

# raavi paar

I don't know why Darshan Singh didn't go mad. His father died at home, his mother was lost in the ruins of the Gurudwara, and Shahni had given birth to twins, two sons. He wasn't sure if he should laugh or cry. Fate had made a strange bargain with him — given with one hand and taken away with the other.

They had heard that freedom was coming, but they didn't know when it would reach Layalpur. Both the Hindus and Sikhs had secretly begun to gather in the Gurudwara. Shahni used to groan with labour pains day and night. It was her first confinement.

Darshan Singh used to bring news about the latest riots. Bhapaji, trying to comfort him, always said, "Nothing will happen, son. Nothing will happen. Has a single house, either

of a Hindu or a Sikh, been yet attacked?"

"But, Bhapaji, the Gurudwara has been attacked, hasn't it? It has been set on fire twice."

"And yet all of you want to gather there!"

That always silenced Darshan Singh. People, however, continued to leave their homes and take shelter in the Gurudwara.

"People feel more secure when they are together, Bhapaji. There is no Hindu or Sikh left in our lane. We are all alone here."

Ten or fifteen days earlier, they heard Bhapaji fall in the courtyard one night. They had got up with a start. They could hear slogans being shouted in the direction of the Gurudwara — "*Jo bole so nihal.*" The slogans woke up Bhapaji and he went up to the terrace to investigate. Coming down the steps, he slipped and his head struck against the axe lying in the courtyard.

They somehow managed to complete the last rites for Bhapaji. After that, they stuffed all their valuables in a pillow-case and the three of them sought shelter in the Gurudwara. There were quite a few terror-stricken people there and that is why they felt safe. He was no longer afraid.

Darshan Singh said, "We are no longer alone. And, in any case, *Waheguru* is with us."

A group of young volunteers was busy with work all day long. People had brought with them all the flour, *dal* and *ghee* they had in their homes. The community kitchen was open day and night. But how long could they have lived there? The question troubled everyone. People hoped that the government would send them some help soon.

"Which government?" someone asked. "The British have left."

"Pakistan has been created, but the government of Pakistan is yet to be formed."

"I have heard that the army is out everywhere and is helping migrants to reach the border."

"Migrants? Who are they?"

"Refugees."

"I've never heard those words before."

A group of two or three families couldn't endure the tension any longer.

"We are going to the station. We have heard that the trains are running again. How long can we stay on here anyway?"

"We'll have to be courageous. *Waheguru* can't carry us on his shoulders, can he?"

One of them shouted loudly, "*Nanak naam Jahaz hai, jo chadhe so utare paar.*"

The departure of a few people always left behind a vacuum in the place. It would be filled only when other people arrived and brought news from the outside world.

"There is a huge encampment at the station."

"There are some people who are dying of hunger and others of overeating! Also there is the outbreak of an epidemic."

"Five days ago, a train had passed this way. There was no place on it even for a sesame seed. People were packed tightly on the roofs."

It was Sankranti. Prayers were recited in the Gurudwara from morning till late at night. On that auspicious day, Shahni gave birth to twins. One of them was very weak. There was

little hope for his survival, but Shahni struggled to keep him alive.

That night someone announced, "A special train for the refugees has arrived. Let's get out."

A large caravan left the Gurudwara. Darshan Singh joined it. Shahni was very weak, but she agreed to go for the sake of her sons. But Darshan Singh's mother refused.

"I'll come later, my son. I'll come with the next caravan. You take care of your wife and sons."

Darshan Singh argued with her, and the *granthi* tried to reason with her. Then the volunteers consoled him and said, "Leave while you can, Sardarji. One by one, all of us will reach the border. We'll bring Beeji with us."

Darshan Singh left with the others. He placed his children in a wicker-basket and then lifted it onto his head, as if it contained all the wealth of his family.

The train was waiting at the station, but there was no free space in it. People seemed to sprout from the roofs of the compartments like grass.

When people saw the new-born children and their exhausted mother, they felt sorry for them and made place for them on the roof.

About ten hours later, the train began to move. The evening sky was red, bloody and hot. Shahni's breasts had been sucked dry. She tried to suckle each child alternately. Wrapped in two dirty bundles, it seemed as though the children had been picked-up from a garbage heap.

The train steamed into the night. After a few hours, Darshan Singh noticed that while one child still moved its hands and legs and occasionally cried, the other was very still.

When he put his hand on the bundle, he realized that the child was cold and had been dead for some time.

Darshan Singh began to weep loudly. People around him realized what had happened. They tried to take the dead child away from Shahni, but she sat like a statue, and clutched the basket to her chest.

"No, he won't drink milk without his brother."

People tried to persuade her, but she refused to let go of the basket.

The train stopped many times, and then started again. People tried to guess where they were in the darkness.

"We have passed Khairabad."

"I am sure this is Gujranwalla."

"We have another hour to go. Soon after Lahore, we'll reach Hindustan."

Feeling a little more confident, some people even shouted slogans:

*"Har-Har Mahadev!"*

*"Jo bole so nihal!"*

The moment the train reached the bridge, a wave of excitement ran through the crowd.

"We have reached the river Raavi."

"This is the Raavi. We are in Lahore."

In that confusion, someone whispered in Darshan Singh's ear, "Sardarji, throw the dead child into the Raavi. He will be blessed. Why must you carry him to the other side?"

Darshan Singh cautiously pulled the basket away from his wife. And then, he quickly snatched a bundle out of it and, in the name of *Waheguru*, threw it into the Raavi.

In the darkness, he heard the faint cry of a child. Darshan

Singh looked in terror towards his wife. She was clutching the dead child to her chest. Then, a storm of voices arose —  
“*Wagah, Wagah.*”  
“*Hindustan Zindabad!*”