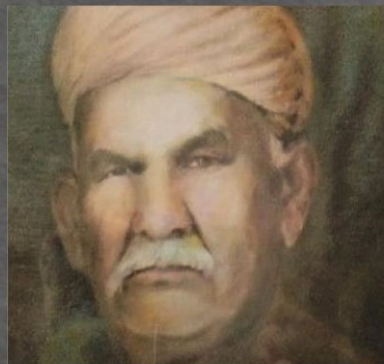


India Before Independence



memories

Editors

Subodh Mathur | Sfoorti Mathur

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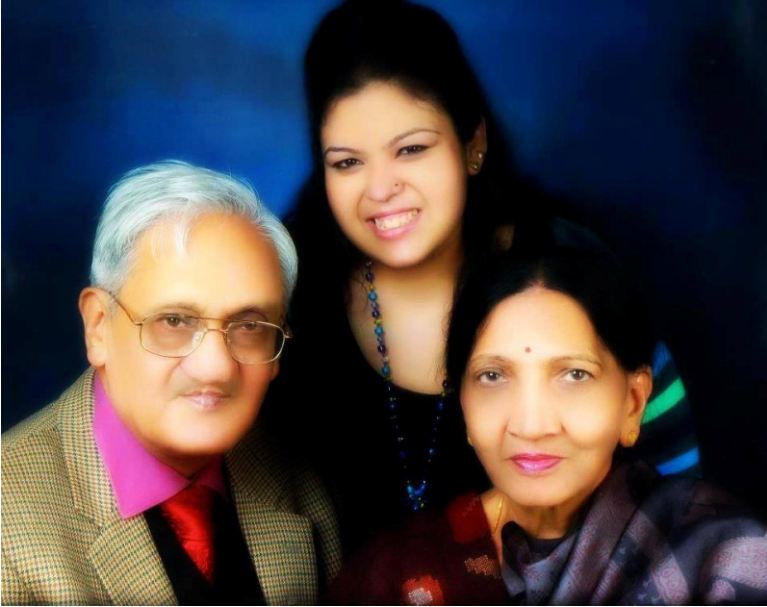
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*Pre-Independence India
memories*

Editors

Subodh Mathur | Sfoorti Mathur

P C Mathur: A Recognition



P C Mathur, his daughter Sfoorti, and his wife Shashi. Jaipur.

Bhai Saheb. Respected older brother. That's what we, his siblings (and our wives) began to call him – he was the oldest – as we settled into our jobs. (When we were younger, in a fit of modernity, we called him by his family nickname Titi). Because he had truly earned our respect by showing us the path to success by the type of person he was. Erudite, loving, gentle, generous.

His cleftpalate and cleft lip birth defects did hold him back – but not much. It was difficult to understand what he was saying. But, still, 'PC', as his colleagues called him, talked often to professors in many of Rajasthan University's academic departments. They learned to understand him because they knew he had something to offer– even outside his own field of study.

Even foreign students and professors who came to Jaipur made the effort to listen to his oral treatises, and kept in touch with him over the years. And he had the ear of the foreign professors who met him in England and USA.

Local senior students and younger faculty kept coming to him for ideas and guidance long after he officially retired from the University. And he continued to be an invited speaker at academic conferences all over India.

None of us knows how Shashi, Bhabhiji for us, managed to understand him right from the start. What we do know is that she travelled the journey with him, and she continues to be the anchor for the extended family.

His forceful voice is gone. But, the family continues to be guided by the example he set for us.

Introduction

This is a collection of true stories related to the lives of people before India became independent in 1947. In a few stories the narrative continues beyond India's independence. There are 31 contributing authors. They are Indians from different parts of India, Britishers, and one Pakistani.

The stories are based on the memories of the authors, which we know are sometimes fuzzy and selective. Some of the memories are about national events, some are personal remembrances, and some are mini biographies.

The purpose of collecting the stories in this book is to convey a sense of life as it happened during the pre-Independence years. We hope older readers will find the book nostalgic, while younger ones will enjoy the personalized narrative of history.

The stories originally appeared on www.indiaofthepast.org. There are many more pre-Independence and post-Independence stories on this website.

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The Day India Won Freedom



R C Mody

R C Mody is a postgraduate in Economics and a Certificated Associate of the Indian Institute of Bankers. He studied at Raj Rishi College (Alwar), Agra College (Agra), and Forman Christian College (Lahore). For over 35 years, he worked for the Reserve Bank of India, where he headed several all-India departments, and was also Principal of the RBI Staff College. Now (2019) he is approaching his 93rd year, engaged in social work, reading, and writing. He lives in New Delhi with his wife. His email address is rameshcmody@gmail.com

The Day India Won Freedom

This story contains seven photographs of 15 August 1947 released by the Government of India in 2007 without any captions. The author has written the captions included here.

India would be independent one day. This was the fond hope, in fact a dream, with which most Indians of my generation grew up. But this dream kept on eluding us. Every time freedom appeared to be close in the 1930s and early 1940s, there would be a setback, with the British throwing back the leaders of the Independence movement back into jail. And then for long, nothing would be heard about it. The cynics would say, “The British will never leave India.”

When World War II ended in 1945, it seemed that the British had finally decided to leave. There was only one lone protestor in Britain, Winston Churchill, who was ignored by the new British Government formed at the end of the war.

But now some of our own people would not let them go. The Muslim League, which claimed to represent over 20% of us, insisted that the British should partition the country before they left. The League's claim was backed by violence on an unprecedented scale. The idea of breaking-up India initially horrified the vast majority of Indians. But, gradually, people accepted partition as the price of getting the British out.

The historic announcement that India would be free but partitioned came on June 3rd, 1947. The actual date of the transfer of power, the 15th of August, was announced a few days later.

I was a student at Lahore, awaiting my final University examination. To escape the communal strife that had gripped Lahore, I had gone to stay for some time with my uncle in a nearby canal colony. It was there that I heard the radio broadcast on June 3rd. Mohammed Ali, my uncle's orderly, was by my side. When he heard of the partition, he shrieked, and said woefully, “*Sahib, mulk ka batwara nahin hona chahiye* (Sir, the country should not be split).”

Within days, I went back to Lahore. I found out that our examinations had been postponed indefinitely. The college authorities asked all the students staying in the college hostels, like me, to leave and return after the 15th of August on a date that would be announced in due course. I decided to go back to Alwar, my hometown, some 400 miles away.

I locked my belongings in my hostel room number 14. I had no doubt that I would be back there within a few months!

Then, it did not matter to me whether Lahore would be in India or Pakistan. I was simply under the spell of the approaching freedom, even at the cost of the partition. In any case, I believed, as did many others I knew, that the communal unrest would soon fade away, and life would return to normal.

The weeks that followed were packed with swift developments, hopes and excitement. The vast framework of an Empire assiduously built over more than 200 years was to be dismantled within just two months. Every day, the newspapers and radio (there was no TV then) brought some exciting news: passage of Indian Independence Bill by the British Parliament, the time table for the departure of British troops from the Indian soil, the shape and colours of the flag to be adopted by the emerging nation, the names of the members of the national government that would assume power on the appointed day. (By now, these leaders have all passed into history, with Jaggivan Ram and C.H. Bhabha, the youngest of the lot, being the last to depart).

As Independence Day came nearer, I made plans with my family to be in Delhi to experience first-hand the thrill for which we had been waiting so many years.

Travel from Alwar to Delhi had been disrupted by the riots that had broken out. Nevertheless, we managed to reach Delhi by train late in the evening of 14th August. The city looked fully dressed for possibly the greatest event in its 900 years of recorded history. The illuminations at the Delhi railway station and around dazzled us. A giant wheel illuminated by blue lights, replicating the Ashoka chakra in the middle of the India's new flag, was revolving on the top of the railway station building. Though there was some tension in the air, it

appeared that people had for the time being set aside their fears and apprehensions in order to celebrate with full gusto an occasion that comes only once in the life of a nation.

By the time we reached Delhi railway station, it was too late for us to move into the city. We decided to spend the night at the railway station, and were lucky enough to get a place in the retiring rooms. (A few months later we learnt that Mahatma Gandhi's assassins spent a night in the same retiring room when they reached Delhi to kill him in January 1948).

We had no access to a radio set that night, and missed listening to Jawaharlal Nehru's famous 'Tryst with Destiny' speech and to the proceedings in the Constituent Assembly, heralding the advent of freedom at midnight.

The first thing we did after waking up next morning was to confirm that India had really become free last night! This was easy. The railway platform was strewn with morning editions of all the daily newspapers, which had banner headlines conveying the great tidings. On all front pages appeared a message of greetings from the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee to his Indian counterpart, Nehru, wishing India, "*a future greater than her past*".

Now we had to decide where to go to witness the great occasion. No one could tell us what the day's programmes were going to be. We took a snap decision, which turned out to be the right one, to rush to Great Place (now Vijay Chowk) at the foot of the Raisina Hill. It was a long distance to cover by tonga, the only vehicle those days. Enrouté, we saw the city draped in tri-colour in various ways, including the colours of the saris worn by some women.

When we reached the Great Place, we saw, to our dismay, the British Union Jack still flying over North and South Blocks of the Secretariat and the Council Chamber (now Parliament House). There was a murmur of protest in the crowd. We heard someone say that India would have to wait for some months before the Indian flag replaced the Union Jack there.



The Indian Army's Standard and new India's national flag flying side by side from the colonnades of the Army Headquarters in South Block on the morning of 15 August 1947. The Indian flag had replaced the British Union Jack there a short while earlier.



Crowd with South Block behind it, before it became large. The writer and his family are a part of this crowd.

But, within minutes, amidst thunderous applause, some dhoti-clad men climbed up the minarets, pulled down the British flag, and replaced it by the national flag.

The dream had at last come true. Many eyes were moist. For my late father, it had yet another significance. Thirty-six years earlier, as an 11-year-old boy, he had seen King George V and Queen Mary crowned as India's sovereigns in this very city. For him, history had taken a full turn.

A short while later, at around 10.00 am, a motorcade emerged from the Viceroy's House (re-named Government House that morning, and subsequently Rashtrapati Bhavan in 1950). It came down Raisina Hill, carrying the leaders of the new government, who had been sworn in a few minutes earlier, and other dignitaries to the Council Chamber, where the sovereign Parliament of independent India was to hold its inaugural session. The first limousine carried Jawaharlal Nehru, who waved and responded to the crowds with his characteristic zest. Then, one after another, we saw cars carrying Vallabhbai Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad and others.

Soon after the motorcade had passed, we witnessed the smart troopers of the Governor General's bodyguard (a 175 years old unit in existence since the time of Warren Hastings), on horsebacks, coming down the hill. Then came the ceremonial coach carrying Lord and Lady Mountbatten.



The ceremonial carriage carrying Lord and Lady Mountbatten emerged from Government House.



This is the same ceremonial Mountbatten carriage at a point between South Block (to the right) and North Block.



Crowd on the steps leading to Raisina Hill overlooking Great Place, which is Vijay Chowk now.



Crowd on Raisina Hill dispersing after the ceremonial carriage had passed.

This carriage descended the Raisina Hill and took a turn to the left towards the Council Chamber, where I was standing. The crowds spontaneously shouted “*Pandit* Mountbatten ki jai (Long live Pandit Mountbatten,” thus showing their awareness of his changed status from that of a representative of the British monarch to that of the head of the new Indian state, chosen for that position by representatives of the people of India.

Some people went up to the carriage and shook hands with Lord and Lady Mountbatten! This was clear evidence of the change that had taken place over night. The day before, no common man could dare go near the Viceroy in this manner. The spectacular procession ended, a short distance away, at the Council Chamber, where Mountbatten, as head of the new State, was to inaugurate the session of the Parliament. With this ended the ceremonies of the forenoon, and the crowd gradually dispersed.

In the evening, there was a function at the Princes Park (as the area around India Gate was then known). The event was billed as a “Flag Salutation” ceremony but I could never find out how it was expected to go. All that I now recollect is that there were scenes of uncontrollable enthusiasm and cheerful confusion all around. At some point, Lord and Lady Mountbatten arrived in the same ceremonial carriage.



Lord Mountbatten saluting the flag, with Lady Mountbatten and Prime Minister Nehru to his left.

And, then suddenly, 58 year young Jawaharlal Nehru emerged from nowhere. He ascended the pedestal at the back of the ceremonial carriage and from there made it run unceremoniously through the jostling crowds on the India Gate lawns, with Lord and Lady Mountbatten waving to the crowds, helplessly and cheerfully. There were no security guards around. To me, the event symbolized collapse of the Empire and emergence of democratic India.

The evening ended amidst a pleasant confusion, laughing and jumping of the crowds. Just before the crowds dispersed, there was a mild drizzle followed by sudden appearance of a rainbow in the sky. It was taken by all as a good omen; heavens, they felt, were blessing India on its independence.

The day thus came to an end. While retiring that night, awfully tired, I was fully aware that I had witnessed a great day that would be remembered by Indians for centuries to come. And yet I could not foresee that some half a century later, the event of this day would be chronicled the world over as one of the greatest of the millennium and one of the greatest in the history of Democracy.

Next morning, 16th August, the newspapers reported that Nehru would to address the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort in the

morning. I wish to tell the readers firmly that it is a travesty of history to believe that the first hoisting of the national flag at the Red Fort took place on 15th August 1947. In 1947, it took place on 16th August. Since the year 1948, it has been taking place on 15th August.

Since we were staying close to the Red Fort, we rushed to listen to Nehru's first public speech as India's Prime Minister. The crowds were not unmanageable, as many people had not found out about the event in time. Nehru appeared in a fawn coloured Jawahar jacket, not the formal white sherwani of the preceding day, indicating an air of informality. He unfurled the national flag, greeted the crowd with *Jai Hind* and spoke for about half an hour in a solemn measured tone.

I recollect two specific points of his address. He referred to Netaji Subhas Bose's dream to see the national flag unfurled at Red Fort. In a sad but firm voice, Nehru regretted that while the dream had come true, Netaji was not alive to see it. Perhaps it was Nehru's attempt to set at rest the doubt in the public mind during preceding two years whether Netaji was dead or alive. (The doubt persisted for decades even after Nehru's speech.)

In another observation, Nehru referred to India as a nation of 33 crores. I remember it sending a shiver down my spine; we were 45 crores till just two days ago.

For me, the Independence Day celebrations ended with this function at the Red Fort.

I met a number of my Lahore friends in the crowds on these two days. They told me their stories about how they managed to reach India in the turmoil. All were eagerly waiting to know on which side of the border their city would fall. The Radcliffe Award drawing the boundary line between India and Pakistan came a day or two later when I was still in Delhi.

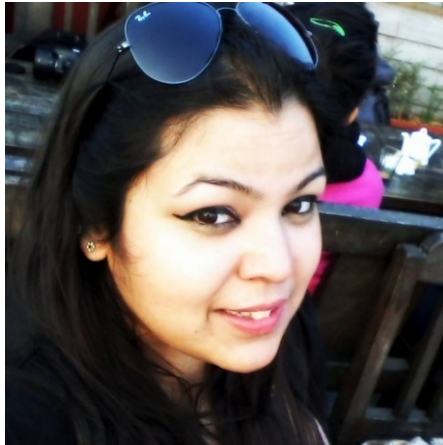
Lahore went to Pakistan. I still thought that I would get back there after a month or two.

I did go back, but after 52 years (in 1999)! And that too only for a week. I did go also up to room number 14 in my hostel. Of course, it did not bear my lock any more. But its occupant, my grandson's age, received me with warmth. He presented me a bundle of Urdu books, which, I felt, compensated me fully for the belongings that I had left behind over five decades ago.

Editors



Subodh Mathur is an economist. In his spare time, he is the creator & editor of www.indiaofthepast.org, where the stories in this book first appeared. He lives with his wife Anuradha Deolalikar in Washington, D.C



Sfoorti Mathur is a communication designer working with a variety of lifestyle brands. She enjoys cooking and travel photography. She lives in Jaipur with her mother Shashi, and pet Sushi.

This is a collection of true stories related to the lives of people before India became independent in 1947. In a few stories the narrative continues beyond India's independence. The stories are based on memories of authors, which we know are sometimes fuzzy and selective.

The purpose of collecting the stories in this book is to convey a sense of life as it happened during those years. So no story is about known political leaders or celebrities.

The collection includes stories of several families who were forced by the Partition of Punjab to move from what became Pakistan to India. There's one family that moved from India to Pakistan. However, the book does not have any story about the Partition itself.

These stories originally appeared on www.indiaofthepast.org. Longer versions of some of some of the stories are available on the website. The website has many more pre-independence and post-independence stories.

