

Lahore nu Salaam-A Salute to Lahore

(Memories of Lahore: 1938 to 1947 as narrated to the author by Randhir Singh, a student active in the Communist movement)

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In analyzing cities, urban historians and urban designers often glorify the magnificent and the monumental and simplify their understanding of the city into easily represented spatial structures or models that ignore much of the subtlety and significance of everyday experience. These simplified structures of analyses then go on to inform proposals for the design of environments within these cities, often ending up manipulating people and places into patterns that are supposed to make for a more 'efficient' human existence. But there is something beyond physical environment that gives value to a place, a value measured in terms more than 'efficiency'. Cities need to be understood as much with theories and models of spatial understanding as with the 'lived in' episodes which hold experiences of our day-to-day activities and events which result in actual place-making. Place and sense of place cannot lend itself to spatial and physical analysis alone, for it is inextricably bound up with all the hopes, meanings and aspirations of people and their lives. There are indeed profound psychological links between people and the places which they live in and experience. Cities many-a-time get their distinctiveness from this deeply felt involvement with places by the people who dwell in them. The memory of a place is as much about emotional experience as the physicality of it. For many, such an attachment to a place continues much beyond their period of habitation.

This paper, through a simple account of a college student, active in the students' movement, who lived in Lahore from 1938 to 1947, a period that was both remarkable and tragic at the same time, seeks to highlight the key events, places and people that continue to form a part of the memory of Lahore more than six decades on. These places in Lahore, as narrated to the author, are not the majestic, cyclopean or iconic structures normally associated with Lahore such as the Lahore Fort, Shalimar Gardens or the Anarkali bazaar, but the ordinary and the everyday, like the Rama Krishna book shop, Kennedy Hall, the Communist Party office on Mcleod Road, the open space in front of Mochi Gate or the Gwalmandi Thana. It was the backdrop of these modest places, which, for the narrator, were the

arena of an extraordinary activity set in an equally extraordinary time where people and events came together. Due to this the city of Lahore transcended to another level, acquired the status of a very distinctive city and continues to hold a very special place in the chronicle of the life of the narrator. It was an emotional bonding with the city due to events and experiences, emphasizing the fact that it is not only physical expression but human responses that give life and meaning to a city.

“This is essentially an adhoc and an episodic personal and political account of the period between 1938 and 1947. Memories filter through time and there is blurring and forgetfulness, especially at the age of ninety. Even after over sixty years some events and places stand out.

For me it all began in Lahore in 1938 when I returned to the city as a student, sixteen years old, in pursuit of my studies. Having lived in Lahore in my childhood, the city for me was always associated with the heroic figure of Bhagat Singh. A morning is still vividly etched in my mind - the morning after he and his comrades were hanged (23rd March, 1931). As a nine year old I was detained briefly, while passing in front of the Lahore Central Jail on my way to the Borstal Primary School in the neighborhood. The memories loom large, of the huge presence of the army and the police, of a surging sea of humanity, tears in each eye, of the proud faces in the portraits of the martyrs everywhere and the defiant unending cry of ‘Inquilab Zindabad’. That morning was born a dream which, I believe, in some form or another, has always stayed with me. Years later I was to spend a few months, among the happiest of my life, in the ‘Terrorist Ward’ of this very prison in Lahore with some of the surviving comrades of Bhagat Singh - Kishori Lal and others – who had in the meantime joined the Communist Party. The Party never owned up to Bhagat Singh as its pioneer in offering to the Indian people an alternative revolutionary politics as against the Gandhian and bourgeois politics, which were then dominant in the freedom struggle; thus Bhagat Singh was left open to appropriation by any and every kind of nationalism. He nevertheless, remained a source of inspiration for many of us in the Party in the Punjab.

I came to Lahore again in 1938, on the eve of the Second World War, for my higher studies at the Punjab University there. My father, a remarkable man in his own mixed sort of way – a brilliant physician and surgeon, profoundly religious and puritanical, with a rather deadly combination of Gandhi and Lenin in his head – sensing the turbulence inside me, his only son, had advised: ‘Do anything out there but don’t join some illegal organization’. Predictably that was the first thing I

did on reaching Lahore. Even as I was searching for it, the Communist Party found me. There was a certain pride in being a Communist. I still remember two lines from the poet C. Day Lewis. A question and an answer; they went something like this: 'Why do we, on seeing a Red, feel small? For he is future walking to meet us.' That is how Lahore is associated with my 'journey through Communism' and the events and the places are inextricably tied to the Communist Party Movement. This was the period inspired by the Russian revolution and there was the still fresh saga of the struggle in Spain – the International Brigades, where the finest of writers, poets and artists, across the continents were taking sides and committing themselves to political action against 'war and fascism'; their manifestoes spoke the language of the revolutionary cause, 'proletarian revolution' and 'the destruction of capitalism', 'the establishment of a workers, government', and so on. One almost inevitably moved left, to revolutionary socialism which was then gathering unto itself, in the Punjab and elsewhere, all the streams of modern India's revolutionary tradition - the legendary survivors of Kartar Singh Sarabha's Ghadarite uprising, old revolutionaries in exile or jails in India and the Andamans, comrades of Bhagat Singh, leaders and activists of the peasant and working class movements, radical young students, poets, artists, intellectuals and many more. For all this, Lahore was the city to be in.

My first impression on arrival in Lahore was its openness; it was open in more ways than one. The open and endless horizon spanned wide as I cycled daily from my house in Model Town to the Mall on my way to and fro from the University. The Mall was very much the spine of the city and its emptiness at times made travel by cycle a very pleasant experience, especially as one could stop at Bhabesh Sanyal, the famous artists' studio in the Regal building, for a cup of tea. The Canal Road was another route frequented by many of us and was very pleasant to walk and cycle on. Distances were short even though new parts of Lahore were expanding beyond the Walled City. Model Town had a newness to it even as it sat surrounded by expanses of agricultural fields and a wilderness which extended all the way beyond the FC College where I was to study later. Our house at D-132, Model Town was very spaciouly laid out, open on three sides with a grove of *narangi* and other fruit trees which gave us an endless supply of fruit to last us through the season. The house was set within sprawling lawns, with flower beds lining the pathways leading up to the modest single-storeyed structure. The crispness of the Lahore winter was legendary and it was the winter imagery of the house with its colorful seasonal flowers dotting the lawns that is still etched in my memory. In the neighborhood was also Baba Pyare Lal and Freda Bedi's unique cottage,

constructed in bamboo and grass frequented by many of us. Bedi later became the secretary of the Delhi unit of the Party.

Lahore was open in terms other than spatial and had a very vibrant public culture. While there were undercurrents of communalism, this public culture had a secular quality about it. At the time the twin city of Amritsar was the centre of trade and commerce and Lahore had emerged as a centre of education and politics where its robust liberalism did not shy away from actively supporting our communist causes, integral to our students' movement at the time. Lahore was above all a students' city and our activities were essentially centred around the freedom struggle. As a student movement our program was anti-imperialist in character. Students' politics crossed all gender divides with the Fatehchand College for Women having a very active unit of the Lahore Students' Union.

The Commercial building near the Punjab University, located at one end of the Mall, housed the office of the Lahore Students' Union of which I was soon the Secretary. The Rama Krishna Book Store near the Commercial building was another landmark I remember. There was also a shed or *khokha* outside the book shop where rare, radical and prohibited literature and second hand books were available. The Coffee House in the neighborhood was another *adda* for our discussions and debates.

My initial years of study were at the Sikh National College, where I became actively involved in the students' movement. The College at the time was still being built on the outskirts of Lahore. In a short span of time the College unit became the most powerful unit of the students' movement in the city. Torchlight processions from Sikh National College to the city were a common occurrence. Its Principal was Niranjana Singh, brother of Master Tara Singh, the Akali leader. He was a Nationalist and a Gandhian and was sympathetic to our movement. The Akali Governing Body of the College became worried about our growing influence and was pressing the Principal to expel me, which he didn't want to do. To avoid any further embarrassment to him and as a compromise, it was decided that I shift from Sikh National College to a college of my choice. I chose Forman Christian College. A deputation of teachers of Sikh National College went and met the Principal of FC College, S.K. Datta, who had represented the Christians in one of the Round Table Conferences in London, asking him to accept me. He looked at my excellent academic record and agreed. About this time Major Short, who was a liaison between the Sikhs and the Army, offered me a commission in the Army to which my immediate

response was - 'I was not born to serve British imperialism'.

Of course my association with Sikh National College continued. Even as I was banned from entering Sikh National College, I remember standing on the water channels and furrows of the fields surrounding the College and addressing crowds of students from there.

I have fond memories of my teachers at the University, J.N. Khosla and P.N. Kirpal in particular, who supported us financially and otherwise in our students' movement. The former was literally responsible for my later career as a university teacher. After my release from prison, I was put under the usual restrictions. Khosla persuaded me to use this period to complete my formal education and even took the risk of giving me an attendance certificate for the period that I was in prison, to enable me to sit for my exams for the Masters degree. This degree came in handy when I became a teacher in Delhi post-Partition. Even otherwise there was a very close bonding between students and teachers which continued during the period at FC College. It was typical of the time that Principal S.K. Datta of FC College refused to give permission to the police to enter the College campus and harass or arrest us. Another teacher whom I remember was Victor Kiernen, who later became famous as a Marxist historian. A member of the British Communist Party, he came straight from Cambridge to Lahore and became our teacher at Sikh National College. The rules of a banned organization like the Communist Party being what they were, it was left to us to discover his identity as a fellow communist on our own. I remember the way it happened. As the tin went around collecting funds for the party, two contributions intrigued us. One was a 5 rupee note, a very generous amount at the time, and the other was a *khota* 50 *anna* coin. The former was easily traced to Victor Kiernen and the latter was believed to be the 'contribution' of one of our zoology teachers. Once we discovered him, Victor Kiernen's residence across the premises of Sikh National College became both the centre of our activities and a storehouse for the banners, posters and material for torchlight processions.

Another person I remember most was Eric Cyprian who was my teacher at FC College and became a whole timer of the Party at the same time as I did. He was a great raconteur and had a great sense of humor, making him an extremely popular figure. We looked forward to the weekly meetings with him in the Party Commune across the Party office on Mcleod Road. He continued to share a great connection with Lahore and was later friends with the Gohar family. On meeting Khadija Gohar a few years ago in Delhi, we shared fond memories of him.

The landscape around FC College was also one of large expanses of agricultural land, beyond which there was wilderness. With its extensive groves of wild *ber* it was a popular spot for occasional picnics. It had the farmhouse of a family friend and I remember playing hockey in its courtyard. The grounds of FC College, along with this surrounding wilderness, gave us opportunities to set up a guerilla training camp. When Japan entered the war and its attack on India was imminent, we organized a guerilla training camp in the spacious lawns of FC College. While I had personal and political reservations about it, it was Victor Kiernen who persuaded me to accept the commandership of the camp. The lawns of FC College and the canal passing by were very useful for training purposes.

There are many other anecdotes of student life of the time. We were a group of eighteen including the two '*nawabzadas*', Mazhar Ali and Mahmood Ali, nephews of Sir Sikandar Hayat, the Unionist Chief Minister of the Punjab. Once when our meeting was on, the police raided us and one of my friends, Surinder Sehgal, who had the list on him literally swallowed it to prevent it from falling into the hands of the police – only to discover later that the police already had more than a complete dossier on each one of us.

The campus of FC College was spatially very scattered with several students, hostels, including Kennedy Hall, where I stayed. Teachers also lived on the campus. FC College had a slot in the time table for religious instruction called the Bible Class. Because of the growing influence of our students' movement and the secular culture of Lahore, these were literally turned into a discussion on current politics and socialism. I still remember Reverend Lucas, my tutor, on learning that I lived in Model Town, once provocatively asking me if my father was willing to give up his property. 'I am not the guardian of my father', was the best response that I could muster at the time.

Global events occupied our minds as much as the situation in India. After the Soviet Union entered the war, we would sit in the living room of Professor Painter, our English teacher and trace on the map the progress of the war and discuss politics. During this period I also remember Mochi Gate reverberating with the eloquence of K.M. Ashraf, the famous historian, who came to inaugurate our conference.

The main centre of activity was the Fazli Hussain building which was the party office on Macleod Road, one of the more posh areas at the time. Because of its location next to a graveyard, the rental was low enough for the Party to afford it. Near the Macleod Road Party

office there was a chowk which was our point of entry into the old city. Across the chowk was the Party Commune where we gathered at the end of the day for informal discussions. Bradlaugh Hall was another hub of all political activity including ours. I remember being *lathi* charged outside Bradlaugh Hall many-a-time when the police dispersed our meetings and demonstrations. Another landmark of College life was the Ewing Hall at one end of Anarkali, which was the official residence of post graduate students of FC College. It was a single-storeyed structure and provided paying guest facilities to new students who could not be accommodated in the College hostel. Bhagwan Singh's shop at the other end of Anarkali was another popular place where *lassi* was measured and sold by the yard.

Life as a student and a political activist had its small pleasures as well. The culinary highlight was the occasional visit as a guest to the Medical College hostel, which had the reputation of serving delicious meals at reasonable rates. We also frequented the shop near the Islamia College for its *shami kebabs*. We regularly attended the *mushairas* at Islamia College and after the *mushaira* we used to make a beeline for the *shami kebabs*. Cultural life was also closely linked with political activity. The Lawrence Gardens had a stage for an open air theatre and was a regular place for both meetings and street theatre. I remember watching many performances by IPTA (Indian Peoples Theatre Association) there. Cinema of the period was also charged with politics. As students we mostly frequented the cinema hall on Macleod Road to watch the Charlie Chaplin classics (The Gold Rush, Modern Times) and the radical films on the Russian and Mexican revolution (Zapata etc.). That was the kind of culture that young people lived on in those days. We would buy the twenty paisa tickets and sit in the front rows with a packet of Peak Freans biscuits as the ultimate luxury, while the rich and the affluent amongst us would sit in the two rupee seats.

The inner city by this time was already growing into a slum and what perhaps had been a place of privilege a few centuries ago, today housed the economically poorer sections of society. Typical of the place was Gwalmandi Thana where I spent the first night of my arrest. The next day I was transported to Kasur jail for my trial where I was charged with obstructing the Government's war efforts. (It was 'the Peoples war' period !). After that horrific night at the Gwalmandi Thana, which was truly the worst night of my life, Kasur jail almost seemed like freedom. I spent a total of one year in jail. At Kasur jail I was entitled to B class facilities, but I chose to share C class facilities with two of my peasant comrades. At the end of three months they were

transferred to Multan while, I was sent to Lahore Central Jail. Walking from Lahore Railway Station to the jail, I reached Lahore Central Jail late in the evening. When the jailor instructed the warden to lodge me in the 'Bomb case *ahata*' (the terrorist ward), it was among the happiest words I have heard in my life as it meant sharing the company of Bhagat Singh's comrades, who were serving their life terms.

Student and party activities continued into 1947 when I used to cycle down from the house in Model Town, bypassing the Mozang area, to the Party office where we would organize ourselves into squads and go into the old city to carry our politics to the people. Being a regular traveler on this route I struck up many a friendship with the owners of small shanty shops which were near the bridge on the canal on the way to Model town. Mozang by now was teeming with refugees from East Punjab with tales of looting, humiliation and death. In June of 1947 the Party instructed me to change my route as it was not considered safe to pass by the Mozang area. As I changed my route and said goodbye to the shop owners I never thought I would not travel that road ever again.

I shifted to the Cantonment and lived in the outhouse of the bungalow of an uncle of mine who was then the Director, Medical Services, Navy. Times changed rapidly and soon any kind of travel for me became unsafe. The Party finally asked me to leave Lahore for the time being. Till the end I wanted to leave my cycle, which was a prized possession, in the Model Town house, hoping to recover it on my return. My uncle in the Cantonment, who was better informed of events unfolding around, kept fobbing me off with false promises. I finally left Lahore in September, 1947 in an army convoy provided to the family of my uncle. Days of travel finally brought me to Mehrauli, on the outskirts of Delhi. Delhi by this time was flooded with refugees and further entry of refugees was banned. I had all along believed I would return to Lahore. However it soon became clear that there was no returning to Lahore except as a citizen of another country. It was time to say my farewell to Lahore..."

(The poem - 'Lahore nu salaam', displayed on the back cover page, was written in 1947 and is part of a larger collection of poems 'Rahan di dhoor' (Dust of the pathways) published in 1950).