

MUSINGS OF A MILITARY MAVERICK



YOGINDER SHARMA



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CHAPTER 1

FROM CRADLE TO COMMISSION

The peal of a newborn's cry reverberated through the rooms of the Engineer's residence on the 16th of March in 1936. It filled the *Powerhouse Parivar* (family) with a different kind of energy than generated by the huge water-turbines! A son, the first of the first-wife had just been born!

Few newborns could have hoped for a better beginning. His father was a celebrity, who had been publicly anointed as the Sun of Muzaffarabad for electrifying the town, two doting mothers and an inseparable silver *katora* (bowl) fulfilled all his worldly needs.



The kitchen- gossip about the new bundle in the cradle was that his head was oversized and legs a bit short? The first was a sign of a cerebral future, but the latter disturbed the Engineer father who kept checking with a slide rule if the design defect was a disability? No one would have ever suspected then that this infant would grow up to be an Infantryman, a Ranger-Commando and a General, despite a 'game' leg.

Does the beginning determine one's future? To a large extent it does, being programmed in one's DNA (genes) and destiny! Both are unpredictable but not beyond our control; there is an Almighty force in one's Free-Will! Since genes matter, a reality check of preceding generations is in order.

My father was raised in a typical farming family. The forefathers owned land in Dera Pir-Khan, a hill-top habitation near Mansehra, in Hazara District. It was a part of the erstwhile North West Frontier Province (NWFP), a buffer district between the princely State of Jammu & Kashmir and Afghanistan. The family supplemented its income by providing logistic support for British forces fighting in Afghanistan. While doing so the men-folk had to accompany the army columns wherever they went. Survival in a harsh and hostile environment was their staple and it paid off at the time of the blood-soaked partition of India in 1947.

Our mothers were raised in a conservative family of Haripur, which is close to Abbotabad. They were steeped in tradition and equipped to run a home and raise a family. All their education was done domestically due to absence of schools for girls. The outside world was neither safe nor an 'equal opportunity' environment for girls. But at home, *Shakti* (the female power) was the ruling deity, and women guarded that space jealously, despite the chauvinistic Frontier-Man's culture.



My Nanaji

Our only grandparent with us was the charismatic *Nanaji*, my maternal grandfather. He was a gentleman of class, having been educated in English at Abbotabad, and was a World War veteran. On demobilisation after the War, he joined the Forest Service. At six feet plus in height he looked formidable, be it in western dress or as a Frontier-style gun-toting Pathan. The progeny from his third wife, whom he married when he was in his 70s, are younger than me in age.

The Nani had passed away in my infancy. The local quack had got her addicted to an opiate drug, as a treatment for chronic pain. It may be this, or the *soma*-guzzling tradition of Aryan progenitors which is responsible for family fondness for over-indulgence? It is definitely a genetic mutation as the trait goes beyond my maternal lineage. Some siblings, cousins and nephews have succumbed to fatal temptation of *spirits*!

My family roots being in this remote tribal corner of North West India is an intriguing part of my past. A search into history shows that Hazara has been at the crossroads of many a civilisation, since pre-Vedic times. It was the stomping ground of powers like Alexander's invasion, Bactrian Greek rule, the mighty Mauryan Empire that extended up-to the Mediterranean, Kushan, Afghan, Turkish, British and Sikh empires. Migrants from

neighbouring areas of Kashmir and the Punjab have added to the ethnic-mixes! My DNA tests corroborate the profiles of genetic migrations and remixes!

The major influx of Punjabis, however, was in the wake of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Army. He had captured all of North West India, including Afghanistan and Kashmir. Consequently, the spoken tongue in the family is a frontier-dialect of Punjabi.

My father's generation migrated into border areas of J&K, in response to offers of land by the Maharaja. Dad's engineering education at the Banaras Hindu University and in the UK was due to Royal recognition of his merit. He fully imbibed the spirit of enterprise and English work ethic and came back safe and single, despite temptations. A search for a suitable match was launched by well wishers.



Domel- Rivers Jhelum and Kishanganga (now Neelum)

But an insidious maverick streak prevailed and he traded off a career and family life for public good. He felt that his qualification as an Electrical Engineer was futile if his hometown remained in the dark. So he chose to electrify it through self help and private enterprise supported by a team of spirited *Sardars* (Sikhs) who were initially hired as personal staff, but later became lifelong friends.



S Ujagar Singh flanked by his son, Me and Madan (my youngest brother)

The last one of that vintage, Sardar Ujagar Singh, died recently at 105, a few months after I had met him in Jammu in 2014.



Dad, in turban and sherwani, at Maharajas reception.

That intrepid team of pioneers cut the hillside in order to channel water, erected turbines and generators imported with money raised as loans from the locals, and commissioned the power supply, all on their own in the early 1930s. It was an incredible turnkey job, all planned and executed by a young Engineer and his band of Karmic Brothers.



Dad with Me (in front of the Turbine) in 1945. Was installed near Naini Tal in 1951 as a power house.

The Maharajas of J&K and Jodhpur had inaugurated the Power House. The high profile recognition became irksome to some and triggered a demand for an early refund of loans that were taken to finance the project. The upshot was that he had to sell the Power House to the Government and join Govt service.

That creative detour did cost Dad the Chief Engineer's job, but he was beyond caring for power or position as long as he could follow his passion. His values of Work as Worship and selfless professional commitment are the greatest gifts passed on to us.

Meanwhile, family pressure to settle down had kept mounting. So he took a break to select a bride from the shortlist of suitable girls from the Hazara *Biradari* (*fraternity*).

With two grown up girls, our Nana's home was an obvious pit stop. A direct boy meets girl encounter was unthinkable in those days. An indirect peek through a door into the *zenana* (ladies section) was all that was socially acceptable. Perhaps he was preoccupied with other thoughts when

he vaguely nodded approval. That sent a cheer of celebration and negotiations started for settling the wedding date.

During the reception of the *Baraat* (marriage party) the groom realised that the bubbly girl of his choice was actually the younger sister, not the proposed bride. Malicious minds muttered *dhoka* (deception) but the sensible elders understood that the problem was due to a visual parallax. In the explosive Frontier culture such a mix up was sufficient cause for loaded guns to come into action. *Gussa* (rage) sits very lightly on the high noses of Frontiersmen. But the family elders swiftly found a creative solution viz. marry off both sisters to the same groom. This may seem an outrageous solution as per modern sensibilities; but at the time it was acceptable to all. Plural marriages were a norm amongst higher social classes and symbolised status!

It was thus that the seven of us; five sons from the elder and a daughter and son from the younger wife, came to have twin mothers. We called them *Badi* and *Choti Ma Ji* (elder and younger moms) respectively. We had no problem with multiple status of mothers, *masis* (aunts) or step mothers. It was one big joint family except when feuding over cream or crumbs!



Many years later, my newlywed wife Despina was stunned by this strange family setting. But it was working so well that a double mother-in-law became a happy prospect. In case of an emotional bump with one, a handy backup was available. Indeed, it was not always a sugar and honey scenario, but show me a family which claims to be hassle-free and I will show you a liar's den. The sisterly dimension acted as a buffer for resolving irritants.

Is this a sanitised version of my childhood? Maybe it is, if viewed from a cynic's perspective, but real life is made of shades of grey and pairs of opposites. There is no sunshine without shadow; nor angels without feet of clay. My childhood was no exception. But I will need to dig very deep to recall any black or dark grays in my early life.

It has become a fetish to blame childhood influences to rationalise personal flaws. Indeed, my parents were imperfect, siblings a bunch of buffoons; servants were scoundrels and neighbours a nuisance, yet my childhood remains a mix of warm and beautiful bittersweet memories. Was I specially blessed or is it make- believe? Ultimately, all reality is a product of our perceptions.

Our work-obsessed father had little time to tend to our emotional needs, but he had compensated by providing us with two mothers. Papa ji had a short fuse and a lethal look that could set off wet streams; and our tiger-moms were menacing in their *Kali* (angry Goddess) avatar. In those days, no one pampered brattiness. It was a Spartan upbringing in 'ashram' style.

I did not get an opportunity for formal schooling till Class 7, due to Dad's postings in way- out places. I was home-schooled by Maulvis or under-qualified school teachers from nearby villages.

But we learnt to be happy in whatever was, and to count our blessings. My deprived socialisation in formative years had a silver lining. There were no tensions owing to competition or contact of undesirable kind. But it did create some hiccups in the seriously competitive world of the Military Academy.



My Brothers and Sister

This has been a rambling recall of my childhood. My first decade was filled with memories of an expanding family (a new member every two years), huge bungalows with acres of gardens, fruit trees, a horde of servants, couple of cows and a mandatory *tandur* for making '*makki ki roti*'. Every three years or so we moved in Dad's car to a new place of posting, passing through verdant valleys and vast forests. There was no rail or air network in the salubrious setting of '*firdaus bar ru-e zamin*' (heaven on earth), as Kashmir was called since Mughal days.

And then all the peace and calm was shattered by the boom of guns and a shooting war. In Aug 1947, an exhausted British Raj abruptly granted Independence to India and fractured it into two. Kashmir became a political victim of aggression, and the wounded valley has been bleeding ever since. Pakistan sponsored tribal hordes invaded Kashmir in October 1947. These 'Kabailis', armed and led by Pakistan deep-state, overcame the overstretched State forces and marauded their way up to the doorstep of Srinagar. Our kin in Pakistan and Occupied Kashmir had to abandon everything and escape. They were caught and imprisoned, tortured or worse, till repatriated by Red Cross many months later.

The shooting war was raging at the doorstep of Srinagar, not far from where we lived. There was no road link to the Valley and Srinagar airport was about to fall to the raiders. Consequent to an overnight signing of the Instrument of Accession and an appeal for help to Prime Minister Nehru, by the popular leader Sheikh Abdulla, the SOS intervention by the Indian Army and Air Force saved the Valley. Slowly the tide began to turn. This was new India's baptism by fire.

After more than a year of fighting, the rollback of Pakistani forces was prematurely ended in the vain hope that the United Nations intervention would bring about a just and durable peace. Instead it has created a bloody stalemate that continues . It is now one of the worst flashpoints in the world.

The family had to shift to Jammu in 1948, on transfer. There was no way to go as Army convoys had choked the road space. Finally, special sanction was given to transport the family in two 3-ton vehicles of the Army. This

was their first ride in military transport, an experience that has since stretched to two generations, and hopefully will last.

In Jammu, Dad had to hire a house which was barely adequate for our family. Meanwhile news arrived that families stranded in Pakistan were being evacuated to Indian refugee camps in Punjab, UP and Delhi. It took months of search to trace them and resettle them.

Nanaji took charge of the maternal side and resettled them in abandoned Muslim homes in Najafgarh near Delhi. His only son Baldev had stayed on with his sisters since our Nani's death in the early '40s. He was like an elder sibling to me. Sadly he died prematurely in 1951 in his sisters' arms due to a congenital heart condition.

My father took charge of the family of the middle brother who had been killed by the raiders. Our combined joint family strength was now over 16. The cramped living conditions resembled life on a railway platform but it had all the warmth of a home. We learnt to share and co-exist in the available space cheerfully. Our elders taught us, by example, that one did not need a huge house or high means, just a big heart to live in harmony.

My formal schooling started in these trying times. I was admitted into a Government school, Sri Ranbir High School, Jammu, a few months before the final examination of the 8 th class. To add to my misery I had come down with typhoid and was still recovering at exam time. I passed and was surprised to get a school scholarship as Top Scorer in Science.

It was taken for granted that I would follow the family career of Engineers. That year my School started an experiment with a special section for Gifted students under a selected form master, Shri Tej Ram Khajuria. He was a martinet but a real *Guru* in the finest tradition of the term.

Many years later when serious riots had broken out in Jammu, curfew was imposed and the Army deployed. As the Chief of Staff of the Corps, I called on the *Masterji*, with the Officer in Charge and directed him to take good care of my Guru.

They did that and he was very touched, but it was a small gesture of gratitude for his immeasurable gifts to us. Till the end of his life in his 80s, he used to walk up to *Vaishno Devi* Shrine as he had done every month of

his disciplined life. By example, he taught us the value of hard work, selfless service as a gift of giving, with no concern for rewards.

Kashmir University had become functional in 1950 and imposed an age bar of 14 years for the School finals in the 10th Grade. I was underage due to a couple of double promotions in my early years. My father was sceptical about my repeating the year as he felt that it would demotivate me. My school had high hopes in me and sided with my father. My view was of course irrelevant.

I was quite ambivalent to it all and felt that it was simply much ado about nothing. I was sent off to the Education Minister who knew my Father, to ask him for a special dispensation despite being underage. He listened patiently and then advised me, “Son, just go tell your headmaster to rectify your date of birth.” Voila! That was how easy it was to stretch my age with help from a pliant priest as well, as there were no official birth certificates then.

I did not disappoint the punters and topped in Jammu province, but was ranked 10 th overall. It is not easy to beat the cerebral Kashmiri Pandits. Not that it mattered to me as I was everything but competitive. Next year, at a special convocation in the College I was the surprised recipient of Book Awards from the then Prime Minister of J&K State for obtaining the highest marks in two subjects.



With Dad and brothers in 1972

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