

A SHADOW FROM THE PAST

Prachi Malhotra

Assistant Professor
Business Communication And
Human Resource Development
GALGOTIAS, Gr.Noida (UP)

I had a very wonderful childhood. With the grace of almighty I possessed a very sharp memory as a child and still I do. Due to this I was nicknamed as “*ELEPHANTUS*” by my elder brother. His vast knowledge said that elephant has such strong memory that it can recognize a person (The one who has done good or bad to him) even after several years and behave with him accordingly. His belief was that I treat him the same way as I was never forgetful of good and bad things he did to me.

My father originally belonged to Sultanpur Lodhi in Punjab, but due to his profession, a civil engineer with the Central Water Commission of India, he travelled across the country. His frequent visits to Sultanpur Lodhi reduced to one or two in a year due to his extensive travelling. He married my mother who also hails from Punjab and a choice of his elder brother lala Roshan lal whom later we used to address as “pitaji”, there was age gap of 10 years between the two brothers. My grandfather lala Lahori Ram died long before my father’s marriage. My mother adjusted very well with my father’s transfers. She mastered the art of “packing and unpacking” as she says that in those days i.e. in 1970’s there was no facility of “packers and movers” as we have it now.

As years passed, we became a family of five. My parents, myself and my two elder brothers. As kids we also adjusted well to the transfers and enjoyed our stay in different parts of the country learning new cultures, enjoying every bit of the facilities given by the Indian government to my officer father and making new friends. Out of three of his children I was the one who was hot favorite of my father (daughters always are). We shared many common interests; Reading is one such interest which I have inherited from my father. He has huge collection of books. He is a firm believer that “books are man’s best friends. My father told me that in the initial years of his job (1965) he was posted to remote and lonely areas of Bhutan, Kargil, Drass and leh. His only friends were either books or All India Radio with Ameen Sayani (who revolutionized the concept of radio jockey in India). He took a vested interest in reading and collected lot of books, later I owned them, the original series of Ian Fleming’s James Bond, Perry Mason series which few would know, is a better detective than the most famed Sherlock Holmes, The God father first version, classics like Rebecca, Gone with the wind (which I read 10 times as a teenager and imagined myself to be Scarlett ‘O’Hara the main female protagonist who was beautiful, charming, intelligent and treated men like trash). And many more.

But, this was not the only common interest we shared; I was my father’s companion and most inquisitive listener when he used to narrate the incidents of his childhood in Sultanpur lodhi and most important person in his life Lala Lahori Ram ---My Grandfather. Even after so many years

that I got married and my father became a grandfather of six from three of his progeny; I am still close to him and a subject of envy for my well settled, beloved brothers.

Last Sunday while we were coming back home in a newly bought Toyota Fortuner my loving husband's dream car, after viewing the heavily popular biopic "Bhag Milkha Bhag" (in celebration of the new SUV).My eight years old daughter who is very inquisitive and a "true copy of mine" as referred by my father ,her granddad , popped up a question that "Mom, is this true that partition between India and Pakistan was so painful that Milkha Singh could not forget it and lost the most important race of his life –Rome Olympics. After giving her query a satisfactory answer I closed my eyes, and in the comfort of our new SUV drifted down the memory lane, the elephant inside me started his journey on the road which took him to Sultanpur lodhi in Punjab where once lived another Milkha Singh my granddad lala Lahori Ram who witnessed the bloodshed of partition and could not bear it. My father narrated this incident of his father's life to me when I was eight years old.

Before I travel further down the memory lane, it's important to tell the brief history of Sultanpur lodhi. This will justify the presence of Muslim majority in this particular area of Punjab. Sultanpur Lodhi is one of the most ancient cities of India, estimated to be established in around 1st century AD. This city, in the period of the centuries, witnessed the ups and downs in terms of politics, religion, literature, trade and commerce. It was a major place of meditation and knowledge for Buddhism. In that period, the city was known by the name 'Sarwmanpur'. It is also believed that the ancient Buddhist book of 'Abinav-Prastava' was authored here by **Katiyana** in 8th century. This place was established as a great empire of Hinduism and Buddhism. In the Medieval times when the Afghan ruler **Mahmud of Ghazni** invaded this area, this city was burnt to ashes by his army, as being a Hindu - Buddhist city. The proof is thick layer of black soil, found few meters below the ground level here. City of Sarwmanpur after that was nothing but a bunch of peoples living in destroyed city. This was the end of ancient city of "Sarwmanpur".

The city was restored once again as Sultanpur Lodhi, in the 12th century by Sultan, son of Hakim, who was the cousin of Muhammad shah then Emperor of Delhi. Gradually it became the Hub of Muslims and Hindus and later on Sikhs also, after the arrival of Guru Nanakdev ji the first Sikh Guru who was enlighten here in the river Kali bein which flows between the cities. Sultanpur Lodhi, in those days was not only famous for its surrounding or trade, but also for its education. City had many Islamic schools of education known as "Madarasas". The two princes of Delhi, Aurangzeb and Dara-sekoh completed their studies in one white mosque of Sultanpur Lodhi.

My father did his early schooling in one such Madarassa. My grandfather lala Lahori Ram was from a well to do family of oil traders. They were famous especially for the "Bhringoil" which is a kind of hair potion prepared from the "brahmi herbs" for black, thick and lustrous hair. People in Sultanpur lodhi be it Hindu, Muslim or a Sikh were very fond of this oil. My grandfather made riches out of this and he was equally benevolent. A kind hearted man who used to donate a lot of money in charity and help the needy. He was liked by everyone in the town and was addressed as "Mahashian ji" a title given to the most respected person. He believed in brotherhood and had lot of Muslim friends, with whom he shared a lot of evening parties over "Hookahs "and sweet milky tea served by my grandmother ,a devoted wife and a loving mother.

Our ancestral house (haveli) had big “verandah”- an open indoor space and lots of rooms shared with my Grandfather’s brother lala Kishori lal and his family, who was also involved in the oil trade but not as popular as my grandfather lala Lahori Ram was, for whom entire sultanpur was his family. My grandfather was very fond of a small mud enclosure of his house; here he used to experiment with his herbs and oils. No one was allowed to come to this corner of the house. Everyone obeyed this including my three years old father and his 13 yrs old brother lala Roshan lal whom we later addressed as “pitaji”. Lala Lahori Ram was quite aware of his elder son’s (pitaji’s) wayward habits so he pinned all his hopes on my father and considered him as his true heir not only in monetary terms but humanity and kindness also.

Once he bought home, a lot of caged birds from the weekly market. My father that time very young was excited to see his “pets”. But lala Lahori Ram asked his younger son, my father to set them free. Then he explained the importance of freedom to his son. Life was smooth and happy going. Then came the year of freedom and partition. For some the reason to celebrate and for some to mourn. Everyday there was news of massacre around the city .Overnight the friends became foes, Muslims craved for Hindu blood and vice-versa. But the major blow was to the Muslim majority of Sultanpur lodhi as this area of Punjab was in the territory of recently formed Hindustan. Muslims were compelled to go to Pakistan and Hindus on the other side in Pakistan flee to Hindustan for their lives leaving all their wealth and riches back home with the hope that one fine day they will come and collect it. The day has never come till date. Once again Sultanpur lodhi became the replica of what it had been during Ghazni’s era, a pathetic site of destruction.

In this tense environment lala Lahori Ram could not withstand the fact that his fellow Hindu friends who in a fit of rage had turned a cold shoulder to their Muslim friends. But lala Lahori Ram did what he wanted and sheltered every Muslim that he could. No one could muster the courage to stop him. He was the one man army for Muslim protection. My father, as a child did not understood a bit of it. But he was confused for what he saw daily. He saw that everyday his father lala Lahori Ram carries a heavy sack and store it in the mud establishment of his house where everyone was forbidden to go. He used to see how sad lalaji was, lalaji’s only focus was safety of his Muslim friends, who earnestly trusted him. He protected all his friends and safely send them to other side of the border, with a promise that one fine day they will come back to him.

By the end of this most traumatic event in the history of India, The mud establishment was stuffed with heavy sacks. Sultanpur lodi gradually started coming back to life again. People tried to move ahead but for some, time stopped, they could not bear the brunt of partition. Lalaji was one of them. This took to lala Lahori Ram’s health and to his business .He became a recluse and spent most of his time in the mud establishment. Lala Roshan lal (pitaji) tried to take over the business along with lala Kishorilal but due to their wayward habits they lost most of it. The “Bhringoi” lost its luster and shine. After 4 years of partition one day, Lala Lahori Ram, my grandfather was found paralyzed against the wall of mud establishment. When he came to senses he called for my father, whom he considered his true heir, a 10 year old, asked him to go the mud establishment and open all the sacks and donate the wealth accumulated in it to the nearby mosque. He said “I promised my Muslim friends that I will protect this wealth till I die; now my time has come, so please do as I say before I take my final breath.” My father, who has witnessed the downfall of his father from a king to a helpless, sad man, did what lalaji wished. With heavy heart he told all the family members and all of them gathered around the mud

establishment. Curiosity was killing them. Pitaji was cribbing that instead of donation this wealth could be used for upheaval of the fallen business.

But the moment my father started opening the sacks, the feeling of shock, disbelief, and amazement could be seen on the ashen faces of family members. As all the sacks contained copies of “QURAN” and other religious Muslim scriptures in all shapes and sizes. Which later my grandfather explained that he saved it from the riots otherwise the extremists would have burnt them. Respecting every religion is the actual wealth. These were the sweet memories of my Muslim friends. He also said that all his friends wanted him to protect the jewellery and the money they had but he preferred what he liked, a staunch Hindu Arya samaji, protecting the “QURAN”. Shielding it against all odds.

My father did what lalaji wanted; he kept few copies in the mud establishment and donated the rest to the nearby mosque. Lala lahori Ram died in peace after this. Leaving his son my father, his true heir who till date is as benevolent and secular as his father, a staunch Hindu Arya Samaji.

Few years ago, during my college days the ancestral property of Sultanpur lodhi was put up for sale. I accompanied my father for this as I was very curious to see the place where lala Lahori Ram lived. All my uncles, aunts their children have moved out of it and are well settled. A unanimous decision was taken to sell it off. My father due to his services with Central water commission has long lost the touch with Sultanpur lodhi and had no interest to keep the haveli, as for him it had bitter memories of his father’s sad demise rather than his sweet childhood. My grandmother also died few years after lalaji’s death and my father was brought up by his 10 yrs elder brother lala Roshan lal (our pitaji). Who also died fighting cancer. Pitaji’s family stayed in the haveli for some time; eventually they also migrated from there for their respective reasons. While the elders were engrossed in the formalities, I moved around the house and tried to smell the laughter of lalaji and his friends over the hookah parties in the palatial verandah. Soon I entered the mud establishment, which still seems to me the most forbidden place. It was left untouched since lala Lahori Ram’s demise. In the corner of it I found an old, rusted iron trunk, the opening was jammed due to the solid rust layer on it. I fought tough and managed to open it, in that laid the empty bottles and paper covers of “bhringoil” and on each bottle stickered was a, vibrant, smiling picture of lala Lahori ram with his thick moustaches and pathani turban....