My Experience Of India's Partition

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Surjit was brought up in many different places in India, went from Delhi University into the Indian Foreign Service, and subsequently joined her husband in academics, shuttling between India and the United States. Now a semi-retired professor with two grown-up sons, she lives with her Himalayan cat, music, books, and walks in Bethesda, Maryland, USA.

By early 1947, the British had realized that they could not stay on in India much longer and decided, as the eminent civil servant Penderel Moon put it, to "divide and quit." No one, perhaps not even the new Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, knew exactly what would happen and historians continue to argue over the causes of Partition. Its tragic and traumatic consequences for the Indian subcontinent remain obvious to this day.

My personal experience as a ten-year old child was neither tragic nor traumatic, but left me with vivid memories of those critical months that I can recount even to this day.

My mother and I had lived in the charming town of Dehra Dun (present day capital of Uttaranchal) since 1942 when my father went abroad with the Indian Medical Service. He was commanding a military hospital in Palestine in 1946-47 and had been home for the wedding of my sister to a cavalry officer in October 1946. My elder brother was studying at King Edward's Medical College in Lahore (in present-day Pakistan) but had fallen ill with typhoid and was sent home in March 1947. His local guardian in Lahore, Justice Teja Singh, who was appointed to the Boundary Commission in July 1947, wrote and advised my mother NOT to send her son back to medical school in Lahore when he recovered because "it looks as if the Punjab will be divided and we do not know if Lahore will go to India or Pakistan. Keep him safe with you in Dehra Dun." My other brother was a happy boarder at the Doon School.

My new brother-in-law gave me a beautiful cocker spaniel puppy that greatly enriched my life as a carefree child. I was vaguely aware of talk about rumblings in the town and the servant boy bringing back shoes and other small items of loot; now I know that governance had practically ceased. At the time my main preoccupation, other than playing with and trying to train the dog, was music practice on the sitar in preparation for the Independence Day recital our little group was scheduled to make on August 15th.

What I remember most vividly about that month was the heavy monsoon rain. Frequent exchanges of visits between my mother and our many, close, Muslim friends were too normal for my notice, and her real anxiety about her natal family in Kahuta (in present day Pakistan) also passed over my head. Only later did we come to know how many had been killed, and how excruciating was the passage of others as refugees across the newly drawn border.

Suddenly, one day my mother told us that my father had been posted back to India, to take command of a military hospital in Ranchi, summer capital of Bihar province and capital of present-day Jharkhand state. He had sent one of his young officers to escort us on the long train journey and we had to leave in three days! What a frenzy of packing and laundry ensued! The rain did not cease for even an hour, and ceiling fans were kept running at full speed to dry the bed sheets.

We left for the railway station one dark and wet evening, accompanied by an armed guard, and

settled into two first class compartments, one with four berths and one with two. Our party consisted of my mother, my elder sister and brother, myself, one young Sikh Captain, one strange gentleman introduced as a Mr. Saxena going overnight with us to Lucknow, a servant boy, my sister's black Labrador dog named Rollo and my black and white cocker spaniel named Caesar.

The train got off to a late start and proceeded slowly through the pouring rain. All the talk that evening was about the frightful killings that were taking place: movingly portrayed by Khushwant Singh in his classic *Mano Majra/Train into Pakistan*. Mr. Saxena deprecatingly bemoaned excess; the young Captain spoke of just retaliation; my dear mother tried to calm ruffled feathers.

At bedtime, my mother decreed that Mr. Saxena would remain with us, while the Sikh Captain and the dogs would go to the coupe, which had no communicating door with our compartment. I remember my own disappointment at losing my separate top berth and having to share it with my mother.

At Lucknow next morning, Mr. Saxena left us with reverential bows to my mother. But my sister turned on her in rage. "Why did you keep that strange man in our compartment?" she shouted. "What will I say to my husband? What will the Captain tell Daddy?"

My mother quietly sat all of us down and said, "His name is Mohammed Mustafa – not Mr. Saxena. We gave him a false Hindu identity, so that he could reach home safely." And turning to the Sikh Captain, she said, "I was sorry to put you out last night, but 'Mr. Saxena' was terrified of sharing a compartment with jus you. We know what is happening between Muslims and Sikhs." My mother also told us how she had not slept all night because she was watching 'Mr. Saxena' in the lower berth across from her, and saw his hand go to his gun every time the train stopped. She was praying that her children would remain safe from harm, and also, I am sure, that kind persons would help her own widowed mother and young siblings on what had suddenly become the blood drenched 'other side'.

Our journey continued, not without further incident. The rain stopped and the train picked up speed down the Ganges valley. It halted amid green fields and the boy took the dogs out. He jumped back on when the train suddenly started up but left the dogs loose! Emergency chains were pulled up and down the train to stop it. I will never forget the beautiful sight of big black Rollo and small black and white Caesar happily racing alongside our compartment in tandem, with tongues lolling and legs pounding against a bright green background of paddy fields. I do not remember what was said to the Guard when he came around to check their tickets. Not all my studies as historian have wiped out that lovely vivid image associated in my mind with Partition.

Would that more people had similarly pleasant memories of August-September 1947. As we know, trauma was the norm. Even I caught a glimpse of that in the peaceful and beautiful semi-hill station of Ranchi. My father was invited to visit the famous asylum for the mentally ill and, for logistical reasons perhaps, took my mother and me along. He stopped for some time in conversation with a distinguished looking lady in white, of princely lineage, and speaking in chaste Punjabi of her one hundred sons, each of whom had been killed before her eyes. Her large, dark, staring eyes haunt me still.

Epilogue

Quite a number of anthologies are now in print consisting of personal recollections, historical analyses, or fictional renderings of the experience of Partition drawn from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Conferences have been held on the subject. The intention behind such efforts is to heal the wounds through greater understanding. My hope too, sixty years later, is that there are many 'Mr. Saxenas' whose gratitude can help the healing process in the subcontinent. That is an imperative of the present day.❖