

Transcription of our Interview with Mr. Radha Krishan Bhagia

Date: 16.03.20

Place: Mumbai

Q. Could you please tell me your name and your occupation?

A. My name is Radha Krishan Bhagia. I'm retired now but I was working as an Assistant manager in the Reserve Bank of India. I retired in 2002 and since then I'm working for the Sindhi society and for the nation.

Q. What is your age, sir?

A. Seventy-five

Q. What was your age during the partition in 1947?

A. I was two years old then.

Q. So you got to know the most about it from your elders?

A. Yes, because of my social nature since childhood, I used to ask questions from my father, grandfather or from the people about the existing environment present there.

Q. You were two years old then, right? So, your father must have told you about the village you were living in?

A. We were living in the Kandvaro village in Nawab Shah district of Sindh province.

Q. What was the demography then? How many Hindus or Muslims lived there? Any approximate idea about that?

A. Though I don't have much idea about it, I think there would have been three to four million Sindhi living there. Actually, they were about six million Sindhi, if you count both the Hindu and Muslim Sindhi together out of which about 2.5 million were Hindu Sindhi. Sindhi were both Hindu and Muslim.

Q. You are talking about Sindh province, right?

A. Yes, Punjab and Bengal are different matters. Because partition also happened there.

Q. How much was your village away from Karachi?

A. About 200 km away.

Q. Which members of your family migrated with you and when?

A. I will first talk about the partition. The Hindu society was not ready for the partition because they had faith that it would not happen due to the assurance given to them by Gandhi and Nehru. So, they were not ready to face it and to leave the country. They were living a normal life there. But when the partition actually happened, from what I have heard from the elders, they had to leave the place suddenly leaving everything behind. They left the country only with a pair of cloth and some jewellery which the women could hide inside their clothes, although most of which were seized from them. They only left enough space for one or two persons to walk at a time in the streets. The Muslims (Mujahidin) who came from Bihar and other places in India and also the people (Muslims) living there were standing on both sides of the street and you had to walk through that only. So, they had to leave all their luggage there.

Q. So people could not bring their luggage with them?

A. No, they had to leave everything there whether it was gold, money, food grains or the village itself.

Q. How did you come to India?

A. We came on the ship from Karachi but many people came by train also. People who came from trains, as most people have told me, were half-filled with the dead bodies. Almost every family has lost at least one or two of its members.

Q. How many people from your village came with you on the ship. Were you coming individually or in the groups?

A. No, we were leaving in our individual capacity. Whomsoever were getting the chance was leaving one by one.

Q. So you were not leaving in groups?

A. No, but they used to form the groups on the way. Sometimes, people from two-three streets moved together but if all the village would have decided to go together then they (Muslims) would have known and it could increase their difficulties further. So, they used to leave only with the people from two or three streets together. One of my friends tells me that they didn't even allow him to bring his father's dead body which had been shot dead by them. He had to leave it there only. They didn't even get to know what had happened to his father's dead body.

Q. They couldn't even perform any rituals there?

A. No.

Q. Could you please tell me which members of your family came with you?

A. My parents, cousin uncle, my father's sisters, me and my elder brother came together. My elder brother was 4-5 years old and I was only two then.

Q. When your family was in Sindh, what was their occupation there?

A. My father was a servant in the PWD department there. We had our farmlands and cows, buffalos also there.

Q. What did your uncle do?

A. He was a farmer. We were involved in government jobs along with the agriculture and cow buffalos also.

Q. Did your family use to sell your product from agriculture?

A. Yes

Q. What other occupations were Sindhi involved in?

A. Most of the Muslims used to work under the Hindu landowners then. They were mostly laborers then and used to work under the Hindus. Many people from Sindh also used to go to another British province for trade purposes from China, Mongolia to Russia. They used to do banking there. You can say that the business of banking has been started by the Sindhi society. What you call Promissory notes today (like bonds) we used to call them "*Hundi*". It was done by the Sindhi people moving in foreign countries.

Q. Do they use it to go toward Middle-east countries like Saudi Arabia?

A. Yes, they went there also. They used to go by walking which took them three to four months to reach. It was a risky job though.

Q. So, Sindhi people are also there in the Middle-East?

A. Yes, most of them were involved in the money lending business only.

Q. Were your family also involved in this money lending business?

A. No

Q. What languages did you speak there in the Sindh province?

A. Though our language was Sindhi there were two scripts used for writing: Devanagari and Arabi. And for the purpose of trade, they used another language, *Hatwanki* (Hat means shop). It's a mixture of both *Gurumukhi* and *Devanagari*.

Q. What is the script of Sindhi?

A. I'll tell you the History of Sindhi language. Hindi literature was completely destroyed after the attacks of Muslims in India and they imposed their Persian language on us whose script was Arabi. It is written from the right to the left. They tried to dominate their language completely. Our script was Devanagari but it could not last for long because 60-65 percent of the population converted their religion into Muslims. This led to the dominance of Arabi script on us.

But when the British came into India, the question of the script came back into the picture in 1843. They announced the Devanagari script as the real script of Sindhi society. But when it was challenged by the Sindhi Muslim society, the Britishers realized that 60% of the population are Muslims here. So, they announced the Arabi script as the real script of Sindhi society.

Q. You talked about the *Hatwanki* language. Did your father know this language?

A. No, it was only used for the trading purpose or in the shops. It was not a literature script.

Q. So most of the Sindhi literature has been written in the Arabi script?

A. Yes, and the older scripts written in Devanagari have been destroyed by them.

Q. About how much the population in the Sindhi society was educated?

A. About fifty percent were educated.

Q. Was this figure the same for the women also?

A. No, they didn't study much but they also could read and write. They didn't have a higher education but most of them read up to class eighth or ninth.

Q. Which languages were used in the schools?

A. Sindhi with an effect of Urdu or Persian over it.

Q. Did the teachers belong to a specific religion?

A. No, they were both Hindu and Muslims. See, before the partition, they both used to live together because these 60 percent of the Sindhi Muslims also had their origins in the Hindu only. They started changing their religion from the 11th century onwards. Akbar was also born in Sindh. So, these 60 percent were also Hindus in their origin. They used to celebrate festivals together.

Q. So, this conflict started after the partition?

A. It all started at the end of the 18th century when Liyakat Ali and Zinnah started provoking the people. There was no such conflict before that.

Q. What was the food culture then? Was it different for Hindu and Muslim?

A. No, it was mostly the same. To the extent of my knowledge, they used to consume *Jwaari* and *Bajri* a lot.

Q. Was meat specific to the Muslims or it was consumed by both the communities?

A. Hindu Sindhis also used to eat meat except for the Brahmins.

Q. Was the Sindhi society also divided among different castes then?

A. Yes, there were different castes but that was not given much importance then. There was no any caste-based village. But there was some difference at the district level which became significant during weddings.

Q. When did your family come to India?

A. We came here by train.

Q. You have mentioned previously that you came by ship!

A. Yes, we reached the *Gandhidham* port in Gujarat by ship and stayed at the bank of Sabarmati river for the next one year. Then we went to Kota in Rajasthan and stayed there for another year. We could not settle anywhere for the next two-three years in search of jobs. Then we went to Delhi and my father got a job and a house there.

Q. Was it given by the government?

A. Yes, the government has given us both jobs and houses. But my father didn't like the job and he found another job in the railway in Mumbai and a house in the barracks. The condition was very worse but my father used to like struggling.

You can imagine the situation where the barrack was the length of 6-12 bogies of a train without any walls separating them in between. There was no facility for water. People divided the barracks using shawls or bed sheets. There was forest all around and snakes or other insects were generally seen.

Q. Where was this barrack located?

A. Mulund

Q. Which job did your father get in Delhi by the government?

A. It was temporarily given by the government but my father couldn't bear the domination imposed over him by the local people and therefore he decided to leave the job. And he got a permanent job in railway here in Mumbai.

Q. Did you get any document claiming that you are a refugee from the government there?

A. No, there was no question of documents then. The government was not even asking for it because they were constantly denying the fact of partition itself. Later in India, the government opened offices at different places for the refugees and people get documents there. We were living in the military barracks in Mulund.

Q. Of which year you are talking about?

A. We came to Mulund in 1950. We spent three-four years moving around the country in search of jobs. I was about five years of age then.

We took admission in a school running inside a tent in Delhi. When we came to Mumbai, the government started running a few schools in the military barracks. I got admitted to one of those schools.

Q. What language did the teachers use there for teaching?

A. Sindhi-Arabi

Q. For how long did you read there?

A. I read up to class 11th there in Mulund and did my graduation from Somaiya college. After that, I joined the Reserve Bank of India.

Q. When did you join RBI?

A. In 1965.

Q. What were the other jobs that people used to do then?

A. People were involved in any type of job they could find like selling toffees, combs, clothes from village to village, etc. There are many big Sindhi traders now but most of their forefathers had started their business by selling goods by roaming from one village to another.

Q. What did your uncle do?

A. They went to Jaipur and started doing service there.

Q. Did you ever think of going back to Pakistan or were you decided that you will live here only?

A. We had been expecting that everything would be fine for the next three-four years and we would be able to go back to our homes. But the hope started diminishing after that.

Q. Could you please describe the camp life in detail?

A. British Indian military used to live in these barracks. We were asked to live there. There was no rooftop. We used to bring wood from the jungles for cooking. Although the government had provided the facility of rations (free of cost) there were very long queues for that.

People use to describe the situation by comparing it with a person who has hit someone's head and is now providing him with the bandages. The government is now trying to compensate for the consequences of partition by providing us with food and shelter. People were very angry.

Q. Did the people express their aggression towards the government or the provinces in any possible way?

A. No, there was no aggression toward this province. In fact, they were thankful that the people here have accepted them. The people living here helped them a lot during those times. So, they were not against the provinces. Their aggression was for Congress. This was the reason that the Sindhi society was completely against Congress in the start. There was only love in the minds of Sindhis for the people living here as they held their hands during the times when their own Sindhi Muslim brothers betrayed them. There was aggression only for the political leaders.

Q. Was this aggression the same for the Muslim League?

A. No, there was neither faith nor aggression for the League as the Sindhis had never seen it as their party. They had faith in the congress leaders. They had not done any preparation before leaving the country only because the Congress leaders gave them the assurance that the Partition won't happen in any case. So, all the aggression was only toward the congressmen.

And they had a lot of respect for the RSS as they helped them a lot in settling here in India. Their workers had helped a lot.

Q. Was there any such organization active in Pakistan like RSS?

A. RSS has been active there since 1939. There were also few full-timers emerging in RSS. They also helped people in evacuating the country. There was another organization of *Arya Samaj*.

Q. Do you have any experience with these organizations?

A. Yes, I had a lot of them. We used to go to play in its *Sakha* (branch). There was no ideological attraction. I used to go only for the entertainment purpose but later it became ideological also.

Q. Do you want to share any experience or any story that you have heard from your father related to the partition?

A. Yes, I have told you the story of my friend who couldn't even bring his father's dead body with him. Also, people sometimes didn't get food to eat for two-three days while coming back to India.

Q. Any experience about the problems faced by the women?

A. I have told you that they used to seize our money and golds from us. Similarly, they also kept the young women of our families with them and didn't allow us to bring them back with us. Such cases were less in Sindh though but were very high in Punjab. When Punjabi Sikh society tried to hide in the Gurudwaras, they put the whole Gurudwara on fire. Several people got burnt inside. They also used to kill the people sitting inside the train leaving for India.

Q. Hadn't the administration from both the sides tried to control the violence?

A. Muslim administration themselves wanted the Hindus to leave the country. So, they were, in fact, promoting the violence. And the Indian administration was not ready for that. They believed that it wouldn't happen. Houses of Muslims in Delhi and nearby who went to Pakistan were

occupied by the Punjabis and Sindhis coming to India. But the Indian administration gave those houses back to the Muslims. The experience was very bad.

Q. This was not the case in Pakistan?

A. No, the government was in their support. They gave our homes to the Muslims going there from Bihar and other parts.

Q. So, they were sure that the Hindus were not coming back and distributed their homes to the Muslims.

A. Yes. But in India, they called them back by giving them assurance of their security and returned their homes back.

Q. All the members of your family left the country?

A. Yes, no one was left there in my family. Even the 2-3% Hindus who dared to live there and didn't come to India are still willing to leave the country as the situation has become worse there.

Q. What were the reasons behind not leaving the country?

A. It can be because of the huge properties there. Also, their faith that this is a temporary phase and everything will be right soon has forced them to stay there.

Q. Have you ever gone to Pakistan again?

A. No, I didn't go but many people have gone there. But they could not visit their homes or their village again. They didn't allow us to go there. They only allow the Hindus to visit the spiritual places that too like a prisoner. There are a lot of restrictions.

Q. Was there any other religion living in Sindh province apart from Hindu and Muslim?

A. Yes, there were Sindhi Sikhs also.

Q. Thank you, sir, for your valuable time...

A. There is also a book written by *Gurudatt* named "*Desh ki Hatya*". The book has been seized by the Government of India. The book has been banned for many years but it is available now. It's a novel with a detailed description of the day to day lives of people during the partition.

Q. Thank you, sir. I'll refer to this book for sure.