

MEMORIES OF AN AMRITSAR MAN

BY M. S. GILL

I grew up in the shadow of Amritsar, or Ambarsar, as we say in that part of Punjab. My village lies just a mile away from Tarn Taran. For us, living in a small hamlet of less than 200 families, Tarn Taran was "shehr", the city. No one ever said: "I am going to Tarn Taran". Everyone simply said: "I am going to the city."

Looking westwards from Chandigarh, with the jaded palate of a man who has seen a hundred cities, big and small, in his time, I admit I have lost that sense of wonder that I had as a child in Aldinpur every time my mother took me to Tarn Taran for the "Masya". The minar built by Prince Naunihal Singh, in the corner of the gurdwara, was always a source of excitement to us. After Ruldu Shah's "hatti" in our village the bazar seemed a mart fit for a prince. The Tehsildar, who lorded it over the town — there were no sub-divisions then — seemed like the Mughal Subedar of Sirhind. He lived on top of the fortress — like a tehsil building and, like all true princes, had a beautiful daughter.

We were very young, but like all little boys we kept a close eye on the romantic goings-on, and we knew that she was courted by the young bucks of the area, including an older cousin. The courting was simple enough. You simply walked round and round the tehsil fort, all the while twirling your moustache, and casting piercing glances at the terrace. Of course, care had to be taken to ensure that your soulful darts did not lock into the Tehsildar's baleful stare. In the evening my cousin walked home to the village, fully satisfied with the day's romantic interlude.

These are all memories of time past, and the belle of Tarn Taran must now be the matron of Baghapurana. Such is the way of all flesh. But since I never saw her, nor may be did my cousin — the Tehsildar, with the efficiency of that generation of revenue officers, saw to it — she remains to me an apparition of beauty.

If Tarn Taran was the city for us, Amritsar, 15 miles away, was a metropolis. It had an aura of distance, size, and immense grandeur. Our little village was an insignificant speck in the giant shadow cast by the city of Amritsar. Our "shehr", Tarn Taran, one of the many "qasbas" around it. The physical distance was impressive enough. The bus was not then as ubiquitous as the common cold. There was the odd coal-fired contraption that peasants going to the district courts rode on. A few tongas or rather "yakkas", did manage to struggle, all of 15 miles, to the city.

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But the proper and decent way to go to Amritsar was to take the morning train from Patti. For those villages that lay in its path it was a veritable Big Ben. I know that our births were recorded in relation to the passage of the "Patti Passenger", which for us was "the train". No other passed our way the whole day. With our limited mental horizons, its 15 miles might have been the 1500 of the Orient Express. For us its wayside stops of Duburji and Mananwala were as strange and romantic as Zagreb and Istanbul. The Amritsar station was a wonder. Its size, its noise, the going and coming of tens of thousands of people, the steaming in and out of dozens of overcrowded

trains, was enough to leave any peasant speechless.

One did not go to Amritsar lightly, or without serious purpose, as people do today. Our present mobility has banished the romance and earnestness of travel. People just wander about, with unseeing eyes. When my grandfather decided to go to Amritsar it was an event, and prepared for as such. Days beforehand his white achkan and churidars were washed and pressed till they sparkled. His special visiting shoes, his stick and his pistol were laid out. Sharmu's tonga was requisitioned to take him to the Tarn Taran railway station. The house would be all abustle, well before dawn, to give him his bath water, and his breakfast.

Soon the tonga would disappear into the winter mist. Around eight, as the weak December sun lighted up the plumes of the sugarcane, the whistle of the train would be heard as it approached the canal bridge. This was the signal that grandfather was well and truly gone for the day, and we could take a holiday.

At Amritsar, like every other visitor, he would go straight to the Darbar Sahib. A dip in the holy pool, a walk around the ice-cold marble Parikarma, a few quiet moments listening to the ragis, and he was ready for the day. Then, like every village man, he went to the district courts. A

farmer's life, unfortunately, centres around his fields and the law courts. The one gives him sustenance; the other takes away his surplus. Khushwant Singh has described the Amritsar courts and magistrates rather well in his novel "I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale Sing."

Business over, grandfather would go down to Hall Bazar to do some shopping. Whatever else he might buy, he could never come back home without a packet of Amritsar's famed "pappars and warian". For his lunch he was bound to go to the "dal-parauntha" dhabas of Khoti Hatta. When he returned late in the evening, with maybe a few guavas for us children, he was in our wonder-struck eyes like Armstrong come back from visiting the moon, or may be a Haji from Mecca.

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In the eyes of the Sikh peasants of the Majha Amritsar was not just a city; it was "Guru Ki Nagari" and honoured as such. It was our Rome, our Mecca, our Jerusalem. No other city of the world figures in the daily prayers of any people. Every Sikh in his morning and evening "ardas" begs the Guru's grace, for the

"darshan-deedar" of Sri Amritsar.

He does so with good reason. Amritsar is the very core of the Sikh people's being. The city's foundations are embedded in the blood of countless Sikh martyrs. Our homes in every Amritsar village had pictures of Baba Deep Singh who would not die until he had fulfilled his vow of reaching the Darbar Sahib. For us his legend was a living one. Every bus from Tarn Taran must stop at his "smadh", just outside Amritsar. They still do. Woe betide the man who doesn't. His car is bound to have a puncture within the mile.

The city is rich in history. In some ways the history of the Sikhs is the history of Amritsar. While Lahore was the capital of Ranjit Singh, Amritsar was his favourite city. How often would he come to relax in the Rambagh Palace, or to sit in the "Parkarma" of the Darbar Sahib, having the scriptures read to him! If I remember correctly, there is a beautiful painting by Reinhalter, the famous Austrian artist, who visited Ranjit Singh, depicting this scene. Ranjit Singh's happiest moment, the wedding of his

grandson prince Naunihal, was in Amritsar. The British commander-in-chief attended. His A.D.C. has left a marvellous account of this spectacular event. The "baraat" to Attari, the fireworks, the lavish giving of gifts to the poor, are all described graphically. Naunihal's diamond studded "sehra" still lies in the Darbar Sahib "toshakhana".

My mind flies to another historic moment in the common lives of Ranjit Singh and the city. In 1809 Metcalfe, the British envoy, came to negotiate a boundary with Ranjit. One was 27, the other 28. Imagine two young men negotiating the fate of north-western India! They did so in leisurely fashion for many months. At first the British, fearful of Napoleon hovering in Egypt, were willing to buy Maharaja Ranjit Singh's friendship by accepting his overlordship over the Phulkian States. Then word came through of Napoleon's sudden return to France. The threat to India had passed. The British changed their mind.

The two young men were sitting on the terrace of Rambagh Palace, when Metcalfe said no. Ranjit was furious. One's blood boils easily at 28. But the statesman that he was even then, he controlled his rage. How? Metcalfe has described it well. The Maharaja ran down the palace steps, jumped on to a horse al-

ways kept ready and rode away like the wind, across the wide plain.

When he returned an hour later both horse and rider were bathed in sweat. But the anger was gone. The Treaty of Amritsar was signed the next day. It was during this visit that Metcalfe's escort was attacked by a Sikh mob. His trained infantry easily beat back the brave but reckless Sikhs. The Maharaja duly noted the lesson and ordered the raising of disciplined brigades, trained by European adventurers.

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In spite of its long and fascinating history, Amritsar has never lived on the memories of its past. No other city lives more in the present. In fact Amritsar believes in making history. Within 40 years of the takeover by the British Amritsar had become the centre of a Sikh renaissance and Sikh resistance to foreign rule. The Singh Sabha Reform Movement, the fight for the gurudwaras, the Guru Ka Bagh Morcha, the Jallianwala Bagh episode — all kept Amritsar in the forefront of the struggle for freedom. But freedom was dearly bought. A madness seized the people of the Punjab and, sad to say, Amritsar could not be the exception. Its citizens too indulged in mutual slaughter. The multi-coloured "phulkari" of the city was left in tatters. Magboolpura no longer houses any Muslim citizens. Now on both sides of the border repentance feeds the flame. How many people have I met in

London who talk with misty eyes of Amritsar!

The people of Amritsar are fond of life. What is more they have a style about them — the true hallmark of a civilised man. There are plenty of rich people in the Punjab, Ludhiana could perhaps boast of the maximum number, and being Ludhiana, I am sure it does. But the "lalas" of Amritsar are something special. They have pedigree. If Misr Bailee Ram, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's keeper of the Kohinoor, was your grandfather, you have something to boast about.

Under Maharaja Ranjit Singh Amritsar was the commercial capital of the Punjab. The merchants of Amritsar traded with central Asia, as well as with Afghanistan and Persia. They were men of substance and men of their word. With the coming of the British all that passed. But the style remained. If you ever saw a "lala" of Amritsar taking the evening air in his custom-built Peshawari tonga, around the Rambagh and then drink a glass of "Thandi Khui" water, you would know, what I mean.

Times have changed. Today Amritsar sits on an international border. And Amritsar does what all respectable border cities do — smuggle a bit. I have not seen anything of the city for a long time. But knowing Amritsar and Amritsarwallas, I would bet my last penny that they do that too with style.