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Toba Tek Singh

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Two or three years after the Partition, it occurred to the governments of India and Pakistan that along with the transfer of the civilian prisoners, a transfer of the inmates of the lunatic asylums should also be made. In other words, Muslim lunatics from Indian institutions should be sent over to Pakistan, and Hindu and Sikh lunatics from Pakistani asylums should be allowed to go to India.

It is debatable whether this was a judicious step. Nonetheless, several high-level conferences took place, and the day of the transfer was fixed. Following a great deal of initial investigation, those inmates who had relatives in India were retained there, while the rest were transported to the border. Since there were no Hindus or Sikhs in Pakistan, the question of retaining anyone there did not arise. All the Hindus and Sikhs in the asylums were taken to the border in the custody of the police.

What happened in India is not known. But here, in the Lahore asylum, the news of the transfer resulted in interesting speculation among the inmates. One man, who had been reading *Zamindar* regularly for nearly twelve years, was approached by a friend.

“What is Pakistan?”

“A place in India where they manufacture razors,” he answered after much deliberation.

His friend appeared to be satisfied by the answer.

A Sikh lunatic asked another Sikh, “Sardarji, why are we being sent to Hindustan? We can’t even speak their language.”

“But I know the language of the Hindustanis,” the first one interjected with a smile, adding, “Hindustanis are devilish, they strut about haughtily...”

During the course of a bath one morning, an inmate shouted, “Pakistan Zindabad!” so loudly that he slipped on the floor and fainted.

Some of the inmates were not deranged at all. Many of them were murderers whose relatives had bribed the asylum authorities to keep them there so that they would be safe from the hangman’s noose. These men had some idea of what was going on and knew something about Pakistan. But they did not have all the facts. Not much could be ascertained from news-

papers alone, and since the guards on duty were illiterate for the most part, little information could be gained by talking to them. All they knew was that there was a man, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who was known as Quaid-e-Azam, and that he had founded, for the Muslims, a separate country called Pakistan. Where was Pakistan? What were its boundaries? They did not know. For this very reason all the inmates who were altogether mad found themselves in a quandary; they could not figure out whether they were in Pakistan or India, and if they were in Pakistan, then how was it possible that only a short while ago they had been in India when they had not moved from the asylum at all?

For one lunatic, the entire issue of Hindustan-Pakistan and Pakistan-Hindustan resulted in further disorientation. One day, while he was sweeping the floor, he suddenly suspended his task and climbed onto a tree, where he remained for nearly two hours. During that time, he lectured extensively and nonstop on the matter of Pakistan versus Hindustan. When ordered by the guards to come down, he climbed higher still; when threatened with force, he said, "I want to live neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan—I will live on this tree."

He descended from the tree when his fever cooled somewhat, and embracing his Hindu and Sikh friends, he cried bitterly. He was saddened by the thought of their impending departure to India.

One morning, a Muslim engineer who used to spend most of his time walking back and forth in a particular part of the garden suddenly took off his clothes and began running about naked.

A fat Muslim from Chiniot, who had once been an active member of the Muslim League and who bathed at least fifteen times during the day, suddenly gave up bathing altogether. His name was Mohammed Ali. One day he announced that he was Quaid-e-Azam, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Following his example, a Sikh in his enclosure announced that he was Master Tara Singh. Blood would have been spilled, but luckily both men were declared to be dangerous and were confined to separate quarters.

There was a lawyer in the asylum, a young man from Lahore who had lost his sanity over a tragic love affair. He was deeply grieved when he discovered that Amritsar had become part of India, because the girl he had been in love with was from there. She had rejected this young lawyer, but despite his mental state, he still cared for her. And he cursed all the leaders, both Muslim and Hindu, who were responsible for splitting Hindustan in two. His beloved had become a Hindustani while he was now a Pakistani.

Some of the other inmates tried to comfort the lawyer. They told him he would be sent to Hindustan, where his beloved lived. But he did not wish to leave Lahore, for he felt that his practice would not thrive in Amritsar.

In the European Ward were two Anglo-Indians. When they heard that the English had given Hindustan freedom and then left, they were devastated. In the course of several secret meetings, they discussed the future of

their status in the asylum. Would the European Ward be retained? Would they continue to get breakfast? Would they be forced to eat the bloody Indian chapati instead of bread?

A Sikh who had been in the asylum for fifteen years used to mutter constantly to himself. “Oper di gur gur di annexe di bay dhanian di mung di daal di of laltain,” he kept saying, over and over again. He slept neither at night nor during the day. According to the guards, he had not slept at all in fifteen years. He did not lie down either. Sometimes he leaned against a wall.

His feet and ankles were swollen from standing too much, but in spite of the bodily discomfort he experienced, he refused to rest. With great seriousness he listened to all the talk about the matter, then assumed a solemn air and replied, “Oper di gur gur di annexe di bay dhanian di mung daal di of di Pakistan government”—his usual gibberish.

Later on “of di Pakistan government” was replaced by “of di Toba Tek Singh government.” Now he began asking people where Toba Tek Singh was, for that was his hometown. But no one could answer that question for him. And if someone did make an attempt to figure out the present status of Toba Tek Singh, more confusion would follow. It had been rumoured that Sialkot, which was once in Hindustan, was now in Pakistan; who could say where Lahore, which was in Pakistan today, would be tomorrow, and was there anyone who could guarantee that both Pakistan and Hindustan would not disappear someday?

This man’s kesh had become thin and straggly, and since he seldom bathed, his kesh and his beard had become glued together, giving him a ghoulis appearance. But he was a harmless man. In fifteen years, he had not once been involved in a brawl with the other inmates. The guards only knew that he was from Toba Tek Singh, where he owned land. He had been a well-to-do landowner. Then, without warning, he had gone insane. His relatives had bound him with iron chains, brought him to the asylum, and admitted him.

They visited him once every month, inquired after his well-being, and then left. Their visits continued until the disturbances began.

His name was Bishan Singh, but people now called him Toba Tek Singh. Though it was apparent that he was impervious to the passage of time, he waited for the visits from his relatives and was ready for them when they came. Before their arrival, he would tell the guard his “visit” was coming; he bathed, scrubbed his body with soap, oiled his hair and combed it, put on his best clothes, which he had reserved for this occasion, and then went to see his visitors. He remained silent when they addressed him. Sometimes, however, he muttered, “Oper di gur gur di annexe di bay dhanian di mung daal di of laltain.”

He had a daughter who was grown up now. As a child, she cried whenever she saw her father, and she continued to cry for him when she was a young woman.

When the disturbances began, Bishan Singh started asking the people at the asylum where Toba Tek Singh was, and since he was unable to receive a satisfactory answer, his curiosity increased. His “visits” had also stopped. He had been able to sense the impending visits of his relatives. But now it seemed the little voice in his heart that had told him they were coming was stilled.

He longed for his visitors, who had been sympathetic and had brought him gifts of fruit, sweets, and clothing. He was convinced they would be able to tell him if Toba Tek Singh was in Pakistan or in India, his conviction stemming from his belief that his family came from Toba Tek Singh.

In the lunatic asylum there was a man who believed that he was God. Bishan Singh asked him about Toba Tek Singh. The man laughed raucously. “It is neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan,” he said, “because I haven’t given any orders yet.”

Bishan Singh pleaded with this “God” to give the orders so that the question of Toba Tek Singh could be settled once and for all. The man said that he was too busy, that there were too many other orders to be taken care of.

Finally Bishan Singh lost his temper. “Oper di gur gur di bay dhania di mung di daal di of wahay guruji, the khalsa and wahay guruji the fathey!” He probably wanted to say that if the man had been a Sikh god instead of a Muslim god, he might have helped Bishan Singh.

A few days prior to the transfer, Bishan Singh was visited by an old Muslim friend. Seeing him, Bishan Singh turned to leave. The guard restrained him. “He’s come to see you,” the guard said. “This is your friend, Fazal Din.” Bishan Singh glanced at his friend briefly, then began muttering his customary nonsense. Fazal Din came forward and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I wanted to come and see you earlier. I’ve just been so busy. Your family has left for Hindustan, and everyone is fine...I helped them in whatever way I could. Your daughter Roop Kaur?...” He paused in mid-sentence.

“Roop Kaur?” Bishan Singh looked thoughtful.

“Yes...she...she’s fine too,” Fazal Din said haltingly. “She also left with the others.”

Bishan Singh remained silent.

“They requested me to check on you every once in a while,” Fazal Din continued. “Now I hear you’re being taken to Hindustan. Give my regards to Bhai Baleer Singh and Bhai Vadhwa Singh...and sister Amrit Kaur. Tell Bhai Baleer I am all right. One of the two cows he left behind has calved, had two calves...One died six days after the birth...And if there’s anything more I can do, tell them I am ready anytime. And here, I brought you some sweets.”

Taking the bag of sweets from him, Bishan Singh handed it to the guard who was standing nearby.

“Where is Toba Tek Singh?” he then asked Fazal Din.

“Where is Toba Tek Singh?” Fazal Din repeated in amazement, adding, “Where it was before?”

“Is it in Pakistan or in Hindustan?” Bishan Singh asked.

“In Hindustan...well, no, no, in Pakistan, I think.” Fazal Din became flustered.

Bishan Singh was muttering again. “Oper di gur gur di annexe di bay dhanian di mung di daal di of Pakistan and Hindustan of di dur fitay moonh!” And with that he walked away.

All preparations for the transfer had been completed. Lists of patients had been exchanged, and the day of the transfer had been set.

On an extremely cold day, lorries filled with Hindu and Sikh lunatics left the asylum in Lahore, accompanied by the police and some higher officials. At Wagah, the superintendents from both sides met, and after the initial formalities were out of the way, the actual transfer began, continuing all night.

Getting the lunatics out of the lorries and handing them over to the Indian officials proved to be an arduous task. Many of them refused to leave the lorries, and those who did ran about wildly, making it difficult for the guards and other officials to keep them under control; those who were naked tore off any clothing that was forced on them, many swore and cursed, one or two sang, some fought with each other, and others cried or wailed. Confusion was rampant. The women were also a problem, and the cold weather made everyone’s teeth chatter.

Most of the lunatics were not in favour of the transfer because they could not comprehend the reasons for being uprooted from one place and thrown into another. One or two people, not completely mad, shouted, “Pakistan Zindabad!” and “Pakistan Murdabad!” This infuriated both the Muslims and Sikhs, and altercations between them were avoided with great difficulty.

When Bishan Singh’s turn came to cross the border, he asked the official who was entering his name in a register, “Where is Toba Tek Singh? In Pakistan or in India?”

The official laughed and said, “In Pakistan.”

On hearing this, Bishan Singh leaped back and ran towards the remaining group of men who awaited their turn. The Pakistani soldiers caught him and tried to force him back to the checkpoint. He resisted vigorously.

“Toba Tek Singh is here!” he yelled. “Oper di gur gur di annexe di bay dhanian di mung di daal di of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan!”

The authorities attempted to reason with him. “Look, Toba Tek Singh is in Hindustan now—and if he’s not there yet, we’ll send him there immediately.” But he was adamant and would not budge from the spot where he stood. When the guards threatened to use force, he installed himself in a

place between the borders and stood there as if no power in the world could move him.

Because he was a harmless man, he was allowed to remain there while the transfer continued.

Before the sun rose, a piercing cry arose from Bishan Singh, who had been quiet and still all this time. Several officers and the guards ran towards him; they saw that the man who had stood on his legs day and night for fifteen years now lay on the ground, prostrate. Beyond a wired fence on one side of him was Hindustan, and beyond a wired fence on the other side was Pakistan. In the middle, on a stretch of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.

*Translation from Urdu by Tahira Naqvi*