

Toba Tek Singh

Two or three years after Partition, the governments of India and Pakistan decided that just as there had been a cordial exchange of prisoners, there should now be a similar exchange of lunatics. That is to say, Muslim lunatics housed in Indian asylums should be repatriated to Pakistan and Sikh and Hindu lunatics, in turn, handed over to India.

It's hard to be sure of the wisdom of the idea. But in line with the wishes of intellectuals, a high-level conference was held, and at last, a date for the transfer was scheduled. A thorough review was conducted. It was decided in India that those Muslim lunatics who had family living there would be allowed to stay while the rest would be taken to the border. Here, in Pakistan, as practically the entire Sikh and Hindu population had departed, there was no question of allowing any to remain; each and every Sikh and Hindu lunatic was put under police custody and duly transported to the border.

One cannot speak for the other side, but here in Lahore, a lively debate began at the lunatic asylum when news of the transfer broke out. When one Muslim lunatic—for twelve years a regular reader of *Zamindar*—was asked, 'Maulvi saab, what is this Pakistan?' he replied after careful deliberation, 'an area in India where razor blades are manufactured.' This explanation seemed to satisfy his friend. Similarly, one Sikh lunatic said to another, 'Sardarji, why are we being sent to India? We don't even speak their language.' The other said with a smile, 'I speak

Hindustanese. And let me tell you they're very wicked people.' Then, doing an impression of their arrogant ways he added, 'they strut about bolt upright like this.' In a separate section of the asylum, a Muslim lunatic, while bathing one morning, cried, 'Long live Pakistan!' so loudly that he slipped and fell on the bathroom floor, knocking himself unconscious.

Some lunatics were not in fact mad. The majority of these were murderers whose families had bribed the police to have them sent to the madhouse in order to save them from the gallows. They—to some extent—were able to grasp why India had been partitioned and what Pakistan was. But of the real facts, even they were in the dark: the newspapers explained little to nothing and their warden was ignorant and illiterate. They remained confused even after much discussion. They knew only that there was a man called Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who people called the Quaid-e-Azam, and that he had made a country for the Muslims called Pakistan. Where it was, what its shape and size were—of these things they knew nothing. And for this reason, those lunatics who were not entirely deranged, were forced to wonder whether they were presently in India or in Pakistan. If India, then where was Pakistan? And if Pakistan, how was it that they had ended up here, despite never having moved and having been in India only a short while ago?

✓ One lunatic emerged from this confusion over India and Pakistan and Pakistan and India, madder still. Sweeping his way along the ground with a broom, he climbed a tree, and there, from one of its branches, delivered a speech which touched upon the problems

of both countries. When the guards tried bringing him down, he climbed higher still. Surrounded and frightened, he yelled, 'I neither want to live in India nor in Pakistan. I'm happy in this tree.' With great difficulty, and only once his fit had subsided, he was persuaded to come down, at which point he fell weeping into the arms of his Hindu and Sikh brethren, his heart filled with sadness at the thought of them leaving him and going to India.

In the daily routine of a radio engineer, a master of sciences who kept largely to himself, spending the entire day pacing the garden's trails in silence, one change occurred: he removed all his clothes, and handing them over to one of the wardens, resumed walking the garden trail stark naked. And a fat Muslim lunatic from Chaniot, who had in the past been a dedicated Muslim League worker, but had since taken to bathing fifteen to sixteen times a day, now suddenly gave up this habit. His name was Muhammad Ali. And so, one day, from the confines of his cell, he announced that he was in fact the Quaid-e-Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Watching him, a Sikh lunatic instantly became Master Tara Singh. And there was nearly bloodshed in the cell until both men were declared dangerous lunatics and separated.

When a young Hindu lawyer from Lahore, whose romantic failures had driven him mad, heard that Amritsar had gone to India, he was filled with sorrow. It had been a Hindu girl from this town that he had fallen in love with. And though she had spurned him, he had, despite his madness, not been able to forget her. He hurled insults at all the leaders, Muslim and Hindu alike,

who had come together to break India in two, putting a border between him and his beloved. When talk of the exchange began, his fellow lunatics tried explaining to him that he should not lose heart; he would be sent to India where his beloved lived. But he didn't want to leave Lahore for fear that in Amritsar his legal practice would suffer.

In the European ward, two Anglo-Indian lunatics despaired at hearing that the British had left and that India was now independent. They spoke for hours in secret, mulling over the problem of what their status in the asylum would now be. Would the European ward be abolished? Would they still get breakfast? Would they now, in place of toast, have to force bloody Indian chapattis down their throats?

There was in the asylum a Sikh lunatic, who had been committed for fifteen years. At any moment these strange words were ready on his lips, '*Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di bedhayana di mung di dal of the laltain.*' He slept neither in the day nor at night. It was rumoured among the wardens that in fifteen long years, he had not slept, not even laid down, for a single moment. At most he would occasionally rest against a wall.

His feet and legs had swollen up from standing up for so long, but despite his discomfort, he refused to lie down. Whenever a discussion about India and Pakistan and the exchange of lunatics began in the asylum, he listened with keen interest. And, if ever, anybody asked his opinion, he gravely replied, '*Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di bedhayana di mung di dal of the Pakistani government.*' Later, however, in place 'of the Pakistani government',

his own
identity

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he had begun to say, 'of the Toba Tek Singh government' and would regularly ask the other inmates if they knew where Toba Tek Singh—his native land—was.

Nobody knew whether it was in India or in Pakistan. Whoever tried to explain would slide into confusing speculations that if Sialkot, which had once been in India, was now in Pakistan, who could say whether Lahore, which was in Pakistan, would not tomorrow be in India? Or that all of India would become Pakistan? And who could say with any conviction that one day both Pakistan and India would not be wiped off the face of the earth?

This Sikh lunatic's hair had thinned and little remained. Because he didn't bathe much, the hair from his head had become tangled with the hair from his beard, and had hardened, giving his face a frightening aspect. But he was harmless, and in fifteen years, he had not once been embroiled in a fight or incident of any kind. The asylum's veteran employees were aware that he had vast holdings of land in Toba Tek Singh. He had apparently been a perfectly normal, bon vivant landlord until one day when his mind had turned.

His relations had brought him to the asylum in heavy iron chains. After that, they came to visit him every month. Once they had inquired after his well-being, they would leave. For a while they had continued to come, but since the trouble began between India and Pakistan, their visits had stopped.

Though his name was really Bishen Singh, he was known to all as Toba Tek Singh. He had no concept of the passage of time, neither what day or month it was nor how many years had passed. But every month

when the time for his friends and relations to visit drew near, he would instinctively know and would inform the warden.

Then on that day, he was sure to bathe well. He would rub his body thoroughly with soap, brush and oil his hair and take out his own clothes, which he seldom wore. And dressed up like this, he would appear before his visitors. If ever they asked him something, he would either remain silent or on occasion burst out with, '*Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di bedhayana di mung di dal* of the laltain.'

He had one daughter, who adding an inch to her height every year, had grown into a young woman of fifteen. Bishen Singh was unable to recognize her. As a girl, she had wept whenever she saw her father, and later, even as a grown-up woman, the sight of him brought tears to her eyes.

Whenever the subject of India and Pakistan was raised, Bishen Singh would start asking the other lunatics where Toba Tek Singh was. When he didn't receive a satisfactory answer, his inquiries became more urgent. The visits had also now ceased. In the past he had known instinctively when his visitors were coming, but now it was as if the inner voice that had informed him of their arrival had fallen silent.

He wished very much that those people, who had shown him sympathy and brought him fruit, sweets and clothes, would return. He was sure that they would tell him whether Toba Tek Singh was in India or Pakistan if only he could only ask them. He was certain that that was where they came from, Toba Tek Singh, where his lands lay.

The asylum also housed a lunatic who believed he was God. When one day Bishen Singh asked him if he knew whether Toba Tek Singh was in India or Pakistan, he replied with his trademark cackle. 'It is neither in India nor in Pakistan. For the simple reason that I haven't given the order yet.' Bishen Singh implored him many times to give the order quickly so that this matter could be resolved, but he said he was very busy as he had many other orders yet to give. Bishen Singh eventually tired of him and exploded, 'Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di bedhayana di mung di dal of wahe Guruji da Khalsa and wahe Guruji di Fateh . . . jo bole so nihal, sat sri akal.' The meaning of this perhaps was that 'you are evidently a Muslim god, for if you were a Sikh god, you would surely hear my appeal.'

A few days before the exchange, a Muslim friend of Toba Tek Singh's came to visit him. He had never come before, and when Bishen Singh saw him, he moved to one side and began to retreat. The guards stopped him. 'He's your friend, Fazal Din,' they said, 'he's come to see you.'

Bishen Singh eyed the man with a sidelong glance and began mumbling incoherently. Fazal Din took a step forward, and resting a hand on his shoulder, said, 'I've been meaning to come for many days, but was never able to find the time. All your people have made it safely across to India. In whatever way I could help, I did. Your daughter Roop Kaur . . .'

He stopped mid-sentence. Bishen Singh had remembered something. 'Daughter Roop Kaur.'

Fazal Din continued haltingly, 'Yes, she . . . she is also fine. She went across with the others.'

Bishen Singh was silent. Fazal Din began to say, 'They asked me to check up on you routinely. But I hear now that you are also to go to India. Do give my salaam to Bhai Balbir Singh and Bhai Vadhawa Singh. And to Bhen Amrit Kaur too. Tell Bhai Balbir Singh that I am well and happy. Of the two brown buffaloes he left behind, one has given birth to a calf. The other had too, but sadly, hers died after six days. And . . . and if there's anything I can do, I'm always at their service. Here, I brought you some sweets.' Bishen Singh took the cloth containing the sweets and handed it to the warden. Then turning back to Fazal Din, he asked, 'Where is Toba Tek Singh?'

Fazal Din said with outright surprise, 'Where is it? Why, it's where it's always been, of course.'

Bishen Singh pressed him, 'But in Pakistan or in India?'

Fazal Din gave a start. 'In India,' he said, 'No, no, in Pakistan.'

Bishen Singh mumbled, and jumping up, said, 'Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di bedhayana di mung di dal of the Pakistan and India dar fittay mun.'

The preparations for the exchange were complete. The lists of lunatics to be exchanged had arrived and a date for the transfer had been decided on.

It was bitter winter when truckloads of Hindu and Sikh lunatics, with police escorts and officers accompanying them, departed from Lahore's lunatic asylum. At the Wagah border crossing, the superintendents of both sides met. After initial proceedings, the exchange began and continued through the night.

Unloading the lunatics from the trucks and handing them over to the officers was no easy task. Some refused to get out. Those who were prepared to step out proved difficult to manage, running wildly in every direction. When an attempt was made to dress those who were naked, they tore the clothes from their body. Some became abusive, some sang songs, others wept and quarrelled; the noise was deafening. The female lunatics, especially, made an ear-splitting racket. It was biting cold and everyone's teeth chattered."

Most of the lunatics were not in support of the exchange because they couldn't understand why they were being uprooted and forced to go somewhere else. The few who understood yelled slogans, 'Long live Pakistan!' and 'Death to Pakistan!'. On two or three occasions a riot was narrowly avoided as the passions of a few Sikhs and Muslims became inflamed by the slogans.

When Bishen Singh's turn came, and the official on the other side of the border began entering his name into a register, he asked, 'Where is Toba Tek Singh? In India or in Pakistan?'

Laughing, the official said, 'In Pakistan.'

Hearing this, Bishen Singh jumped to one side and ran off to rejoin his remaining comrades.

The Pakistani soldiers caught hold of him and tried taking him to the other side, but he refused. "Toba Tek Singh is here," he said, and began yelling loudly, '*Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di bedbayana di mung di dal* of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan.'

A great effort was made to convince him that Toba Tek Singh was now in India. If he didn't go himself, he

would be sent, but Bishen Singh would not relent. When they tried forcibly to send him across, he dug his swollen heels in at a point in the middle of the border, in such a way that it seemed no force was powerful enough to uproot him.)

Excessive force was not used as he was harmless. He was simply left standing there while the rest of the exchange was completed.

Phantom Before the sun rose, a piercing scream broke from the throat of a rigid Bishen Singh, standing at attention. Several officers came to see the man, who had been on his legs day and night for fifteen years, lying face down on the ground. There, behind barbed wires, was India. Here, behind barbed wires, was Pakistan. In the middle, on a nameless piece of earth, lay Toba Tek Singh.