

TOBA TEK SINGH

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A COUPLE OF YEARS after the Partition of the country, it occurred to the respective governments of India and Pakistan that inmates of lunatic asylums, like prisoners, should also be exchanged. Muslim lunatics in India should be transferred to Pakistan and Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums should be sent to India.

Whether this was a reasonable or an unreasonable idea is difficult to say. One thing, however, is clear. It took many conferences of important officials from the two sides to come to this decision but eventually the final details, like the date of actual exchange, were carefully worked out. Muslim lunatics whose families were still residing in India were to be left undisturbed, the rest moved to the border for the exchange.

While it is not known what the reaction in India was, when the news reached the Lahore lunatic asylum, it immediately became the subject of heated discussion. One Muslim lunatic, a regular reader of the fire-eating daily newspaper *Zamindar*, when asked what Pakistan was, replied after deep reflection: 'The name of a place in India where cut-throat razors are manufactured.'

This profound observation was received with visible satisfaction.

A Sikh lunatic asked another Sikh: 'Sardarji, why are we being sent to India? We don't even know the language they speak in that country.'

Not all inmates were utterly mad and some probably had a vague idea why India was being divided and what Pakistan was, but, as for the present situation, they were equally clueless.

As to where Pakistan was located, the inmates knew nothing. That was why both the mad and the partially mad were unable to decide whether they were now in India or in Pakistan. If they were in India, where on earth was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how come that until only the other day it was India?

One inmate had got so badly caught up in this India-Pakistan-Pakistan-India rigmarole that one day, while sweeping the floor, he dropped everything, climbed the nearest tree and installed himself on a branch. The guards asked him to get down; instead he went a branch higher, and when threatened with punishment, declared: 'I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree.'

When he was finally persuaded to come down, he began embracing his Sikh and Hindu friends, tears running down his cheeks, fully convinced that they were about to leave him and go to India.

There was another inmate, a Sikh, who had been confined for the last fifteen years. Whenever he spoke, it was the same mysterious gibberish: '*Uper the gur gur the annex the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain.*' Guards said he had not slept a wink in fifteen years. Occasionally, he could be observed leaning against a wall, but the rest of the time, he was always to be found standing. Because of this, his legs were permanently swollen, something that did not appear to bother him. Recently, he had started to listen carefully to discussions about the forthcoming exchange of Indian and Pakistani lunatics. When asked his opinion, he observed solemnly: '*Uper the gur gur the annex the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the Government of Pakistan.*'

Of late, however, instead of talking about the Government of Pakistan in his chant he had started talking about the Government of Toba Tek Singh. Toba Tek Singh was a small town in the Punjab which was his home. He had begun inquiring where the town of Toba Tek Singh was to go. However, nobody was quite sure whether it was in India or Pakistan.

The old man's hair was almost gone, and what little was left had become a part of the beard, giving him a strange, even frightening, appearance. However, he was a harmless fellow and had never been known to get into fights. Older attendants at the asylum said that he was once a fairly prosperous landlord from Toba Tek Singh, who had quite suddenly gone mad. His family had brought him in, bound and fettered. That was fifteen years ago.

His real name was Bishan Singh, but everybody called him Toba Tek Singh because he was always talking about it. Once a month, he used to have visitors, but since the start of communal troubles in the Punjab, they had stopped coming. He lived in a kind of limbo, having no idea what day of the week it was, or month, or how many years had passed since his confinement. However, Bishan Singh had developed a sixth sense about the day of the visit, when he used to bathe himself, soap his body, oil and comb his hair and put on clean clothes. He never said a word during these meetings, except occasional outbursts of '*Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dbayana the mung the dal o f the laltain.*'

Since the start of this India-Pakistan caboodle, he had got into the habit of asking fellow inmates where exactly the town of Toba Tek Singh was, without receiving a satisfactory answer, because nobody knew. He was increasingly restless, but, more than that, curious. Not only had his visits stopped, but so too had the sixth sense, which used to alert him to the day of the visit.

He missed his family, the gifts they used to bring and the concern with which they used to speak to him. He was sure they would have told him whether the town of Toba Tek Singh was in India or Pakistan.

Then one day, one of Bishan Singh's Muslim friends from Toba Tek Singh came to see him for the first time in fifteen years. Bishan Singh looked at his Muslim friend once and turned away, until a guard said to him: 'This is your old friend. He has come all the way to meet you.'

Bishan Singh looked at his friend and began to mumble something. His friend placed his hand on his Bishan Singh's shoulder and said: 'I have been meaning to come for some time to bring you the news. All your family is well and has gone to India safely. I did what I could to help. Your daughter Roop Kaur.' - he hesitated - 'She is safe too ... in India.'

Bishan Singh kept quiet. His Muslim friend continued: 'Your family wanted me to make sure you were well. Soon you will be moving to India. What can I say, except that you should remember me to bhai Balbir Singh, bhai Vadhawa Singh and bahain Amrit Kaur. Tell bhai Bibir Singh that I am well by the grace of God. The two brown buffaloes he left behind are well too. Both of them gave birth to calves, but, unfortunately, one of them died after six days. Say I think of them often and to write to me if there is anything I can do.'

Then he added: 'Here, I brought you some rice crispies from home.'

Bishan Singh took the gift and handed it to one of the guards. 'But where is Toba Tek Singh?' he asked of his friend.

'Where?' said his friend ' Why, it is where it has always been.'

'In India or in Pakistan?'

'In India ..' said the friend then frowned 'No, in Pakistan.'

Without saying another word, Bishan Singh walked away, murmuring: *'Uper the gur gur the annexe the be dhyana the mung the dal of the Pakistan and Hindustan dur fittey moun.'*

Meanwhile, exchange arrangements were rapidly getting finalised. Lists of lunatics from the two sides had been exchanged between the governments, and the date of transfer fixed.

On a cold winter evening, buses full of Hindu and Sikh lunatics, accompanied by armed police and officials, began moving out of the Lahore asylum towards Wagah, the dividing line between India and Pakistan. Senior officials from the two sides in charge of exchange arrangements met, signed documents and the transfer got under way.

It was quite a job getting the men out of the buses and handing them over to officials. Some just refused to leave. Those who were persuaded to do so began to run pell-mell in every direction. Some were stark naked. All efforts to get them to cover themselves had failed because they couldn't be kept from tearing off their garments. Some were shouting abuse or singing. Others were weeping bitterly. Many fights broke out.

When Bishan Singh was brought out and asked to give his name so that it could be recorded in a register, he asked the official behind the desk: 'Where is Toba Tek Singh? In India or Pakistan?'

'Pakistan,' the official answered with a vulgar laugh.

At the reply Bishan Singh looked horrified. He tried to run, but was overpowered by the Pakistani guards who tried to push him across the dividing line towards India. However, he wouldn't move. 'This is Toba Tek Singh,' he announced. *'Uper the gur gur the annexe the be dybana mung the dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan.'*

Many efforts were made to explain to him that Toba Tek Singh had already been moved to India, or would be moved immediately, but it had no effect on Bishan Singh. The guards even tried force, but soon gave up.

There he stood in no man's land on his swollen legs like a colossus.

Since he was a harmless old man, no further attempt was made to push him into India. He was allowed to stand where he wanted, while the exchange continued. The night wore on.

Just before sunrise, Bishan Singh, the man who had stood on his legs for fifteen years, screamed and as officials from the two sides rushed towards him, he collapsed to the ground.

There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh. Or the namesake of Toba Tek Singh.