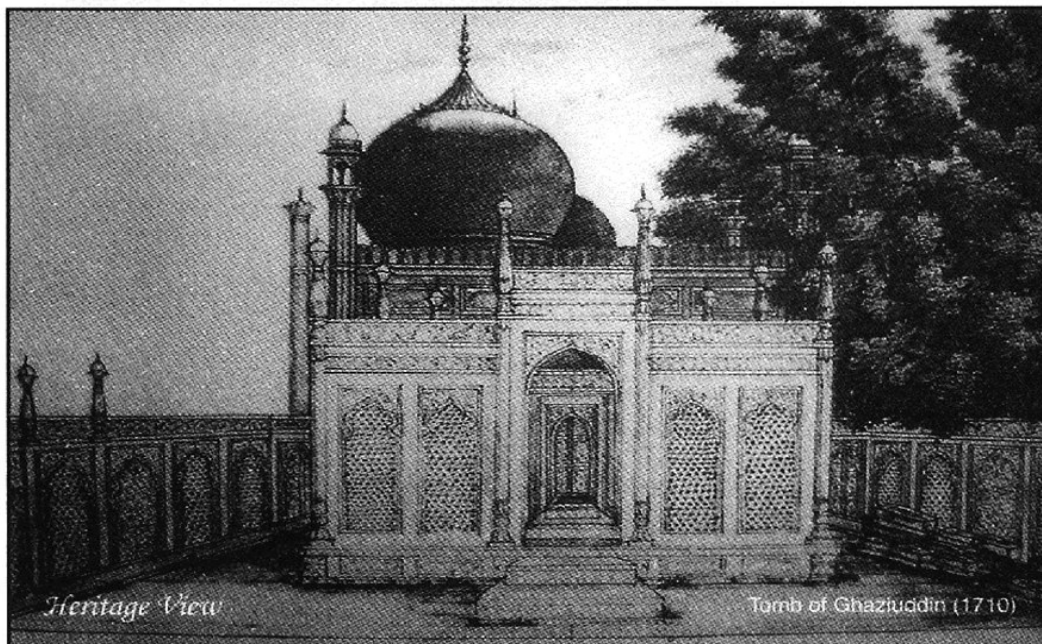
300 Smoke Without Fire

After the Partition of India, the legendary Principal Begg Sahib led the college through hard times into a stable and bright future. In the re-establishment of the College, he was associated with such well known intellectuals like Dr. Zakir Husain, Prof. M, Munjeeb and Abid Husain, Such luminaries as Iarneeluddin Aali, Sardar Iafri, Iazbi, Akhtarul Iman, Bhisham Sahni and J.N. Dixit have been associated with this college as faculty or students.

With the Zakir Husain Memorial Trust taking over the management of Delhi College in 1975, this important institution of learning was renamed Zakir Husain College,



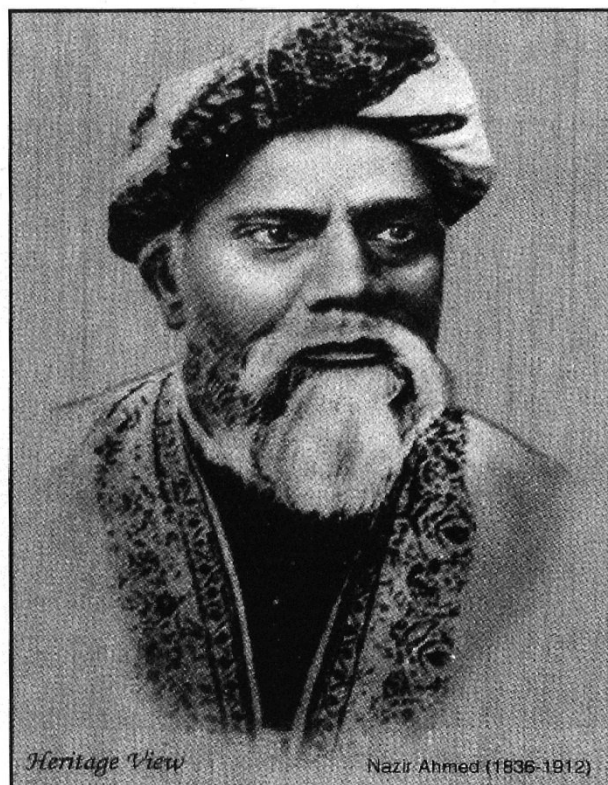
Across the Divide: College Principals



Tomb of Ghaziuddin (1710)



Delhi Venrancular Society



Nazir Ahmed (1836-1912)

Religious composition of students at Delhi College and their subjects, 1835-6 to 1855-6

Year	Community			Subject			
	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	English	Persian	Arabic	Sanskrit
1835-6	201	158	05	166	81	61	56
1836-7	134	108	07	108	Total strength of Oriental Section: 141		
1837-8	114	89	08	88	56	35	32
1838-9	140	80	06	123	39	35	29
1839-40	105	73	11	85	39	41	24
1840-1	93	7	03	84	34	28	82
1841-2	214	102	10	157	146	16	46
1842-3	146	128	12	124	75	40	36
1843-4	179	111	15	162	53	58	32
1844-5	299	146	15	245	109	75	31
1845-6	230	132	13	196	115	66	24
1846-7	209	107	18	198	57	65	24
1847-8	234	109	16	231	43	72	17
1848-9	222	105	14	226	47	56	17
1849-50	231	94	11	224	61	43	19
1850-1	206	105	22	222	56	39	18
1852-3	217	93	10	209	57	39	25
1853-4	206	114	15	211	57	38	27
1854-5	243	97	10	217	77	33	23
1855-6	158	83	04	-	-	-	-

Source: Abdul Haq, *Marham Dilli Kalij*, pp. 109-10. (Figures for 1841-2 not available.)

Heritage View

Student Demographic Distribution (1835-1856)

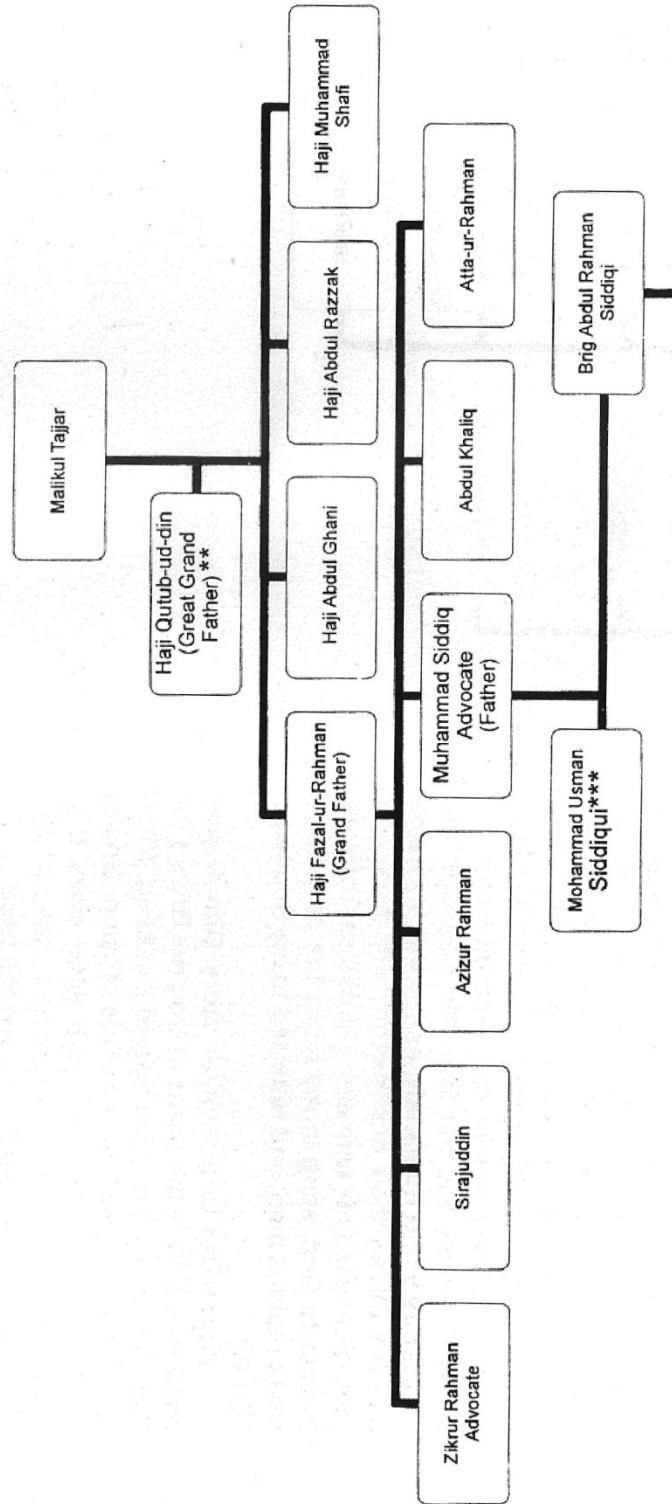
Student Demographic Distribution (1835-1856)



Master Ramachandra (1821-1880)

Appendix II

Author's Kathuria/Kathuray* Family Tree from Great-great grand father down to grand children: Only Male Names Figure



306 Smoke Without Fire

'Kahturia (Kathuray)' an off shoot of the Hindu Kaisth/Kathri cast adopted after conversion to Islam about 16th century. In all my academic records – class V to XVI – my name appears as Abdul Rahman Kahturay

Ghalib in his Dastanmbou, mentions him as 'his friend'. Ralph Russell and Khurshitatul Islam, in Ghalib Life, Letters and Ghazals quote him as follows: 'From a point rather more than two furlongs from our lane, to the house of the merchant Qutub-ud-Din, on the other side of the Chandni Chowk, where the wise and capable Colonel Brown had his HQs. He spoke to me courteously and humanely, asked me my name and the others their occupation, and there and then dismissed me with every kindness. I offered thanks to God, sang in my heart the praises of that gracious man, and returned to my house....' (P-145)

According to a popular story Ghalib was produced before the court of Colonel Brown (or Burn) on charges of drinking and gambling. When the Colonel asked him about his religion, Ghalib said: 'I am half Muslim.' And what does that mean...? 'Well, Sir, I drink but I don't eat pig.' The Colonel laughed and dismissed the case. ...

The surname SIDDIQI/SIDDIQUI was adopted by my elder brother Usman and myself in the 40's at the height of the Pakistan movement

