

This time it was not Pakistan alone. The Indian government, too, did not give us permission to go right up to the Wagah-Amritsar border to light candles on August 14-15 to commemorate the birth in 1947 of our two countries. As in the past six years, I wrote to the Union Home Minister to allow some people to light candles at the border. Mr Advani's reply was prompt: the matter was under consideration. I did not hear from him after that.

The Hind-Pakistan Dosti Manch, an umbrella organisation of different cultural bodies, holds an annual function near the border, where people from different walks of life come to light candles at midnight. They come from different parts of India, particularly the Punjab. The purpose is to shatter the darkness enveloping India-Pakistan relations with the lights. The Manch's aim is to enable free travel between the two countries, so that people from the same stock, who share the same history, meet and demolish the wall of hatred and enmity that exists between the two sides.

I thought of the idea when India and Pakistan entered the 50th year of their independence. Some NGOs in Pakistan promised to reciprocate, by lighting candles on their side of the border. They could not do so because they were threatened with dire consequences by both their government and fundamentalists, if they dared go to the border. We, on the other hand, had no problems with the plan. The Centre was cooperative, the state government was a participant and there was no threat from fundamentalists.

Although there has been no visible response from the other side in the past, we have not been daunted in our efforts and have continued to light candles every year. This time too, there was no response from Pakistan. However, about 200 Pakistani women asked for permission to light candles

Remembering Partition

Kuldip Nayar

at the border. The government did not allow them to do so. Like us, they also lit their candles at the point where the border police stopped them. On the Indian side, it was a tremendous sight. At least 1,000 candles were aglow, 800 yards short of the border.

One question repeatedly asked by skeptical Indians is whether there is any response from Pakistanis. Yes, it has been there from day one. But people in Pakistan have to fight a situation in which democracy has been decreasing and the role of the military and extremists increasing. In India, we have the advantage of being an open society. Yet, the criticism, from intellectuals and journalists, contaminated by the *hindutva* philosophy, is on the rise. What we are aiming at is the build up of public opinion against violence in

both countries. We believe that if people from India and Pakistan are allowed to meet freely, they could generate so much goodwill that both governments would find it easier to tackle the problems they are caught up with, including Kashmir. The way to change the mindset in New Delhi or Islamabad is to put pressure on the establishment. This can only be done through the pressure of unanimous public opinion.

There were about 100 people present at the first candle lighting ceremony, at the start of the 50th year of Independence. The number of participants has increased manifold since. This year, over 10,000 people were present on our side of the border. Songs were especially written for the occasion and conveyed the poignancy of feelings, of friendship,



Refugees of partition

and looked forward to the day when the border between the two countries would be soft. Hans Raj Hans, the well-known Punjabi singer, had the audience swinging with his rendition of a song on the Agra summit and what it had achieved in the sphere of India-Pakistan relations.

For me the Wagah border has special memories. Whenever I am there, I become nostalgic. This is where I crossed into India after the Partition. Then the border did not have gates on either side. It was a row of upturned whitewashed drums. I vividly recall leaving my home town, Sialkot, all by myself because we (three brothers and our parents) did not want to put all our eggs in one basket. People were reportedly being killed on the way. Therefore, travelling together was ruled out, so that at least some would survive and live to carry on the family name.

The journey to Sambrial, about 20 miles from Sialkot, was uneventful. But beyond that, suddenly, the convoy stopped. A wall of men blocked the road. Stenguns, rifles and machine-guns that our military escort carried were readied. But it was a false alarm. It was only a stream of non-Muslims from far away towns trekking to India. It was a harrowing sight. They looked haggard. Suffering was writ large on their faces. They had lost practically all their possessions. Many of the men had bruises which testified to weapon blows; the women and children were dazed. Some spoke of terrible tragedies when husbands had asked their wives to jump over cliffs and fathers had set their own daughters on fire.

I still remember an old Sikh, with a flowing beard flecked with grey, nudging me and trying to hand over his only grandson to me. 'He is all we have in the family,' he implored. Take him to India. At least he should live.'

A young woman thrust her child into my arms. 'I shall search for you



View of a refugee camp, 1947

and collect my son', she said. How could I take their children into the truck where only I, a lone member of my family, had been given space? How could I explain? Rejecting these helpless people was hard. But it was each one for himself at the time and there was nothing one could do to help. It was a long way to the border. The Major heading our convoy did not want to waste daylight. The trucks spluttered into motion. As I looked back, I could see outstretched hands beseeching us to send help. The dust that the trucks churned up soon covered the refugees and they faded out of sight.

We drove along the Grand Trunk Road and met many convoys, big and small, some from the Rawalpindi side and some from Gujranwala and other wayside towns. It looked as if the whole population was on its feet. How far to go? None probably knew; no one cared. What did it matter now, when they had left behind the homes they had lived in all their lives and the friends they had cherished?

It was late in the afternoon when our convoy reached the outskirts of Lahore. It halted; nobody knew why.

Word was that a convoy of Muslims had been attacked in Amritsar and that the Muslims of Lahore were waiting to take revenge. We were ordered to get down from the trucks, which were then parked in a circle to form a sort of first line of defence. The men took up their positions behind the trucks and the women and children were asked to sit in the centre. We waited in silence. There was some stray shooting in the distance and from nearby fields came the stench of decomposed flesh. Slogans of *Allah ho Akbar*, *Ya AH* and *Pakistan Zindabad* came to our ears. But there was no attack. After a long wait our fears were proved wrong.

And then we heard *Bharat Mata ki Jai* (Salute to Mother India). That was it: the end of the line.

Some of us stood in silence just to see people leaving India. None spoke—neither they nor we. But we understood each other; it was a spontaneous kinship, of loss, pain and hope.

Nothing could be more futile noy than an argument about who was responsible for the Partition of the subcontinent. With the sequence of

events stretching back for over two decades, such an exercise can only be an academic distraction. But it is clear that the differences between the Hindus and Muslims had become so acute by the beginning of the 1940s that something like Partition had become inevitable.

For those who still regret the division, I can only say that the British could have probably kept the subcontinent united if they had been willing to ladle out more power in 1942 when Sir Stafford Cripps tried to reconcile the aspirations of the people of India with his limited brief. The Congress Party could also have done it, if it had accepted in 1946 the Cabinet Mission's proposals of a Centre with limited powers and zonal and provincial autonomy. But the ifs of history are at best hypothetical and at worst, subjective.

Has the Partition served the purpose of the Muslims? In Pakistan people avoid the word 'partition'. On August 14, they celebrate their deliverance not so much from British rule as from the fear of Hindu rule. During my trips to that country, I have heard people say that they are happy that at least they have 'some place' where they feel secure, free of 'Hindu domination' or 'Hindu aggressiveness'. But, in fact, I feel that the Muslims have been the biggest losers; they are now spread over three countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Imagine the influence that their numbers, their votes could have commanded in an undivided subcontinent. They would have been more than one-third of the total population.

I do not see the subcontinent being reunited. But I do believe that one day the high walls of fear and distrust will crumble and the people of the subcontinent, without giving up their separate identities, will work together for the common good. It will be a day worth waiting for. □

Women Bhakt Poets

*'Woone can stop you- Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, fatmtty honour'" all these I threw off my head
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towerSt red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armllets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,
The traycfremembrtnce in my hand - a beauty more true,
Mira steeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rand, you go to your house 'you and I annoi putt together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy*

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