All About My Mother

Krishna Bose witnessed the ecstasy as well as the agony of freedom. Her memoirs, now translated into English by her son SUMANTRA BOSE, chronicle history's passion play.

**EXCERPT**

**Delhi 1947**

Meanwhile the instability gripping the nation caused instability in my life as well. The matriculation examinations kept getting postponed. On 20 February 1947 I heard Clement Atlee, the British prime minister, announce on the radio that Britain would leave India by 15 June 1948. This was a reasonable timeframe for departure. Lord Mountbatten, who had replaced Wavell as India's viceroy on 2 February, later advanced the date to 15 August 1947.

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My matriculation examinations were again postponed, to start from 19 May instead of 17 April. It was difficult to predict what might happen next. When I received my admit card on 8 May, it seemed that the examinations would finally be held. I finished my examinations on 7 June 1947. On 3 June a radio broadcast by Mountbatten announcing the Partition of India was aired from London and New Delhi. This caused great worry to my family. Mother had relatives in Dhaka while Father had relatives in Mymensingh. Both these districts would definitely go to Pakistan.

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As a family we were terribly demoralised by the division of Bengal. Although long-time Cuttacas, Father and Mother were both from East Bengal and had grown up there. It was our very personal blow for them. My diary entry for 20 June records an evening discussion at our flat above Rashbehari Avenue between Mother, Father, my Chhoto kaka (Uncle Benode, the youngest of Father’s five brothers) and me. We were all very sad. Father kept saying that after all the sacrifices and contributions Bengal and Bengalis had made to the cause of India’s freedom this outcome was hard to accept.

Uncle Nirad wrote to Father that he should be sent to Delhi for a vacation since I was sitting at home after the conclusion of my examinations. I couldn’t travel alone so Mother accompanied me. Mother and I reached Delhi on 30 July 1947. We stayed until 15 September. For one and a half months I had a ringside view of Independence and Partition in the national capital. It was a truly extraordinary experience.

Our address during those weeks was the P&O Building on Nicholson Road in old Delhi. Uncle Nirad lived with his family in a flat in this building. The road was named after John Nicholson (1822–1857), a particularly brutal military officer of the East India Company. He led the re-capture of Delhi from the rebels in November 1857, and died later of wounds from the fighting. After his death he became a central figure in the British narrative of 1857. An imposing statue of Nicholson in uniform, a very longsword dangling from his waist, stood on a pedestal at Nicholson Park off the road. After Independence it was removed to a courtyard, but was placed back in origin, where it stands today in the grounds of the school he went to as a boy.

At that time Uncle Nirad was writing the book that would make him the internationally known writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri a few years later—The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian (1953). I would wake early in the morning to the ‘clack’ of his typewriter. Delhi was hot but even in the summer and most of the building’s residents would sleep on the roof at night. Because I had a tendency to catch cold easily I would sleep on the flat’s south facing verandah on a rope charpoy (khata). Late into the night Uncle Nirad would sit on the floor beside my bed, reading out long passages from the manuscript. There was much interest in his childhood in East Bengal—tales of the ancestral village of Banagram, stories of life at the turn of the century in Kishoreganj town. My father, two years older than Uncle Nirad, featured very frequently in the narrative. After a while I realised that I was Father’s proxy in these reading sessions. ‘Tell dada this is how I’ve written about Kishoreganj,’ Uncle Nirad would instruct me, ‘and remembler to tell dada how I’ve described the verandah in the village.’ One day he whispered the title of the book in my ear. ‘Tell dada, but no one else must know,’ he said.

The reading sessions were fine but I would get uncomfortable when Uncle Nirad launched into one of his tributes about India and its future (or rather, the lack of a future). A fervent, almost comical loyalist of the British Empire, he was convinced that India had no future whatsoever after British rule. He told me that India would split into many fragments once the British left. The concept of dialogue was unknown to Uncle Nirad throughout his long life (he died aged 101 in 1999 in Oxford, having permanently moved to England in the 1960s). He would simply deliver monologues on a variety of subjects. I was the ultimate captive audience but would occasionally protest. He was adamant that while some individual Indians would certainly shine in the world, India as a country had no prospects. I was especially disturbed by how disrespectfully he spoke about our national leaders. Gandhi was a crafty, scheming operator, a prize hypocrite of ours. He was blazing with light. All the major public buildings and monuments had been lit up. As the evening progressed, we could see the entire city lit up. Uncle Nirad was about to be trampled by a policeman mounted on a horse. Someone pulled me out of the way just in time. Delhi went from celebration to carnage in a matter of days. Hindu and Sikh refugees from western Punjab had been trickling into Delhi for months. Now the influx became a flood. The apartment building on Nicholson Road overlooked one part of the boundary walls of the Red Fort. Refugees camped by and large in the streets and in the compound of the building. One day the Sikh gentleman returned in a drawn taxi of Delhi in those days. The Muslim tonga driver plunged a knife into his abdomen. He pulled out the knife, took off his turban and bandaged his stomach with the cloth. He then drove the tonga home. He died after three days.

Soon Delhi was put under curfew. The longest spell lasted eighty-four hours and a half days. We would go out in the roof of the P&O building to try and get a sense of what was going on. The city was covered with thick plumes of smoke from numerous fires. There was a tin of egg powder at home. I don’t recall ever seeing this product again, possibly it was a leftover from wartime rations. Mother and I swayed uselessly and a variety of egg dishes appeared at the dinner table. Uncle Nirad decreed that the atmosphere in the flat must remain as normal as possible. To that end he banned the use of certain words from our conversations: murder, looting, rape.

At the beginning of the riot I had a hair-raising experience. I was at the beginning of the road, hadn’t ridden a bicycle for months. Now the influx became a flood. The apartment building on Nicholson Road overlooked one part of the boundary walls of the Red Fort. Refugees camped by and large in the streets and in the compound of the building. One day the Sikh gentleman returned in a drawn taxi of Delhi in those days. The Muslim tonga driver plunged a knife into his abdomen. He pulled out the knife, took off his turban and bandaged his stomach with the cloth. He then drove the tonga home. He died after three days. Soon Delhi was put under curfew. The longest spell lasted eighty-four hours and a half days. We would go out in the roof of the P&O building to try and get a sense of what was going on. The city was covered with thick plumes of smoke from numerous fires. There was a tin of egg powder at home. I don’t recall ever seeing this product again, possibly it was a leftover from wartime rations. Mother and I swayed uselessly and a variety of egg dishes appeared at the dinner table. Uncle Nirad decreed that the atmosphere in the flat must remain as normal as possible. To that end he banned the use of certain words from our conversations: murder, looting, rape.

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little while ago. Leave this area immediately.'

We panicked. I had never thought I could cycle so fast. We had no idea what direction we were going, we just went. After a while I was overcome with exhaustion and fear. I stopped, got off and sat down by the road. Dhruba managed to find a tonga-wallah. We went on the tonga with our cycles and reached home via a circuitous route. By that time the morning papers had arrived and Mother, Uncle Nirad and his wife were on the verandah, looking out for us with anxious faces. To this day it surprises me how Uncle Nirad could have sent the three of us—a girl of sixteen and two boys aged fourteen and twelve—out to find his missing servant, apparently oblivious to the tinderbox situation in Delhi.

One day the curfew was relaxed for half an hour. Dhruba went out to the post office and came back with a sheaf of letters. There were several from Father. Both he and Uncle Benode were very worried at the news from Delhi. One letter contained news of my matriculation results. I had not done very well but had passed in the first division with seventy per cent marks. Father wanted me to return to Calcutta as soon as possible to be enrolled in college.

That was easier said than done. The rioting had subsided but Delhi was far from normal. During the rioting Dilip kaka—Dilip Sanyal, a professor of English at Delhi University's Ramjas College and a friend of Uncle Nirad's—had joined us in the flat on Nicholson Road. Eventually it was decided that he, Mother and I would travel to Calcutta together. On 15 September 1947 the three of us boarded a train at Old Delhi station. The station and its vicinity were littered with putrefying corpses. Uncle Nirad came to see us off. He kept saying that we were from an aristocratic family. The gang was not impressed with us—a girl of sixteen and two boys aged fourteen and twelve—because most of Bengal was now part of Pakistan. A sharp argument broke out between the gang and our Sikh co-passengers. The orphaned girl led the confrontation with the gang. The argument was in Punjabi but I could make out some of it. She gestured towards Dilip Uncle and I heard her say, ‘He’s a professor.’ Then she gestured towards Mother and me, saying that we were from an aristocratic family. The gang was not persuaded but they moved on to the next compartment with an ominous ‘We’re coming back.’

A little later the train pulled into Kanpur. Evening had fallen. I looked out on to the platform and saw a large contingent of British soldiers—‘Tommies’ as they were known then—lined up in formation, guns at the ready. They boarded the train and moved systematically through the carriages. The gang was apprehended and taken away. I had never imagined that the appearance of British soldiers could provide such deliverance.

We had been an independent country for a month at that time. After Kanpur there was no further disturbance. I climbed on to the next compartment with an ominous ‘We’re coming back.’