APPENDIX 2

VEENA SHARMA’S ACCOUNT

I was six, getting on to seven, where we – my parents, elder brother a younger sister and I – were living in Balloki, a small township in the western part of the main Punjab, located on the site of a water headwork on the river Ravi from where the Bari Doab canal emerged. There were a lot of people around in our household, all of whom appeared to me like members of our extended family. Called by different names or designations like chowkidars, malis, beldars, orderlies, mates and so on, they were in and out of the house at all times of day and night. Life had its own kind of excitement: we used to go out swimming or boating, we also accompanied our father on long drives when he went on inspection tours, criss- crossing rivulets, water lagoons and other water bodies as also going through various villages. It used to be exciting when friends and relatives used to come to stay with us and we took them around. Sometimes we would go up to Lahore, some fifty miles away, to meet friends and relatives, do some shopping, watch movies and return. I had an aunt there who would wear only khadi and who gave me my first lessons in patriotism and nationalism.

Little did I know that life was going to take a turn that would be irreversible. It was sometime after 15 August, may be even late August when I remember seeing a lot of changes taking place. One day our cows and buffaloes were taken away by the beldars and malis (gardeners in the house): perhaps my parents had given them to those people. The cows and buffaloes did not want to go, as it looked like a break in the routine to them. They were pulled and dragged by the ropes by which they were tied. I even saw tears trickling down their eyes. A young horse was kept for my brother. That, too, was taken away. It was hard for me to understand what exactly was happening as parents did not always explain things – whether it was anything to do with family rivalry or history or even other momentous things – perhaps they thought silence was the right way of keeping us protected from those events.

Soon after, a railway wagon was loaded with all the household effects and sealed – the wagon could come almost up to the gate of the house as there was a train track there – I think it was meant to transport things from the nearest rail station some six miles away up to the headwork. It was used only when material had to be transported to the headwork, as it was not a normal rail route. We had spent many an afternoon rolling down this track on hand pushed trolleys that used to ply on this track particularly to carry higher officials to wherever they needed to go.
At times we would place a small coin on the track to find it pressed flat after an engine had passed over it – that was only when the engine plied that way.

Now I know that my father’s subordinate staff was coming every day to advise him to leave the place as it was not safe for him and the family to continue staying there after the situation had changed so dramatically. They even offered to accompany us up to a point so that we could move out safely. But as a disciplined civil servant, my father would say that he would not move out till the received ‘orders’ for his next posting. The wait was a never ending one.

Ultimately, when the orders did not come, my father decided to move out, handing over charge to, his next in command and leave. My mother, brother and sister, together with Santu (our Himachali domestic help) were stuffed into my father’s old Pontiac car, together with some items of immediate need including a surahi full of water. My father was at the wheel. He had a gun and Santu, slung an empty pistol holster filled with newspapers across his chest! Many came to see us off. They had been with us for all the years that we had been there and now we did not know if we would ever see them again.

Just as the car was about to move out, two Sikh gentlemen with a young girl – the daughter of one of them - came up to the car requesting my father to take them along, as otherwise they might get killed and the young girl raped. My father could not say ‘no’ although carrying them enhanced the risk, as Sikhs were more easily identifiable. So, they too were squeezed in. Both the men carried long kirpans slung across their shoulders.

The car moved out, traversing kutchha canal roads that were well known to my father who had often driven on them. Altaf Ahmad’s (the officer whom my father had handed over his charge) vehicle moved ahead like a pilot car up to a point where he bade us a touching good bye.

Almost immediately after Ahmad parted company with us we noticed a boy outside a village had spotted us approaching. He shouted something and within a minute some four hundred persons carrying long spears appeared – blocking the road about five-hundred yards ahead of us (it was interesting that Altaf Ahmad had left us just there – knowingly or unknowingly). It looked as though we would be waylaid there. But in an amazing show of quick wittedness my father slowed down the car as though he were going to stop. The crowd divided itself on both sides of the road. This gave him the required opportunity. So, as soon as we neared the crowd he revved the car to the maximum and sped away. The car jumped several feet and I thought it would fall into the canal that flowed beside the road. Some from the crowd ran behind the car, luckily their spears did not pierce a tire but they managed to peel off the number-plate. Inside the car our hearts were beating fast. It could not be known if they had associates further up along the canal road.

After driving further for some time, when sun set was approaching, my father stopped at a rest house which he must have used innumerable times during his
inspection tours. He went in and came back with the information that the chowkidar had advised him not to stop there for the night as marauders came every night, killed anyone they found and threw the bodies into the canal. He said it was better to stop somewhere in the jungle, hide there and then take off quickly in the early hours of the following morning.

My father drove further. Dusk faded into a dark night. Tall column of fires were visible on all sides in the villages around and sounds of bachao, bachao could be heard in the air. My father veered off the road and drove into a sort of scrubby bush, keeping the canal as his guide post. He stopped the car. The two sardars, who could easily be identified due to the long beards they sported and who, in no way could pass off as Muslims were made to lie down under the car. My parents sat outside while we children remained inside the car. The weather was very hot – perhaps not the less because of the fires around. The surahi broke during the melee. We were thirsty. Santu, the faithful young helper walked up to the canal through the scrub and brought water. I remember, in the darkened hush of the night the water tasted very sweet. It was only later that I got to know that the muddy river carried a number of dead bodies in her bosom. I do not know why we did not get infected or get sick.

In the early hours of the morning, when it was still dark (it may have been something like three in the morning), my father decided to start the car with as little noise as possible. But it would not move. The wheels were stuck in the swampy mud. Everyone tried lifting the tires and simultaneously pushing the car – but to no avail. In his enthusiasm Santu opened the cap of the radiator to check the water. The boiling water gushed out and burnt his hands. Quietly he applied some wet mud and carried on.

Trying to seek some help, my father walked up to a truck that he saw standing nearly. He peeped into its back with the help of his torch and quietly walked back. As I was told later, it was full of dead bodies.

As providence would have it, after all the efforts the car started. Slowly we moved along towards a direction that was well known to our pilot, my father. As dawn started to break we saw a number of bullock carts loaded up to the top with what looked like hay on which numerous people sat coming from the opposite direction, into what was Pakistan now. My father softly whispered to mother that under all that hay were concealed weapons and that riots could break out at the slightest provocation. He moved with caution in the direction of the Ferozpur headwork on the river Sutlej which was in India. As we tried to get in we came across a barricade beyond which we were not allowed to proceed. Having come all the way across the areas which were now Pakistan we were being prevented from entering the country that was ours!

At this point my mother took hold of my brother who was about ten years old and went up to the barricade, asked a militiaman on duty to let her make a phone call. He allowed that. Soon after, an uncle who was posted at Ferozpur (he too was an
irrigation engineer), arrived and our car was allowed to go through the barricade to ‘India’. The ordeal, lasting some eighteen to twenty hours, came to an end.

I have no memory of how long we stayed at Ferozpur. My next memory is that of a train journey to Delhi. We travelled with frightened passengers who were continuously being served hot milk and chanas by sturdy looking Sikhs whenever the train stopped at a station. They cajoled us also into accepting something, when we declined. I saw these Sikhs at one stage, running madly after a single person who wore a chutia on his shaven head. They claimed that he was pretending to be a Hindu. They managed to stop the train and ran after him into a bush shouting murga, murga. I also remember seeing darkened and swollen dead bodies lying strewn along the railway track.

On my first entry into Delhi, I felt that the city looked terror stricken. This city was one day to become my home. We stayed at the house of an aunt, a single storied bungalow, in the vicinity of Connaught Place. In the evenings we would walk to Connaught Place, which looked devastated with window panes broken, and hardly anybody there. We slept on the roof top terrace of the house which we climbed up by using a bamboo ladder which would be pulled up after we had reached the terrace. The women and children were on the terrace roof top where quite a number of bricks were kept for their safety, while the men folk took turns walking around the area keeping vigil.

One day I saw some hefty looking persons taking out furniture and other items from a house next door and throwing them into a fire that they had lit outside in the lane. The house owner came out pleading, “Ab yeh to rehnedijiyey” (kindly allow at least this piece to remain). But the burly men paid no heed. The owner, apparently, was a Muslim.

Shortly afterwards we left for Shimla where my father got his new assignment. I do not know how this was worked out (as all the departments would have been new and how they placed persons where they did, must have called for a mammoth operation). There, too, initially we stayed with some friends. Winter was fast approaching and we had no warm clothing, leave alone any other necessary household articles. Somehow my parents managed to put things together after we moved into our first house in independent India named Edelweiss, located on the slope of a hill, leaving the memories of Balloki and the car drive from there to Ferozepur behind, at least for some time.