

Childhood survivor of the Partition of India writes memoir **Hindu son Satinder Vig on his journey from 'Old India to the land of dreams and promise'**

By JEAN BARTLETT | THE WEEK OF 1-28-19–2-3-19



(courtesy photo)

Satinder Vig.

Satinder Vig wrote the majority of his memoir on his laptop at a coffeehouse in San Francisco. Eventually, as the days went by and Satinder continued his typing, he and shop regulars began to chat. What was he working on? And so he took his listeners down an ancient road of his Motherland, India. He took them to the year 715, when Umayyad general Muhammad bin Qasim invaded the Sindh region of modern Pakistan. He introduced them to Maḥmūd (971-1030), sultan of the kingdom of Ghazna, whose conquests included northwestern India. He told them of Babur (1483-1530), the founder and emperor of India's dynasty, the Mughals. And eventually, Satinder arrived at the beginning pages of his own story. He was born in 1938, in the world-famous city of Peshawar, to a lower middle-class Hindu family. Peshawar was then the capital of the North-West Frontier Province of British India. In 1947, when British authority in India collapsed, the subcontinent was partitioned into two independent nation states: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Hindus in Peshawar fled for their lives.

It is somewhat difficult to understand Satinder when he speaks and he is often asked to repeat himself. The reason behind that is also part of his story.

"In 2012, I went through my second worst trauma in the U.S. – squamous cell carcinoma in the lower cavity of my right cheek."

He is very grateful he survived. He has kept his humor. When he was in the hospital recovering from his surgery, with a variety of medical extensions attached – let's see, there was a breathing tube in his neck, a feeding tube in his stomach, a tracheostomy tube, a collection container pinned to his hospital gown to prevent his pulling out the tubing – he signaled for the night nurse to come over.

"What is the difference between a nurse and a nun?" he wrote. "A nun only serves one god."

He also survived the radiation therapy though he must work around its permanent side effects. "Wiping my drooling saliva 24/7, spitting viscous mucous, difficulty eating and swallowing, a constant dry and inflamed mouth, the sensation of choking, chronic eczema, speech issues resulting from a swollen right cheek and dissolved muscles of the reconstructed right cheek free flap."

"What is the distinct difference between God and a doctor," Satinder asked. "God knows he is not a doctor."

His worst trauma in America was the death of his wife, Romila. She was 68. It came out of nowhere. It was quick and he was stunned.

"I was shaken down through the core of my body and my soul. Looking back, I would say that Romila was for me, a wife out of this world and I can never thank God enough for this blessing."

But even through all his sorrow, he found his humor when his friend Amrit talked to him about Romila's death.

"Romila was smart," Amrit joked, "great timing as far as dying. Leave early and avoid the rush. We two dummies are still here to mourn her absence."

His book travels through all of this, along with his decision as a young man to leave what everyone told him was the career of a lifetime – he was a commissioned officer in the elite Indian Air Force – to move to the United States in 1968, "where I could live and excel in the American dream."

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"Fly away to America to discover the new world and the new me," he humorously sub-captions his chapter on his rebirth in America. His wobbly first steps in what he now calls his "Fatherland," immediately supplied lessons galore on such American offerings as: generosity, stinginess, prejudice, welcoming, friendship, lack of prejudice, thievery, jealousy, beauty, spirituality, lack of spirituality, humor, glass ceilings, unaccustomed freedoms, and the list goes on. He also arrived in what can be called this country's most tumultuous year, with only a few of the history-changing shocks listed here: the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, the killing of 17-year-old Black Panther Bobby Hutton, and the clubbing and tear-gassing of anti-war demonstrators outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In contrast that same year, the American Tribal Love Rock Musical "Hair" opened on Broadway, Arthur Ashe made history as the first black man to win the U.S. Open, and Yale University announced that after 267 years it would finally admit female undergraduates.

In 1968, Satinder was also surprised to learn about miniskirts and the National Organization for Women. But he was most personally stunned to learn that he was labeled a "coconut" – brown on the outside, white on the inside. Nevertheless this mechanical engineer went on to build a very successful career in management that took him all over the world, until one day, decades later, he experienced a quite unexpected, career crash and burn of unusual magnitude.

Satinder is grateful that Romila deeply shared with him her devotion to Indian yogi and guru Paramahansa Yogananda. Yogananda founded Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) in 1920. A world-wide spiritual and humanitarian organization, SRF was established to introduce the teachings of meditation and Kriya Yoga. Satinder's complete acceptance of Yogananda in his life has provided and continues to provide him great peace. He calls Yogananda and the guru's teachings his "goldmine of enlightenment."

"My roots run deep, far deeper than the narrow, dusty winding lanes of Peshawar or the suburban roads of the USA," Satinder writes in his memoir. "I cannot be uprooted. I am still Indian but American all the way. That American spirit just gets into you. My America abides."

Satinder's memoir presents a narrative that is full of East and West, modern and ancient history, love and war, family, friends, tragedy, playfulness, politics, deep spirituality and material pleasures – and it challenges people to step out of self-made circles and hear the thoughts just beyond the gate.

Link here to a sample read of Satinder Vig's: "[Fractured Shadows ~ A Memoir](#)" (*My Exodus from Old India to the Land of Dreams and Promise*). In this sample read, you will find Satinder's email.



A Bartlett's Biographies Headliner

Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.