6 January 1948

THAKUR CHAWLA

Karachi city. Near the press building of the daily *Hindu* (now *Hindustan*) was a prominent circular structure and across that was the area called Gaadikhaato. At the outskirts of Gaadikhaato, stood a pale green, five-storey building called Thakur Nivas (now Maahrukh Manzil).

Thakur Nivas belonged to us. We had an office on the first floor and our home on the third. The remaining three floors were rented out. We were in the business of finance. Over a period of time, Baba had meticulously squirreled away money and had the building constructed. He made allowances for the ups and downs of business and assumed that at least the rent would take care of his children's expenses. But God had something else in mind. The year 1947 changed history. The country was divided into two, followed by brutal riots everywhere. In the interiors of Sindh, zamindari was dying out, and it seemed almost certain that people would have to leave behind wells and buildings, gardens and parks, and homes put together over years.

Our house was so tall that you could see it for miles around. It was in the village of Ranipur, which you had to

pass through to visit the dargah of Sachal. My baba had been the *mukhi* of Ranipur for years, so people migrating from Ranipur and its surrounding villages, who needed to stop by in Karachi to board ships, used our home in Karachi as a temporary refuge. They would wait for their tickets, and sometimes this could take four or five months. Out of the five rooms on our office floor, we had reserved four for guests, and these were constantly packed with the belongings of people migrating from Sindh. Every piece of luggage had a name written on it.

On the morning of 6 January 1948, at about noon, there was a sudden furore on the street where we lived. Shrieks and shouts came forth from neighbouring homes. I must have been fifteen or sixteen years old then. When I came out into the balcony, what I witnessed was daylight robbery. Two trucks stood nearby. About a hundred non-Sindhi Muslims, that is, Mohajirs, were filling up the trucks with pickings from a building only a block away from ours, where Dr Premchand used to live. It was horrifyingly evident from the way they spoke and acted that these were Muslims who had migrated from UP or Bihar and they intended to kill us and rob us. I ran downstairs. Oblivious to the mayhem, our watchman, who hailed from Allahabad, was busy cooking dal in his alcove under the stairs. I yelled at him and made him lock up the iron gates. I explained the situation to him and quickly sent the women and children to the top floor of our house.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, a bunch of Mohajirs stood outside our building, violently shaking the iron bars of the gate, and shouting '*Allah ho Akbar*'. About seven or eight of us stood in the balcony randomly throwing things at them to prevent them from entering the building. The Sindhi

Muslims living in the government-owned quarters across our building merely watched.

Within no time, we ran out of dispensable objects, such as pieces of wood, which we had been using to throw at the hooligans, who now began to bang and thump the wooden doors on the ground floor vigorously. As a result, the latch of one of the doors came unfastened, giving them access to the rest of the building. I wanted to call up the police but the the telephone wires had been cut. Companions who I had thought would support me in resisting the attacks had fled, taking refuge in their own houses. As for the guests, whose belongings had lain safely in our office, they had rushed to the terrace with their wives and children.

When the crowd started pounding our door, there were only three of us left in the office—my cousin Hardasmal, the watchman and me. Hardasmal was ready to leave the following day, that is, 7 January, with his eight bags and gunny sacks full of utensils. He now watched with growing terror as the latch came undone slowly but surely and he suddenly collapsed in a heap. The watchman threw away his lathi and hid himself in the bathroom.

I took up the lathi but didn't have the chance to use it. Hefty looking Mohajirs descended on us with knives and staffs. Some hit us with sticks, and some with blows. One of them grazed my nose with a knife, and another one grazed my back. My clothes were soaked with blood. 'Police! Police! *Bachao, bachao*!' I shrieked but to no avail. The rooms were deserted, bereft of belongings, including bags which contained trousseaus for daughters. Some of the bags had contained everything needed for a new life in India. In one fell stroke, the aspirations and hopes of all the guests were buried. They had been turned paupers.

Two hours later, the police had arrived. The injured were taken to hospitals. The following day, the daily newspaper *Sindh Observer* had covered the incident and also printed the names of those who had died. The list included my name because there was little hope of my survival. Luckily for me, a nurse who used to live in the neighbourhood, had seen me in hospital and she took painstaking efforts to help me recover. With timely medical attention medicine and under her care, I managed to return home within a fortnight. By then, everything had changed.

Every single relative and neighbour of mine had left for India. Willy-nilly, I too began to think of leaving Karachi. I had written off the possibility of selling my immovable property—the house, the land, and in the village, houses, wells and *otaks*. As for the building in Karachi, which could have been sold for one and a half lakh rupees before the riots, it was now reduced to exactly half its price. I finally found a buyer for sixty-eight thousand. At that point in time, the government had promulgated a fresh rule prohibiting any distress sale of property after the riots. In order to prove that the transaction preceded the riots of 6 January, I needed a certificate from the collector.

My friend, who was a lawyer, helped me approach the collector. The collector, a Sindhi Muslim, said to me, '*Vaanya*, for once you are at my mercy. I will charge you a thousand rupees to issue a certificate.'

This is how I sold my building in Karachi, abandoned everything else, and migrated.

When I Experienced the Simultaneity of Life and Death . . .

POPATI HIRANANDANI

We have with us neither death nor life. We lack completely in autonomy.

—Lachhman 'Komal'

The radio announced that the nation was divided. Newspapers mentioned that the entire province of Sindh had gone to Pakistan. Refugees had begun to come into Sindh. The next day we heard that five thousand Muslims had come to Hyderabad. Some had been put up in the Muslim hostel, while some others lived in the neighbourhood of the Salatis. The Muslim hostel was on the street to our right. The atmosphere was vitiated by fear and misgiving, and terror gripped our hearts. As if this was not enough, some young Muslim men got out of the hostel and began to shout, 'Hand over the beauties of the beautiful Hyderabad to us.' Our heart beats raced. Young women in every house were being warned. *The moment a Muslim enters your house,*

Excerpted from the *Golden and Silver Chapters of Life*

you must shove your fingers in the nearest electric socket, turn the switch on and bring an end to your life. Small packets of poison were also being given to them.

At six in the evening, I heard somebody's voice on the loudspeaker. To catch the words, I walked to the head of the lane where I lived. An announcement blared from a row of police jeeps. 'No riots will take place. The police are alert. Military forces are also present.' Wherever the police jeeps passed, doors and windows closed one by one. People felt a sense of imminent danger. A hush fell over the streets.

I entered my home and switched on the radio. But Amma did not let me. 'Don't, the rascals will think we are having a good time listening to music.' Usually, the light above the main door of the house would be turned on at 7 p.m. and it would remain on until the late hours of the night. The main door would be left open almost till midnight. But on that day, even the lights in the courtyard and the verandah were switched off. The door was fastened with three kinds of latches.

With the exception of my brother Hashu, everyone was inside the house. Young men were busy equipping themselves for possible skirmishes with the incoming refugees. They were forming small defence teams and training themselves to safeguard lives and homes. Hashu was the leader of one such team. He would arrive late at night and unload lathis from his bicycle, which he would then slide under my stringed cot in the verandah because my cot was covered with a sheet. Some of the lathis were pierced on one end with pins, while some others had glass splinters on them. At least fifty lathis were buried in a secret corner of the terrace so that the women of the house could have easy access to them and fight from the rooftops.

It was 9 p.m., but no sign of Hashu. The doors of the house facing ours were shut fast. It was all quiet and deserted around us in Hyderabad, a city otherwise bustling and active late into the night. Even at one in the morning, you could hear gramophones playing, *Kya kaaran hai ab rone ka . . . kya kaaran . . .* (Why the tears now . . .) or hear loud cries of 'Eh, kaara! Give me ice for fifty paisa,' as a hot and thirsty customer called out to the ice-candy man. You could see young men hanging outside shops and laying wagers over who could eat the most bananas. Grandmothers would be busy telling stories about how 'Kuno abducted the virgin' and tongawallahs would sing legendary songs like 'Umar took Marui away, took her away . . .' A demon had visited those streets that night.

I heard a gentle knock on the door. Everyone sat up. Amma would not let anyone else go and open the door.

'Who is it?'

'It's me, Hashu. Open the door.'

Hashu was quiet today. We found it very surprising. Usually he would start chattering incessantly as soon as he arrived home, 'Rajab ate six eggs today! Fakir held an ice cube for half hour in his hand! The Negro hit a member from the Salat community so badly that he tumbled over. Nanu swung the lathi so well that all of us lay flat on our backs . . .' But today, he looked sad. He said, 'Hyderabad is surrounded on all sides by refugees. Muslims from Lahore slaughtered a cow in the middle of the bazaar.'

Our bodies were reduced to mere ears. Softly, he said, 'It has been decided to evacuate the women from Hyderabad. We will first make arrangements for unmarried girls to leave. At midnight, a truck will leave from here for Mirpurkhas. Women will be made to board a train from Mirpurkhas.'

'But where will they go?' My mother asked.

'That arrangement will also be made. I have sent somebody to Jodhpur. He will rent some kind of a place. Popati and Kamla will be the first ones to leave.' He faced me and said, 'By first, I mean tomorrow. Take as few things as possible.'

I was but a girl. I had a hand-embroidered sari. I had just begun to put sequins on one half of the sari. It was lying on the cot encased in an embroidery ring-frame and Amma had made pleats around it. There was a radio cover with mirrors embedded in the fabric. Colourful ribbons, a beaded cap, collections of coins, a handkerchief with names embroidered on it, notebooks that held the deepest secrets of my heart, books with pictures and images, a marble-topped table for study, a swing, a skirt with beads and buttons, a small temple in the loft . . . What to carry and what to abandon? Are these things to be left behind?

I tossed and turned in bed all night. What will my friend Kala say when she comes to know? *You didn't even tell me?* Hari was quite reassuring. He did say that if there were any problems, he would come and stay with my family. But once Kamla and I leave, what if something does happen? What will I do then?

My elder brother worked in Karachi. Apart from Hashu, I had two younger brothers. All of us went to a studio to get a family photograph taken. God knows when we would all be together again, we thought. We must at least have each other's pictures. I stood with Amma for a photograph, while Kamla stood with my younger brother.

Amma kept wailing, 'Scoundrels, such torture they have inflicted upon us.'

My younger brother tried to console her, 'Hindustan is like our elder mother, tell yourself that we are going to our senior mother.'

'To hell with the elder mother and to hell with all those scoundrels who are separating us from our children,' Amma wept.

When we visited maasi's home in the evening, we noticed utensils being packed in gunny sacks and members of the family stitching up the sacks. When we informed them that we were leaving Hyderabad that night, they too admitted that they were preparing to migrate. My maasi, that is my mother's sister, her daughter-in-law, two unmarried daughters, three married ones and their children—all of them were getting ready to leave. Maasi suggested that we leave with them, and have Manghi, my mother, also join us.

Once we came home, Amma also began to get ready. When she packed her petticoats and covers in a little suitcase, every fibre of her body was moist with tears. All of us began to sob. We neither ate nor slept that night.

We spent that night going from room to room, looking wistfully at every object. I stood upon the terrace of the house and said goodbye, not only to the house, but the small piece of sky above me. The walls of the mohalla, and sparrows in the little alcoves, the cool breezes that blew over hillocks, the white bitch that lived in the gali, the trough for the horses, the little bird-feeding station for the pigeons—we were losing everything. September 17. It was my birthday, but it felt like the day of my death. We left home at 2.30 in the night. Three of my brothers accompanied us, the three women of the house. Once we left the lane, we kept turning our heads to look back. Only Allah could tell when we would get to rest our eyes on all this again . . .

My maasi's house was not far. There was already a lorry

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waiting outside her house. We started loading it with small suitcases, trunks and gunny sacks filled with utensils. Then we got into the lorry. The men reminded us, 'Hurry up, anything can happen on the way. Leave your howling and growling for Mirpurkhas.'

Our hearts cried but our eyes shed no tears. The windows of the lorry were shut, it picked up speed and raced into the darkness. We were like thieves fleeing our own nation in the dead of night.

We reached Mirpurkhas before sunrise. My cousin's husband lived in Mirpurkhas and he was an influential man. He said he would book an exclusive compartment in the train for us and advised us to take food grains with us. On the following day my mother's first cousin and her daughters as well as daughters-in-law arrived at the railway station. We occupied two railway compartments. It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The train started but within the next thirty minutes a bunch of Muslim officers stopped the train. They entered our compartments. One of my relatives was carrying a fan with her. She sat on one of the wings, while another relative had removed a handle from a sewing machine and was carrying that in a box. The officers tapped every object with their sticks and took away all the bags including those with the food grains. We were left with neither food nor clothes.

We reached Jodhpur in the morning. We were fifty in all, women and children. We waited in the retiring room at the station because we didn't know where we had to go. In the afternoon, a boy came and took us to a bungalow in a tonga.

We reached the bungalow safely, but what were we to eat and wear? Two women from the group left to seek help

from neighbours. A Rajasthani neighbour said that she would feed only the children. An hour later, she and her daughter-in-law brought food. The children were made to sit in a row and served food on scraps of paper. The same women also brought dinner for the children. The adults fasted that day. We did not have mattresses, beds or pillows to sleep on. We covered ourselves with our saris and tried to sleep, but how do you sleep on an empty stomach?

The following morning someone came to sell fried moong dal. We bought half a *ser* each and downed a few fistfuls of moong dal. The bungalow was far away from the centre of the city. We did not know the roads and streets well. Of course, we had some money, but we also feared using it up. So we were reluctant to spend it.

On the third day, we bought some soap and washed our clothes, or rather a sari or blouse—only one thing a day. We were crying and laughing at the same time. We had an old woman amongst us, with years of experience to her credit—Sundri. She took money from us, made a list of things we needed and went to the shops. She bought wheat and had it ground into flour. She also brought some vegetables. We were eating wheat after two days, but Sundri stood at the kitchen door and rationed the number of rotis. The children got one each and adults got two, with a spoonful of sabzi, nothing else.

Once we had had some food, we indulged in the luxury of thought. We were all worried about the family we had left behind. We wrote letters and sent telegrams. Seven days later, my maasi's eldest son arrived in Jodhpur along with news from home. Our anxieties got worse. A train with thousands of Punjabi Muslims has arrived in Karachi. Sindhi Sikhs were made to assemble in a temple. Muslims doused

the entire area around the temple with kerosene and set it ablaze. About a hundred and sixty Sikhs were burned inside the temple! Muslims had been knocking each and every door in Hyderabad. Locks were simply broken and homes appropriated.

When the women heard such things, they regretted their migration. What was the point of living when their men might meet a brutal and premature end? My cousin had come to check on us. When he was leaving, two days later, we pleaded with him, 'Please tell our families to come to us as soon as possible. They can come barefoot and empty-handed, we want only them and nothing else.'

Twelve days later, a lorry arrived with food grains. My cousin's husband had also sent some clothes. For twelve days we had lived on a single meal a day and in the same clothes. On the thirteenth day we could bathe and eat without restraint.

Gradually, both the young and old men of the family began to join us. But they were all empty-handed. My brother Hashu had gone to Delhi. He sent money and clothes from there. Meanwhile, my elder brother was left behind in Karachi. When we came to know that he too had left Sindh, we rejoiced.

Now there were sixty- six people in the bungalow. With makeshift doors we had carved out bathrooms and kitchens, and each family occupied half a room. At nights we would have festive moments together telling stories, reciting proverbs, singing songs, inventing riddles and laughing at children's jokes. In all this we would forget the agony of having left our motherland. The children were blissfully unaware anyway, but the grown-ups felt, all too often, a sharp pain stirring within them and nagging at their very

being. A word, an anecdote, a memory related to Sindh or Sindhi and a fresh stab made our wounded feelings bleed with renewed pain.

A month or two passed by in this manner. We kept hoping for a message that would say things were now calm, the dust had settled and that we could now go back. But why would such news arrive?

We got ready to take the nest apart. Only one family stayed behind in Jodhpur. They decided to enter the bus service business, while others left for Bombay and Delhi. Some went to Baroda, while some others started lives anew in Calcutta. My sister and two of my brothers had yet to finish their education. Baroda was affiliated with Bombay University, so we went to Baroda.

While boarding the train, I felt as if I had witnessed my death during my life and now I stood facing yet another life.