

Partitioned Hearts

It was the midnight of 15 August 1947; I had tried to close my eyes for a few moments, to drown out the surrounding horror, but I was brought back to the harsh reality, when ammajaan shook me vigorously, to be brought back to the ensuing massacres happening right on the street outside our home in Punjab. The angry mobs were chanting hatred filled stream of obscenities, demanding for Muslims to come out of hiding from their homes (although not sure we could even call them our homes any more), so they could brutally murder us. There was a lot of commotion & shoutings of "Kahaan chupen hain woh ghaddar Musalmaan unko bahar nikalo" Bring out those Muslims, Bring out them traitors!

Abbajaan, clutching to a blunt kitchen knife, gestured the four of us to follow him to the attic. He instructed us not to leave the attic until the coast was clear. I carried my trembling body upstairs sandwiched between my bhaijaan & ammajaan. I was shocked to find dozens of my Muslim neighbours all huddled in the dark, damp, attic that bore witness to the brutality of the night. Through the attic windows we could see the unfortunate bloodbath that was taking place right in front of our eyes. Mobs indiscriminately killing fathers, mothers & children without the slightest hesitation,

Few families in our vicinity had taken the bold compassionate step to break down small sections of the brick walls between our attics, so as to create secret tunnels, an unspoken symbol of unity and support, to stand arm in arm with one another during this life & death situation.

Our Hindu neighbours 'the Mishras' had always been like family to us, & during this fateful night, they quietly passed food, water & blankets, to us to keep us going.

In the light of the outdoor lampposts that stood witness to the bloodshed, I could see streaks of red staining the soil. My 8 year old mind was paralysed with intense terror. We all silently prayed for a miracle to God to spare our lives.

We were acutely aware that although we were still sheltered in our strong walled attic with steel doors and having a father who was the son of the richest landlord in the area, & a practising Ayurvedic doctor, respected in the village until then, but other houses were blatantly being drowned in gasoline & shrieks of burning bodies were difficult to ignore.

The carnage lasted all throughout the night & into the wee hours of the morning.

By the morning, Military had been dispatched to the areas where communal rioting was rampant. As a result of the presence of a few uniformed armed military officers on our street, the violence was being curtailed.

It all began in June, 1947 when the Governor General Lord Mount-Batten stunned everyone by announcing that 15Aug 1947, would be the date of the departure of the British & the transfer of power from the British to the Indian people. This announcement had partitioned our one nation of Hindustan into two, & thus was created the new nation of Pakistan on quite uncertain terms. The task of partition and creation of borders was done with little thought or care. The particulars of the Partition Plan & the negotiating where the new borders were to be drawn was to be led by Sir Radcliff, who had never set foot in India, before then.

The mess that the partition created resulted in us having to forcibly migrate across the newly drawn borders between India and Pakistan. That afternoon, abbajaan, with a heavy heart, asked us to pick just one small item to take along with us on our journey across the borders. I chose my wooden teacup that was given to me by my dearest neighbour and friend Arthi (from the Mishra family), and my ragged cloth doll that ammajaan that bought me for my birthday. Bhaijaan grabbed the colourful threaded bracelet that Arthi had lovingly woven for him with her own hands. Bhaijan and Arthi loved each other dearly and both our families were fully supportive of their relationship. Ammajaan chose to carry her Phulkari coat, an important symbol of the life she was about to leave behind.

Along with our Muslim neighbours we dragged our feet to the railway station, to take the Sind Express train from Amritsar to Lahore. It was really hard to leave behind everything, and embark on this scary journey across borders, to a new place, to start a new life, riddled with uncertainty.

When we reached the station, we saw trains filled to capacity, with people sitting on roofs of carriages, well as in between carriages. They did not want to risk missing the train and having to wait for the next. We got onto the train, with a heavy heart, but within the next few stations, suddenly violence broke out on a large scale. Carriages were being attacked and looted, People were being stripped and murdered in front of our eyes. Abbajaan pushed each of us under the seats and bhai in one of the berths to try to keep us safe. My 8 year old eyes witnessed mass slaughter. On the stations, looters and rioters would jump into the carriages of our train, unleashing mass destruction with knives and guns.

On every station, we could see bodies strewn across the tracks, some disfigured badly enough for me to feel like vomiting. We were almost close to reaching the other side, when one of the rioters inserted a bare ploughing blade into abbajaan's stomach, with blood gushing all over. I resisted the impulse to rush out and place my trembling hands over his chest. My eyes welled with helpless tears, intoxicated with intense mental agony, I lay paralysed under the seats.

By the time we reached Lahore, and I tried to come out of my hiding place, I saw my ammi badly injured because of all the chaos and stampede that resulted. A few months later ammi passed away from the inflicted wounds of that fateful journey, not just the physical ones, but the ones that tore the heart into a thousand pieces.

Sanjit Singh Chowdhary, was the Sikh soldier and angel who helped us Muslim refugees finally cross the border and reach Lahore in Pakistan.

Bhaijaan suffered severe wounds to his left leg, which had to be amputated a few months later.

Six months later finally a cease fire was announced, and some basic normalcy was reinstated.

We saw and heard of the horror on the other side too. Hindus fleeing from their home in Lahore to Amritsar by Bombay Express, faced similar atrocities. People of both religions lost their loved ones in this senseless bloodbath. The newspapers carried pictures and stories of millions of innocent civilians on both sides of the border that lost their lives in this meaningless partition. Homes were burnt, women and girls were raped, and children being slaughtered in front of their parents and siblings. Trains carrying refugees between the two new nations would arrive carrying corpses, and passengers were being slaughtered by angry mobs on route. It is estimated that 700,000 refugees travelled by train between 15 August 1947 and 8 September 1947, and around 20 million of people were displaced from their homeland.

It took a very long time for me to be able to get in touch with the Mishras and my best friend Dara Mishra. I could never bring myself to go back to my homeland Amritsar. I lost so much on that fateful journey. My Abbajaan, Ammijaan, my home, my identity, my beloved Mishra family neighbours, everything was stripped away from me.

My dear granddaughter," it is important for you to always remember that human lives are more precious than any arbitrary distinctions based on religious identities and ideologies".