

A FEW YEARS AFTER Partition, the thought occurred to the governments of
5 Pakistan and Hindustan that, as with ordinary prisoners, an exchange of lunatics was
in order. Muslim madmen in Indian asylums should be sent over to Pakistan and the
Hindu and Sikh lunatics languishing in Pakistani madhouses should be handed over
to Hindustan.

10 Whether the proposition was smart or dumb only God knows. Anyway, following the
decision of some wise men, a bunch of high-level conferences were convened on
either side and concluded with a date for the transfer. A thorough scrutiny was
mounted. Muslim lunatics with relatives still living in Hindustan were allowed to
stay there; others were shepherded to the border. In Pakistan, the question of
15 keeping anyone didn't even arise since nearly all Hindus and Sikhs had already
migrated to Hindustan. The remaining Hindu and Sikh lunatics were rounded up and
brought over to the border under police escort.

Regardless of what did or didn't happen across the border, in the Lahore asylum the
news of the coming exchange stirred up rather interesting speculation among the
inmates. There was one Muslim lunatic who had never missed reading the newspaper
20 Zamindar during the last twelve years. When a friend asked him, 'Molbi Sab, what is
this thing called Pakistan?' he gave the matter prolonged, deep thought and said, 'It's
a place in India where they make straight razors.'

The explanation satisfied his friend.

25 Likewise, one Sikh inmate asked another Sikh, 'Sardarji, why are we being sent to
Hindustan? We don't know their language.'

The latter smiled. 'But I know the Hindustoras' language. They are absolute rascals –
these Hindustanis. They strut around.'

One day, as he was bathing, a Muslim lunatic shouted 'Pakistan Zindabad!' so loudly
that he slipped, fell to the floor and was knocked out.

30 There were some inmates who weren't really mad. Most of them were murderers.
Their relatives had them committed after bribing the officers so that they would be
spared the hangman's noose. They did seem to have some inkling of why Hindustan
was partitioned and what this Pakistan was, but even they didn't understand the

matter clearly. Newspapers weren't much help and the watchmen were idiots and completely illiterate; nothing definite could be gleaned from conversations with them. All they knew was that there was this man Muhammad Ali Jinnah whom everyone called Quaid-e Azam. He had made a separate country for Muslims called Pakistan. But they knew nothing about where it was located. So these inmates, whose minds hadn't fused entirely, were continually in a fix about whether they were in Pakistan or Hindustan. If they were in Hindustan, then where was Pakistan?

One inmate got so mixed up about this business of Pakistan-Hindustan, Hindustan-Pakistan that he became even crazier. One day, while sweeping the floor, he suddenly climbed a tree, perched on a limb, and for the next two hours held forth non-stop on the delicate matter of Pakistan and Hindustan. When the guards tried to coax him down, he climbed even higher. When he was threatened, he told them in no uncertain terms, 'I don't want to live in Hindustan and I don't want to live in Pakistan; I'll live here in this tree.'

Finally, when the bout of madness subsided, he decided to come down, whereupon he started hugging his Hindu and Sikh friends deliriously, crying all the while because he was overcome by the thought that they would leave him there and go to Hindustan.

A Muslim radio engineer with a Master of Science degree always kept himself aloof from other inmates and walked quietly on a particular path of the asylum's garden all day long. Suddenly, one day, he took off all his clothes, gave them to an officer and started frolicking in the garden stark naked.

A plump Muslim lunatic from Chiniot, once a very active worker for the Muslim league, used to bathe fifteen or sixteen times a day. He abruptly gave up bathing altogether. His name was Muhammad Ali, and one day he announced from his cubicle that he was Muhammad Ali Jinnah. A Sikh followed suit and declared himself Master Tara Singh. This nearly led to a bloodbath, but designating both men as highly dangerous and confining them to separate quarters averted the crisis.

A young Lahori Hindu lawyer who had lost his mind after failing in love was terribly hurt upon hearing that Amritsar had now been moved to Hindustan. His beloved was a native of that city. Although she had snubbed him, even in his madness her memory was fresh in his mind. He constantly hurled obscenities at the Hindu and Muslim leaders who had conspired to eviscerate Hindustan, making him a Pakistani and his beloved a Hindustani. When talk of the exchange began, many of the other lunatics tried to bolster his sagging spirits. They told him not to lose heart; he would be packed off to Hindustan where his love lived. But he didn't want to abandon Lahore. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to set up a successful law practice in Amritsar.

There were two Anglo-Indian inmates in the European ward. They literally went into shock hearing that the English had freed India and gone back home. For hours they secretly discussed the grave matter of their status in the asylum now that the English had left. Would the European ward be kept or liquidated? Would they get a 'real breakfast'? Or would they be obliged to force the bloody Indian chapatti down their gullets in place of the double-roti?

A Sikh inmate had arrived in the asylum fifteen years ago. He could be heard uttering strange gibberish all the time: 'Upar de gurgur de aynks de be-dhyaana de mung de daal aaf de laaltain.' Day or night, he never slept. The watchmen could vouch for the fact that he hadn't slept even a wink in fifteen years. Whenever he heard talk in the asylum of the coming exchange, he always listened to it intently. If someone asked him his opinion, he would answer with complete seriousness: 'Upar de gurgur de aynks de be-dhyaana de mung de daal aaf de Pakistan government.'

Later, though, he changed aaf de Pakistan government to aaf de Toba Tek Singh government, and started asking the other loonies where Toba Tek Singh, the place he came from, was. But no one knew whether Toba Tek Singh was in Pakistan or Hindustan. And if someone tried to explain, he inevitably got confused, thinking that Sialkot, which used to be in Hindustan, was now said to be in Pakistan. Who knew, perhaps Lahore, currently in Pakistan, would shift to Hindustan tomorrow, or maybe all of Hindustan would become Pakistan. And who could say with any surety that both Hindustan and Pakistan would not disappear altogether.

Over time this lunatic's kes had become so scraggly that it almost seemed to have disappeared. He hardly ever bathed, so the hair of his beard and head had become matted and stuck together, giving his features a frighteningly grotesque look. However, he was a harmless man. During his fifteen years in the asylum he had never had a brawl with anyone. The old staff knew that he had owned quite a bit of land in Toba Tek Singh. He had been a prosperous landowner until one day, suddenly, he went berserk. His relatives brought him to the asylum in heavy chains and had him admitted. They came to visit him once a month, inquired after him and then went back. Their visits continued for a long time, but stopped when the Pakistan-Hindustan garbar started.

His name was Bishan Singh, but everyone called him Toba Tek Singh. Although he had no awareness of the day or month or how many years had passed, somehow he always knew the day his relatives were expected. He would tell the officer that his 'visit' was coming that day. He would take a long bath, scrub his body vigorously with soap, oil and comb his hair, have his clothes, which he hardly ever wore, brought out and slip into them, and meet his visitors thus, looking all prim and proper. If they asked him something, he remained quiet or mumbled his

incomprehensible ‘Upar de gurgur de aynks de be-dhyaana de mung de daal aaf de laaltain’ now and then.

5 He had a daughter who, growing a little at a time, had become a young woman in fifteen years. Bishan Singh never recognized her. As a little girl, she would cry when she saw her father, and now, as a young woman, tears still welled up in her eyes at the sight of him.

10 When this confusing business of Pakistan and Hindustan began, he started asking his fellow lunatics where Toba Tek Singh was located. His curiosity grew by the day when he didn’t get a satisfactory answer. Now the ‘visits’ had also stopped. Where before he would instinctively know when his relatives were coming to see him, now that inner voice no longer intimated such a visit to him.

15 He fervently wished those people who talked with him with such kindness and warmth and who brought him gifts of fruits, sweets and clothes would visit him. If he were to ask them, they would surely have told him whether Toba Tek Singh was located in Pakistan or Hindustan because he thought they themselves came from Toba Tek Singh.

One lunatic called himself ‘God.’ One day Bishan Singh asked him about Toba Tek Singh: Was it in Pakistan or Hindustan? As usual, ‘God’ burst out laughing and said, ‘Neither in Pakistan nor Hindustan because we haven’t yet given the orders.’

20 Bishan Singh begged ‘God’ many times to give the order so the dilemma could be laid to rest, but he said he was too damn busy because he had many other orders to give first. So one day, fed up with ‘God’s’ dilly-dallying, Bishan Singh let him have a piece of his mind: ‘Upar de gurgur de aynks de be-dhyaana de mung de daal aaf Wahe Guruji da Khalsah and Wahe Guruji ki fateh – jo bole so nihal, sat siri akaal!’ Perhaps
25 he meant to say: You’re the Muslims’ God, had you been the God of the Sikhs you would surely have heard my plea.

30 Some days before the scheduled exchange of lunatics, a Muslim friend of Bishan Singh came to see him. He had never visited him before in all these years. Bishan Singh saw him but shrugged and started to turn back. The guards stopped him and said, ‘He’s coming to visit you. He’s your old friend Fazl Din.’

35 Bishan Singh hardly glanced at the man and started to mumble something. Fazl Din drew closer and put his hand on Bishan Singh’s shoulder. ‘I’ve been thinking of visiting you for quite a while now but was pressed for time. All your relatives have safely left for Hindustan. I helped them as much as I could. Your daughter Roop Kaur...’ He suddenly held back.

Bishan Singh looked as though he was trying to remember something and then mumbled, 'Daughter Roop Kaur.'

Fazl Din said falteringly, 'Yes...She...she's all right...she went with them.'

5 Bishan Singh remained quiet. Fazl Din continued, 'Your family asked me to keep inquiring after your well-being. Now I hear that you're also leaving for Hindustan. Give my salaams to brother Balbeer Singh and brother Vadhwa Singh...and, yes, to sister Amrit Kaur as well. Tell brother Balbeer Singh that Fazl Din is doing well. The two brown buffaloes they had left behind – one of them gave birth to a male calf. The other also had a calf, a female, but it died after six days...And if there's anything more
10 he'd like me to do, tell him I'm always ready. And this, here, a little morandas for you.'

Bishan Singh took the small sack of sweets and handed it to the guard standing nearby. He then asked Fazl Din, 'Where is Toba Tek Singh?'

Fazl Din was a bit bewildered. 'Where...where it's always been.'

15 Bishan Singh asked him again, 'In Pakistan or in Hindustan?'

'In Hindustan...No, no, it's in Pakistan.' Fazl Din was flummoxed.

Bishan Singh left, mumbling, 'Upar de gurgur de aiynks de be-dhyaana de mung de daal aaf de Pakistan and Hindustan aaf de durfatte munh.'

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20 Preparations for the exchange had been completed. The list of lunatics who would be swapped had been sent over to the country receiving them and the day when the exchange would take place had been fixed.

On a blistering cold morning, lorries packed with Hindu and Sikh lunatics started out from the Lahore asylum under police escort along with the officials overseeing the
25 exchange. At the Wagah border, the superintendents of both sides met, concluded the preliminary formalities, and the exchange began, continuing well into the night.

Getting the lunatics out of the lorries and handing them over to the officials on the other side turned out to be a gruelling job indeed. Some resisted getting out, others who were willing to come out became impossible to control because they took off in
30 different directions. As fast as the stark naked ones were clothed, they tore the clothes right off again. One rolled out a torrent of obscenities, another broke into song. Some got into fisticuffs, while others cried their hearts out, sobbing

inconsolably. The hullabaloo was deafening. The female lunatics were raising their own separate hell. And all this in a cold so punishing that it made one's teeth chatter non-stop.

5 The majority of lunatics were against the exchange. They couldn't understand why they were being uprooted. Those who still had some sanity left were shouting Pakistan Zindabad! Or Pakistan Murdabad! – which so enraged some Muslim and Sikh lunatics that they nearly came to blows.

10 When Bishan Singh's turn came and the official across the Wagah border began to enter his name in the register, he asked, 'Where is Toba Tek Singh – in Pakistan or in Hindustan?'

The official laughed. 'In Pakistan.'

15 Bishan Singh jumped, withdrew to one side and ran to his fellow inmates. Pakistani guards grabbed him and started pushing him towards the other side of the border. He dug his heels in, refusing to budge. 'Toba Tek Singh is here!' and then he started to spew out loudly: 'Upar de gurgur de aynks de be-dhyaana de mung de daal aaf Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan.'

20 They did their best to coax him into believing by saying, 'Look, Toba Tek Singh has now moved to Hindustan, and if it hasn't yet, it will be sent there right away,' but he stubbornly refused to accept that. When they attempted to drag him forcibly across the border, he dug in with his swollen legs with such determination on the patch of earth that lay in the middle that no force in the world could move him from it.

Since he was entirely harmless, the guards didn't force him and let him stand where he was while the rest of the exchange continued.

25 Just before sunrise an ear-splitting cry shot out of Bishan Singh's throat. Officials from both sides of the border rushed over to him, only to find that the man who had stood on his feet day and night for the past fifteen years was lying face down. There, behind the barbed wires, was Hindustan, and here, behind the same barbed wires was Pakistan. In between, on the thin strip of no-man's-land, lay Toba Tek Singh.