

Fractured Shadows ~ A Memoir by Satinder Vig (page 1)

"My Exodus from Old India to the Land of Dreams and Promise"

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Fractured Shadows ~ A Memoir

(My Exodus from Old India to the Land of Dreams and Promise)

By Satinder Vig

Where do they come from, showing up suddenly: forgotten, fractured shadows; colorful moments; melodious music; the things frozen in time?

INTRODUCTION

From a childhood of bliss and trauma, to beginning again, to becoming a commissioned officer in the Indian Air Force, to marrying my Romila (a blessing I can never thank God enough for), to opening the door to the American dream with a rest-of-my-life move to the U.S. in 1968, to finally following Romila's advice and falling for her guru, my guru, Yogananda, to surviving the cancer that has taken my speech but not my words – this book is the painting of my voice.

It is better to die struggling than to abandon your efforts while there is still a possibility of accomplishing something more—Paramahansa Yogananda

I was born in Peshawar, NWFP, India, on September 1, 1938, in a lower middle-class Hindu family. North-West Frontier Province, now Pakistan, was a former province of British India. My father was a college graduate with a great job in Pakistan. My mother died when I was very young. It was on the day that so many came to our house to celebrate a new life in my family. Like everyone, my sister and I waited with anticipation as we also admired the table of food and sweets my father had prepared to mark the festive occasion. My father told everyone who entered, "You see these baskets of sweets? Before you leave, take one basket with you, our 'thank you' gift. Please, help yourself."

For a long time, my mother's loud shrieking cries could be heard. Suddenly, the door opened. My grandmother, the midwife, and the other ladies came out. They were all crying loudly and beating their chests hard. In shock, my father quietly picked up his two living children and held us tightly in his arms for a long time.

The mood of joyous celebration was dealt a deathly blow. I cried profusely. My mother was dead. Life is fickle.

The deep vacuum created by my mother's death, was temporarily filled by an abundant, pure unconditional love from my paternal grandparents, Lala Ji (grandfather) and Bhabi Ji (grandmother). They lived in Khushab (sweet water), a rural farming city situated on the banks of the Jhelum River, District Sargodha, West Punjab. Their house was a big haveli (mansion), with a large aangan (courtyard) in the interior and seven condo-type family units. For years, I thought that my Bhabi Ji was my mother. I even went to school in Khushab.

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Bhabi Ji was a very loving, caring and charming, hard-working saintly lady. An excellent cook, she was constantly feeding not only me but apparently the whole neighborhood. It was in her ancient kitchen where I first developed my strong taste and cravings for the delicious Punjabi dishes and sweets.

I was glued to Bhabi Ji's hip. She would wake me up early and teach me how to do morning puja (prayer). She taught me how to churn dahi (yogurt,) to make lassi (whipped whole milk yogurt) and makhan (butter). She taught me how to milk the cows. I watched her cook family meals and watch over the servants. Her work never finished. Forever embedded in my very soul is this kind old lady, my Bhabi Ji, with her ancient, deep-lined face. She taught me constantly. I especially remember her mesmerizing stories of times long gone.

One burning hot summer day, Lala Ji called me. "Satinder, take these paisas (pennies). Go to the market and buy a block of frozen ice."

I walked the winding lanes of a nearby dirt road and then got into a long line and waited for my turn. At the store, under the shaded awning, I saw huge, rectangular thick blocks of frozen ice, wrapped in layers of jute cloth and spread on long benches. The shop keeper saw me and shouted.

"Come here grandson of Lala Ji."

Hurriedly, I left the line and ran to him. He cut a big chunk of ice block with his pickaxe and threw it in my lap. "Free for you! Run and say my 'As-salāmu 'alaykum' (Muslim word for 'hello') to Lala Ji."

By the time I reached home, a big chunk of the ice block had melted away.

My grandparents held my tiny hands for just a little while, but my heart forever – my hidden garden of pure love. Those were the days. I prayed they would never end.



Yesterday is but today's memory and today is tomorrow's dream—Khalil Gibran

CHAPTER 1

It is early morning. The little boy stands outside his house entrance door. He is four years old and he is waiting to go to school. He is whining and crying loudly.

"The milkman is not here yet and I am already late to school."

That whining, crying boy is me. Right behind me, I hear the angry, shouting cursing voice of my father.

"Haraam-Zaada (bastard). I will show you where your milk is."

Suddenly, I am flying from my father's arms, across the short inside verandah and into my room. I barely land on my bed, inches away from the hard floor. Scared, I shut my mouth tight and profusely pee in my knickers, wetting the bed sheets. I think this is the end but more is coming.

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"How many times have I told you not to whine when your father is around?" Masi Ji, my stepmom, said. "More work for me, more wash again – your bed sheets and your clothes."

Missing my birth mother, I pray a zillion times to God. "Bhagwan (God), Rama and Krishna, please bring back my dead mom."

Hearing of my early morning disaster, my school friends started laughing. One Muslim friend, Sameer, said, "You call this a beating? Your dad was too soft on you. My dad uses a wooden rod and beats the shit out of my hands and butt."

My Sikh friend Surinder also weighed in. "You don't want to ever be beaten by my father. At least your dad takes you shopping afterwards and buys you sweets and candies. Next time it happens, I will show you all my bruises."

Realizing it was the norm felt good. That evening, when Father returned from work, he gave me a few tight hugs – assuaging his feelings of guilt. "Everybody get ready and hurry. We're going out for dinner. We're going shopping." We loaded up with our favorite delicious Indian sweets and candies: ladoos, pista burfis and jalebies.

In Indian marriages, it was the parents, not you, who first fell in love with your future partner in crime. Parents found suitable spouses for their children, typically, through known families, mostly within their own religion, caste or social status. Papa Ji remarried the younger sister of my birth mother, a common ancient tradition in the Indian arranged marriage system. For many years, I called my stepmother, Masi Ji, sister of my birth mother.

Now it is another day and I am playing with my friends in the street. An older kid throws me on the ground, sits on top of me, and starts banging my head against the ground. Bad luck. Returning home from work, Papa Ji (Father) sees me crying. He curses loudly.

"Ullu-daa-patthaa (son of an owl)!" I am slapped all the way home.

Papa Ji was a tall, muscular athletic man, captain of his college football team. He found it hard to accept his only son, a small, weak chubby kid, was not tough enough to fight off the other kids.

There was no end to his parental physical and mental discipline. In America, it definitely would be termed as child abuse. Indians are famous for using abusive slang, mostly to people they love or someone who is acting "idiotic." But rain or shine, we were street kids, playing with rubber balls, sticks and rocks on dirt roads where cows, buffalos and wild dogs roamed uninterrupted. How I loved riding a donkey on a dirt road or sitting on top of a buffalo, lazily sunning herself in the filthy water pond. These were our toys. Commercial toys were unknown to us.

Love with discipline was my father's best friend. "Spare the rod and spoil the child." But I worshipped Papa Ji, my God on this Earth. He worried that if his second wife had a child of her own, she would mistreat my sister and me. He often told his friends. "No child from my second wife. My two children are precious. You know stepmoms. They are guaranteed to mistreat children that are not their own."

My father, a history buff, loved to talk about our world-famous Peshawar; our home. Peshawar was enclosed within a wall with 16 gates. It was situated in a valley bordering Afghanistan.

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"My Peshawar, India's most ancient city, was called Pushkal (Lotus Land, the City of Flowers)," Papa Ji boasted. "It was named after the son of Hindu King Bharata, the founder of ancient India (Bharat Varsha)."

Our house was in one of the many narrow, twisting residential dirt alleys, adjoining Qissa Khwani Bazaar, Peshawar's busiest ambience – the immortalized "Street of the Storytellers." Traders and soldiers going east to various other Indian cities, or arriving through the Silk Route from far off places, camped here to relax. They drank the famous Arabic qahwa (coffee) or green tea, and avidly listened to the late-night storytellers entertain them with ancient ballads of brutal tribal wars and sullen adventures of traders. Amongst friends, drinking and gambling, I would hear Papa Ji quoting Rudyard Kipling about the city of my birth.

"City of evil countenances. Other cities lived. Peshawar lurked. Even the shadows here had shadows. A mercantile hub – dwelled by tribal warriors, smugglers, soldiers of fortune and spies – the playground for the great game of espionage between imperial Russia and its enemies. The oldest land wherein the powers of darkness range."

Rudyard Kipling became my first favorite Western author. I was nearly lost in childhood to a story that Mr. Kipling might have written. I was 5.

A huge, tall muscular male Pathan (ethnic Pashtun), from the bordering mountainous Afghanistan, grabbed me. He ignored my childhood pleas of "help me, help me." He threw me in his jute bag and started running away. My friends saw what happened and shouting loudly, they ran after him. Scared, he dropped the bag and raced away from the scene.

Feeling severe pain in my head as it hit the hard-concrete ground, I shrieked loudly through the jute cloth bag. Tears flowed. Feeling a big bump on my head, I struggled out. But for my little friends, in all probability I would have grown up subjugated as an Afghani slave in the dark world of Afghanistan's dry mountains. For years, seeing an Afghani would make me tremble with panic and fear. My family celebrated our good karma.

Father's Afghan friend, Uncle Ahmed Shah, said, "Don't worry. One of my cousins, a tribal leader in that region, knows most of the families there. Afghanis, in general, are great citizens and renowned for their hospitality and legendary bravery. However, they are especially famous for revenge and bloody feuds. Unfortunately, many Pathans have been living in those dry mountains where nothing ever grows and it has left their families in extreme poverty. An Afghan would rather look into the frightened eyes of his kidnapped rich kid, than face the sadness of his poor wife and hungry children. Rest assured, my cousin will catch and punish the man who tried to abduct your son. Guaranteed."

Months later, Father confirmed that the abductor had been arrested and turned over to the police. Happiness. Karma is as karma does.

My Muslim uncles, Sunni and Shia, are at each other's throats. Why?

In the streets and bazaars of Peshawar, I had gotten accustomed to watching peaceful religious demonstrations by Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims. Whenever Papa Ji saw me playing in the streets, he would caution, "Stay far away from any Shia or Sunni demonstrations. Invariably, they result in violent clashes between these two major Islamic sects."

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One day, while we were shopping in the bazaar, we heard the distant loud voices of demonstrators. Papa Ji said, "Hurry. Let us go inside that store."

The shopkeeper shouted, "They are celebrating Muharram. Shia demonstrators are heading this way. It may result in dangerous riots between Shia and Sunnis. I am going to shut and lock the door of my shop."

I held tight to Papa Ji's hand as he looked through the window.

"See those crowds of men dancing through the bazaar, beating their naked chests and backs with metal chains called zanjeer zaani?" Zanjeer zaani are knives and razors attached to chains. Blood oozed from the naked chests and backs of these dancing men. "They are Shias celebrating the ritual of self-flagellation during Muharram. Did you hear that loud noise? It sounds like gunshots." Papa Ji's son was scared shitless.

Papa Ji had many Muslim friends, both Shia and Sunni. Sundays, or other holidays, were days of family gatherings at our house or theirs. Men drank whiskey, shared favorite Hindi film songs or Urdu ghazals (poems), and gambled while playing cards.

"Why are they shooting each other, Papa Ji? Are they enemies? They are all my uncles."

"It is ancient history," Papa Ji said, "a long story that I will tell you later."

Later is full of the unexpected. Later is when an asteroid hit our world of peace, comfort and harmony. It was the Partition of British India.

In the early 1940s, Papa Ji and his gang of friends – Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims – used to have frequent, heated discussions about their solid friendship, in spite of the dangerous, current political insecurities loudly espoused by India's major religions and their political leadership.

"Hindus have their caste and cow-protection," Papa Ji said. "Muslims have their circumcision and kosher meat. Sikhs have their long hair and their hatred of Muslims. Parsees have their fire worship and their feeding of vultures. It is all a gigantic mess."

"Missing in each religion is zero talk of morality," Uncle Mohammad Khan said. "Nobody talks about it."

"Don't forget about World War I," Uncle Bukhara Singh said. "The British drained our country. The masses were literally starving. The poor died all across India."

During that time, these slogans were shouted daily across India. "Our protector is also our devourer."
"India by the masses and for the masses."

In 1940, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, future father of Pakistan and president of the Muslim League said, "Islam is in danger from the Hindu majority. I am promoting a two-nation plan. India is neither a country nor a nation. It is a subcontinent with different nations and nationalities with nothing vaguely in common between them."

In August of 1942, Mahatma Gandhi declared the "Quit India Movement." This demanded the end to British Raj with a call to "Do or Die."

"Sarfroshi ki tamanna ab hamare dil mein hai." (Our heart is filled with the desire for martyrdom.)

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Papa Ji would take me along to watch thousands protesting in peaceful, political demonstrations. We joined hundreds of other excited patriotic spectators, and shouted in unison slogans such as: "Inquilab Zindabad (Long Live the Revolution);" "Nothing less than freedom, do or die;" and "Goron ko London jana padega" (the whites will have to return to London.)"

I was 4 and these were my earliest exhilarating experiences of India's freedom movement. But unbeknown to us common folks, these early climacteric years proved to be the forerunner of the ultimate tragedy of South Asia – the infamous doomsday bifurcation of Greater British India into India and Pakistan in 1947. The die was cast and the British will be remembered eternally as wise old owls of divide and rule.

The Rape of Rawalpindi ~ Hell hath no fury like a Muslim politician scorned.

How little did I know then that overnight, our peaceful comfortable existence would fall into the abyss of a nightmare.

In late 1946, Papa Ji got a new job. He became the Regional Bank Manager. We relocated to Rawalpindi, the winter headquarters of the British Northern Command. It was a Hindu-majority dominated city but it was surrounded by Muslim-majority dominated villages. We were staying with my father's elder brother. He was the administrative secretary of Rawalpindi Municipal Corporation. By the time we arrived, the family had been forewarned about communal tensions between Hindus and the Muslims.

In August of 1946, the All India Muslim League declared: "Direct Action Day." This demanded the creation of an independent Muslim State of Pakistan.

In March of 1947, Uncle brought home Sardar Harinder Singh and his family. They were distant cousins of his wife. He told us of their miraculous escape from the beastly Muslim slaughtering of men, women and children in their village, Thoha Khalsa, which is famously remembered as the "Rape of Rawalpindi."

"We heard that Muslim rioters were killing Hindus and Sikhs in surrounding villages," Uncle's cousin began. "Our village leader, Sant Gulaab Singh, told all Sikh families to immediately assemble at his large ancestral home. He said it was a safer place to defend against the advancing Muslim marauders.

"Hurriedly we left with over 1,000 Sikh families. We assembled at our village leader's huge farmhouse in the hopes of defeating the Islamic rioters.

"We stood on his rooftop and we were shocked to see horrific dark clouds of smoke rising from our shops and houses. Adjoining streets were littered with dead bodies. On March 7, we were besieged by thousands of Muslim invaders. They shouted anti-Sikh slogans."

"Kafirron Ko Maar Do!" (Kill the infidels!)

Uncle's cousin stopped to compose himself.

"Armed with daggers, spears, rifles and kerosene oil, they demanded we all convert to Islam or face a heinous death," he continued. "For days, we valiantly fought the invaders. Realizing, we were greatly outnumbered and facing imminent dishonor, many of our men started killing their own women and children with guns and kirpans (swords).

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"Horrified of rape and/or abduction, Sikh women with children committed suicide by jumping into a nearby water well. Luckily, the well filled up saving the lives of dozens of women and children who were pulled out. Soon the Indian Army trucks arrived and the Muslim killers ran away. Rescuing us, the Army dropped all of us off at a refugee camp in Rawalpindi."

As it turned out, the decimation of the village Thoha Khalsa was just the beginning of thousands of Sikhs fleeing from Rawalpindi to seek refuge under the protection of the Sikh Maharaja of Patiala, in new East Punjab, and start the revenge killings of Muslims fleeing to Pakistan.

Unable to quit his job, Papa Ji promised to join us soon. In the meantime, he decided to send us to our maternal grandfather Nana Ji, a reputed local physician in Lahore, a paragon of multi-cultural brotherhood, considered much safer and projected to be a part of a new truncated India.

We had been living in an oceanic peace and overnight, our world turned topsy-turvy, imploding into hurricanes of chaotic beastly mayhem, butchery, murder, rape, burnings and lootings.

In Lahore, the devils danced.

Within a few weeks of our arrival in Lahore, it started looking more and more like the mayhem in Rawalpindi. Beastly Muslims rioters killing Hindus and Sikhs, and burning or pillaging their houses became the daily norm. I can vividly recall those horrifying scenes of people running helter-skelter in adjacent streets, the loud scary sounds of shootings, and the dark, thick black clouds of smoke rising sky high in the distance.

Elders shouted. "Children, hurry! Pump your water wells faster. Adults are waiting for the water-filled buckets to go out and help extinguish fires."

This scene, day or night, was repeated often. Scared, we bravely did our part. Typically, the Muslim police showed up soon after the fire was extinguished by neighbors and on their way out, they lit fire to another house.

The centuries old unbreakable bonds of Hindus and Muslims were breaking.

Lo and behold, a day arrived when one of Grandpa's trusted wealthy Muslim patients, a bosom friend, surprised us all when he visited in the dark of midnight.

"Doctor Sahib (Sir), your life is in danger, actually the whole family is in danger," he announced. "I learned about the secret plan of Muslim League politicians and bureaucrats. They are going to ethnically cleanse Lahore of all Hindus and Sikhs, helped by blood thirsty gangs and backed by the Muslim police.

"Secret plans are in the works to attack your neighborhood, slaughter families, rape or abduct your women, loot and burn your houses. Rioters are already on their way to your neighborhood.

"I have a plan to save you. You must hurry. No time to waste. Quickly, gather together money, jewelry and important documents. We must leave under the shade of darkness. I will personally take you to a safe place where further arrangements have been made for your safe escape to east Punjab."

Scared for our very lives, we hurriedly said a heartbreaking "Sayonara" to Lahore.

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We were dumped into two taxis that later transferred us into an Indian Army vehicle loaded with other families. We were shoulder to shoulder. The Sikh Army driver and a dozen Sikh soldiers, heavily armed with rifles and swords, assured our safe landing. Later on, we learned that not only had our Lahore neighborhood been raided – houses looted and burned, families butchered – but also, my Nana Ji and his family were at top of the list to be abducted.

Living hell – run, run, flee for your lives.

Horrified, scared, tired and stressed out, I fell asleep. I wished I could never open my eyes again. But when I did, Nana Ji was talking to my stepmom.

"Wake up everybody and take a look," Nana Ji said.

It was a bright, sunny, burning hot morning. There were miles of caravans and thousands of men and women, many injured, walking shoulder-to-shoulder, precariously holding onto their children. Some had a few of their belongings tied on top of their heads. Many were riding in over-packed bullock carts, or on donkeys, army trucks and roofs of buses.

"Our vehicle is over-packed," Nana Ji noted as we all looked out to the chaos.

I could see armed Sikh soldiers in jeeps, looking out, making sure no Muslim rioters could infiltrate our caravan. I felt sick in my stomach. Every adult was on tenterhooks. Everyone was nervous about what would come next and mentally praying to God for a safe journey.

"I am so grateful we were able to leave in time," Nana Ji said as he looked out to the carnage of bodies scattered everywhere. "I have never seen so many thousands of wounded and dead. There are rivers of blood and trucks full of corpses. Oh God, look up in the sky. Hundreds of starving vultures are hovering in the air."

Then a Sikh soldier shouted, "An extravagant feast for vultures. They won't be able to fly anymore." Other soldiers laughed.

It was a horrific, scary scene – hard to forget, ever.

Landing in East Punjab, New India.

Hell hath no fury like a Sikh or Hindu politician scorned.

Jalandhar.

Devils dance in East Punjab.

It was a traumatic, scary bloody flight. Finally, Masi Ji, my sister and I, were dropped off at the house of my father's sister in Jalandhar, a majority Sikh city in east Punjab. My maternal grandparents, Nana Ji and Nani Ji, continued their journey onwards to Shimla Hills to live with their son. I was thrilled to have the company of three cousins to fool around with.

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I stepped out of my aunt's house and walked around the city streets and bazaars. I was shocked at the incredible carnage: bloody streets; burned houses, shops and factories; and long caravans of scared Muslims fleeing to West Pakistan. Thousands of their women had been abducted or raped. It was weird and sickening. The situation was reversed here in Jalandhar. Tit-for-tat.

Papa Ji survives deathly train ride.

Surreal. Walking through the valley of death.

Fleeing from Rawalpindi, Papa Ji lived to tell the following story of his deathly train ride.

"Rawalpindi was under siege by Muslims," Papa Ji began. "The newspapers were reporting fleeing Hindu refugees being slaughtered on trains, ambushed by Muslim rioters. Without telling my Muslim boss, I dared board one of the over-crowded trains to India. People were sitting on the roof and hanging from the doors. To get in, I literally had to muscle myself in through a window.

"When the train stopped at the Lahore Railway Station, the last city before crossing the border into India, I was horrified. Hundreds of Muslims goondas (thugs), armed with guns, swords and knives, entered the train loudly shouting."

"Allah Hu Akbar!" (Death to Hindu and Sikh infidels!)

"I was scared," Papa Ji continued wearily. "I instinctively ran to the restroom, squeezing behind other passengers to do so. It was a life-saving decision. I could hear Muslims slaughtering the passengers, transforming our compartment into a chaotic hell with deathly cries, shrieks and groans. Some of the passengers in front of me suffered serious injuries. Blood oozed out. I kept praying for my life. It seemed like a lifetime but finally, our train started moving again. It crossed the border into New India and I heard crowds shouting the friendly Sikh slogan.

"Wahe guru ka khalsa, Wahe guru ki fateh." (Victory to the purest guru and long live India.)

"The train stopped at the Amritsar train station," Papa Ji said. "To get out, I had to step over the littered dead and injured. It was a living hell in heartbreaking funeral silence.

"A flood of tears rolled down my cheeks. Once I stepped outside of the blood-soaked train, the first thing I did was to lie down on the ground. I kissed it and murmured my heartfelt thanks to the almighty God who saved my life."

For a while, our life in Jalandhar was chaotic and full of adversity. We had little money and there was an indifference from the natives. They looked down on us. We were the displaced refugees. Papa Ji, a college graduate and a bank manager in Rawalpindi, made his living now riding a bicycle in scorching heat, pulling a heavy cart of rectangular butter packages, wrapped in ice-filled jute bags. He sold these butter packages to retailers in neighboring bazaars.

My father, however, constantly hammered encouraging words into our bodies and souls. I will never forget them.

"We must learn from our setbacks, for each setback brings forth new opportunities. But you must have a purpose, courage and focus to keep going on. Remember, in life nothing is free and nothing comes easy."

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I became an adult at the age of 8.

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