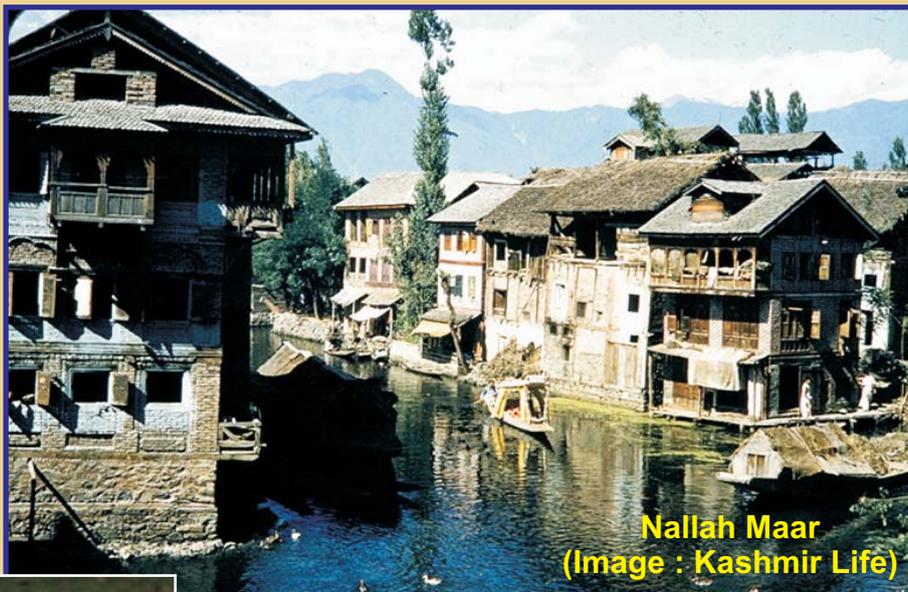


Supplement
Praagaash February 2020
(For Private Circulation Only)

Kashmir - The Halcyon Days
The Story of a Bicycle



Chaman Lal Chowdhury



Praagaash Supplement : The Story of a Bicycle

Chaman Lal Chowdhury - A Brief Profile

By Dr. K.L.Chowdhury

Chaman Lal Chowdhury, my older brother who completed his earthly sojourn in 2017, would often count his bicycle as the most precious gift he ever received. He never tired of recounting his adventures with it during the four years he studied at Amar Sigh College. Often, during his visits home from London (where he moved at the early age of eighteen), he would insist that he see his bicycle, which had passed many hands. One day, I suggested that he write the story of the bicycle. He agreed. In the process, he wove an interesting account of the life of those days, a kaleidoscopic view of the times we were young in the middle of the last century when life was simple and oozing with innocence, families were close-knit and relationships strong and based on sharing and caring, when resources were scarce but contentment ran deep, when tender feelings of love reigned in the hearts, and the everyday joys and sorrows made life so full of meaning and beautiful.

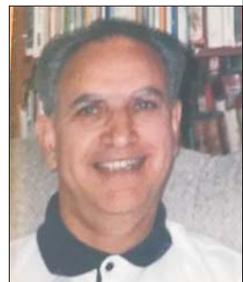
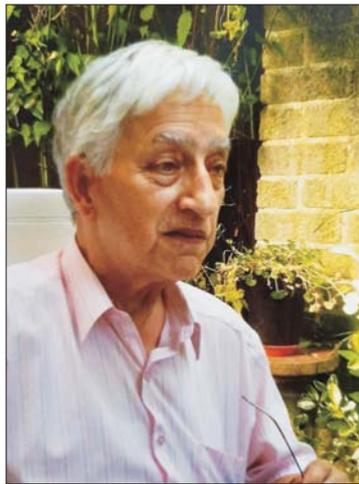
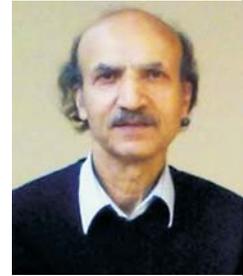
On my request, he gave me his permission to publish this small memoir of a bicycle in one of our community journals. I forgot about it until the other day when I retrieved it from my archives and decided to share it with the readers.

My brother was a civil engineer, a specialist in urban and environmental engineering. Though he was British by adoption, his love for Kashmir was intense,

possibly because he left the Indian shores at a tender impressionable age. It was his burning desire to pay back to his homeland what he thought he owed to her for the memorable days of his childhood. In the process he embarked on an ambitious project for the drainage and sewerage of the city of Srinagar on the pattern of a modern western city, including the revival of Dal Lake from its perpetually moribund state. For this he was in the process of raising funds from an international consortium and had begun the surveys in right earnest. But the insatiable greed of the state government officials including the engineers and bureaucrats and, soon after, the eruption of terrorism, put paid to his dreams and he had to abandon the project. The rest is history as they say.

Brother Robin adds :

We were six siblings, four brothers and two sisters, who influenced and guided each other from childhood. We remained connected to each other and to our parents, Pt. Jia Lal and Smt Dhan Rani, both of whom provided





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unconditional love, support and guidance.

The Chowdhury clan (extended family) all lived in an ancestral house at Rajveri Kadal, on the bank of Nal'ae 'Maer', a canal or stream with connection to the famous Dal Lake through a Lock at 'Dal Gate'. A masonry arch bridge over Nal'ae 'Maer' at Rajveri Kadal defined our locality. By late 1950s the canal had become polluted and silted up and, within a couple of decades, water was almost stagnant. No rectifying measures were taken by the authorities to improve water flow or to prevent further pollution. Eventually, without public consultation or justification, the canal was completely filled up.

Father maintained a garden, with a well-kept lawn, flowers and shrubs that was a defining feature and a draw for the neighborhood.

Chaman was very popular within the clan, amongst relatives and in the neighborhood. He developed strong friendships and also was recipient of attention, gifts and privileges from relatives and even some doting clients of father.

He joined Amar Singh College in 1951 and completed his BA in 1955. That is when he got the cycle as a birthday gift. Going to Amar Singh College proved quite liberating for him. He went on hiking trips to several locations in Kashmir featuring clear-water streams, snow-clad peaks and pristine lakes, including the holy Amarnath Cave.

In 1956, he left for London to study Civil Engineering. His first return visit to home was in 1962 to a tearful tumultuous welcome by the whole clan, friends, neighbours and others.

After he obtained his degree he joined Kershaw and Kaufman, a firm specializing in water and wastewater engineering that gave him a chance to hone his skills as a practical engineer. He also became a member of the Institution of Civil Engineers, London.

During that period he got to know and

befriend Anne who worked in a library in the area where he lived for a time. Anne was an only child and her parents were delighted by his friendly and warm personality and considered him as part of the family.

On his second visit to India in 1965, the family home in Srinagar had shifted to Barbarshah, near the famous Ram Temple and SP College. After a few weeks he found a senior position with a prestigious firm in the state of Maharashtra where he worked for about 6 months. However he returned to London after confiding with his siblings about his desire to marry Anne, and, later, a candid conversation with parents who blessed him without any reservations. They got married on March 8, 1968 in a simple civil ceremony in London. Anne gave birth to daughter Indira in 1969 and Asha in 1971.

The whole family visited India for the first time in 1973 at the time of Usha's wedding.

Chaman was offered a position with Balfour Beatty, a relatively large company and given an overseas assignment in Saudi Arabia for a couple of years.

Chaman had heart surgery (bypass) in 1985 and, as part of his recovery, he traveled to India to see family. With the healing touch of dear parents and the abiding love of siblings and others, he made rapid progress towards good physical and mental health and returned to his work.

During the years 1986-1989 he pursued the 'Srinagar Project' in connection with which he visited Kashmir frequently with his colleagues and gave us immense joy to savor a lot more of his delightful company that we would ever dream of.





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Kashmir - The Halcyon Days

The Story of a Bicycle

- Chaman Lal Chowdhury

Early days in Srinagar :

I was born in Srinagar in the spring of 1937. India was under the British; Jammu and Kashmir was one of the several princely states. Our State woefully lacked any infrastructure worth the name. Even Srinagar, the capital city that

was a status symbol.

A Tonga would carry in comfort two passengers in the rear and one in the front but the driver, to earn extra cash, invariably carried four passengers. Four annas (a quarter Rupee) was the fare per person and the Tonga journey would generally commence only when the driver had a full load on board. The alternative was to hire a Tonga at the full price of one rupee. The average income at the time was around Rs 20 per month and travel by Tonga was unaffordable for the common man. The Shikara was slightly cheaper but took longer especially when travelling up stream. Nevertheless, it was a popular transport till the late forties by which time arterial roads were



spanned the seven bridges across the Vitasta, remained essentially medieval with narrow lanes and cramped localities where the roofs of houses kissed each other. There were two highways, one on either side of the river within the confines of the city. They were passable between the first bridge at Amira Kadal and the fourth bridge at Zaina Kadal and adequate for travel by Tonga or a motorcar. Beyond the 4th bridge their condition, as also of the connecting lanes and by lanes, was atrocious. A city bus service did not exist. People either walked the distance or opted for a Tonga or a boat when commuting from one place to another.

The cheapest form of transport was the flat bottom boat called Nav or Shikara that glided on the rivers and waterways, there being an extensive canal system in the city. A few rich people owned their own Tongas. It

being extended and maintained and branch roads metalled with tar. We could hire a Tonga





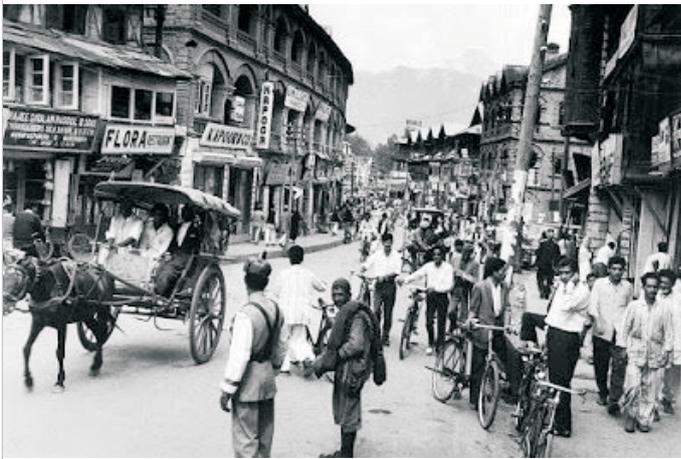
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right to our home in Rajveri Kadal, a kilometre further down the city from the last Tonga stop at Zaina Kadal if we paid an additional rupee. That was quite a sum.

There were perhaps no more than a dozen cars in the city when I was a boy. They were owned by the Maharaja, his Chief Minister, the British Resident and few other senior state government officials and a couple of rich businessmen. The only family in our neighbourhood to own a car was of Maulvi Yusuf Shah, the spiritual leader of the Sunni Muslims. I was fascinated by his shining black car with a running board on which would ride his body guards holding on to the windows during the troubled times of 1947 when he would return home from his Friday 'Waz' (sermon). I am confident that Maulvi Yusuf Shah along with his wife Amina and sons, Ahmed and Yasin, left the valley for Pakistan in 1947 in that same car because we never saw them or the car again. I was ten at that time.

Individual transports :

The only other form of individual transport was a bicycle. Bicycles, since they mostly came from Britain, were unaffordable by the common man. By the middle to late 1940s, however, Indian bicycles were being manufactured and allocated to each of the states for an equitable distribution.



They were cheaper but you had to be in queue and the waiting list was long. People liked the Vilayati (British) products for their quality and endurance and were happy to wait for an English model bicycle.

Our granduncle owned a bicycle that he never forgot to lock when it lay idle. It was always parked in the wuz (the corridor) outside our vot (the family room) within the ken of family members and, therefore, almost impossible to take out for a ride. A bicycle of a client or a visiting family friend, leaning against the wall of my father's consulting chamber (a lawyer by profession) was a strong temptation and the best bet if the client left it without a lock. We never missed the chance to find out as we thirsted for a ride that was always discouraged and denied. "Do you want to get hurt" was the usual ruse. But we always waited an opportunity to ease the bicycle from its parking place and steal a ride. My cousin, Piyare Lal, was in league with me in these adventures as we helped each other to ride, balance and let go. We would not risk going straight out on the road when there was our whole big ground at our disposal where we could practice. We had a vast stretch of family land divided into four portions - the ghui bagh (the dung garden), the bon bagh (the vegetable garden that was in the lower terrace and flanked the canal called nalei meir), the poshe bagh (the garden where we had a lawn and flowers) besides the angun (the front yard). The ghui bagh was a big lot lying waste where father allowed the neighbouring cowherds to dump cow dung in huge mounds that we climbed in fun, or to be spread in loaves or lumps and dried in the sun to be sold as fuel for the hearths and kangris. We never charged them any rent for the ground. It was here that we played cricket and initiated ourselves into cycling. More sneak rides followed as we became more proficient and more daring, even as we felt sure that we were tempting fate and would be found out one day.



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That day came sooner than we expected. We were caught red-handed when a client came to deliver some papers only to find his cycle missing when he came out of father's chamber. We had mistimed and misjudged. We got a scolding for wasting precious study time, for riding a cycle without the permission of its owner and for possible mishap and injury to ourselves and damage to the bicycle.

Having tasted blood, our appetite only increased. The more it was denied the stronger our impulse for a joy ride. It was a thrill we had never experienced before, an exhilaration that came at no cost. No punishment was going to deter us from bigger adventures as we ventured outside our estates into the lanes and by lanes, and, soon after, on the highway. More rides on bicycles loaned from friends followed, as people realised we were safe riders. As we grew in self-confidence the desire to own a cycle grew stronger.

Independence :

The year was 1947. I had just turned ten, the age when you want to explore the world, when there are many diversions and adventures waiting, when you are filled with a unique enthusiasm and a sense of invincibility and immortality. I was hardly aware of the uncertainty and anguish that faced all of us in Jammu and Kashmir as the British decided to quit India. Independence came at a terrible cost as the subcontinent drifted into a period of massive turbulence caused by the division of the country into India & Pakistan, creating mass migrations and large-scale communal slaughters in the east and the west. Millions would die and millions would become refugees. It was a colossal human tragedy. The upheaval brought death and destruction, misery and destitution.

There was relative peace

between Hindus and Muslims in the Valley but tension prevailed because of the Maharaja's indecision as to which of the two independent nations Kashmir should accede to. He bargained for time and offered a Standstill Agreement with both the nations, but Pakistan violated the agreement before he could make up his mind. She engineered a tribal invasion of the State backed with her regular army. The invaders attacked, looted, pillaged and murdered as they pushed relentlessly towards Srinagar. It was wintertime and all roads in and out of the valley were blocked either by military conflict or by winter snows. Kashmir valley depended a lot on trade and commerce. Once the transport arteries got cut off it was time of poverty and severe shortages.

Maharaja Hari Singh had no option left except to beg India for help to drive the raiders out. Accession was the natural consequence of the brutal Pakistani invasion. India sent her troops that pushed back the invaders. By the time cease-fire was declared Pakistan had seized control of more than a third of J&K and the solitary all-weather road in and out of the valley had come under her control. The summer road over the Pir Panchal ranges remained the only life line between the valley and rest of India. It needed upgrading and reinforcing for major continuous





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traffic including heavy army vehicles and other equipment. This route would eventually become the national highway.

The period of massive shortages and poverty was coming to an end as goods started to flow normally on this road by about 1950. Massive subsidies and fiscal stimulus to business and industry by the Central Government of India to the people of the valley, besides guaranteed food rationing, started to build up the people and the commerce. For the first time in many decades the state was on road to prosperity.

I join college :

I passed my Matriculation in 1951 and enrolled to study science at Amar Singh College. The college was situated nearly 7 km away from our Rajveri Kadal home. I would foot the daily round trip of 14 km and found it tiring and time consuming. The legs ached and I moaned about it to mother in order that my plaint reached the proper ears. Months later, during the winter break of 1951, when I was on one of my most memorable travels with father to Jammu and the plains beyond, I alluded to the difficult commute. I also threw hints about the utility of a bicycle. Father remained characteristically non-committal.

End of February 1952 and we bid farewell to winter and celebrated Shivratri with the traditional fervour. The last of the snows in the city and its suburbs had largely thawed except for a few mounds on the street corners and the houses under the eaves. I entered my fifteenth spring. The season burst on the valley like a pageant from the heavens. Snowdrops, narcissus and crocus bloomed at every conceivable place on earth. Daffodils and almond blossom were not far behind and, in tandem, the forsythia, the primroses and pansies. Birds sang their lilting tunes, the ubiquitous crows cawing aloud on the top of the poplar trees that flanked the fence walls of our estate. At a lower level in the Bon Bagh, came to



life with new plantations of hakh (collard green), monja (knoll-khol), palak (spinach), sochal and wangun (egg plant). The bulbuls serenading on the eaves boards outside our bedrooms and the power lines heralded the end of the three-month winter break. It was time to go back to college and resume the long commute.

The long march to and from my college was not without its delights. I had the company of my cousins and friends part of way. Some took off at Fateh Kadal to go to the Gandhi College, and some veered off at Habba Kadal on their way to the Sri Partap College while I continued on my track for the remaining 4 km and, on the way, met more students coming from different directions. It was fun to be part of the great walking community – people going to offices, schools, workplaces, and businesses.

At home I dropped reminders now and then about the long march. Bod Kakni (Grandmother) made light of it by reminding me that walking at my age after the confinement of long winter months was a beneficial exercise that would strengthen my body. Boba (grandfather) was in agreement. He would ensure that my shoes were in good order for a comfortable wear. He was parsimonious to the hilt and often mended our shoes to give them a longer lease before we changed into new pairs. He loved to repair damaged articles, provide a stitch in time and take care of the little nuts and bolts of family life.



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That year we welcomed Navreh, the traditional New Year day, as usual with a morning pilgrimage to the temples of the Hindu pantheon around and on the Hari Parbat hill for prayers and thanks-giving. The spring picnics in the almond orchards at the foothills of Hari parbat in the fullness of badam phulei (almond blossoms) were most memorable and we delighted in making garlands from fallen petals to present to each other, playing games, drinking tea from the samovars with nadir munjas and pakoras. The speciality that we savoured most on these picnics was the ga'er (chestnut). It was a delight watching the vendors light fire from dry grass on which to bake the chestnuts before selling them hot to us. We got hold of two stones to break the chestnut and ease the kernel out. Nothing tasted better.

Sunday was a day of relaxation after a six-day working week. Nevertheless ours was always an open house and all sorts of people would visit us including my father's clients even though they knew that he did not encourage legal consultation on his day off.

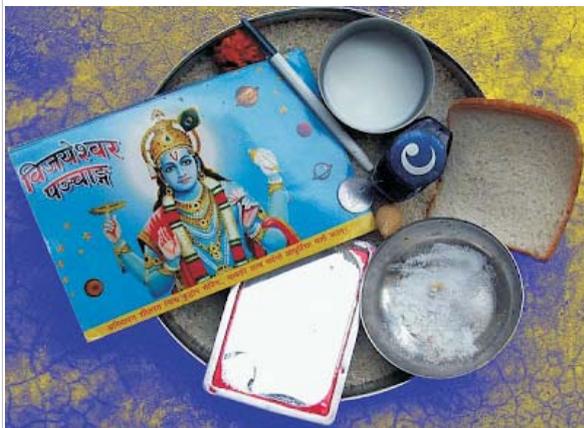
Sunday was also a card-game day. A group of father's close friends would arrive in the afternoon for a game and some non-playing friends would just enjoy watching them. There was Gopi Nath Bhan, Dina Nath Bhan, Nil Kanth Bazaz, Hirday Nath Merchant, Habibullah (Habseb), Sanaullah Basu, Dina Nath Ganju and



others whose names now I forget. It served the twin purpose of recreation and socialising.

The hubble-bubble (hookah) was an invariable companion of the group and would change hands from one player and spectator to the other. It had a long pipe which was passed around. It was the duty of the servant to change the water of the hookah everyday and to make sure that tobacco in the box was replenished. He had to fill the chillum with fresh tobacco every often and if he were occupied elsewhere we were handy for the job. I remember having walked on numerous occasions to the grocer Prithvinath across Rajveri Kadal Bridge to buy tobacco dispensed as packets wrapped in old newspapers. Tobacco of different grades - light, moderate and heavy - was always a major item on prominent display in huge vats in his shop. Sometimes we were also asked to buy cigarettes if the stocks ran low. Father smoked hookah at home and cigarettes when at work in the courts. Habibullah (Habseb) neither smoked nor played; he came for company.

The game 'flash', commonly known in the west as 'three card brag', was a local version of poker. It was played with serious money but the stakes were low and the rules strict. One could double the stakes at a time but there was a limit to doubling to ensure it did not go out of control. It was a friendly game, more fun than gamble.





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Often, the winner returned money to the losers at the end of the game.

Children were not encouraged inside the game room except when called to refill the chillum when it was spent in smoking and to replenish the kangri (a wickerwork covered terracotta pot) with live coals to light the tobacco and keep it simmering. We contrived to stay within hearing distance and coveted the job so that we could sneak a look at the game, taking our time, pretending to keep the coal burning. It was not long before we understood the nuances and rules of the game and started playing at our own level, often with our pocket money and the tips we received from the winners. Tea and snacks were served every often till the card session ended, sometimes late in the evening, and the participants departed happily for their homes.

Sunday 30th March 1952 was like another beautiful spring day. Papa (father) was already up, tending his favourite rose garden and tidying up flowerbeds and borders in preparation for planting the annuals, especially his favourites, the marigolds, phlox and pansies. I was soon in the garden asking if I could be of any help but he was happy doing his own thing. I sat on the wicker chair and enjoyed the morning sunshine for a while. Soon my mother, siblings and cousins joined us and we had a morning cup of tea.

My most memorable Birthday gift :

Monday 31st march was my official 15th birthday. The tradition of celebrating birthdays, religious functions and rituals in the Kashmiri culture is unlike any other. We go by the lunar calendar. On birthdays the family priest calls at the house early in the morning for a ritual prayer and blessing according to the sacred scriptures. He provides a new sacred thread (yonea) to be slung around the neck and arm of the birthday boy, and ties a yellow and red wrist band (naerband) on all the family members and anoints the centre of their foreheads with saffron or vermilion paste (tyok). Yellow fried rice (teher),

salted and spiced with turmeric, and yogurt is a speciality on the occasion. It is sanctified by mantras and served as rice balls to all the members, after having thrown some to the birds and domestic animals.

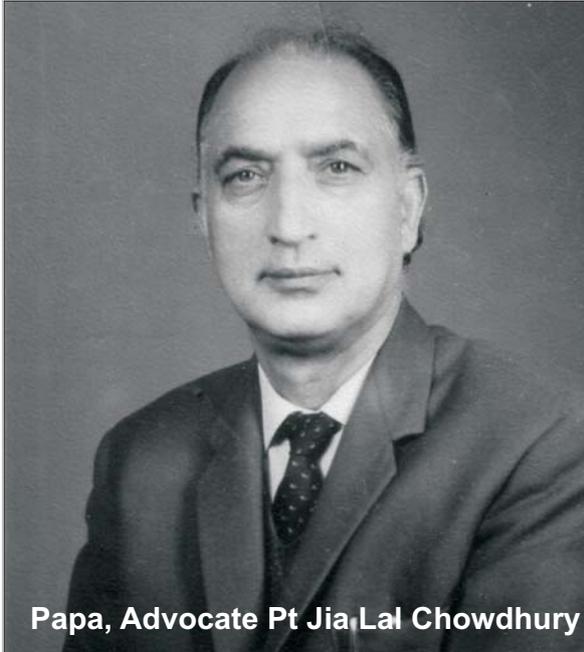
Gifts were not a fashion but we invariably got a new shirt and trouser. Father was a veritable Anglophile. He would never forget the birthday cake which he ordered from Odeon Hotel of his client and friend, Mohamed Kabir Waza. The hotel was a kind of watering hole for father and other hard working professionals including lawyers and some of my college professors who frequented the place for an evening snack and tea before taking a tonga back home. The venue was like a pub is to English people, a pub without beer and hard drinks! Father would have tea, butter-toast and kebebs. Sometimes, after our college, we would loiter near the courts and manage to be there just when he came out from his work. He would spot us and take us along to Odeon Hotel for the treat and back home in a tonga. Imagine our pride to be in adult and august company of intellectuals, professors, lawyers, and others.

My official birthday on 31st march 1952 started just like any other in the past and having already celebrated my lunar birthday I was not expecting anything special on this day except the traditional cake when father got home. Being a Monday, a college day for me and a working day for others, I woke up normally to get ready for my





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Papa, Advocate Pt Jia Lal Chowdhury

long trek to college. My parents were also up early as usual getting on with their chores.

At around 8 AM, the time when father's clients would start arriving, I heard him call me. When I came down and entered his office he was engrossed in the files. Without looking up from his table, he pointed to the annexe to his chamber, a small room where the clients removed their footwear or left their bags. "Something is waiting for you, go have a look," he said in a calm and casual tone and continued with his work. I could not quite understand anything but my steps took me to the little room.

What greeted my eyes was incredible - an ornate bicycle - part of it still covered in protective paper tape - reposing against the wall. I had never seen such a pretty machine. 'Rudge Whitworth' read the nameplate, something difficult to pronounce. Made in England! Wow! Was it for me, I wondered. There had been no mention about it, no commitment, no promises. In fact my gentle reminders seemed to have met with almost deliberate disregard. I gently fondled

this beauty of a bicycle and suddenly it dawned on me that this was a birthday gift for me and my heart pounded with a sudden rush of excitement.

The popular cycle brands of those times were Hercules, Hindustan and Hero, the former made in England (the Principal of our college, Mahmood Ahmed, owned one) and the other two in India. To my knowledge, the only person to own a bicycle of the unique design and shape like the one I now owned was the well-known surgeon, Dr Peshin of National Hospital in Karan Nagar. I would often see him on my way to college, riding his green Raleigh, looking imposing. How I envied him!

I ride my own bicycle :

But right now my head was in the clouds, unable to take it all in, incredible of my fortune. What a fabulous birthday present! Father must love me a lot, I thought to myself, to shower me with such an expensive gift. He looked even happier than me, and very proud. Just when I was getting ready to leave for college he asked me to take good care of the bicycle because it was one of a kind. He was right; never a duplicate or a twin was ever seen in the valley as far as I remember. People's heads turned as they saw me riding my beauty till they got used to the sight over a period of time.

When I rolled out my bike on to the road to go to college I was scared and apprehensive, and very careful. I had never ridden a bike in the narrow lanes beyond my neighbourhood, and certainly never on the city roads in traffic. Turning left outside the main gate of our residence I rode well till I got to the first of the ninety-degree bends in the back lanes. I got down at all further bends not wanting to hit anybody or anything coming the other way. I walked my bicycle for short difficult stretches avoiding to ride it over mounds, potholes and ditches, on craggy surfaces and over the mini drains that ran out of houses across the lanes, lest I damage the tyres or land with a puncture.

It took me quite some time on that first fateful day to cover the short distance to my friend



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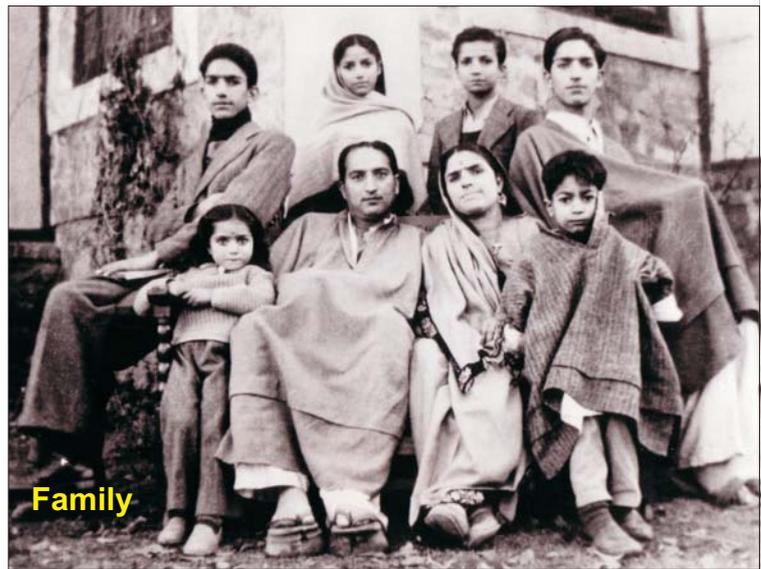
Kanaya Lal Khushu's house at Wazpora, and to the Muna Halvai's (sweet meat confectioner) shop at Mahraj Gunj, the famous trading square of the city. From there, it was a better road, being the busy highway on which plied bicycles, Tongas, hand carts and carriages, and, a few cars; rarely trucks with merchandise.

I had to ride even more cautiously as I passed by the familiar Mahraj Gunj post office, the Wani brothers (grocers), the famous Gulam Ahmed Noor Mohamed booksellers, the historic Budshah tomb (of king Zain-ulabudin), arriving into the elite commercial centre at Zaina Kadal, the 4th bridge, also the Tonga terminus. I had to dodge a herd of Tongas parked in the stand right in the square and decide whether to take the east bank route or the west bank across the Zaina Kadal Bridge on this maiden journey. I was conscious of people eyeing my bike curiously, eyebrows raised, as I passed the familiar shops in Zaina Kadal square. Father's clients/friends, Abdul Salaam Parimoo, the shoe shop proprietor, and Gulam Ahmed Samavar of the brass-and-copper kitchenware fame, and many others greeted me joyfully,

as I rode along, not daring to halt or come down and reciprocate their greetings traditionally as I would when I walked to and from my college.

I chose the west bank route for being less congested though longer to my college. I had started late and already missed an important class. I rode faster than I had started and was more confident as I passed by the Pather Masjid, the Commissioner's office across the kuti kol (canal), the Sher Gadi road, Hari Singh High Street and into the by lane leading to Hazuri Bag, the vast open grounds and pastures that lead to Amar Singh College road. Within the next few minutes I was entering the main gates of my beloved college.

I headed straight for the covered bicycle shed and asked the keeper for a place to park my bicycle. The shed had room for about 20 bicycles, mostly taken by the staff. He was quite taken by my machine and gladly accommodated me. I did not have a lock and chain. I admonished him against letting any one ride my bicycle and returned to my classroom, my thoughts on the bicycle all the time. After the lecture was over I rushed to the parking lot to check on my bicycle and again sneaked a look after every break. That



Family



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aroused the curiosity of my friends who followed me to have a look. There was a mixture of joy and jealousy in their eyes, and a burning wish to ride my bicycle. I acquiesced and let them a small ride each, before I saw it secure again in the cycle shed. We hurried to the next class.

A minor mishap :

The last lecture ended around 3:30 pm. I headed back fast to the bicycle shed to get on my bike and go home to celebrate my birthday and relate my first day experience with my bike to my family. At the shed I was met by a bruised, guilty and tearful Hussein, waiting for me to come out of my class.

He, on the strength of our friendship, had persuaded the shed keeper to let him take my bike out for a longer ride. Not content with the half kilometre ride from the shed to the college gate and back he had ventured on the main highway and raced the bike till he reached the acute bend at full speed when he was face to face with a truck turning into the road from the right. He had panicked and braked hard and been thrown into a ditch. In the process he got his foot caught in the spokes of the front wheel, breaking two spokes. His hands and face were bruised badly against the rough brambles and a tree standing by the ditch.

I was horrified to see his injuries and the sad state of my new acquisition but I did not get mad for I loved Hussein like a brother. He was my neighbour, classmate and friend. I perspired and trembled at the thought of my father who had asked me to take care of my gift. How irresponsible would I look when he came to know how I had treated his gift on the very first day. I felt wretched at the thought.

Together we surveyed the damage to the bicycle. Mercifully, apart from three broken spokes and a couple of tiny scratches on the paintwork, there was no major catastrophe. She could not be ridden in her bruised state for the spokes needed quick repairing or they would brush against the legs while riding. The mortified

shed keeper, fearing he might lose his job, directed us to a repair shop across the open ground along the airport road. What would it cost us, we wondered. Hussein said he would pay for the damage. Even as I would hate to accept his offer we would have to pool our modest pocket money for the repair.

But before that it was time to attend to Hussein's bruises at the college first-aid centre. He did not make much fuss about it except that he had to explain it away to his family on reaching home.

We walked together in silence with the bike to the repair shop, sighing loud and deep, feeling sad and mad, thinking how faithless fortune can be and how ephemeral joy.

The repairman was amazed to see this unusual bike and was soon at work repairing the spokes, only one of which needed replacing while the other two needed straightening and fixing.

We headed home, walking the bike all the way. We could have double ridden it but that was illegal and I was not sure if the little bike could carry two big boys. The instruction book had said to avoid two grown up passengers riding the bike although it had an attractive pillion.

Everyone at home was waiting, full of expectation to hear my first-day experience with my bike. They were also worried about my safety as I could see from the relief on their faces on seeing me. I thought it proper to defer any reference to the accident that could have marred the happiness in the family. After all, no harm was done and the beautiful shining black beauty looked none the worse for her misadventure into the ditch. Father returned from the law courts with the traditional gift of a large chocolate cream-cake prepared by the chef at Odeon. This time the cake was bigger because he knew a bigger gathering would be present in our house to felicitate me. He had also brought an extra quota of cream pastry puffs.

“Well, how did you fare today, Chaman? Are you happy now that you have your personal transport? No more talk of tiredness, I hope.” He



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wore a big smile of contentment.

With a lump of gratitude in my throat, a surge of affection in my heart and a happy tear moistening my eyes, I would truthfully have liked to give my father a big hug of affectionate thanks but that kind of sentimental display was not the practice. Painful parting hugs and joyful embraces of reunion were reserved for the times we departed for any length of time from home or the times we returned from a long absence.

I described my adventures on the bicycle and the reactions of friends and classmates and the sensation the bicycle created. Mother said that was as natural as a kid getting a new toy.

"Why don't you go to your matamal tomorrow on your way back from college and get your grandfather, Tathya Kak, to bless you, and show your bicycle to uncles and cousins?" she suggested.

In fact, I would show off my bike for days on end by visiting all our relations and friends throughout the length and breadth of the city. It was only natural that I should. I was quite sociable even before I got the bicycle and visited relations more than my siblings did. Now it was easier and quicker. I would soon get into the practice of dropping at the homes of close relatives and friends just to say hello or with an errand. In the process I enjoyed a cup of kehva, a glass of milk, or a nice hot telwaroo (bagel) or kulcha (bun) that was forced on me out of affection. It was exciting to be on the wheels. It was incredible. I was in air!

But the wonder and joy of owning a bike had still not sunk in really till the facts came out and I realised how parents strive to provide for children, to spare them the hardship they themselves must have faced much before father made a name for himself as the well-known Jee Chudir, a typical Kashmiri abbreviation for Pandit Jia Lal Chowdhury. It so transpired that father, after graduating in law at Lucknow, had started his practice in Srinagar. But, as with every new professional, the going was not easy in the beginning. So he had taken up the job of teaching

part-time at the Convent College, the famous mission school for girls at Rajbagh across the river. He had to commute back and forth from Rajveri Kadal to the law courts at Amira kadal 6 kilometres away and, from there, another 3 kilometres to the school. He would walk part of the distance to the Tonga stand; take a ride to the courts from where he had to walk to and fro the school and then the return journey. Sometimes he would borrow a friend's cycle, at other times from his uncle, till he bought one of his own. The comfort and convenience from a personal vehicle and the timesaving was not lost on him and, even before I started moaning about the distance to my college, his mind was already at work.

By August 1951 he had been on the lookout for a bike for me. Not only had he checked the Indian newspapers but also kept an eye on the available English magazines at Raina's News Agency, the famous book shop on the Bund. Father was a nationalist to the core, yet he was an anglophile to boot and admired goods made in Britain for their quality. He had put the word out for one type of bike he had seen in a journal and arranged the delivery through his relative and friend, Shri Channa Lal Koul, the owner of Kaula Motor Stores. The bicycle was delivered quietly on the evening of Sunday 30th March after the card players had left and we had retired to our rooms. The whole task of choosing, ordering, delivery etc. was kept secret - not a word had ever been spoken about the bicycle to anyone, no promises had been made. Only mother knew about it.

I became famous during the next few days for being the lucky owner of a fancy bike which, though sturdy was rather small, that made people believe that it was either a ladies' or a children's bike. In fact, it was a semi-racing design, popular in England at the time. The manufacturers were looking for good sales in the newly independent Indian subcontinent. The Second World War had impoverished Britain even in her victory; India, the jewel in the British Crown had been lost, and the dwarfed Empire now needed to boost her



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economy by accelerating trade and commerce. Education was another field to cash upon and Britain made it reasonably inexpensive for Indians to study in British colleges and universities, fully aware of the fact that it would take long for India to create the massive infrastructure to educate her masses.

Wherever I went on my bicycle there was admiration for her uniqueness and envy for me but it earned me many more friends. I was quite possessive in the beginning and would not let anyone touch it, let alone take it for a ride. Kundan, four years younger, often implored me to let him just dust it everyday. Even the act of touching this beauty was a pleasure for him. In due course I allowed him to clean it, even as I knew he would steal a ride or two. Gradually the other siblings, and the larger family of cousins of all ages, all got their chance to learn and ride my bike and no one was denied. We often took the bicycle to the sprawling Hari Parbat grounds where there was no fear of traffic and we played cycle games up and down the slopes, often double and triple riding this little machine. Going down the hill brought a special thrill. And soon we were adept at hands-free cycling - that is to ride a bicycle and let go the hands off the steering!

Transformative :

In the weeks and months to follow, the bike transformed and magically uplifted my life in ways I had never imagined as it opened new vistas beyond the old city roads and the largely fetid muddy lanes. For all practical purposes the vale of Kashmir had remained a foreign land. We had seen so little and been to so few places.



Bar Association of Srinagar. Among others, Pt. Jia Lal Chowdhury with Pt. Nehru & Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan

Normal commute was restricted to friends and relatives living in the city on the shores of the Vitasta, accessed by the seven bridges, with occasional visits to the Dal or Manasbal lakes, Khir Bhavani at Ganderbal and the Moghul gardens. Add to it the exhilarating morning walk around the Hari Parbat fort paying obeisance at the numerous temples in its foothills and the visits to Badamvari in the huge lawns sloping from the hill and you get a fair idea what our world was. The bicycle made all these places so very accessible. Suddenly, time was at your bidding and distances had shrunk!

By then I had learned all about the working components of the bike - the driving chain, the brakes, the dynamo function. The bike came with a hand pump and tools like a wrench. I bought the puncture kit from a bicycle repair shop who trained me in repairing an inevitable puncture. The carrier seat at the back had a good spring-loaded arm that held the books and goods safely



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as I drove to college. But six months into the use of the bicycle we purchased a purpose built cane-basket that fitted the handle bar by special iron clamps and this additional implement came in handy for carrying extra baggage. Often we seated Usha, our youngest sibling in the basket and what a picture she made - a beautiful living doll!

Ah the joys of riding! Cleaving the air as though on wings; defying time and space by making what used to be a full day's journey on foot, just in a couple of hours; passing by garrulous acquaintances, who formerly bound you in unending conversations by the roadside, with a light ting ting of the bell and a casual wave of recognition as I swished by.

The bike now opened a new world for me. Suddenly I was the king of the road. I could go anywhere within a reasonable distance, even up some steep hills to places like Chashma Shahi gardens 10 kilometres away, and to hamlets, Khir Bhavani, 25 kilometres from my home, make a tour of all the lakes circumnavigating the area from Dal Gate on the Boulevard to Nishat and Shalimar gardens over to Nagin lake and returning home via Naseem Bagh, Soura and Zadibal and the Hari Parbat area before getting back home. It was pure magic to sit on the parapet wall of the lakes and watch the world go by. The bicycle was light and so easy to ride and never left me tired.

Another time, I would set myself in another direction and drive along the yellow fields of mustard and green fields of rice and, or along the saffron fields at Pampur. Yet, another day along the Airport road to the plateau to get an open, unobstructed view of the breathtaking panorama that is Kashmir valley with her azure blue sky with clouds of all formations kissing the snow covered mountains, the green hills nearby and the beautiful slopes laden with wild flowers.

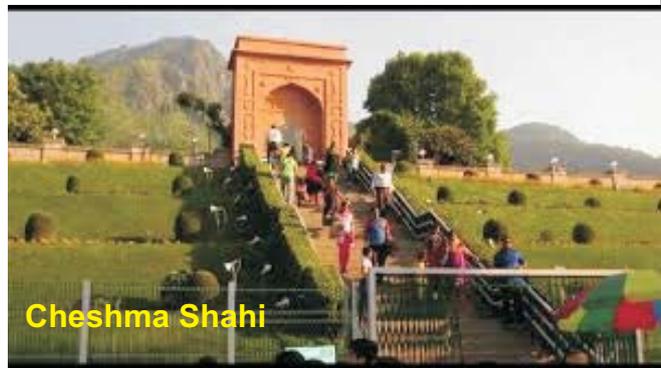
An age of love and longing :

It was an age of love and longing. Couple of

years after I got the bicycle, a flame kindled in my young heart. It was instant yet authentic, the tender and sincere love of adolescents. She was pretty, the daughter of a family acquaintance. Open liaisons between boys and girls were taboo and our courtship had to be clandestine and a guarded secret in deference to the cultural norms of the time. It was hard for both of us and yet we managed to meet and communicate in spite of the risk of being found out. The bicycle made our life easier and allowed us many more meetings for I would ride along the route she took to her college and back and we would spot each other and behave as if we were acquaintances who met by chance on the road. The mere fact of walking together was the acme of our love and all that we desired.

One time, a cousin found us walking together and I behaved as if I were inquiring about some person from the girl. It was a lucky escape. But the greater escape was another time when we were walking together in Lal Chowk and I saw father coming out from the law courts. I shot off on my bicycle like an arrow before his gaze would catch me. After a little distance when I looked back I noticed him walking towards the girl to greet her. I patted my little Rudge like a pet dog who had saved a situation.

For the four years that the bicycle was in my possession my life was exciting and filled with adventure. I got a great kick out of allowing my younger siblings (Robin, two year younger to me,





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and Kundan, another two younger to him) a ride now and then, carrying others as pillion passengers and, at times, seating Usha, our little sister, in the basket hooked to the handle bar. If my mother was going somewhere with her little ones, the bicycle was useful as a carrier for her clothes and utilities. The bike often came quite handy as a carry cot/ buggy.

Siblings grow up, our family advances :

The year 1955 was epochal for our family. Robin, Kundan and I were in teens, going through the enormous physical, psychological and gender transformations of adolescence. Sister Vijay a preteen, while Bodhji (Surender) and little sister Usha were still kids, eight and six years respectively.

We had been cooped up all winter studying hard for our examinations. Kishni (father's younger sister), cousin Piyare Lal and I, all in the same grade, had been swotting under the faint glow of a combination of oil and hurricane lamps and dim electric lights. Our neighbour, Girdhari Bhan, would also join us now and then. We were preparing for the most important BSc. examination due to take place at the end of March 1955. Mother played the angel's sheet anchor role once again as she had done in my previous university examinations of Matric and Intermediate in 1951 and 1953 respectively, waking us up each morning at

around 5 am to get on with our studies, providing us kangris to keep us warm, oil lamps to work in the dark and tasty snacks to boost our energy. While we studied, she knitted our socks, mittens and other woollens tirelessly. This year was also special because my sibling Robin was going to sit for Intermediate examination, a prelude to entrance in a professional college and Kundan for Matriculation. While the all of us were expected to pass our examinations with good grades, Mohan (mother's younger brother) and Robin gave us reason for great expectations and spectacular results because of their performance two years earlier in Matriculation where they had secured the first and tenth positions respectively in Jammu and Kashmir!.

And so it turned out. Robin scored second top position while Mohan got a high percentage. My bicycle again came in for a special role in bringing the happy news home from the university where the examination results were posted. It would take hours to get the results from news papers and radio so I rode to the university offices at Lal Mundi early and waited for the result sheet to be pinned to the bill board. It was incredible to find Robin's name at the top. I must have screamed in joy and taken off like a flash of lightening, probably doing a dangerous 40 km per hour all the way to Rajveri Kadal and shouting the news a mile ahead of home to the astonishment of all onlookers. It was a landmark achievement, a day of great joy and pride in which my Rudge Whitworth Bicycle played its vital role.

Kundan followed this up beating the family record for Matriculation, standing first in his school and sixth in the university. We all did well and all the siblings continued in the tradition which came to be known, in a way, the Chowdhury phenomenon, of getting top positions in the examinations. We became famous and our parents swelled with pride as, down the years, the younger siblings continued to top the ranks in their examinations.

Robin should have inherited the control of



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the bicycle in 1955 when I graduated and travelled the plains in search of a good institution before finally leaving for London in 1956 for higher studies. But he was already out of the valley studying at Benaras Hindu University. The bicycle passed on to Kundan who rode it to S P College for the next two years. Unlike Robin, Kundan and I who were the products of government school, our youngest sibling, Surinder, would enjoy the privilege of going to Biscoe Memorial, the best private school in Srinagar, nearly 5 km from home. Kundan would carry him as a pillion passenger and drop him at school before going to S P College and pick him on his return journey till he departed for his medical studies at Patiala, Punjab. Surinder, a safe rider by then, assumed the full and independent charge. He would continue to use it the longest until he joined Regional Engineering College at Naseem Bagh where he became a full border from 1964 to 1968. He would still use the bike during college term breaks and holidays. Going to Naseem Bagh by bicycle was too far and there were distinct advantages for him to stay in a student's hostel.



Mother Smt Dhan Rani Chowdhury

Dida (Vijay) never rode a bicycle and went to Nawa Kadal Girls School nearby on foot while Usha joined Arya School near the Exhibition grounds in her 9th class and was gifted a new lady's bicycle which she continued till she completed her studies in the Government College for Women for two more years, before she joined Srinagar Medical College as an MBBS student. By then, Kundan returned with a postgraduate degree in Medicine and joined the faculty in the medical college while sister Vijay was completing her MBBS from Medical College, Patna.

In 1969 Surinder, like Robin before him in 1968, would join me at England to do their postgraduate studies at Liverpool University, the former moving to Australia and the latter to USA, to settle down there for good. Kundan too would study Neurology in the famous Institute of Neurology, London staying with me during that period before returning home. Dida would also join the Srinagar Medical College as faculty while Usha would settle down in USA after graduating in Medicine.

It was a dream run for the Chowdhury siblings to carve their destinies and settle down in their careers at different places and continents. We became global much before modern technology turned the world into a global village

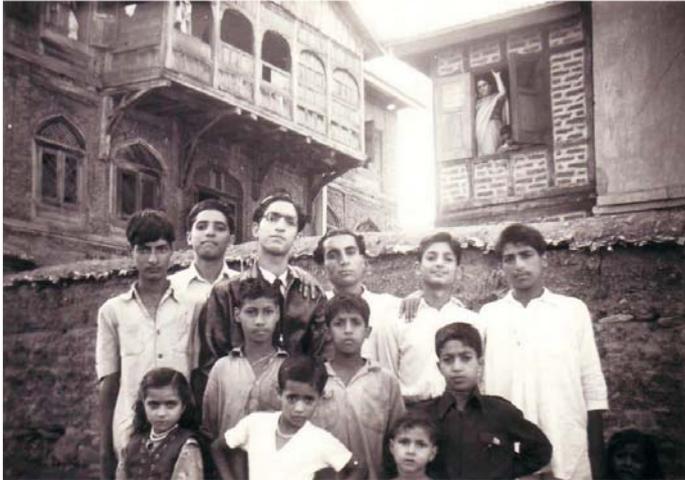
Come 1962, while still at Rajveri Kadal, Papaji purchased his first car, an Ambassador. The world was changing fast and cars became a necessity like my bike was in early nineteen fifties. The family was advancing in many ways and our ancestral home getting rather cramped for space. In 1963, our parents decided to move uptown to a central place at Barbarshah, near Ram Chander temple. However, my bicycle, the workhorse of the previous decade, was not going to retire, as it passed into the hands of the servants who went shopping and other odd jobs on it.

Memories of the bicycle :

In London I often remembered my beautiful bicycle. When I returned to Kashmir first time in



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On the eve of leaving for London. Mother watching from behind.

1963 it was to the new home at Barbarshah. My beloved Rudge looked aged and worn out for lack of tender loving care. There were signs of rust and decay. I touched it gently to get a feel of the good old days. Memories cascaded like a cloud expanding in space. I visited again in 1965. She was still serviceable but only a ghost of her past glory - the black mud guards and the metal of the struts and handle bars had lost the gloss that spoke of her unique quality, workmanship and style. Again in 1973, when I, along with Anne, my wife, and our girls four and two years old, flew to attend sister Usha's wedding, the bike was still in use but a relic of its past!

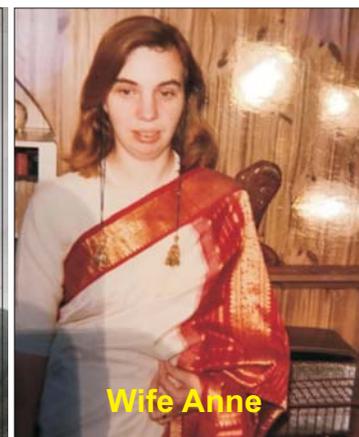
By the time I visited home with my family again in 1982 the old beauty was stored away as an archive in the outhouse, the servant's quarter. It was not being used. The car was the king now. Kundan was constructing a new house at Indra Nagar near Sonwar where the family moved, leaving Barbarshah behind, where Papa still maintained his office and visited every

morning. He loved the place. On my next visit in 1984 Barbarshah looked abandoned, a ghost house, even as nothing had been moved from the place. It is the inmates that make a house not the furniture and furnishings.

The last time I had a glimpse of my bike was 1986 when Papaji and Bhabi decided to perform a Havan (the fire ritual) as a thanksgiving for my safe recovery from a triple by-pass operation in February 1985.

I have to confess that in all the hubbub of the event I had forgotten my teenage friend, the Rudge, the transport of my delight of thirty-three years back, the most enduring part of my existence. But, as the cooks were assembling a temporary open air furnace for cooking for the big event, and I was looking around, I happened to peep next door into the window of the outhouse and there in the corner I saw her

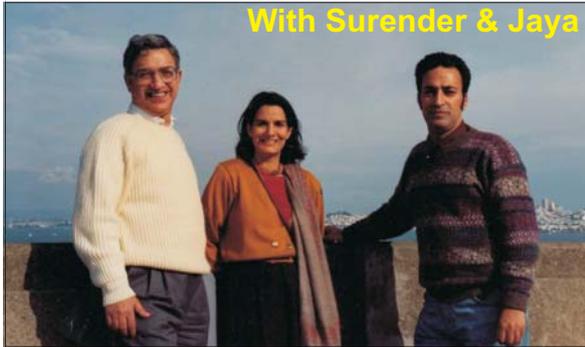
covered in dust and cobwebs, the original name tag "Rudge Whitworth", still showing proudly on the diagonal strut. I opened the door and entered the room and sat on the old wooden platform bed next to the bike, abandoned and sad. There was a rag nearby, probably an old shirt. I extricated the cycle from the catacomb of cobwebs, picked the rag and wiped off the dust. The tires were flat, the dynamo was missing as was the chain guard,



Wife Anne



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but the lamp was still attached to the front vertical strut and the delightful hand bell still stood in place. I could not get it to ting, ting. I unscrewed the rusted cover and found the spring broken. The bike was suffering from lack of tender loving care that I used to shower on it day in day out. I sat there a long time and went into a kind of reverie, reflecting on my life, my teenage years, my first love, my visits to the lovely places of the land of my birth that nurtured me in my formative years and gave me enough stamina and vitality to carry me all these years despite inclement health. I thought about the changes that have taken place in my life, my family, my country, and the world at large. My reverie was broken by the voice of dearest father calling me to greet a friend who had just arrived. I didn't know what to do with the bicycle. With heavy heart, I leaned it against the wall to the peace and quiet of the room for an unknown future.

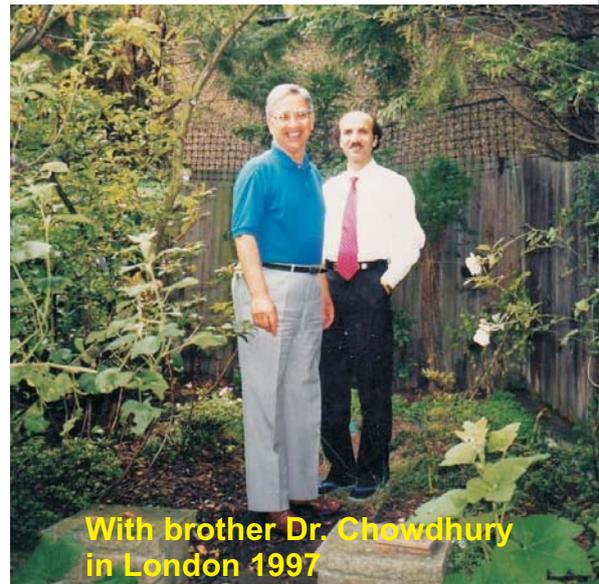
I returned to Kashmir several times in 1987 and 1988. I had persuaded my parent company in London, along with some global partners, to embark on an ambitious project very dear to my heart – the drainage and sewerage of the city of Srinagar on the pattern of a modern western city, including the revival of Dal Lake that seemed dying incrementally every time I visited Kashmir. I had to stay at Oberoi Palace Hotel with my overseas colleagues and enlist local officials and technocrats for the project. Our parents had permanently moved to Kundan's house at Indra Nagar and I would visit the family there, hardly

getting any time to visit our Barbarshah home that lay unoccupied. Alas, I did not get to see my bicycle again. The car was the normal conveyance now; the Tonga had vanished, cycles still plied in bye lanes while city buses, scooter rickshaws and motor taxis had taken over the mad passenger traffic.

End of an era :

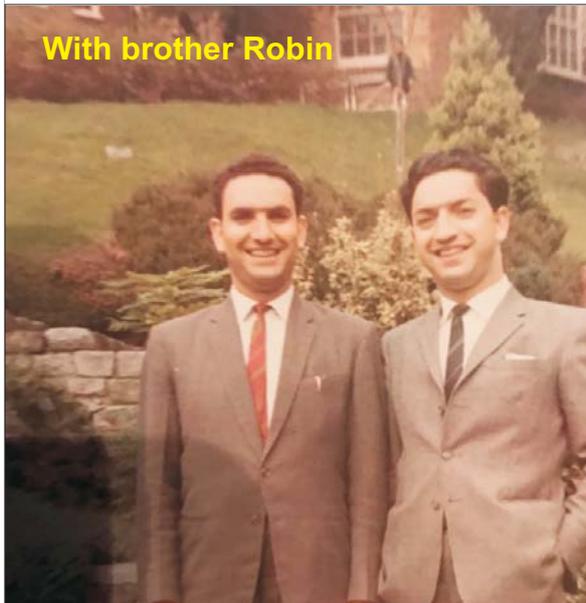
The autumn of 1988 cast a dark shadow in our happy family. Papa had been diagnosed with lung cancer and was flown to USA for treatment at the insistence of Usha and her wonderful spouse, Bansi, both doctors in Buffalo. Kundan and mother accompanied him. I visited him there a few months later. But father was going down, the end was nearing and he preferred to die at home. He always was a great fighter like an Indian tiger, the greatest fighter I ever knew. He was called the 'lion' in the courts in Kashmir for the way he terrorized even the ablest opponents with his arguments and earned the admiration of the judges with his humour, wit and riposte.

He was flown back in March 1989. I went on business again to Srinagar in the March of 1989 and celebrated my birthday at Kundan's





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With brother Robin



house with father at the helm of prayers even as he was emaciated, weak and hardly able to sit and stand. I returned to Kashmir again in April but he was slowly melting away. I flew to Delhi on 9th

April on my way back to London. I had a meeting with my project colleagues there. Next day, my colleague Vernon Turnbull took a call on my behalf from Kundan to break the news that father had passed away the night I left. Traditionally the eldest son in the Hindu faith should perform the last rites and light the funeral pyre. Hindus must cremate the body within a few hours of demise to release the soul from the mortal remains.



At Graduation Function of daughter Indira

I could not get a plane seat within the required time frame to perform father's funeral rites and cremation, which were carried out by Kundan. I returned to Srinagar the day after to perform the ten days of rituals and mourning and to help Kundan out with many other tasks when a person passé to immortality.

It was at the end of the mourning period that I took the domestic help, Ashok, to



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With wife Anne, brothers Robin & Kundan during a Kashmiri Pandit Conference in London in 1997

Barbarshah home to see if the place needed some care and maintenance that I could attend to. A leaky roof had spoiled the floor boards and the beautiful carpets that we put out in the sun to dry to be rolled for storage. Sadly I did not have time to see all the parts at the huge home and never even thought of the old faithful 'my bike' that last I saw in the outhouse in 1985.

I was again in Srinagar at the end of 1989 with some colleagues trying to finalise the Kashmir project when terrorists appeared on the beautiful landscape of Kashmir. There was no looking back from there. It was as if father had taken all the peace of the place, all the beauty, all the fraternal spirit with him to the other world. Our project and three years of hard work came to an abrupt halt as the place became dangerous. In November the



With family



militancy got worse and Pandits were being kidnapped, tortured and gunned down with impunity. The administration collapsed, the govt abdicated and there was all round mayhem. In January 1990 all non-Muslims were threatened with annihilation and ordered to quit the valley. More than three hundred and fifty thousand Kashmiri Pandits and another fifty thousand Hindus and Sikhs were forced to leave their homes to become refugees as the world watched in silence. Genocide and ethnic cleansing was in



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evidence in the valley again after Sikandar the iconoclast of thirteenth century had killed, converted or banished Pandits to leave only 11 families behind.

Kundan, and Dida had to flee along with the rest. The houses were looted, vandalised and occupied by militants and squatters.

In 2006 a Muslim family offered to buy Barbarshah and we all agreed to sell the property, preferring a pittance to the illegal annexation of part of the land and occupation of the houses.

I am hoping that when the buyer took the place over he gave my bicycle the same love and care and a lease of new life so that his children might learn how to ride on a bike that had our family history etched in its soul, if cycles have one.

Epilogue :

The bicycle was made in Yorkshire England by a firm that started in 1870s. They still continue to manufacture pedal and motorised bicycles amongst other things. My bicycle that had an active life in a foreign country for at least thirty-five years is a tribute to the engineering and quality of work of the English industrial excellence of those days. Since the break-up of the British Empire, the Hong Kong islanders, the Japanese, the Taiwanese, the Koreans and now the Chinese, as also the Indians, manufacture goods that once came from England to all corners of India and the old British Empire.



Odes to Baisahab

By Dr. K.L.Chowdhury

1) Lightning Bolt

Darkness shrouded the earth
Lightning snaked across the sky
A thunderbolt struck
The sky crashed
The world turned upside down
The senses became numb
The mind dumb

You have left us
And flown away
Taking us unawares
Leaving us maimed.

2) No, I can't believe it

No, I can't believe
That you are no more.

Just the other day
We spoke with each other
With great affection and fervor.
You seemed so well preserved
Well-groomed
And rapturously handsome,
Looking like a philosopher,
With your shining silvery hair.

You spoke with great emotion
Of life and love and longing
Of the nostalgic past
Of today and tomorrow
Of happiness and sorrow.

You never looked like one
Sick or handicapped



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Or in the last lap of your journey,
Unfulfilled or melancholy

Oh, how can such a beautiful life
End so abruptly?
How can it end at all?

3) Unreal

For the last week,
Gathered here in Fremont,
We have been moving like puppets,
Like characters acting our roles.

There is a feeling of unreality
In everything we do.
We sleep and wake up as before
And go through our chores
As we reminisce about you
And sigh and sob and cry,
Raising our hands to the sky,
Seeking answers
To the riddle of life and death.

There is a denial
That you have ceased to be
Even as we mourn you deeply

How long do we live in limbo
Between not believing
And yet acutely conscious
Of the immutability of death?

4) Unravelling

And now, in your passing away,
We have been utterly unraveled;
The strongest link that held us together
Has been snapped;
Our dourest defence breached;
Our crown chopped off;

Leaving us weak and vulnerable
As never before

There is no going away,
For you have cleared the way
And it is our turn now,
Even as we know
That there is no hierarchy in dying
But a mystifying randomness
That picks and chooses
At its own behest
But I am ready
For there is the consolation
When my time comes
It will be to join you, finally,
And then,
There will be no regrets.

5) What was it in you?

What was it in you, our dearest brother,
That endeared you to everyone?

Yes, you were a darling,
A prince among commoners,
A god amongst mortals

Yes, you were our eldest brother,
Our friend, philosopher and guide,
Loving and affectionate,
But there was something
That made you exceptional,
That captured our soul
As it did others'.
On the day you left for London
Sixty-one years ago
When you were just eighteen
And London was a far off place,
Further than our imagination could go,
The whole neighborhood came out
Still rubbing sleep off their eyes
To bid you farewell.



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Some went on tongas,
Others walked the five miles to the bus stand,
And their hands rose to touch yours
As the engine gurgled and growled
And the bus started moving slowly.
Emotion-choked, they sobbed and sniffed
And tears flowed down their cheeks.

They never forgot you,
They wouldn't stop talking about you,
Until your return five long years later.

On that occasion,
Several friends and relatives
Traveled all the way to Delhi –
From Srinagar,
From Jammu, and Kishtwar,
From Patiala and Jaipur –
To give you a royal reception!
Others waited for you
At the mouth of Banihaal tunnel.

And all others, in hundreds
Gathered in our Rajveri Kadal home
To welcome their son-of-the soil,
Their loving Chaman Lal.
Such was the enthusiasm to receive you.

They hugged you,
They kissed you,
They held your hands and wouldn't let go,
They looked at you as if from an alien planet,
They listened to your adventures in wonder,
They lingered on and on,
Reluctant to return to their homes.
Such was your magnetic charm.

You made London your home
But came back on visits on and off
And they were always there
To receive you
With tears of joy.

There had to be something
very special in you.

6) Duality

You turned British but
you remained an Indian to the core
Your body was in London but
your soul stayed back in Kashmir
Your love and life was there but
your longings were with us
Your loyalty was to England but
your sympathies for your homeland
Britain was your *karma bhoomi*,
but Kashmir your pet project.
There was this duality
that dominated your life, dear brother
The call of duty on the one hand,
the tug of motherland on the other.

Even death can't erase that
duality of your life;
You will be cremated in Kent
But your ashes are coming back to India.



Robin, Kundan, Chaman
in London 1997