The Persistence of Memory: The Search for Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation

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On March 11, 1947, Sant Raja Singh of Thoa Khalsa village in the Rawalpindi district picked up his sword, said a short prayer to Guru Nanak, and then, with one swift stroke, brought it down on the neck of his young daughter, Maan Kaur. As the story is told, at first he didn't succeed: the blow wasn't strong enough. Then his daughter, aged sixteen, came once again and knelt before her father, removed her thick plait, and offered him her neck. This time his sword found its mark. Bir Bahadur Singh, his son of fourteen, stood by his side and watched. Years later Bir Bahadur told me the story: "I stood there, right next to him, clutching on to his kurta as children do. ... I was clinging to him, sobbing, and her head rolled off and fell ... there ... far away. It was such a frightening, such a fearful scene."

Shortly after this incident, Bir Bahadur's family fled Thoa Khalsa, heading toward the Indian border, where they hoped to find safety. India was being partitioned, and large-scale carnage, arson, rape, and looting among Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs had become the order of the day. In many families, like Bir Bahadur's, the men decided to kill the women and children, fearing that they would otherwise be abducted, raped, converted, impregnated, polluted by men of the other religion — in this case Islam. They called these killings the "martyrdom of women."

It was only two years earlier, in 1945, that Bir Bahadur's family had moved to Thoa Khalsa. Talk of a possible partition was in the air and they were worried for their safety. Saintha, the village in which they had lived for many years, was a Muslim-majority village; in fact theirs was the only non-Muslim family there. It was this that had made Sant Raja Singh decide to move to Thoa Khalsa, where there were many more Sikhs than Muslims. Everywhere in India at the time, people were banding together with their own kind, believing that safety lay in numbers. Ironically, and tragically, it was in villages like Thoa Khalsa that the real violence took place. In retaliation for attacks by Hindus and Sikhs on Muslims elsewhere in India, villages in this part of Rawalpindi — inhabited mainly by Sikhs — came under concerted attack from Muslims for several days. Shortly after Sant Raja Singh killed his daughter and several others, he asked a relative to take his life — perhaps the burden of the knowledge of what he had done was too heavy to bear. A single gunshot and he joined the ranks of the martyrs. Later, some ninety women of the village jumped into a well and drowned themselves to escape possible rape and conversion.

Forty years later Bir Bahadur told me these stories. I had met him while researching a book on oral histories of the Partition of India. In the lower-middle- class area of Delhi where he lived, Bir Bahadur was someone people looked up to — he came from a family of martyrs. Not only his sister but several other women had been killed that day. Bir Bahadur had been a boy at the time, but his memories were crystal clear and sharp. He remembered the fear and the violence, remembered too that when the attacks had begun to seem imminent, people from Saintha had come to Thoa in a delegation to offer his family protection in his "home" village. They were led by Sajawal Khan, the village headman. But his father had turned them away. They were Muslims, and although he had lived among them in safety and peace for many years, he no longer trusted them. Bir Bahadur has never forgotten this rejection.

Stories of such violence — and more — are routine when Muslims and Hindus speak of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The British decision to partition the country into two, India and Pakistan, led to the displacement of millions of people, a million deaths, and nearly a hundred thousand incidents of rape and abduction. Many other forms of violence became commonplace. Women were particularly vulnerable: not only was there mass rape and abduction but hundreds were killed by their own families, ostensibly as a form of "protection." Some had their breasts cut off, others had symbols of the "other' , religion tattooed on their bodies. But while stories of violence are routine, what are less known are the stories of friendship that cut across the rigid borders drawn by the Indian and Pakistani states. In the year 2000, Bir Bahadur and I embarked on one such journey of friendship and reconciliation across what had until then seemed a somewhat intractable border.

It began with a phone call from Chihiro Tanaka, a Japanese television journalist. She was keen to make a program on an Indian taking the India-Pakistan bus to visit his or her relatives. She and a crew would travel along with this person, filming the journey and the "homecoming." She asked for suggestions; I offered Bir Bahadur. He had wanted to go back to his home village in Pakistan for years but had never had the opportunity, not because it was expensive but because visas between the two countries are almost impossible to get. Now the chance had presented itself.

Now in his seventies, Bir Bahadur Singh is a tall, statuesque Sikh with a flowing white beard. Always dressed in white, with a black turban and a saffron head-cloth showing through, he makes an arresting figure and stands out in a crowd. Bir Bahadur and his family were only a few among the millions of refugees who had fled from Pakistan to India. They carried nothing with them, and Bir Bahaduis key memories of the time are of hunger, fear, and cold. Once in India, he and his family had struggled to keep body and soul together. He tried his hand at different things, then, at eighteen, managed to put enough together to set up a small provisions store. Later his family arranged for him to marry a woman from a village close to his home in Rawalpindi, and together they brought up a large family. Bir Bahadur has never been rich, and has worked hard all his life for the sake of his children. A might-have-been politician (he stood for municipal elections on a Bharatiya Janata Party ticket some years ago and lost), he now leads a retired life, dividing his time between his farmhouse close to Delhi, his extended family of children and grandchildren, and his old (ninety-plus) mother, who lives nearby. He was beside himself with excitement at the news that he might get permission to travel to Pakistan and visit his home village.

With Japanese intervention, visas were swiftly arranged, and a few days later we left for Pakistan. Bir Bahadur arrived at my house with a small bag and a sackful of hard dry coconuts. These were to be his offerings to the people of his village. "There are no coconuts there," he explained, "and people love to have them." He had also written two letters, one to the people of his village, one to his schoolmate Sadq Khan, son of Sajawal Khan. "We were good friends in school," he said, "I am sure he will remember me." These he carried with him in the event that we did not make it to the village. He was convinced we would find someone, somewhere, who would carry his letters there, and that in response people from there would immediately arrive to see him. For days he had been like a child, excited and nervous. He had called me every day — sometimes two or three times in a day — to check on this or that detail. Would we be staying in a hotel? How much money should he bring? Would I be with them the whole time? Could we not persuade Chihiro to do a radio program instead of one for television (we did) — it would be much less obvious? Now that we were actually on our way, he could not believe his luck.

Heavy rain and bad monsoon weather delayed the flight. We spent a long and tiring night waiting at Lahore airport, uncomfortable in plastic seats. Occasionally Chihiro and I would doze off, out of sheer exhaustion. But not Bir Bahadur. Every time I opened my eyes, I found him wide awake, sitting on

his haunches in one of the airport chairs, recounting his story to someone or other — now a family on their way to Karachi (also delayed), now two helpful employees of the airline (with whom he was quickly exchanging photographs and addresses), now the toyshop owner or the man selling tea. ... Hazy with sleep, I wondered wearily whether there was anyone at the airport he'd left out of this storytelling.

Islamabad is a city of wide boulevards and tree-lined roads. At night, speeding through the deserted streets, there was little to see. We arrived, exhausted, at our hotel at three in the morning after a twelve-hour delay in our flight. But this did not seem to have affected Bir Bahadur. Why did we want to wait till ten in the morning to set off, he asked plaintively, "I won't be able to sleep, let's go at six!" But this proposal was shot down firmly by our Japanese friend, and the time of our departure fixed for ten.

The morning rose clean and washed. Heavy rain had cooled things down and the sun seemed almost mild, the air clear of the oppressive humidity of the monsoon, the trees and plants a rich, freshly washed green. Armed with some water and our passports and visa papers, we set off for Thoa Khalsa. A wide, straight road led through fairly flat terrain to the outskirts of Islamabad. We'd been driving for an hour or so when we arrived at a turnoff, clearly a major junction. One side of the wide road was bordered at this point with small shops selling fruit, juices, cigarettes, food, snacks, and all the small knickknacks that travelers buy when they make stopovers. On the other side was a terminal for buses and tempos (three-wheeled taxis commonly used for local transport), with scooter and tempo drivers shouting out their locations, picking up point-topoint passengers, and quickly shuffling men into separate seats the moment they saw prospective women passengers. (One of the unwritten rules of tempo travel in Pakistan — and indeed often in India too — is that men and women do not occupy the same seat lest they inadvertently touch.)

We stopped here to ask directions, then turned off onto a narrower road to the left. A gate across the road proclaimed a level crossing, and a small signpost gave the name of the station. "This used to be our station," Bir Bahadur told me excitedly, "the train stopped here, and we'd have to take buses from our village to get here!" We stopped in the marketplace to get a better look. The car was immediately surrounded by a crowd of tall, hefty men in shalvar kameezes. They were everywhere: at the doors, in front of the car, virtually inside the driver's door. We couldn't move, and I began to panic a bit. In situations like this the rhetoric of hatred that India and Pakistan constantly rehearse comes back to haunt us, and although the situation is harmless enough, it suddenly acquires overtones of fear. But Bir Bahadur was unfazed: "Stop, stop the car," he told the driver unnecessarily, and wound his window down. He leaned out, trained his gaze on the tea stall across the road, and said, to no one in particular, "Bhai sahib, bhai sahib, excuse me, can you help?" A cyclist stopped to see what he wanted, and the crowd of men around the car suddenly transformed themselves from a threatening bunch to a group of curious and helpful onlookers peering at two strange women and an odd man, clearly from over the border for he wore a turban and there were no Sikhs in the area. "Welcome, welcome, sardarji," they said, "where have you come from? India? What are you looking for here? Can we help you find it?" (*Sardarji* is a term of respect used for Sikhs.) Bir Bahadur immediately launched into his story while Chihiro and I sat nervously, wondering if it was wise, in an unknown place in Pakistan, to recall stories of the violence of Partition.

"I'm from this area," he told them, "my father used to run a shop in Saintha, and I am looking for the road there. Do you know Sajawal Khan, from Saintha?" "Not Saintha," I whispered to him, "we need to know how to get to Thoa Khalsa." "Yes, yes," he said, turning to the man, "and we need to get to Thoa Khalsa as well. But first I want to find Saintha." It was at this point that it became clear to me that Bir Bahadur had decided on his own itinerary for this trip: no matter that Chihiro wanted

to capture the drama of taking him back to the place where he had seen such a bloody history, he was determined to go to Saintha, his home village. I felt a curious mixture of relief (that we might not now have to confront what could have been an unpleasant situation), elation (that he had succeeded in doing exactly what he wanted), and concern (for Chihiro and her radio program, which, after all, had paid for us to be here). While these thoughts were turning around in my head and I was wondering how to break the news to Chihiro, I suddenly found that Bir Bahadur had invited one of the men outside into the car. Basheer, he told us, was a "son-in-law of Saintha" — his wife's family was from there — and had offered to ride there with us and help us find the place and the people Bir Bahadur was looking for. "Can you slide up a bit, *beta*?" he said to me, and I pushed myself into as small a corner as I could to make room for the rather large and hefty Basheer. We were breaking the unwritten code here: three of us in the backseat, one woman and two men. The available space was tight and it was up to me to ensure that our bodies remained at least an inch apart. Meanwhile everyone on the road offered us advice and suggestions, one person ran off and came back with six bananas, another asked if we'd like a cold drink, we must be tired, while a third offered us *mithai*. Finally, they waved us off with good wishes, extracting a promise from us that we would come back this way and stop for a cup of tea and some sweets.

And so we set off, down a long straight road, past large fields and scattered homes, the occasional tractor carrying bales of straw, and groups of women drawing water at village wells, their faces partially veiled. Slowly the landscape gave way to a gentle, hilly terrain. We could have been in India: everything looked exactly as it would on the other side of the border, in Punjab — the roadside shops, the villages with their mud houses, the scene at the well, the fields covered with stalks of wheat pushing their way out of the earth. "Son," said Bir to Basheer after a few minutes, "just keep telling me the names of the places we are passing along the way, just keep reminding me." Dutifully, Basheer did as he was told, and at one point, as we were passing a small rise on our left with stray houses scattered along its slopes, bordered by stubby bushes on the road, Basheer said, "That village is called Thamali."

"Stop, stop," Bir Bahadur said to Sain, our driver, "please stop. Thamali is where my wife used to live, it's her village." We swung over to the side of the narrow road and Bir Bahadur and Basheer leapt out of the car and began climbing. "I can't believe it," said Bir Bahadur excitedly, "we used to come here to play. There, there's the banyan tree we used to sit under, and over that hill was her grandfather's house, the water pump — please," he said, turning to me, "please can you take a picture of me by the tree, I'd like to take it back to my wife." As he stood there waiting to be photographed, the tree behind him, a small knot of people — husband, wife, perhaps a brother or brother-in-law and two children — came out of a nearby house. Bir Bahadur greeted the children, affectionately patting them on the head, and waited as the parents drew up. They came, faces open with welcome: "Where are you from, *sardarji*, how have you come here? Won't you come to our home and drink some sherbet with us?"

"No, no, my child," said Bir Bahadur to the young woman, "thank you for your welcome, my daughter. This village, Thamali, is where my wife comes from. I used to play here as a child fifty years ago, long before you were even born. See, see that tree over there? That was the tree we sat under. My wife's family home was over that hill, there was a pond and a water pump there. ... The pond was still there, they told him, but of course the water pump had gone. The school, too — the building was there, but it was no longer used as a school. Thamali had been at the receiving end of the Muslim attack on Sikhs in March 1947, and many people had been killed. Looking at the small, peaceful village nestling in the July sun, it seemed hard to believe that such violence could have taken place here. I tried to picture the mobs that so many (not just Bir Bahadur) had told me about, the countryside resounding with the cries of murder and revenge, the thirst for blood. How would they have

moved from village to village, I wondered inconsequentially, this thin ribbon of road probably wasn't here then. How must people have felt to see hundreds, thousands of attackers coming over these gentle, almost sleepy slopes? What protection did their houses offer? At which points did they negotiate? What do people do when violence breaks out in this way?

The people of Thamali, I remembered being told, had initially refused to believe that they could be attacked. Then someone from another village had persuaded them to climb atop one of the higher houses and look down at the area around them, and they'd done so, seen the mobs, and quickly started evacuate the village. Some thirty to forty women and girls had been abducted from this village, among them two sisters of a family I had spoken to when I was working on my book. As with many Hindu and Sikh families from which women had been abducted and almost certainly raped, the family refused to acknowledge the existence of these sisters, for their history was a history of shame, best forgotten. And here we were, fifty years later, standing on that very spot, in the slanting, late-morning light, being welcomed by people from Thamali. "Please come," they insisted to Bir Bahadur Singh, "please come and bless our house." Bir Bahadur took a drink of water from the young woman, touched his hand to his brow, and blessed his hostess and her children. "We don't have time to stop, daughter," he said to her, "but I would like to give you something small as a token of my love for you who live in this village now." With this he called down to our driver and asked him to bring his bag out of the car. He pulled out two dried coconuts and held them out to the young couple, "This is a small offering, I know, but I would like you to have it. I have lived here, I know that it's not possible to get dried coconuts here. These are for you with my love, with love from your mother, my wife." Saying this he embraced these strangers he had met only a few minutes before, touched the bent head of the young woman of the house, and turned to us and said, "Come, let us move toward Saintha."

Twenty minutes later we rounded a bend in the road and Bir Bahadur suddenly let out a shout of recognition. "Look, look there," he said, "there's my old school. It looks just the same!" We looked. Atop a little ridge stood a small, lowslung building, with a narrow verandah running its length, and green-painted doors and windows. In the yard in front there was a solitary gnarled tree. It was under this tree, Bir Bahadur told us, that he and his friends had played during their school years, but, he asked, where was everybody? "It's a holiday today," we were told by one of the children who had by now attached himself to our little group. "But many of the students are in the village — you can come and meet them there."

As often happens in villages when outsiders come, by this time our party had acquired something of a following — a clutch of curious youngsters offering to help, a few scruffy-looking children, a stray dog or two. And as we made our way deeper into the village, this small crowd swelled with the addition of a few other young men. There were no girls, of course, nor any women. Within a few minutes we had arrived at a scene of considerable activity: a house was being built. Construction workers looking for all the world like the poor, bedraggled, and hungry construction workers one might see in India, their thin wiry bodies blackened by the sun, their only covering a scrap of tattered cloth, were busy carrying loads of cement from one place to another, while the owners, two burly, prosperous-looking men, stood and watched and supervised. The arrival of our little party caused some excitement. Work stopped. Everyone looked. "Welcome, welcome," said the two large men, instantly recognizing us for outsiders, while their welcome was echoed by the little knot of men — friends and neighbors — standing around. "You're from India, *sardarji*?" they asked, addressing Bir Bahadur, to which he responded, "Yes, but first I am from here, this is my home." At this, information was exchanged and we were immediately invited into their home, an older building that stood nearby: "You can't go away like this — you are our guests, for us you are like God. Come, let us at least give you a cup of tea, a glass of sherbet." Bir Bahadur thanked them and said that he was anxious first to track

down his friends before he settled down to spend any time, and asked their permission to carry on. "Only," they said, "if you promise to stop here on your way back. Are you going to stay the night? Stay with us."

We began walking. Some distance in front of us Basheer spotted three old people shuffling along, weighed down with heavy cloth bags full of provisions. Recognizing two of them as his parents-in-law, he rushed up to them and stopped them. We followed. Bir Bahadur introduced himself (Basheer had already given his parents-in-law the background to the story), giving his father's name first. The old man recognized the name, although he did not remember Bir Bahadur himself. The woman with them, who'd been standing silently, suddenly opened her mouth in a wide toothless grin and poked Bir Bahadur in the chest. "Are you Biran?" she asked, using the nickname his friends had given him. "Yes, yes," said Bir Bahadur, somewhat surprised, "who are you?" But she wouldn't say. Instead she looked at him, mischief glinting in her eyes, and asked, "How is Santo? Is she still alive?" using the nickname for Bir Bahadur's mother, Basant Kaur, "and how is Maano?" — his dead sister. I slowly realized that the villagers in Saintha did not seem to know about Maan Kaur's death, or the horrible way in which she had died, or, if they did, they did not want to make any direct reference to it, and spoke instead as if she were still alive. "Santo is well," said Bir Bahadur, glossing over the second question, "she's in Delhi with all her grandchildren, but tell me who are you?" "I am," she said with a touch of drama, "Sadq Khan's wife." Bir Bahadur gave a great whoop of joy and instantly put his arms around her and lifted her off the ground. "My sister, my sister!" he cried, tears beginning to stream down his face. "Oh my sister, where is my brother? Where is Chacha Sajawal Khan? I heard he had died, is this true? Where is my sister Taj, with whom I used to play? I wrote a letter to you all some time ago. Did you get it?" Questions and more questions. The old woman answered some, avoided others. We later learned that her slight hesitation had been because she no longer had an "official" status as Sadq Khan's wife: he had taken another, younger woman as his wife. But right then all we knew was that the first contact had been made. Sadq Khan was alive and he was in the village.

Sadq Khan's father, Sajawal Khan, had been the headman of Saintha. Although Bir Bahadur's family had been the only Sikhs in a village of Muslims, as both moneylenders and shopkeepers they had been considered important. Sant Raja Singh had been respected and trusted in Saintha. This is how Bir Bahadur had described it to me earlier:

> The Mussalmans used to believe in us, trusted us so much … that for example those who were workers … those who used to serve … if a money order came for someone, no one would go to their homes to deliver it. … [The post office] was in Thoa Khalsa and the postman would not reach people's mail to them or get money orders to them. That was why, when Mussalmans went away to work from their homes, they would give our address as the place to receive their money orders. … My father used to make entries in his register scrupulously … this belongs to so and so, this belongs to so and so … and then people used to come and buy their provisions out of this … those people trusted us so much.

In return, however, the Sikhs did not extend the same kind of trust to the Muslims. They practiced the customary untouchability of Hindus toward Muslims, refusing to eat anything cooked or touched by them. In Bir Bahadur's words:

> If there was any function that we had, then we used to call Mussalmans to our homes, they would eat in our houses, but we would not eat in theirs and this is a bad thing, which I realize now. If they would come to our houses we would have two utensils in one corner of the house, and we would tell them, pick these up and eat in them; they would then wash them and keep them aside,

> and this was such a terrible thing. This was the reason Pakistan was created. If we went to their houses and took part in their weddings and ceremonies, they used to really respect and honor us. They would give us uncooked food, ghee, atta, dal, whatever sabzis they had, chicken and even mutton, all raw. And our dealings with them were so low that I am even ashamed to say it. A guest comes to our house and we say to him, Bring those utensils and wash them, and if my mother or sister have to give him food, they will more or less throw the roti from such a distance, fearing that they may touch the dish and become polluted. … We don't have such low dealings with our lower castes as Hindus and Sikhs did with Mussalmans.

In 1945, when Sant Raja Singh had decided to move his family and business to Thoa Khalsa because he felt it would be safer there, the villagers of Saintha had tried to dissuade him. We'll keep you safe, they offered, we'll protect you from attacks. But Sant Raja Singh was afraid; he no longer trusted his Muslim friends. There were just too many stories of friends turning into enemies, of old, trusted relationships being betrayed. So he took no heed of their appeals. Once in Thoa, he felt, the family would be safer — should anything happen, the Sikhs could band together and fight. It wasn't like being a lone family amid people who could turn hostile at any moment. The tragedy of course was that in Thoa Khalsa the Sikhs were actually more vulnerable to attack, for the Sikh community there was a target, and the attacks lasted several days. And the tragedy was compounded when Sant Raja Singh rejected the offer of the villagers of Saintha. I quote from Bir Bahadur's description:

> When the trouble started the people came from there [Saintha]. You know that Ma Hasina, whom I mentioned to you, her son, Sajawal Khan, he came to us and said we could stay in his house if we wanted to. He came with his children. But we were doubtful, and today I feel that what he was saying, the expression on his face, his bearing — there was nothing there but sincerity and compassion, and we, we misunderstood him. We had all been through so much trouble and they came to give us support, to help us, and we refused.

In many ways Bir Bahadur's return to Saintha fifty years later was a journey of penance and reparation. For half a century he had carried within him the guilt of his family's refusal. He wanted in some way to appease this guilt, to lighten the load. "I just want to go to Saintha," he had said to me, "and take the soil of my village and touch it to my head. I need to ask their forgiveness." What if they will not forgive, I had asked, doubtful. "Of course they will," he said, confident. "After all, once you fight, what is there left but reconciliation, what is there left but forgiveness?"

Forgiveness, of course, is not so easily asked in something like this. All the time that Bir Bahadur spent in Saintha in the year 2000, neither he nor anyone else could bring themselves to refer to the violence that had taken place in Thoa Khalsa. I could not understand at the time, and I am still unable to do so, whether the villagers of Saintha knew what had happened to Bir Bahadur's family, and to his sister, Maan Kaur; whether they knew that so many women had jumped into a well and taken their own lives … and yet, I thought, surely they must have known. News, and particularly news of this kind, spreads easily between villages that lie close together, as these did. But whenever anyone asked Bir Bahadur about Maan Kaur — and a few did, but others did not, again making me wonder if they knew — he somehow evaded the question. Only once did he say to an old woman who asked: "She died." Maan Kaur's absence hung in the air in virtually every encounter we had, and yet, apart from the odd question or two, no one explicitly mentioned her.

We made our way farther into the village. A small house at the turn of the narrow strip of road we were following came into view. Bir Bahadur told us that this used to be a sweet shop run by someone he knew, and soon enough, almost as if on cue, a group of young women emerged, granddaughters and granddaughters- in-law of the man in question. Yes, they confirmed, there used to be

a shop there, but it closed after the old man died. The conversation was interrupted by the sudden arrival of a tall, emaciated, scruffy-looking old man in a brown *shalvar* and *kurta* and sporting a pencil-thin mustache and a short beard. He hesitated for a moment, listening. Then he fixed Bir Bahadur with a sharp direct stare and asked, "Are you Biran?" "Yes," said Bir Bahadur, "and who are you?" "You don't remember me?" said the man, "really, you don't remember me?" I couldn't tell whether he was angry or amused; there was a glint of something in his eyes. "No, I'm trying," said Bir Bahadur, "but I can't. Tell me your name." "You bastard," said the old man, "you nearly strangled me to death one day! You jumped on me and almost scratched my throat into ribbons," he said, gesturing wildly at his throat, and then leaping onto Bir Bahadur and making as if to scratch his throat. There was one of those moments of perfect stillness. Suddenly fear was palpable. I realized in a moment that even though the event was more than fifty years past, we had, after all, carried the history of that bitter division with us. I felt a stab of fear at our situation. And then we saw that the old man was chuckling quietly to himself. He had made a joke! "You crazy," said Bir Bahadur, once he'd been reminded of the story, "and I'll scratch your throat again!" and he leapt on him in mock attack, as the two tangled and laughed and cried at the same time and the old man, whose name was Aslam, recounted the story.

He and Bir Bahadur had been at school together, and one day Aslam had accepted a dare from his schoolmates to "pollute" Bir Bahadur's drinking water by putting the earthenware pot in which it was stored to his mouth. Hindus and Muslims did not drink from the same vessel, or keep their water in the same pot, for fear of pollution — the Hindus, that is, feared that the Muslims would pollute their water. It seemed incredible to me that Bir Bahadur's family, the only non-Muslim family in the village, could still keep to these taboos, but they did. The young Aslam had drunk from Bir Bahadur's pot and had then teased Bir Bahadur about it, at which the incensed young Sikh had attacked his friend and tried to scratch his throat. "You used to have such long nails then," shouted Aslam gleefully, "let me look at your nails now," and he grabbed one of Bir Bahadur's hands to examine it. The boys had fought, and had then been gently pried apart by the village elders, who had explained to Aslam that he should not have done what he did, that it was important to respect the customs of others — something, I thought, that we would do well to remember today.

Bir Bahadur had not remembered this particular incident, but water and food had played a major part in his journey home. "There are two things I want to do if we make it to Saintha," he had told me earlier, "to drink water from the village well and to eat in the home of a Mussalman." This was his private penance, his reparation, his way of asking forgiveness for the harshness and cruelty of Hindu "untouchability" and the purity and pollution taboos practiced by Hindus and Sikhs. Now he turned to Aslam and said to him, "Brother, can you take me to the village well. I want to drink the water from there." Wordlessly, almost as if he divined what it was that drove Bir Bahadur to make such a request — for between the first instance of playful pollution and today stood a long history of hate and violence — Aslam led us down the road to a half-covered well. Two young men from the village were dispatched to find a couple of tumblers, while others lowered the bucket into the well — which looked, at first glance, as if it might not be too healthy — and drew up a bucketful of clear cool water. Bir Bahadur took the tumbler from the young man who had filled it and held it out to him, and touched it to his forehead and drank deeply. He closed his eyes, and seemed to pray as he drank — I could not make out the words, but I thought he was asking forgiveness, not so much for himself but also on behalf of his people — and then he bent, took up a fistful of earth, touched that in turn to his forehead, and ran it over his turban. There was silence all around: all of us watching, somehow sharing in this most private of rituals and yet feeling a bit like intruders. I could feel my eyes prick with tears — how, I thought, how could we have done this to ourselves? How could we have allowed ourselves to be divided thus? And then the spell was broken as two old women, watching us from a balcony above the road, spoke up and asked Bir Bahadur if he was Biran. And he was off

again. But not before he had turned to me and offered the remainder of the water to me: "Here child, you drink also," he said. After a moment of doubt about how clean or otherwise the water was — after all, the well was open to the sky, even though the water in the bucket looked clear — I decided that there were times when considerations of bacteria and health simply did not matter. I put the glass to my lips and drank.

News of Bir Bahadur's visit had spread in the village, and we had collected quite a large following. We moved on, Bir Bahadur and Aslam in the lead, talking about this field and that crop, this hillock and that house. We were heading, I guessed, toward Sadq Khan. Finding him, I realized, was not going to be hard — with the mysterious village grapevine at work, everywhere we went people came out to greet Bir Bahadur, their faces wreathed in smiles of welcome. As if in support of our little expedition, the day remained bright and clear, the heat and humidity miraculously restrained. Bir Bahadur meanwhile did not know whether to laugh or cry — as each new person came up and enfolded him in an embrace, his tears fell with a sort of abandon, drops of moisture glistening on his white beard. "These are tears of joy, *beta*, don't worry," he reassured me every time I looked at him. "I am so happy. Did I not tell you we would be welcomed?"

We crossed a small bridge over a nullah, skirted slushy wet mud still recovering from last night's heavy rain, and made our way through some low bushes up a green grassy slope. To the left and right just above us stood two houses, the one a makeshift sort of barn, the other an open, airy living space that held three or four old men and women. Between the houses ran a small lane leading to another house farther back. As we wound our way up, people came out of the house to greet Bir Bahadur and began to talk. I suddenly became aware that, for the first time since we had entered Saintha, Bir Bahadur's attention was distracted. He was not listening. Instead he was looking at the narrow lane that led to the house at the back. Through this, now, came a small, stocky man in a *shalvar* and *kurta*, a two- or three-day stubble on his face, shuffling along with difficulty. As he drew closer a sort of silence descended on our group, and we watched as he broke away from the clutch of old women and children outside the house and made his painful way down toward us. His face held a smile but his eyes shone with tears. I think both of them knew instantly who the other was, but for some moments it seemed as if we were all caught in a state of suspension. No one could move.

Then he came within a few steps of Bir Bahadur and said to him, in a whisper, "Biran, is it really you? After all these years?" And Bir Bahadur, laughing, crying at the same time, thanking God, begging forgiveness, opening his arms wide and saying, "Sadq, my friend Sadq ... the gods be praised ... Vahe Guru," he said, lifting his eyes heavenward, "Vahe Guru, my cup is full." With his arm around Bir Bahadur, Sadq Khan turned him gently toward the house and said, "Come, let me take you to your home." It was then that I realized that the house at the end of the lane, Sadq Khan's house, was the house that Bir Bahadur had grown up in.

As if on cue, the group of women and children broke into loud chatter. We entered a large courtyard, followed now by our entire entourage, and there was a great deal of good-natured banter: "So, Biran," they said to him, "have you come to take over your house? D'you want your property back? You'll have to tussle with us first you know." And Bir Bahadur laughed and said, "No, no, this is yours, not mine, it's yours." The house lay in a kind of protected hollow: a small field on one side, a courtyard bordered by two other houses on another side, a winding road running behind the house. At one end, young women cooked, their heads covered and faces hidden. We were shown around the house and I thought of the young Maan Kaur, playing with friends here, little knowing the terrible fate that awaited her.

But we were here to work. Suddenly, reminded that we should be paying attention to the radio program we had come to make, Chihiro thought that this might be a good moment to capture — the two friends meeting after all these years. So she tried to shoo everyone out of the room in which we now sat, a dark, cool room with only one window, much of the space taken up by two beds, a number of trunks, a couple of Rexene-covered sofas and a table. She turned the fan off: it was making too much noise, she said, and would disturb the recording. Someone immediately turned it back on, and its whirring, grinding noise resumed. Chihiro tried to get the children to leave and the two men to respond to her questions, without success. Eventually she gave up, and decided just to capture the background noises. She'd do her interview with Bir Bahadur later.

Outside, charpoys were now laid out in the shade of the old banyan tree and people had begun to congregate there. Years earlier Bir Bahadur had told me the story of Ma Hussaini, a neighbor, who had been like a grandmother to him:

> There was a Mussalman woman, Dadi, Dadi, we used to call her. Her name was Ma Hussaini and I would go and sit on one side of her lap and her granddaughter would sit on the other. I used to pull her plait and push her away and she would catch hold of my jura, my hair, and push me away. I would say, she is my Dadi, and she would say, she is my Dadi. ... It was only after we came here [to India] after Pakistan was created that we realized that this woman we used to call Dadi, she was a Mussalmani. She used to have a garden of fig trees, and she had kept one tree for me and she would not even give the fruit of that tree to the masjid, she had reserved it for me.

Bir Bahadur's rival in Ma Hussaini's affection, her granddaughter Taj, had been married into a village nearby and had spent some time in the Middle East with her husband. This Bir Bahadur knew, for he and Taj had kept in touch while she was in the Middle East. But now down the slope behind the house came an old woman, hobbling along with the help of a stick — Tals sister, come to meet her childhood friend. And soon quite a crowd had collected under the tree. "Did you ever receive the letters I wrote?" asked Bir Bahadur of no one in particular. Yes, he was told, two letters had arrived, one addressed to the village and one to some of the village elders who were now dead, so for a while they had lain around in the village postbox and no one had known what to do with them. Then they had decided to open them and the letters had been shared among all those in the village who were there at the time of Partition.

"I wrote you two more," said Bir Bahadur, "I was not sure I would be able to come here, so I thought I would send you the letters from Thoa." Where are they, he was asked, and he produced them from his pocket. So that everyone could know what was in them, Sadq Khan asked Bir Bahadur to read the letters aloud. Meanwhile he and another man with a black scarf tied turbanlike on his head went into the house and came out holding sitars. They strummed gently as Bir Bahadur read the first letter:

> I greet all my brothers and sisters of Saintha village and offer you my salutations. I am Bir Bahadur Singh, son of Sant Raja Singh, who used to run a kirana [general merchant] shop in Saintha. I have come to Pakistan from India to fulfill a long-cherished dream. All my life I have had but one dream — that is, to be able to come here and meet with all of you, and now I have come to realize this dream. I wanted to come back, to visit again the places where I played as a child, to meet with all of those people who gave me so much love; I knew that if I could do this, it would give me real happiness. I have forgotten the names of so many of you who were my childhood friends — it has been fifty-four years since I left Saintha village — but in my memory I have kept the names of some of the village elders I remember, and I am putting them down here: Chacha Mohammad Zaman, Masi Barkat, Masi Noor Jehan, Chacha Sajawal Khan, Chacha Sarwar Khan, Chacha Muran who was lame in one leg, my dear sister Taj, my elder sister Sultana who was given in marriage

to Khodiwala village, Dan i who became my friend at the time of his circumcision. So many of the children of our elders went to school with me. Chacha Sajawal Khan's mother, Ma Hussaini, or Dadi, in whose lap I used to play and under whose loving care I grew up. I have come to make your acquaintance, to renew my friendship with the families of our respected elders. I request you to come from Saintha to meet me [the letter was written when Bir Bahadur did not know whether he would make it to Saintha or not]. I will be ever grateful to you for this. If you can, I will be found at the address given below. My visa is valid for only four days and I will be waiting for you. I have full faith that you will surely come.

My mother is still alive and it was also her desire that I come and meet with you once. When you think back on those old times, you will remember me. I have drunk the water of the Dhela Dulla stream and the village well, I still have the taste of Chacha Sarwar's guavas and the fruit from Khojiwala on my tongue. I remember my teachers, Sargat Ali and Saif Ali, from whom I learned so much. They lived in Sadda village. I studied in Skot school and was the only Sikh there. Those of our elders who are alive, please give my salutations to them, and those who have passed on, I ask you to pay my respects at their graves. For those of you who are alive, I hope you will accept once again the hand of true friendship that I extend to you. I am waiting for you. When you come, please bring me a handful of earth from our beloved Saintha and some water from the Dhulla stream where we played as children. Please also bring some photos and then we can sit and talk here.

God be with you and may He protect you.

Then Bir Bahadur read the second letter:

My brother Sadq Khan

My beloved Sadq Khan, son of Sajawal Khanji, please accept my greetings. My brother, I am the son of Sant Raja Singh, who used to run a kirana store in Saintha. I have written you letters before this, and have also received replies, but for some time now I have not written. Please don't think that I have forgotten you and everyone else in Saintha. Every day in my dreams I taste the delicious figs of Dadi's gardens, and I swear to you on God's name that when the dream breaks, and I awaken, I can still taste the sweetness on my tongue. I remember dadiji, Chacha Sajawal Khan, and everyone from the village — your memories are still fresh in my mind. I remember Arif Bhai, who lost his life while trying to save me from snakebite — perhaps it was that God loved him too much and took him away. My sister Taj and I used to play in Dadi's lap, we used to fight over who had the right to sit there. I would say Dadi belongs to me and Taj would insist that she belonged to her and Dadi would take us both in her lap and give us abundantly of her love. I have memories of the kharboozas [melons] Masi Barkat fed us, the fruit Chacha Sarwar Khan gave us, and so many others. … It is with these memories in my heart that I have come from India to see you. I want to greet you and all my friends with whom I studied in Skot school. I have come to Thoa Khalsa and this evening I will return to Islamabad. My visa is only for four days. I beg you to come and meet me. I will do my best to come to Saintha but it may be that I will not be able to come. I am sending you this letter from Thoa Khalsa, please come here to see me.

Your brother
Bir Bahadur Singh (Biran)

The letters read, Bir Bahadur handed them over to Sadq Khan. As his voice faded, the strumming grew louder, and soon a clear strong voice rose above the noise of conversation, singing songs of loss and joy, welcoming long-lost friends come from afar. Others joined in, and gradually a silence

descended over the gathering, each person thinking his or her private thoughts. The shadows began to lengthen, the sun making its way to its resting place and quietly, tactfully, as the singing continued, we were drawn aside and taken into the house to be fed. As we began to move, we heard a voice say, almost as if in jest: "Our cup is so full, we have even forgotten to eat! But the guests must be fed, for us this is enough." Sadq Khan put down his sitar and followed us into the house, where he ate with us. Then we said our goodbyes and set off. A long train of people followed us through the village, some singing, some talking, some just holding Bir Bahadur's hand.

We approached the small road we had taken into the village. Here the construction work had stopped, but the two men waited for us to make good our promise to spend time with them on the way out. We were taken into the house, a long, shady room, set with sofas in deep red velvet. Small Formica-covered tables stood in front of the sofas, and on them were three plates of biscuits, three large bottles of Coca-Cola, and three glasses. We sat, the brothers sitting across from us and sundry other people from the village scattered all about. We could see the shadowy figures of the women of the household watching us from behind the *chilmans* — we must have been a strange sight. We had started off thinking this last stop on our journey was merely a formality. It turned out to be quite different. The owners of the house knew all about Bir Bahadur — for the daughter of Arif, the man who had died of snakebite while attempting to save Bir Bahadur from it, had married into their house. For Bir Bahadur there could have been no better way to end this journey of friendship and reconciliation.

But while one journey had ended, the other — to Thoa Khalsa — still remained incomplete. Should we go there or not? Bir Bahadur's clever sleight-of-hand that morning had initially sidelined the issue. And now it no longer seemed that urgent. Chihiro had her story — a happy one. In Saintha they had advised us against going — the people of Thoa Khalsa are not good, they said, they do not like strangers. They were being polite, of course — by strangers they meant Indians, or more precisely, Hindus and Sikhs. And who could blame them? Every such stranger must have been a reminder of that terrible and violent history of a half century ago. I myself wasn't sure about going, and wondered what kind of reception we would get: in 1947 the population of Thoa had been mostly Sikh, but now, there wasn't a single Sikh left there. They'd been replaced by Muslims, many of whom must have carried their own tales of violence at the hands of Hindus and Sikhs. Would they even want to see us?

And then there were other things. I have known Bir Bahadur for more than ten years now. I have interviewed him extensively for my research and we have kept in touch. In all that time, Maan Kaur's story has always remained at the edges of our conversation. Or perhaps that's not quite true: Bir Bahadur has never hesitated to speak of Maan Kaur, but he has always described her as heroic, a martyr to the cause of the religion, someone who embraced death willingly. I find this difficult to believe. She was sixteen years old. What could she have known or understood about the troubled politics of Partition? Of the hate and rage that suddenly seem to have consumed people who had lived until then as friends and neighbors? Could she really have believed that the cause of making a new nation would be best served by her death? Or indeed by the deaths, rapes, and abductions of countless other women?

For Bir Bahadur these were not the questions that troubled him. Maan Kaur had brought honor to his family, she had done them proud, and he admired her for that. Instead, it was his father toward whom he extended his understanding and compassion. He said as much to me once. "Imagine," he said, "imagine, a father who kills his daughter, how much of a victim, how helpless he must be."

We did not make it to Thoa Khalsa in the end. Not that we did not try; we did, in a half-hearted sort of way. But it turned out that Thoa Khalsa now fell inside Pakistan's "atomic ring," and was banned to foreigners. We returned to Delhi the next day, our journey done, the radio program made, a sort of forgiveness asked and given, Maan Kaur's story once again relegated to the realm of silence.

Urvashi Butalia. The Persistence of Memory: The Search for Truth, Justive, and Reconciliation. In: Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Octavio Zaya (ed.): Experiments with the Truth. Documenta11_Platform2. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit. 2002, pp. 175-192.