

Men & memories: A walk down history lane

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From the Partition to the division of Punjab into Haryana and Himachal, it has been a tumultuous journey for Punjab. Chandigarh too was taken away, so was the Bhakra Dam. Both of these had been built by Nehru to restore the spirit and pride of the Punjabis, after 1947. The argument continued and agitations were launched to no effect.

PARTITION in 1947 was the greatest subcontinental disaster, leading to migration and misery for the people of Punjab. Governor Glancey wrote to M.A. Jinnah that he was doing everything to clear out the rural Sikhs from the rich canal colonies. Daily violence in Lahore pushed out Hindus and Sikhs from the urban areas. The March 1947 massacres in the Rawalpindi area encouraged the eastward movement of Hindus and Sikhs. Vast numbers of men, women and children were steadily pushed eastwards and westwards. The Sikhs left fertile lands and got a few sandy acres in the east. Still, they gave India the Green Revolution of 1967-68. The country's deficit areas were fed and freed of dependence on PL-480 grain from the US. People from Lahore and other cities settled in North India and prospered.

Master Tara Singh, from a Malhotra family, adopted the Sikh faith as a boy and became a passionate fighter for their lost cause. He came to Amritsar. Immediately after Independence, he jumped into the fight to get the Sikhs, "an area where they too, could experience the glow of freedom". Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had used these words, before Independence, in giving this assurance. Living in near-poverty Master Tara Singh too fought for his cause. As a college student in Ludhiana, in 1953-57, I saw all the turmoil. Every now and then, Tara Singh was locked away in Dharamshala or Ooty. After an interval, Nehru would invite him to a breakfast of *dahi-paranthas*. Somehow, they would patch up and the temperature would come down. After a while, it would rise again. I lived through it all and joined the Punjab cadre of the IAS in 1958.

Potti Sreeramulu had fasted to death for Andhra and succeeded. Master Tara Singh also tried such a fast, in the Golden Temple. Strangely, the fast lengthened, but with little weight loss. Chief Minister Kairon's C.I.D. knew. The threat lost its bite. He did it twice in that period and lost the blind following of the Sikhs. Suddenly, a new unknown leader for the Sikhs was brought in from Buddha Jauhr. Master Tara Singh was turfed out. He died unregarded in the PGI, Chandigarh.

The Sikhs started a new *parampara*. We learnt a new designation of a new leader: Sant Fateh Singh. Of medium height, stocky, soft spoken, he pushed for a Punjabi state, with the focus on language. This was strongly opposed by the urban population. The Jalandhar Press encouraged them to record Hindi as their mother tongue, even in Amritsar, in the 1961 census. Punjab was in constant emotional turmoil, each group shouting for its own beliefs. Master Tara Singh was an urban Sikh but with Sant Fateh Singh power passed to the rural Sikhs, Jats. During that period, one saw *morchas*, *satyagraha* and *jail bharo* as new players jumped in constantly. One remembers Dr Kalicharan of Ludhiana. A little like Praveen Togadia in Gujarat, he took up the urban Hindi cause passionately and created ripples of excitement. We suddenly got a new player — Mahant Sewadas. Nobody knew where he came from. He sud-



PRIDE OF PUNJAB: Jawaharlal Nehru arriving in Ambala on the way to Nangal (below) and (above) at the capital site in Chandigarh. FILE PHOTOS FROM THE TRIBUNE.



denly began his dance in the Punjab turmoil and made it to the headlines and then he faded away. I wonder where he is. They all appeared on the stage of life, said their pieces and disappeared into the changing rooms.

In August 1965, I became the Deputy Commissioner of Ambala, which stretched from the Bhakra and the Sutlej to the Yamuna. I saw a Hindi agitation. Every evening, boys created chaos in the Ambala bazaars. Birbal Nath, the SP, head of the BSF later, and I, ran around to get them off the streets. In those days, we still followed the British code of management of turmoil. The present system of police firing at the slightest did not exist. We were trained, not to allow it. In the first week of September, the 1965 war with Pakistan started. Sant Fateh Singh withdrew his agitation. I witnessed the villages of Gurdaspur, Amritsar and Ferozpur supporting the Army, even sending food to the trenches. The Army's system had failed. The country was amazed at the fearlessness and sense of duty of the people of Punjab.

The Government of India appointed a Parliamentary Committee under Sardar Hukam Singh, the Speaker, on the Punjab issue. I was asked to give tea to Sant Fateh Singh's delegation, on way from Amritsar to Delhi. Punjab underwent a second partition. The new Radcliffe was ICS officers from Delhi. They divided, as directed from behind the curtain. The hill areas went to Himachal, and pure Punjabi-speaking areas, remained in the new Haryana. Chandigarh too, was taken away; so was the Bhakra Dam. Both had been built by Nehru to restore the spirit and the pride of the Punjabis, after 1947. The argument continued. Agitations were launched to no effect. In the new Pun-

jab, I became the DC of Jalandhar. Sant Fateh Singh decided to burn himself on a given day, in *agni-kands*, on top of the Akal Takht building. I remember Umranganal, a tall strapping Amritsar Jathedar and two, three others joining him, with the thought of future benefit. As the day came nearer, there was great excitement in Punjab and beyond. I sat on edge in Jalandhar, ready to face the aftermath. Who wants to die? In the nick of time, Sardar Hukam Singh was rushed from Delhi to Amritsar, to give flawed and meaningless assurances. These were promptly accepted to escape the fire. Young men in the *Parikarma* shouted protests, but to no avail. Sant Fateh Singh too lost his halo.

In 1967, a coalition government came under Justice Gurnam Singh. The giving up of fasts rankled with the Sikh masses. Suddenly, Jathedar Pheruman, 80 years old, in glowing health, a Congressman of Nehru's time, who had moved on, was on a fast unto death. The Gurnam Singh government put him in jail in Amritsar. Indira Gandhi, who knew him from the old days, tried every appeal. He refused. He said he had taken an oath, before the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and a Sikh does not back out. I was in Amritsar, in connection with the setting up of the Guru Nanak Dev University. The Deputy Commissioner, who was going to see Pheruman in jail, on the 20th day of his fast, took me along. Pheruman appeared in good health and I remember what he said. "I am not bothered about arguments on Chandigarh. I only want to prove that if a Sikh takes a sacred oath, he carries it out". So he did, dying a bitter death but not giving way in his last hallucinations. Earlier, only an Irish man had done it, and then Potti Sreeramulu.

Over the years, the appetite for struggle faded. Chandigarh remains under a Delhi joint secretary. Will the Punjabis in the coming decades never have their capital? It's a situation unknown within India. Will the Bhakra and the Punjab waters never belong to the state? Of the 15.8 MAF, allotted to us by the Indus Treaty, only 3.5 MAF is to remain with us. The Supreme Court is about to pronounce on the river waters issue. All the current players on the Punjab stage, and I, all will pass on. What will happen in future decades, only people and blind history know.

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