



PROJECT MUSE®

The Owner of Rubble

Mohana Rākeśa, Alok Bhalla

Manoa, Volume 19, Number 1, 2007, pp. 91-99 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/man.2007.0048>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217469>

The Owner of Rubble

They had returned to Amritsar from Lahore after seven and a half years. The hockey match was only an excuse; they were more keen to see the bazaars and houses that now belonged to strangers. Groups of Muslims could be seen strolling down every street of the city. Everything in it caught their attention. For them Amritsar was not just an ordinary city, but a place of wonder and surprise.

As they walked through its narrow bazaars, they reminded each other of the past. “Look Fatehdina, how very few misri shops are left in Misri Bazaar!...A panwallah now sits at the corner where Sukhi used to light her bhati...Ah, Khan Sahib, this is Namak Mandi! The girls of this lane were really so namkin that...”

It had been a long time since these bazaars had seen red Turkish caps and turbans with well-starched tassels. In the group that had come from Lahore, there were quite a few Muslims who had been forced to leave Amritsar during the Partition. Some of them were surprised at the changes that had taken place during their absence, while others were saddened. “Allah! How did Jayamal Singh acquire so much land? Were the houses on this side burnt down?...Wasn’t this Hakim Asim Ali’s shop? Has it now been taken over by a cobbler?”

Some of them could be heard exclaiming, “Wali, that masjid is still standing! These people didn’t convert it into a gurudwara!”

The people of the city watched these groups of Pakistanis with eagerness and curiosity. There were, of course, some who were still so suspicious of the Muslims that they turned away when they saw them on the road. But there were many others who walked up to them and embraced them. Most people who met the visitors assailed them with a variety of questions. “What is Lahore like these days? Is Anarkali still as bright and gay as it used to be? We hear that the bazaar of Shah Alami Cate has been completely rebuilt. Krishna Nagar couldn’t have changed much, could it? Was Rishwatpura really built from money taken in bribes?...They say that the burqa has disappeared from Pakistan—is that really true?” These questions were asked with such sincerity and concern that it seemed as if Lahore wasn’t merely a city, but a person who was related to thousands of others who

were anxious about its well-being. The visitors from Lahore were treated as the guests of the whole city, and most people were delighted to talk to them.

Bansan Bazaar is a poor, run-down locality of Amritsar where lower-class Muslims lived before the Partition. Most of the shops there had sold bamboo and wood. They had all been burnt down. The fire in Bansan Bazaar had been the worst of the fires in Amritsar, and for some time it had threatened to send the entire city up in flames. Indeed, the fire had burnt down many of the areas in the neighbourhood. Somehow the fire had been brought under control, but for every Muslim house burned down, four or five Hindu homes had also been reduced to ash. Now, seven and a half years later, a few structures had been rebuilt, but there were still piles of rubble everywhere. Standing in the midst of ruins, the new buildings presented a strange sight.

As usual, there wasn't much activity in Bansan Bazaar that day, because most of the people who had once lived there had perished along with their homes, and those who had fled didn't have the courage to return. That day, however, one old and frail Muslim did venture into the deserted bazaar, but when he saw the new buildings standing next to ruins, he felt as if he was lost in a labyrinth. He reached the lane that turned to the left, but instead of entering it, he stood outside, perplexed. He couldn't believe that it was the lane he wanted to take. On one side of the lane a few children were playing hopscotch, and a little further up two women were screaming and cursing each other.

"Everything has changed except the curses!" the old Muslim mumbled to himself as he stood there resting on his cane. His legs were bent, and his pyjamas were a little torn. His sherwani, which didn't reach up to his knees, was patched in several places.

A child came running out of the lane crying. The old man called out to him in a kind voice, "Come here, son! Come, I'll give you something nice—come." He put his hand in his pocket and began searching for something to give to the child. The child stopped crying for a moment, but then pouted and began to weep again. A young girl of about sixteen or seventeen years came running after him, caught him by his arm, and started dragging him back into the lane. The girl then picked him up, put her arms around him, kissed him, and said, "Stop crying, you little devil! If you don't, that Muslim will catch you and take you away! So stop crying!"

The old Muslim put back into his pocket the coin he had taken out for the child. He took off his cap, scratched his head, and then put the cap under his arm. His throat was dry, and his legs were shaking. He supported himself against the porch of a closed shop in the street and then put his cap on again. Across from the entrance to the lane, a three-storey house stood in the open yard where there used to be a shed for logs of wood. Two well-fed kites were sitting absolutely still on the electric wires running past the house. There was a patch of sunlight near the lamppost. The old Muslim

stood quietly for a while in the sunlight and watched the dust being raised by the wind. Then, almost involuntarily, he sighed, "Ya Mallik!"

A young man approached the lane swinging a bunch of keys on a chain. Seeing the old man, he asked, "Miyan, why are you standing here?"

The old man felt his heart beat a little faster, and a slight tremor of excitement ran through his body. He moistened his lips, looked at the young man curiously, and asked, "Son, aren't you Manori?"

The young man stopped swinging the key chain around, clutched it in his hand, and asked with surprise, "How do you know my name?"

"Seven and a half years ago, you were only this tall," the old man said as he tried to smile.

"Did you come from Pakistan today?"

"Yes! We used to live in this lane once," the old man said. "My son, Chiragdin, was your tailor. Six months before the Partition, we had built a new house for ourselves here."

"Oh, Gani Miyan!" Manori said, recognizing him.

"Yes, son, I am Gani Miyan! I know that I shall never meet Chirag, his wife, and his children in this life again. But I thought that I should at least see our house once again." The old man took his cap off, scratched his head, and wiped his tears as they flowed down his face.

"You had left this place long before the Partition, hadn't you?" Manori asked with sympathy in his voice.

"Yes, son, it was my misfortune that I escaped alone before the Partition. If I had stayed here, then along with them, I would have..." As he said those words, he felt that he ought to be more discreet. He stopped himself in mid-sentence, but he let the tears flow from his eyes.

"Forget the past, Gani Miyan. What's the use of thinking about it now?" Manori reached out and grasped Gani Miyan's arm. "Come, I'll show you your house."

In the meanwhile, a rumour had spread that a Muslim standing at the entrance to the lane had tried to kidnap Ramdasi's son... Had his sister not rescued him in time, the Muslim would surely have carried him away! As soon as they heard this news, the women sitting on low stools in the lane picked up their stools and shut themselves in their houses. They also called indoors all the children playing in the lane. By the time Manori and Gani walked through, there was hardly anyone to be seen, except for a single street-hawker and Rakkha Pahlwan, who was sleeping comfortably under a peepal tree near the well. Of course, many curious faces peered out into the lane from behind the windows and doors of the houses. When people saw Gani walking with Manori, they began to whisper. Despite the fact that his hair was now completely white, they had no difficulty in recognizing Abdul Gani, the father of Chiragdin.

"Your house was there." Manori pointed to a heap of rubble in the distance. Gani stared in astonishment. He had reconciled himself to the death

of Chirag, his wife, and their children a long time ago. But he wasn't prepared for the shock he received when he saw the ruins of his house. His mouth became parched, his knees weak.

"That heap of stone and ash?" he asked in disbelief.

Manori noticed that the colour had drained from the old man's face. He held him a little more firmly and told him, as if he was narrating a distant event, "Your house was burned down during the riots."

Supporting himself on his cane, Gani somehow walked up to the spot where his house had once stood. All that remained was a heap of dust and ash and a few broken, burnt pieces of brick. Things made of iron and wood had been picked out of the rubble a long time before. By some strange chance, the charred frame of a door still stood in the middle of the rubble. Beyond it were two almirahs, which had been blackened by smoke. After gazing at the heap of rubble for some time, Gani whispered to himself, "Is this all...is this all that is left?" He staggered a little and had to hold on to the charred doorframe for support. A moment later, he sat down and rested his head against the doorframe. Then he began to moan quietly, "Oh, my Chiragdin!"

The doorframe, which had stood like a proud relic for seven and a half years in the middle of the heap of rubble, was so badly seared that it began to crumble. The moment Gani leaned his head against it, small bits disintegrated and scattered on the ground around him. A few pieces of wood and ash fell on his cap and his white hair. Along with the cinders, a long worm fell out of the wooden door and landed near his feet. It raised its head a few times, slithered here and there looking for some hole to hide in, and then wriggled desperately towards a brick-lined drain nearby.

By then many more people were staring out of their windows. They were sure that something dramatic was about to happen. "Chiragdin's father, Gani, is here," they whispered. "He will find out what happened seven and a half years ago." They felt that the rubble would reveal the whole story. That evening, Chiragdin had been eating his dinner upstairs when Rakkha Pahlwan shouted for him from the street and asked him to come down for a minute. In those days, Rakkha was the uncrowned king of the lane. Even the Hindus were afraid of him. Chirag, a Muslim, got up without finishing his food and went downstairs to meet Rakkha. Chirag's wife, Zubaida, and his two daughters, Kishwar and Sultana, watched from the windows upstairs. The moment Chirag stepped out of the door, Rakkha grabbed him by his collar, threw him down on the street, and sat on his chest. Chirag caught Rakkha's hand, which held a knife, and screamed, "Rakkha Pahlwan, don't kill me! O God, help...save me!" Zubaida, Kishwar, and Sultana screamed helplessly and ran downstairs wailing. One of Rakkha's disciples pushed Chirag's arm aside while Rakkha pressed his knee down on his thighs and shouted, "Don't scream, you sister-fucker! You want Pakistan, don't you! I only want to send you there! Now go!" By the time

Zubaida, Kishwar, and Sultana reached the front door, Chirag had been dispatched to Pakistan.

By then all the windows in the neighborhood had been shut. Those who had witnessed the murder had shut their doors and refused to intervene. Even behind shut doors, they could hear the screams of Zubaida, Kishwar, and Sultana for a long time. Rakkha and his companions had arranged to have them sent to Pakistan that very night, but by a different and longer route. Their bodies were later discovered—not in Chirag’s house, but in the canal nearby.

For two days, the house was raided. After everything had been looted, someone set it on fire. Rakkha Pahlwan swore that if he ever caught the person responsible for the fire, he would bury him alive. Rakkha had killed Chirag because he had wanted the house for himself. He had even bought everything necessary to perform the purification rituals. But he was never able to discover who had burnt the house down.

Over the last seven and a half years, everyone had accepted the fact that Rakkha was the owner of the rubble that had been left behind. He would neither allow anyone to tie a cow or a buffalo there, nor let anyone put up a temporary shed. No one ever dared to take even a small piece of brick from the rubble without his permission.

People looking out of their windows were sure that Gani would discover the entire story—that he would be able to read the history of his family’s fate in the pile of rubble. They watched as Gani sat in the middle of the pile, scratched ash from the rubble with his nails, and scattered it over his head. Then he put his arms around the doorframe and wailed, “Speak to me, Chirag! Say something! Tell me where you are. O Kishwar! O Sultana! My children! O God, why is Gani still alive?”

The fragile doorframe crumbled a little more, and pieces of charred wood fell to the ground and scattered.

Rakkha Pahlwan, who had been sleeping under the peepal tree, woke up or was woken up by someone. When he learnt that Abdul Gani had returned from Pakistan and was sitting on the debris of his house, his mouth went dry. He cleared his throat and spat on the ground near the well. When he looked towards the rubble, his heart beat faster and his lower lip became a little more pendulous.

“Gani is sitting in the middle of the ruins of his house,” Laccha Pahlwan, one of Rakkha’s disciples, said as Rakkha sat down next to him.

“The ruins of his house? That rubble is mine!” Rakkha said in a hoarse voice.

“But he is sitting there,” Laccha said and looked at him meaningfully.

“Let him sit there. Go and get my chillum!” Rakkha said as he stretched his legs and massaged his naked thighs.

“Suppose Manori tells him?...,” Laccha asked as he got up to fill the chillum.

“Does Manori want to get into trouble?”

Laccha left to get the chillum.

Dry leaves from the peepal tree had scattered around the well. Rakkha picked them up one by one and crushed them with the palms of his hands. After Laccha had wrapped a cloth filter around the chillum and handed it to Rakkha, Rakkha took a long puff and asked, “Has Gani talked to anyone else?”

“No.”

“Here, take it,” Rakkha said as he coughed and passed the chillum to Laccha.

Manori helped Gani off the pile of rubble and supported him as he walked towards the well. Laccha crouched on the ground and puffed hard on the chillum. He watched Rakkha’s face while keeping an eye on Gani.

Manori walked a little ahead of Gani, as if he wanted to make sure that Gani walked past the well without noticing Rakkha. But Gani had already seen Rakkha and recognized him from the way he sat with his legs stretched out on the ground. As soon as Gani neared the well, he stretched his arms out and said, “Rakkha Pahlwan!”

Rakkha looked up, squinted a little, and stared at Gani. Then he grunted, but didn’t utter a word.

“Don’t you recognize me?” Gani asked as he dropped his arms. “I am Gani, Abdul Gani, Chiragdin’s father!”

The people at the windows continued to gossip. “Now that they have come face to face, they are bound to talk about what happened...Maybe they’ll abuse each other...Now Rakkha can’t touch Gani. The times have changed...He thought that he was the owner of that rubble!...That heap belongs to neither of them. The government owns the ruin!...That bastard doesn’t even let anyone tie his cow there!...Manori is a coward. Why didn’t he tell Gani that it was Rakkha who had killed Chirag, his wife, and their children?...Rakkha is not a human being; he is a wild bull. He roams the streets all day long like a bull!...Look how thin poor Gani is! His beard is completely white...”

Gani sat down by the side of the well and said, “Look at my fate, Rakkha! When I went away, I had a fine and happy household, and now there is nothing left but that heap of dust! The only sign of a house that was once inhabited! To tell you the truth, I don’t want to leave that pile of rubble behind.” His eyes filled with tears.

Rakkha pulled his legs in and sat cross-legged. Then he picked up his towel, which had been lying on the parapet of the well, and wrapped it around his shoulders. Laccha pushed the chillum towards him, and he started puffing on it.

“Tell me, Rakkha, how did it happen?” Gani asked as he wiped his eyes. “You were friends. You loved each other like brothers. Couldn’t he have hidden in your house? He was bright enough to have thought of that.”

“I don’t know,” Rakkha replied, but he sounded strangely unconvincing. His mouth was dry. There were drops of sweat on his moustache, and they trickled down to his lips. His forehead felt heavy, and his back ached for support.

“What is it like in Pakistan?” Rakkha asked. His voice was tense, and the veins on his neck were throbbing. He used his towel to wipe the sweat under his armpits, and then he cleared his throat and spat into the lane.

“What can I tell you, Rakkha?” Gani said as he leaned with both his hands on his cane. “Only God knows how I live. If Chirag had been with me, the story would be different...I tried to persuade him to go with me. But he was determined not to leave his newly built house... This is our lane, he said obstinately; there is no danger here. Like an innocent dove, he didn’t consider the threat from outside. All four of them gave up their lives trying to protect that house!...Rakkha, he depended on you. He used to say that, as long as Rakkha was around, nobody would dare to hurt him. But when death finally came, even Rakkha couldn’t help.”

Rakkha tried to stretch his back because it had begun to ache badly. His sides too had begun to hurt. He couldn’t breathe with ease. He felt as if he had stomach cramps. He was perspiring badly, and his feet seemed to be full of thorns. He saw flashes of bright light burst like fireworks before his eyes. He could neither open his mouth nor utter a word. He wiped his face with one end of his towel. And then, quite involuntarily, he whispered to himself, “O dear God, have mercy on me, have mercy on me!”

Gani noticed that Rakkha’s lips had become dry and that deep, dark circles hung under his eyes. He placed his hand on Rakkha’s shoulder and said, “What happened was fated, Rakkhiya. There is no use moaning about the past! May God bless the virtuous, and may He forgive those who have sinned! Now that I have met all of you, I feel as if I have seen Chirag again. May Allah keep you in good health.” And then, with the help of his cane, he stood up. As he started to leave, he said, “Allow me to take my leave, Rakkha Pahlwan.”

Rakkha tried to say something. He folded both his hands. Gani looked around at the neighbourhood once more with regret and longing, then walked slowly out of the lane.

The people at the windows started whispering once again. “Once outside the lane, Manori will tell Gani the entire story...Rakkha didn’t dare to say anything to Gani...Now he won’t dare to stop us from tying our cows in that area...Poor Zubaida! She was such a fine woman! Rakkha has neither a home nor a family. How can he respect the wives and sisters of others?...”

After some time, the women went out of their houses into the lane. The children began to play gilli-danda. Two teenage girls began to argue with each other about something and then came to blows.

Rakkha continued to sit by the well till late into the evening, smoking his chillum and coughing. People who passed by asked him, “Rakkhey Shah, I hear that Gani came from Pakistan today.”

“Yes, he came,” Rakkha would answer every time.

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened. He went away.”

When night fell, Rakkha went to the shop on the left side of the lane and sat on the porch as usual. Every day, he greeted his acquaintances as they passed by and told them about the secrets of the lottery or gave them remedies for good health. But that day, he told Laccha about the pilgrimage he had made fifteen years before to Vaishno Devi. When he went back into the lane after sending Laccha home, he saw that Loku Pundit had tied his buffalo near the ruins of Gani’s house. Instinctively, he picked up his stick and drove it away.

Tat, tat, tat...tat, tat!

Then he sat down to rest for a while near the charred remains of the doorframe in the middle of the rubble. Since there was no streetlight nearby, it was dark. He could hear the soft sound of water running through the drain nearby. The silence of the night was pierced by all sorts of sounds rising from the mound of dust and ash...*chick, chick, chick...kirrr-rrrr-ki-ki-ki...* Suddenly, a crow that had lost its bearings fluttered around, then alighted on the doorframe. The wooden frame crumbled a little more, and pieces of burnt wood fell here and there. As soon as the crow settled down on the doorframe, a dog that had been sleeping in one corner of the rubble got up and started barking at it loudly. *Bow-wow-wow-wow...bow-wow-wow-wow!* At first the crow stayed where it was, but then it flapped its wings rapidly and flew up to the peepal tree near the well. After chasing away the crow, the dog turned towards Rakkha Pahlwan and began to growl at him. In order to chase away the dog, Rakkha shouted at him, “Go away, shoo, shoo!...”

But the dog became more aggressive and began to bark louder. *Bow-wow-wow-wow!*

Hat-hat...durr-durr-durr!

Bow-wow-wow-wow...bow-wow-wow-wow!

Rakkha picked up a stone and threw it at the dog. The dog moved away a little but didn’t stop barking. Rakkha called it a son-of-a-bitch, then got up, slowly walked to the well, and lay down on the platform. As soon as he left, the dog followed him, continuing to bark at him. After some time, when the dog saw no one moving about in the lane, it twitched its ears and went back to the rubble. Sitting down in a corner, it continued to growl.

Translation from Hindi by Alok Bhalla