

FORTY KILOGRAMS

FORTY KILOGRAMS

& MEMORIES OF PANIPAT IN THE 1950

by

JK Luthra

Gindi Press, Ltd.

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PREFACE

This book took me five years to write, and five years to get published. I wanted to thank all those people who helped me but especially Bob, and Bill and Shiela and Tony. Without whose pizza, I never would have gained the 20 pounds that have over the last 6 months. Those pounds were my inspriation to sit and not go outside and instead lay in bed and think about this book.

It is during those times that I thought about more pizza and sometimes cake. And also all the good things my mother gave me when I was growing up in Panipat. Though at that time, there was no pizza there. For that I have to thank Bob and Bill and a bit of Tony who really introduced me to Pizza in the 70s long after I left Panipat.

While we were in England I thought I was going to be influenced by Charles who was an Oxford Man and had no time for pizza. Instead he insisted on feeding me things like Stilton cheese and fine port wine. That too was enjoyable but I gained no where enough weight to sit in my bed and contemplate writing and publishing. And so that plan was no good and I had to come to America to meet Bob and Bill and eventually Tony who really put the cap on everything.

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CHAPTER I

FORTY KILOGRAMS

The receptionist at the front desk was rolling her eyes and throwing up her free hand in the air, seemed frustrated, apparently from being screamed at by the person on the other end of the telephone line. She would have loved to hang up and before doing so would have surely told that fireball where to go and burn, in no uncertain terms, but could not for fear of losing her job, especially in these difficult times when many of her friends and family members were getting laid off with no prospect of getting another job. A small droplet was trying to make an appearance from the ever so slowly rising lake of tears in her left eye as she had hooked the telephone between her left ear and shoulder so that she could keep working on the computer partly to tune out the greyhound, who would become a poodle in the examination room in front of the doctor, and also to finish her day's work lest her off site manager presumed tardiness.

The line at the check in counter had gradually become five deep. The lean, partly balding man in well-ironed light blue shirt, grey pants and hurriedly polished shoes was at the head of the line. The shirt matched his unusually blue eyes which were highlighted by his white hair's backdrop. He had Indian features but with the fair skin and blue eyes he could easily pass for a Caucasian. His wrinkled forehead betrayed the

worries he was trying to hide with his twinkling eyes while making jokes with people behind him.

His keen sense of observing others in distress picked up the anguish the receptionist was experiencing. He pulled out a tissue from the Kleenex box for the receptionist to wipe away that droplet before it embarrassed her by spilling over her mascara in front of now 7 persons fidgeting to sign up and start the long wait before seeing the doctor for maximum five minutes. This was the first time he had come to the office and had never met the receptionist before. As much as he wanted to help her, just as he always would go out of his way to lend a helping hand for the needy, he folded the tissue into his palm as he was well aware of the strange laws of presumed sexual harassments in this new country. He used the outstretched hand to pick up the pen tied to a string and wrote his name in the sign-in sheet in a neat, straight handwriting—Prem Luthra.

He was quite content with the diagnosis from his family doctor in India but his son, Ashit, who is settled in New York, insisted “Papa, you must come and get a second opinion from Joan Harding Cancer Center, they are the best. Unexplained weight loss can sometimes be the first sign of a hidden cancer.”

Prem had come half an hour early, a childhood habit. He was never able to figure out the origin of this reflex. No matter where he had to go, the alarm clock was set hours before the departure, check lists were made, a series of questions had been prepared and revised till he was satisfied that every possible situation had been considered, mentally solved and put on legal sized paper in neat double spaced lines. Before taking the final step out of the house every item had to be checked and marked off.

The fancy waiting room filled with leather chairs, high definition television, coffee with assortment of cookies on one hand made him relaxed and confident that the doctor must be considerate and compassionate while on the other hand might be very expensive. After all, the customer pays all the bills. Having no insurance was also playing

on his mind and was one of the reasons he would rather let the unexplained weight loss play out its course than bankrupt his hard working son who had a wife and two children to support. Ashit had again refuted the argument by saying “Papa, remember, you used to forego all the pleasures of your life so I could have everything I wanted, needed or not. You never said no, not once. It is my turn to pay back, especially when we feel guilty leaving you and Mummy behind in India, alone.”

Over the last year or so he had noticed a gradual decline in his weight. It used to be steady 40 Kilograms in his college days and for a few years after. And then he got married. The excellent cooking and company of his wife made him eat more in quantity and regularly. The cheeks as well as the abdomen puffed up reflecting prosperity in happiness and wealth.

Unlike his other siblings, who all went on to professional colleges due to the determination of their father, he had chosen the path of getting a job selling radios and parts. He had no interest in pursuing further studies in the two professions commonly talked about...medicine or engineering. When someone would ask him “Beta, what are going to do when you grow up?” his standard answer, partly true and partly to get them off his back, he would say “I want to do business.”

At that time he was old enough to see and feel the stress his father, addressed as Pita Ji, was going through from raising and educating eight children single handedly. That number is daunting in itself and to top that the hardships had multiplied due to the unforeseen partition of the country resulting in loss of the home and steady income from farming in Khanewal, India which all of a sudden was now named Pakistan.

In May, 1947 the family had come to a hill station called Sabathu, 20 miles south of Shimla, where Pitaji had purchased a summer vacation home in early part of 1947. In August, 1947 the country got divided based on the religion with Muslims claiming Pakistan whose boundary was decided by a line arbitrarily drawn by an English bureaucrat. Unfortunately their ancestral home and part of the country where several generations had lived was suddenly not their home any more. Sad as

it was but they were blessed that unlike the 12-18 million people who migrated on both sides and about 1.5 millions were massacred trying to do so, they already had at least a roof on their heads and they were safe and all together.

Prem had frank discussions with his father resulting in the decision to supplement Pitaji's meager income by getting the job in Madras. The positive effect of such a huge physical distance, in the absence of telephones and air planes and short train journey, instilled a fantastic life-long habit of writing letters. Letters became longer and more frequent to make up for the vast distance created by the move to Madras. Prem had a unique quality of visualizing the intended recipient on the pages of his long letters, vanishing the physical gap, which would make him less homesick. He would then simply talk to the intended receiver of his letter while the pen automatically put the words and feelings on the paper. Being the only one flung thousands of miles away, he wanted to bottle up and store every possible semblance of an object that would connect him with the separated family. The other members were not deprived of the family structure and therefore never realized or comprehended the pangs of separation that Prem was going through. They did not write back as frequently as they received his frequent and voluminous letters. The letters were his life-line for survival and he hung on to all the letters he wrote and received. He started a unique habit of making a three ring binder for each member of the family, friends and even strangers who he wrote to or received a letter from. Meticulously, he made copies of every letter that he wrote and filed carefully into the binder. He went even farther by making an index showing the date and summary of the main subject of the letter. Then he would patiently wait, check the mailbox at least once and sometimes twice a day just in case he missed a post card sticking to the bottom of the familiar red box. Sporadically as they trickled in, the original letters from the family members, which he had so longingly awaited, were read and re-read and then lovingly filed them in the appropriate folder. At the first possible opportunity he would sit down on his usual chair and ta-

ble, with his ink filled pen and legal size papers and shoot off another monologue to the face he clearly saw in the paper. Before mailing, he fondly made copies and carefully filed them in the binder. The collection of his cherished memories traveled to Calcutta when the job brought him to the new and life long residence. One person who added the most to his collection of letters was his soon to be wife, Shashi. They promised to write a letter to each other everyday from the time they got engaged in December 1959 till they would get married which they finally did on October, 8, 1960. Marriage not only brought prosperity to Prem's cheeks and abdomen, now a healthy 70 Kilograms, but also added weight to the ever increasing collection of letters written and received by him to another group of relatives who came with his marriage.

As lives became busier, postage more expensive, incomes shrunk, lack of expected replies, the rate of weight gain of his collection of letters slowed down. The final nail in this decline was the invention and rapid explosion of use of internet.

He and his grandchildren, Disha and Tanuj, one day marveled at the life long collection. Prem, in his usual manner, wanted to place a bet with Disha and Tanuj about the weight of the mail. The one closest to the actual weight would do 21 salutes in front of the friends at Saturday Club. Excitedly the grand children took on the grand father, fondly called Babu Ji. To the children the huge pile looked massive and they bet it was 50 Kg while Prem underestimated it and placed his bet at 35Kg. Actual weight was an astonishing 40 Kilograms, the same as Prem used to weigh in his college days.

Grandchildren were surprised by the coincidence and Prem in his mind quietly wondered about its significance. His inquisitive mind always wonders about each and everything and this figure of 40 Kgs of his college time weight and the current, ever slowing rate of growth of the mail made him wonder if there was a hidden meaning of nature. To confuse the matter even more was his own decline of weight over last two years to 49 Kilograms. He wondered if the convergence of the al-

most stagnant weight of the letters and his own declining weight had a mortal significance. The question still bothered him and he put it aside to be solved at a later date. He would relish the salaams of his grand children at the Club and with that thought causing a smile on his face he sipped a perfectly chilled beer, resolved to solve the mystery later.

“The doctor is running late due to an emergency at the hospital”, Prem heard while half asleep in the comfortable chair as the nurse made an announcement in the waiting room. Having read every conceivable book, medical and otherwise, he knew that the doctor was held back in the golf course and the announcement of an ‘emergency’ was just a cover up. He was willing to wait, only hoping that the doctor had not celebrated his victory with a beer at the club’s bar. The waiting room was full by now. Some of them looked fairly healthy and out of place in the cancer clinic. A couple of them were emaciated to the bones, again raising the questions in Prem’s mind about the possibility of cancer silently growing, evading every conceivable test that his family doctor along with the two greedy specialists had done in India. This had resulted in similar loss of the weight of his wallet and he would jokingly say “I will die when these sharks have stolen every paisa and my wallet is squeezed out of money and life is squeezed out of my body”

After another 45 minutes wait, the nurse shouted out over the sound of television and a constant chatter in the waiting room “Prem Luthra!”

Prem had made sure that morning to put a new battery in his hearing aid. Despite the noise, he heard it clearly and nervously made his way to the examination room pointed by the nurse. The folder full of copies of the reports and a long list of questions was carefully held in his right hand. She is really pretty, he thought as he followed her, being careful that she did not notice the direction of his sight which admirably followed the curves of her body. The age and perceived sickness did not bar him from appreciating the beauty when he saw it and he saw beauty more often than not.

As ordered, he took off his clothes and donned a thin, worn out gown and felt conscious about his thin body with wrinkled skin, even though he felt like a sixteen year boy in his mind. The nurse did the preliminary tests of weight, which was 47Kg, pulse and temperature, both of which had gone up a notch at the touch of the beauty that was so close to him. She noted down the chief complaint of unexplained weight loss over the last two years. She also made a note about Prem's question of possible link between the convergence of weight of the letters and his own weight and whether a life ends when the purpose to live is no longer there. Prem knew that this was not really a medical question but rather a philosophical debate but he still respected medical professionals for their knowledge and insight of the unknown.

Having done the preliminary work up, the nurse assured that the doctor will be in shortly and she was sorry for such a long wait. He pulled out his thick folder along with the list of concerns and questions and nervously started the waiting game again. This time it was only 12 minutes, which was still long enough to start a shiver from the nervous tension, loss of muscle mass and cool temperature which the doctor liked in his clinic, forgetting that the patients were sitting almost naked, barely covered by the old, flimsy gown.

Doctor Huffman appeared to be in his early fifties. He was well dressed in a tailored blue striped suit and a cheerful red necktie. He did not wear the dreaded white coat to prevent the additional anxiety for his already scared patients, most of who were stricken with some type of cancer. He had an easy reassuring smile, an unhurried manner and a warm hand shake.

“ Good morning, sorry I made you wait so long. “

“ Good morning, Doctor. Wait never bothers me. After all, where are we going to go anyway, rushing around raising our own blood pressure and also those of others around us? My wife, Shashi, and I use such time to make friends with strangers and have some fun along the way for ourselves and who will soon become strangers again. But memories linger and that is what life is all about anyway.”

Doctor Huffman by now had pulled a leather chair next to the examination table and was scanning through the chart. As always, even having read the notes written by his nurse, he still wanted to hear from the patients their complaints and history of illness. Patients, especially males, had a way of giving only patchy history and needed prodding to come out with the details. They tried to trivialize some of the complaints, whether out of denial or pride that ‘nothing can go wrong with me.’ That is why he moved slowly and tried to get to know the patients more intimately and also make them comfortable with sharing their deep fears and concerns about disease, and mortality. “ So, what nationality is that, Prem? Did I pronounce it right?”

“ Oh yes, you did fine . You can’t mispronounce that name. It is not like some other Indian names like Juginder, poor fellow, my brother in West Virginia who gets mercilessly hacked by getting called Huginder, Jugainder and many times simply—what the hell is that?. My name is Prem Luthra, call me Prem just as James as in James Bond. Delete the S and that is how Prem is pronounced and you did a fine job with that. I am from India and visiting our son and daughter-in-law who now live in New York.”

“ What brings you to see me today?”

“ I told my son that there was no need to make this appointment because I know my diagnosis but they insist that I be examined by the best in the best cancer institute in the world”

“ Oh, you already know that you have cancer?”

“ No, I know that I don’t have cancer but they feel that with my progressive weight loss and in the absence of any other detectable cause the bugger must be hiding somewhere. I have been put through the hide and seek game by some necessary and many unnecessary tests in India. My son feels that you guys are the best detectives to seek out the sneakiest hidiers. That is why I am here, bankrupting my children”

“ Hum, If you know you don’t have cancer, then you must know why you are losing weight and why you are worried about impending death?”

“ You see doctor, everyone needs a purpose in life to live. Nature puts us on this earth to become a piece of the giant jigsaw puzzle. Each one of us figures out, makes up or simply believes in divine destiny and finds a purpose which makes him/her feel useful and the life becomes purposeful. Studies at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago in 2009 along with some other studies are now scientifically showing that if you have a purpose in life and lead a meaningful life, you live longer. You take away the purpose and the man withers away. As if nature is saying “I don’t need to waste any more resources on this useless piece of flesh. Let it perish and convert the atoms into something that will add value to my purpose.”

After a short pause Prem slowly, almost in a whispering tone said “And I have lost my purpose in life. As if directed by nature my appetite is diminishing and accordingly I am not eating enough, resulting in weight loss, but no one believes me.”

Dr. Huffman listened to this interesting man and his self-made diagnosis. His curiosity was getting the better of him. He knew that he was already running 45 minutes behind schedule but he had never been more curious and eager to learn more of this patient’s unusual story. He mentally made a plan to give Prem a complete physical examination now and then, at no charge, have him come on another day when he could easily spend time without worrying about the angry looks from 12 sets of eyes in the waiting room. With help of the nurse, who had just walked in indicating with her hands and eyes to hurry up, he removed the flimsy gown from Prem’s thinning body where the loose skin was folded in places. The glowing skin at one time used to be smooth and taut to cover up the abundant muscular mass.

After all, Prem at one time was the best badminton player in his college and for many years after that. Girls would hawk at his swift movements and muscular contractions easily seen through the sweaty white cotton tee shirt. The looks and the victory ribbons would make him practice even more and he stayed number one badminton player through out his college. The muscles were now just a faded memory,

though the silver victory cups still reminded him, his son and grand children the golden days of his body.

Dr. Huffman methodically, like he had done thousands of times before, examined Prem from top of the head to the small toes. His eyes were keenly looking for any hidden enemy, fingers were palpating all the tissues they could reach. Percussion, even though being displaced by fancy scans, was still a part of his armamentarium. Stethoscope again was on the verge of becoming extinct, being replaced by well paying and presumably more accurate echo-cardiograms and C T scans. Dr. Huffman still believed in these gadgets because they added to his diagnostic skills and also gave him a chance to spend time with the patient. He listened with his instruments but more importantly he listened to the patient very carefully with his ears. He knew that almost all the time the patient in some verbal or non-verbal language was going to tell him the diagnosis. The reason we are becoming more dependent on the tests is that a time consuming examination does not pay the bills and also does not leave behind a trail for the insurance companies and lawyers that all that could be done 'was' done. Dr. Huffman had decided to cover all the angles by an exhaustive history taking and a comprehensive physical examination. Even though this was not the protocol of his system, he decided to just go through the examination at this time and planned to do a detailed, non-rushed history taking at a later date.

The physical examination failed to reveal evidence of any obvious disease that would explain the gradual, progressive weight loss. Orem had made sure that copies of the tests and reports of examinations done in India had been carefully cataloged, placed in a folder and arranged date-wise. The front sheet enumerated the date, name of the test, results and the name of the 'Thief' who ordered and profited from the test. This was Prem's way of getting even with the 'thieves' as he would describe the Indian doctors. Even the amount of money stolen from him was entered with varying number of ? marks next to the entry. Huffman carefully and with a smile reviewed the reports and copies of some of the scans that Prem had coaxed out of the doctors who were

reluctant to do so for fear of getting caught having misread the test or someone really finding out that the test was not indicated at all considering the type of history and the findings of the examination.

The tests and the reports did not show any indication of the lurking enemy. Huffman asked the nurse to arrange a couple of more modern cancer detecting tests not available in India and a scan of the kidneys. Kidney disease sometimes can cause no obvious symptom and yet cause unexplained weight loss. Noting that Prem had no insurance and also the fact Dr. Huffman had liked his friendly nature, he directed the nurse to have the billing clerk give a 50% discount on the visit and also on the tests he had just ordered. Prem loved discounts and bargains. He promptly said, "Since I am getting 50% off, it means I can have my wife examined for free. Like the signs we read in the shopping mall—pay for one, get second free!" Shashi had survived an Osteoclastoma at a very young age. Decades had gone by without any recurrence. This was a miracle for which Prem would thank God, although many times he would debate that there was no such thing as God who would be busy managing our daily lives and every move. In later years his opinion was changing toward accepting the existence of a power beyond the physical body. He had started going to the Ram Sharnam in Panipat at every chance he would get.

With a smile, Huffman said good bye for now and asked the nurse to make the next appointment for Prem, making sure that he would be the last patient of the day in case the story got more interesting.

The nurse left him alone to get dressed up and come out to the front desk for billing purpose and next appointment. The dates for the tests were arranged on a Wednesday afternoon when his daughter-in-law, Jyoti, would be free from her job in the music recording studio.

Prem knew that the examination would be negative for any cancer but still felt a sense of relief that the best detective of cancer agreed with him. No matter how safe we feel, a visit to the doctor is always a nerve wrecking experience. You never know, whether correctly or just to make up a presumed diagnosis to order tests at the lab or facility

where they have financial interests, the doctors will add a dose of anxiety and additional bills. Sometimes the doctors will add a pill here or an injection there just to treat a symptom or finding that might even have cured itself. Prem loved the cartoon where a doctor is leaning over a patient in his bed and the doctor is saying “Mr. Jones, we did the operation just in the nick of time; two more hours and you would have cured yourself!” The cartoon can be funny as long as it is just that but the fear of yourself being the hero of that cartoon is real when you are in the examination room completely at the mercy of the trusted doctor.

Prem loves to read at least two books a week. Any subject is welcome but he truly loves to read legal and medically oriented books. Everyone knows that there are good and bad lawyers and doctors but somehow they all believe that their own is the best in the whole world. Most of the times they are trusted as much or even more than God. Huffman fitted the description of being the best in Prem’s mind.

Having made the appointment two weeks later, settling the discounted bill and wondering if he would use the savings for a nice chilled beer before heading home, he said goodbye to the receptionist. With the additional help having arrived and the office machinery moving smoothly, she seemed to be calm and collected. In addition to the discounted charges, she gave a generous smile to Prem. His gesture earlier to help her tears was duly perceived and mentally appreciated by her.

Folder was carefully closed and tied. He wished that the doctor had more time to discuss the history rather than spend time on the examination. Doctor’s office is one place where he, like most patients, are tongue tied out of respect or fear of offending the life saver. Any other place he would have told the guy to sit down and listen, especially when he was going to pay a hefty amount of money just to listen but not to a doctor. When paying the expensive dollars he said only in his mind “They are all the same, here or in India. At least here I am getting a 50% discount.” But his mathematical mind quickly found a flaw in his reasoning. Here he had to pay in dollars and even with the discount it would translate into a big bundle of rupees. Slowly he made his way

out of the office and sat on a bench under a canopy to start the wait for his son who was to pick him up during lunch break.

Lunch break reminded him of his friends in Calcutta, longish lunches, chilled beers, making fun of strangers and friends with bets on every conceivable subject. Malik, Rajpal, Singh...all came alive in his mind. His friends had called to wish him luck for the upcoming visit with Dr. Huffman. They would have even placed a bet whether the doctor would be late by more or less than one hour, the doctor would give Prem more or less than 5 years to live etc. Malik would even jokingly tell Prem that the doctor will never let him die before he paid the bill and therefore the best way to live long will be to not pay the bill. Laughter would be in the air for hours.

There was never a dull moment except one fateful day when someone in the group jokingly told him “ Prem, don’t you realize that no one is sending you letters any more. Internet thaan ik bahana hai; people are just not interested in receiving your same old letters and don’t want to waste their time writing back hoping that this will put a stop to your long time-wasting letters.” This was said in the spirit of jest but somehow Prem took it to heart. Even though he was told repeatedly “Come on Yaar, this was just a joke. You are taking it too seriously.”

No one should make fun of something so close to the heart, something that has become a purpose of life, a reason to get up in the morning, get dressed, go to the office, less for work and more for seeing the faces of your loved ones in the white striped pages, something Prem had done practically all his life. This one sentence pierced through his heart. He wanted to believe that it was just a joke but then he would wonder in the wee hours of wakeful nights that where there is smoke there must be fire. “Someone must have told my friend just what he repeated to me”, he would mutter under his breath for fear of not waking up Shashi and letting her know how one single sentence had changed his life forever. That was the day when he started wondering if there was a link between the stagnant weight of the mail and his own declining weight. Behind closed doors he started weighing himself daily and

sometimes twice a day. His appetite became poor resulting in declining weight. His analytic mind connected the dots between the mail getting stalled at 40 Kg and his weight having come down to 49 and falling. He got convinced that the mail was the purpose of his life and it was nature's signal that when his weight would also reach 40 Kg, that would be his last day on earth. He even envisioned a scene where there are two pyres burning side by side. On one is lying a 40 Kg male and one other there is a pile of 40Kg mail. Here he saw a merger between a completed life and a completed purpose.

"First thing first, let us rule out any medical illness causing the weight loss", Shashi had emphatically said to him. To appease his wife and just to be sure that there indeed was no cancer or such dreaded disease causing the progressive weight loss, he had made appointment with his friend, Dr. Minocha. Initial examination was negative but Dr. Minocha did not want to take a chance of missing anything serious, especially in a life long friend. Two specialists and many tests later Prem was relieved that there was no cancer but was convinced that unless either he put on weight or the mail started growing, his days would be numbered.

His letters, now scanned through the internet, started reaching quarters covering much wider audience and farther than the snail/expensive mail ever did. The responses were generic and short in this fast paced life, not counting as letters according to Prem's definition. The pace of physical weight decline had continued even after he reached USA.

Honk, Honk!! Prem suddenly jolted from his mental journey back to India with his friends, looked around and saw Ashit waving near the gate leading to the parking lot, asking him to come over. Ashit was saving the minimum \$5 parking charge, otherwise he would get an earful "You wasted Rs. 250 just for 5 minutes of parking. I am still strong enough to run, let alone walk over across the road. When I was your age, the whole family could buy food for one month with 250 rupees." As he stood up he felt a little dizzy, held on to the end of the bench,

rebalanced himself and then started a slow, slightly wobbly walk towards the car. A tear welled up in Ashit's eye as he watched the scene and also recalled the badminton games the father and son used to play years ago. Gradually, with will power, the pace picked up and the gait became steady. He hopped into the front seat and methodically placed the seat belt. In India, one could get away with a bribe of 10 rupees or it may have gone up to 50 by now but in USA a ticket could be an expensive lesson.

To the expected question from Ashit, Prem said "See, there was no need to feed more money to the already rich doctor. I am totally fine and the big C has not made its home in my body." There was a distinct relief in Ashit's demeanor, which could be seen on his face and now relaxed shoulders. "I am still glad that the best of the best has checked you. A few dollars is worth the peace of mind" said the loving son who wanted to hang onto the umbrella between himself and his own death, a thought that had lately started creeping in his mind.

After a few quiet moments, Prem said that the doctor wants to see me again and with a smile said that he had charmed Huffman into not charging even a penny for the next visit and some of the tests to be done will also be discounted. There were still a lot of good people left in this world, he thought. Reluctantly he even entertained the idea that all doctors are not just after money.

After supper he pulled out the folder and carefully placed all the documents in their proper places, wrote a summary of the day's events on a single sheet of paper and stapled it with the medical reports. Shashi got an extra tight hug of relief and dreams of long life together, only if he could somehow control the progressive weight loss. With that thought and a book by James Patterson in his hand he turned to one side and before long the book fell down. Shashi carefully pulled away the glasses, lovingly rolled his grey hair back, covered him with a soft blanket and sat up for her regular meditation session in her bed. She said an extra thank you to Ram and called it a night with a smile on her lips. What a wonderful life, despite all the ups and downs of their lives they were

just as young today, together as when they were courting many decades ago, which felt like it was only yesterday. Few blinks of eyes and boom, the years flew by. She felt happy that they had not only filled those years with open and private affection for each other but also that they had enriched and filled many a heart with their genuine care and love.

Filled with books, walks, visits to monuments and museums and interacting with Ashit and Jyoti's friends and strangers, two weeks went by fast. The weather in USA suited them well, not that they ever complained of the oppressively hot weather followed by ocean pouring down from the monsoon clouds over Calcutta choking the fragile veins of the city's drainage system.

The flowers in the park were in full bloom, all the lawns in their development were manicured better than most heads of many of the youngsters they would see in the shopping malls. Trips to the malls were purely recreational and for exercise. They had never been fond of accumulating material stuff but lately even a mention of buying one more thing could trigger a massive headache. Buying a gift for Disha and Tanuj was a whole different story. Children need the excitement and use of the gifts, he would often say. Some things never change and it was no different when at the age of 25 he felt old enough not to need anything for himself. Almost half of his pay would go towards a monthly check to Pitaji for running expenses at 2 Model Town, Panipat, the newly adopted home. About a quarter would be used for living expenses and the remainder was used for gifts for the four younger brothers, age 7 to 16. The youngsters growing up in poverty never were allowed to feel any less than the most well-to-do folks around them. Prem's every visit to home meant boxes upon boxes of gifts. Braino, Mechano, cricket set, Murphy radio, transistors for constant cricket running commentary, Bianca feet Malay, among numerous others kept children occupied and happy. When their mother, Mataji, died in 1990, several of Prem's gifts were fondly spread between his siblings to lovingly keep in their homes, reminding them of the glorious childhood. The south Indian temple made from the pulp of bamboo

shoots and a large sea shell which had adorned the cupboard along with the picture gallery of the family, are now prized possessions of Juginder and Dolly. The brown electric clock on the wall across from Mataji's bed was always in demand as no one else had a watch. Keeping up with the age-old habit, Prem and Shashi would always be on the look out for gifts for their grand children. One day before his visit with Dr. Huffman they bought one thank you card for the doctor and one for his staff along with seven picture post cards with a resolution to write to Disha and Tanuj every day for a week.

Appointment with Dr. Huffman was at 3.45. Prem asked Jyoti to drop him off at 3.15 so he had enough time to organize his thoughts and thick folder for the doctor. He had not heard the results of the tests that had been done a week ago. No news is good news, especially when it relates to the report of the test results, he thought. Blissfully he was oblivious of the fact that many doctor's offices do not call back with the results because they don't have a tracking system to follow up on all the tests that had been ordered. If the lab does not send the results or the reports get filed away or lost, doctor would never remember to call the patient. Some doctors wanted to discuss the report in person especially if it was going to be a bad news but many times just to collect fees for another visit.

At 4.00 PM he was escorted into the examination room by the pretty nurse. His pulse rate went up some but he did not care as there was going to be no examination and nobody will know or suspect an old man having any sexy thought. He even escaped the embarrassing gown. He used to say that such gowns are like insurance companies; they guarantee coverage but leave many cracks open in critical areas.

Dr. Huffman soon followed and pulled a chair close to the one occupied by Prem. "I am so happy that you came back at the end of the day" he said as he shook Prem's hands without first washing them. Prem made a mental note to not touch any part of his body till he had thoroughly washed his own hands at the conclusion of the visit. He had read that about 98,000 American die annually just because they

were in the hospitals. Number one reason was cross infections spread by providers who did not wash hands between patients.

Huffman reviewed the test results in the folder and with a reassuring smile said “All the tests came back negative. One of these tests is super sensitive about the presence of any type of cancer in the body; even at the very early stages. So, we can safely say that your doctors in India may have run a few extra tests but were correct in their conclusion that the big C has not chosen your body as a host. Now let me hear from you about this conjecture of relation between your life and weight of the mail in your possession.”

Prem carefully opened one of the many folders he had brought along and pulled out the index cards. Each one had the name of a relative or friend on top of the page. Underneath was a carefully made Excel style sheet made with a pen. It depicted in chronological order the date the letter was written or received and a short note about the contents of the letter followed by any special comments. Some index sheets ran several pages. Each index sheet was linked to three ring binders containing copies of the written and originals of the received letters. Some letters were dated as far back as 1952. No one goes through such laborious work unless they are convinced deep in their hearts that the efforts are worth the trouble, will make a difference to someone’s life, may be an accurate source of history of the family, the city and the country.

Carefully keeping the sheets and some folders on the examination table, Prem gently caressed his treasure and then with a sad smile said “You see doctor, these letters have been a purpose of my life, something I looked forward to doing every day. It made me look forward to living fully. For various reasons, the amount of out-going and in-coming mail is rapidly declining. Coincidentally or by nature’s design, my weight also started to decline at about the same time. My belief is that nothing in this universe happens by chance. Everything is governed by a plan, unseen it may be but surely there is a designer creating the design.” He took a short pause and then with sadness expressing through moist eyes he continued “Once the weight of the mail got almost stagnant at 40

Kg. and my weight declined from 70 Kg to about 49, the meaning was obvious—end is near, only 9 Kg away.”

Huffman had diagnosed and treated thousands of patients but today he was stumped. He did not know whether to whisk away this stupid notion or were we all a pawn in the grand scheme of things and events coordinated by the unseen hand with unseen powers. What if there was a real message coming or was there a place for placebo effect playing a role here. Mind can be programmed into sickness or health based on the data fed into the mind. It is effective as long as the mind believes the data to be real. Even if there are no external chemicals affecting the cells, the tissues and the organs, the mere focused, firmly believed thought will generate internal chemicals actually affecting cells and organs in a constructive or destructive manner depending on the basic nature of the thought.

Researchers estimate that 80% of all major illnesses like cancer, skin disorders, cardiovascular disease and even backache are related to mind and behavior. Stress is perceived to be a psychological problem but it has very real physical effects. Increased secretion of adrenaline, acceleration of heart beat, greater tension in the muscles, slower or improper digestion are the results of such physiological changes. Blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels may rise, there is thickening of blood and making it more prone to clot formation. This in turn increases the risk of heart attacks and stroke. He could sense that in this patient the self destruction was in progress. Simply telling Prem “What nonsense, there is nothing wrong with you. Go home, stop wasting your money and our time”—will not solve the problem.

He leaned over and put his hand gently over Prem’s left shoulder in a sympathetic and almost fatherly manner, even though he was half Prem’s age. The chair one sit in adds years to one’s demeanor and authority. Every word delivered has several times more weight compared to someone else, without the aura of authority, saying the same thing.

“ I fully understand your dilemma, Prem. I am sure you and your family are as happy as I am that you do not, I repeat, do not have any

organic disease, including cancer, causing your body to wither. Your friend was obviously joking when he made comments about your declining mail. You took it much too seriously and let it get to you. May be now you will get burdened with the guilt of affecting many innocent people who were the butt of your jokes and pranks! I am only kidding.” They both had a big laugh of relief and joy.

“Now you go back to your life and remember that a purposeful person will always find a niche where nature is calling for help. You have so much more to add to the lives of your family and friends.”

They shook hands and Dr. Huffman made Prem’s day by saying that there would be no charge for today’s visit. Prem said “Thank you. Even if you had billed me I would not have paid any way. You know why? Because one time a doctor gave a patient 6 months to live. The patient did not pay his bill so the doctor gave him another 6 months!” They both had a hearty laugh as they went their separate ways, both feeling sad that they might never meet again.

Jyoti was in the waiting room and could not wait to hear every word that was uttered behind the closed doors. On receiving the good news, she let out a loud ‘yipee’ startling some lingering patients and their families in the waiting room and the staff behind the glass window. Happily, Jyoti and Prem left the office to head home and celebrate the good news by going out for drinks, dinner and ice cream.

With new lease on life, the first thing Prem did next day was to buy a new legal size note book, a new pen—made in China, and sat down to write every detail of the story plus all that was happening in the lives of Disha, Tanuj, Ashit, Jyoti as well as the Nation. After 21 pages and with tired hands he went over to the fridge, pulled out a cold Heineken, put his feet up and looked out of the window at the white fluffy clouds gently rolling across light blue sky. Just as he had taken the last sip, Jyoti walked in with a large plastic bin with the markings of U S Post Office and placed it on the table.

“You wouldn’t believe, Papa. I got a call from the post office that the amount of mail to be delivered is far too much to fit in our small

mailbox. They asked me to come and pick up the box full of letters from all over the world.”

Unknown to Prem, Dr. Huffman, with the help of Shashi, Ashit and Jyoti had taken the addresses of all of Prem’s family members and friends. He then dictated a letter stating the diagnosis of mind over body playing tricks with Prem and the obvious treatment was to increase the weight of the mail. This in turn will encourage Prem’s mind to tell the body to eat and exercise more, drink a little to keep up with the increasing load. He ended by saying “ Rx: This is Doctor’s order, please comply.”

Every member of the family, including grand children and circle of friends not only wrote a letter making sure that they were not of the kind which said “I am well and hope you are in the same well. Rest all is fine” They were long, juicy, full of news of themselves, their work, family, hobbies, good news and bits of sad news they wished to share. More letters went out and more boxes were carried in periodically, initially in USA and then for many years in Calcutta.

Years went by, folders got heavier and their numbers multiplied. Another steel almirah was needed to store the treasure.

Bets were floating via Facebook and Twitter whether Prem, who was by now at age 99 , will make century or not. Bets of all kinds were being placed, various permutations and combinations brilliantly thought out by Raju, Umang, Rohit and others. The betters’ names were kept secret, only the numbers for and against were known. At age 99 and 11 months a century was being considered a safe bet. With all the bets in, the fateful day of June 1, 2031 was being awaited with great anticipation. Over 2 lacs of rupees had been placed in the kitty and everyone was making plans how to spend it.

And then, at different times, in different time zones, in different countries, the news traveled via telephones or email, Facebook, Whats App and Twitter in the form of the following letter.

My Dear Family,

Obviously it is impossible, but wishful thinking has no limits or boundaries. I wish Mataji and Pitaji were here to see this day with us. The bets have been placed. 99% are betting for the century up but the deep desire to win the bet and to get out of the frail, hurting body are telling me that as much as I would love to see the century completed, it seems that the innings is over. I did have a cancer for a number of years that was not easy to detect and fortunately was very slow growing. It has finally permeated every part of my body.

I have no regrets now, had some as we were going through life but in some strange ways it all evens out. The blessings were way more than the shortfalls, balance sheet was overfilled with abundance. Looking back, I would not change a thing...may be I would not have worried as much. Blissfully I was granted a positive attitude and outlook to life. I would focus on only the good qualities of everyone I came in contact with. My inner passion was to learn about others' life, and helping wherever I could.

Love has been my guiding force in life. Money has some value but love trumps it all. Excess money tends to cause more problems than it solves.

I never believed in it but now I do want to believe in reincarnation and hopefully will see you all again, soon at the next FGT...or when you see a long letter, hear wind blowing, a thunder or lightning in the sky, a sound of a bird, a cold beer, a loud laughter, a zindabad shouted out somewhere, it may just be ME!!

Love and Bye,

Fondly,

Prem

This is how the family got the news of the outcome of the bet...via a letter with slightly shaky writing but still beautifully crafted letters and still never a word crossed out or re-written, scanned and sent as an attachment. On the night of May 30, 2031 two days shy of the century, the giant, the glue of the family, Dear Prem said good bye to the family. He passed away peacefully with a smile on his face, holding one of

Shashi's hand who held Amritvani and a Mala in the other. The family will celebrate his life and hope that they can get at least some of the number of qualities that came so naturally to him. Without having a firm belief in God, he indeed was blessed. So was the Luthra Parivar to have had such a love filled and love giving person, appropriately named Prem, in their family.

Prem was the only one who had placed his bet against the century being up and ended up winning the last bet of his life. The partial benefactors of his Will turned out to be, in equal share, every member of the Khandan of Vidya and Kundan Lal Luthra, right down to the latest addition of Mataji Pitaji's great, great grand children. They all divided up the eight lac rupees . They decided to have the largest FGT of all times, rented the whole movie theater, spent two lacs on tickets and a few bags of popcorn. Right in the middle of the movie, the lights went out completely, a pre recorded short movie of lightening and thunder lit the screen ending with sounds and sights of rain and then the words mixed with flowers started descending with a picture of Prem filling the screen in the background and the captions reading ... Presented Fondly by Prem Luthra. A voice commanded everyone in the audience to repeat five times—Prem Bhapa Zindaba, Prem Chacha Zindabad, Prem Mama Zindabad, Prem Papa Zindabad, Babu Ji Zindabad.....Pictures of Mata Ji and Pita Ji gradually descended on both sides of Prem's picture, rose petals gradually falling and they said-Prem Beta-Zindabad, Prem Beta—Zindabad!!!

His grand children, Disha and Tanuj had orchestrated this portion of the movie.

CHAPTER II

FESTIVALS OF OUR CHILDHOOD

Life is nothing but a continuum of experiences... routine mundane activities, sorrows, joys, cries, laughter, mournings and celebrations.

Growing up in the 1950s in Panipat, India, gave us a plateful of all of the above.

Thanks to the wisdom and foresight of MataJi and PitaJi, as the boat of our lives was going through the crests and ebbs of river of life, they held us securely tight during those tumultuous time. They hid from us that mere 3 years before moving to our home in 2 Model Town, we were all refugees, had lost every material object including land and house, had no money or job. They hid the tears and let us fully taste the celebrations of life.

Life seemed full of festivities and festivals. One festivals followed the other, each one filled with wonder, laughter and joy. Even though it all happened about 70 years ago, it seems like we the children are running around, carefree, totally immersed in enjoying every festival.

Dusehra followed by Diwali, filled with numerous activities, is celebrated with great pomp and show. We are well conversant with the stories of Ramaayan. We read Ramaayan not as a ritual of a religion but

as a requirement before dinner is served. After washing hands, we have to pick up the thick book of Ramaayan, place it on a beautifully carved wooden, folding X shaped book holder and each one of us reads two pages. The thick thread is carefully placed between the last read pages to carry on the story next evening.

Readings at home and recitation of stories of Ramaayan in the temples make the characters of Ram, Sita, Lakshman and others come alive for us.

We the children go to the temples less for religious reasons but more for the free Prasaad of boondi laddoos or loose boondi, sweet baked rice and halva. Many times we join the lines twice. Pandit Ji gives us a knowing smile. Still hungry for more, we stand outside where devotees share their sweets after having stuck a small portion on the mouth of statue of Hanuman Ji.

The Ramaayan stories are played out live on a stage through the Ram Leela in the form of a drama every night for 10 nights leading up to Dussehra.

This is held in the pleasant nights of October. After dinner, with a group of friends, we run to the Ram Leela grounds. We carry a piece of jute cut out from a bori (large sack used to pack whole wheat grain) to sit on the dusty ground. The stage is set up by amateur local artists comprising of only men and boys. Even the roles of women are played by Saari clad males with long hair wigs and thick make up. They try to change the pitch of their voice on the stage. They are all working people or full time students with very little time for rehearsals or remembering all their lines. Sometimes the voice of prompter is as loud as the artist on the stage. We have a big laugh when we see the female characters behind the stage lighting up beedis and cigarettes, talking in regular voice.

Ram Leela depicts the whole story of Ramaayan starting with Dashrath seeing a grey hair In the mirror, to asking Ram to take the throne, forced fourteen years exile to the forest, abduction of Sita by Raavan, organization of monkey army, victory over 10 headed Ravan and final Lu return to Ayodhya with whole city and country lit up to

commemorate the victory of good over evil. The whole story is played on the stage in ten nightly episodes.

The actors have colorful dresses, hand made decorative mukuts (crowns), bows and arrows. Amid the air filled with dust, which smells sweet, we become deeply engrossed in the story. We cry, laugh, get mad as the events seem real to our naive minds. The show generally starts around 9 pm and goes on till midnight.

Merrily, we walk back without any adult chaperones, climb into our beds that had been laid outside in the front courtyard before leaving. In those cool nights, a thick cotton filled razaai (quilt) and a pillow was all we need to doze off in a matter of minutes.

Next morning, sleep-deprived, we reluctantly wake up, get ready, have a stuffed prantha with milk for breakfast and walk half an hour to Sanatan Dharam high school, reliving the story of night before and looking forward to the upcoming episode that night.

During these days, at home, we get semi hard cardboard pieces, cut them to the shape of crowns (mukuts), belts and containers for arrows. Straight branches from the trees work as arrows whose one end is crowned with pointed card board pieces. Bows are made of flexible branches from the two neem trees on our land, one near the right gate and one at the junction of house number 2 and 3. Shiny colorful papers are cut to appropriate shapes and sizes and glued onto the card board pieces. A thick thread is passed through small holes near the ends to tie the mukut around head or belt around the waist. Mustaches and wigs are purchased from the market. MataJi sews colorful attires for the different roles and we have Ram Leela at home.

There are enough siblings to cover most of the roles. During summer vacations Narang family children stay with us for about three months. Among other activities we recreate Ram Leela in anticipation of the one to follow in a few months.

The tradition was revived once during our FGT (Family Get Together) at Rishi Kesh. I still get a smile when I visualize Virinder with

his mouth puffed out to simulate monkey god Hanuman Ji, with a pressure cooker on his shoulder depicted as the gada.

Dusehra is a major celebration to depict annihilation of evil by the virtuous ones, victory of Ram and Lakshman over the 10 headed Ravan and his son, Meghnath and sleepy brother Kumbhkaran. Almost 50 feet tall, three effigies, filled with fireworks are created by numerous volunteers. They are tethered to the ground with ropes and anchors. On the evening of Dusehra thousands of people gather around the effigies. It is a noisy, festive atmosphere.

Vendors are selling all types of material to celebrate Diwali. Sweet Jalebis are a favorite treat for the children.

As the sun goes down, two men dressed as Ram and Lakshman pull out the arrows and shoot them into the effigies. It is perfectly timed with the organizers lighting the fuse to ignite the encased fireworks. Booming crackers shoot out. One by one, the last one being Raavan, the effigies catch fire and the wooden framework comes crumbling down. The crowd roars in cheers and claps. As the last piece touches the ground we disperse and head home, planning the next twenty days.

Diwali is celebrated twenty days after Dussehra. Diwali celebrates return of Ram, Sita and Lakshman back to Ayodhya after fourteen years of exile. It also celebrates victory of righteous Ram over the evil Ravan, victory of good over bad. These are special days, full of activities, laughters and fun.

The whole house is cleaned. There are not many material things to move around. A complete white wash (safedian) is done on the outside and inside walls. Labor is hired to do the real work. White chalky powder (choona) is bought in medium sized sacks. It is poured into steel buckets, water is added taking precaution not to get the material splash into the eyes. We are warned that it could burn the eyes. We help the labor in mixing this material with wooden rods. Small bubbles erupt as the mixing proceeded. Koochees (jute brushes) are soaked with the wet choona and the laborers apply this to the whole house. At the end of the day, their faces are speckled with white choona. All the yellow

streaks on the walls from the seepage of water leaked through the roof during monsoons and the damage done to the lower parts by the young hands are repaired and painted. The boundary wall is also painted with choona, although it is pale in color. The characteristic smell of freshly painted choona persists for a few days in the house and forever in the mind.

All the children get a set of new clothes and sometimes new shoes. Some events become indelible in the mind, however insignificant they may seem at the moment. In the Shehar (Old city) it is not appropriate to call them roads as they are barely six feet wide with a drain on each side, carrying rain water mixed with sewage, at times stuck and overflowing. We call them Galiyan (small streets). Along one such street, in the center of the Shehar, a Bata Shoe shop is located. One day PitaJi takes me there, sits by my side as I try brand new Bata shoes! He patiently lets me try many till I settle for the ones that fit and I like. He never let me see his expression whether he can afford them. And I had brand new shoes for the first time! Normally we are used to wearing hand-me-down clothes and shoes. But Diwali is special and special I am made to feel that day.

It is not the amount of money spent on them that children remember, it is the amount of quantity and quality time spent with them that they cherish and save as priceless treasures that live on in their minds and heart long after all the material goods and givers have vanished without a trace.

With uncontrollable excitement we wait for new clothes. The tailor in house number 40 is one happy man during Diwali season. Reluctantly, after losing pleas and arguments, we have to patiently wait to wear them on the day of Diwali.

Krishan, nick named Harhtaalu because he was born during a country-wide strike to oust the Britishers, meticulously cares for his possessions. He folds his clothes, properly irons and stacks them in his personal locked metal suit case. The rest, in varying degrees, save them in different shapes. I don't particularly care what I wear or whether

they were ironed or not. There are more important things to do, such as playing and making mischief.

Sneakily, we get into Krishan's suit case and rumple up his clothes. This makes him real mad, resulting in fist and stick fights. Kanchan finally intervenes, punishes and locks up the mischief monger in the store room. It is not a bad punishment because that is where all the sweet mithaai is stored and locked. She doesn't know or pretends not to know that there is a secret way to remove the top shelf, slide thin arms and small hands to get to the mithaai. It is a sweet punishment !

Finally the big Day arrives. All of us hugs one another wishing "Diwali mubaarak ho." Even strangers do not pass by without exchanging the words "Diwali mubaarak, Diwali ki badhaai ho." Family and friends exchange wrapped boxes of sweets, mostly laddoos or kala kand. Bosa Ram makes more money during Diwali season than the rest of the year.

An integral part of Diwali, also called Deepavali (Deep means fits, a lamp), the Festival of Lights, is to light up hundreds of diyas. Many days before the big night, we purchase hundreds of reddish brown clay diyas of varying sizes from the vendors sitting on the floor along the toads. Buckets are filled with water, diyas washed and soaked. They are then sun dried. Large cotton balls are purchased. Patiently we pull out pieces of cotton and draw them into shapes of about three inches long wicks. Stacks of wicks are made taking care that they do not intertwine.

The day before and the morning of the big night, the house is busy as a beehive. A wooden ladder is placed against the kitchen, the lowest section of the house. Children carry the diyas and lay them side by side, about a foot apart along the perimeter of the railing-less roof edges and on the boundary walls of the house. Next step is to carry mustard oil and, without spilling, fill the diyas. Oil -soaked cotton wicks are place in the oil with one end sticking out at the pointed edge of the diya.

We are bubbling with excitement and can not wait for the sun to go down. Candles are lit and all the children get busy lighting the oil dripping wicks with the candle flame. Sometimes hot melted wax drips on

the hands making us jump with pain. Lighting of the diyas is happening all over the town, and many parts of the country.

A dark night is suddenly lit up with diyas, their flames flickering with gentle breeze, making it a breathtaking sight. We go around with buckets of oil for refills, wishing for the light to go on and on.

Fireworks (Pataake) have already been purchased according to each home's budget. This is one time when PitaJi does not worry where the next rupee will come from! Bags full of strings of red pataake, anaars, sparklers, havaais, chakrees, are brought out on the street. We light them carefully putting candle flames to the fuse and run back. Havaais are placed in a glass soda bottle and the fuse is lit. They have a mind of their own about which direction they will fly. Running away from these is absolute critical.

The air is filled with various levels of lights and sounds depending on the size of the pataaka. Sky is lit with havaais shooting up all around us, streets are lit with anaars, chakrees, jalebis. A round black flat disc, once lit, starts growing in the shape of snake. This produces lot of smoke, more than the other pataakes. Smell and sight of smoke fills the air.

A yelping running dog meant someone has tied a string of small red pataakas on its tail and has lit the fuse. We dare not pick on a big dog for fear of getting bit. Small dogs are our targets. Mercifully only a few dogs became the victims of the innocuous fun for us but quite a scary experience for them. Sometimes we keep pataakas under a small can leaving the fuse out to be lit. Then we run back to see the can shoot up in the air. No one knows about the dangers of eye injuries and luckily no one we knew of got hurt. PitaJi carefully supervises and keep the little monsters under check. Noise from the fireworks and children goes on till past midnight.

The stock of pataakas are finally finished, oil buckets gets empty, glowing wicks get charred black, throats get hoarse from shouting and inhaling smoke, even children's unlimited energy is really not without limits.

In between these activities, food has been eaten on the run, exchanged boxes of sweets have been ripped open, sweets disappear before they saw the lights.

With full stomachs, tired eye and bodies we finally get into the beds that have been laid out in the front vehrha (courtyard) by Virinder, MataJi and PitaJi and whoever is around to listen and help.

Tradition is to leave the doors open and some lights lit all night. It is believed that Goddess of wealth, Lakshami, descends on the earth and goes from home to home, blessing them with prosperity. Everybody wants her to come into their house. It would be a catastrophe if she comes to the house but finds the doors closed and no room lit, indicating there was no one home to receive the bounty and she moves on to the next house. As a result money will not come to careless one in the upcoming new year.

Many communities and businesses commemorate Diwali as the beginning of new year. Invariably the greeting cards say—Happy Diwali and a prosperous New Year.

Gambling by playing teen patti, a card game akin to poker played with three cards and several variations, is traditionally a part of Diwali festivities. People play this the night before Diwali. Level of stakes vary depending on the financial status. Our stakes are in Paisas and Aanaas. Even though we play, it is not a significant part of Diwali celebrations in our home.

End of one festival is sad in one way but also happy in another. We have so many festivals to celebrate that the end of one mean anticipating and starting preparation for the next—Lohrhi, Holi, Rakhi...

CHAPTER III

GAMES WE PLAYED

Children have a built-in desire and zest to play and have fun, provided they are placed in a safe and loving environment. They laugh and giggle and entertain themselves with a variety of games depending on where and when they grow up.

When I see our grand children play games, blissfully not on the tablets or phones but mostly outdoors physical games and interactive or educational indoor games, faint memories start waking up. When I hear their non-stop laughter and noise, I reminisce about the games we used to play in Panipat in the 1950s. They are so vivid as if I can reach out and touch the participants.

We have simple yet engaging team games, that fill the long days growing up in Panipat.

Immediately after the partition, a life changing major event as we understand it now, but completely oblivious at that time. Our parents never mentioned to us the catastrophic event and its effects on their lives. They just wanted for us to have carefree childhood. They were busy in their innumerable chores. Their reassuring presence engulfed us as we went around, free of care, planning and playing out our days of childhood.

There were no computers or television, let alone the hand held devices.

Most of the times we play outdoors with friends and the brothers and occasionally indoor interactive games with family members. Our brother, Prem who lives in Madras, brings suitcases full of fun and educational toys. He has also taught us, never-heard-of, card games. The whole family eagerly waits for his visits. His lively personality, love, laughter and games paint our lives with bright colors.

Even though we are poor, we never feel deprived. Childhood for us is a never ending fun. Even after several decades I can see images as if I am still the same child.

We have competition by deciding who will make the longest jump from the swing set strategically placed outside the Puja/store rooms. The landing is on a grassy soft patch of land under the shade of most delicious Dussehri mango tree lovingly planted by Pita Ji in 1950 near the main entrance of the house.

The game of Lakeeran (Lines) is loved by all. Gleefully, children sing "Cheecho cheech galian, do teriaan do meriaan." Hearing this all children get together.

Two teams are formed, each assigned roughly an equal area around the house. Both teams draw small lines with a pencil, a chalk or a piece of soft charcoal on pieces of papers, stones, bricks, or wood in a fixed time. These objects are carefully hidden in hard to detect places; under the leaves, bushes, stones, bricks or whatever else we find as a camouflage. Even though prohibited, we draw lines in poorly visible parts of the pale concrete walls of the house or the perimeter wall of the house. A mental note is made about the hiding locations. At the end of the set time the teams go into the opponent's territory, hurriedly search and uncover the objects bearing the lines. At the end of a fixed search time, the children on both sides pull out the undetected objects marked with lines. The team with maximum number of undetected lines is the winner. The lines are washed or erased preparing the area for future games.

On Sundays during school days and 3 to 4 times a week during the three months of summer vacation, a group of our friends go for a four miles walk in the open fields dotted with keekar, neem and peeple tress. The goal is to reach the Nehr (Canal) located southwest of our home. Dressed in knickers, shirt and slippers the trek starts before sunrise to take advantage of the cool breeze before the ground started baking. We break twigs of neem or keekar tree, pluck the leaves, chew the bark on one end, let the juice rinse the mouth while exposing the bristles in the shape of a micro broom to be used as a tooth brush. Bitter initially, the taste slowly became mild, the twig was our tooth brush. Shamelessly spitting whenever and wherever needed, we talk, sing and walk leisurely to the Nehr. The canal is too big and deep for our comfort.

Use of our primitive tooth brush never bothers us even when we see some well-to-do children use tooth paste and proper brushes. Neem tooth pastes start showing up in the market. Now we understand the possible reason of never having the need to see a dentist in our childhood.

A naala (creek) feeds the Nehr. The good swimmers jumped into the river, the lesser ones bathe in the creek and non swimmers enviously looked on. Sometimes urged by the will to be part of the group and sometimes mischievously pushed into the naala, the non swimmers go through some 'gothe' (getting little bit of water in the windpipe or the lungs) and struggle out of the water gasping for air. Only once we heard of a boy getting washed away by the currents and occasional whirlpool that used to be fun to watch but we knew it could be deadly.

We are lucky that there is a play ground near the entrance gate. There is no development behind our house, just flat open field. There is ample ground to play all known outdoor games.

Piththu is a very popular team game in northern India. We collect 8 to 10 pieces of rocks, some flat and some irregular in shape. A flat one is placed on the ground and other irregular ones carefully stacked as a column. It is intentionally made easy to crumble and difficult to

reconstruct. Theekree is a variation where all the rocks are flat and easy to re-stack.

Two teams are formed. One player at a time from the offense team holds a rubber ball in hand, stands about 10 feet away from the rock column. One player from the defense team stands behind the column to catch the ball and the rest of the members from both sides spread out in the field. The object is for the pitcher to throw the ball and hit the column making the rocks scatter. He gets three attempts to hit the column and if he fails, other players in the team take turns. If all fail, the defense team becomes the offense team. When the column gets hit and crumble, the offense team players run up to the site, collect all the rocks and recreate the column. The defense team tries to hit the opponents with the ball. The offense team players scream, run, twist and turn, jump to avoid getting hit while at the same time continue the attempt to recreate the column. If the ball touches any player he sits out decreasing the number of column makers, making the hard job even harder. Eventually either the team successfully recreates the column or all their players are out after getting hit by the ball.

At the end of one game the teams reverse the role. The game goes on and on till Mata Ji (Mother, with Ji added as a sign of respect) call us in, announcing the dinner.

Hungry, exercised bodies need the nutrition. Without making any fuss we run in, wash hands, say a quick mandatory prayer, read Ramanan, sit down on the floor outside the kitchen and eat freshly cooked vegetables and fluffed fresh roti (round flat bread made of whole wheat flour.) made on the hot tava (Skillet). There is always a friendly argument about who gets the first roti. Having quickly devoured the food, washed hands and rinsed mouths, the boys are eager to go out and ready for more games.

It was only in later years we found out that Mata Ji had served all the vegetables to us and ate her own roti with salt, pickle and onions!

After the sun goes down, we play Lookan Mitti (hide and seek). It is not the kind we play with our grand children these days where a few

rooms and closets are chosen to silently hide and excitedly wait as the seekers are heard searching nearby.

Our hiding places are a set of about 30 neighborhood houses. No one is allowed to go inside their homes. We can hide on their rooftops, in their yards, gardens, tree tops or any outdoor locations.

One time we got into trouble as we went into an open outhouse which was being used by an older woman. Oops!

Every grown up person looks old to our young eyes. We are barred forever from going to that house again.

After 15 minutes or so the seekers go out hunting for the hidiers. Once a while the hidiers sends signals by whistling or shrieking. Like all games, this also comes to an end when the message comes that it is time to come back and sleep.

A glass of sweet milk, sometimes with bread pieces soaked in it works as a night cap. After a restful sleep the body is ready for school and then more games.

One very popular and apparently unique game of India is Gulli Danda. Gulli is constructed from about 4 inches piece of round wood. The two ends are chiseled like the ends of a sharpened pencil. The danda is about twenty inches long round tree branch which has been made smooth by sanding.

Gulli Danda is played in two ways. The common way is to have two teams of 5 to 6 boys on each side. A slit like burrow, khutti, is dug in the ground, the gulli is placed across it and the danda touching the ground is kept behind it. One player at a time from the offense team takes turn till they were all out. He pushes the gulli in the air. The defense team lines up a short distance in front of this starting point and tries to catch the gulli as it soars in the air. If it is caught, the boy is out and next players comes on. If it is not caught, the starting player keeps the danda across the slit. Offense team throws the gulli back, the goal is to hit the danda. If it touches the danda, the player is out and if not, the player strikes one end of the gulli with the danda making it rise in the air. As it rises up in the air he hits it away with the danda, the farther the better.

If he cannot not hit the gulli he is out. If it gets the hit and gulli gets caught, as it flies in the air, by the now spread out defense team, the player is out. If not, the defense player throws it back with an attempt to hit the danda placed across the khutti. If it fails the player hits the gulli from where it lands. The game goes on till all the players had a chance to hit the gulli. Number of hits decide which team wins.

Once all the players on the offense team out the teams reverse the role.

The other way these two tools are used is called Daayra (Circle). A large circle is drawn on the ground with chalk powder. One player from one team stands inside the circle with a danda in his hand. The opponent team players throws gulli in the air over the Daayra. The player inside the circle hits the gulli as it descends with the danda. If missed and it lands in the circle or if the gulli gets hit but caught he is declared out. Victory is decided by the number of hits. We never thought of eye injuries.

Riding bicycle with groups of friends is another fun exercise. We cut out a medium hard card board piece and stick it along the spokes of wheels in such a way that it creates an intermittent sound when the moving cycle makes the card board strike the spokes. Faster ride makes the beat faster to a level when you hear a continuous sound. Bike racing on the road is safe as there are no cars or scooters in our neighborhood. There is no concept of helmets or knee guards.

Rerha (rim of bicycle wheel) is another physical game children play. A metal rod is bent at one end to create a U shape that hold the rim of wheel, not too tight and not too loose. Having thus engaged the wheel in this contraption we run with it on the road. At times we have races running with the rehrha.

Sound of tho tho tho or hey kabbadi kabbadi kabaddi without taking the next breath can still be heard on command in my mind. Kabaddi, India's national game, is played by having two teams of about 5 to 10 players on each side. A dividing straight line is drawn between the teams with chalk powder and a square boundary line drawn around

both sides to demarcate the playing field. Clothes except underwear are taken off, body is soaked with sarson ka tel (mustard oil) to make it slippery and difficult to grab. One player from one side goes into the opponent's territory saying *tho tho....* or *kabaddi kabaddi* in one breath. He tries to touch as many players as possible while they attempt to escape getting touched. Their goal is to grab the invader and hold him down within their territory till he takes next breath. If successful, the invader is declared out but if the invader comes, touches the opponents and successfully retreats home, the boys he touched are out. Then a boy from the opposite side repeats the process. Victory is decided when all players on one side are out and the opponent still have players on the field.

We play Kabaddi mostly at the Shakhnas (Physical training classes arranged by RSS—Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh.” We wear khaki shirts, knickers and carry a bamboo stick. After physical exercises, bamboo stick fight training, a game of kabaddi is played. I must admit I was not cut out for such games.

British gave India the game of Cricket along with a common language, railway system, a common enemy and constitution while at the same time making Indians their slaves and subordinates for over two hundred years. They left an independent India and newly carved out country of West and East Pakistan in 1947. They vanished but Cricket stayed on as the most popular sport for the masses. It is played at the National, State, and school levels.

It is played in proper gear and attire on a well prepared ground. Inside a demarcated large oval field, a rectangular hard pitch, 66 feet long and 10 feet wide, is not covered with grass whereas rest of the field is. On each side of the pitch are three wickets made out of round wooden stumps with a horizontal groove on the top for the bails. A flat bat with a round handle is used to hit the red hard ball.

The game is also played by boys on the streets and local play grounds. We play either in the oval grounds in front of our house when playing with friends, in the yard between house number 2 and 3 with siblings

and later, during the Family Get Togethers, on the front brick lined courtyard. The wickets is made of tree branches or vertically stacked bricks. Street clothes without protective gear are the norm. The ball is either a cheap hard ball or bouncy rubber one. Ground is irregular grass, asphalt or bricks. Somehow we manage to get a proper bat. Most likely a gift from Prem. Rules of the games are followed as close as possible. Our brother, Krishan, is an exceptionally good cricket player as a batsman and a bowler. He is captain of Sanatan Dharam School cricket team. We walk with big smile and heads held high during days of inter-school cricket matches. When asked the reason of our joy, we would say with pride "I am Krishan's brother!"

Minor injuries are common in cricket and occasionally major ones too. Pajamas with large round bell bottoms are in fashion these days.

While running, six foot tall, lanky Virinder once gets his foot stuck in the flaying bottom of the pajama, trips and fractures his left forearm. A local masseuse fixed it.

Bunte (Marbles) is one of the most popular games. We happily play them under shade of trees or any available cool spot. They come in different colors and sizes. We buy them, win and sometimes acquire them by doing some work for others in return for marbles. They are our prized possessions, carefully counted and stored in glass bottles. Missing ones are detected, become cause for finger pointing and denials settled by occasional fist fights.

There are two ways we play them. In both versions we make a round shallow hole in the ground—khutti. Each player rolls a banta from a distance of about 4 to 5 feet toward the khutti. The one closets to it starts the game. Each player gives two bante to the player who rolls them toward the khutti. Some land in it. In one variation we squat and hold one banta between left and right index finger with right thumb resting on the ground. With the flick of right finger the banta is shot toward the one pointed by the opponent. If he is successful in hitting it, the player keeps the ones in the khutti, otherwise the next player takes turn. When all the marbles in play have been won the next game begins.

Sometimes a sore looser pees in the khutti. A common saying was "na khelan ge na khelan diyan ge, khutti vich mootan ge." It meant: neither we will play nor let anyone else play, will pee in the khutti".

Second version was to hit the pointed banta, while standing 4 to 5 feet away, with a banta almost twice the size of a normal one. Winners and losers are determined in the same manner as in the squatting version.

We love playing bante so much that sometimes we miss school. As much as we love having a large family of 8 siblings, the downside is that each one had a circle of friends. None of us can get away with mischief. Kanchan's friend reports to PitaJi when she found me playing bante during school hours. Everyone knows PitaJi's temper when it comes to education of his children. Puppy love becomes a bark. But we all knew that soon he would feel guilty of making his babies cry and reward them with sweets from Bosa Ram.

Patang udhana aur Peche ladhana (flying kites and get the string criss crossed with other flyers) is one of the passions in early spring. Major festival of Makar Sakranti around middle of January is celebrated by almost every household. We don't celebrate the religious aspect of it but enthusiastically participate by flying kites.

The grounds and fields are open and endless, unlike now when every spot of land is covered with residential quarters.

The process of flying kites is a major production. We go to market weeks ahead of the season and purchase crepe paper, hard bamboo shoots, spools of cotton thread, glue, and a charkhari (a cylindrical piece of wood with decorative flat round ends larger than the cylinder connected with one round 4 inches long half inch diameter piece of wood attached on each side. This is the spool on which the thread is wound.

Old glass bottles at home are crushed using a stone mortar and pastel to convert glass to extremely fine powder. Old pajamas or sheets are cut as thin strips, tied together to make tails for the kites. Depending on the financial situation we occasionally buy pre-made paper kites but almost

all are made our own hands. Paper is cut as squares, the bamboo sticks are cut with a sharp knife to make thin yet sturdy strips of same size as the kite. One is glued vertically down the two pointed ends. The second is arched horizontally, the ends at the horizontal tips with the highest point of arch near the upper tip of paper. These are glued to the paper and set aside to let them dry.

Glue is mixed with the glass powder and some wheat flour. This is called manjjha. It is used to coat the cotton thread. We tie one end of the thread to a tree or a post, rest is wound between posts or trees at several levels, finally tying the other end. Manjjha is applied by hand to the thread and dried in the ever present sun. Sometimes a sharp glass piece makes blood appear on hand. We just suck the site or patch it with manjjha till the bleeding stops.

The sun-dried manjjha coated thread (Dor) is wound around the charkhari (spool)

The kites have also dried up by this time. With a pin we make two holes around the junction of the vertical and the arched bamboo strip and two holes on either side of the lower end of the vertical bamboo strip. A Y shape of two threads is created by using knots. One end of the Y is passed though the upper set of holes and the other end through the lower set. They are secured with tight knots.

We are almost there and visualize the kite in the sky. We toe other end to the thread on the spool. The kite is balanced by tying small cloth pieces on the lighter side. The tail is tied at the lower end of the vertical stick. The sticks are bent and an arch is formed and finally the kite is ready to up and away in the hot blue sky.

On a windy day, standing in an open field or on roof top, one boy takes the kite about 15 feet from the flyer. When a gust of wind arrives he lets the fly go up while at the same time the flyer pulls in the dor making the kite soar up. This was called 'kanni dena'. Deftly, by giving dheel (letting go the dor) and intermittent pulling (tunka) the kite rises in the sky.

Sometimes we insert the dor end through a 3 to 4 inches square paper before tying it to the kite. We write our names or a random message on it. With each tunka the paper rises higher and higher till it reaches the kite.

Other boys around are raising their kites joining hundreds of others which paints the blue sky. They look like numerous birds flying. Kites of variety of colors, sizes, and tails fill the air. With efforts we engage dor of our kite with other's and give a sharp tunka. Glass in our manjiha is hopefully sharper than the other's. The end result is that one of the dor gets cut and kite gradually undulates as it descends, carried farther by the wind. Several boys run to catch the free floating prize. They run after the loose kite, on the ground and on the roof tops. On lucky days we retrieve our own or steal other's. Sometimes it get stuck in overhead electric wires and is considered lost. Sometimes the kite lands on a tree. Fearless children climb the trees attempting to be the first one to retrieve the kite. Falls from the trees and roof tops are natural hazard but youth trumps all fears.

Laughter, sounds of running foot steps, and fights over who caught the lost kites first fills the sky and earth. During the festive season it is a fair game and no one fights.

My fear of phobia of heights is traceable to seeing Shoki stepping down from the roof on to the concrete awning of a high window at 30 Railway colony. He was on his way to retrieve a kite stuck in an adjacent tall tree. He did get the kite but I held my breath, afraid that he might fall down anytime. Since then I cannot look down any building 6 floors or higher. I also get nauseous just seeing someone else do it.

Kho kho is another outdoor game I rarely play. It is a strenuous tag game between two teams comprising of 9 players in one and 12 players in the other team.

Football, called soccer in USA, is sometimes played in the playground. One of our friends, Bhashi uses his head a lot to hit the ball and is called Takroo. He also uses his head in occasional serious fights with other boys.

The girls play their own games. Boys never play with them. I don't recall any reason for it...it is just not done. They play Shataapu, Bante in a different version, dolls, and other games I don't remember. They help mothers in the household chores.

Boys are obviously spoiled but we never thought about it till now when I see our sons-in-law helping with household chores. We are creatures of our times and environments and become what we see and perceive as the norm for that era. Children become what they notice and not what they are told. I don't recall PitaJi doing any household work other than taking care of the yard and garden, procuring items for food and all other outdoor necessities. At no time Mata Ji asks him or us to help with cooking or laundry.

The only time Pita Ji cooks is when he can afford to buy a chicken. He sets up a chulha outside the house because MataJi does not allow cooking meat in her kitchen.

As if the outdoor games were not enough, we had many indoor games to keep us entertained and educated. My earliest memories go back to our paternal grandfather, Lalaji plays sweep with his friends. Once in a while he says "Ve mundiyo (O boys) ithe aao (come here). We eagerly run up to him, a rare thing for us.

He teaches us how to play card games –Sweep and Dussar. PitaJi also loves playing sweep with his friends after he retired at age fifty six, in 1962. This coincided with the last son leaving for college. Occasionally if one of his partners does not show up, we get a chance to play with them. They take the game seriously and tempers flare up at times. Mata Ji complains that they are having fun and she has to make tea for them.

Snakes and ladders on one side and Ludo on the other side of the board are fun to play by boys and girls. But we soon grow out of the childish game.

Chess never really caught on in our family; it needs too much brain and is too quiet for our family. Games have to be noisy and filled with fun and laughter.

Prem has taught us a very enjoyable game called Aaloo matar gobhi. The whole family sits in a circle and have equal number of cards dealt. The stack of cards is kept face down in front of each player. Each one of us is given name of a vegetable or fruit. Everyone tries to get a hard name. By turn each player quickly opens the top card from front end and lays it down. Other players follow suit. When the last opened card matches one open card of another player, the two loudly call out each other's given name. First one to call correct name gives their open pile of cards to the other. In the event of a dispute the remaining players become referees. The aim is to get rid of all the cards. All kinds of names get yelled out. If in a hurry, when the cards don't match and a player calls out a name, the opened cards of named person are given to the one who is too eager. There is lot of noise, wrong list of names blurted out, disputes about who was first to call out the correct name.

It gets confusing when the number of players approaches 5 or more and invariably it is more than 10. It is loud, friendly, noisy but always filled with lot of laughter. Once Laxman Jeejaji got so excited he almost got his glasses thrown off. It is not just mouths screaming, hands are flaying too.

In-Between is another game Prem brought to the family. A pool of money created by equal amount contributed by every player is collected in the center. Each player is given two open card. By turn the banker/dealers gives players one additional card, if wanted by the player. The recipient has to bet a sum of money, amount of bet depends on the chances of the next card to be in between the two cards in hand. Ace being the highest and 2 being the lowest creates the best chance of next card to be in between these two. The bet placed in this case is high. The least chance to win is if the two cards are like 7 and 9 or jack and king. There is no chance to win if the two cards are same. In this case the player may pass.

One also has to keep in mind how many cards have been dealt and what are the chances for the next card to be in between. Maximum bet

is the amount of money in the pool and how much money the player has.

This drama is deeply ingrained. Bhushan Jeejaji has ace and 2, giving him the best chance for the next card to be in between. He has very little money to bet and the pool is humongous. Pita Ji is the banker. Jeejaji bets his watch against the advices from many. But greed and Hope make us deaf. There is suspense in the air. Pita Ji deliberately delays dealing the next cards. Finally he opens the next card. It turns out to be ace. Jeeja Ji loses the watch to the banker—Father-in-law! Pita Ji has choice of keeping the watch with an upset son-in-law or breaking the rule and returning the watch to a disappointed loser. He wisely returns the watch. Peace is more important than greed.

Prem also brought to the family a game called 21 or pontoon which we found later was same as Black Jack. Bets are extremely small not by choice but by reality. We hardly have money to buy food, let alone gambling. Good thing is that winning and losing stays within the family. The bughee system of pooling family money evens out the winning and losing.

Rummy dealing 7, 10 or 13 cards is played depending on how many players are in the game. This again is a rather quiet game and therefore never popular.

Whenever Virmani Mamaji visits, a foursome including Suraj, Prem and Pitaji is made to play Bridge. The younger three are never included. Three tail Enders don't care for the serious game. Virinder sits out and watches very carefully. Whenever a player is needed to make the four-some they let Virinder play. Once he made one mistake, he was scolded, as it is commonly done during the postmortem of the Bridge game. Mama Ji scold him "Tenu bridge khelni kadi nahin aaye gee" (You will never learn how to play Bridge). He took criticism to heart and made a vow to learn this game as best as possible. At age 76 he played championship matches and invariably is first among a group of three to four hundred players !. Now at age of 86, he is very sharp and has patiently

taught it to me also. But he is kind and never scolds me and he is happy to see me less and less mistakes.

At our annual FGTs, he accepts me, a novice, as partner against Suraj and Prem who refuse to be my partner. Virinder and I lose every time because of me. But not once he scolds me. Instead, during Covid days in 2020 and 2022 he taught the game to me on Zoom and now at age 86 he and I play once a week on line. He is kind, patiently points out the correct play and never scolds me. He is happy to see his student make less and less mistakes.

Scrabble was brought by Prem. It becomes increasingly popular as our vocabulary improves in school or through the game. Bhushan Jeejaji is invariably the winner with the best vocabulary in the family. Only once I was able to beat him by making a seven letter word—rosette. It must have been a rare sweet victory because even the word is in my memory bank after over sixty years.

One by one, the birds flew out of the nest. Noise and laughter got replaced by quiet and solitude.

Pita Ji played Sweep and Dussar when he could collect other retirees. When the groups dwindled, finally Pita Ji played Solitaire, all alone. Seeing the scenes of laughter-filled games of the glorious days. A quiet tear of joy and sadness was felt in the throat, eyes and nose.

When I write about these games, I know that hardly any of these are played by the children in USA. I also wonder how many children in India play them these days.

Times change, lifestyles change and so do the means of entertainment and physical fitness. We all have our memories of our childhood. Hope the children today live their childhood fully and when they look back at this golden period of life they exclaim—Wow those were really great days.

Today's wonders become wonderful memories for tomorrow.

August 21, 2014

CHAPTER IV

GRIT AND BRAVERY

Growing up in the newly independent India, I did not realize or know that my mother and father were very brave. Not only brave, they anticipated the dangers ahead, acted upon them and in the process lost every material possession except the most precious commodity they had produced, protected, cared for and loved deeply. Together. That was the seven children with the eighth and last one to arrive three months after the move.

The event was a massive, partly anticipated, partition of India resulting in the free India and newly created Pakistan. India was built on a secular system while Pakistan was based on choice of religion, a land for Muslims. Our parents, Hindus, happened to be in the wrong section of India, and had a decision to make: Lose all the material possessions by leaving their home or risk their own and their family's lives by staying and hoping that the turmoil would settle and division of the country would not happen.

They made the right call. In May 1947 our parents, Vidya Wati and Kundan Lal Luthra, moved across the potential boundary line yet to be drawn by a British lawyer. This resulted in the greatest migration of humanity in recent history. About 14 million people crossed the borders and 1.5 million were killed.

Our family was safe, thanks to the foresight, wisdom and bravery of our parents. They had purchased a vacation home in Sabathu near Simla in March 1947.

They never mentioned the turmoils and tribulations they went through and provided us the most love filled, hatred free childhood. There was not a word of the enormous losses they had incurred, nor the fact that they had no money, no job, no source of support or hope. Their only guiding lamp post was to do whatever it takes to survive and do so with a smile. They knew that the children are very perceptive and pick up on the negative or positive vibes. They chose the latter.

Early on, they figured out that shelter, love and education were the keys out of misery. Without a paisa in hand, they bought a house with borrowed money, gave unconditional love beyond imagination and made sure that all eight of us got education to stand on our own feet. Four became engineers, one a businessman, two teachers and one doctor. Not getting an education was not an option for the children.

While growing up, we never heard them complain about politicians, British government, the circumstances or even the Muslims for asking for a new country which usurped our home and possessions. There were no regrets of the lost past, only grit to move on and survive to the best of their ability.

Over the last 68 years since the partition I received education and went on to become a physician, an Ophthalmologist, got married, blessed with a daughter, and emigrated to United Kingdom, blessed with two daughters and finally reached the United States of America. Life has offered its ups and downs. In the hardest of the times, I look back at what my parents went through and realize that my problems, no matter how big, are minuscule compared to ones tackled by Mata Ji and Pita Ji. That gives me courage to stand up and face the challenges as life presents to me and my family. My parents taught me that adversities will come, sometimes predicted and at times unannounced. The solution is to be brave, assess the situation and find the best possible way.

Forty Kilograms

Let not the past spoil the present and the future. Fill the days with grit,
love, bravery and forgiveness.

CHAPTER V

FOODS WE ATE

Mere thought or mention of Thandi daal and garam prantha (cold lentils and hot fried bread) awaken the senses of taste and smell amidst sounds of a bustling happy family, with a clear picture of Mataji as the conductor of the beautiful symphony played at 2, Model Town, Panipat, India in the 1950s and early 1960s. The hustle bustle, hugs and laughter add life to the scene.

It initiates mouth watering Pavlov's reflex and sliver of a water in the eyes as the mind gets transported to those heavenly days.

Distinct visualisation of the multi-layered prantha straight from the tandoor, transports and merges us into the past of caring love and a variety of perfectly prepared foods provided by our Pita Ji and magically cooked by our mother, Mataji. They are voraciously consumed by the fast growing jumping giggling bodies.

Hearing the word or seeing Amrood (guava) or Dussehri mango brings forth the images of young Pita Ji, ordering the best plants from the nursery and getting them planted for the use of his growing family in 1950. The greenery of plants and trees, the variety of fruits hanging from the branches; the color and fragrance of the flowers surrounding the house engulfed those who were fortunate to be part of this home.



The home-cooked food is painstakingly, always lovingly prepared and generously served by Mataji. Home grown fruit trees and vegetable plants are tenderly cared for by Pitaji and his little soldiers. Various festivals, celebrations and frequent sprinkling of, mostly unannounced but always welcome, guests brings in foods that are not commonly served.

We are a large family and have limited resources; we are refugees as a result of the recent partition of the country resulting in our migration to the new land. Mataji is always working from 5 am to who knows when. She is busy washing clothes, jharhoo poncha (brooming and dusting), but mostly chopping vegetables, cooking and serving.

By this time she is done being pregnant every other year, having given birth to 10 children between 1928 to 1947. Two did not survive past the age of five years, while we were still in that part of India which on August 14, 1947 became known as West Pakistan.

Pita Ji is mostly away from home procuring money by working at the newly learnt job of making bricks at the out-of-town brick kilns. He supplements the income by bringing home some and selling some of the produce from the farm land allotted to him in partial reparation of several acres we were forced to abandon in Pakistan.

He is kind hearted and generous to a fault at his own expense. The laborers at the farm are poorer than us. He gives away most of the pro-

duce to the families of the labor. As a result, sometimes he gets an angry response from Mataji who has been waiting for the vegetables. "Apne bachche bhukhe so jaan pur tuhanu kee parvaah" (our children may sleep hungry, but what do you care). He pleads, "Laborers have children too, who will definitely go without any food without our help. We may be poor but our children still have lot more." He is right. We did feel the churning stomach causing hunger pains but there is always something to eat. If nothing, we just climb on a mango or guava tree and get fresh fruit.

The days start with fried pranthas made on the skillet, home made yogurt, sometimes cold black or yellow lentils (thandi daal) and achar. One Anna or dwanni (1/16 or 1/8 of a rupee) is our lunch money with which, during school recess, we can buy food from the open stalls outside the school.

After walking or running home from school we are given a steel glass full of hot milk. Hectic outdoor playing requires much needed calories in the form of vegetables and many wheat rotis during dinner. Night cap is a glass of warm milk mixed with bread and sugar. On lucky days, it is filled with jalebi.

Almost everything is prepared from scratch. Wheat is the most commonly used flour. Pitaji purchases large jute sacs filled with wheat kernels. The wholesalers dusts the wheat with DDT to protect it from insects. No one knew, till much later, that DDT was a risk factor in causing cancer, when its use was banned.

Small portions of wheat are placed in a flat tray made of bamboo strips with its sides and back raised. It is gently shaken to get the husk separated from the kernels. The husk is gently discarded by shaking the tray, blowing it away or let the wind do the job.

The boys partially fill the oval steel drum with water, drawn manually, from the hand pump in the front yard. Using small buckets we put the kernels into the water. Playfully, we swish the kernels around and splashed water on one another. The faint dark water containing

dust, DDT and small floating bugs, called Ghun, is drained. Nothing is wasted.

Narrow brick lined naaliyaan (channels) take the water to the thirsty plants and trees. More water from the hand pump, more rinsing and draining till the water looked clean, brings a cheerful relief. Shukar hai!

White sheets are spread out on the cots or floor in the yard. We spread out the kernels evenly for them to dry out in the hot sun which shines over Panipat everyday except during the monsoon season.

Our job is also to keep an eye on the ever hungry larks, doves, pigeons, sparrows, crows and parrots. Beating steel drums with sticks to make loud sound and shooting stones with our gulel (slingshot) keeps the invaders away most of the time.

Dry kernels are then placed in more manageable sacs or containers. Loaded on the carrier of our prized bicycle, we pedal across the open fields into a new development called 8 Marla with much smaller homes. Aate di Chakki (flour mill) is owned by a kind, always smiling man. An electric motor runs the flour mill. He puts kernels in the large opening at the top and whole wheat flour comes out from the chute, a magical event to us. Containers are refilled with ground wheat flour. We secure them on the carrier and peddle our way home. Pitaji settles the bill every month.

Prior to this machine we had a Chakki (Manual Grind) at home. This is made of two round rough stones, with a minimal gap between them, stacked and kept together by a vertical piece of wood going through a hole in the center. The top one has a hole for feeding it with wheat kernels and a vertical handle near the edge for rotating it. Rotating off the top stone grinds the kernels between the two stones and aata spills out at the edges. It is hard work. When one hand gets tired we switch hands and, to catch our breath; all of us take turns.

The flour is stored in air tight metal containers (peepe) with a hinged lid that is latched securely. Even then it is not uncommon to see Susrian (Weevils) crawling around in the flour. They are small black cylindrical shaped bugs which find their way into the flour. Or most likely their

eggs hang on to the kernels, escape the effects of DDT or crushing and are now happily hatching in the flour. No one freaks out; it is normal and just another nuisance we learn to live with. We were not so rich to discard the whole thing. Susrian are manually picked out or we use a fine chaanani (sieve) to let the aata (flour) go through into a more secure container and discard the susrian crawling around in the chaanani. Any remaking ones or their Aggarwa are going to get cremated on the skillet anyway.

In addition to the wheat we sometimes buy pre-made flour of barley or corn. Combination of Makki di roti, makhkhan and saag (corn bread, butter and spinach) is one of the classic Punjabi foods. Made out of corn flour, the thick large roti cooked on skillet with slow heat or in the tandoor till black spots start showing on the surface. A clump of home made butter in the middle with a side dish of sarson da saag (mustard leaves) and a glass of lassi (yogurt mixed with water and rock salt) is heavenly combination for any Punjabi, anywhere. It is usually served for lunch, which induced a deep slumber on a cot in the shade of a tree.

Cooking is done indoors or outdoors depending on the weather. In early 50s outdoor cooking is done on a clay 'Chulha'. It is a U shaped structure hand made with clay at home. The approximately 2 inches thick walls were about 10 inches high. The first chulha was placed near the southern boundary wall of the house. Later on a gate was built in that section of the wall and the chula was moved closer to the house, near the large mango tree.

For the purpose of creating cooking fire, the children gather dry tree branches from the surrounding woods and stack them. We purchased larger logs of wood from the market.

A unique source of fuel is made from the cow dung called 'gobar'. We follow a herd of stray cows with a round shallow metal container and a scooper in our hands. Even though we close our noses, the large green clumps are a delight to our eyes. We run to collect them in the container till it is filled or too heavy to carry on our heads. The pre-

cious free material is placed in a heap near the south boundary wall. It is mixed with Toodhi (cut pieces of dry wheat plant). Round balls are flattened with bare hands into a 8 to 10 inch round patties, called Goye, and stuck to the walls. Hot sun dries them in a few days, at which time they are peeled off and stacked in piles. They are excellent fuel for slow cooking and perfect example of not letting even the animal waste go waste.

Dry wood and goye are placed in the chulah through the open end of the U. A fire is lit and air is blown into it through an about 18 inches long metal cylindrical pipe called 'Phookni'. Dried ashes fly back making us squint our eyes. Invariably some ashes and smoke get to the eyes. Watering of the eyes is a common consequence of using phookni. Once the fire starts, smoke vanishes and our natural stove is ready for the magic through Mataji's hands.

The flour is mixed with water and dough is kneaded (guniya) in a large metal deep dish called praat. She makes round balls and by deftly slapping them between two hands she creates a perfectly round roti. Tawa, metal skillet, has already been heated on the flame. One after another, countless rotis are cooked. The puffer the roti, the hungrier are the eaters, is a common saying.

A glob of home made butter or a half spoon of ghee is placed over the roti and served hot on a steel plate. A burki (piece) from the roti is broken off by fingers and used to wrap up one or two vegetables and eaten with great delight and to no end, unless the Aata finishes. Onions and home made achar are the condiments; or sometimes the only accompaniments of rotis if there are no home grown vegetable or money. They are also common dishes for Mataji, who unbeknown to us, keeps giving us the cooked vegetables till there is nothing left for herself.

All types of lentils are prepared. Udhad ki dal is most commonly made. It is kept in a pot full of water and cooked on low heat for several hours. Chane ki dal is notorious for producing noxious gases next day. In fact, if someone farted with a foul smell, he was asked "Kal chole di daal khaai see kya?" (Did you eat chick pea lentils yesterday?)

Sometimes Mataji grates cauliflower and/or white radish and uses them as fillings to make pranthas. Garnished with butter, they are a delight to eat with salted yogurt. Kali Daal is all time favorite for all.

Some days she makes Choori for us. It is ghee filled roti broken up into small pieces and has sprinkling of granulated jaggery or Shakkar.

In October 2013, Prem, on a flying three days visit at Virinder and Santosh's home in Delhi, had asked Salomi to make Choori for him. Such was the impact of the loving and delicious food of our childhood and its impressions on the hard drive of our brains. That was his last serving of choori, he died at the age of 81 years in February 2014

We also have an outdoor Tandoor in the corner between the walls of the kitchen and small dining room, facing the north boundary wall. Tandoor is an oval cylindrical structure made of clay. It is open on the top and closed all around except for a small hole in the side wall near the bottom. It let the air flow through while cooking and ashes out at the end.

It is preheated by burning wood logs and dried branches in it. Once the wood has turned into red coal and the inside walls of tandoor take on reddish hue, Mataji bravely inserts her hand carrying the round flat dough (roti) on the front and a thick cloth for protection on the back. The rotis are stuck to the hot wall. Once a young boy from Bombay, who had never seen a tandoor, was visiting and was awed by the roti sticking to the hot tandoor wall. He asked Mataji "Do you put glue on the roti before sticking it to the wall?"

One roti followed the other till the dough was finished. The cooked tandoori rotis are snapped off by hand or a chimta (metal prong).

Some of us love dry kadhak (crisp) roti while some love a generous ball of butter or melted ghee. Mataji creates several variations to the basic theme of the tandoori roti. Some are single layered, some multi-layered with a coating of ghee between the leaves of dough; some sprinkled with red mirchi or stuffed with onions or boiled mashed potatoes. Sometimes rotis are made with the flour made from barley or corn.

The family members sit on cots or chairs pulled out of the house. Thandi (cold) daal, one or two vegetables and home made yogurt and ahaar makes a perfect meal. Till today, even in the best the restaurants, our favourite food is kadhak hot dry roti and kaali cold daal.

Some people have made a business out of the tandoors. On days when Mataji is tired or we expecting company, Mataji makes the dough and we take it to the community tandoor. They charge small amount of money, and convert the dough into a stack of rotis. They offer optional purchase of maah di kaali daal (black lentils) which we rarely purchase.

It is common custom for Mataji to pack some food and send one of the boys to take it to our family's Guru, Shakuntla Behan Ji at 9 Model Town. Other neighbors frequently exchange food.

The outside chulha slowly surrenders to kerosene burning pressure stoves. They are made of brass. Kerosene is filled into the base container through a screw type round capped hole. We have to pump lot of air to create pressure with a piston attached to the container. Kerosene vapours come out through a round fenestrated knob at the top. It is lit with a match producing a bluish flame which is accompanied by a hissing sound of pressure pushing out the kerosene. A round thick wire platform on the top holds the skillets or pots.

We are fortunate but some are not. It is not uncommon to hear the horror stories of pressure stove bursting and injuring its users.

The risk of bursting and expense led to development of one with a wick. One inch wide, cotton wick has one end place in the kerosene filled base and the other end is lit. Its height and size of the flame can be adjusted with a twist knob.

Poor economy and hoarding by wholesalers and retail merchants cause shortage for consumers. Kerosene, like many other commodities, is rationed. We have a ration card which allows us to get a fixed amount of kerosene, sugar and grain every month.

We also have an Angeethi, a metal burner in which coal is burnt for slow cooking and heating water. Coal most often used is called Pakka

kola. It is mined and similar to the one used in the railway engine. We go to the railway station and sometimes are lucky to find spilled over coal from the railway engine.

In contrast, the soft coal is produced from partially burnt wood and therefore more expensive and less popular.

The chulha still stays as a back up. The wick driven stove gave way to gas cylinder with its own rubber tube connected to a portable stove with one or two burners. The red metal cylinders are delivered on demand, loaded on a three wheeler tempos, but invariably are in short supply. We don't know if there is real shortage or is it hoarding.

The indoor and outdoor chulha survives as back up till there are no shortage of kerosene or gas cylinders. It is extinct now in urban settings but still seen in villages. The gas cylinder has stayed as the primary source of cooking. Cylinders slowly gave into piped gas into homes.

The tandoors have mostly simply vanished from homes.

At a much later date, Dolly's mother mentioned to Shoki that she wished she had a tandoor. Shoki conveyed this to Pitaji who quickly got one made. Shoki, who studied in Engineering college, Chandigarh, carried one on top of a bus and presented it to Dolly's mother, Mrs. Shielly Sachdev. She was a superb cook as well and used the tandoor for a number of years.

The biscuits are made in a bakery located in a house beyond 100 Model Town. Mataji prepares and gives us sweetened dough. We carry it to the bakery. The owner flattens the dough and using various types of steel Saanchas, (cutters) he cut out the shapes requested. These are put on a metal tray individually. The tray is placed on the wide, flat metal surface connected to a long rod. This end with the tray is placed in an oven heated by flames of burning wood. After a few minutes it is pulled out with crisp hot biscuits which are stacked in a peepa (metal container with a latching lid).

Mataji stores these as well as other sweets in a wooden almaari in the store room. She locks the door to keep these goodies away from us. But

there is a removable drawer above the door. We remove the drawer and insert our flexible hand and arm down to get the goodies out!

Almost always we eat vegetarian food. Pitaji was a farmer before the partition and is blessed with a dark green thumb. He has created a beautiful garden at home. Many of the vegetables are grown in our own home. They included potatoes, turnips, onions, bhindi, karele, cauliflowers, baingan, bell peppers (Shimla mirch), hot mirch, peas, and thori. The dried stems of thori's plant are used as pretend cigarettes by the children.

Mushrooms are picked by the children in the open fields. There is one patch of fields where the mushrooms actually mushroomed. Early bird get the worm, is known to us. We get to it way before the sunrise and pick up umbrella shaped mushrooms.

Lotus stems called Bhen is a delicacy and cooked along with potatoes.

The home-grown fruits are guavas from the 6 trees, all have white pulp except one which is pink. Dussehri mangoes from the tall original tree and the one that grew from an accidental discarded guthli, jaamun from an almost 50 feet tall tree which grew accidentally in our yard, shehtoot (mulberry, anaar (pomegranate), nimbu (lemon), bananas, papaya, red and white grapes. Every couple of weeks, Pitaji pours red blood at the roots of the grape vines. We think it is to give red color to the grapes. Only later we discovered that it was nitrogen rich fertiliser blood that the local butcher saved for our grapes.

Mataji is busy, on her Singer sewing machine, stitching cloth pouches for us to tie around the bunches of grapes to protect them from the birds.

Children are always busy shooping away the parrots who love to eat ripened guavas. Worst part is that they bite into not so ripe ones. They don't like the taste and move onto another one. As a result the fruit tots away. We scare them with sounds of drum beat or hitting them with stones shot from our Gulel (sling shot).

One day we are playing out side. The sky quickly get dark in the middle of the day. We soon learn that this is a major locust attack. The sky got dark because millions of locust swarmed over Panipat. We are scared to go out. They fly into us. There is hardly any place to walk without stepping on them. We are scared they may eat us. They devour everything that is green.

We muster courage and step out to beat large tin cans loudly with wooden sticks to scare them away. They completely ignore us and the sound of drum. We could not save that year's crop but luckily did not lose any trees or plants. Next year blooms and fruit flourished.

We love to eat plenty of home grown fruits. Even after filling our stomachs we cannot finish all that nature gives us. Excess is partially distributed to neighbors while the rest is carried to a vegetable shop on the Railway road across the railway lines. The shop is owned by the two most pleasant brothers. We barter guavas for other vegetables and fruits.

Fruits that we purchased were Ber, Peelu, watermelon, cantaloupe, oranges, and louquat. After eating cantaloupes we save and dry the seeds. These are later peeled, eaten raw or put in the rice kheer.

We buy Singhadhe, raw green ones or boiled purple ones from the vendors who carry them on large cart with wheels. Once Pitaji brought a large jute bag full of the most delicious Singhadhe. Krishan, who died at a young age of 45 years in 1987, used to love them.

Over-stuffed trucks and carts pulled by tractors carry Ganne (Sugar cane) to the Sugar Mill. We along with many children run along or behind them and pull out the Ganne. After washing them, we use a knife to peel off the hard skin. The sugar containing pulp is either cut into pieces with a sharp knife called ganerian or pieces are bitten off by mouth. They are chewed till no more juice comes out. The remains are spitted out.

Some vendors sell Ganne da rus (sugar cane juice) by squeezing the whole sugar cane through two metal rollers. The rollers are rotated

manually by a handle till electric ones came along. We generally avoid them due to reasons of hygiene.

Some venders sell moongphali (peanuts) on a rolling cart. A pile is made and a clay container filled with burning charcoal is placed in the middle. Warm moongphali is sold and dispensed in envelopes made out of newspaper. Moongphali is also sold in the movie halls during the interval. It is a common scene to see people peel the shells, put the roasted peanuts in their mouths and discard the shells on the floor. The concept of using a trash can is unknown to us.

Chabriwalas, carry various fried spicy lentils, in two large platters connected by ropes to two ends of a bamboo stick, which is carried over the shoulder. Fresh lemon is squeezed on the sold portion, which is dispensed in cones made from newspapers. Roasted spicy Chana chor garam is another snack sold by them. It is a common custom to ask for Jhoonga. It means asking the vendor to put a little bit more than the agreed upon portion purchased.

Corn on the cob is sold along the streets. The sellers sit on the ground with stacks of raw corn cobs. They have a pile of burning charcoal over which air is blown with a hand held fan to generate extra heat. The cob is held over the red hot coal and rotated slowly. The kernels make crackling sound as they turned light black. When it has been cooked all around, a cut lemon, dipped in salt, is rubbed over it. Yummy !!

Gol Gappe is a popular snack. Round small puffed sooji / flour made pieces are poked with thumb, filled with a mixture of boiled potatoes, onions and chick peas. The vendor dips them into a large clay pot filled with specially made mixture of water and several condiments.

We put the whole thing in the mouth taking care not to snap down the teeth till the lips were fully closed. No gloves or hand washing is done. Miraculously we all survive.

A flat version of the same sold as Chaat Papadhi. They are put in a plate and garnished with chopped onions, imli and mint chutney and yogurt. Salt and pepper is sprayed on it.

Now I wonder if the dispenser ever washed his hands. They are dispensed on small plates. A boy discards the solids into a Tokri (basket) and quickly rinsed the plates by dipping them in succession through two buckets filled with water, first one looks dirty and second one half clear. No running water or soap is used. Stray dogs surround and fight over the leftovers.

We buy Chitri vaale Kele, ones with black spots beginning to form. They more sweet. Salted bananas also sold in the market. The seller peels one side of it, slices the length of the banana and pours salt mixed with other tangy condiments in the slit. It makes banana mouth watering delicious. Similarly we put salt on the slices of watermelon.

Kulfi and falooda are sold in the summer season. The vendors also sell shaved ice balls covered with various colored syrups.

While traveling by train, Mataji packs few pranthas made with dry jeera, Aalu and achaars. Sometimes we bring hard boiled eggs for the journey.

In the evening, after washing hands and reading Ramaayan, (Hindu holy book), we are given a spoonful of Sehat. It is an Ayurvedic solution to promote health, as indicated by its name. It is bitter but we drink it anyway, with our nostrils closed.

After bickering over who gets the first roti, we get our fill of vegetables and rotis. Home made achaar is made and stored in shiny tall pale colored clay containers. Mango, turnip, lemon and ginger are the most commonly made achaars by Mataji.

We do not like Teende and Kaddoo. Bhindi is our all time favorite. Karele are also up there in our list. It is a lengthy process to make them. We help peel them. They were then squeezed to get some of the bitter juice out. Mataji partially slices them length wise. A pre-made masaala is filled in. It is tied by a cotton thread to prevent the masaala from leaking. They are sautéed with onions and ready to serve when they turn dark brown. The cooked crunchy seeds taste beyond description.

All the expertise, time spent and effort in cooking is appreciated by asking for more, a standard way of meaning it to be a compliment. Ver-

bal praise is not heard, a learnt trait which we did not get. We still get into trouble for not complimenting our wife's cooking. When someone else cooks and we praise them, it becomes a recipe for double disaster.

About once a month, Pitaji cooks goshth (lamb meat). Mataji stays away from non-veg cooking. Although she ate meat before marriage, she stopped eating it afterwards. Our grandfather, Lalaji, told her "In our house, women do not eat meat." Such was the power of men those days.

The aroma of goshth spreads all over the house. It is savored by all but Mataji. Sometimes he cooks chicken also. A live hen is bought from a large cage in the market. The neck is severed, its feathers were plucked, skin peeled off and guts are discarded. It is done outside the house. They are expensive and therefore made occasionally.

During Wedding times, few halvaais (cooks) set up their chulhas and tandoor on the yard between house number 2 and 3. They come about 3 or 4 days before and cook for the family and friends, who start gathering a few days before and stay a few days after the event. Hot puffed poori, bhatoore and chole are loved by all.

They also make sweets like Shakkar Paare of refined and non refined sugar. Other sweets are purchased from Bosa Ram.

He sold several varieties of barfi—plain, pista, kaju, and badaam. In addition, he sold gulab jaman, milk cake which was also called Kalakand, and for unknown reasons, Palangtodh. He also makes hot Jalebi. It is fascinating to watch it being made. Semi-liquid dough is placed in a piece of cloth with a small hole in it. He has a large pot filled with boiling oil. Carefully and expertly he squeezes the dough onto the hot oil, making circular connecting pattern in a line. Sizzling sound and conversion of dough as it gets cooked into a jalebi still causes mouth to water. The long stack is picked up and placed in a large container containing orange color sugar syrup. Jalebi stays in it to soak the syrup (Chaasni). Children and adults loved eating jalebi by itself or in

combination with vanilla ice cream or rabdhi. Sometimes we mix jalebi, instead of bread, with milk as a night cap.

Unknown to us, Pitaji has a running account with Bosa Ram. His children and later, grand children used to think that Bosa Ram was such a nice man, he gave sweets and salty dishes free to all the children who came from 2 Number.

Festivals and guests bring most delicious sweets to our home. Boxes of sweets are used to exchange gifts at the time of Diwali. Pitaji buys special Pedhe from a shop in the Shehar (old city). Weddings and other festive occasions are reasons to send sweets, generally Boondi de Laddoo, to relatives and friends. For some auspicious reasons, the number ends with 1; e.g, 11 or 21 or 51.

Once such a tray had arrived and stored in the Almari. Some guests arrive and Pitaji asks me to bring out the tray. While in the store, with nobody watching, I eat one and innocently bring the tray to Pitaji. Unknown to me, he knows the missing one right away. He questions me twice if I ate one. When I deny the second time, I receive the first and last resounding slap from him. Touching my cheek, I still love it.

At the times of Festivals or Poojas, Mataji makes wheat or sooji halva, plain or with white resins and cashews. It is served as Prasad, offering or as a dessert. Whether semi solid hot or cold, it is one of the most delicious desserts.

Boondi Ladoos or plain Boondi is served every Tuesday evening, the day for Hanuman Puja, at the temple in house number 22. We stand in line two or three times till caught by the friendly Pandit Ji, who later conducted our marriage ceremonies.

We have a cow in our house. It is free to go about for grazing in the open fields but at home it is tied to a wooden post in the corner between house number 2 and 3. Its feed is prepared by chopping hay with a large set of blades held in the circular metal rim. A handle connected to the rim is pushed manually as the hay is fed into the machine. The rotating blades chop the hay into small pieces. Virinder is the main person in charge of feeding the cow. Sometimes other children also help him.

Cow's milk is saved for Pitaji's father, Lalaji's need. Remainder goes into the common pot for the rest of the family. Milk is usually drawn in the mornings. Mostly the grown ups do this job but sometimes children are allowed to help. The cow's hind legs are tied near the ankles; she is known to occasionally kick the thief of her milk. The udders are washed with water and primed. A washed metal bucket is held between the thighs as we squat to milk the cow. We constantly watch for her tail as she swings it to shoo away the flies, other insects and the invaders of her milk. Squeezing the udder produces a stream of milk which we point into the bucket. First one produces a metallic sound while the following ones produce a layer of foam on the surface of milk. Sometimes we point the stream into our mouth, drink fresh milk and many times miss the mark with milk splashed over the face.

Home production is not enough for the large family. The remainder is purchased from the milk vendor. The vendor ties two large drums, with narrow necks, on each side of the bicycle over the rear wheel. Milk is dispensed by ladles of quarter 'ser', one ser being little less than one kilogram. Required quantity is transferred into the recipient pot.

It is a known fact that most vendors mix water into the milk. One only hoped that there was more milk than water. The joke is "I hope you used water from a tap, not from the stream." The vendor always says "Others may be doing it but Ram kasam (By God), I don't do it." Everyone knows it is a lie and say "Achcha Achcha , swere swere jhooth nahin boli da" (OK, don't tell lies in the morning." The subject is dropped for similar conversation a few days later.

Cow's milk is supposed to be less fatty and more pious and is used for auspicious occasions. Babies are fed cow milk; it is felt to be easier to digest. Buffalo milk has more fat but is cheaper. We purchase both. Milk is not pasteurised and therefore is always boiled with at least two ubaalas (heating it twice till the foam nearly spills.)

Milk is used for general consumption, making tea, custard, rabdhi, phirni, kheer, gaajar halva, ice cream, and yogurt and its products such as lassi, makhkhan, and ghee. Yogurt is eaten as such with salt and pep-

per and also used to make kadhi and raita. Nearly spoiled yogurt is used as face and hair cleaner.

Yogurt mixed with a little water is churned in a clay pot called Madhaani. A wooden rod has long rope wound around it. The ends of rope are held in each hand and pulled alternately giving rotation to the rod. Wooden end inside the madhaani is a cricket ball size which has been cut to make four prongs. The white butter came up on the surface and it is scooped out.

Butter is partly used as such and partly boiled, producing clear liquid called Ghee. The dried foam at the bottom and side of the pot is called 'Pondh'. It is scraped and Mataji uses it as a filler to make Pondh de praanthe. Because of its limited quantity there is competition as to who gets them, a major source of sibling fights.

Mataji is allergic to milk but can eat yogurt and its products. Strangely though, she can walk right up to a bee hive, with the bees swarming around her, and not even one bites her.

In winter months we mix Jelly powder with water and put it in a container with a lid. It is hung overnight on the clothes line which spans the long yard, one end tied to the mango tree and other on mulberry tree, about 60 feet apart. It is hung to save the jelly from the many stray cats in the area. Frozen, undulating jelly is ready to be eaten in the morning.

"Baitho na, chah thaana pee ke jao. Jaldi ki aye" (Sit down, have tea at least. What is the hurry) is a very commonly heard sentence in our home. Anytime and every occasion was tea time in India. Not being asked for tea is considered a sign of insult. "Lao Ji, asi unhan de ghar gaye, chaah thak nahin puchee!" (See, we went to their house, they did'nt even offer tea !"

Tea is also used for other language. If a guest stays too long, the host says "Ik cup hor piyo ge?" (Will you have one more cup?) The meaning is known to both parties. The guests politely get up and the host sees them off outside the gate. The departing guest joked "You want to make sure that I am definitely out of the house" and the guest replied "Nahin, eh thaana tuhaada apna ghar aye, jadon marzi aa jaao". (No,

this is your own house, come back any time”) Relieved, the host closes the door.

But sometime the line misfires and the guest says ”Lao thusee in-haan hee kehnde ho phir ik cup hor piya diyo.” (If you insist, make one more cup). Smiling outwardly, the host makes another cup, inwardly promising not to ask for the third.

Neighbors, family or friends drop in unannounced. We have no telephone or even a door bell. A knock on the door or simply showing up is the normal way for an arriving friend or relative. Hot tea is served.

Pitaji relishes playing cards. Solitaire is his favorite solo card game. His favourite team game is Sweep, played by two or foursome. His buddies show up around 10 am. Mataji grumbles ”eh thaana taash khelde nein, chaah thaana mainu babaani paindi aye!” (“they play cards, I am the one who has to make tea!”)

Mostly it is Indian style and occasionally it English style. Indian style is to boil water in a pan with a handle, add tea leaves and bring to a boil twice by moving the pan away and bringing it back. Generous amount of milk is added and brought to a foaming boil twice. Sugar is added as is ilaaychi or ginger (cardamom or ginger). The tea is filtered through a metal chanani (sieve) with a handle into a glass. It is savored by drinking while making a slurping sound thus avoiding burning lips. Sometimes tea is poured on to a saucer and slurped from the edges.

English style tea is reserved for upscale guests. Locally purchased black tea leaves are stored in a glass container with a tight fitting lid. Later, Bhushan Jeejaji, manager at a tea estate garden in Assam, brings special Darjeeling or Assam tea. Boiled water with tea leaves is put into a ceramic, decorated tea kettle and covered with a thick tea cozy to keep it warm. Milk boiled separately and served in a matching milk pot. Sugar has its own decorative pots. After letting it brew in the kettle, tea is poured through a round metal chaanani into a cup with a small matching saucer. Chaanani had its own stand to catch the drips. Milk and sugar are added to taste. It is savored in a cup without slurping. Occa-

sionally a sophisticated guest expose the Indian in the guise of Anglo-Indian by drinking it out of the saucer and making slurping sound.

Tea is accompanied by home made pakodhe or Bosa Ram made pakodhe and samose. Mint and turmeric chutney are used as a dip. Parle, Marie or locally made biscuits and rus are served. The latter are eaten producing crunchy sound, spreading small crums on the clothes and floor or dipped in the tea to soften them. Barfi and other sweets are served according to the occasion or status.

Coffee and alcohol are not served, even to the sophisticated guests. Tea rules everywhere; at the bus stops, railway stations and through independent stalls surrounded by ever present flies. In our house tea is served only when guests came or when Pitaji wants. Children are not allowed to have tea. Things change when Chander and Santosh join the family. They brought the tradition of tea being made every morning and evening.

One by one the birds flew away from the nest, making their own nests all over India with one in the USA. Pitaji retired after Shoki joined college in 1962. Life slowed down. Families got together in Panipat at weddings or Family Get Togethers (FGT). Food preparations and variety declined.

Pitaji still liked to pick up his Thaila (cloth bag), and walk over to Bosa Ram chowk. A vegetable vendor had set up a shop across the street from Bosa Ram. This was Pita Ji's exercise, connection to the past and some socialization.

On December 27,1976, like every other day, Pitaji went over to the market, bought vegetables and had social talks with other shoppers. In the afternoon he talked with the renters and reminisced about how his own father had died while reading the Gutka. He looked and felt fine.

At the Satsang time, around 5.00 PM, he told Mataji "I feel little tired today and will not go to the Satsang." Mataji went alone. After the Satsang she chatted with her friends for a while. When she returned around 6.30 pm, she saw Pitaji lying on his hard bed, takhtposh , in his small room. He had a quilt wrapped around. "Looks like the cold is

getting its grip on me.” As he used to like, Mataji squeezed his legs for a while. It was common for the recipient to lie face down and the massage giver would gently, alternately stand over the calves. Mataji was doing that and talking about the cold. She heard him take two somewhat loud and deep breaths and then it all became quiet. Mataji turned him over. His eyes were closed, never to open again. Breath chain cut never to start again. A wonderful courageous 70 years young man with multitudes of ups and downs, never complaining about anything, a wonderful husband, loving and caring father and grandfather and provider of all love, material goods and foods at 2 Number Makan, left the world with his favorite Mala in his right hand and a crying wife by his left side.

During the memorable and fantastic FGT in Hyderabad, at the recommendation of Namita, Mataji was honoured at a special lunch at the Oberoi hotel. She sat in a chair, inwardly missing her husband and the departed son, with a smile of satisfaction, joy and pride on her face. Momentarily she had a distant look wishing Pitaji were also here with her to see the beautiful garden they had grown together with their love, grit and hard work. Every family member presented her one rose flower and received her blessings.

On February 4, 1990 Savita and Shoki had arranged a dinner at home and invited their friends, all of whom addressed her as Mataji. She recanted old stories and they shared jokes and tears producing laughter.

On February 5, 1990 Mataji and her help, young Sushma, started a long train journey to Panipat. Savita and Shoki saw her off. ”I don’t feel like going back”, she told Savita as Shoki went to pick up dosa, vada and Saambar requested by her. After asking them to buy an independent two bedroom house for her nearby and promising to come back permanently after 6 months, she settled in her seat, the train pulled her toward her cherished home where she felt like a queen.

She was scheduled to get off at Delhi and stay a few days with Kanchan and Bhushan Jeejaji. Jeejaji actually went to Delhi railway station to pick her up. She had different plans or there was a divine plan not known to anyone at that time. She made an excuse that there was too

much luggage, even counting the ones belonging to a co-passenger. She would rather go to Panipat, settle all this stuff and then come back to Delhi.

She reached Panipat on February 6. She and her constant companion, Sushma, had dinner at the home of Mr. Bajaj, a neighbor. They recounted all the highlights of the FGT, like she did before and after every FGT. She was in great mood reflecting a full purposeful life. She had plans to go back and settle in Hyderabad in August, 1990.

On February 7, 1990 she woke up early, as always, and started doing her life long favorite activity. She picked egg plants from her own garden. After washing up, she wore colourful salwar kameez, unlike the usual white saari. She sliced the baingan and started cooking them on the stove in the small kitchen. She had put the salt in the pot and picked up turmeric between her thumb and two fingers from her rectangular wooden condiment dispenser with a sliding lid to put in the skillet when she collapsed on the floor.

Her young help, Sushma, heard the thud, called out Mataji, Mataji ! from the adjoining room. Having heard no response, she rushed into the kitchen to grasp the scene. Mata Ji was laying on the floor, head under the sink, haldi in her hand, and no breath. A frantic run to the neighbours, a failed dash to get any doctor could not change the fate. At the age of 78 Mata Ji passed away peacefully doing what she loved, in a spot where she had toiled tirelessly her entire life for the family she loved and cherished and fed.

CHAPTER VI

VENDORS AND HAWKERS

Silence is the first things that hits me when I return from India. The orchestra of sounds created by animals, birds and human vocal cords, along with a variety of man-made machines and amplifiers suddenly vanishes, making me wonder if I am losing my sense of hearing or facing deafening silence.

This is particularly true of the era long gone, the years of Panipat in the 1950s. The years when the flower of life, as I know, started blooming and absorbed the panorama of the world around me. Times change but the memories of those days, somewhat faded, still linger.

Among the constant background sounds, the one missed the most is the periodic shrill yelps of numerous vendors and hawkers selling products in the trains, buses, movie theaters, on the streets and roads.

Who can forget the shrill high pitched sound of 'Chai garam' at the train stations? Just as the train begins to slowly pull in to the station, numerous young boys start the chorus, trying to outdo one another, to seek attention of potential customers. The bolder ones hop on to the steps of the moving train, precariously holding onto the metal handle bar while balancing their aluminum kettles and reddish brown clay mugs. They briskly walk up and down the aisles to get a first shot at the thirsty, tea loving customers. Various tones and pitches saying

Chai Garam fill the air inside the train and along the windows partially blocked by horizontal bars with enough space to exchange a steaming hot mug with money.

Some vendors carry the tea in aluminum kettles and some in open buckets. Flies follow the sweet smell of pre-mixed sugar.

The tea sellers are soon followed by sellers of moongfalli (peanuts) still warm in their shells. They are served in folded bags made out of old newspapers. It is a common scene to have the empty open pods scattered all over the train floor. Some snacks like fried yellow moon daal, roasted chick peas are served in conical containers created from old newspapers. Even the thought of spicy fried lentils in the cones with freshly squeezed lemon juice induces Pavlov's reflex of saliva trickling in the mouth.

Moongfalis were gradually getting replaced by pre-packed nuts, spicy snacks and biscuits.

"Santre kele le lo!" (get oranges and bananas) is hawked by another set of sellers. Fruits are stacked on round jute trays deftly balanced on one hand as the other hand exchanges the goods for money. Seasons dictate the types of fruits; cut slices of watermelons are popular in hot summers.

All of them manage to squeeze through the narrow aisles rubbing shoulders with the constantly moving passengers and fellow vendors. Somehow they deliver the merchandise, collect money and almost always jump off the moving train, maximizing their time in the compartments.

Alongside the train are also boys walking briskly and hawking garam samose and pakode. They make a great combination with garam chai. They are dispensed in the double layered pieces of newspapers. Imli chutney adds the tangy taste and cools down the piping hot samose and pakode.

"Boot Polish kara lo sahib" is another sound that fills the railway platform as one waits for the arrival of the train. Young boys with array of Kiwi black and brown boot polish in round metal containers,

brushes, cloth pieces and a metal ankle size pedestal to park the foot on. Needed or not, I get the shoes polished, partly to get rid of the pervasive dust that settles on the shoes and partly thinking that at least the boy is trying to work to earn money and not begging.

When our rickshaw or tonga with luggage approaches the railway station or when the train arrives at our destinations, we get surrounded by the sounds of "coolie sahib" from men wearing red shirts with a brass badge on the sleeve and a rolled piece of cloth on their heads to support some of the luggage as the rest hangs over their strong shoulders. No one tells you how much they will charge; they attempt to grab the luggage to beat the competitor. They do put the luggage properly and then the haggling starts. Coolies are helpful in knowing exactly where the third class compartment will stop. When a train arrives at the station, coolies hop onto the moving trains and vie loudly for grabbing your luggage to take it down with a standard statement "give whatever you please." There is also quibbling among coolies "I touched this suit case first. This is my customer." Sometimes both do the tag game at the same time. It is best to stay out and let them settle. After a yelling match and friendly Panjabi abuse they split.

After the delivery of luggage into the train or out of it, the rigorous process of haggling starts. Finally one succeeds, ending the fake bitter argument over the fair price for the services. If you know the system it is quite an enjoyable experience but to a novice it may be annoying.

Now a days this old tradition has gradually vanished from large urban train stations but still prevalent at smaller stations. It is more orderly now but I still miss the old drama.

Train stations are not the only places where hawkers thrive. Four wheeler carts, filled with fresh vegetables, some pushed by hand and some pulled by a bicycle, start making appearance on the streets at sunrise. The sellers move slowly, periodically howling "Aloo pyaaz sabji le lo." Women and sometimes men come out to avail these services, thus avoiding trips to the market. The vegetables are weighed in the hand held traazoo (scale) with the produce placed on one side and different

weights in the other. The customer is always wishing to see the produce side tipping more while the seller trying to keep it even and sometimes tipping the scale down on the side of the produce with an invisible play of the hand holding the scale, giving false pleasure to the customers. Back and forth accusation and defense about this hand trick a always a way of benign bickering. These scales are now getting replaced by the stationary weighing scales which still need different sized weights on the other side to weigh the goods without the risk of tipping the scale with hand. More recently the automated scales with the moving needle or even digital scales are making appearance.

Just about the same time one starts hearing "Ande double roti makhkhan le lo", the last one getting a prolonged stretch. Some of the carts have bells making their presence known to the potential customers. Home delivery of fresh eggs, bread and butter is much appreciated.

In hushed voice the vendor says, "Painji tusi sudiyan Mehta sahib di kurhi musalman naal bhaj gayee aye. (Sister, have you heard that Mr. Mehta's daughter ran away with a Muslim.)" The customer has already heard it but pretends not to know. "Then what happened", she says in an attempt to squeeze more juice out of the gossip. These vendors not only sell their products but also become a venue for social news and gossip exchange among the customers as well as the sellers who keep track of what is going on in the Mohalla (local area). After a fair share of gossip, bargaining and purchase, the hawkers move on to their next stop.

Doodh vallaaaa sound accompanies a man on bicycle with two drums hanging on each side of the carrier over the back wheel. Gentle arguments over water having mixed with the milk are commonly heard. Later the bicycles gave into motor cycles, then delivery in glass or plastic containers. Now they have also mostly vanished, thanks to super markets.

Medical system is rudimentary, especially in rural areas. Some vendors in the buses and occasionally trains hawk powder in a bottle claim-

ing it will cure stomach pain, hemorrhoids, heart diseases and even marital problems. Surma with an applicator can cure kala motia (glaucoma), safed motia (cataract) and trachoma. Powder in small packets can cure all dental problems. Even as children we know they are fake but many people fall for these shysters.

As the day matures one starts hearing Raddi, botlen!! (Paper trash and bottles). Recycling has been used decades before this word came to Western vocabulary. These are buyers of used newspapers, magazines, books, bottles and metal objects. They come on bicycles with two bags hanging on each side of the carrier-one for paper and other for glass/metal. People save these items in piles during the week. On hearing Raddi botlen, they rush out with the recyclables, get them weighed and collect money in exchange. Most vendors give money but barter system is also common, exchanging valuable trash for vegetables, fruit or toys.

'Bhaande Kalayi Kara Lao' (get your utensils polished) is sound of the announcement of a team of two or three men coming to apply a shine on the inside of cooking utensils. They come prepared with soft charcoal, a manual machine to blow air to keep the burnt coal red hot, naushadar powder, sticks of tin, a pan to hold cold water and woolen as well as cotton cloth. The brass or copper utensils are held by a metal tong, made burning hot, naushadar powder is applied and rubbed with thick folded cloth. It creates white smoke. The tin sticks are sporadically applied to the inner surface. Melted tin spots are spread out quickly with folded cloth to give a uniform luster to the inside wall of the utensils. The utensils are quickly dipped in a pan of water. I can still see the steam rising along with the sizzling sound of red hot utensil cooling down in cold water. Utensils look new for about six months till the cooking gradually melts the tin, which the hungry growing bodies gorge down with the delicious food made by Mata Ji. No side effects occurred unless you count waking up at 3 AM and writing all this on iPhone as one of them. Seventy years later.

Loud speakers attached to rickshaws are used by politicians to beg votes just before the elections. Their names and party symbols are prominently displayed. Then they go into hibernation and show up before the next one.

Movie theaters promote the currently playing movie with large posters on three sides of rickshaws with loud speakers blaring songs from that movie.

In the evenings, after the children return from schools, one starts hearing calls from ice cream sellers. These are particularly popular in the summer. The vendors entice children out by their calls of "Ice Cream le lo" as well as loud bells announcing their arrival. A variety of ice creams are stored in the cooler pushed as a cart or pulled by a bicycle. The children beg their parents for money and merrily run out to lick their favorite flavor and cool down the sweltering heat.

Even though everyone in Model Town is a refugee, I don't remember seeing a beggar. People take pride in doing any job, scrape and save money and start the life from scratch.

Hari Ram is barely able-to -see-shadows blind man with pocks marked face. He lives with his family near our snatched house in the city. They own buffaloes and sell milk and butter. Hari comes to our home for the milk and butter delivery. He chats with us while MataJi graciously serves him hot meal. Few years later Virinder was traveling in a train. To his surprise Hari Ram comes in with his harmonium and starts singing, and begging money. Virinder says "Namaste Hari Ram. This is Virinder." Hari felt ashamed of being seen begging by someone known to him. Without a word, Hari runs and disappears into the crowd. We never saw him again. Even without eyes he could not look at us, due to shame of begging.

Children get a thrill when a family brings monkeys which perform tricks in exchange for some money. They always include a scene of a male monkey marrying a saari clad female monkey.

Young boys and girls with rubber like flexible bodies dance and do acrobatics in anticipation of some money in return. Most people oblige

but some sheepishly walk away before the show ends lest they get too embarrassed to pay the performers.

Loud shrill sound of Moongfali just a few seconds before the interval in a movie theater seems to be an integral part of movie. Sounds of Chai garam fills the air here also. Chana chor garam, the spicy roasted chick peas, are also our favorite snacks.

The humdrum of sounds of vendors and hawkers fill the air in the markets, festivals, rickshaw stands, railway stations, and the streets of Panipat.

A mere 17 hours of flight from India transforms me back to an orderly but eerie silent life. Adjusting to the jet lag takes a few days but the adjustment to the missing orchestra of sounds takes me several weeks or even months after I return from India to the USA. In fact, the sounds of home sit on the back burner but never vanish completely.

CHAPTER VII

KEEPING COOL

When I was growing up, in the 1950s, summers were extremely hot in Panipat. At that time, Panipat was a Tehsil in district Karnal, Punjab, and is now a district by itself in Haryana, India.

The deep chill in December and January made us all pray for warmer weather. Be careful what you ask for! It starts warming up in February; by May and June, the temperature rises to 100 degrees F or more and stay there, with bright sun glaring down every day.

Even though almost seven decades have passed, it seems like it happened only yesterday and I can visualize, feel and immersed in that time.

We have a variety of ways to stay cool. Mercifully, none of us knows the words like air conditioner or air cooler. As a result, there is no problem of comparison with others.

In the 1950s nobody is complaining much about the hot loo (burning hot air) that hits our faces when we step out of the shade of the house. No one knows or cares to know what the temperature is in Celsius or Fahrenheit. We simply say “Bhai, is saal tthaan kamal di garmi payee aye” (Brother, this year the heat is unusual). And we say the same thing every year. It is just burning hot, and everyone talks impatiently

about the upcoming rain, which cools down the place. Cartoons showing eggs being cooked on the roads are printed in newspaper.

Everyone is saying "Is saal barshan late ho gayiyaan nein" (The rains are late this year). And we say that every year. Everyday we look to the west looking for a floating cloud that may be an early soldier announcing big army of clouds and the onset of Monsoon. Our prayers are finally answered and we see a wave of black clouds at the horizon, thunderously making their way towards us. Finally the lightning and thunder are signals for my siblings and I to run in, shed our clothes to bare minimum for decent public exposure, and then run out. Some younger boys come out screaming and jumping, totally naked. There is excitement in the air. Even radio is playing happy songs of monsoon.

Initially, the big splattering drops raise small plumes of dust from the parched ground into the air, making it emit an unforgettable, indescribable smell of the first rain. It is as if the thirsty dry earth is saying "Thank you." The single drops, a promise of outpouring of water from the dark sky, sometimes leads to nothing more than that. To the disappointment of all, the clouds change direction, go elsewhere, and make someone else happy. We feel sad, but know that more are around the corner, and our turn will come soon.

When they finally come, no one cares or even knows about the fatal effect of lightning strikes. We are out in droves in the open spaces and streets and soak the sheets of water falling from the dark sky.

Soon the the open naaliyaan (open sewer lines) are overflowing. Small brown rivulets have formed giving birth to large puddles and ponds.

Swirls of black clouds, accompanied by an orchestra of thunders preceded by lightning flashes, which look like dancing branches playing hide and seek, let loose the much appreciated water.

All the children and some adults, for hours, run around in the water. Even cows and buffaloes take dips in the ponds to cool off. To our amazement, dogs are swimming in the pond. They come out, shake

their heads, spraying water around them. But then they jump right back as more have joined the group.

We had already stocked up on paper boats, later made famous in a Jagjit Singh's song, well in advance of the first rain drop. They are now ready to float. We let them loose, and run after them amidst sounds of thunder and laughter. We catch them, empty out the pouring water from the boats, and let them float a bit longer. But then the undulating waves and rain drops overpower them.

We waddle out, dripping water into the house, pick up the remainder of the boats and start the fun all over. Squeals of joy fill the air.

PitaJi, my father, is ready with bucketfuls of washed choosa (sucking type) mangoes. Getting soaked in the rain or standing under open roof spout, parnala, in the central part of the house, we roll the mangoes between the palms to loosen the pulp, bite and spit a small piece on the top, and suck out the pulp. We don't need knives. The ones with faster hands and mouths gets to eat more. The four brothers and their happy father devour them, throwing the pits and skin in the flowing water.

One such pit later took roots and became a source of future supplies.

The mangoes vanish quickly, prompting PitaJi to run in and bring more from the house, till none was left.

Eventually, MataJi, my mother, calls all our names as a one liner – "Vey VirinderKrishanGindiShoki hun andar aa jao, garam garam Poorhe te kheer tayyar aye" (Hey Virinder, Krishan, Gindi, Shoki – come in now. Hot poorhe and rice pudding are ready.)

We all run in, make the floor soaking wet, take a quick shower with the water carefully saved in the large oval galvanized iron tub and several metal buckets.

Water from the taps comes for one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon. We leave the tap in the open position. At the first intermittent hissing sound of air coming out ahead of the precious commodity flowing through, we run to the three tootiyaan (faucets) in the house. We fill every container of every size and shape with water.



Figure VII.1: Luthra home in Panipat, 1950s

We schedule bathing in the tap water around the times when it bubbles out of the faucets.

Large water storage tanks on the roof tops and motor pumps to transport the water up came much later.

We save water in the containers for later use, such as the one now required, before the kheer and poorha, which we enjoy in the open veranda, watching the rain gradually stop. It is amazing how all the puddles and ponds get soaked up quickly by the thirsty land, plants, and trees.

On lucky days we get hot jalebis purchased from local sweet maker, Bosa Ram. We never have to pay him any cash. Unknown to us, he kept a running account book in a long red cloth covered ledger, for us as well as all the people living in our mohalla (neighbourhood). At the end of the month, PitaJi paid the bills. We grew up thinking that Bosa Ram was such a generous man giving away free sweets.

He actually is a sweet man, always smiling and handing out a freebee or two to us, especially boondi ke laddoo on Tuesdays, the day of god Hanuman.

The first rain is a matter of rejoicing. The school principals declares this day as a Fine Day. He declares the school closed. "Children, it is a fine day. You can go home, enjoy the rain and have a fine day." These are melodious words to the children. We all hurriedly pack up our bustas (school bags), and run home. There are no school buses, no pick ups, no telephones to alert the parents. It is completely safe for everyone. All the children, noisily, run or walk home.

On later rainy days, children plead "Principal sahib, it is a Fine Day, may we go home." Depending on his mood, children run out with glee or sulk and stayed in school.

The abundant water transported by the clouds brings joy to all living objects. Life is a double faced coin, pleasure and pain run side by side. Occasionally we hear about someone drowning, some areas get flooded by overflowing rivers and creeks. There are no dams to regulate the ocean being unloaded on the land.

We never faced such life changing calamities, but had our share of minor annoyances. The solid appearing concrete roof of our house is obviously not water tight. Water drips through into all the rooms from the lowest parts of the uneven ceiling. We hurriedly move around our precious furniture of 10 wooden chairs, a table and two beds. What cannot be moved, gets covered by plastic sheets. We strategically place all available containers, large and small, to catch the drips. Everyone is running in and out, emptying the rapidly filling containers. Finally the clouds declare the end of their show.

Panipat is located on flat land and there is nothing to obstruct the display of nature's panoramic display of receding clouds, a hazy sunshine and colourful display of all its colours in the semi-circular rainbow from one part of horizon to the other. Some days we are gifted two rainbows in all their glory.

The cool air stays for a while. Then the heat, along with the newly added humidity, returns with vengeance. Constant dripping sweat keeps our cotton shirts and knickers (shorts) wet. We replenish it by drinking cool water dispensed from the wide open clay round con-

tainer – gharha or matka, and from narrow long necked clay container – surahi. We have a wooden stand that holds three of these containers. Their openings are carefully covered with a steel plate, inverted katori, or cloth to protect the drinking water from dust and thirsty flies. Being made of porous clay, they are natural water coolers.

A daily dose of Shikanjvi (lemon drink) is a must. We are lucky to use freshly picked lemons from our own garden to make the sweet lemon drink with the cool water. The young hands struggle to press the flat handled of a wooden lemon squeezers. We are thrifty. The squeezed lemon pieces are again stacked in the squeezer to get the last drop out. We are generous with sugar to dilute the tangy taste of lemons; some people add a pinch of salt as well.

In the verandas and windows, we have Khas Khas chick, sometimes called Tatti. We always laugh and wonder why such an aromatic mat is given such a paradoxical name. This is made of a breed of grass that grows downwards, and can attain a length between 6 to 8 feet. We fill buckets of water, which we pour on the top of the chicks, letting it trickle down. The one in the veranda has a cloth border with a rope attached at one end. We take turns to sway it back and forth, letting air filter through it and bring the cool fragrant air inside. The ones in the windows depend on the flow of breeze. These are our natural fragrant air coolers.

We keep ceiling fans switches in the on position all the time. But it doesn't mean that the fans swirl all the time, as it is common to hear "Lao, bijli fir chali gayee aye" (There, electricity has gone again.) Electricity runs through the wires intermittently with random interruptions. "It is gone more than it comes" is a common complaint.

As a backup, we have several ornate, rectangular or rounded, hand held fans made of woven cane strips attached to sturdy polished wood handles. Each one has different pattern of cloth border. Cheaper varieties without cloth border and flayed borders are also available. Children happily sway them back and forth for themselves and also help the elders as the swirling motion of their fingers or wrist can easily tire

the old hands. In addition to providing movement to the air, these fans keep flies at bay.

We never stop playing outside, despite the heat or even the hanerian (dark dust storms) that make their appearances in the weeks leading up to the rainy season. There are many trees on our street, providing us the much needed shade to play Bante (marbles). Other games such as Piththu, Guli danda, and Cricket are saved till the air cools down a little, as the orange sun moves towards the horizon. Three months of summer vacations from school is heavenly respite from heat in the school and also provide us plenty of time to play.

We wear one of the two cotton white shirts and knickers we all have or share. We wear one and Mataji, with regular help from a lady, Ganga Devi, washes and dries the other.

Mataji is always busy, from before sunrise to way past sunset, mostly washing clothes and cooking.

We take short baths two or three times a day to wash off the dust and also to cool down the body. In the absence of constant running city water, we draw water from the two hand pumps in case all the containers are empty.

Street vendors are busy selling baraf de gole, (shaved crushed ice balls), covered with multi-colour sugary syrups. Depending on how much money is left over after buying the essentials, we sometimes indulge in this luxury.

The vendors also sell frozen kulfi pulled by the end of immersed wooden stick out of conical metal containers, which are stored in ice filled drums. It comes in plain variety or one mixed with pista (pistachio). Spaghetti shaped Falooda is placed over the kulfi. It makes a delicious cold combination.

Some street vendors sell carbonated soda drinks, dispensed in ice chilled glass bottles. These are way too expensive for our family. I might have tasted the sweet soda water only once. The gas in the bottle is held in check by a marble size glass ball in the narrow neck of the bottle. The ball is pushed down using the thumb with force. Once, a bottle burst

under high pressure, and a friend of mine lost his one eye due to the injury from broken glass. There are no eye surgeons in Panipat.

Making ice cream at home is a highlight of the summer. Amongst many other luxuries of life which our elder brother, Prem, brought home, everybody loves the ice cream maker. It is a wooden drum with a metal container inside. The revolving blades inside the metal container are attached to a handle through a couple of gears.

Making ice cream is a big production. Mataji boils milk, mixed with cream; later sugar and Kesar is added. Sometimes we have the luxury of adding cut pieces of almonds or pistachios. When the mixture has cooled, we pour it into the container.

In the meantime, one of us pedals our bicycle to the ice cream factory located about 2 miles from home. It seems much farther than that to small legs and feet. We purchase a slab of ice, wrap it carefully in a sheet cut out from a jute bag, and tie it securely to the carrier of the bicycle. The return journey is brisk, lest all the ice should melt. Slow drips of water are incentive to pedal harder.

The team at home is eagerly waiting and ready with a metal hammer to quickly crush the wrapped ice into small pieces. These pieces, along with sprinkling of large salt granules, are placed between the metal container and the outer wooden wall.

Impatiently, we start rotating the handle, adding salt and ice, as it melts and oozes out through the slits in the outer wooden container. Initial rotations are piece of cake and easy and are assigned to the younger children. The more muscular older children complete the job as the churning blades become hard to move through freezing ice cream.

Anticipation grows as the rotations becomes harder. When rotating becomes almost impossible, this is a sign of joy and screams. Now, we all have watering mouths. The lid of the container is opened, and a water laced spoon, later replaced by a round one with a release handle, takes out the ice cream. All of us have katoris and spoons ready on out stretched hands. "Thodhi hore de de na." (give me little bit more)

we all request. We relish it, eat it quickly to get a second helping and also before the heat melts it down to milk. Almost always, we argue about who will scrape the bottom portion of the container. We turn the container upside down to let the last few drops trickle down into our thirsty mouths. Vanilla is our favourite flavor. The taste and memory lingers.

Sardai is another drink for the summer. We make it mostly when PitaJi comes home for a couple of days from his job at the out of town brick kilns. Water soaked, peeled almonds, cantaloupe seeds and black pepper are crushed using Dauri Sota (mortar and pestle). Dauri is made of stone, and Sota is a round smooth log of wood, 3 to 4 inch diameter and about two and a half feet long. We occasionally use the sota as a weapon during the sibling fights.

The crushed powder is put in a jug. Water is added to make a paste, and then we add more water, which converted it into a drink. This is filtered through a thin muslin cloth. Sugar and cool water (ice-if available from Bosa Ram), are added and this makes a wonderful drink in the hot days.

Another way to stay hydrated is to eat fruits rich in water. A large watermelon, weighing about 30 to 35 pounds, is kept in cool water all day. In the evening, the whole family sits together and eats all of it in one go. We have no refrigerators to store the left overs. We eat cucumbers, considered Thandi Sabzi (vegetable that cools you), every day. We cut the top and rub it against the bare surface of the remainder for several minutes; white foam erupts from the main body of the cucumber, which is wiped away. This is supposed to remove the bitterness out of the cucumber.

The sun mercifully sets. Preparations are made for a comfortable sleep. Tired bodies need to revitalize and face the next hot day.

All of us sleep outside in the yard. All the children sprinkle water (Taraai) on the dry parched ground as well as the brick lined large yard. We carry buckets filled with water which we sprinkle by hand, half on the ground and merrily half on one another. The water settles the dust

and cools the hot grounds. The family lays out several charpais, four legged beds made out of jute or nivaar (crisscrossed wide cotton bands). Two sheets and a pillow make our bed.

Mosquitoes are waiting for the victims. In our defence, we put up Machchardanis, (mosquito nets.) Two bamboo sticks are anchored in the shape of an X at the two ends of the bed. We tie the mosquito net to the bamboo sticks using the attached cotton strips in the four corners. The edges are carefully tucked under the sheet. Even a small opening means listening to the swirling sounds of mosquitoes, as if alerting us to get ready for the bite.

The night time temperature drops quickly. A glass of ice cold milk, sometimes with jalebi or bread, is our night cap. “Don’t forget to rinse your mouth”, ever vigilant MataJi says, and we obey. We don’t brush our teeth but rinse several times, a vigorous polishing teeth with index finger, swishing and rinsing is a must. Laying in beds, side by side, we talk of the day’s events and make plans for the next. Exhausted bodies go off to sleep, and wake up to the sound of roosters and feeling of heat from the sun.

It is going to be another nice, hot day in Panipat and we are ready for it.

CHAPTER VIII

MORE FESTIVALS

Most of the times we simply follow the traditions and festivals handed down to us by our parents and the society. The meanings behind the symbolism of the events are uncovered, if ever and correctly, much later. Time has a strange way to alter the traditions as the distance increases between the time of the occurrence of the event and the time we experience their memories.

Festivals do continue to carry their main essence as they are passed on from one generation to the next. The same Festival may also be celebrated in different regions with completely different meanings, rituals and the reasons behind the celebrations.

In Panipat, Haryana, India in the 1950s, we celebrated festivals through out the year. Following Dussehra and Diwali, the most elaborate ones in the pleasant months of October and November, chill starts setting in Panipat. In the absence of any external means of heating, bed sheets and thin razaais (cotton filled covers) give way to thick ones to cope up with cold winters.

Outdoor beddings get moved to tight but cozy sleeping areas indoors on the beds and on the floors. I don't recall ever feeling cramped. In fact our house felt palatial.

Paternal grandparents traditionally live with the sons. Our Dadaji (Father's father) Lala Gokal Chand and Nani (Mother's mother) Mrs. Kesar Bai lived with us. Since mothers did not traditionally live in daughter's house, she insists on paying rent. She feels psychological better that she is not a burden to her daughter. Nani has money which rest of us can use for essentials but more importantly for splurging on supplies for the Festivals.

Our home has four rooms in a line with one small kitchen at each end. The farthest left room is occupied by Dadaji, fondly called Lalaji and next one is used by Naniji. By this time the eldest two brothers, Suraj and Prem have left home for studies followed by jobs.

Remaining eight comprising of parents, two daughters and four sons live in the two rooms and the attached veranda. The verandas on the two sides originally were open but soon were enclosed to create additional rooms.

In this set up the traditional celebrations of the Festivals were carried on despite difficult emotional and financial times.

Under one roof there was the unending energy and curiosity of the children and knowledge of the elders who knew the customs transmitted over decades or centuries, and now ready to be passed on to the next generation.

Children, especially the younger ones have less responsibility and more time for fun.

Festival of Lohrhi comes along on January 13 to mark the end of the brutal winter and celebration of Rabi crop. This is an event spread out over several days, although not as elaborate as Dussehra and Diwali.

Starting about 10 days before Lohri, after school and a quick gulp-down snack, we along with a group of friends assemble on the street. Boys and girls have separate groups.

We start collecting logs of wood, corn, sesame covered jaggery and never-to-refuse money from neighbors. Some householders consider receiving money as begging and discourage children from accepting money. For us this is the most essential and not considered begging.

Every evening we chart out a territory to visit. We knock on the door of every house in the selected area of the day. One boy leads the chorus while others say "Hoi" in unison. Sounds of "Sunder mundriye– Hoi, tera kaun vichaara –Hoi, Dulla bhathi vala, dulle dee dheer viyahi, ser shakkar paai, kurhi da salu paata, salu kaun samete,...Each line followed by loud Hoi. We do not know its meaning, significance or its connection to the Lohri, but we sing it loudly with great enthusiasm. This is sung to the owners of the house who have stepped out to greet and join the fun.

At the end, home owners give to the boys a handful of revrian made of dried refined white or brown sugar coated with Sesame seeds, Phuliyen (puffed rice), roasted moongphali (peanuts) in the shells, kernels of corn, few pieces of dry wood or money. If the home owners are generous, all the boys jump commensurate with the amount received. Generous ones receive a chant from us "Ganga bhai Ganga, eh ghar chhanga." (first three words are purely for rhyming purposes, the last three mean this house is nice.) Stingy ones get "Hukka bhaai Hukka, eh ghar bhukha" (this house is miserly)

The girls make their own groups, have their own Lohri song. They do not venture out as far as the boys are allowed. It is not considered safe for the unaccompanied girls.

The caravan of boys keeps going around door to door, a scene somewhat similar to the Halloween in USA, without any special costumes. All the neighborhoods are very safe. Boys go around worry-free without any parents watching or protecting. When it gets dark, we all run back, put away the collections of fun-filled hours of hard work. The piles of wood, revris, corn, peanuts and money grow every day till the day of Lohri.

On the day of Lohri we get dress up and in the evening, we pull out all the wood that the neighbors have given us plus the ones we had collected from the woods. The small twigs are set at the base to be used as starters. Bigger logs are stacked at an angle carefully leaving air spaces

between them. Older members of the family and neighbors sit on the floor or on the few chairs that have been pulled put.

With deafening noise and contagious enthusiasm the fire is lit. We cheer as the flames get higher and higher. Boys and girls run around the fire. The arms are stretched out to get warmth to the hands from a safe distance and put on cold cheeks. We keep doing it many times. Corn kernels are thrown into the fire. Cracklings and popping sounds associated with flying hot red particles are fun to hear and watch but may also be the source of burnt spots in the shirts or saaris. Revrian and phullian mixed are placed on a platter and moongphalis in bags. They are passed around to everyone enjoying the fire. Everyone picks up the eatables by handful and munch away. Shells of peanuts are tossed into the fire. It is fun to see their edges glow red and then the shell turn into a ball of fire to ashes. Corn seeds are also thrown in the fire.

More firewood is added till the fire from last log turns to charcoal. Buckets of water are splashed over the simmering charcoal. Crackling sound from the hot coal and steam swirling in the air announces the end of the show.

Reluctantly everyone gets up, leaving the warmth of fire and fun, to get tucked under the thick razaai and use the body heat to warm the cold bed.

By March the weather improves significantly. Greenery starts filling the trees, plants and fields; flowers start blooming which make the landscape come alive with colors. To match the nature, we are getting ready for the Festival of colours, Holi.

Once again preparation start several days before the big day. Our total inventory of clothes to wear is very limited but even among those clothes there are some that have become torn and unwearable. They are separated and kept aside for Holi.

The markets become alive and vibrant with shopkeepers displaying various colored powders in open sacs or large round metal containers. Once again Pitaji gives us money to go and buy the colors. Feeling rich, off we run to the Bosa Ram Chowk. Ghan Shyam Das, the retailer in

the shop next to Bosa Ram, has the largest supply in our neighbourhood. Trembling with excitement we debate which colors to buy and finally settle for what and how much we can afford. Red, green, and yellow are the most popular colors. Ghan Shyam weighs them on a scale and fills up bags made of recycled newspapers.

The stockpile keeps getting bigger as the day of Holi approaches.

We also buy Pichkaris, (water guns), which are made out of large hollow bamboo pole about a foot long with a solid piston. The front end is chiseled to make it pointed. Pichkaris looked like large wooden syringes. In later years metal and plastic pichkaris start appearing in the markets.

The colors are used as dry powder or mixed with water in buckets. Even large drums are filled with different colored water.

Excitement of the upcoming day of Holi keeps mounting. On the big day we get up before sunrise, quickly eat breakfast and change into clothes which we will discard after the event.

The army is ready to go out with our armamentarium of packets of powder, bucket full of colored water and full pichkari ready to shoot.

Other friends are already on the street or about to join. Everyone is shouting "Holi hai" and with that we throw colors at one another, smear the exposed parts of body including hair and then shoot out coloured water at the willing victims.

Everyone, known person or stranger, who steps out of the house is a fair game. Some try to run away or try to get back into the houses but the young army is swift and catches the victim. If they are too far to catch they are caught by the long reach of water being shot from the pichkari.

Several groups run into one another and if they see the participants already unrecognizable from the colors, they save the supplies for other victims. Some groups join each other and the Tola (group) gets larger.

Everyone is jumping, laughing, shouting "Holi hai" on seeing the next clean person. They happily get colored, squirm, laugh, run, get angry, resist or even fight according to their temperament. But the mob

overpowers and right before our eyes, within a matter of minutes, a clean body wearing clean cloths is turned into a multicolored, unrecognizable person.

Due respect is shown to females. Girls are drenched in water color from a distance. Older women, if they asked to just get a speck of color on their forehead, cheek, hair, or edge of cloth, they point out the area and one or two boys follow instructions with full respect. Some women do not care and are covered all over.

Widows wear white clothes and do not play Holi. If we know someone is a widow and even if seen by us, we do not throw colors at them. The older ones do not mind the exclusion but some young widows, deep inside their hearts, wish to take part but the pressures of society keeps them from enjoying the festivities. No such rule apply to widowers. There are not too many widowers as they frequently get remarried whereas widows are cursed by the society to stay isolated singles till they die. It never feels fair.

We run home to refill the buckets from the drums, pick up more bags of colored powder and run back to join our groups.

Some boys have access to trucks or open tempos. Sometimes we are allowed to ride in them which takes us to areas beyond the reach of our feet. From that height we can use our pichkari to reach those just standing outside their doors within the boundary walls of their houses. Fun loving ones stay and get wet while others quickly run inside. The doors and walls pick up the colors.

The action goes on till past noon or when the supplies run out. With clothes completely soaked, body including hair painted with all types of color, we come home. We all look alike, fully rainbow colored bodies.

Exhausted from walking, running and laughter we are ready for a long bath. Large drums had been filled with water which would no longer be coming from the faucets at that time of the day. Hand pumps are in full use.

The clothes are thrown away after attempts to clean and save for next Holi fail. Faces and arms are clean but some color has soaked deeper and will take few more days to shed off.

A nice big meal with deserts of halva and kheer has been prepared by Mataji. It is quickly devoured by the hungry growing boys. Girls also play Holi but not as wildly compared to boys.

We hear that in some homes they crush poppy seeds and make an intoxicating drink out of it. No one in our house does that or even talks about it.

April 13 is a much celebrated day in Punjab. Haryana used to be part of Punjab but it became a State by itself in 1966 as Punjab was split based on linguistics. We are Punjabi speaking people but now got rooted in the Jaat majority State whose basis of formation is Hindi as their spoken language. Mataji used to stay "Asi tha hameshan refugees hee rawan ge" (We will always stay refugees.) At first Pakistan kicked us out and now Panjab has disowned us.

Punjab and Haryana are mainly an agrarian society and are considered the food baskets of India.

Vaisakhi, as is known in Punjab and also called Baisakhi elsewhere, heralds the beginning of harvest season. April 13 is considered as an auspicious day because it is the opening day of harvest season. This brings prosperity when the farmers start selling their crops.

Home delivery with help from Daai (an experienced woman for deliveries) is the common way babies see the light of the day. No records of births are recorded. With large number of children, parents have hard time keeping tracks of their birthdays. Use of lunar month complicates remembering the date on solar calendar. We never had birthday parties. Therefore the date of birth is not required till the admission to the 5th grade in a school.

One day Pitaji takes me to Sanatan Dharam High school in Panipat for admission. The Principal asks for my date of birth. Not knowing the answer he thinks of an auspicious date and said "Thareekh thaana yaad nahi aye. Thusi 13 Aprayle likh chadho. Sun shaayad 1944 see." (I

don't remember the date. You may write 13 April. The year most likely was 1944). That is how my official birthday became April 13, 1944.

Mataji's version, corroborated by Kanchan, the memory champion of the family, is that my birth was in the evening of no moon night in late November of 1943. This happens to be around November 24, 1943. She was playing outside when her friends ran up to her and told her "Larhka hoi hai" (boy is born). She then ran into the house to greet the new addition, saw him and went back to climbing the tree.

Vaisakhi is a festival mostly celebrated by Hindus and Sikhs and especially farmers. It was on the Vaisakhi day in 1699 when Guru Gobind Singh initiated the Panj Pyaare and started the Khalsa Panth. We are not Sikhs but do have some in our genealogy, Ram Singh being one of them, and our Dadaji has the Sikh holy book, Guru Granth Sahib in our home which he reads everyday. He keeps the back door open and welcomes any friend or stranger come in and read the holy book any time.

We are not farmers after we reached Panipat following the partition. Before that Pitaji was a full time farmer. After partition he was allotted a small piece of rural land near Panipat where vegetables for home use and for the workers are grown.

After bathing, Mata Ji makes halva and poori for the breakfast. We put on new, if affordable, but surely clean washed most colourful clothes from our meagre wardrobe. It is festive around us but we do not have any special Bhangra parties as are organized by the Sikhs in our neighbourhood.

In Khanewal the family used to go to a nearby creek and take bath in it early in the morning.

The Festival of Rakhi, also known as a Panjabi version and used in our home—Rakhdhi or more formally called Rakshabandhan (Raksha meaning protection and bandhan meaning tie or tie a knot) is celebrated every year in the month of August. The date of this function varies because it is performed on the full moon day in the fifth month of lunar calendar, Shravan which got abbreviated to Saavan, corre-

sponding to between July 23 to August 22. Lunar calendar has fewer days than the Solar calendar in each month. Therefore the Rakhi date changes every year.

It symbolizes the love between brother and sister. Times change, necessities change but traditions continue. Historically women and young females were in danger of getting harassed or kidnapped by the invaders. Sisters prayed for long life of their brothers and brothers promised to protect the sisters. The threats and kidnappings by the invaders are long gone and forgotten but the tradition of symbolism and reminder of love between sisters and brothers continues to be celebrated.

Weeks before the day of Rakhdhi, many stores in the markets start displaying a varieties of colorful, ornate bands made of cotton or silk thread, called Rakhdhi or Rakhi. Some are plain weaved threads. Red color is the most common choice. Some are decorated with colorful stones and beads. They are laid out on white cloth covered tables or covered charpais (Four legged portable beds). Bosa Ram is again a happy man because sweet mithaai is a significant part of the celebration.

Sisters buys one Rakhdhi for each brother. If she does not have a real brother she ties Rakhi to a cousin brother.

Our mother, Mataji, was her parent's only child. She used to tie Rakhi on our Mamaji (mother's brother), Chuni Lal Virmani's hand. Chuni Lal was son of Mataji's chacha (Father's brother). If a female did not have brother or cousin brother, she would pick a boy who also agreed to become her brother with all its responsibilities such as protect her, perform some ceremonial functions and provide utensils to the sister's daughter when she gets married.

Occasionally some boys and girls take advantage of the system. Dating is a taboo these days in India. If a boy and girl love each other and are afraid of being seen together by the parents or society, they pretend to have Rakhi tying relation to be able to openly meet without getting reprimanded. A few known ones get taunted – Din mein behan bhaai

, raat ko banee lugaai. (during the day brother and sister and becoming lovers at night). It is a vrare occurrence.

On the day of Rakhi everyone takes bath and wears freshly washed clothes. After saying a prayer the sister ties the rakhi on brother's right arm just above the wrist while praying for and wishing long life for him. Brother promises to protect his sister as long as he lives. He hands her money and/or a gift. They feed each other a piece of sweet mithaai. "Rakhi mubaarak, may God give you long life", they hug and say to each other. As children we are less interested in the Rakhi than sweets.

Once during FGT at Panipat, all six brothers and two sisters were present. 6 rakhis were tied by each sister. 6 forearms were arranged in a circle and photographed. Krishan died that year on October 12, 1987 at the age of 44 from a heart attack in Shimla. Since then we do not take collective pictures of the rakhi clad arms.

September is the month to take a breather. It is time to start thinking of and planning for the big one—Dussehra and Diwali.

Amidst good and bad times Festivals and celebrations continue at house number 2 Model Town, Panipat.

But all good things come to an end, only to be reborn again, somewhere. As the circle of life moves, young ones grow up, move out and with them move out the festivals, but the sweet memories of vibrant joyous days linger. The providers stay back and reminisce about the golden days played out under their wings. In their mind they can see what a beautiful life they created for their children, relatives and friends. Ever so grateful, the recipients carry the memories and plant the festivals in their own gardens. Cycle continues although the intensity declines.

CHAPTER IX

CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND SUPERSTITIONS

Indians may leave India but India never leaves Indians, no matter which part of the earth they migrate to.

There is hardly any country where Indians have not made a home outside the native homeland called Hindustan, India, or Bharat. They carry their genetics, ingrained thinking, expressions, customs, traditions, and superstitions with them. While practicing these at home, by and large they merge with the adopted society and its norms.

In the fluid global international world, the firm boundary lines are gradually fading. Indians transmit their native culture and traditions to the adopted one and add their unique color to the tapestry. And they imbibe the language, customs and traditions of the adopted countries.

Many customs, traditions and superstitions while living in the post-partition Panipat in the 1950s come alive in the mind even after 70 years.

Crowing of the rooster wakes us up but we cover the heads for a little more snooze. Virinder, our responsible elder brother and mentor Kanchan, elder sister pull the sheets down. Now there is no choice.

We bow down, touch feet of the elders as they keep their hands on our heads and bless us with wishes of long life (jug jug jiyo). The hand

which touched the feet is brought to touch our hearts as if transmitting their blessings to our heart. It is the first thing newly married couples do to their priest, parents and elders. The feet touching is done to all elders any time relatives, or friends of Mata Ji or Pita Ji visit. But it is a must when Shakuntla Ma periodically stops after finishing her Satsang.

Even though there are several places of worship including temple, Gurdwara and mosque nearby, most homes have a small place of worship in their homes. Children are busy with schools, little bit of homework and then, just being kids, busy with outdoor games. Elders read scriptures, sing devotional songs and meditate. Every so often, especially on auspicious occasions, children are asked to join the religious rituals in our temple at the house, located behind the swing and attached to the store room.

We wash hands and feet, take off the shoes and sit, then copy what elders do.

For more elaborate and special functions, a priest (Pandit Ji) is invited to conduct the religious ceremony. Books of devotional mantras and devotional songs are handed out to everyone sitting on cushioned floor. A harmonium and dholki (two sided drum) player are invited. The congregation follows the lead singer or the Pandit Ji conducting the pooja. At the end of the ceremonies, a bit of food is put on the mouth of moorti of the Hanuman and then distributed to all as parsaad. Some people place a thali comprised of all the foods we are going to consume in front of the picture of the chosen, revered God. After serving food to God, everyone else gets their plates. In later years, reciting Amrit Vani, written by Swami Satya Nand Ji is the norm. Kanta leads the melodious singing accompanied by her playing the harmonium. Everyone else sings along, some by memory and some by reading the booklet.

I learnt from elders that in Khanewal, we had separate utensils for Muslims and Jamadars (garbage, laterite cleaners). Hindus did not go to Muslim homes. We have no Muslim visitors in Panipat but rules con-

tinue for jamadars. They or their shadow should not touch the kitchen area. If it does, the kitchen floor is washed with water.

Menstruating women are also not permitted to enter the kitchen. They stay in their room and food is delivered to them. That was a custom around but we never heard it in our house.

Following the trauma of the Partition, Pita Ji's main goal is to make sure all the children get best possible education. He keeps a distant but close watch on our grades. Only two options are given to boys—Engineer or doctor. Girls are educated to become teachers. Stern love is the driving force. Fortunately all but one followed the dictates. Only Prem started job after Bachelor of Arts, to financially support the family.

Exercises are not done in a formal way. Walks to and from school and unending outdoor games and cycling burn more calories than we consume.

A crow cawing indicates that a guest is expected. Many times the prediction comes out to be true. That is partly because it is common to have unannounced guests come in. Some for a day and some for stay. Both are always welcome.

Formal Yoga is done whenever our Mama Ji, Chooni Lal Virmani visits. He is son of Mata Ji's paternal uncle. Being the only child, Mata Ji ties Rakhi to Mama Ji, her first cousin. He has glowing fair skin, is jovial and a devout practitioner of yoga. He calls us his little Chelas (students). He teaches us Surya namaskar, sitting on our folded legs, separate the legs and lie backwards till our flexible body and back of head touch the ground. That's all forgotten as soon as his fiat car is out of sight. But even at age 79, I can lie down between the folded legs! And remember our loving Mama Ji.

Being on time is considered a strange phenomenon to Indians. It has become ingrained in our system and we still run on Indian standard time. This may be 15 minutes or even 2 hours late. And there is no apology or explanation. The hosts also accept it as a norm because they do the same when roles are reversed. When abroad, Indians do follow

the normal time when invited by caucasians. But when going to Indian home or function, we default to IST.

We eat home-made, almost always vegetarian food. Even after 50 years of leaving India, we start missing Indian food after just one or two dishes of other countries.

We are asked to eat yogurt before heading for any school exam. "It will improve your memory," MataJi says. Right or wrong, no one questions it.

The tradition of arranged marriage is the way to find suitable match. It is said that marriage is not only Union of the couple but also the two families.

Friends or relatives start suggesting a suitable match for the marriage age child. For girls it starts when she turns around 16 and boys around age 20. Common sources are barbers, priests, relatives and friends. This is arranged by the parents and children simply get informed. Our oldest brother, Suraj was engaged to Urmil for seven years and they saw each other at time of wedding. Virinder and Santosh also had seen each other by looking at photographs taken in the studios till they met at the time of wedding. Things did change. Dolly and I met on the stage doing a drama. Little did we know that we would have to go through a family drama to finally get together.

The traditions are changing. Arranged marriages are still done, but boy and girl get to meet in company of families and lately in privacy. Western culture has entered in a big way and now most marriages are arranged by the boy and girl, with ceremonial blessings of the parents.

Dowry system is a standard part of marriages around us. As the society became more educated, some times girls started earning as much or more than boys, the tradition is gradually dying down. In our family dowry system is not followed. Prem returns even a fruit basket sent by Kalras after he gets engaged to Shashi Kalra.

The boy's parents can stay with the couple, but the girls parents do not. Our Nani pays rent to stay in our house. Stretching to extreme, girls parents do not even drink water at the boy's home. This happened

as late as 1960s. In our house, Shashi Bhabi's parents never drink water, let alone tea or food. This tradition has been shed, at least in urban areas.

Barring few Anglicized Indians, regular clothing in Panipat is shirt/pants for men; salwar kameez or saari for women. At Indian functions while living abroad, this has not changed much. Men wear neckties on formal occasions. Kurta pajama is the traditional night wear.

We grew up listening to Indian film music and that is ingrained on our hard copies of the brain. A very special music starts the day on the All India Radio, Vividh Bharati. Just listening to the first few notes, Indians who were old enough to remember in 1950s, can recognize the tune.

A musical program, Binaca Geet Mala, conducted by Amin Sayani from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) comes on the radio from 8 pm to 9 pm every Wednesday. Family drops everything and gathers around the radio. His segments, recorded on CDs, are still played all over the world. Lately the CDs have vanished giving way to streaming and You Tube. Binaca Geet Mala lives on. It is sponsored by Binaca tooth paste which obviously is very famous and used by many.

Even after living abroad for fifty years, Hindi music sounds melodious and touches the heart. Dolly finds old Hindi songs as therapy or meditative.

Among many happy traditions, some sad ones are prevalent but fortunately are disappearing. A widower, after only a few months was allowed, rather encouraged to get remarried. Sometimes to the sister of deceased wife, relieving the parents of struggling to find a suitable match and to save providing dowry.

On the other hand, life of a widow is a living hell. They can no longer wear Jewellery or colored clothes. By hitting her arms on a solid base, she breaks the glass bracelets. Seeing a young woman in white sari is a sign of her being a widow. She is scorned and shunned by the society, many times including the family. It is considered a bad omen to invite a widow to a wedding, lest her presence may invoke a curse and may

somehow bring early death to the boy about to get married. A common word often heard in Hindi movies “You have already eaten one man, now you want to eat another one.” This was the thought implied and sometime verbalized.

We experience this first hand when my brother died at the age of forty five leaving behind a forty years old widow. With three young children. Widows do not choose marriage sometimes to protect their children from an unknown man who may or may not treat her children well. She sacrifices her life for children. As much this tradition is changing, it is still more difficult for women than men even in the modernized society.

According to the memory bank of our home, Kanchan tells that I was quite a naughty child. I am told that I used to make small round balls of the expensive and laboriously made wheat dough and throw them standing on the railing-less roof top, throw stones and break clay pots. Virinder drops me to the school on the bicycle. I run back and many times I am home before Virinder comes back. Pita Ji is mostly away to work. Mata Ji has numerous jobs to do. She is at her wits end how to deal with me.

She thinks of the Bum Bum Bolay baba. The last resort was to pay an exorcist. This Baba is a man who goes around on the streets, stomps a long bamboo staff on the road. It has many ghungroos tied to it. They make loud sounds to attract potential customers. He is supposed to have powers of exorcism. He wears only loin cloth; his body, including face, is painted orange and blue. His lips are bright red. He is a devotee of Lord Shiv. He has long hair, holds a wooden staff with attached bells in his right hand and a broom in the left. One day Mata Ji brought the Baba in and asked him to do something for the naughty son. I am brought out to our side bricked yard. Bum bum bolay stomps the staff on the ground, goes around me and screams words to the effect asking the ghost to leave my body. I find it amusing. Apparently it worked. He advises Mata Ji not to wash clothes on Thursday, Shiv Ji's day of

the week. Since that day till her death in 1990 she never washed clothes on Thursdays. Such was the influence of belief in Bum Bum Bollay.

Taking care of the elders is a norm. Pita Ji's father lives in the house. He wears a tight white turban with a long tail hanging behind. He walks carrying a cane, not to help him walk, but to warn Mata Ji of his approach. He also gives a gentle cough in case the sound of cane is not heard. Mata Ji quickly covers her face with the part of saari covering her head. This is called Ghund in Panjabi.

This tradition stops as Pita Ji does not believe in this practice. May be his progressive mind or the educated daughters-in-law have a role in reversing an age old tradition of Panjab in our house.

One peculiar way of head movement of saying yes by nodding forward and also by moving it side to side seemed normal to us. Till we came abroad and learnt that side to side means no. Even now I have to consciously be aware of this habit.

Growing up we have many superstitions. A black cat crossing the path we walk on makes us stop and say Ram Ram seven times. Even after education, and moving abroad this persists. Someone else sneezes when a person is leaving for an important job is ominous. As is drinking water as we are ready to walk out of the house. Number 3, for some reason is considered unlucky number.

Many of these customs, traditions and superstitions have changed, some linger.

CHAPTER X

SIGHTS SOUNDS AND SMELLS

"Khuda ka vaasta tumhen. Aap ko apne bachchon ki kasam. (For God's sake. You swear upon your own children). Please put your sword back. I have two wives and five small children to take care of," stuttered the man, wearing a round white cap, pleading for his life. His trembling body, the betrayed fear of imminent death in his eyes, the hands clinging to the feet of a man with three white lines painted across his forehead, begged for mercy.

Before bringing the sword down, which would create a limp body immersed in a pool of its own blood, the Hindu said "Don't make me swear by my children. They were mercilessly killed by your brothers in Pakistan last week. Right in front of my own eyes! My pregnant wife tried to save them. The long sword simultaneously pierced through her and our one year old son she was holding close to her chest. I was made to witness this torture, tied to my cot. Their plan was to put the cot on fire at the end of the carnage, but an urgent call to kill another fleeing large family took the killers away. Besides, the striking strip of the match box had become wet by the spurted blood from the little neck of my child. The first son saved his own father's life! Should have been the other way. I squirmed and desperately pulled the rope trying to free myself to save my family, my blood running through the small bodies.

I begged for mercy offering my life in return of saving my wife and children fell on deaf ears. The guilt will kill me little by little every day, every moment for as long as I will breathe. And don't worry about your two wives and five children; we severed their heads from their sinful bodies in the other room five minutes ago. They are at peace."

Then all was quiet. The severed head, now capless, jerked around for a while till it settled next to the quivering body soaked in its own blood. The three lined foreheads and the bearded, turban wearing men, brandishing their blood tinged shiny swords, moved viciously onto the next target. They had vowed to take revenge for losing their wives, children, old parents and all the material possessions they had owned for generations.

We occasionally heard such stories from our relatives and other elders, but read many more similar incidents much later in life. The dark shadows resulting from the partition of India were kept away from our innocent minds.

The sounds and sights of the hue and cry of the departing Muslims and the arriving, displaced Hindus and Sikhs in Panipat must have been experienced by me, a three year old boy in 1947. The screams of the victims, the insane fury of the perpetrators and sights of mangled bodies on the trains coming from and going to the newly formed Pakistan must be buried deep in my grey matter. All these horrific events transpired following the division of India and creation of the new country, Pakistan, on August 14, 1947.

Like a river, life has the tenacity and need to keep flowing regardless of the current or preceding turbulent obstacles, small or large. Survival mode kicks in, time for regrets and counting the losses is placed on the back burner.

As children, we did not fathom the mammoth obstacles and turbulences our elders were going through, enduring their effects and myriad ways of surmounting them. We were busy enjoying our childhood. Surely our parents dealt with the numerous problems, but they kept the younger ones insulated from the trauma.

”Suraj and Prem, you guard the house from 6 AM to 4 PM. Virinder, you watch the gate from 4 to 7. I will stay up all night”, Kundan Lal, our father, known as Pitaji, ordered his three elder sons, who at that time were 19, 16, and 11 years old respectively. They were the oldest of the six sons. In addition to the three youngsters, one only few months old, two sisters need full time protection as well.

One day there was a scare in the household as Kanchan, the younger of the two, wandered off without telling anybody. Unaware that the whole family was frantically searching for her, with fears of every horrific possibility in their minds, she was merrily playing with some friends. Such was the frightful environment in the early days after the partition. All the elders had their hands full immediately after the family’s sudden, rushed arrival in Panipat.

Pitaji’s paternal uncle, Dr. Gopi Chand, who, with his family, was passing through Panipat on his way to the safety of Delhi, had earlier sent an urgent message to Pitaji ”I have possessed and am holding an abandoned house, vacated by a fleeing Muslim family. It will be perfect for your large family. Come as quickly as possible before someone else pushes us out.”

Our whole family, including my pregnant mother, for the tenth and the last time, had come from our permanent home in Khanewal, District Multan to our summer home in Sabathu, a cantonment town near Simla, in May 1947, for the three months of summer vacation. The family comprised of my parents, seven siblings including the one who was yet to be born in August, 1947, and Lalaji, my paternal grandfather. Maternal grandparents had stayed back in Sargodha, Punjab, and migrated with great difficulties after the partition. Our family’s plan was to return to our permanent home in September, 1947.

All types of information was circulating about the possible and impending partition of the country. No one knew for sure when or if it would really happen. But then, without much warning, partition was suddenly announced in June, 1947 and history of the region and lives of its people changed instantly. Our family abandoned our land, home,

and almost all material possessions, but was safe, together except for Nanaji and Naniji.

Pitaji immediately led our family from Sabathu to this abandoned house, deep in the city of Panipat in the fall season of 1947. The house must have been vacated in a rush because some pots, filled with partially burnt vegetables, were still sitting over the cold ashes of wood burning chulhas. There was no electricity; scorpions and occasional appearance of snakes came with the territory. We called it our first permanent home in the Independent India. This was the shelter which protected us from death and destruction. It had to be guarded around the clock.

In 1950 we moved to the new development called Model Town in house number 2. This became the permanent home to live and die in for Mr. Kundan Lal and Mrs. Vidyawati Luthra, my parents. This was the safe haven where they happily struggled to raise a large family in Panipat.

Sights, sounds and smells of Panipat in the 1950s started registering in a recollectable manner in my memory bank. Activities of a busy household occupied by twelve persons, ranging in the ages from 3 to 80 years, surrounded my young senses and mind.

The home is filled by sounds of laughter and crying; scents of food, rain, flowers, and odors of open latrines; and constant flurry of activities beginning before the sunrise and ending past the sunset. Mata Ji and Pita Ji's grit and foresight had this package delivered to us in an envelop of security and much love.

The city wakes up with the hazy sun filtering through dust, smoke from the burning coal and wood, and cool fog. Crowing of the roosters and chirping of the birds in the abundant trees are our wake up calls.

Mornings are also announced by prayers and hymns being sung over loud speakers. The newly arrived Hindu and Sikh refugees have brought their religious practices with them. Many brave Muslims have stayed back in the old city. No Muslims reside in the newly developed Model Town. Each sect started their days with competing sounds of Al-lah U Akbar, Gurbani, chants of Hare Rama, Hare Krishna or recita-

tion of Hanuman Chalisa to invoke the god Hanuman. Hindus and Sikhs set up Temples and Gurdwaras in the newly constructed houses. Several old mosques are present in the old city.

Our family's place for prayers, Shri Ram Sharnam does not participate in this loud morning ritual. Swami Satya Nand Ji had separated from the Arya Smaaj, taught that the enunciation of the word Ram is the sound of the unseen God. Small gatherings started at the home of Shakuntla Behanji in house number 76, and later number 9, both of which became too small for the escalating large gatherings of devotees. A large hall named Shri Ram Sharnam was inaugurated on October 9, 1960 at 588 Model Town, which has been growing ever since, now under the Guruship of Darshi Ma. Melodious Bhajans, Amrit Vaani, Sarv Shakti Mate Parmaatmnein Shri Rama E Nama and discourses are recited over a low volume speaker system, during the evenings prayer sessions.

Once the fires of partition cooled down and extinguished, the three communities live in harmony, peace and non judgmental acceptance. Every religious sect or group and individual follows their respective religious practices without questions or fights over My religion is better than yours. Survival is the common Mantra.

Roosters crow, dogs bark, crows croak, men and women with water-filled Lotas in their hands make their way to the open fields. Some people are seen taking baths in cold water, shivering, and chanting Ram Ram Ram or Om Namoh Shivaaye. Shopkeepers start raising shutters of their shops. Tea stalls start preparing hot coal for making much needed morning tea. Smoke starts to fill the air with its acrid smell and grey haze. Vegetable sellers are busy filling their stalls with several fresh vegetables just arrived from the Mandi. Chewing their daatan, spitting as they go along the streets, cloth bags in hand, men and women are making their way to the market to buy the supplies for the day. Milk vendors, newspaper sellers peddle around on bicycles. Children, in their respective school uniforms, start walking to their schools; some play-

fully happy and some still yawning, missing their cozy beds. The whole town is waking up. Life of Panipat is becoming alive.

A large body of stagnant water, called Talaab, west of the railway line produces an odor, which spreads out beyond its borders. It also provides a fertile home for the mosquitos to hatch, multiply, bite and spread malaria.

The washermen (Dhobi) and women wash clothes at the edges of this body of water. Dhobis soak the filthy clothes in water and soda and put them in large containers, simmering overnight, over a light coal fire. The process loosens the dust from the clothes. The dirt-filled wet clothes, soaked in soap, are beaten by wooden flat bats or swung hard onto flat rocks. They are rinsed in the water and squeezed by twisting over and over till they look like braids. Multicolored rows of clothes are hung on clothes lines or laid out on the adjoining land along the Talaab to dry in the ever present sun. Soap-filled water flows back into the Talaab.

Dogs, half submerged cows and buffaloes bathe, urinate in and drink the same water. This is where people and cattle take baths together. People fill their metal container (Lota) with water for washing after defecating in the open fields along the railway lines; many do not have outhouses or latrines yet.

Our Mataji, as we call our mother, and Ganga Devi, a regular hired help, wash the clothes at home in a similar manner, except the water is from the city water pipes or hand drawn pumps and the loosening of the dust process is done from 5 AM to noon in a metal container called peepa. Locally made pale colored, square shaped bar of desi soap for the sole purpose of washing clothes is used. It is too harsh for the skin during bathing. Commercially made, red Lifebuoy soap is used for bathing. Brown, translucent Pearce soap is too expensive for us. Mata Ji and Ganga Devi use about three inch wide bat with a round handle to beat the dirt out of the clothes. A single steel wire, stretched across the whole yard, is used to hang the clothes for drying.

A newly established Sugar Mill is located at the southern tip of Panipat. It is notorious for announcing the approaching Panipat to the people traveling on the Grand Trunk Road, commonly called G T Road, and in the trains. The characteristic pungent odor greets the visitors, making them cover their noses till they go past the city or get accustomed to it. Residents are surrounded by it, breathe it all the time and no longer notice it. They are thankful for the much needed jobs provided by the Mill to the thousands of refugees who have abandoned everything behind in Pakistan. What is pungent to the outsiders is a sweet smell of livelihood and life to the residents.

Open sewers, lined between the homes and paved streets, carry a slowly moving black sludge of solid waste from kitchens, bathrooms and latrines. It is prodded along by the scant water and it was not uncommon for the drains, called Naaliyan, to get blocked. The homeowners use water in baaltiyaan (buckets) to move the smelly stuff beyond the boundary of their own house. Private or City employed Jamadars (Sweepers) use a U shaped metal piece, connected to one end of a wooden shaft, to pull out the black sludge blocking the open drains, onto the sides of drains. The foul smell and sights of these intermittent dark piles surrounded by flies are perceived to be normal by us.

In those days of poverty, I remember once throwing a one Rupee coin in this sludge filled naali. The whole family spent, in vain, half a day searching for the lost treasure with scoops and bare hands. Most likely, that day we ate Roti with salt, onions and achar. And surely I got a thappadh or a smack with a broom.

The sewage system is meant to carry off the rain water as well. It is obviously insufficient for the job, as is evident after every rainfall. The shallow playground gets filled and turned into a swimming pool for the squeaking children and heat exhausted animals.

In addition to various fruit bearing plants, Pitaji has planted a variety of perennial flowering bushes. Raat Ki Raani, (queen of the night) opens its thin, elongated white flowers, spreading its unique scent all over the 1200 square yard. It also permeates into the house. It is said that

the smell attracted snakes; children approach the plant carefully watching for any slithering movements. During the days, white Jasmine flowers, orange and yellow marigolds, purple Bougainville provided color and fragrance. Mango tree forms clusters of pale flowers, called boor. Anarkali, the flower of yet to be born pomegranate, is one of the prettiest flowers in our yard. Covering the center of the wall, between the two grey painted entrance metal doors, is a pinkish white flower bearing climber plant. Flowers from okra, eggplants, large yellow ones on the vines, guavas plants and others mentioned above invite honey bees and bumble bees which helps cross pollination. Butterflies of different colors and sizes hop from one flower to the other.

Once the fruits start forming, a large number of green, and some multi-colored, chirping parrots provide constant beauty and nuisance. They fully or partially eat the guavas. We take out our sling shots and aim small stones at them. Mataji sews small cloth pouches to protect the guavas and also grapes hanging from the grape vines. Pitaji gets blood from the local butchers and pours it at the roots of the vines, a good source of nitrogen.

Crowing of crows, looking for unattended or discarded food, are connected with superstition of arrival of unannounced guests. Their coarse sounds contrasts the sweet sound of 'Koyal'. Anyone who sang a melodious song is complimented "Bilkul Koyal jaisi awaaz hai" (Sound is just like that of a Koyal)

Buzzing sound of the abundant houseflies during the day and mosquitoes at night fills the air during summer season. Flies are ignored or just smacked by hand or hand held jute fans. There are too many to kill. Flit is sprayed in every room in the evening and the doors are closed for a while. After that we enter the rooms closing the doors quickly before the next platoon of mosquitoes follow. Darting tongues of the crawling lizards, magically holding onto the walls and ceiling, take care of any remaining insects. We look at them as friendly chipkali, but they spook our children during our annual visits during the 1980s and beyond.

Groups of stray dogs bark and roam the streets. No one has a pet dog or cat. People throw a piece of roti or stripped and marrow sucked bones to them. They become nuisance during the night and early hours of the mornings, when they engage in loud barking fights over the prized leftover, unattended or discarded bread or bones. Loud barking ends with some dogs whimpering, declaring the winners and losers. Losers generally tuck their tails and meekly walked away. The term Dum daba ke bhagna comes from such scenes.

Visits to Bosa Ram, the sweets makers is mesmerizing. The sights of barfi, freshly made jalebi, laddoos make us salivate then and even now just writing about it.

Our home is about half a mile west of the busy train station and the tracks, called railway lines. Another half mile further east is the main national highway, GT Road. Dotted along and east of the GT road is the crowded old city.

The High Schools were built along this road. Everyone living in the Model Town has to cross the railway lines and GT Road to get to the schools, bus stand, public offices and markets.

There is only one overhead bridge on Assandh road. It was constructed in early 1950s to facilitate traffic between the newly created Model Town and the rest of the city. It is used by pedestrians, bicycle riders, trucks, bullock carts, tractors, occasional cars and buses. There is a small pre-partition underpass south of it, which is used by pedestrians, bicycles and rickshaws. It was the only safe way across the railway lines till the overhead bridge was created. Now the underpass is mostly used when the railway phatak (crossing gate) is closed. Phatak closes before the arrival or after departure of the trains at the train station. A variety of vehicles create long lines on the steep road on both sides of the crossing. Pedestrians and bicyclists squeeze through and keep crossing the lines till there is just no chance of escape from the whistling and rushing trains. Some are not so lucky.

Most of us do not go over or under the safe passages across the railway lines because of the distance from home. We simply look both ways

and walked across the eight open railway lines as there are only four tracks. At times we squeezed through in between the dubbas of long stationary goods trains, hoping that they do not start moving while we are still under them.

Panipat Junction is on the main route connecting Delhi with north and northwestern parts of India. The railway engines scream loud whistles at all hours. This is partially to announce arrival and departure of the passenger and goods trains. The main reason is to prevent accidental crushing of people who continue their hops across the railway lines even in the face of oncoming trains, betting their lives that their legs will win the race against the lunging train.

Endless blaring of the horns from the increasing number of cars, buses and trucks is a normal phenomenon on the GT Road. Ringing of the bells by bicyclists and ricksha pullers adds to the noise. "Bauji, hut ke" (Mr., please move), rickshaw pullers and tonga drivers say to the constant stream of pedestrians competing for the space on the roads.

Model Town is quiet; hardly anyone can afford a car. Sugar cane loaded trucks and containers pulled by tractors, followed by the children running and pulling out the sugar canes, drive on our roads on their way to the sugar mill.

"Bol Jamooore, peeche lambe baalon vaale sahib ki pocket mein kya hai, chashme vaale sahib ke hat ka rung kya hai?" The man in the middle of the encircling crowd asks the sheet-covered boy, jamoora, lying on the ground. In a high pitch, the boy under the cover of the sheet, to the amazement of the crowd, accurately describes a pen, a comb and the color of the hat. He even describes what another person was planning to do that day, another's future. A large crowd stands in a circle around the master and jamoora. Eager ones push to come closest possible. The impressed crowd is willing to pay a chavanni or duanni to the man for asking the jamoora their future or a solution to their problems. Little do we know that the persons described in the audience are planted and are part of the team. They collect money from the fools and move on to the next village.

Proponents of Shilajit attract another set of crowd standing in a circle. Promise of better performance in the bedroom prompts many to part with precious little money they have.

Some are touting powders, pills and potions to cure bawaseer, (hemorrhoids), upset stomach, Kala motia (glaucoma), safed motia, (cataract), infertility, curing all dental problems and everything else in between. Such fake doctors try to sell their cure for all diseases in the trains as well.

It was not uncommon to see lay persons sit on the roadside pulling rotted teeth with pliers. Without anesthesia and of course without license.

Billboards and painted signs cover every visible wall along the GT Road showing names of Hakims and RPMs– Registered Medical Practitioners. Bawaseer and infertility were the commonest issues. A big man, with a big mustache, a Hakim appeared on many walls.

Trained monkeys and bears perform tricks to amuse the crowd, who throw coins into a tin container. We love when a stick holding male monkey marries a sari clad female monkey and lead her away, apparently to his home.

Another crowd of people surround a couple of men, one playing the musical instrument called been, while the other uncovers the jute baskets. A cobra crawls out, it's head standing at right angle to the body, black beady eyes follow the movements of the been, and at times ominously darts forward, it's tongue sticking out to strike the been player. We get scared, very nervous and worried for the player. Later we learnt that the venom sacs had been removed and the snake bites, if they happen, are harmless.

Pythons crawl out of bigger containers and wrap around the bodies of the performers. Some bold spectators are also given the chance for this feat. For a fee, of course. To our horror, some bold ones take on the challenge.

Many signs on the walls, some with the pictures of donkeys, saying– Dekhiye, gadha peshab kar raha hai, (Look, donkey is urinating) does

not prevent men, their legs spread apart for the stream to flow through without wetting their feet, from standing there and urinating. The smell of urine permeates the air so much that we are accustomed to it.

GT Road is also known for overturned trucks, hit and run accidents and unattended victims on or along the its sides. If one sees a victim, it is considered best to ignore and not report it to the police. The fear is that whoever reports the accident, the police holds them as the prime suspect unless proven otherwise. Ambulances do not exist. Those who do make it to the sporadic government hospitals received no or delayed treatment as they had become police case. FIR (First Incident Report) has to be filed before any examination or treatment can be initiated. Many victims do not survive the wait. Almost always no one files medical malpractice lawsuits. In fact, we heard that terminology when we came abroad in the 70s.

Roads in Model Town are wide and crowd free. Going through the galiyaan (narrow streets) of the Shehar is another story. The narrow streets are crowded, life in motion: People walk zig zag trying to find empty spaces, rubbing shoulders, splashing red fluid, like a pichkari, from their mouth indiscriminately on either side, while chewing the Paan; bicycles and rickshaws weaving their way through the swarms of moving or gossiping stationery bodies; people haggling loudly with the shopkeepers of the various shops that line the streets.

During the summer season most people wear white cotton clothes, dotted by black burka covered Muslim women whose number keep increasing as we go deeper into the old city. Their number rises significantly as we approach the famous Kaldndar Chowk, the site of Kalandar's Masjid.

Here the population is mostly Muslim and it was here that we had snatched our first home in Panipat in 1947.

Election times brings out rickshaws and tempos, with large posters attached on the three sides showing names and symbols of the party. Portable loud speakers blare loudly, urging people to vote for their re-

spective parties. Many people are illiterate. At the time of casting their votes, they press their thumb on a blue ink pad and imprint it on the ballot paper.

One party always chooses symbol of a hand, to become easily recognizable. There are many National and local parties with their individual insignias. Most popular is the Congress Party. Their leaders wear white, boat shaped caps. Their sign is Gandhiji's Spinning Wheel, Charkha. These symbols are meant to cash in on the recently won Freedom from the British Raj of almost 200 years.

The Rickshaws are also used to have large boards depicting the currently playing movies in the two cinema halls we have along the GT Road. Large posters of these movies are also pasted on the prominently visible walls and free standing display bill boards.

Going to the cinema halls for watching films is a major event, although rare due to financial constraints. Admission ticket varies from 4 to 8 Annas, equivalent to a quarter or half a rupee. There are three show times: 3 to 6, 6 to 9 and 9 to 12 PM. Every few months we go to 6 to 9 shows. The hall is always packed.

Sometimes tickets were sold in black market. There is no provision of buying tickets in advance. They are purchased from a partially closed window where a hand is inserted through a space at the bottom of the metal guardrail. Money is exchanged for a paper ticket. Some people buy tickets in bulk. Before long, the window is shut, a sign board depicting House Full is placed next to it. The line is still long and people were eager to see the film. The bulk ticket purchaser then, in hushed voice, goes around and tries to sell the ticket by saying "thus ka ek, thus ka ek or bees ka ek (one ticket for 10 or 20 Annnas) depending on the demand.

It is an illegal act. But the cinema owners, black marketeers and even the policemen, with their danda swirling in their hands, are part of the scheme.

Movies are about 3 hours long with an interval. Vendors came into the hall selling tea or Moongphali (roasted peanuts in the shells). Some

people go out for the urinals or tea and cigarettes. Smoking is allowed inside the hall but not during the showing of the film. National Anthem is played at the beginning. Everyone has to stand and be perfectly still and silent. We are relishing our freedom from the British. At the end of the show the floor is covered with shells of moongphali.

Dev Anand is our family's idol and hero. Puffed hair style and raised collars at the back are copied by the boys. At times, even after being told not to go, we still went to see the film. Once I stole 6 Annas, from the space under Mataji's Singer sewing machine, to see the movie Jagriti. Invariably we get caught and reprimanded by Pitaji. Kanchan tries to save us as much as she can.

The early morning music from Vividh Bharati still resonates with the fond memories. Listening to the running commentary of the five days Cricket test matches brought life to a stand still. A commonly used sentence during these days is "Bau Ji, score kee ho gya hai?" (Mr., what is the score?). The radios and transistors are turned on at homes, offices and shops. We listen to it on the fixed radio and later on a portable light brown leather covered Transistor brought by our brother, Prem in 1957. Binaca Geet Mala is something the whole family listens to on Wednesdays from 8 to 9 PM on our black Murphy Radio. Games are finished, food is consumed before 8 and no other activity is scheduled between 8 and 9. The voice of Amin Sayaani is ingrained in our minds. The show is broadcast from Radio Ceylon. Bhaaiyo aur Behano, aaj ka dasveen padaan ka geet hai....and finally, with a celebratory music, Pehli padaan (first position) is announced.

Such sounds fill the air in the noisy but now quiet household at 2 Model Town, Panipat.

I grew up surrounded by these sights, smells and sounds of Panipat from 1947 to 1959, when pursuit of higher education took me to Government college, Rupar, Punjab.

The early traumatic sights, smells and sounds from a fractured country had been silenced by the glorious childhood. Poverty and misery had been trumped by tenacity to survive, protective reflexes and lim-

itless love. They had been filled by the safety of a large loving home, sights of abundant greenery, the fragrance of flowers, and sounds of laughter and music.

CHAPTER XI

DREAMS DON'T DIE

There was a flurry of activity all over the house. "Is the suitcase ready? Did you pack enough mango pickle and praanthe with cooked dry potatoes placed between them? Are your shoes polished? Do you have enough money for the journey? Do you have Dr. Chitkara's (Pitaji's cousin) address, at whose house you will be staying for the first 3 or 4 days?"

The last question was planned to avoid the notorious, scary ritual of ragging which every new student received from the seniors.

"Make sure your shoes match; one black and one brown will look really funny. Don't stick your head out of the moving train, you will get a coal particle in your eye. Above all, no more mischief; you are a big boy now."

Questions and advice were coming from every corner and everybody. Mataji (as my siblings and I called our mother), with her nose dripping and tears in her eyes, haltingly, in a raspy voice, said, "Make sure you eat properly; I will not be there running after you with butter soaked praanthe and your favourite bhindi and karele." She kissed my forehead. Our tears mingled.

What was the fuss and occasion for all this hoopla in September 1961 at House Number 2, Model Town, Panipat?

I was on my way out of the home, at the age of 17, alone, plunging into the large, unknown world. I grew up with the luxury of being sheltered, so far, by my mother, brothers, sisters, Dadaji and, mostly physically absent but in spirit always around, my father (Pitaji). We all knew that, felt that.

After the partition of India and our migration from what now had become Pakistan, the responsibilities of supporting the large family was on Pitaji's shoulders. Money earned from the newly learned trade of brickmaking was never enough. First, the eldest son, Suraj, followed by the next one, Prem, and later, Virinder, got jobs and supplemented Pitaji's meagre income. All of this combined money was barely enough to cover the family's basic needs of food and shelter.

Education was considered to be as essential as food by Kundan Lal Luthra, my father, whom we called Pitaji. That was the main goal of his life for his children.

The family had distributed 11 boondi laddoos as gifts to all the neighbours, and appropriate donations had been made to the needy woman, Brahmni, who visited us weekly to receive money and food for her recently uprooted family. Ganesh, the god who removes obstacles, had been invoked with indecipherable mantras. We had also obtained proper blessings from the family gurus - Swami Satya Nand Ji and Shakuntla Behan Ji.

Yes, indeed, it was a big occasion for the family, and above all for Pitaji. I was the first child going to medical college and, hopefully, becoming the first doctor in our family. My six older siblings had become engineers, businessmen, and teachers. The one younger than me, the last one of the eight siblings, had clearly declared his intentions of becoming an engineer. I had also wanted to become an engineer, not a doctor - because I hated blood! In hindsight, what a foolish reason that was; but at that age, it was a major one that caused me to join pre-engineering courses after high school. In the two-year course, I had already attended pre-engineering classes for three months in 1959 at Government College, Rupar, Punjab.

A two-week all-India trip, arranged through the college, gave Pitaji a window of opportunity to change the course of my life. While I was on the trip, he went to my college, cancelled my Physics and Math classes, and enrolled me in Botany and Zoology. He also arranged for evening tuition and extra classes, to make up for lost time.

He was pleasantly surprised and happy when I did not object, but quietly followed the path he had carved out for me. After getting sufficient grades, I was accepted to Medical College, Amritsar, only 20 miles from Lahore. Since then, I have been forever thankful for his foresight.

We later learned that there was a whole different dimension to this action: the fulfillment of a long, hibernating dream of the architect of education of the whole family, our Pitaji.

Before Independence, Kundan Lal was one of the two sons of Lala Gokal Chand. Lalaji had been gifted 10 acres of land by his British officer. Kundan's brother, Karam Chand, was meant to take over the farming. Kundan loved to help people. "What better way to serve than to become a doctor?" was his thinking. The year was 1921. The handsome young man had worked very hard to achieve his dreams. With this goal in mind, Kundan took pre-medical courses at Daya Nand College, Lahore. He completed the prerequisite courses and earned higher marks than required to get admitted to the prestigious Glancy Medical College, Lahore.

Much to Kundan's disappointment, a Muslim boy with lesser marks was given the one remaining spot due to the quota system in Muslim-dominated Lahore. Not one to be defeated and give up, Kundan continued his studies to complete his B.Sc. to ensure admission to medical college the following year. His actions and courses were on track.

No one can foresee or predict the hand of destiny which is stronger than one's efforts. What is not meant to be will not be. Defeatism, a rational defense mechanism of acceptance, or ingrained deep faith in destiny and the will of God: such has been the Hindu philosophy.

At that time, infectious diseases were prevalent and a common cause of death in all age groups. Kundan's brother, Karam, fell victim to one

such disease and died at the age of 21. Their mother died shortly thereafter. Kundan Lal got K C engraved in green ink on his forearm in memory of Karan Chand.

Lalaji summoned Kundan back from Lahore to Khanewal, our ancestral village, to look after the land. Kundan's pleas to let him continue his education fell on deaf ears. One could cry, make a scene, but the dictates of the elders could not be denied. Such was the culture in the 1920s. The budding doctor, overnight, became a doctor of crops. And what a farmer he became! Farmers from all around Khanewal sought his advice on all aspects of farming.

The country got divided, the family got uprooted, displaced, and became homeless refugees. Pitaji taught us that all you have today can get snatched away in a moment. Don't give up; hard work with a smile can build a full life.

Pitaji's suppressed, dormant, hibernating seed of becoming a doctor had never died. One day it had to sprout. He must have seen something in me akin to himself and saw a doctor in me, serving humanity. The one to carry the torch and to keep the man's dream alive. His surviving 7th child was about to enter medical college and become a doctor. The dream lived on.

Now I was finally ready to embark on the daunting, lonely journey to Amritsar on a newly started train called the Flying Express. After the flurry of activity at home, goodbyes, tight hugs and tears, Pitaji escorted me to the train station.

The train, as usual, was running late. He did not talk much, but looked at me with his usual style of tilted head with a slanted gaze, a tear building up in the corner of his eye. He carefully wiped it with the same motion he would use to straighten his hair, hoping the train would be delayed a little longer.

A loud whistle, a down green signal, and a plume of smoke far to the left broke his trance. Overhead speakers announced the arrival of the train that was rushing in to take his son away to finally fulfill his long cherished dream. The held back tears could not be subdued any longer;

a mixture of joy and sorrow wet my cheeks and collar as he gave me a tight reassuring hug.

The train rolled out gently. His blessings to serve humanity, and become as good a doctor as he had dreamt to be, kept following me through his loving gaze, the gradually fading smile on his face and the waving of his hands.

CHAPTER XII

SURVIVAL

Our body is a miracle of non-stop self governing, defending and repairing machine. It serves us for all our needs and demands. It has amazing mechanisms to protect itself and survive despite getting attacked by numerous enemies. Most of the enemies enter the body through the mandatory breath and food. Some enter through breaks in the otherwise impenetrable skin. Some enemies attack us from within while their origin may be due to external irritants such as smoking, drugs, alcohol among others or governed by genes while the cause of some remains illusory so far. Even the strongest tend to buckle under giants.

I feel fortunate to have survived, rather flourished, when I think about numerous enemies I had to surmount living in Panipat, India in 1950s. Obstacles can bring us down or make us stronger. Our immune system learns to recognize the enemy and its soldiers stay alert and are ready for the next invasion.

Growing up in that era exposed our bodies to innumerable invaders. I just have to close my mind and the vibrant images emerge from deep subconscious mind.

There is the unavoidable dust in the air due to vast dry land, constant construction as the newly developing Model Town keeps constructing thousands of homes and shops to accommodate the influx

of hundreds of thousands refugees uprooted from newly created Pakistan. The cilia in the trachea and bronchi are working 24/7 to eliminate the dust through cough and sputum that is considered a norm. Noises over the sink outside the front door or spitting anywhere is proof of machinery clearing itself. It is most noticeable during quiet gatherings. .

At times the minor cough turns into painful sore throat. Gurgling sound of salt water gargles is commonly heard over the sink outside the front door. Our mother, Mata Ji, mixes salt, charcoal ashes with mustard oil and applies the concoction, called ghundi, to the throat with her fingers. She does it ever so gently, without inducing a gag reflex. She has to be an expert. After all, she raised 10 children, even though two did not make it beyond the age of six years due to small pox in what had become Pakistan. These home remedies are effective almost all the time.

Summer heat takes its toll by making life uncomfortable for us. Tiny reddish dots, called pith, spreads all over the body. We are instructed not to scratch them lest they get infected. These spots resolve spontaneously when the temperature cools down.

Those people working outdoors without access to shade and drinking water are prone to get heat strokes. Pyaaus (drinking water stalls), set up as fixed structures or portable ones on wheeled carts, are a common scene. Many of them run as businesses while some are set up as means of charity by the well-to-do, good hearted people.

Everyone eagerly looks forward to the cooling effects of monsoon rains. Nothing comes free. The rains provide the much needed dip in the temperature and supply water for everything thirsty to its core. As a side effect they also create ponds and puddles which became breeding grounds for mosquitos. They love to bite and suck blood from us. The female mosquitoes are the carrier for malarial parasite. They buzz around and bite the sleeping folks in the evening or at night. To save our skin and sometimes life we set up mosquito nets over our beds. Swarms of them follow above our heads as we walk around in the evenings. No

matter how hard we try to break up the assembly by swaying our hands, they regroup immediately. Even running cannot not match their flying speed.

Mosquitoes rush to get indoors in the evening looking for victims. We spray Flit with a hand held pump to kill any invaders and quickly close the doors. Lizards on the ceiling and walls are periodically darting their tongues out. Insects gather around the light bulbs and that spot becomes the dining area for the lizards.

I still remember going through the classic cluster of symptoms and effects of malaria. It starts with fever and intense shivering for a day. Thinking that body is cold, I get tucked in the bed and covered with cotton filled covers, razaai. Cloth soaked in ice cold water is applied to the feet and forehead. Profuse sweating is seen as a sign of relief. The fever and chills subside for several hours only to return in a day or two. The diagnosis of malaria is made without consultation with a doctor. Quinine tablets are started on our own. I remember getting my tilli enlarged on the left side of upper abdomen. That area, normally soft, has become very hard upto mid abdomen. Later I learnt that we were feeling the enlarged spleen.

When the fever does not subside, Mata Ji walks me over to Dr. Parma Nand, pronounced by us as one name—Parmanand, who lives three houses from us in 5 Model Town. As children we love going to him. All his medicines are sweet powder or tablets.

After several days of taking his medicine and bitter quinine, hydration, activated immune system, prayers, my symptoms subside, hard tilli shrinks, a common fatal illness is cured. Malaria is a dreaded disease which kills hundreds of thousands people. We are lucky that it did not kill any member of our family close relative.

Not only for my episode with malaria, Dr. Parma Nand is our first line of medical intervention. He is a self taught homeopathic doctor. All his medicines look same to us. They are small sweet white tablets sitting in clear glass bottles on a few shelves.

After listening carefully to our complaints he holds our wrist feeling the pulse, have us stick our tongue out, "Say aah", pulls down the lower lid and looks at the eyes. With this much information he picks up two or three labeled bottles, shake out a few white tablets on a white piece of paper. Sometimes he crushes the tablets into powder form. Carefully he folds the paper and asks us to take one pudhiya (folded white paper), or tablet two or three times a day. He always ends up by saying encouraging words "Take this and you will be fine in no time." Children think he is a quack giving same sugar pill to everybody from different bottles to simply impress the patients.

Most illnesses get cured by Dr. Parmanand's medicine, his encouragement, placebo effect, simply time for the body to heal itself or a combination of all.

If there is no relief, the next line of defense is Dr. Lal Chand, a partially balding man wearing a hard khaki hat, who makes house calls on his bicycle. He lives in 56 Model Town, not far from on Bosa Ram chowk. He does not have M.B.B.S. but has some diploma attached to his name, enough to get the title of a doctor.

A message is sent to Dr. Lal Chand. Hearing the bell from his bicycle outside our door, one of us runs out to carry his brown leather bag as he is greeted into the house "Come in Doctor sahib. Will you like to have some water?" No one refuses water in the summer days.

His examination, in addition to the tongue and eyes, extends to check the pulse, palpate the ticklish abdomen and placement of stethoscope on the chest. His medicines, dispensed from his brown bag or later picked up from the shelves in his clinic at home are much hated bitter tablets or partially sweetened liquid dispensed in light brown glass bottles with raised markings as a measure of the dose, called khu-raak. He gives instructions, never failing to give advice about what to eat or avoid during the period of sickness. Reluctantly we gulp down the bitter pills or liquid medicine followed by a spoon of sugar to wipe away the bitter taste from the tongue. We are consoled "If you hate the

taste so much, imagine how it would taste to the little malaria or other bugs.”

Next line of medical defense was Dr. Nehchal Das, 63 Model Town. He is also not an M.B.B.S. but has better diploma or the one with more letters in it. He has a reputation better than that of Dr. Lal Chand. Occasionally we end up with him and are treated the same way as by Dr. Lal Chand. He just charges more and does not make house calls; may be that is why he is considered a better doctor. No lab studies are done. I did not see an X Ray machine till I joined medical college, Amritsar. There is not even one pharmacy store in Panipat. Doctors or their compounders dispense the required medicines.

Last resort is with the only doctor in Panipat with M.B.B.S. written next to his name. He is Dr. Dhamija who lives in 264 Model Town, which to our little legs, seems miles away from home. After similar evaluation he writes a prescription that we take to his compounder sitting in the next room. The compounder takes out pills from different bottles lined up in the shelves on the wall, puts them in a pastel and crushes them with a mortar. Folded recycled news paper pudhiyas are given with instructions. Liquid medicines from large bottles also dispensed in small brown bottles. The compounder acts as a doctor when Dr. Dhamija is out of town.

Once someone was really sick at our home. We bypass the first three tier of doctors. Two of the boys run to Dr. Dhamija's house to request him to come to our house in his car, one of the few people in town with that luxury.

“He pulled his back muscle this morning. He is resting but will surely drive up to your house in the afternoon to check the patient”, the compounder told us. The doctor had misdiagnosed the symptoms of his own heart attack and died that afternoon at home.

Food poisoning is prevalent due to improper hygiene as well as absence of refrigerators. Almost always it is a transient issue resolved by the body's innate mechanism of vomiting and diarrhea to eliminate the offending organisms or toxins before they have time and ability to get

absorbed into the body from the intestinal tract. Sometimes we are not so lucky and sickness can last days and requires pills.

Cholera (Haiza) is a highly contagious and serious disease. Hand washing is a rare phenomenon in India. But in our home we are instructed to wash hands before meals but otherwise nobody cares.

Summer is water melon season. It is considered a cold fruit which also provides much needed hydration. When eaten at home, the family gathers around a freshly washed big tarbooze, cut slices and finish the whole thing in one go, biting the slice down to the white of inner wall.

Vendors set up stalls displaying cut red, juicy slices. Flies love the sugar and sometimes hard to distinguish from the black seeds. They swarm all over but our mind does not register their presence. It is simply a normal thing to see. With open out houses and uncovered sewers the flies become an efficient and fast carriers of the cholera causing bacteria. Intense nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea ensues. Fortunately lot of fluids, pills and syrups from the step ladder approach of doctors cure us.

The episode curtails our eating watermelon from the street but we cannot resist sweets from Bosa Ram? Flies like the same exposed sweets but we do not pay attention to them. Consequently we pay the price in the form of Typhoid. It is almost mandatory for all of us to get at least one episode of this malady. High fever, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pains are the punishment for our weakness for eating openly displayed sweets and other outside food.

This does require visit by or to the doctors. Antibiotics and hydration cures it. At least for the occupants of 2 Model Town.

Outdoor summer activities, luckily for us, cause only minor falls from the trees and bicycles. Bruises and small cuts heal very fast, thanks to our youth and strong immune system.

Even though scorpions and snakes are in abundance in vastly open fields, we never had poisonous bites. We do see snakes but leave them alone, and they do the same.

Doctors are very busy in the summers. We do not always have money to pay them. They happily accept home grown guavas, mangos, or vegetables. At times, simply saying thank you is good enough except for Drs. Nehchal Das and Dhamija. Times are hard for everyone but some doctors just don't get it.

I see that even now, even here in the land of prosperity. They forget a simple lesson later taught to me in 1973 by the most respected professor, Dr. Prem Chandra "When you look at the eye of the patient, do not look at their wallet." This lesson should be universally applicable, not only in Medicine but in any profession and all spheres of life.

It seems strange now but in the 1950s it is considered normal to see tiny wiggly white worms moving around in the potty. Sometimes we see worms that are like small earth worms. It does not scare us because everyone else reports having them. Surely we get treatment for them too and get cured. Parents repeatedly tell our deaf ears to wear shoes when we play in the dusty fields. Infections invade through minor cuts or bruises in the feet.

While playing outdoor games of all types it is not uncommon to get bruises and cuts. Aak, also known as milkweed, grows wild in the open fields that are rapidly disappearing giving way to new homes. We break off a branch with oozing thick milky juice and apply it to the cut. Apparently it has antiseptic qualities. Very rarely the wounds get infected. If aak is not available we use dirt to cover up the wound, oblivious to the danger of tetanus. Luckily none of us got that dreaded disease.

Miraculously only one major injury at 2 Model Town, beyond the cuts and bruises, is a fracture sustained by Virinder while playing cricket. There is not even one orthopedics doctor in town. In the newly expanding Panipat there is no formal hospital either.

The fracture happened while playing cricket. When I asked Virinder how it happened, he laughingly recalls: "It was the new pajama, too strong to tear. When I tripped, my leg got caught in the bell bottom end, as was the fashion those days, and the damn thing did not tear. All other pajamas were old and tattered and on the brink of being torn

at the slightest force. Our clothing inventory, as mentioned before, was basic minimum. I had just got the new pajama stitched from our family tailor in house number 40. Any old pajama that day, you will not be writing about my fracture. Pajama would have torn and I wouldn't have fallen."

Pitaji happened to be home. Going to Karnal, which had a hospital, 25 miles away by bus, in so much pain, was not possible. At someone's recommendation, Virinder and Pitaji hail a rickshaw, a rare luxury, and head for a man known for his expertise in fixing bones. He lives in old Panipat. They are asked to wait while the 'bone doctor' is called. Virinder recalls this episode years later. "I saw an old man, everyone ten years older than us looked old to us those days, walk in with assistance. He was about 80 and blind!" The blind old, so called unqualified, bone doctor held and felt the left forearm where both the bones had broken, displace about an inch but skin was still intact. His one hand held the proximal and the other held distal end of the forearm, pulled the farther end out with a jerk and then snapped it back. Ouch, I screamed. But in that one movement the blind man had put the bone ends together. No anesthesia and no pain medicine. Having done the miracle, without X-Ray or scans, he put wooden splints held together by a bandage. A sling around my neck and the arm has been like new ever since."

The malshi, (masseuse) did the follow up care. "After a couple of weeks, he periodically removed the splints, gave gentle massage to the area and put the splint back. After about 4 weeks the fracture had healed, splints were removed and I went back to my college in Ludhiana. Dr. Ram Lal Narang, our Bhaaiya Ji, (Pita Ji's sister's husband) arranged follow up care with one of his doctor friends."

That is how our brother Virinder spent his summer vacation in Panipat at age seventeen in 1954. And spoiled our clean, serious injury free record!

I personally do not have any memory of our first house in Panipat where we lived from 1947 to 1950.

Virinder still gets nervous talking of the day when our Mataji almost died.

It happened in our original occupied house in the 'Shehar' (City). It was a two storey house previously occupied by a Muslim family which fled for their safety. Following their departure we occupied it for our family. It had open verandas but no windows. Light came into the rooms through the open doors. There was no electricity. Store rooms had no ventilation and were pitch dark. One had to carry an oil burning lamp to go there.

On one fateful day, in 1948, at the young age of 36, having survived ten home deliveries and all the prevalent diseases, she developed an attack of asthma. Pitaji was away to Palval. Children, their Nani and Shiela bhua were at home. Virinder can still hear the wheezing sounds as Vidya, our Mataji, tries to gasp for the precious oxygen. She is struggling for breath and getting paler by the seconds. Nani frantically rubs her daughter's back but it is not helping.

Suddenly the wheezing stops. There is no breath. Nani starts wailing, beating her chest as ladies in India do when someone dies. She starts crying loudly and saying "Vidya, thu aidee jaldi chodh gayee" (Vidya, you left us so soon.) Virinder bolts out running down the streets of the strange new town frantically asking everyone if they know of a doctor. Fortunately he finds one within few seconds-Dr. Hans Raj. The doctor rushes wasting no precious moments. There is no breath but heart is still beating and pulse feeble but present. He quickly gives some injection and our Mataji starts breathing again. There were no after effects of this episode. It had never happened before and fortunately never recurred. Most likely it must have been the mold in the store room which initiated the almost fatal asthma attack.

Soon we move to the spacious, open house with many doors and windows. We have electricity. And we have our mother, hale and hearty. She never told us this story. May be she was busy living her present. May be we did not make time to listen to her.

Considering all the outdoor sports, flying kites on rooftops, running, bicycling without any guards, climbing trees, jumping in water without knowing how to swim, playing day and night on the grounds infested with snakes and scorpions and fights with axes and bamboo sticks, it was a miracle that we survived and that also with only one major incident.

Even though we do not have any spare money, there is just enough to buy food. This is amply supplemented by home grown vegetables and fruits. Fortunately we do not suffer the effects of malnutrition, a problem faced by millions of Indians. Similarly due to reasonably good hygiene and open spaces we do not suffer the effects of trachoma, an epidemic eye disease and common cause of blindness prevalent all around us.

Surma, also known as Kajal, a black powder made of lead, carbon, antimony and zinc is used by girls as eye liner for cosmetic reason. It is presumed to have antiseptic properties. It is also applied to the eyes of newborn children for presumed antiseptis as well as to protect the baby by warding off any evil eye.

Whether it is brushing with the neem tree branches, rinsing of mouth after meals or lack of chewy candies, we never visit the only self taught dentist located in the old part of Panipat. There is no qualified dentist in Panipat. No one knew the word Orthodontist and nobody had wires on the teeth. We just leave them alone and teeth get aligned for the job nature prepared them to do. And if the teeth are crooked, no one makes a big deal about them.

Small pox and polio are prevalent all over India. Our two older siblings had succumbed to smallpox around the age of six years. From that tragedy onwards our parents learnt about these diseases and did get us vaccinated. Two large marks on the left arm from smallpox vaccination are evidence of their wisdom. These are much better than the pock marked faces, blind eyes, death and occasional limping child we see among our school mate. We are the lucky one who have lived through the onslaught of these virulent viruses.

Everyone experiences attack of chicken pox. We get rash all over the body and it is contagious. This is uncomfortable but not fatal or accompanied by any long term complications. So we thought then, till I learnt later that the Herpes Zoster shows up in later life from the sneaky chicken pox virus which hides in a cocoon and comes out swinging when our immune system weakens in old age.

Bed bugs and lice are mere nuisances. Itchy red spots on waking up in the morning prompt us to wash the bedding in hot water, shake the beds, hit the jute or cotton strips of the charpai. Then we look for the bugs on the floor and also search for the hidden ones in the crevices of the beds. Surely they are on the floor and crevices. They are promptly squashed with shoes. We check and recheck the beds till no more are seen.

In the neighborhood we see mothers or elders have youngsters sit in front of them as they merrily chat away and search for the lice at the roots of hair on the heads. Special combs are there to trap the tiny bugs. Picking them out of the hair and then squashing them between the two thumb nails is considered simply one of the routine chores.

Thanks to no over crowding, daily bath, sometimes twice a day, very infrequently anyone in our home has issues with the lice. When detected it gets dealt with right away.

Fortunately no one smokes or drinks in our home. We are spared of the second hand smoke and the subliminal signal that such activities are not good. We never hear of anyone at our home or in the entire neighborhood using recreational drugs. In fact we learnt much later that there was a difference between drugs and medications.

Winter months send flies and mosquitoes into hibernation thus reducing many of the summer diseases. Multiple layerings protect us from extreme cold weather in January and February. Woollen pants, jackets and long winter coats, donated by affluent Americans, are sold by vendors on wheeled carts. We eagerly sift through the big piles, find one that fits reasonably well and buy these at very reasonable rates. The purpose is protection, not fashion. In the absence of any source of ex-

ternal heating we have to find ways to conserve our body heat. Thick cotton filled quilts (razaais) and layering with sheets protect us during the freezing nights.

Some less fortunate people without these basic needs sometimes freeze to death. It is not uncommon to see rickshaw pullers curled up at night on the seat barely covered with a sheet or a thin blanket. After finishing undergraduate college when I returned home by train and then rickshaw, I gave my razaai to the emaciated looking rickshaw puller "I have one at home, you need it more."

Being mostly indoor and many occupants, only one has to get flu or other respiratory bug. And we all share it. Luckily these are self limiting and clear up in a week. Due to salt gargles or due to our strong immune system.

Before we know, the winters are over and spring brings wonderful weather. New leaves sprout and unfurl on the trees, flowers and fruits follow which instill signs of vibrant life all around.

With each passing year we get exposed to almost all bugs, thankfully in micro doses which act like vaccinations, thereby making our immune system stronger.

We are ready to jump outdoors, eat gol gappe (Panipuri) and chaat from the street vendors who rarely wash their hands. Bosa Ram again makes irresistible sweets. In good health and spirits the family is ready again to face the challenges of survival in Panipat.

CHAPTER XIII

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

Living in the USA for forty eight years, we along with millions of others, use cars, trains, buses and planes to get from one place to the other. Apart from major metropolis areas, very few people are seen walking or using bicycles. Once we reach our destination, we get into all types of buildings and homes. Streets are devoid of people. It seems that the vast land has very few inhabitants.

Born in Khanewal, Multan, India, now in Pakistan, I grew up in Panipat, India following the partition of our country. When I was three years old, we moved to the old city, Panipat in 1947. In 1950 we moved to House number 2, Model Town, Panipat in a newly constructed development to accommodate some of the millions of refugees who got uprooted. Panipat is located about fifty miles north west of Delhi.

Being the children of partition, we have only heard stories and seen pictures of caravans of dust covered, starving people walking, if they could not carry all children some choosing whether to carry across boy or girl-the boy is preferred, some too weak to walk succumb to starvation, dehydration and heat. Some are riding on horses, bullock carts carrying whatever material goods that could be salvaged, and trains,

some full of slaughtered bodies, trying to get from there to here and here to there between the newly carved Pakistan and the parent country India.

Once established in our new home, we did not move around much beyond the limits of Panipat.

I can see my smaller version and shorter legs moving around in Panipat and an occasional trip out of town. Full of joy and energy, totally oblivious of the extraordinary historical trauma my family and the whole region and the country had gone through.

Walking is the commonest mode used by us. Our little legs make us feel that the distances are much farther than what we see now when we go back for our annual visits. The brain calculates distance by number of steps we take and not the actual distances.

Trains and buses connect us to the rest of the country. Only a few rich people have cars. For us they are a novelty to watch and just touching them is a thrill. But never a grain of “Oh, we wish we had one.” We didn’t have much but we had abundant and were happy in what we had. Beyond contented. Once a while we see an airplane making us wonder how it flies and who can possibly afford to fly in the sky.

There is no local public transport or taxis. All local travels have to be organized on our own within the means.

Among the 10 family members, comprising of three generations, we have only one vehicle. That is our prized possession—an Atlas bicycle, manufactured in the neighboring town of Sonapat, Haryana, the site of largest bicycle factory in India.

It is a regular sized black bicycle with a handle bar ahead, connecting bar to the seat and a carrier on the back. The carrier has a snap latch to keep contents secure. The U shaped stand is at the rear end. It is folded under the rear wheel when bicycle is not in use. A shiny silver bell on the right side of the handle produces jingling sound when the lever is pressed by right thumb. Pita Ji, in Khanewal, used to collect fireflies, collect them in a glass jar which was tied at the middle of handle

bar. Bicycle would be visible to others at night. We never tried that in Panipat.

The chain has no cover. Loose pajama ends sometimes get caught in the chain. The thin tires have rubber tubes in them.

Riding on rough roads and meeting discarded nails, punctured tire and tube is fairly common. In frustration we say "phir puncher ho gaya" (got punctured again). Every Chowk (major crossing) has a bicycle repair shop. The mechanic, usually a boy working under supervision of an older man, takes off the tire from the rim and pulls out the tube from inside the tire. The boy inflates the tube and puts it in a tub full of water. Rising bubbles detect the culprit hole. He cuts an appropriate size square piece from a pre-glued rubber sheet and sticks it to the punctured area on the tube. The patch is then firmly attached to the tube by pressing it with a hot smooth metal for an airtight seal. The boy inflates and rechecks it under water. No bubbles is a moment of joy and laughter. Tube is deflated and deftly placed inside the tyre. The combination is placed over the metal rim with inflating valve stuck out of the hole in the rim of the wheel. Wiping sweat from his forehead the boy inflates it by pumping laboriously the long hand pump, supported by feet placed on the two metal flanges near the lower end of the pump. Once the tyre feels solid, it is ready to go, knowing fully well that the next trip back is not too far in the future.

Seeing 8 or 10 patches on a tube is very common. It is cheaper to repair than replace is the rule, not only with the bicycle but everything else. That is one thing that confounded us when we moved abroad, where just the reverse applied. Till today the old mentality of saving and one day somehow fixing it results in piles of clutter. Due to extremely limited resources, throwing away anything, including the bicycle tubes covered with numerous patches, is just not done in Panipat.

Bicycle is used for any trip beyond Bosa Ram chowk, named after the famous supplier of sweets and fried salty dishes such as samosas, pakoras and mathian...

In early sixties, the prettiest sight in Amritsar is Dolly on her bicycle riding down the road between Medical college and Dental college. She rides on her bicycle as I wait for her to pass by for a glance only to be ignored. That, however, did not last too long.

After our marriage in Chandigarh, we purchased a blue/grey Lambretta scooter which had been booked several years ago by Dolly's father.

The two wheeler scooter is how Dolly and I get around. Then came along our daughter, Namita. Initially she sits in Dolly's lap as Dolly sits sideways on the back seat. All are without helmet. Later Namita sits between the us. When she becomes sturdy and steady on her feet she stands in front of me on the small platform between the driver seat and control handle. Once, while overtaking a car, we barely escaped getting hit by an oncoming truck.

Jobs take us from Chandigarh to Ambala to Jind and Rohtak. Our favorite Lambretta takes us to various places safely.

PitaJi, as we fondly call our father, uses the bicycle to go to his newly allotted land about 20 miles south of Panipat along Grand Trunk (GT) road. The road was originally built in about 300 BC during Maurya empire. It had been improved by a Muslim king, Sher Shah Suri, in mid 1500s to connect his sprawling empire, which he had won from the second Mughal emperor, Hamayun in 1540. The road connects Kabul, Afghanistan to Calcutta in Bengal, India. It is a two lane road with no painted dividing or the edges line or paved shoulders.

One has to ride the bicycle on the dusty unpaved shoulder of the one of busiest roads in the country. The road is occupied by trucks, buses, cars, tractors, three wheel tempos stuffed with passengers, some hanging out from three sides, motor cycles, bullock carts, horse drawn tongas, rickshaws, camels loaded with large jute bags full of hay on both sides, occasional elephants and, of course, cows, buffaloes, donkeys, mules, goats, dogs and people walking on foot.

All are trying to get to their destination as fast as possible except for some cows and buffaloes. They use the flat ground for an afternoon

jugali— regurgitation and mastication of hurriedly stuffed food earlier; the white foam lines their lips and later followed by a snooze. Traffic slows down and goes around them. Cows are holy, having been tended to by Lord Krishna

Horns blare constantly, the issue of right of way is decided by the might is right rule. Seeing three vehicles, two on the road and one on the unpaved and ill defined shoulder with no guardrails is not uncommon. Overtaking from any available or forcibly created space is the norm. Flashing headlights means “Watch out, I am coming through, slow down or move over if you don’t want an accident.” Rule of the jungle dictates who flashes the lights first and if both do it simultaneously, might is right rule applies. It is not uncommon for two opposing forces to play psychological warfare, sharply swerving at the last second to avoid the collusion. Slight tilts of the vehicles and near misses are taken for granted. Near misses sometimes become collisions or overturned vehicles.

Overturned or lying sideways trucks in the adjoining ground dot the length of GT road due to the speed, overtaking and use of alcohol. Desi sharab (locally distilled alcohol) shops are set up along the road. Most of these have now been removed and been replaced by Dhabas (informal eating places) and fancy restaurants. Two lane road has grown to 6 lanes divided highway with a barrier in the middle and guardrails on the sides. There are paved shoulders and adjacent service roads for slower traffic, animals and walkers.

PitaJi has no such luxuries. Wearing a hard khaki hat, loose cotton clothing, he makes these perilous trips on GT Road to and from the allocated and fortunately without any accident. He never complains about the ordeals he has to go through to shelter, clothe, feed, educate, marry off; quietly serving the ten occupants in different ways. Including himself, the ten included his father, Lala Gokal Chand; mother in law, Kesar Bai, who apparently had brought money from Pakistan and pays rent for staying in her daughter’s house; two daughters, Kanta and Kanchan and four sons—Virinder, Krishan, Juginder (Gindi) and

Ashok (Shoki). The two older sons, Suraj and Prem, have moved out for studies and job.

In addition to the bicycle being used to go to the farm, vegetable market, the old town, and ice factory, it is also used by the boys for joy rides. There are no helmets and knee guards. Falls and resultant cuts and bruises are common. Once my right thigh got caught in the spinning spokes of the wheel. We just covered the cuts and bruises with milk from wildly growing plant called Ak (milk weed) and plain dirt. We have never heard the word Tetanus. Later in medical college we had a tetanus ward and learnt that it was a prevalent and potentially fatal disease. But we turned out to be the lucky ones.

Sanatan Dharam High School where Virinder, Krishan, I and Shoki studied, is located about one and half miles east of our home. We walk on the dirt tracks, along ditches filled with water during rainy season, escaping swarms of mosquitoes by swaying our hands or note books, cross the railway line and then walk to the school located just across the GT road. I am not particularly fond of going to the school and prefer to play. Some days Virinder takes me to the school on the bicycle and see to it that I have entered the gate. Some days, to his surprise, I run home faster than he can return on the bicycle!

No one in our section of the Model town has a car. Everyone walks or uses bicycle. Usual destinations are the school, market, one another's home, temple, and playgrounds. There are three playgrounds. Oval one is across our home, flat one near Bosa Ram chowk and doonga (deep) in a large ditch, near house number 100, where our Bhabi (Brother's wife), grew up.

Rickshaws, three wheeler vehicles, pedaled by thin, sun tanned muscular men, are used by people at the railway stations or bus stops. One or two passengers sit on the vinyl covered seats with or without the pull up shade depending on the weather. Riksha vaala pedals on the flat roads and gets off to pull rickshaw when he has to go uphill. Some considerate passengers get off and walk along to give him respite. Some are not so kind and want to get full value for their money.

Every time a rickshaw comes to our house, it means an unannounced welcome guest or ever-so-missed children from college have arrived. Ways of communications are rudimentary to non existent. "A crow was crowing this morning. I was wondering who will be coming to our house today," MataJi says and luckily crows crows a lot in 2 Number.

Another way of travel is Tonga. It is a horse-drawn colorful wooden carriage with large wooden wheels, pulled by one horse. This is used as a taxi. Like rickshaws, they line up outside the railway station and bus stand. These are more spacious and faster than the rickshaws. You also do not feel as guilty, especially when going uphill. The sound of metal studded hoofs of the horse on the road makes us think of movie songs directed by O. P. Nayyar. The driver sits on the front seat with leash in one hand and a long narrow stick or a whip in the other. Two passengers can sit on the back seat and one on the front seat with the driver. Sitting on the front seat provides the view ahead but is perilous because horse often lifts the tail up and provides manure to the ground. Luggage is kept near the feet of back seat passengers.

Once in a while we are enamored by a dark blue Fiat car that stops in front of our house. This means that our loving Virmani Mama Ji has arrived from Delhi. Chuni Lal Virmani is the son of our Nanaji's brother. MataJi is the only child and at a young age she had started tying Rakhi to Chuni Lal, which made him her brother and our Mamaji. Car is a novelty and a rare luxury. The children line up and with stretched necks examine the inside through the windows. We are careful not to touch it with our dusty hands. Mamaji is very loving. He opens the doors and sometimes let us into the car. To our amazement, once he let me sit in his lap for a drive around the park. Shoki sometimes sits on the driver's seat and pretends to be the owner.

The next car we experience this close is when Bhushan Jeeja Ji comes on his Standard car carrying a Gold Flake round cigarette container—both signs of luxury and unapproachable high living from where we stand.

Not much traveling is done by the children or MataJi. Some summer vacations are spent in Ludhiana at our Narang Bhaaiya and Sumitra Bhuaji's house, while during other summers they come to Panipat for three months.

This journey is done by train. Packing is not difficult as there are not too many possessions and in summers one does not need anything more than two cotton shirts, a pant and two knickers. One set of chap-pals and one pair of shoes complete the packing. No tooth brushes are needed because neem and keekar trees grow everywhere. One end of a branch of these trees is chewed to make it like a tooth brush.

We get to the station at least half an hour before departure time, go to the counter to buy a rectangular beige colored ticket made of card board for the third class compartment. This one has wooden benches, in two tiers. We have never been inside of second or first class compartment. We do sometimes peek in to see the other world.

The platform is a busy place with people are carrying round cloth bound packings. Some bring steel or leather suit cases. Hold all is used to pack and roll beddings. Some people are sitting on benches, some sleeping on the floor. Tea and snacks stands are busy with people and flies. Stray dogs are sniffing around for left overs or food sticking to the scattered papers on which food was served, on the platform and on the rail tracks. Books and magazine stores are busy with browsers and some buyers.

Trains rarely came on time. It is a common joke that once a train got in on time, the excited passengers later got disappointed when they found out that it was from yesterday's schedule. Generally they are several minutes to several hours late and there is no way to find out which is true. We all wait patiently, occasionally looking to the left to hope for a glimpse of smoke emitted from the engine or a down signal.

At last the train arrives, pulled by a large black, smoke emitting steam engine. Most compartments are almost full and the existing passengers are reluctant to open the doors while the incomers have to get in somewhere, somehow. If some passenger has to get down in Panipat, the

door of that compartment has to open. That is like winning a lottery for the eager entrants. Everyone rushes to any voluntarily opened or pushed open door. After several minutes of shoving and pushing with occasional fight erupting, the people and luggage settles down. There are no assigned seats. After the storm there is a lull. One by one people find a spot: a full seat, a partial one shared by the prior occupant, floor, vestibule near the door and some hold the entry door railing enjoying fresh air.

Some pull out food, wrapped in a cloth piece or metal tiffin carrier. Food is generally fried pranthas, dry aalu bhaji (Potatoes), hard boiled eggs and achar (pickle). It is customary to offer it to the neighbors. With full stomachs some doze off, some pull out book or newspaper and some pull out playing cards for the leisurely long journey.

The melodious sounds of a steam engine train starting to move are unmatched. Green flag waved by the conductor and down signal gets the driver to move the train. A long shrill whistle followed by chuk chuk chuk starting at a higher pitch and slower beat gradually reversing the pattern as the speed increased, whistles of the engine blare to alert late boarders to hurry up and warn people crossing the railway lines in front of it. Plume of smoke swirls up from the top chimney, steam gushed out intermittently from the sides and the train slowly pulls out with people waving to the loved ones on the platform and vice versa. Some walk and then run along till they can not keep up any more.

Coal particles fly out making many a people cry in addition to the emotional tears of separation. PitaJi is not the one to cry and sometimes would make an appearance and excuse of getting a piece of coal in his eye to cover up the emotional tears that rolls down as he watches his children leave home one by one.

The trips are long and pangs/joy of separation from the loved ones is a sad/happy occasion depending on which side of the fence one stands. Parents warn children "Don't stick your head out looking towards the engine. You will get coal in your eyes." Mostly we listen but the excite-

ment to look out and ahead into newly opening panorama overpowers the caution and we pay for the mistake.

The trains have three levels of seating. First class, which we never see from inside, apparently has individual cubicles with plush seating. Second class has open light blue cushion seatings. Third class has open hard wood benches. We never notice the hard seating as we are busy sitting, walking, hanging by the handles of open doors, eating, playing cards and just chatting. One favorite pass time is to watch the telephone lines as they go from pole to pole making a pattern of sagging down, then climbing predicting arrival of the next pole.

The bus journey is the other way to go out of town. Being not as comfortable, we ride the bus for rare short trips to Delhi. Itihad bus service runs buses between Panipat and Delhi. We walk to the bus station, buy a paper ticket and wait for the next bus. Just like trains, the buses are also packed. The luggage is kept on roof top by climbing the steps on the back of the bus. Sometimes we are lucky to get a seat but mostly one just stands, holding onto the leather straps hanging from the central metal rod on the ceiling. Some boys and men barely have their feet on the entry platform and hold onto the handle bars for survival. Some sit on roof top and some hang onto to the ladder used for carrying luggage to the roof top.

Women find bus journey particularly hard as pushing and pinching by some men is common. A few tell the men off but most suffer in silence. Bus journey is demeaning and source of life time scars.

Sumitra Narang, our Bhuaji from Ludhiana was visiting Delhi to attend someone's funeral. She traveled by a local bus. Driver has no way to see the entry/exit doors. While she was getting off, the bus moved too soon and she fell hitting her head on the road. She left behind five young children and a grieving husband. In my memory that is the first time I cried.

Pursuit of education and my father's dream takes me to Rupar, Panjab in 1959 at the age of 15. The journeys to and from college are made by train. My brother, Krishan is one year senior and already studying

there. We have no bicycle or other vehicle here. We walk everywhere. Admission to medical college takes me to Amritsar in 1961, where again we depend on our feet for moving everywhere. Out of the class of 100, only two boys have cars and a few have bicycles.

Pursuit of further education takes us to Post Graduate Institute, Chandigarh. Walking and Lambretta carry us around.

Lufthansa takes me away to UK. At the airport, on March 28, 1974, over ten family members see me off. Dolly and Namita hoping to join soon. MataJi is wiping her nose with end of while saari. PitaJi cannot find the excuse of coal particle getting into his eye. His dream and his doctor son boards the jumbo jet to get there from here. He just let tears flow, wondering if he would see again his son and, soon to follow, his daughter-in-law and grand daughter. Alas, he never did. Buried by the excitement of the future, it did not hit me then but the scene of separation is vividly alive. A tear wells up and I taste their tears.

CHAPTER XIV

THE AUTHOR

Dr. Juginder Luthra completed his MBBS from Medical College, Amritsar in 1966, and his M.S. in Ophthalmology from the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGI), Chandigarh in 1970. He moved to Nottingham, UK along with his wife, Dolly — a dentist from the Amritsar Dental College — and a daughter, Namita. They were blessed with twin daughters, Rohini and Rashmi, in May 1975. The family moved to Weirton, West Virginia, USA in June 1975. Now their three loving daughters are married to wonderful sons-in-law, and they are blessed with six glorious loving grandchildren.

