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I

Decisive Moments in My Life

Prof. Hazara Singh

As I reminisce, I find a chain of events which became decisive moments to influence my thinking and course of life.

It was early summer in 1930, when my mother died. I was then a lad of seven, about whom it had been suddenly discovered that he was exceptionally intelligent. It happened when the junior teacher of our village primary school, who believed more in the efficacy of wielding his rod than in the proficiency of his teaching skills, was on leave and the senior teacher, who was comparatively benign supervised casually our class also in addition to his normal duties. His affectionate handling of the pupils revealed that I was the only student of the class who could solve the arithmetical sums. This sudden revelation about my worth increased my value in the estimation of my father, S. Harnam Singh, who like the elders of the then authoritarian society was strict to the extent of being harsh. He chose to take me with him to Hardwar for the performance of the ash immersion rites of my mother, a status which I otherwise did not deserve for my being not the eldest son.

After our visit to Hardwar on Asadh 3, Bikrami year 1987 (as per record kept by the *pandas*), we reached our village Chak No. 6 G.B., Ram Nagar, District Sheikhpura, about 8 miles from the nearest railway station, Nankana Sahib, quite late after sunset. As we entered the village on our horses, my father became agitated to listen to the slogans 'Inquilab Zindabad', 'Samraj Murdabad', 'Bhagat Singh Zindabad',... A crowd of about twenty youngmen was thus giving vent to their emotions before our house, which had been chosen, because my father was the village lambardar (headman). I was also getting excited to join the chorus of slogans, when to my utter dismay, my father with his commanding voice

was able to persuade them to disperse, because according to him, that demonstration did not behoove the loyal subjects of the Crown. I developed a spontaneous disliking for the behaviour of my father and resolved that I would, when I grew up, participate in the freedom struggle to atone for that unpatriotic act.

That was the period (which I later checked up) when the Punjab Government had appointed a Special Tribunal to try the accused of Lahore Conspiracy Case. That Tribunal had been given extraordinary powers for conducting its proceedings even in the absence of the accused. Bhagat Singh and his associates protesting against the 'No Vakil, No Daleel and No Appeal' set-up of that judicial forum decided to boycott it. The Tribunal comprised three judges; two English and one Indian. The latter resigned because the Chairman of the Tribunal ordered the police arbitrarily to beat the accused even in the courtroom itself, for he did not approve the slogans which the accused raised during the proceedings. The press and the public were vehemently protesting against that mock trial. The demonstration which I witnessed in my village was a part of that campaign.

Time lingered on. I passed my matriculation in 1938. The result was declared on May 10 by the Punjab University, Lahore. Before I could arrive home, news had already reached there that I had broken the school record. I expected to be greeted with cheers and pats, but found my step-mother quarreling with my father that she had all through been opposed to my school education, because a naughty boy like me was bound to do some damage to the school property. The phrase 'breaking the record' had been misunderstood by her as the smashing of some material object, for which my father would have to compensate. That fray settled once for all that my further education had been firmly ruled out.

I kept mum, because obedience to the wishes of parents was still regarded the acid test for being considered a noble offspring. I ploughed my land with all its seasonal chores for more than two

years and then in September 1940 chose to quit the village. A crumpled currency note of Rs. five was the only sum which my step-mother grudgingly allowed to be doled to me.

I reached Amritsar and met an earlier school teacher of mine, Ch. Amar Das Saini, who had shifted to that city in 1937. He received me well. Because I was exceptionally good in Mathematics, I started helping him in group tuitions. I got assured that I could become a self-supporting student. I sought admission to Khalsa College Amritsar in June 1941 with Rs. fifteen, which Ch. Amar Das gave me. Bhai Jodh Singh, the then Principal, very objectively assessed my worth and allowed all possible concessions and stipends. During winter I earned averagely about Rs. fifteen per month through tuition work. The joy which I got then while sharing that amount with my younger brother and friends got seldom surpassed by my later acts when my earning exceeded four figures. It was in that period that I developed certain life-long friendships.

These were the summer vacation of 1942. While all other students had gone to their respective homes. I stayed back as, I had resolved to tops the Intermediate Examination of the Punjab University scheduled to be held in April 1943 and had been working hard accordingly. A turning point came. I read in the papers of August 9, 1942 that all the prominent Congress leaders had been arrested on the earlier night at Bombay, where a special session of All India Congress Committee had been going for launching the Quit India Movement. It appeared that the entire country was up against the foreign rule. It dawned to me that it was the most appropriate time for me to redeem the pledge which I took in 1930 to atone for the lapse on the part of my father. I had to choose between a first class first, medals, scholarships, etc. and the perilous participation in the freedom struggle.

I firmly chose to take part in the Quit India Movement.

I was arrested and consequently suspended from the college rolls. I gathered later that I got released due to behind-the-scene efforts of Principal Jodh Singh, who had been given to understand by my teachers, that in spite of dislocation in my studies, I could still bring some laurels to the college. After my release, which preceded the fast which Gandhi Ji had undertaken in the jail, most of my time was spent in organizing the prayer meetings. Even then I won a scholarship on the results of the Intermediate Examination, which the State Government confiscated due to my having participated in the Quit India Movement. The gratification which I received on that decision of the Government convinced me that stigma of the unpatriotic act of my father had been washed off.

I could not plan my studies according to my aptitude due to my financial compulsions. History had been my favourite subject, Law was my ambition. Mathematics became my guardian, because that was the subject in which I could easily get tuition work. After spectacular success in B.A., which I passed with Mathematics A & B course, I shifted from Amritsar to Lahore and got enrolled for M.A. (English), because that was the only subject which allowed me to carry on my political activities, without regular class attendance. I led the 'Save I.N.A.' campaign at Lahore and was arrested again. That time, my arrest was reported prominently in the papers. My village folks felt elated to read those accounts. After my release, a galaxy of my village elders including my father came to Lahore to persuade me to accompany them to my birth place, On entering the village, I found an enthusiastic crowd led by my step-mother assembled to greet me, while none was there in September 1940 to say formal goodbye to me.

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II Three Questions

Prof. Hazara Singh

It was an awfully cold evening of early December in the city of Rawalpindi. The piercing gusts of wind were worsening the weather. Everyone seemed to be in hurry to return to the protection of home. Even the court chose to rise for the day a bit early. Shortly before that I was taken into the courtroom, where the grounds of detention were read out to me. In the morning the police, in a swoop, had arrested me on my arrival at Rawalpindi from Lahore. I had come to preside over the annual session of Punjab Students Congress. The mounting resentment of people to the I.N.A. Trial* seemed to be making the government feel nervous. The district authorities were not inclined to give me an opportunity to address the gathering. Perhaps they had been forewarned by their counterparts at Lahore.

After that formality in the court, I, with handcuffs on, was taken to the nearby Central Jail by a brief guard of police. As I was well-dressed and my face, too, reflected the cultivation of higher education, every passerby, in spite of his being in hurry, halted impulsively to see me being escorted thus. He pondered in bewilderment as to what offence might have been committed by me. Thus puzzling the lookers-on we reached the gate of jail. As it had been my third arrest in connection with my political activities, I had been used to hardship of confinement in jail. But during that brief march from the court to jail, under the police escort, my mind had been somewhere else. That was the time when I was to be taken in a procession to the venue of conference, but instead, I was

*Trial of the officers of Indian National Army in the Red Fort, Delhi in the later half of 1945

being led to the jail. An inlet in the iron gate opened with a bang. I with the police party entered the porch.

A jail warder, dressed in a drab brown uniform, was standing there. He held a worn-out pen on an untidily kept register. He stared at me assuming artificial strictness. He cried, "What is your name"? I told him politely my name.

"What are you?", he shrieked again.

I pondered at to what to say appropriately in reply.

"Why do not you bark?", he howled.

I said in a low tone "A human being".

He flew into rage and snarled, "How dare you misbehave"? Finding me still composed, he screamed, "Will you tell"? He raised his hand as well, but withdrew after a disapproving look from the police guard. He explained his query, "Are you a Hindu, a Muslim or a Sikh"?

I kept mum. He himself recorded something in the register.

"What is your offence?", he cried again.

The police official got me rid of him by telling,

"Detained under Defence of India Rules".

Putting down the pen, the warder stretched his hands towards me to search my dress and person. When he felt satisfied that I carried nothing objectionable, he directed a prisoner, wearing a black waistband*, to take me to the courtyard. The handcuffs were removed after I had been entrusted to judicial custody.

In the courtyard a prisoner clerk, sitting under the central tower, noted my name and parentage. Handing over a cardboard ticket to me he cautioned, "Keep it carefully with you. If it is misplaced,

*Prisoners with a good record of their jail term are not put to hard labour, but are used as attendants ; those who act as message-boys wear black waistbands, while, the seniors among them, entrusted with supervisory duties, put on the yellow ones.

you may invite trouble".

Then he asked the attendant to have me issued the requisite blankets and vessels. He led me into a high-walled barrack. Many inmates were either loitering about or were preparing themselves for the night lock-up. They watched me eagerly, as if I were a messenger from the outside world who would convey some good news. Many asked in a chorus,

"What offence? How long sentenced? Which district?".

Three questions were showered at me again. I replied to their queries. They could not understand my offence, because I was a political detenu. Almost all the prisoners acquire a perverted knowledge of various provisions of law. The important sections of Indian Penal Code are at their fingertips. But neither they could comprehend the offence, I was charged with, nor were able to reconcile themselves to the fact, as to how a person could be punished without a trial. It got added to their knowledge that the inmates of a prison included the detenues in addition to convicts and undertrials. They evinced no interest in my replies to their first two questions, because central jails are packed with criminals sentenced under I.P.C. sections 307, 302 and the ones dealing with other heinous crimes. Longer the term of one's sentence, the warmer ovation one is given. They do not try to develop acquaintance with the convicts who are to serve brief terms. The fellowship with a person, whose sentence is sufficiently long, is a source of considerable solace and is ardently sought. This attitude is justifiable. If the pangs of separation continue to be inflicted every now and then, the jail life becomes doubly afflicting.

When I told about my district, curiosity of a few of them got aroused further. They surrounded me and enquired about the police station and the village I came from. I was admitted there and then to the fraternity of district. As I was a political detenu, I was to be kept in a separate cell.

Reflecting on these three questions asked so sympathetically and the ones hurled contemptuously by the warder, I followed the attendant carrying a few dust-laden blankets and two iron vessels. I realised that the jail life had imparted him a lot of practical wisdom. He exhorted me,

“Young friend, I salute you. Only the guilty and the upright are sent to the jail; the former for being punished for their misdeeds, and the latter for being cowed down for raising voice of protest against tyranny and oppression. We are ordinary people. Even Lord Krishna’s mother gave him birth in jail. Guru Nanak, too, had to grind corn in detention.....”

With a keen ear to his interesting sermon, I reached the allotted cell.

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III

A Day with Frontier Gandhi

Prof. Hazara Singh

Abdul Ghaffar Khan, popularly called ‘Khan Badshah’, also adored as Frontier Gandhi, and a stalwart among the pioneers of freedom struggle came to India in 1969 to participate in the Gandhi Centenary Celebrations. That reminded me of the day, which I passed with him during August, 1946. I was then President of the Punjab Students Congress. We had organised a students’ camp at S. D. High School, Moga to educate the young with the current social and political problems of the country. S. Partap Singh Kairon, inaugurated the camp and on his advice I reached Delhi, a couple of days later, where he had gone to attend the meeting of All India Congress Working Committee. He had offered to endorse my request to a few Congress leaders, that they should visit Moga to address the trainees. None of the high-ups in the Congress, we talked to, seemed to heed my request. The Congress Working Committee was seized with the important proposition whether to participate in the interim government under Lord Wavell or not. Acharya J. B. Kriplani put me off jokingly by excusing that he was afraid of the hefty Punjabis. Dr Keskar, the then one of the two secretaries, All-India Congress Working Committee, first enthusiastically accepted my request, and a few hours later when I met him to finalise the programme of his visit, expressed his inability due to other pressing engagements.

At Birla Mandir

The Congress Working Committee met for its next sitting at Birla Mandir to avail themselves of the advice of Mahatma Gandhi. When the members rose for evening tea, they came out one by one; the radiant briskly walking Pt Jawaharlal Nehru, the unusually

silent but composed S. Patel, the modest and humane Rajinder Prasad, the elegant and graceful Maulana Azad and many others. The last to come out was the bare-headed tall Khan Badshah wrapped in a white sheet and holding a staff in hand. I hesitantly approached him and sought his permission to talk to him. He affectionately placed his hand on my shoulder and his very touch removed my entire despondency. He stepped towards a corner with me, where there happened to be lying a single chair. He pressed that I should sit and he would keep standing because I might have been tired while standing outside waiting for him. It was an awkward situation for me. Neither I could decline nor comply with it. Fortunately, S. Partap Singh Kairon seeing me talking to Khan Badshah also came there. He wanted to be sure that the programme of his visit to the camp was arranged not according to my youthful fancies, but with full consideration to the convenience of venerable leader. Khan Badshah informed me that he was leaving for Peshawar the same night by Frontier Mail. I proposed that he should break his journey at Ludhiana, drive with me on a waiting car to Moga, address the trainees there for a few minutes and then in that very car I would take him to Lahore via Ferozepur, where he could catch the same train. I had calculated that the stoppage of Frontier Mail at Ludhiana, Jullundur, Amritsar and Lahore itself, would spare enough time for us to catch it again, in spite of a circuitous journey. S. Partap Singh Kairon was not convinced. He took me aside and warned me that in case my plan failed, I would be exposing the Frontier Gandhi to a lot of danger, as the Muslim League after the misfire of its Direct Action Day on 16th August, 1946 at Calcutta, was desperate and was bent upon to arouse the passions of Muslim masses to demonstrate against the nationalist Muslim leaders. Khan Badshah perhaps over-heard the apprehension of S. Kairon. He intervened and readily accepted my offer assuring me emphatically that a man of God was never afraid of the slogans of a few bigots. It was settled that I would meet him four hours thereafter at the Delhi Railway Station.

My delight knew no bounds when I found that a leader of the eminence of Khan Badshah had so readily acceded to my request. When the flush of excitement got abated I wondered from where I would get a car at Ludhiana. I was also not sure whether a taxi would be available there or not for I had experienced earlier the hardship caused by official restrictions imposed on taxies in their interdistrict travel.

A Providential Help

During the two or three hours at my disposal I had to give a ring to my co-organisers at Moga intimating not only about the visit of Khan Badshah to the camp but also to make sure that they would be able to send a car to Ludhiana. Fortunately, at the Telephone Exchange, New Delhi, a young man met me who had seen me earlier at Ludhiana during a students' conference. He belonged to Ludhiana and his family had a car. Learning the predicament I was in, he there and then gave an urgent ring to his people that their car should wait for me at Ludhiana Railway Station, and he explained to the driver my physical appearance on the phone.

I rushed to the Delhi Railway Station to meet Khan Badshah as arranged. He did not permit me to purchase his ticket, because he said that he travelled at his own expenses for all of his political undertakings. As the train reached Ludhiana, I requested Khan Badshah to detrain only after I had made myself sure about the car, which was to take us to Moga. I ran out and thanked God to find the car waiting for us. I rushed back to bring Khan Badshah who had by that time packed his simple bedding and was keenly looking out for me. We came out and within three quarters of an hour reached Moga.

At Moga Camp

The trainees hastily assembled as it was still early in the morning. Khan Badshah declined to sit in a chair. He squatted on a mat with the trainees and addressed them for a few minutes. He

told them that during his night journey he was pained to listen to a fellow traveller enquiring from a hawker whether he was selling Muslim or Hindu *shakinjibi*. He said that such communal fissures had been created among Indians by the English and that harm could be undone only if we considered ourselves Indians first and Indians last. **He observed that the message of love, truth and non-violence of Mahatma Gandhi had transformed the bellicose Pathans into disciplined fighters for freedom.** He was busy with his sermon impressing on the young trainees to devote themselves to selfless service of motherland when I politely requested him to rise for breakfast. He desired that he would have it with the trainees, a gesture which greatly thrilled all of us.

Rushing to Lahore

The fifteen minutes which he spent at Moga seemed to have passed like a wink. We got into the car and in the way I showed him the place near the Hussainiwala Bridge where the martyrs Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru had been cremated unceremoniously by the British. He bowed his head to the martyrs.

We sped through Lahore and on the Nisbat Road, late A.C. Bali of *The Tribune* happened to notice me and waved for a halt. He had seen Khan Badshah and was keen to ascertain his reaction about the current political situation. Khan Badshah told me to carry on and whispered paternally that he was very shy of press and publicity.

The Slip, but Our Grit

The Frontier Mail had left Lahore a minute earlier when we reached the station. Khan Badshah complained that we could have caught the train, had I not wasted time in making enquiries at the booking window. We drove direct to Shahdra. The Circular Road leading to Shahdra was so over-crowded with carts that we reached slightly late there too. The railway crossing was closed and we watched helplessly the train steaming off by us. We sped to

Gujranwala, the next stoppage, and reached there fifteen minutes ahead of the train. The car slackened in speed when we were yet a furlong or so from the railway station. The driver reported that the petrol was exhausted. Fortunately, we were quite near the station. What would have been our lot if that situation had occurred when we were still miles away from the destination. I thanked God again.

We had to walk about two hundred yards to reach the station. Khan Badshah was very particular to reimburse the amount spent by me to purchase a ticket at Lahore for him for Peshawar. All the time he was feeling sorry that I had been put to a lot of inconvenience. The train arrived. I wanted to touch his feet, but Khan Badshah gave me an affectionate hug and invited me to visit him at Nathia Gali, the centre of his political activities in N.W.F.P. Who knew that about a year thereafter the country would be partitioned and we would become foreigners for each other.

I heaved a sigh of relief. Coming out of the station, the first thing I did was to inform telegraphically S. Partap Singh both at his Delhi as well as the Kairon address that my plan had not misfired.

Though I have been living at Ludhiana since 1955, yet I have not been able to meet that gentleman, whom Providence sent to Telephone Exchange, New Delhi to help me.

Hussainiwala Visited Again

I happened to pass a month near Hussainiwala Bridge during 1966 when, as an N.C.C. Officer, I was attached with an army unit for higher training. I crossed the bridge so often to visit the tomb of martyrs and looked wistfully beyond the custom checkpoint towards the city of Lahore, where I passed the golden years of my life. Incidentally it was the same bridge, crossing which, I entered free India as a refugee on September 6, 1947.

IV

Wedding Rings

Prof. Hazara Singh

Shabnam was given to snatching a hasty glance at her palms, whenever she woke up, before she looked at something else around her. She had a strong belief that even a casual sight of any unpleasant or unfriendly object as one opens the eyes after sleep, does not hold a good omen. On the other hand if the eyes fall on something pleasing and amiable, the time that follows promises a smooth and care-free passage. This habit had become an element of faith for her. She was convinced that there was nothing more favorable for a person than to look, thus, at his or her own hands. Hence glancing at her own soft and lovely palms every now and then, not only imparted comfort to her pliable nature, but gratified also her vanity, rooted in self-admiration. Even after her marriage with Hasrat, she chose to stick tenaciously to that habit in utter disregard of the customary injunctions that a marriage for its being predetermined by destiny, blends two beings and the happiness of couple matters more than the convenience of an individual spouse.

She disliked leaving bed just after waking. She felt that it was unlike the ways of aristocrats, a fading fact about her lineage 'The distant ancestors of my father were big landlords', she would claim with pride so often. She had arranged with her husband that he would serve her a cup of tea both in the morning and afternoon. After sipping it leisurely and having flown to her satiety in the fairy realms of imagination, she would saunter out humming a tune, demonstrating that all cared for her while she bothered about none.

One afternoon as she opened her eyes after the siesta and true to her habit glanced at her palms, she was surprised that her slender fingers were bare. Her wedding rings were not there. Her heart sank. She taxed her bewildered memory and got a hazy recollection

that after kneading the flour, she had removed them for cleaning. She placed them on the table, which much to her dislike, was always covered with books of her studious husband. She had developed a hidden jealousy for them, because they occupied a greater part of his attention than her blooming self. She had a mind to pick up the rings after the kitchen chores. But she got so overwhelmed by drowsiness as she finished her lunch, that forgetting all about the rings, she dragged herself with effort to her bed.

Everytime she looked at her bare fingers, her uneasiness increased. Abdicating her lolling and without waiting for tea she pulled herself reluctantly out of bed to have a look at the table. The rings were not there. They were nowhere to be found. Her confusion and irritation mounted every moment.

Hasrat, unminful of her frantic search, was absorbed in his studies in the adjacent room. His examination was near at hand. His chances of securing a respectable job depended upon the degree of his success. He had taken to his studies a bit too seriously, because he was sure that teaching job in a college would make up the loss of conjugal happiness which his unemployment had been tending to nibble at. He got startled to listen to an accusing enquiry from Shabnam,

“Where have you placed my rings”?

He could understand from her tremulous voice that a storm had been kicked by some mishap. She always attributed her omissions to others and claimed their credit, if any, for herself by asserting. “I knew it and had already said so”.

Pushing aside the book, he hastily moved to the table to find out the cause of trouble. She simply stretched her bare fingers towards him. Hasrat took no time to understand the cause of her pitched excitement. He conducted a thorough search of the table, but the rings, the auspicious gifts reminiscent of their marital hopes and promises, were nowhere to be found. He shared the anxiety of his tearful wife.

“Did anybody come into my room, while I was sleeping?”, demanded Shabnam, with visible indignant hesitation.

Scratching his head, Hasrat replied that the wife of their next door neighbor had knocked at to ask for a piece of thread and needle.

“Did she come up to the table?”, Shabnam cried in an unusual shrill manner.

“I am sure that she did not, because finding you asleep, she remained standing in the verandah”, Hasrat said emphatically.

“How can a bookish fellow like you understand the women folk, whose eyes are sharper than those of vultures even. I am sure that by beguiling a simpleton, which undoubtedly you are, she slipped away with the rings”, Shabnam specified her accusation.

“But they are respectable and dependable neighbors”, protested Hasrat.

“Did anybody else other than your respectable neighbor visit our home during those fateful hours?”, Shabnam made another deriding outburst.

“Oh, yes. My friend Iqbal came in for a couple of minutes. He wanted a book and instead of my pressing hard, did not stay for a cup of tea”, said the bewildered Hasrat.

“How could he wait for tea with the rings in his pocket? It is my misfortune that with your bookish knowledge you ‘ll never understand the ways of world”, shrieked Shabnam with her eyes shimmering with tears.

Hasrat no doubt shared the nervousness of his wife at the likely misplaced jewellery, but the aspersions on his dear pal, with whom he had been attached ever since his school days, shocked him. He tried to console her by assuring that he would get her new rings out of his first pay after employment. Being terribly shaken by grief and loss, she screamed,

“If neither your respectable neighbor, nor your pal has slipped away with my rings, should I say that you concealed them to sell secretly to provide for the domestic expenses during this unending period of your sitting idle at home”?

Tearing her hair she flung herself on bed, as if she would succumb to her heart-rending sobs. She wailed :

“Had not destiny yoked me with a worthless person, my wedding rings would not have been lost. I had never imagined myself to be kneading flour with such lovely hands”.

Anger, remorse and helplessness almost puzzled the otherwise stoic Hasrat, whom the ups and downs of life had seasoned long before it was due. He slunk away thoroughly distressed. He was at a loss to understand as to what to say and what to do. The hidden hand of destiny had not only inflicted a scar-leaving loss to them, but also had disturbed their otherwise, though uneventful, yet peaceful life. He understood well the anguish of his wife at the loss of such sentimental pieces of jewellery, but his inner self was protesting as to how far she was justified in disbelieving him and accusing other people.

Shabnam did not rise from her bed despite the consolations and caresses of her husband. Her hair got dishevelled and the pillow was drenched with tears.

The kitchen fire was not lit that evening. Hasrat tried to divert his distressed mind by resuming his studies. Having been exhausted by sobs and drained by tears, Shabnam fell asleep. Hours passed uneasily for Hasrat. He listened to some rustling of papers behind the box in Shabnam’s room. An idea flashed through his mind. He dashed to switch on the light in her room.

On being thus disturbed in her sleep, Shabnam protested :

“Why have you come to deprive me of a few moments of sleep disregarding the loss I have already been made to suffer”?

Hasrat patiently pocketed the snub. He began removing one by one the copies of old papers thrown carelessly behind the box. Shabnam could not understand his odd action and began to exhibit symptoms of anger.

“Are you collecting the waste paper to sell it tomorrow morning?”, she cried in an exasperated voice.

By this time, something yellow had caught Hasrat’s eyes. He touched it to be sure and said in a stentorian tone :

“No. I am instead recovering the lost jewellery as well as salvaging the honour of innocent people”.

He picked up the flour-stuffed rings which the rats had dragged behind the box. Springing from bed, Shabnam snatched the rings crying with joy:

“I knew that my wedding rings would not be lost. You should not have thrown the papers like that to provide a cover for the rats”.

As Hasrat turned to resume his studies, she clasped him, nudging with a bewitching smile,

“What a feelingless fellow you are? I have not sipped the afternoon tea even and you are unmindful of your exhausted wife”.

Hasrat felt relieved as a storm in the cup had blown off. Both had tea and snacks and went hand in hand to bed.

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V

Clash of Cultures

Prof. Hazara Singh

My cousin Aman Deep and her husband Surinder Pal migrated to U.K. in the early Nineteen Sixties. They left behind their two children, a son and a daughter, not yet school-going, to be looked after by us till they got suitably settled there. The young couple had many an inbred habit, regarded virtues in the orthodox Indian background, but quite unhelpful to them in the western way of life. Both were vegetarians and hence had a restricted choice of food items due to their taboos. No doubt both had degrees from an Indian university, but were not proficient in any skill. Shyness, difficulty in understanding English spoken in local accent and above all gnawing affection for the children, left behind, kept intensifying their loneliness.

Aman Deep stated in her first letter that she spent her time either weeping or sleeping. I replied to her in a cheering tone suggesting to communicate regularly with me sharing her feelings and experiences. She wrote in her next letter that one evening after the factory hours, while the workers were collecting their coats, she felt concerned when a white male co-worker was seen removing her coat from the peg. She cried ‘Please, it is mine’. He smiled and said ‘Young lady, it is a western etiquette that men help women in many a way’. Aman felt sheepish because in the Indian male dominated society, the men instead of displaying any such courtesy to women, expect to be helped by the latter.

She wrote in one of her subsequent communications that it had been the day of *karva chauth* (the fourth lunar day falling in the month of October) when the Hindu women observe fast praying for their lifelong conjugal union, (sohag) that she expressed her reluctance to have the usual cup of tea during recess. When her

colleagues learnt the reason thereof, a few of the native women cried 'They should rather pray for an early death, so that not only they get the property of the deceased, but also a fair chance of another marriage'. Aman Deep felt shocked that in the West marriage was not looked upon as the union of two souls, but a contract of convenience, terminating so often in divorce on trivial grounds.

A year later she wrote that as the second name of both of them, i.e. Deep and Pal, were different, they were mostly regarded not as husband and wife, but a boy and a girl living together with mutual consent. She desired that marriage registration certificate be arranged for them, so that when their children joined them in U.K., they should be considered the offspring of a lawful wedlock.

In due course their children reached U.K. They learnt about the rights of child in their schools. Whenever their parents rebuked them for any omission or commission or raised hand to slap - a prerogative of Indian elders - the children cautioned, 'We will inform the police, if you resort to violence'. When thus confronted it was hard for them to cope with that erosion in parental authority.

About a dozen of years later, Aman started stressing on us to find suitable matches in India for her son and daughter. When the latter came to know about the earnestness of their mother, they told her firmly that they would choose themselves their respective life partners. While Aman told them philosophically that it was one of the obligations of Indian parents, they repudiated her by holding that it amounted to curtailment of their right. Surinder Pal tried to console Aman by saying 'My dear, we have to accept this generation gap caused by the clash of cultures'. Their children roared with laughter 'Dear parents, rather cease to suffer from the degeneration which your orthodox values are inflicting on you'.

During our trip abroad thereafter we stayed with our cousin. In a family gathering on a Sunday afternoon, Surinder Pal

reminisced that on their arrival in U.K. they were mostly referred to as 3-£ immigrants, because that was the maximum foreign exchange amount per head, which the Government of India permitted then to be carried abroad. But by dint of hard work within two decades they were fairly well-off. His son enquired curiously 'Dad, why is India still poor in spite of its abundant raw material and mammoth manpower'? Surinder Pal kept mum. As if to strike the iron while it was still hot, the daughter sought to know from her mother 'Why do we read a lot about bride-burning, bonded labour and what not in India which is referred to as the land of sages and saints'? Aman Deep said with maternal authority, 'Keep your women-lib ideas with you. Glory of India lies in her modest women and toiling peasants'. The son added derisively 'Also in the naked sadhus and the stray sacred cattle'.

Many years thereafter I happened to go to U.K. again. The son and daughter of Aman had got themselves wedded, each exercising his or her inclination in choosing the respective spouse. Their children were also getting adolescent. I asked them as to what they expected from their offspring regarding their matrimonial preferences. They confessed 'The least our parents desired from us was to confine the selection of our life partners to the Indian community, while we fervently pray that our children may not choose to be gay or lesbian couples'.

The clash of cultures had led to a turmoil in social values.

VI

Respectable Protection

Prof. Hazara Singh

During early Nineteen-Seventies we had an American, Dr Raymond Griffith, as a guest teacher in English at Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana. He asked me hesitatingly one day whether an incestuous marriage was accepted in India. On my looking askance at him, he stated that almost every week one or another acquaintance had been approaching him with the request,

“Dr Griffith, I am marrying my daughter next Sunday. Please attend the function”.

I felt amused and said,

“He meant that he was going to solemnize the wedding of his daughter”.

Griffith exclaimed,

“Oh! He should have said that he was marrying off his daughter”.

I considered it as an opportune moment to have a puzzle solved. “Raymond” I said, “Your surname is Griffith. It is intriguing that your mother is called Mrs Mary Hicks”.

Griffith laughed and replied in an easy tone,

“After my father’s death, mother chose to marry one Mr Hicks. She did not drop that surname even after legal separation with her second husband. I send her a card regularly on Mother’s Day. Whenever I am in the States, I call at her with appointment at the home for old people”.

Griffith informed also leisurely that after every such visit she ascertained invariably whether he carried sufficient money with him. On my asking the purpose thereof he said,

“The gangsters frequently waylay the people driving home at night. If their victim does not have sufficient amount to meet their expectations, they hit him hard contemptuously because he lacks respectability according to their norms”.

I felt uneasy to learn such unusual things about a country, the dreamland of many. For making me feel relaxed, he told me appreciably,

“My mother shows with pride to her fellow-lodgers the letters she receives from you. Few people in USA find time to communicate through writing as they consider it convenient to talk on phone. Printed cards, suitable for each occasion offering a large variety, are available which are posted to cover corresponding social obligation”.

After a pause, he continued,

“The fellow-lodgers envy my mother when she reads to them your affectionate letters because they never receive any such communication even from their offspring”.

After he left, I kept buzzing ‘East is East, West is West, never the twain shall meet’. To my great astonishment they met at my house itself.

We are an ageing couple living in a spacious house, constructed keeping in view the needs of a joint family. Our children are well-settled but scattered over three countries. Hence the maintenance of an empty nest entails a lot of physical exertion. They talk to us often on phone for ascertaining our welfare but expect us to keep writing to them detailed letters for filling their emotional gap.

During May 1993 we became the victims of a burglary. Earlier in the afternoon my wife received touching and fascinating Mother’s Day cards from USA and Canada. There had been a duststorm followed by showers in the evening. We had a nice sleep. Surprisingly, neither of us felt the urge to go to bathroom that night. When we woke up the next morning, we found the other bedroom

bolted from within. Lo! The studyroom as well. On going out we discovered that the glasspane of a window had been removed and the grill unscrewed. The almirahs had been ransacked and a locked trunk removed to a corner of the courtyard. It had been broken open and the contents lay scattered around it. The condition in the studyroom, to which the entry got provided through the combined bathroom, was no better. Being present at home, we did not expect any such daring breaking-in. The steel almirah in that room remained unlocked. A day earlier a handsome amount had been drawn from the bank for the routine biennial repairs. The purse lay on the table. I knew precisely what I had been deprived of. My wife, who is more methodical in safeguarding her valuables and effecting savings than me, took time to ascertain her loss. The burglars had been choosy. They lifted yellow metal and cash only. The loss exceeded a six-digit sum.

Old age coupled with pain in knees restricts my movements. I rang to my eldest son who reached within an hour. Finding that we had escaped any physical harm, he heaved a sigh of relief. When I remonstrated that why he had been ignoring my advice to remove his jewellery to the bank locker, he submitted calmly,

“I had kept a part of it at home to ensure your protection. Imagine, if after ransacking the almirahs, the intruders had not found any cash or ornaments, they were sure to awaken you and mishandle even to find out where the valuables have been hidden. On your resistance, the desperadoes could have gone to any extent. Material loss does not mean much. Thank God, that neither of you needs hospitalization. In that event there would have been none to attend to you there for long”.

In a flash I got reminded of what Griffith had talked three decades earlier about respectable protection from antisocial elements.

The police was informed. They came, inspected the site, found faults with us for our being careless, advised us to pack the scattered

articles and have the grill refixed, but showed no inclination to register the first information report on the plea that nothing was likely to come out of that. Being a local officer, my son could persuade his counterpart in the police set-up to have at least the complaint registered. We were obliged after thirty six hours of the mishap.

Alongwith started a stream of callers - friends, neighbors and fun-seekers. After the preliminary what and how, all congratulated us for our having escaped any physical harm. Some of them even indulged into philosophizing. I normally choose to sleep in the studyroom, because the cooler in the bedroom aggravates my knee trouble. It was sermonized that the Almighty managed our safety. Had there been no squall followed by showers, the hot weather would have necessitated switching on of the cooler, leading to my opting to sleep in the studyroom and thus exposing myself to a possible encounter with the intruders.

We are sadder and wiser after the event, but ponder often that the police being busy with its other more important tasks, if packs of burglars continue to break in, what shall ensure our protection next? Electrical gadgets..... parchments.... crockery till we get pushed to a home for old people.

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VII

A Hair-Breadth Escape

Prof. Hazara Singh

Three days thereafter the marriage of our eldest daughter was to be solemnised. Her periodic visits home from her hostel created a festive atmosphere for us. Her coming that evening after completing her medical education was an event, great in itself, worth celebrating. It was a nice family get-together. We beamed with pride and our offspring rejoiced equally as a good precedent had been set up for their educational goals. Preparations for marriage were meticulously discussed and responsibilities assigned, so that all ceremonies went ahead without any miss or slip.

Next morning our youngest son showed reluctance to go to school, as he wanted to talk and play with his eldest sister to his heart's fill. His insistence which would have been ordinarily disapproved, was readily accepted. It was the last week of September. The weather was still warm and a bit humid. Both were sitting on a bench in the park with their legs dangling down. Their conversation was disturbed by a movement near her feet. As she lifted them, she was alarmed to see a snake. She shrieked. Her brother screamed in terror. The confectioners, engaged to prepare sweets, working nearby, ran with sticks in their hands. They killed the reptile before it could find a protective cover. Some one remarked, what would have happened, if either of the two had been bitten by the snake, which was a poisonous one. We heard him with hands folded in thanks-giving to God.

After some time both our daughters left for the city as they had an engagement with a beautician and also wanted to make a few other purchases. We impressed on them to come back by lunch time. The delay in their return was natural. An elderly relative, who arrived that morning, was carrying on her strain,

'In our days neither of the groom nor bride was allowed to go out till the wedding had been solemnised. Our ancestors had not been fools who laid down such restrictions. The girls should not have been allowed to go to the city'.

All our educational training could not help us to overlook her continual chiding. Thus, every minute, passed in waiting for them, was adding to our anxiety. The snake incident had already upset us a lot. Her prattle kept adding to our tension. To our great relief, the girls returned by three in the afternoon. As we sat for lunch, all of a sudden a half inch in diameter solid iron rod, fixed as a curtain bar fell down, its end missing striking the head of bride-to-be nicely set by the beautician a while ago, but scratching across her shoulder tore the sleeve of her shirt. We were dumb with fear, as if ill luck was stalking the family.

One of our neighbors was hospitalized for a minor operation. It was an imperative social courtesy to call at him. My wife desired to accompany me and thus became the pillion rider on my bicycle. The road from university campus to hospital was in bad shape. A lot of construction was going on in that fast developing suburb. The road was not only without street lights but also littered with heaps of building material on both sides. I was cycling quite cautiously, because it was getting dark. A truck with flashing lights appeared suddenly from the opposite direction, dazzling me and making my grip on the handle unsteady. While trying to save ourselves from being knocked down by that fast moving vehicle, we fell on a heap of sand. It had been a narrow escape. My wife held firmly that we would walk back, as her nerves could stand no further strain.

The growing cool night breeze began to have a soothing effect on us. We returned home wondering, what could have happened to the first wedding in our nucleus family, had there been not a hairbreadth escape from any of the three mishaps, which we faced that day.

VIII

Spectrum of Life

Prof. Hazara Singh

It is said that if a person records candidly his life history from childhood to his last active years, that text turns out to be an interesting novel. Likewise, if one ponders over one's daily happenings, it reflects the changing attitudes of society towards contemporary life. It is how I experienced one day.

Ugly Ancestors

The wife of a bigwig at our university campus called at us during her pre-lunch sauntering. She kept looking superciliously at various pictures in our drawing room. At last not able to contain herself any longer she said to my wife pointing towards the picture of Socrates with his flowing beard and half-naked body wrapped loosely in a shawl,

“Is that old man your father-in-law”?

Before the latter could reply, as if to hit the nail again on its head, the former with her eyes falling on the portrait of Abraham Lincoln, remarked disapprovingly,

“How ugly the ancestors of your husband are!”. Instead of feeling exasperated or belittled, my wife felt amused at her swagging rooted in ignorance.

The Gems

The same evening I and my maternal grandson, a smart well-bred child of about 10, were to catch train for Amritsar. Our single piece luggage did not necessitate looking for a coolie. In spite of my being in the sixties, I was sure that I could carry it upstairs conveniently. Impelled by affection, my grandson insisted that the

suitcase be given to him. I fondly said,

“Dear child, I am not yet so old that I would not be able to carry this much luggage even”.

Prompt came his reply,

“Nor I am so tender now that I should not share any burden with my grandpa”.

A railway worker, passing by, overheard us, beamed with smile, patted the child and notwithstanding my entreating ‘Oh! No thanks’, took the suitcase from me. When we reached the platform, without giving us even a moment to thank him, he clasped the child affectionately, bowed to me respectfully and hurried his way.

As I pondered over both these happenings, I felt that while the evolving material-based outlook was rendering our middle class as vain and shallow, the common people still believed that lending a helping hand to an elder was a social obligation. They sparkle as gems in our murky developing society.

IX

Ethics of a Pickpocket

Prof. Hazara Singh

While travelling back from Secunderabad, we intended breaking journey at Gwalior. As the A.P. Express did not have a halt then at Gwalior, we got down at Jhansi. It was a chilly February morning. A lad of about ten, insufficiently dressed was trying to move closer to me in the crowd, while we changed the train. I thought that perhaps warmth of the shawl, dangling around my shoulders, was the source of attraction for him. I did not mind his touching me from behind. Another traveller, not familiar with me, started thrashing the lad. When I protested that as to why he was so harsh to an innocent-looking child, he chided me explaining that he resorted to that chastisement for saving my hip-pocket which the urchin was about to pick. Availing himself of the diversion of attention, the alleged pickpocket disappeared.

I was cautioned by that passenger that the railway belt between Jhansi and Gwalior, a stretch of U.P. penetrating into M.P., was infested with pickpockets who tried to be friendly with their intended victims either by exciting pity as the urchin had been doing or by posing as sympathisers through a caution to be careful about the money they carried, thus impelling many of them to touch the pocket impulsively, where the purse was kept. Two days later while we were at the Gwalior railway station for catching Dadar Express for homeward journey, I came across a youth forewarning me in that vein. I chuckled at his artful interest in our welfare.

My wife had a craze to keep a regular record of her weight and would stop while passing by a weighing machine. She insisted that I should take out a 25-paisa coin for inserting in that machine. I pleaded with her that she kept a stock of such coins in her hand-

purse, but she impressed that it was the privilege of a lady not to spend even a penny, while she was escorted by her spouse. Trying to look chivalrous, to comply with her conjugal prerogative, I revealed unwittingly the pocket, where I had kept the purse. When the train arrived, we rushed towards the compartment with sleeping berths. The conductors normally lock one of the entrances of such compartments for regulating the exit and entry of passengers.

The simultaneous getting in and getting out results in a lot of pushing and jostling, an ideal opportunity for the pickpockets for performing their feat. When we found our seats and settled down, I was astonished to see a wide neat cut under the waist pocket of my coat. I put my hand anxiously in the inside pocket. Lo! the purse was not there. I searched all other pockets frantically, but in vain. I told about the mishap to my wife in a saddened tone. Her usual sarcastic observation in such situations 'I knew it already' pinched me deeper than the loss of purse. My worry was not about the money, thus lost, (fortunately the tickets were in the brief case) but for a fair number of chits on which I had jotted the addresses of many a knowledgeable person, I had met during that trip and the notes I had taken. It was an unpleasant end of an otherwise rewarding tour.

A week later, as I returned to the Department after a meeting, I was astonished to find in my mail an envelope with my visiting card pasted on that to serve as postal address. As I opened it, I was delighted to find that all the chits in my stolen purse had been faithfully returned. I thanked the pickpocket for his code of ethics, returning and not throwing away, what he did not need.

Down the Memory Lane

Prof. Hazara Singh

Mubarak Singh, Editor *Art of Living* and I were contemporaries at Khalsa College Amritsar during the early Nineteen Forties ; he a student of M.A. (English) and I, that of F. Sc. (Non-Medical). Apparently there was nothing common between us ; I, a robust ruralite, not yet even twenty and he a well-mannered person hailing from Pothohar, handicapped with a congenital deformity of feet and too elderly to look like a student. We became acquainted with each other during the quit India Movement, in which I participated impulsively and he quite consciously, though both of us pursued our studies under limitations peculiar to either of us.

When the college broke up for summer vacation in 1942, I did not go home like other students as I had to earn to learn. My teachers thought very highly of me and often impressed on me that they expected me to top in the University Intermediate Examination. As such I endeavoured to rise to their expectations.

The predawn arrest of Congress leaders at Bombay on August 9, 1942 before the quit India resolution could be discussed in the AICC session, the subsequent widespread uprising of masses, particularly of the youth with the war cry 'Do or Die' and the ruthless suppression resorted to by the government made the situation a challenging one. Kamal Kishor, a local student and I decided to spearhead an agitation after the reopening of college. We had no organisational experience and political education, except ebbing enthusiasm. All India Students Federation, owing allegiance to the Communist Party of India was the sole organised body having its branches in various colleges. We contacted the secretary of our college unit for advice and support. The communist parties all over the world which had been initially considering Hitler, the German

Fuhrer, objectively progressive in the onslaught against democracies by dictatorship, changed their opinion about him, when he invaded USSR in June 1941. For them, the Indian struggle for independence became a nonevent. Instead the Russian alliance with the Allies against the Nazis began to be proclaimed as People's War. The office-bearers of AISF did their best to dissuade us from our resolve. They even offered to join us in organising protest strikes in colleges, if we first agreed to mobilising public opinion, their pet political phrase, before resorting to any action. Their strategy was to keep the strike-plan in suspense. We resisted their tactics.

When the college reopened, Kamal and I started raising slogans supporting the Quit India campaign and condemning the British Imperialism, The students of senior classes i.e. those of second, fourth and sixth year were scheduled to sit for a week-long house examination. We got their support enmasse, not due to any political awakening but because it gave them an opportunity to abstain from the examination which was a gruelling academic exercise. We were overjoyed at that unexpected success on the first day. Bhai Jodh Singh, Principal of the college, was a strict and seasoned administrator. He appeared on the scene. On such occasions he talked less and conveyed his message through his stern eyes. The slogan shouting students got silenced and would have started dispersing but for the appearance of an elderly Englishman, who conducted preparatory classes for temporary commission in the army in our college. Quite unwittingly he walked to the place, where the Principal was standing, expecting that the promise he held for the youngmen seeking to join army as officers would lend weight to the authority of Principal. It had just the opposite effect, as a casual remark by me 'A cousin of Dyer' electrified the crowd again. The Principal thought it a better part of discretion to retire winking to the English man to follow him.

On the second day, we had a similar success. We got the active support of Mubarak Singh and a few other senior students who

even addressed the gathering. The Principal forbade the police to enter the college compound. In the afternoon he cancelled the house examination and ordered the restarting of regular teaching work from the next morning. The colleges then used to have a sort of semi-militia in their professional sportsmen. The physical training instructor would use them to jostle and hoot the elements inconvenient to college authorities. On the third day our agitation fizzled and on the fourth it collapsed. As I had been a nonresident student, the police had no difficulty in arresting me. The Principal suspended me from the college rolls, a word which he chose to use in place of expulsion, perhaps in deference to the wishes of teaching staff who were impressed by my brilliance. I learnt later that Kamal Kishore had been whisked away by his parents and that was the end of his college education.

After my release, I was readily readmitted because my teachers had been continually suggesting to the Principal that in spite of the dislocation in my studies, they still expected me to acquit myself creditably in the university examination.

I happened to meet Mubarak Singh one day in the college library. It was customary then that the students greeted their teachers and seniors as 'Sardar Ji, Sat Sri Akal'. He hugged me and on my asking that he appeared to be worried, he informed me hesitatingly that he had not received the stipend which the Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee Nankana Sahib paid to him from their educational grant on quarterly basis. I then also learnt that he was married and had a child. I took out a tenner and a fiver, the amount which I had in my pocket and placed before him. He was reluctant to accept.

I blurted out,

"Sardar Ji, I get twenty one rupees these days from three tuitions ; ten from a tenth class student for coaching him in English and Mathematics ; six from another for teaching him Maths only and five from the third as a tutor in Urdu. I have yet to get six rupees and my expenses include three rupees a

month for two meals a day, two as rent for a room including electric charges, and one for miscellaneous needs like bath, wash and stationery."

So earnest was my persuasion that he accepted the money. He returned it after a fortnight or so. Many a time thereafter, he referred to my gesture as a great act in his friendly circles.

It was February 1943. Mahatma Gandhi resorted to a three-week long fast in jail for self-purification. We decided to organize prayer meetings and approached the Principal for holding our first assembly in the college hall. The Government of India had conferred on him the title of 'Sardar Bahadur' that every year through the New Year Day List of Honours. He acceded to our request but advised that the meeting be convened by the Student's Association recognised by the college. The Principal used to be its patron and as per rules only a fourth or sixth year student with a brilliant academic standing was eligible to seek election as its secretary. He also suggested that the meeting though to be conducted by the elected secretary could be chaired by any student. The Principal expressed his willingness to offer *ardas* seeking blessings of God for Gandhi Ji in that ordeal. Mubarak Singh proposed my name for chairing the assembly and I recollect that he praised me a lot while making that proposal which was seconded by a chorus of voices. I felt embarrassed and rose hesitatingly, because my dress was neither smart nor impressive. J.S. Wasu, the secretary looked condescendingly towards me. Quite unwittingly, instead of requesting the Principal to commence the *ardas*, he started congratulating him for having been conferred upon the title of 'Sardar Bahadur'. Mubarak Singh objected that it was not on the agenda and threatened to walk out. Slogans 'Mahatma Gandhi Zindabad' began to be raised by a section of students. Bhai Jodh Singh, who was ever admired for not losing his calm. protested against the interruption by Mubarak Singh holding that it went against the spirit of mutual understanding. The meeting was about

to end in confusion. I do not know when my awkwardness disappeared, from where I got a sudden confidence and how I found the wit to disapprove the conduct of a senior student and that of the head of institution, who had ignored the chair. I never witnessed my Principal so humble and graceful. His eyes reflected regrets, he removed his shoes, put a scarf around his neck and started offering *ardas* seeking blessings of the Almighty for Gandhi Ji. The meeting dispersed in a solemn atmosphere. A lifelong attachment developed between Bhai Jodh Singh and myself in spite of the awe which his personality commanded. Acquaintance with Mubarak Singh deepened into intellectual friendship. A sudden transformation was experienced by me. Previously whenever I rose to address a meeting, many a time my tongue faltered and my legs trembled. Thereafter I became an eloquent speaker.

Mubarak Singh secured 315 marks out of 600 in M.A. missing the coveted second class, which was then adjudged with a 55% score. He did not adopt college teaching as a career on principle, as his approval would have been conditional and thus inconsistent with his self-respect. I won scholarship in the F.Sc. examination which was confiscated for my having participated in the Quit India Movement. But I did not miss the distinction, because I happened to be the only student all over India, who was thus penalised. After my graduation from Khalsa College Amritsar in 1945, I joined M.A. (English) classes at S.D. College, Lahore because that was the only subject out of my combination of subjects at the B.A. level, which allowed me active participation in the freedom struggle without regular attendance. India got partitioned, before I could complete the M.A. studies. My teachers at S.D. College decided unanimously to condone rather overlook the shortage in my lecture attendance, because there was a lot of admiration for my political activities and their confidence in my ability to give a good account of myself. The examination could not be held due to the widespread riots. The dislocation in life which came in the wake of Partition

was so staggering that career plans of many of us got revised. I got second class in M.A. and joined Khalsa College Amritsar as Lecturer in English in October 1950. By that time I was married too and had a daughter. I shifted to Government Agricultural College Ludhiana as Assistant Professor of English four years thereafter.

It was the summer break of 1962. I had gone with the college cadets to attend a two-week NCC camp at Sabathu. On my return I learnt that messages through various sources had been received from Mubarak Singh desiring me to see him. He had taken over as Chairman, Ludhiana Improvement Trust. When I called upon him, after the exchange of pleasantries, he firmly told me that he wanted to allot me a plot in Shaheed Udham Singh Nagar, a locality which the Improvement Trust was developing and desired to know whether I would like 'a plot' or 'the plot'. When I told him that I did not understand the complication of the articles 'a' and 'the', he clarified that a corner plot was normally called 'the plot' for its being in greater demand than the others. He went on to add that a 54' x 100' plot measuring 600 square yards would cost Rs. 8400/-, if the price was deposited in a single lot and about ten thousand if paid through six biannual installments provided one third thereof was paid in advance. When I expressed my inability to enter the transaction, he sought to know my pay, which was Rs. 470.00 per month in spite of my being a class II teacher with eight years service. He also found out that I got Rs. 50.00 as honourarium for being a NCC Officer for nine months in a year. He firmly laid down that thereafter the NCC honorarium, camp pay and remuneration for doing university work would constitute a half-yearly instalment and one third of the price enjoined to be deposited with the application as advance would be managed by me by taking refundable advance from my G.P.F. and the permissible loan from LIC against my two policies. A plot was allotted there and then. After the registration of sale deed, he even advanced a loan of Rs. ten thousand to me from the Trust to start construction. Wordly

unwise, as I had been, I did not start construction of the house and refunded the first instalment of loan with penal interest.

It was twenty years thereafter that I undertook the construction with the retirement benefits, which I got in the form of CPF, Gratuity and Leave Encashment. My colleagues, who had been jeering at me during 1962-63 for wasting my money on the purchase of a plot in sandy mounds, started dinning into my ears that the plot could easily be sold for 4 lakhs or so, a bulk of which amount would not be mentioned in the sale deed. Those worldly wise persons stressed that with that amount I could not only purchase a new plot in any developing locality and build a nice house there, but also save a substantial sum for comfortable living. But the mention of black money was repulsive to me and I felt that by succumbing to the temptation, I would not only be guilty of indulging into what I had been disapproving all through, but taint also my sacred association with Mubarak Singh, who while signing the sale deed on behalf of Improvement Trust, Ludhiana remarked 'My pleasure knows no bounds, when I can be of some help to a freedom fighter'.

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XI

Motherhood

Prof. Hazara Singh

After attending the evening classes at the then Panjab University Law College, Jalandhar, I caught train for back-journey home. The engine whistled. Just then a woman, holding firmly a child clinging to her left shoulder and dragging a lad of about five, rushed into the compartment. A man, imploring her to accompany him home, followed. The nearby passengers began to watch intently as to how they resolved their conjugal discord. She was asserting that her father would seek the assembly of elders of tribe to settle their separation. The bewildered lad, unnoticed by the mother, shifted towards his father to indicate his yearning for reconciliation between his estranged parents. The train moved and before it could pick up speed, the man lifted his son briskly and placed him out safely on the platform, instructing him to run back to their camping site. The mother protested vehemently. A few passengers remonstrated him for endangering the life of lad. He said in an assuring tone that the children of acrobats inherited the instinct to overcome minor risks. In no time the defiant wife got deflated to a helpless mother. The next stoppage, Jalandhar Cantt, was nearing. He offered to hold the other child. She accepted submissively and rose to get down with him as the train stopped. The earlier apologetic husband beamed with a triumphant smile.

Affection emanating from motherhood is not confined to human beings alone. The manner in which even the beasts of burden display this instinct makes the homo sapiens - the supreme among His Creation - feel quite small.

The masons engaged by me needed some construction material urgently. I went to the nearest stall and got the purchases loaded on a cart. The driver deployed all the methods ; coaxing, shouting and

whipping, to make the harnessed mare move. The more the mare resisted, greater grew the fury of its master. Spectators started swelling in number hurling various suggestions at the fuming driver, but none of them seemed to work. The man and the beast seemed to have reached the peak of desperation. The cart could turtle at any moment. A boy rushed to the place shouting, 'Father, stop it. I will make the mare move'. He untied a filly from a nearby tether and started running with it ahead of the mare, which to the surprise of everybody gave up resistance and followed readily the filly and the boy. As soon as it got on the road and assumed trotting, the boy withdrew dragging the filly back to the yard. The one-way traffic on the congested road and the constant thrashing by its master kept the mare on the move. The filly neighed helplessly. The boy was gleeful. The motherhood in the mare stood outwitted.

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XII

Bleeding Soul of the Punjab

Prof. Hazara Singh

It was the afternoon of February 20, 1987 and I was travelling by bus from Chandigarh to Amritsar. As we were approaching Dhilwan, many car drivers coming from the opposite side were found to be giving signals. On enquiry from our bus driver we learnt that it was being communicated that the road ahead was blocked. On reaching the railway bridge near Dhilwan we found scores of buses and trucks parked. The tractor trollies were adding to the confusion.

It was gathered that about a dozen boys and girls were squatting on the road protesting that the police was not giving information about the whereabouts of the youth picked up from their homes by the former during raids on previous night. The protesters were receiving a tacit support from public, because there was a general apprehension that the police instead of producing the arrested before a court might resort to exterminate them in fake encounters. Their suspicion had been strengthened by the fact that the names of the hauled-up had not been entered in the diary of the concerned police station. There was no evidence that the *dharna* which started at about eleven would be lifted even by late evening. The police was present on the spot in a large number but seemed to be a passive spectator. The range of vehicles getting stopped, was gradually expanding from Beas towards Rayya and from Dhilwan towards Subhanpur. Fortunately, it was not summer. But even then by afternoon children began to cry, women started getting panicky and the men had no other option but to fret and frown. The hawkers had the best of day. The rates of their fare, however inferior began to soar. Inwardly they were happy and seemed to wish that such *dharnas* got enacted more frequently.

A few women were referring in a pathetic tone to the bleeding soul of Punjab. They were lamenting that a mother took about twenty years to rear a son to a youngman of her dreams, while the police took hardly twenty minutes to dash her hopes to ground.

By late evening a welcome group of persons appeared at the scene. The inhabitants of the neighbouring villages started cooking meals in the gurdwaras and served *langar* in the buses to all the passengers. It was also announced that milk would be provided to children and the arrangements for the night stay of women passengers would be made.

A few non-Punjabis among the passengers, who appeared to be visibly shaken during the day were the most relaxed despite the nearing sunset. They were observing that had such a blockade been caused in their state, the *chapaties* would be selling at exorbitant rates, and even water, the free gift of nature, would have been served on caste considerations.

As it grew dark, police decided to take action. After firing a few shots in the air they resorted to a mild lathicharge chasing off the squatters. In their belated unusual enthusiasm they even hit the spectators, which included a few bus drivers and conductors.

Suddenly another section of the state administration i.e. the transport workers resorted to showing their mettle. They started raising slogans 'Punjab Police murdabad', 'Punjab Sarkar Hai Hai', 'Buses shall not be moved'. After some excitement the transport workers seemed to have realized that as the night would get darker and colder, their resolve might get weaker. Then the buses started moving. I counted the number of vehicles crossing that of mine. It was more than two hundred.

During that suspense I reminisced the Punjab situation in a more realistic manner than I had heard at seminars by academicians. A state which after the advent of green revolution was projected to

overtake the developed countries had rather been pushed back by two generations by extraneous political moves.

XIII

Still in Eighteenth Century

Prof. Hazara Singh

The part-time gardener working at my place informed that he would be going to his village for six weeks to marry off his granddaughter, a lass hardly nine. The groom, about ten years old, assisted his parents as casual labourer at his native place.

I was shocked to learn this and did my best to impress on him that to arrange the marriage of a girl below eighteen and of a boy not yet twenty was illegal and ripe with dire consequences. The gardenor turned a deaf ear to my persistent persuasion and was adamant to stick to the age-old custom of his caste. His main argument was that his ancestors had not been fools who prescribed such customs and his defence was that he would not like to face ridicule and even excommunication by his caste for not adhering to them. He stressed that *gona* i.e. formal conjugal life of spouses would take place after ten to eleven years and by that time legal requirements of age, if any, would get fulfilled.

Our maid servant, who belongs to a scheduled caste family hailing from western U.P., entered into argument with the gardener, a native of district Faisabad in eastern U.P., as to what would happen if either of the bride and bridegroom developed fancy for another person during the period intervening child marriage and *gona*. The gardener observed contemptuously that such waywardness was committed by those only, who were sent to school. He became philosophical while stating that if any of the spouses died before *gona*, that was God's Will, where human beings were helpless. It was gathered further that while the widower in such a case could remarry but the child widow was doomed to forced spinsterhood so that she did not cast ill luck on any other man.

Before leaving that evening the gardener registered a mild protest that the maid servant should not have been given so much liberty. He was at a loss to understand as to why the low caste people were allowed in Punjab to enter home and hearth, whereas in his part they had to remove even their footwear before being admitted to the courtyards of the upper castes.

Such marriage customs and humiliating restrictions on domestic workers are not an exception but a customary code in many parts of Hindi belt despite the progressive legislations, rendered dead letters like many other socio-economic policies of State. By the way, this child marriage came to notice while we were celebrating the International Year of the Girl child with all the fanfare of media. It took place in a state which claims to own seven out of the nine prime ministers of the Republic of India during fifty years after independence. The custom is raging in the region which has been getting the foremost consideration of many a political party for raising structures resurrecting our ancient heritage.

How farcical is our slogan to gatecrash into modern era by the dawn of Twenty First Century, while large chunks of our society are still caught in the cob-web of eighteenth century beliefs.

XIV

A Single Wish

Prof. Hazara Singh

There had been an aged couple with a married son to look after them. The old man remained confined to bed mostly due to this or that ailment. His wife was blind and depended on her daughter-in-law in all respects. For worsening the situation she had a nagging tongue and often taunted her daughter-in-law for not having given birth to any child in spite of her conjugal span exceeding two years. She often recounted her achievement that the son was born to her just nine months after the marriage. She further stressed that she would have delivered more offspring, if she had not decided otherwise for having lost eyesight due to her eyes often getting sore.

The son was a hardworking casual labourer, obedient to parents and attached to his equally diligent and cooperative wife. She never complained but her husband could gauge that she covered her distress through her sad eyes.

One evening the hearth fire was not lit as there was nothing at home to be cooked. The old man created more than his usual nuisance. The blind mother, not being able to bear her hunger, protested that the daughter-in-law might have fed herself, otherwise she would not have been lying unconcerned on her bed as her old useless husband was telling her.

The silent suffering of his wife moved the young man more than the clamour of his parents. He pondered over the worsening domestic situation and cursing himself for his helplessness resolved to put an end to his life.

Next morning he left quite early. Every one thought that he had gone in search of work. He walked to a nearby fast-flowing

deep stream. He had been there many a time with his father while he was a lad. His father would wash and swim advising him to keep playing under a nearby tree. He was about to jump into the stream with an intention to be drowned to death, when a voice came from above :

‘Stop. There is a way out’.

He looked around. No body was there. He heard again :

‘Go back. Consult your family members. Any single wish of you all shall be granted. Come tomorrow with that wish’.

He rushed back home and narrated the happening in an excited tone. His parents forgot about the hunger. The father cried :

‘Ask for the restoration of my health, so that I may assist you in supplementing the family earning’.

The mother yelled :

‘No. I know about his earning capacity’.

She coaxed her son :

‘Seek my eyesight, so that I may supervise as well as lend a helping hand in home-keeping’.

His wife whispered :

‘Ask for a son, so that he may cheer us now and look after us in our old age’.

The young man thought over the suggestions. Neither the restoration of health of his father, nor getting back the eyesight of his mother and nor the birth of a son could bring prosperity and domestic peace. The next morning he returned to the tree on the bank of stream and silently invoked the voice which had addressed him yesterday. Much to his delight he heard :

‘Have you chosen your wish’?

The young man implored :

‘My healthy parents wish to see a grandson born with a silver spoon in his mouth’.

There was an appreciative laugh and assurance :

‘Your wit carries the day’.

The young man returned home, calm and self-confident. He found an employer waiting for him with a lucrative offer and handsome advance. His wife also got part-time remunerative work. His mother responded to the eye treatment in a nearby free dispensary. His father started moving about as his diet got improved. The house was rebuilt with added space and suitably furnished. After a year the daughter-in-law gave birth to a lovely son, with peace and prosperity reigning at home.