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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

In 1947, shortly before and after the partition of India, the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs got involved with killing each other. The Hindus and Sikhs were on one side and Muslims on the other. Humans were killed in the midst of a crowd because they happened to look different due to their dress or shaving pattern. Someone would come close and stab someone else either in the back or in the stomach right in the waves of people into which the stabber melted in no time. In several cases, the stabbers could be friends, neighbours or anyone who knew the religion of the victims. Many made use of the lawlessness to settle old scores. In my early teens in those days, we used to live in Karol Bagh,

New Delhi.

Every time there was a stir caused by the wind, a car on the street, the bark of a dog, or the mew of a cat, we froze inside our house. Every time there was anything unusual, unseen tragedy was expected. The nights were nightmares and the days did not bring any hope. Often, the mornings dawned with more lamentable events. It was not easy to sleep when night after night the ghosts of fear looked straight into our eyes. It turned into an obsession that afflicted me every minute of every hour that whom to trust and to take in confidence. Passers-by and neighbours appeared to be the possible killers. Apparently, the dark forces of religion roamed around freely to terrorize minorities.

I cannot forget the scene one afternoon. There was a short relief from the curfew to go out to buy basic needs. I was sitting on the steps of our house to watch how life suddenly came back to life. I saw John on the other side of the street, wearing a shalwar, a pyjamas-type outfit,

worn mostly by Muslims of Pakistan but common in India among the Hindus as well. He smiled, waving a hand to greet me. Thank God I did not encourage him to stop though being a Christian, meeting another Christian, he might have. He was much older than I was.

Minutes later, I saw a crowd wearing helmets and chest braces and carrying swords, axes, spears and daggers, running in his direction. Some shouted that they saw a Muslim riding a bicycle over there. I could recognize some people. They were polite and humble ordinary shopkeepers and others. That afternoon they wore the mantle of crusaders. I had the feeling that the whole Christian family where he headed was in trouble. This Christian family was not more than four blocks from our house.

Terrified, we locked ourselves in. A few days after that we came to know that someone from that family came out trembling to inform the crowd that John was a Christian. Some of them did not

believe this. They removed his clothes to be certain he was not circumcised because circumcision was considered a Muslim practice. Even after decades I shudder within when I picture how he must have anticipated his end, surrounded with daggers, sabers and spears pointed at him. Even the Christians, where he went, must have witnessed death face to face. John was let go. One can imagine the severity of his fear and also of his hosts when there were only two or three Christian families in that area and the crowd was not human in any case and Christians were only tolerated.

I cannot forget the man who used to carry a hidden spear. His sober, tall, muscular, slim appearance still flashes across the eyes of my mind. He could have been thirty years old. I used to notice him crossing the road in front of our house quietly in the morning and returning in the evening like a soldier from the battlefield. He had the appearance of self-confidence. He carried a solid stick of about seven feet

long and about one and a half inches in diameter. He kept that solid stick shining and clean. I used to hear that he massaged the stick with mustard oil every day before going to bed. One end of the stick was about six inches hollow that had a round metal screwed to it. The metal piece had a sharp iron blade attached. The blade was screwed inside the hollow part of the stick. He could unscrew the metal piece and then screw it back with the razor outside. When he walked, the razor was hidden inside the hollow part. People thought it to be an ordinary stick. Actually it could be turned into a spear within minutes. He walked like Moses in *The Ten Commandments*.

That stick must have tasted the blood of several infants, old men and women. Just from a distance of seven feet from his victim, he could unscrew the end and screw it back with the razor outside. I heard he had killed several people, piercing that stick into their hearts.

There were several others in our vicinity whose job was to leave their homes

in the morning and return in the evening, carrying boxes on their heads. When the occupants of a house fled or were killed, these people looted whatever they could. Often, I picked up books from the street which the looters dropped while running. Later, I threw many of them away for fear that the police could involve my family in the riots.

I cannot forget the oil-crusher who lived about ten houses from us. Their only son managed to escape to a safe place. They had collected pieces of stone and rock on the top of their house to hit the crowd if they were attacked. One afternoon, the old man ran out of his house towards the street in front of our house, hoping for the emergence of a police car or someone to save him. Two or three pieces of rock hit him from somewhere and he fell. Then more stones and rocks. A few people collected wood and kerosene oil from the neighbourhood, heaped them above him and burnt his body. Perhaps, he was still alive. Hearing a police car approaching, as

it was the curfew time, the crowd started dispersing. The police officers passed the scene as if there was not even a fire.

I cannot forget the climate of New Delhi which emitted a strong offensive smell due to the rotting dead bodies in the houses. It was said that the government had their buses loaded with bodies to be burnt somewhere outside the city. The authorities could not find adequate loaders because of the stench. Even the water became polluted because several dead bodies were thrown in the Yumana River which was the source of supply for the city residents.

I cannot forget a medical doctor. I had gone to him a couple of times when I had malaria. Two or three times there were bomb explosions in our vicinity. It was said he was behind those explosions. After that, I became afraid even to look at him. A friend, must be in his early thirties with a smiling face, told me about the formation of a group of Hindu youths for defence and to keep an eye on the movements of

suspected people of the area. They collected kerosene oil from different homes and were taught to make crude explosives.

My friend did not seem to be against Christians and was interested in writing. He was in the army abroad that was organized by Subash Chandra Bose, a freedom fighter, with the help of the Japanese and German governments. He often shared his experiences of war with me which I loved to hear with interest.

I cannot forget the youths wearing scarves around their necks, seen on the streets. Later I heard they belonged to the same Hindu group. Their scarfs identified them to other members of their organization.

I cannot forget the mercy of a Sikh gentleman, our next door neighbour. A carpenter by trade, of masculine build, he must have been in his thirties. He invited us to sleep on the roof of his house for protection. He repeatedly assured my father that he would be the first to come

forward in case of peril.

We managed to carry one cot for my father because there was not enough space on the roof for more beds. The surface was hot for hours even after sunset. We used to sprinkle it with water and then had to wait for a long time to let it cool down. Most of us slept on that surface.

We also carried glasses and water to drink. We felt ourselves at the mercy of that couple. My father was a smoker and therefore coughed intermittently in the night which disturbed the sleep of the Sikh gentleman. Therefore, he could not afford to continue his generosity for many days. When the dust settled, we found that our house had been a target during those days of riots. We were spared due to the intervention by some old people of our area.

I cannot forget the pain and the disgrace we had to go through for a crime we had not committed. I always prayed for our lives. Often I wondered if we would go straight to Heaven for dying as followers of

Jesus. Would our sins be forgiven ? What was our fault? We were not against any religion or even anyone. I used to think, if attacked, how we would be killed. It might be with axes or a long spear like the one the man carried whom I used to notice passing in front of our house. Would it be safer to run to the street or ask for mercy? Would the attackers give us that much time? It is sure they would first break our door which was very easy to do.

There were the occasions when I expected the Bishop of New Delhi to send a vehicle or a police officer to get us to a secure place for a few days or the priest of our church to get in touch with us to find if we were safe and needed any help. The church was so far that in those days of insecurity it was not possible to go there. The buses were not running and taxis were expensive and nontrustworthy. Even if we had taken the risk, there was no guarantee that the Catholic priest would welcome us to stay with him during those days of disturbance.

For the first time I began to wonder how easily shepherds can forget their flock. I began to feel lonely and think that safety or survival is a personal path. We passed most of the days silently, pretending as if nothing tragic was going to happen. We tried to ignore the danger or maybe fear had paralysed our thinking as well as our speech. I am sure that my parents prayed all the time in their hearts as I did. We did not talk about any danger openly because that could have made everybody nervousness and feel helpless. But danger was visible from our look and silence. There was nothing that we could do in any case. The only wise step that my parents had taken was to send my two elder sisters to a convent because young females at home were harbingers of tragedy. My trust in humanity was shaken so badly in those days that I had to struggle with myself patiently for a long time to recover it. I began to realize at an early age that it was important for people to associate themselves with organizations or their

groups closely for reliance in their bad days.

The Muslims who were concentrated in certain areas of New Delhi were largely safe. In those areas, rather, the lives of the Hindus were in danger. Those areas of concentration were miles away from our place. Once in a while, there were rumours that Muslims were marching towards our side for an attack. Though I was in my early teens, I had a hard time believing that there could be a face-to-face fight. The rumours used to spread like the wind. Grown-up mature people used to arm themselves for defence, coming out of their houses, standing at their doors or congregating on the streets. They used to go back to sleep when nothing happened in an hour or so. These were perhaps methods used by the Hindu group to keep the residents on their toes although it was next to impossible to expect such stupidities from the civilians who formed a minority of two percent and who lived in fear about ten miles away.

I cannot forget the sight of the

South Indian military who were called in when the situation went out of control. It was rumoured that the fanatic group of the Hindus tried to bribe the military of South Indians to get their support for those who wore handkerchiefs round their necks. The fanatic group did not succeed in winning them over. I often saw one or two soldiers stationed in front of our house. We were ordered to keep the doors and windows closed. Once in a while I saw their movements through a window hole. They were always ready to shoot anyone breaking the curfew. They noticed people with handkerchiefs or scarfs round their necks involved with anti-social activities. They became the suspicious targets. The presence of those soldiers brought some sanity into the insane area.

Our part of the city, Karol Bagh, was not a ghetto of low class citizens. It was not a small town or a village either. It was a part of the metropolis of New Delhi. We had mixed populations of labouring class and university educated persons from

different cities of India but most of them were Sikh, Hindu, Panjabis, Adi Bassi from Bihar and Muslims. Most Muslims fled during the riots to the part of the city where they were in the majority. Several Christians also fled. The nearest Catholic Church was about twenty miles away. My father did not anticipate that bad situation and was not a man of action. He was a good bread earner and was interested only in his family and work. He hardly had any friends or enemies. I always felt we would have been better off if we had lived in a place where enough Christians were around. I cannot understand that why he never thought in those terms.

I cannot forget the newspaper reports of how persons were mercilessly killed on the streets, in the houses, trains and other places. People were changing their religion under force, and forced marriages to men of other faith were common. Young girls were kidnapped and were passed on from one man to another for pleasure. I cannot forget the

reports when young girls were stripped naked in processions; their breasts were cut off and on their bodies religious signs were carved. Old men and women were butchered on the spot.

Hundreds of women killed themselves with poison. Hundreds of them jumped into wells to end their lives. Hundreds of them committed suicide in other ways. Those who fell in the hands of fanatics, preferred to remain unknown, instead of facing their families. It was a chapter of violence and terror, insults and degradation of women. Jam-packed trains ferried hundreds of thousands of people back and forth across the border of India and Pakistan, who spread the stories of horror caused by religious bigotry.

This happened on both sides of the border between the followers of all the three religions. There were hardly any face to face challenges. There were no combats; only unarmed residents were butchered. Such news prompted others to take revenge on other innocents.

Equally annoying to me was the close division of the country on the basis of religion. In daily life as well as on festivals, Hindus visited and were visited by other Hindus. It was same with the Muslims and Sikhs and Christians. It became more annoying when I was entering the threshold of my youth. A love affair between a Christian boy and a Hindu or Muslim girl was an open invitation to grim consequences that could lead to murder.

The anticipation of danger lurking in the air all the time killed me piece by piece with the unseen sword of the distress of my mind. There were moments when I considered myself a helpless invalid, who wades through the waters of discrimination in social life and hunts for affluence.

The suffocation caused by the thick smoke of fear and distrust shaped my decision to leave India. The big question was why any nation should accept me. I should be in a position to offer something in return. Therefore, I decided to go for a higher university education. I

obtained a master's degree.

I sent letters to nearly every country for a job. I also sent letters to nearly every consulate in New Delhi for help. One of those days, while waiting for a friend in a library, I flipped through a newspaper. I glanced at an advertisement for a teaching position in Ethiopia. Four months after my application, I was called for an interview at the Ethiopian Embassy in New Delhi and after another four months I received a letter of appointment for three years with an offer for free travel, medical facilities and living quarters. I thanked God.

Life in Ethiopia was comfortable. But I wanted to be a writer and for that I planned to settle in an English speaking country. I felt I needed further education. I applied for admission to a doctoral program. Canada seemed to be the ideal because the University of Ottawa offered me a part-time job and hope for a fellowship after a year. Since Canada had no diplomatic relations with Ethiopia, I applied for my permanent residence in England through the British

Embassy and I was accepted. From England I applied for a student's visa to Canada.

In Ethiopia, as in India, I had dreams of being chased and soldiers shooting people for no reason, while I was trying to escape. I had difficulty in falling sleep that afflicted my life from the days of the riots. Those nightmare followed me in Canada. As the night approached, I felt uncomfortable for reasons unknown. The scenes of those crude events are alive somewhere in some caves of my blood. I still dream about people in military uniform, shooting at others for no reason. I began to drink heavily in the evenings.

A person from the roots of that experience and background could go insane or fanatic or something could develop along these lines. It is possible that such a background can make a person renounce the world. On the other hand, the soil of my environment has nourished my outlook differently. That harsh and unfriendly atmosphere has

shaped a global outlook in me. But the story does not end here.

Fear as a wolf of painful emotions kept emerging again and again from the bushes of helplessness in the wasteland of time. It kept disturbing the peace of my nights, particularly whenever I heard about riots from my compatriots in Canada. Even when the wolf was asleep, the thorns of the scars bothered me. One of the incidents which awoke the wolf was an article I read by a Panjabi playwright Gursharan Singh that appeared in *India Journal* on the 22nd of August of 1997 on page 11 :

"I was eyewitness to an incident when Muslem girls were forced to remove their clothes and paraded on the street at the instance of some Sikh leaders," Singh said.

"It was only when a group of Hindu and Sikh women lodged a strong protest that the Muslem girls were allowed to wear their clothes and return to their places."

The stories like that and of Mr. Kumar resurrected the wolf of my fear and insecurity. Mr. Sherwan Kumar, whom I met in Montreal, told me he was in Khanewal, Multan, in June/July of 1947 when India was to be divided. Around that time, Mr. Kumar said, the stabbing of the Hindus in the night started.

He left his work as a Canal Dak Munshi and went to his village. Those villages were situated on one side of the river. The other side of the river were the villages of the Muslims.

It was rumoured that Muslims were saying that they would make the Hindus recite Kalma (verses from *the Koran*). In other words, they would convert them to Muslim faith by force. Several Muslims, mostly Pathans, started attacking Hindu villages with spears and axes and abducting young girls. For defence, the Hindus began to form their groups. They decided to have weapons better than the Muslims had. Some retired military soldiers in a meeting said they wanted six rifles.

Some young and strong boys snatched them from policemen, perhaps they were Hindus, killed them and gave to the retired soldiers. They also made crude bombs. With the six rifles they went to the bank of the river for vigilance. There they saw two Muslim policemen on patrol. They killed one and the other managed to run to the other side. He spread the news that the Sikhs were going to attack the Muslim villages. The Muslims went to the Bloch soldiers who were all Muslims, stationed not very far from there. The Bloch military crossed the river and opened fire. Several Hindus were killed while running for their lives.

Six old men, one from each of the six villages, used to take food for those who defended the Hindus at the bank. One of them was Mr. Kumar's father. When the defenders were being killed by the Bloch soldiers, he hid himself under his bull-driven cart. Six of these men were caught by the military and ordered to stand in a row. A soldier was ordered to kill them with

one shot to spare the ammunition. When the order was to be carried out, someone shouted to let these six men recognize the dead bodies of their villages and load them on to their bull-driven carts for exposure to their villagers. They also said they would follow them shortly to kill any villager they would find. Mr. Kumar's father took seven dead bodies. He and others began to weep, shouting to run for your life because the Bloch military was coming.

For food, they took enough of the wheat grains mixed with jaggery (gur) and hid themselves in the crops of sugar cane and cotton. That was the first time Mr. Kumar saw his father crying. They drank dirty water and ate whatever they could. Mr. Kumar, along with his mother, two sisters, his father, nieces and his friend Govinda, were together. They waited for the Pathans and the military to come, loot and return.

Luckily, it started raining and the Bloch military could not use their vehicles in the mud. The Hindus remained inside the crops for three days without sleep and

rest.

Mr. Kumar told me about a youth who was shot by a Muslim soldier. The rifle bullet had gone from the back, opening his chest widely. His front was all open and he was moving from one place to another rubbing his calves together writhing in pain. Even his calves were ripped due to the friction. They did not know what to do. When he fell on the ground, his friend Govinda took a spear, remembered God and stood over the sufferer and pierced through his heart to end his misery. It was a deed of mercy, Mr. Kumar added.

He also told me about young girls in his family in Khanewal. They were handed poison to swallow if they saw their males killed. One day, three of them, except the eldest one, took poison. She is still alive in New Delhi. The others took poison thinking the men had been killed by Muslims. They in reality had gone into hiding when their house was attacked. Those men were safe. But the women, who were on the top story of the house, did not know. That sister of

Mr. Kumar still cries when she thinks of those young sisters and one sister-in-law taking poison and dying in front of her.

On the third day, still hidden in the crops, Mr. Kumar and villagers heard people shouting on loudspeakers saying that Gandhi and Nehru had sent them to take them to India. Their villages were part of Pakistan. They shouted further that they were worshippers of Rama and Krishna.

The villagers doubted, thinking that could be a ploy of the Muslims or Pathans to kill them. Peeping through the branches of the crops, they saw short and fair soldiers. They had never seen such people before. They were certainly not the Blochs nor Pathans and neither were they local Muslims. Govinda was the first to come out to be under the shelter of Gorkha soldiers.

The Hindus formed a long caravan, several miles long to reach Narankana Sahib, a distance of seven to eight miles to be covered on foot. On the way, they found the wells and tanks filled purposely with the

carcasses of animals and other dirty elements to pollute the water. In certain places, they took one or two drops. The old people who were not able to walk were left behind crying. The others were tired, hungry, thirsty and nervous when they reached their first destination.

In Narankana Sahib, district Shakhupura, there was a camp where food was supplied by a Sikh temple that consisted of a loaf of bread for the whole day. People gave their jewellery for an extra loaf. On the second of December they were taken to D.A.V. College in Lahore, not far from the Indian border. They began to receive one cup of lentils and one cup of rice. Even for that they had to stand in a long line for hours. It was a problem to cook the rice and lentils because there was no wood.

After fifteen days they were told that a train was going to India. According to an arrangement among political leaders it was decided that at Shalamar Bagh Station, a train of Muslims would first arrive from

India. In return, the railway authorities would let a train from Pakistan leave for India carrying the Hindus and Sikhs. That was the last week of December. Their train was stopped in a jungle. There were shouts of Allah (Muslim word for God) and to kill all the kafirs (non-believers)-- meaning the Hindus and the Sikhs. The train was stationary for ten hours. The Gurkha military kept assuring the passengers that as long as they were alive no one would touch them. The passengers were advised to remain wherever they were in the train. The shouts kept coming from afar from both sides while the Gurkhas patrolled vigilantly in the night with their rifles.

It was rumoured that the train that came from India was packed with dead bodies. To pay in the same coin, the local Muslims wanted to return a train with dead bodies. The passengers were completely exhausted, both mentally and physically. They wore old clothes, had not bathed for days and had no food. In the morning, they were allowed to go amidst shouts of killing.

The India of my childhood was revived more vividly when Mr. Sherwan Kumar told me that Govinda, who was driven out of his home in Pakistan, became a Sikh leader in New Delhi. When Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, was assassinated by a Sikh guard, there were celebrations among a section of the Sikhs. The Hindus retaliated by killing the Sikhs. Govinda was about to be burnt alive when Muslim families saved him by hiding him in their homes.

I always imagined that the Westerners will welcome me openly when they will find a Christian from India. I got this impression when I saw the followers of other religions flocking together in India. Truth dawned on me in Canada that churches do not teach such things. For Westerners, Jesus preached love for ones neighbours, to help the needy, poor and destitute that means to love every human without creed and nationality. No amount of ink can describe the frustrations

of my anguished soul that went in search of an oasis. It was a shock when I realized that the darkness I left behind had been chasing me continuously. The thought of cruelty of humans always remained in my mind like my own shadow. The more I thought of it, the more I became obsessed to write about it.

The violence that I had seen and read and heard was not committed by the followers of one religion; rather

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by the followers of all three religion--- like Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. In India, violence was against Muslims; in Pakistan, it was against the Sikhs and Hindus. The same type of Muslims who drove the Sikhs from Pakistan and historically remained at dagger's drawn with them, rescued them risking their own lives in India after the murder of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi which caused riots between the Hindus and the Sikhs for the first time in history. The same type of Muslims who condemn

Christians to death in Pakistan for religious reasons are the first to support them in India. In Pakistan and even in Bangladesh, the Hindus who are in a minority live in harmony with Christians.

A person is largely the product of the environment. The purpose of the illustration of my environment is to reconstruct for my readers the smithy that has shaped my being to a large extent. My farewell to the country of my birth was not to find a land to dig gold. It was to dig the gold of my safety where I could grow the crop of my thinking and were I could live with respect and dignity. No doubt, Canada has its own cases of discrimination, but they are in a more disguised and civilized way. Moreover, there are remedies, though costly and time-consuming. But they are there. For the first time I found pride and freedom in the expression of my beliefs openly.

I joined the world federalist movement to find a cure in a democratically elected one government for the whole

world. I found hope in the truth that revenge does not help anyone and that violence has never solved problems in human history. I found that the sharks of discrimination are everywhere. I began to write and give talks to tear the mask of ignorance and to promote non-violence.

In Canada, there are opportunities for everyone. Here, the government has given and is still giving financial help to Muslims to build their mosques; to Hindus to build their temples; and to Sikhs to build their Gurduwaras. That is what the countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and other nations should be doing for minorities. Happy minorities will contribute towards the building of the nation. If minorities feel secure, they will do everything to feel proud of their heritage. Absence of security and harmony leads to economic/ political disaster that endangers the stability of the majority. Protection of minorities is in the interest of the majority and the whole nation, even the world.

Moreover, it is fun to have flowers

and fruits of different shades and kinds in the same orchard. Uniformity and homogeneity in the political and religious climate is a utopian thought. Also, it is boring. Canada is the best example of co-existence of a society of diverse cultures and faiths.

Canada is a United Nations in microcosm. It is a country where it is illegal to propagate hatred against other beliefs. It is a country where the government legally supports multi-culturalism to foster tolerance. The experience of violence, the multicultural aspect of Canada, my travels, the life of Jesus, and world federalism, in addition to George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, must have nourished the plant of my outlook and the literature I am producing. I find the environment of Canada stimulating for the further nourishment of this plant. I believe in unconditional love and global peace through a democratically elected world government. I consider myself a citizen of the world, a trait that is obvious from my poems. I believe in the rule of law.

I have pointed in my articles as well as in my poetry that terrorism is sickness, a horrible crime against humanity.

The cure to the malady of religious and racial fanaticism and violence lies in the acceptance of the values of tolerance, understanding, and co-existence. I am against war because killing has never been able to solve problems. The Second World War and all other wars fought before it, failed to achieve anything. I have expressed this belief in different ways, again and again, in my talks, poetry and articles and wherever I find it possible to do so.

It is still an enigma for me how people who appear to be normal in their everyday life turn into animals in the name of religious creed. Is it from Satan or in the blood? Where does that animality come from? Is it because their religious books are filled with incidents of revenge, cruelty and violence? Is it possible to find ways to remove those incidents from those scriptures and replace them with incidents

of compassion and mercy in order to save humanity? Who is going to do that and how? This is a question which you and I will have to reflect over deeply in order to prevent further destruction of the bridges to harmony and peace.

There are regimes on our planet today which are producing religious robots, ready to kill and be killed for a quick passport to Heaven. To counter these robots, regimes of slightly different faith, are also producing robots. There does not seem to be an ending to their productions. With all the sophisticated technology, the world would be in a much worse situation than it was during the days of the Crusades in the Middle Ages if nothing is done to lock the doors of these laboratories and factories. One right step to look into this problem closely is the establishment of a strong United Religions Organization, along the lines of the UNO.

I have given the background information here in the belief that the

readers will have a picture of the person behind this book. This knowledge may enhance their appreciation and enjoyment of these poems.

Stephen Gill
Canada, June 1998