The Pomegranate Tree

Unlike my brothers, who have stayed behind in our adopted "home town" of Slough and been a daily part of our mum's daily life, I, having migrated to Britain as a teenager all those years ago, upped sticks soon thereafter and never returned for any prolonged period.

I often joke that I slept rough at a time when no one slept rough. "You have wheels under your feet. What has gone wrong with you? Isn't one migration enough for you that you wander like a vagabond from place to place?" my anguished mum would often admonish me during my visits home. Perhaps that, and the fact that we both shared the experience of migration, (twice; once forced and sudden in her case), made her feel at ease when discussing her past life. My occasional short visits home became an opportunity to reminisce and learn about family history and about a way of life and a composite civilisation that was lost.

Those discussions also enabled her to "lighten the load," as she would describe it. Loss she expressed but never bitterness at those who went on to occupy her former home. If anything, it was this shared experience of migration and loss that enabled my mum to develop strong bonds of friendship with some of the Pakistani women in our street in Slough.

"Aunties" as my siblings and I always called them, forewarned by my mum about the "wanderer's" return, would come and often bring food during my visits. "He understands. He is interested. I don't know why, but he is," she would tell them as I sat and listened with rapt attention. Together they would often reminisce about what each had left behind when they had made that "bloody" migration in 1947; my mum, a Sikh, from the newly created Pakistan to India and the Muslim "aunties" the other way.

It is very rare for my mum to visit us in Birmingham and it is always I and my family who visit her in Slough. Then a couple of summers ago she unexpectedly called and asked to be picked up so she could spend a week or so with her grandson. To put her at ease I carefully selected a list of her favourite hymns and music and on a warm and sunny day; we listened and chatted on our drive to Birmingham. She is quite relaxed

about my atheism and told me that unlike those who only know the rituals of the faith, I at least understand the history and true meaning of the Sikh Gurus' teachings. We reminisced about family history on our journey in a relaxed manner that we hadn't done for years. She was delighted to see her daughter-in-law and grandson, both of whom showered her with love and affection. And then the next day, things took a very different turn. Let me explain.

The partition of India in 1947 affected my mum and her family very deeply. Theirs was literally the last village on the new border to fall in Pakistan. And although the family still remained quite well off by the standards of most, the loss of all they had and what they got as compensation in Indian Punjab was too great.

The fact that her village and birth place, Gopal Singh Wala, named after her grandfather lay just across the border, almost visible and yet a place so utterly out of reach, has always haunted her. (Years later, my niece recounted to me the pain and anguish she witnessed when, during a visit to the Sikh holy city of Amritsar, she and her parents drove my mum through villages close to the border with Pakistan: “I have never seen her cry so bitterly. She remembered the names and details of villages she had known since her childhood, but not visited since the time of partition, even before we got close to them. Suddenly, she told us to drive to a particular village where the family rested during their flight and were given food and water. We got out and she immediately remembered the house which had welcomed them. We knocked and grandma, with tears in her eyes, introduced herself to the old lady of the house. As you can imagine, a lot of tears were shed as they both reminisced. And all the time, memories, very painful memories, flooded back. Even mum and I cried and hugged and comforted her.”)

The next day after lunch, she came into my library where I do my work, and curious, wondered what I was up to. “Oh, researching a lecture I have to deliver, mum.” I was sitting at my computer and recalling the sensation I felt a few weeks earlier when I finally managed to track down her village on the internet. I asked whether she wanted to see her birthplace.

Astonished, she said, "What do you mean, see my village?"

I explained to her that it wasn't much, but that I could at least offer her an aerial shot.

"Really! Go on."

I pulled up a chair and we sat side-by-side. Even for someone who lives by the written word, I'm at a loss to explain the sheer complexity of emotions and reactions my mum went through as I honed in on the village. Her face alone was a sight to behold as she “saw” her birthplace after 70 years.

Encouraging me to then look for other familiar villages and other landmarks, my mother astonished me with her detailed knowledge of the area, she had last seen as a child, when she and the family fled the violence and bloodshed that marked birth and separation of independent India and Pakistan within the space of a few hours. Even more than 70 years after partition, she immediately recognised the bends in the road and two canals that flowed at the edge of the village as well as the famous GT Road which passed close by.

Recently, having been moved by Aanchal Malhotra’s book, *Remnants of a separation: A history of the partition through material memory*, I asked my mum what happened to “things”, objects, they carried with them to India.

“Things? Objects? What are you talking about? The clothes on our back. And our lives. Nothing else.”

Having then calmed down a bit from the stupidity of my question, she explained how very few people thought a partition would actually happen.

“There were troubles and violence throughout my childhood,” she said as she leaned back on the sofa. “But after a while, things reverted to their ‘natural’ state. We as a prominent family were less affected than others. The big issue for my family was how to manage the estates which were scattered across the Punjab,” she said.

She then grabbed her walking stick and walked over to me. Giving me a list of names of places I had never heard of, she told me to, “put them into your internet.” Not just the new knowledge but also her intimate memory of place names, nearest railway stations, the time it took to travel and a whole heap of information she could churn out after a gap of more than seven decades took my surprise. (This remarkable power of recall and of transmitting memory across generations is not, as it turns out, that unusual. I recall, a few years earlier an Arab friend telling me of descendants of the Moors, expelled from Spain, often called, “al Andalusi”, the Andalusians, still passing on the keys to abandoned property, more than six centuries later). “But the expulsion we experienced,” she

explained, “was so sudden that there was no time to take anything. I could not even take my precious doll that your uncle had bought for me during a trip to the grain market a few years earlier. Oh, how that man, your uncle, spoilt me, his baby sister. I guess it was because I, his youngest sibling, was the same age as his oldest son and nephews,” she smiled at the memory. “I think given our age gap he saw me more as a baby daughter than a sister.”

We reminisced and I learned so much more about family history in the few days we spent on the internet. Every morning, after breakfast and the school run my mum and I would sit at my computer as, I would find yet another place she had mentioned. She would then proceed to reminisce about a life she left behind as a child. And then one day she told me she felt a sense of being re-born, a moment that has stayed with me. She also told of wonderful details which put flesh to bare bones of the partition narrative. Sorry about the digression. Now, where is that pomegranate?

One of her brothers, my favourite uncle, the one who bought my mum her doll, took the loss very badly, especially as it dawned upon everyone that this was not another temporary madness that would calm down and allow people to return to normality. Forced to leave the land of his birth, he, above all, missed the friends he had grown up with. In as much as it was possible over long distances, he wrote and tried to keep in touch with his mates.

And so, about 10 years after the event, his best friend invited him to travel to Pakistan. Full of excitement, my uncle travelled across the border and was met by a few of his friends. A successful businessman, as well as being a landowner by now, he carried with him a bag full of presents for his friend’s family. The village wasn’t that far and they decided to walk the short distance as they hugged, cried, laughed and reminisced about the old days. As they reached the outskirts of the village and he looked longingly at the place which meant so much to him and which was the “Shangri la” of his youth, a piquet of security men who must have got wind of his arrival met the party. He was told that, given the village’s proximity to the border, he was considered a security risk and would not be allowed to visit his birth place. Stunned at the sudden and unexpected hurdle, he and his friends used a mixture of reason, faith, emotion and threats to persuade the security men to relent. “Sorry, we would love to oblige but these are orders from on high,” was the consistent response.

It gradually became obvious that this was a stand-off that couldn't be resolved. More and more people, curious at what was going on, walked the short distance from the village. They all recognised my uncle and a whole lot of hugging, smiling and crying followed.

Children born after partition were presented to their "uncle". Those who had migrated from the Indian side of the border and had settled in the village, joined in the conversation and excitedly asked of news of their own lost villages. The shared pain of forced migration somehow acted as a balm as tears flowed and everyone reminisced.

Young boys were sent back to the village to fetch water, milk and snacks for the guest. Everyone joined in appealing to the "good nature" of the security men. An old aunt, who had acted as the handmaid to deliver my uncle at birth folded her hands. "Sons," she appealed to the security men with tears in her eyes, "I helped to bring this boy into this world. Think of him as my own son. He has travelled a long way. Let him at least catch a glimpse of his own home?" Only to be met with: "It is not up to us auntie. We are only obeying orders."

Realising at long last that all was in vain and already mentally exhausted, a great cry arose from my uncle's breast as he threw himself on the ground and wailed. Full of sadness and within sight of his birthplace, my uncle cried in anguish, "let me at least have something of my village to take back. If not its soil give me at least a cutting from my old orchard."

Witnessing his pain, my uncle's best friend and a few others morosely walked back to the village. They brought back two small pomegranate saplings wrapped in cloth with some wet soil to keep them moist for the journey back to his new village. An almighty dirge followed as everyone with tears in their eyes scrambled to hug him.

My uncle and his friends slowly walked to the border, that line, that blood-soaked line, drawn in the sand by an Englishman on a quick visit to India and who had never visited Punjab. Taking one last, longing look at his birthplace that he had come so close to visiting and clutching the saplings with all the tenderness of carrying a new born child, my uncle crossed the border with a heavy heart. He took the saplings back and planted one at his own newly-laid orchard, and the other one in the courtyard of his house in his

village, Bassi. This was the pomegranate tree that exercised such fascination throughout my childhood.

And finally, perhaps the permanence of that great and violent division (the much more emotionally charged word “batwara” in Punjabi) sank in. He changed his surname from that of his birthplace, as was, and in many ways still is, the custom in Punjab, to that of his new village where he lived out the rest of his days. Trying perhaps to re-create his family’s lost glory, my uncle acquired a reputation as a great philanthropist using much of his wealth to build schools and hospitals in the area.

Many years ago I came across the story of the second Mughal emperor, Humayun, having lost his throne, on a forced migration to seek refuge at the court of Shah Tahmasp of Persia. With dwindling resources and pursued by the enemy, the party camped for rest. A heavily pregnant empress Begum Hamida Banu, suddenly felt a craving for a pomegranate; a strange though not un-natural request, in the middle of their life and death situation. As it happened, at that very moment, a passing trading caravan camped nearby. It was at that point that something truly serendipitous happened. One of the traders just happened to be carrying a small bag of pomegranates, a hardy fruit, whose precious, sweet and juicy and pearl like reddish/purplish seeds are encased in a tough outer bark like layer. A surprised empress no doubt happily satisfied her craving as she sucked and chewed the succulent seeds in the middle of a harsh desert.

The pomegranate, a fruit, that I have had a fascination with since childhood for reasons then unknown became a symbol of loss, forced migration and craving when I read about empress Hamida Banu’s pregnancy. Centuries later, it became entwined with my uncle’s odyssey. Like my mum, he too fled his birthplace with little but the clothes on his back. But he at least was able to retrieve a living, organic thing that became a longer lasting object of memory that he held on to. Very few of my family know or remember the origins of the pomegranate tree. But the pomegranate, through an event in the desert in the mists of history, has, in recall by my mother, now become *my* object of memory of a lost civilisation that my ancestors were a part of within living memory.

Intrigued and attracted by the notion of a composite culture as a good and desirable pre-requisite for living in a multi-cultural Britain, I had been planning a visit to my parents' homeland which had it all and then threw it away. I had spoken to my mum about it a few times. "Why do you want to go? What will you find? It is all gone," she would say. "Because I want to experience, to feel and write about what you had and have given me as part of *my* heritage mum. You are my archive" I would say. "And that way, maybe I can bring some of it back for you. Just imagine the photographs alone that I will bring of your home land and how we will reminisce."

In January this year, when I had finally bought airline tickets, booked accommodation and activated my contact network in Pakistan (until Coronavirus descended on the world like a scourge and all my best laid plans bit the dust. But I intend to go and explore those "markers" of a lost shared, syncretic culture when the time is right.) I rang her with the news. "Tell me what I can bring back for you. Ask for anything." Too old to travel with me and asking to me to be careful she called off with these words. "I hope you manage to get to my village. And if you do, call me when you get there, I will guide you through it. Oh, and on the way back, pick a bit of the earth that I was born in. Put a bit of it my coffin when I die and mix the rest with my ashes."

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10/05/2020

Objects that one carries from one place to another and which stay with us throughout our lives are silent carriers of memories of times and places past. Is there an object in your family that has made such a journey? If so, what does it signify to different members of the family across generations?