

The loneliness of a centre-half

By M. H. Askari

The year 1936 because of the World Olympics which were held then in Berlin had been something of a landmark in the labyrinth of memories of my boyhood in Delhi, for two reasons.

Firstly, the Indian Hockey team which become world champions in Berlin had in it as the centre-half M.N. (Mirza Nasiruddin) Masud, who had married my eldest sister, Atiya, only few months earlier. Tall and handsome, he had a niche for

himself in my secret scrap book alongside film stars such as Ronald Coleman, Robert Donat and Prithviraj. Secondly, the abominable racist arrogance of Hitler who refused to shake hands with the legendary black athlete Jesse Owens who won a record number of gold medals at Berlin, left an indelible impression on my mind and I have since regarded all dictatorships as something evil.

Hitler's Nazi philosophy ended with his defeat and death at the end of the World War II. What he did to

Jesse Owens has been condemned many times over by the entire civilised world. The other link in my memory with the Berlin Olympics was lost for me forever last month when we got news that Masud had passed away after a brief illness in New Delhi where he had chosen to stay after partition.

Bhaijan (as we called Masud) to the end of his life remained impervious to the advice that anyone else gave him once he made up his mind. My sister told me when I phoned her that he had suffered pneumonia in

both his lungs but refused to see a doctor until it was too late.

Stubbornness was a streak in Bhaijan's personality which made him choose to stay on in Delhi after partition, although in due course the rest of the family was to migrate to Pakistan. He had a lucrative offer from a Hindu businessman, friend of Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) who was willing to trust all his investment to him after he himself had shifted to Delhi. But Bhaijan felt that his place was among the Muslim community of Delhi who were beginning to get embroiled in the aftermath of the partition and the senseless communalism which was beginning to take its toll.

August 1947 was comparatively calm in Delhi although there had been some incidents in New Delhi and in the outskirts like Qarol Bagh (where Dr Zakir Husain's *Jamia Millia* suffered at the hands of a Hindu mob), and the Civil Lines outside Kashmiri Darwaza where amongst those of others, the homes of Dr Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi and the adopted daughter of Dr M.A. Ansari (one-time president of the Congress) had been raided and looted by frenzied mobs. At the beginning of September however, communal trouble manifested itself in Delhi with its full ferocity. Curfew hours became longer and longer. In our *mohalla*, situated at the junction of *Kucha Chelan* and *Tiraha Bairam Khan* (two old Delhi localities where the remnants of the Muslim elite which had survived the downfall of the Moguls lived), the sound of pistol and gun shots or hand-grenades going off ricocheted for long hours and the smell of cordite would almost perpetually hang in the air. A part of our *mohalla* adjoining a Hindu residential locality, *Kucha Tara Chand* and its hinterland, was already being abandoned. We saw every morning a regular stream of men, women and children, carrying their scanty belongings pouring out



Hockey supremo Dhyhan Chand (L) and Masud signing autographs on their 1935 New Zealand tour.

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of their ancestral homes and running for shelter in the direction of localities closer to the Jama Masjid which were almost entirely Muslim. We too were in the grip of panic but my father, a retired educationist of considerable renown, with an obsession for cleanliness and hygiene, refused to move out of the house. "I would rather die at the hands of Sikhs in my own home than of cholera in some refugee camp," he firmly told us. Bhaijan and my sister had moved into a house close to our home and came over every now and then.

After a particularly disturbed night, there was a short break in the curfew and Bhaijan came to our place, carrying an umbrella to protect himself from the persistent drizzle. He declared that somebody had to take the initiative to stem the exodus of the Muslims from the area. Not every Muslim could run away to Pakistan or seek shelter in the make-shift refugee camps in the *Purana Qila* and the ruins around *Dargah Nizamuddin*. Something had to be done.

He decided to get together a peace committee comprising a mix of Hindu and Muslim elders of the *mohalla* and I too was coopted without being asked whether I volunteered or not.

During the curfew-breaks the peace committee would take a round of the localities where Hindu and Muslim homes were situated side by side and panic was at its worst. With his umbrella held aloft, Bhaijan would invariably be in the lead. He talked to the fugitives abandoning their homes, hoping they would have the courage to stay back, and to their Hindu neighbours reminding them of how peacefully they had lived together for generations. Now and then we could see a crowd of fierce-looking young men (they were *jats* and Sikhs from the small towns adjoining Delhi, we were told) assembled on roof-tops, carrying *lathis* or *kirpans*. Frequently they would listen to Bhaijan's oration in silence but now and again they would break into blood-curdling anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan slogans. Many of the venerable members of the peace committee would then race back to their homes of unbelieva-

ble speed and Bhaijan would be left there almost all by himself, but still fully composed, betraying no signs of panic.

To my protests of despair that no peace committee would be of any use in the midst of the communal madness, he would calmly respond: "Not everyone can run away. And in any case who is going to help those who don't wait to or don't have the means to go? Someone has to stay with them and keep up their morale."

This was when he came in contact with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad who used to take a tour of the affected parts of Old Delhi almost every day. Occasionally he would come and sit in my father's study (they had known each other from their early youth and their friendship had endured despite Maulana Azad's total commitment to the Congress and my father's close association with the Muslim League). Our home would then be mobbed by people unburdening their tales of misery, imploring for help. The Maulana Sahib was obviously deeply moved by their plight but also seemed somewhat helpless because of the cold-blooded apathy of his colleagues like Sardar Patel. In Bhaijan he found a willing volunteer who was prepared to be part of his team which had to somehow strive to "save" Delhi.

Delhi was a veritable hell by now and the refugee camps were full to capacity. Bhaijan was however more determined than ever that there was no question of his going to Lyallpur. He had no idea what he was going to do for a living, for shortly before independence he had been forced out of his position as Chief Secretary of Rampur State. Yet, he persisted. Maulana Azad had him vested with the powers of a special magistrate. He interceded with the authorities on behalf of the local Muslims arranged bail for many who were implicated on false criminal charges, wrote out petitions for people who were under threat of being dispossessed of their homes on the pretext that some members of their family had migrated to Pakistan, and generally made an effort to ensure that the voice of the destitutes would be heard in the corridors of bureaucracy. Sometimes he succeeded, sometimes he did not.

To begin with, my sister felt utterly miserable, as practically all her family had already gone away to Pakistan and Bhaijan for days together would be fully engrossed in what he looked up on as his mission. At one stage he even told her that she too could go over to Pakistan to be with her parents temporarily since he could barely spare the time to attend to her needs. However, she did nothing of the kind and later joined a team of volunteers who were touring the two halves of Punjab in hope of recovering women who had been abducted during the holocaust.

Gandhiji too came and camped himself in Delhi and Bhaijan joined his crusade to keep the Muslim community of Delhi from becoming uprooted. One day, Gandhiji was told that a whole community of Meos of Gurgaon had been put on a train leaving for Pakistan and were being forced to migrate against their wishes. He deputed Bhaijan and two others who happened to be Hindus to go to Gurgaon and somehow prevent the Meos from being 'deported.' They found the local authorities most adamant and decided that the only way the train could be prevented from leaving Gurgaon was by offering *satyagraha*, lying down on the railway tracks. The situation became tense as the staff at the railway station appeared determined to give the green signal. Fortunately, the Chief Minister of East Punjab happened to be in the vicinity and discovered what was happening. He ordered for the train to be stopped and the Meos off-loaded to be rehabilitated in their villages. Gandhiji was extremely pleased at the outcome.

Maulana Azad appointed Bhaijan as his private secretary. Later, he was absorbed in the education ministry which was under Maulana Sahib's charge and also did a stint as UNESCO's country representative in Indonesia. After Maulana Azad's death, Pandit Nehru sent him out as India's Ambassador, first to some countries of the Gulf and later to Saudi Arabia. He retired from public service in 1964 but remained active in various official and non-official organisations functioning in India for the uplift of the Muslims and their proper integration in the mainstream of Indian nationhood.

During my stay in New Delhi as Minister for Press and Information with the Pakistan embassy from 1982 to 1985, I was saddened to discover that Bhaijan was gradually becoming isolated from the society around him. He seldom engaged himself in any social or political work and seemed deeply agonised at the disunity and fragmentation of the Indian Muslims. He was bitter about the Muslim leaders who, to him, appeared too engrossed in pursuing their own personal ambitions. He wrote incessantly about the problem but perhaps realised that all that had little tangible impact.

Never too punctilious about the observance of formal religion, Bhaijan nevertheless had deep faith in Islam and believed that it could drive Muslims towards greater and ever more glorious goals. When Azharuddin scored a century in his maiden test appearance for India, Bhaijan felt the achievement had something to do with the fact that Azharuddin was Muslim.

Bhaijan also felt alienated from India's Congress politics. He had been an ardent admirer of the Nehru family at his life but became increasingly critical of Mrs Indira Gandhi's autocratic handling of the domestic situation and her attitude towards Pakistan.

When I heard that Bhaijan was no more, I was instantly reminded of my earliest association with him, when he was regarded as the star centre-half of the Indian Hockey team. Along with Dhyana Chand and Roop Singh he was included in a trio of 'Indian wizards,' as the Press in New Zealand referred to them when they toured that country in 1935. The centre-half is an odd position in a Hockey team. Some one playing in this position is really something of a loner. He has to 'feed' the players in all other positions yet he is neither quite among the attackers (the forwards) nor the defenders (the full-backs). As the rest of the team rushes past him concentrating upon its objective of scoring or saving goals, the centre-half must suffer from a sense of loneliness. In the latter years of his life, Bhaijan seemed withdrawn, not quite a part of the mainstream. The sense of loneliness of a centre-half never perhaps quite left him. ■