Journey to nowhere

Caught on the wrong side of the divide at the partition of India, Malwinder Jit Singh Waraich's father and brother were killed as the family attempted a perilous 20-mile walk to relative safety.

British rule in India lasted in various forms for some 200 years until 1947, when Mohandas Gandhi succeeded in persuading the British government to grant India its independence. Muslims in some parts of the country had long been campaigning for an independent Muslim state, and this too became a reality in 1947: with independence came the partition of the sub-continent into the predominantly Hindu country of India and the predominantly Muslim Pakistan. The boundaries of these two nations were intended to reflect the religious distribution of the population but inevitably many people found themselves on the 'wrong' side of the border, resulting in the largest human migration in history as millions were displaced in both directions across the new borders — in all some 6 million Muslims crossed into Pakistan and some 4.5 million Hindus and Sikhs into India. More than half a million people were killed during the migration, most of them through sectarian violence rather than the other attendant dangers of disease, floods, hunger, thirst, and exposure.

Among the millions caught on the wrong side of the divide were 17 plus year-old plus 2 science student Malwinder Jit Singh Waraich and his family — Sikhs who lived in the village of Ladhewala Waraich, about 5 miles outside the city of Gujranwala in the Punjab. 'Gujranwala stood every chance of inclusion in Pakistan by virtue of both being predominantly Muslim as also being geographically proximate to Lahore, the heart of newly-born "West Punjab",' states Malwinder. 'However, all kinds of rumours and wishful thinking abounded among the non-Muslims that our area may "go" to India.' But even after it was confirmed that Gujranwala would become part of Pakistan, what Malwinder calls 'the gloomy prospects of having to emigrate from our ancestral abodes' seemed remote to most non-Muslims, because accepted thinking among Hindus and Sikhs was: 'Rulers have changed in the past, but the ruled have never. We have heard that rulers change but we have never heard that in such and such a country at such and such time the inhabitants did also change!'

However, as 14th August 1947 approached, with independence and partition scheduled for midnight that night, tension began to mount and people's worst fears of extreme violence were realised. 'There were killings on a large scale in Rawalpindi (now Islamabad). Lahore became a fertile ground for group clashes and individual killings mostly by stabbing. Amritsar, where both the rivals were more or less evenly placed, held the unenviable distinction of the maximum of damage to life and property. In one incident a train was stopped by pulling the emergency chain while it was passing through the Muslim locality of Sharifpura (which, ironically, means 'the abode of the gentle') in Amritsar, followed by a mass assault on Hindu-Sikh passengers by a crowd of dagger-wielding marauders. "Tit for tat" became the maxim avowedly professed on both sides, with no holds barred.

Despite the increasing violence across the region as a whole, the village of Ladhewala Waraich remained peaceful, and good relations across the religious divide were seemingly confirmed when Malwinder's father Bhag Singh though a Sikh, was chosen to unfurl the new Pakistani flag at a village level ceremony to celebrate the creation of the Muslim state. But the goodwill did not last and just ten days after partition Malwinder, his family,

and hundreds of other non-Muslim villagers were forced to leave their homes. News of gruesome atrocities committed elsewhere in the region, coupled with half-baked rumours of impending attacks by non-Muslims, led to the demonisation of the minority Hindu and Sikh population — something that Malwinder later discovered was happening in reverse on the other side of the border: 'When we came to India we learnt that identical rumours were floated here also, with Sikh attackers substituted by Muslims.'

On 23rd August, after mounting tension during which his father had to negotiate with the Muslim villagers to prevent a massacre of Hindus and Sikhs, he was ordered to surrender his licensed firearms at the local police station — an order that he disobeyed because it would leave him with no means of defending his family. 'The message was loud and clear,' recalls Malwinder. 'We had no place in Pakistan.' His family and some 300 other non-Muslims left Ladhewala Waraich 36 hours later, having spent the next day winding up their affairs, packing whatever possessions they would be able to carry, and depositing the rest of their belongings with trusted Muslims in the hope that they would eventually be able to return home. 'It was a day of taking momentous decisions, making once in a lifetime decisions. The lurking pangs of impending displacement were compounded by very tangible and palpable fears staring us all in the face.'

The biggest of those momentous decisions was where to go. There was a refugee camp in Gujranwala, only a few miles away, but it was considered too dangerous to make that short journey: 'The metalled road to the city swarmed with hostiles on the prowl ready to pounce upon their victims. The only other option was the trackless track through the fields; walking trails that would enable us to reach a camp at a Gurudwara called 'Sacha Sauda', around 20 miles away. Only a few among our co-villagers had traversed through this route to visit their relatives in that area, on foot or on horse- or camel-back. For us rest all it would be like moving in a dark alley, or an endless tunnel.'

So the decision was made to head for Gurudwara, and at dawn on 25th August the refugees gathered on the south side of the village to begin their journey. 'We started assembling in the village playground, from where the track would bear the load of our steps, each one being too heavy. Many of our Muslim neighbours were there to see us off and wish us well, embracing equals, patting youngers and bowing to the elderly. I can vividly recall one of my student friends, a staunch proponent of Pakistan, clutching at the shoulders of my elder brother while loudly wailing in anguish.'

Having said their farewells, the refugees sadly left Ladhewala Waraich for the last time. 'We were walking at a snail's pace, since the crowd consisted of around 300-odd souls, including the elderly, infirm, and infants. I particularly remember a fellow-villager who was walking along with his cycle, bearing a new-born baby along with its mother, both seated on the carrier-saddle of the cycle. There was little talk. Most of the sparse communication was through exchange of dumb look, vacant eyes, proclaiming danger, fears looming large with no destination tangible enough to act as a magnet to galvanise our pace of walking.'

Another reason that the crowd of refugees moved so slowly was that they were overloaded with whatever possessions they could carry, although many had found alternative means of transporting their belongings 'Some of the farmers had their own camels, which were ideal for the purpose. A resourceful few hired or purchased an odd donkey to carry the all

important retrievables. Loads carried in person had to be in resonance with the weapons to be borne for safety. I was carrying my father's 12-bore single-barrel licensed shotgun, and his revolver was tucked below my shirt in the loose sheet-like *dhoti* commonly sported by us villagers. The rifle was with my elder brother, an army officer who had served in World War II. Almost every adult was carrying some weapon or another. Among the assortment there were axes, swords known as *kirpans*, spear-like weapons called *ballams*, and bamboo sticks known as *lathis.* A few among us were wearing steel armour under their shirts, which they had improvised in the wake of bloody events.

It wasn't long before the need for arms and armour became apparent: 'We had hardly walked a couple of miles when we came across some prowlers in threatening postures, firing with primitive improvised devices obviously to scare us. We could see no purpose in their sporadic forays, which could not actually harm us since we were apparently better armed. However, as we learnt later, there was a method in their madness.'

Malwinder learned later that the seemingly ineffective gunfire was part of a wider plan by troublemakers from outside the locale, and was intended to provoke the inhabitants of the next village into attacking the refugees. The plan worked, and a few miles further on, as the refugees approached the village of Qila Mihan Singh (the first settlement on their journey), they came under heavier and more effective fire from the villager, splitting the crowd in two and preventing them from approaching further. I happened to be in the rear group along with my two younger brothers, whereas my parents, elder brother, and a few other leading families — along with baggage-laden animals — were further ahead, close to the sugarcane fields near the village. The miscreants who had fired on us earlier, lacking the requisite firepower, dared not assault the forward group. Hence they started assaulting the softer target. Driven by survival instinct I managed to escape the loose dragnet and joined the forward group. Once I joined my parents and elder brother and disclosed to them that the two younger ones may have met their end, my father said that none of us was going to survive the day.'

Suddenly the shooting from the village side stopped, and soon afterwards the original attackers offered the refugees a deal: 'We were asked to hand over our firearms (our only defence) to them and they would lift the siege. So we did. But the moment we were at their mercy, they proclaimed: "Now is the time to avenge the killings at Amritsar etc. by Sikhs." Again driven by survival instinct I entered the adjoining sugarcane field, lying there on my abdomen to cover from fire. After a while I heard sounds of some movement and instinctively asked, "Who is it?" It was my brother, who signalled me to keep mum, so as not to attract an attack. In the meantime a young Sikh boy, a bit younger than me, came and joined us and told us that our mother had been assaulted. I ventured to imagine that if they are not sparing even women really none of us would survive to see the evening of 25th August.'

But, despite his fears, Malwinder, his brother and several others managed to crawl through the sugarcane and escape. 'When I went out of the thick grown fields into the open, there was no-one to pursue me as I had feared. In fact no-one followed any of us. The reason was very prosaic — the greed of looting our baggage left behind. We were moving cautiously towards the next village when a Muslim boy beckoned to us and said that he could give us shelter. Then he changed his mind regarding the place to shelter us and asked me and my brother to wait till he came back after locating a safer place. The

moment he left, we two brothers decided to part, for the simple rule of survival — that if together, both may be killed; if separated one of us may survive. I volunteered to go to the adjacent village that I had been to before, called Khabbe Ke, where I knew a Muslim family.' Malwinder left quickly, but the brothers' suspicions were to prove unfounded: I was told later that our rescuer returned soon after I left and was desperate to locate me. The Muslim boy was responsible for saving my brother besides two three other youngsters.'

Meanwhile, Malwinder continued his flight, totally alone after being separated from the rest of the family and now from his brother. 'The moment I got near to Khabbe Ke, where I was to seek refuge, I heard a drum beat there, which was a signal for danger and mobilization for attack or so-called defence. At once my bones fell cold — I had escaped from the previous attack because the victims were numerous, but here I was a single prey to many prowlers.' Malwinder was terrified, but his luck was in because the drum beat was summoning the inhabitants to respond to a threat from the other side of the village: 'This mobilization was the boon for me since all the potential marauders had been sucked out to the western side whereas I was on the eastern side. I approached an old man standing near the first well, and begged for mercy. He locked me inside the cattle shed at my request.'

Later that afternoon, from his hideout, Malwinder heard voices discussing the killings that had taken place in Qila Mihan Singh that morning. He recognised one of the voices as the head of the family he had been seeking, and came out of his hiding place to an emotional greeting. 'My acquaintance showered all his affection on me and felt grieved at our tragedy. Till then I was in the dark as to the outcome of the attack but he told me that a few Hindu and Sikh families [in Qila Mihan Singh] were looking after the injured.' Malwinder was desperate to rejoin his family but, he says, I could not gather courage to proceed alone even after this assurance, and I requested my acquaintance to accompany me, to which request he readily agreed.'

When Malwinder finally made it back to Qila Mihan Singh, there was terrible news awaiting him: 'My father and our youngest brother had been killed, and my younger brother grievously injured. Mother escaped with only a minor injury on her right hand when she tried to ward off the single blow aimed at her.' In all, twenty-six of the refugees had been killed and twenty-six more seriously injured (all of whom survived their injuries), but the situation had changed completely since that morning — the villagers who had shot at the refugees to prevent their approach were now offering them protection. It transpired that the troublemakers who had launched the initial attack had sent a false message to the inhabitants of Qila Mihan Singh that a group of armed Sikhs was about to attack their homes. Malwinder now learned that as the refugees had approached the village, 'Someone saw us with his binoculars, some of us with guns and rifles, and they heard the gunfire (being fired at us) and thus swallowed the bait. One or two of them had brought their guns, positioned themselves behind cover and opened fire, which stopped at our approach perhaps, when they saw that there were women and children, they quietly withdrew.'

It is noteworthy that the village headman, the *Lambardar* of Qila Mihan Singh went to the police station at Qila Didar Singh to file an F.I.R., which he was obliged to do as per law. However, he was scornfully laughed at by the policemen on duty for his naivety.

The surviving refugees stayed in Qila Mihan Singh for a few days before setting out for a new-destination —the refugee camp in Gujranwala that they had originally rejected because they considered the journey to be too dangerous. This time, though, they had military transport, and the perilous journey that had begun on foot ended with a truck ride in the opposite direction. When the refugees reached the camp, Malwinder found himself in familiar surroundings: 'After 4-5 days' stay in the village, our relatives who were in the camp at Gujranwala sent a rescue party on a military vehicle to transport us there. Ironically the camp was located in my *alma mater*, Khalsa High School, from where I had matriculated in 1945. Indeed, we were put up in the classroom in which I had sat for one year in my 8th class.'

(Qila Mihan Singh village was south west of Malwinder's village Khabbe Ke village was west of Qila Mihan Singh

All these villages are west of Gujranwala, now also a famous city of Pakistan.)

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