

# He risked his life for a

## Muslim friend

BY MANOHAR SINGH GILL

HE sits opposite me with the inherent dignity of those born to the soil. A tall grey-bearded man with piercing brown eyes, Ajaib Singh looks one in the eye with the bold candour of a man who earns his bread with the sweat of his brow, a man who, confident in the honesty of his labours, fears neither man nor God. I look at his hands. Long knotted calloused fingers, a broad powerful wrist, and a palm roughened by the gathering of a thousand harvests. A man who would wield the sword as dexterously as he handles the plough. A man not to be trifled with. And yet when he smiles his eyes light up with a strange softness and betray a gentle heart.

Sardar Ajaib Singh is a happy and contented man. Carrying his 65 years lightly, he still goes out in the early morning to plough his land. Recent years have brought much progress to his village. At the time of partition, Bajrur, one of the big villages in the Nurpur-Bedi block, lying across the then untamed Sutlej, was really isolated. There were no roads then and no bridge across the river. Agriculture too was primitive. Today with village roads, electricity, and a new agriculture, some of the old harsh conditions of living have disappeared. Some might be still dissatisfied, for now the prices of fertilizer and wheat worry the farmer. But Ajaib Singh is not one of those, full as he is of "sabar" and faith in the Gurus.

We talk of the partition when darkness descended upon the land. "Lokan de dimag te parda pae gia see," says Ajaib Singh. I ask about happenings in his area. He turns reminiscent. I can see that his thoughts are far away, back in the momentous days of that fateful and sultry August.

"I was young then. In the prime of life, as you might say. We had plenty of Muslims in our area. My own village had a hundred families. My best friend, Chaudhri Nazir Hussain, Zaildar of 27 villages, lived in the neighbouring village of Nangal Abiana. Our fields bordered each others. 'Kathe Khana Peena See'." "When he went away to the Great War, it was my duty to look after his wife, Fatima Bibi, and the children. I would go and stand outside the deori while she, standing behind a purda, would tell me of her problems, be they of the land or money or something else. Nazir Hussain and I were, as you might say, brothers. This may seem strange to the new generation, in today's divided Punjab, but it was so till the fury and blindness of partition undid everything. In fact the Chaudhri's younger brother, Dilawar Hussain, was a playful light-hearted young man, and it is to me that the Chaudhri brought all his serious problems.

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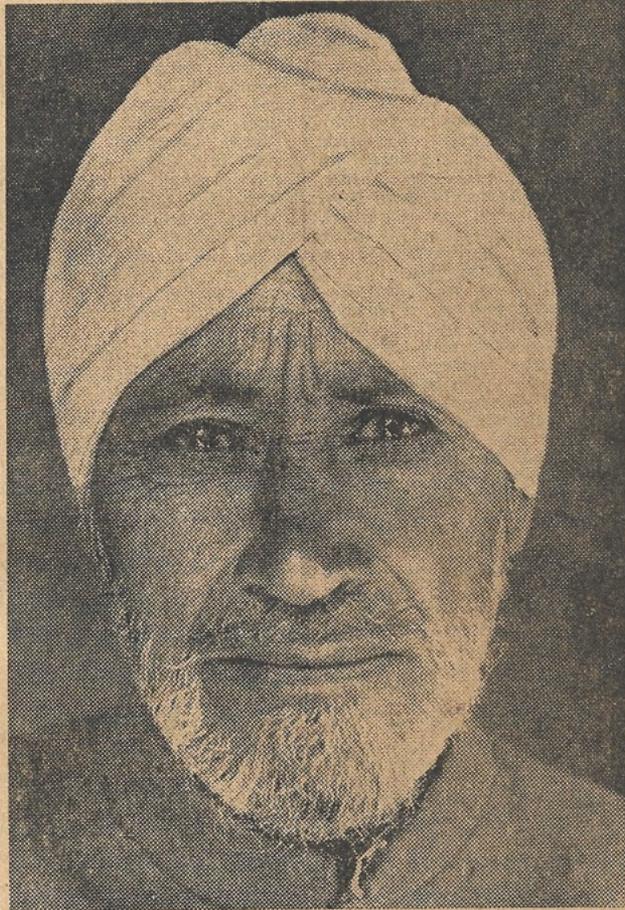
The summer of 1947 was a terrible one. The Sutlej was in monsoon flood, as it had never been before. At the same time a pall of fear and blind antagonism lay over the land. It burst like a sore full of puss one oppressive evening. A wave of fear gripped the Muslims. They knew they had to go. The hundred families of my village rushed to my haveli for shelter. Somehow, by the grace of the Gurus, they had trust in me. In Nangal Abiana, too, the Muslims got ready to leave. But Chaudhri Nazir Hussain was in a dilemma. Fatima Bibi gave birth to a boy that very night. She could not travel.

Chaudhri Sahib sent me an urgent message. It was drizzling when I reached his village along with an escort of four or five men that fateful evening. My friend said there was only one way out. He would leave Fatima Bibi, the new-born son, and his two girls aged five and eight, in my care till they were able to travel to the refugee camp. I could not show my "pith" to a friend, and accepted my duty. The Chaudhris had a doli to allow their womenfolk to travel in purdah. We carried Fatima Bibi and the children in it, across the fields, to the safety of my home. As we were leaving my friend took me aside and begged one last favour — a promise to kill them

same spirit of humanity, had carried "their pir" across the Machhiwara forests to safety.

The next morning all the Muslim families of Bajrur and Nangal Abiana left their ancestral homes for ever, and fled to the safety of the refugee camps. This sad scene was being repeated over thousands of villages spread across the cursed land of the five rivers. Chaudhri Nazir Hussain's family was the only group of Muslims left in the villages surrounding Bajrur. There was grumbling among those with lesser grace and vision. But Ajaib Singh made his resolve known. "I will pluck out any 'maili akh' that looks towards my haveli," he proclaimed.

To the eternal credit of the



SARDAR AJAIB SINGH

with my own sword if their protection became outside my power."

As he talked, Ajaib Singh's mind was far, far away. He was reliving those terrible days. I marvelled at the bonds between these two men. Those were the days when vile suspicion stood like an invisible wall even between life-long friends. Ajaib Singh was then young. A "hawa" was sweeping the land that turned men's minds to insanity and a strange cruel madness. And yet Nazir Hussain had faith that his friend would not be swayed by this ill wind. As they carried the doli away through the summer darkness. I wonder if Ajaib Singh and his friends could relate it to another such episode, more than 250 years ago. Then two young Pathans, moved by the

men of Bajrur they supported him to the hilt. The Begum lived amongst her own people for 20 days, recovering her strength. Then it was time to go. But the river was in flood. Ajaib Singh fashioned a raft of sleepers. On top of it they tied a cot for the comfort of the Begum. Ajaib and four or five stalwart Sikhs, with inflated goat skins around their waists, swam the raft across the bloated Sutlej. The Sirsa Nadi long ago had once given way to travellers in the same area. Perhaps the Sutlej did.

Ajaib Singh brought the family to the village of Awankot, where they were reunited with Chaudhri Nazir Hussain. One can imagine the emotional scene and the gratitude the Chaudhri must have felt for his friend. After staying for some time in the Bunga centre near Kiratpur

the family moved to the big refugee camp at Kurali. The Chaudhri again sent a message to his friend. The family desperately needed winter clothes and other necessities. The response was prompt and generous. Such were the bonds of faith between the two friends that the Chaudhri asked Ajaib Singh to take his 12-year old son, Bahadur Hussain, with him to the village and feed him.

They are almost starving in the camp and the boy suffered acutely. He had no fear for his safety as long as he was with his uncle Ajaib Singh. The uncle and nephew spent a day at the village of Padiala, where the boy ate good food. To ensure his safety Ajaib Singh made the boy sleep with him.

One fine morning the trucks rolled in and parted the friends for ever. Nazir Hussain did manage to make one visit after partition to see his friend, but the barriers of politics were beyond the power of mere individuals. Even letters were difficult to exchange. In 1973 Chaudhri Nazir Hussain passed away. The Begum, knowing how much Nazir would have wished it, wrote to Ajaib Singh begging him to come for the ceremonies. But alas! Ajaib Singh could not cross the border.

Two weeks ago fate willed a meeting between uncle Ajaib Singh and niece Fazirat whom he had carried to safety that summer evening 30 years back. She hugged him as her own father. Unabashedly, both wept. The men and women of Bajrur too shed tears for a "vichora" that history had brought. She was a daughter of the village, who had come visiting for the first time with her husband. "Neonda" must be given. Each one gave what she could, however modest. But, above all, they gave of the warmth of their hearts. Sometimes the welcome of the people can be more graceful than that of kings. Politics can gouge out lines across the face of the land, but rarely, if ever, can it draw permanent lines across human hearts. The people of Bajrur and Nangal Abiana could not question the course that history had taken, but they could make known their love for those that were their own.

By the grace of God, Chaudhri Nazir Ahmed's children have done well in life. Fazirat married a brilliant scientist, Dr Amir Mohammed, who, apart from being Vice-Chancellor of the Lyallpur Agriculture University, is also the Agriculture Minister of Pakistan. Sardar Ajaib Singh, too is happy at the way life has treated him. His five sons — tall and strapping like him — are either in good jobs or cultivate the land. Ajaib Singh is at peace with himself and the world.

I sit for a while musing over his tale. Today it is all too easy to work up feelings of horror at the dark deeds of 47. But at that time, when a poisonous wind blew over the land, even the best of men were swayed from their loyalty to the cause of humanity. To have stood tall and upright then was indeed an achievement to be proud of.

Ajaib Singh could be forgiven a show of vanity. But when I asked him he answered with humility: "Je rakan wala howe te kaun wal winga kar sakda ae jee." It was as simple as that. As I said goodbye to him, I thought to myself: Men such as Sardar Ajaib Singh are the true keepers of Punjab. Her survival has been due to such as he; her prosperity is due to their honest labours. Perhaps one has been privileged to meet a truly great man.