

GOING HOME

The Road to Mai Jio Ji

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU'RE FROM? IS IT WHAT YOU CONSIDER HOME? IF YOU CAN'T PICTURE IT IN YOUR THOUGHTS AND TASTE IT ON YOUR TONGUE, COULD IT BE THAT 'HOME' DOESN'T EXIST?

AVTAR SINGH GOES BACK TO PUNJAB TO FIND OUT

REMEMBER a short essay Prof. Henry Louis Gates wrote about Rushdie, in *The New Yorker*. I think it was on the back page, and it was many years ago. Dr. Gates was of the opinion that Rushdie's real value was in pointing out to us, his readers, that in this time and space, "there is no such thing, as Home."

I remember being struck by the assertion then. I was just completing my undergraduate thesis, coincidentally on Rushdie; like most undergrads of the time, I was a big fan of the good professor; and I was convinced, in this instance at least, that if the professor was right about Rushdie—in what Rushdie was saying, and the importance of it—then they were both wrong.

You see, I've lived in Delhi, in a boarding school in the hills of North India, in the US as an undergrad, and for the last few years, in the city of Mumbai. And I've called all those places 'Home'.

So. As some of you may have noticed, I do my own back page thing with this magazine, and what with one thing and another, I don't think I've ever mentioned Rushdie, Dr. Gates, or Home with an upper case H there.

So why, you ask, do I bring it all up now?

Well, it's quite simple really. I'm a practising Sikh in Mumbai, and every time I get asked, 'where are you from', my automatic answer is Punjab. This should be self-evident. Most Sikhs are from Punjab, unless they are converts from different races, like the rosy cheeked blonds you sometimes see hiding under their turbans in the Gurudwaras of North India. And I feel a real kinship with Punjab. I speak the language, I can read and write in it; till recently, my father's old uncle and aunts still lived there.

But the funny thing is, I had never been back. Oh, I'd travelled in Eastern Punjab, in the region around Patiala and Nabha, with the families of boys from my old school, and playing matches against legions of much larger (and older) boys from other public schools. But when I say Punjab, I mean the Majha region, where Amritsar is, where I was born; the region across the Sutlej when you come from the south, and across the Beas when you come from the east. This was the heart of the Sikh kingdom of Punjab in the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which to the average Sardar bears all the symbolic weight of the Classical Golden Age. I'd never considered myself encumbered by this ponderous inheritance: indeed, I was amused when my father's contemporaries gassed

on about Punjab, undivided Punjab, and the glories of Lahore and all the rest of it. I knew little of its intellectual and cultural attainments—the rest of India of course is convinced there were none—and I didn't really mind.

My attachment to Punjab was at a much more basic level. It's where I'm from.

And, I repeat, since I'd been born, I'd never been back.

If you can't see your home in your mind's eye, if you can't taste it and hear it and smell it: could it be that it doesn't exist?

I could see the good Prof and old Heavy Lids and all his home-seeking protagonists lining up to ask me that one terminal

question: 'hey man, where are you from?'

I knew where I was from, but I couldn't describe it, not in a way that a stranger would understand.

I had to go back.

I set off in mid-December from Mumbai. I got off the plane in Delhi, stopped only to get a Mahindra Bolero, and was off to Karnal in Haryana to pick up a friend. Since travelling at night wasn't feasible because of the fog, I ended up spending the night in Karnal. Karnal, of course, is in Haryana. But, in a sense that many people of my generation won't even be aware of, it is still in Punjab.

Punjab wasn't only partitioned by independence. It was also partitioned after,

giving birth to Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, leaving behind an almost ludicrously small state, considering the large number of people running around the world laying claim to a Punjabi heritage. As I walked, drove, and rode around Karnal, I could feel Punjab beating under the surface. On the Grand Trunk Road on the way to Karnal, many of the milestones are in Punjabi. In Karnal itself, there are many turbaned heads, and the sound of the language being spoken is everywhere.

This friend—an old school friend, like all the other guys I stayed with in Punjab—is a farmer, and a very good one, his talk full of yields and crop varieties and cropping patterns, and he took me by his

fields. We walked there in the North Indian twilight, the only sounds the evening *Ardas* being said in the Gurudwara, and the clank of the occasional tractor rolling past. His labourers, itinerants from UP engaged in cutting the last sugarcane of the season before the wheat is planted for the spring harvest that is heralded by *baisakhi*, spoke to him in the mixture of Hindi and Punjabi that is the language of the fields here. As I was to find out, this is a pattern repeated throughout the North. The labourers are from UP and Bihar, the landed farmers—Sikhs, Jats, Gujjars—too prosperous themselves, now, to reap their own harvests by themselves. The labourers move from field to field, picking up a



PHOTOGRAPHS BY AVTAR SINGH

smattering of Punjabi and earning a living.

His neighbour, a Haryanvi Gujjar with an impenetrable accent, cut out a stalk of cane and handed it to me. Juice dripped from the cut he'd made in it, a cut that would make it theoretically easier for my city teeth to get a grip. I hadn't chewed on a stick of sugarcane since I was about eight years old. In Mumbai, you stop by a cane juice stall, chances are you'll walk away with typhoid. I looked at the cane blankly. My friend, a stalk in his hand, grinned at me, said welcome home, and walked away.

We sat in his compound in the village that evening, as night closed in, and the cattle he owns were led in to be settled down for the night. The frisky ones were belled, one or two hobbled by weights tied to their necks so they couldn't escape into the fields. He pointed to the home next to his, a nice neat place, of modern construction but made in the old style, with a big terrace for the summer months, the whole oriented inwards, to the inner courtyard where the women held sway.

They were Sikhs like him, refugees from across the border, their lands swallowed by partition. This land was allotted to them, presumably left behind by Muslim families whose homes would have been much like this one. I'm friends with them, he said. Went to the wedding of one of the boys, recently. It was a complete mela. Guys drinking, hired women dancing, all those drunk clowns loosing off their guns in the air. His fields are half the size of mine, yet he got an Esteem in his dowry.

Really, I asked. You guys make that much?

We make enough, said my friend. He is a qualified lawyer, but farming takes all his time, and he enjoys it. He has a good education, owns a car, his own home, takes vacations with his wife. But you're luckier, he said suddenly.

Why, I asked.

You're on your way home.

Well, you're already home.

He pointed out a nilgai that was puttering around his cane, the cane that was still standing, the body of the nilgai only a silhouette against an almost black sky. Wish I was carrying a gun, he muttered. Would have had steaks for dinner tomorrow.

No, he continued. I need a visa to go home. I've never been, I'll probably never go. My father still cries for the home he remembers. This is where I live, man, but it's not where I'm from.

Night and the fog closed in on Karnal, ex-of Punjab and still part of it by the weight of history. Damn right, Prof. Gates, I thought as the drinks came out. He may never go back, may never even have been in the first place, but every Sardar in the world knows where he's from.

Next day, we were on our way to Muktsar in Southern Punjab, in

There's a song that I remember hearing while I was there: the chorus was *mera rangeela Punjab*. Someone from Goa, or Kerala, or the hills of North India that change colours with the passage of the sun, might shake his head and ask what the fuss is about. But to me, it's truth itself

the region known as the Malwa. Muktsar is a place sacred to Sikhs, because of the valour of a band of forty who gave their lives there to protect the life of the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. The gurdwara that was built there attracts many pilgrims, and the tank at its heart gives the town its name.

Another friend was waiting for us there. Also a Sikh, also a farmer, he's also distinguished by being the proprietor of a transport company, that other great Sardar occupation. The road to Muktsar led us on the GT Road till Ludhiana, passing

through places such as Sirhind, infamous to the Sikhs as the seat of Mughal power in southern Punjab, a town that the Sikh General Banda Singh Bahadur razed to the ground. Khanna is also on the way, reputedly the largest grain market in Asia.

At Ludhiana, we branched off to the south. The road led through Moga, Faridkot, Kotkapura. A few things stand out in my memory. The first thing, of course, is the profusion of gurdwaras. Cast your eye in any direction and you'll see the saffron *Nishan Sahib*, topped by the *Khanda Kirpan* emblem of the Khalsa. This is both

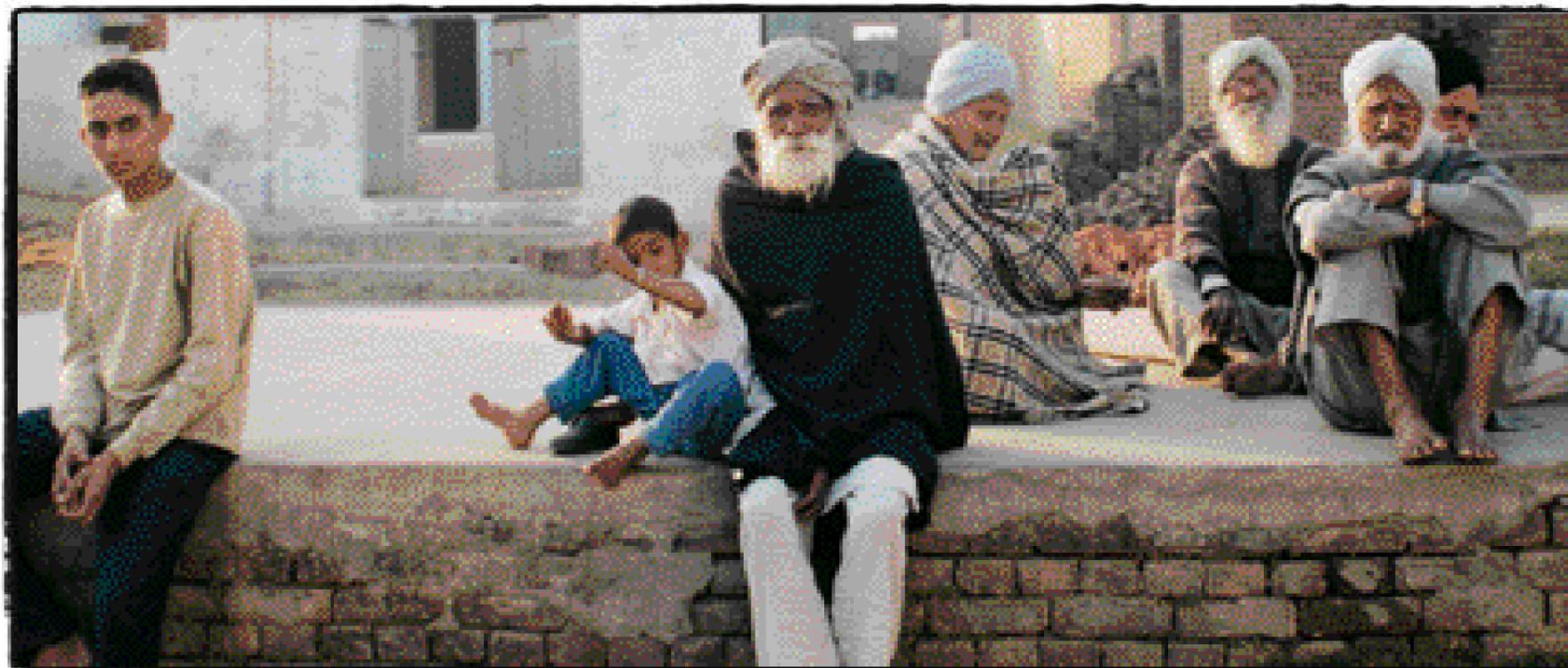
son for it to be there, and you've got a fat cow that you can milk long after your son's blown his tuition money in Vegas.

Well, so I knew the truth, but I still found it comforting to see the *Nishan Sahibs* everywhere. Accustomed as I am to be stared at, it was a heady experience to be somewhere where my turban was taken completely for granted; in fact, to be in a place where to be a practising Sikh is not equated with being some sort of religious extremist. The old "What, you mean you don't smoke, you don't cut your hair? Why, are you a fundamentalist?"

would be. At the Hussainiwala border near Firozpur, famous for being the place where the Pakistani Army crossed the Sutlej, the BSF and the Pakistani Rangers played out their pantomime at sundown, glaring at each other while the flags came down, their antics being watched to polite applause from the galleries, filled by anyone from India or Pakistan who could afford the five rupees for the entry ticket. It would have been hysterical if the threat of war didn't actually loom over these men. Here, they were clowning around. In a day, in an hour, they would have been

Even in the flat haze of the North Indian winter day, with nothing to see but green fields and gurdwaras, I saw texture, and nuance, and colour everywhere. In the shapes of the crops that I recognized and the ones that I didn't, in the brown furrows of fields waiting to be seeded, in the clothes that women wear and the signage that is always in Punjabi when you're in Punjab, even in the different accents of the towns that we passed through.

There's a song that I remember hearing while I was there: the chorus was *mera rangeela Punjab*. Someone from Goa, or



a good thing and a bad thing. Sikh piety has always been tempered by sturdy realism, I knew, and the men I sat down and had a drink with that night confirmed it. The amount a man prays has no bearing on the sort of guy he is, said one. Or the animals he sells you, laughed another. No, and anyway, any guy can set himself up as a *baba* and con poor villagers to make him a gurdwara, and then pocket all the money that comes in. It's quite a cottage industry, I was told. You want to send a son abroad to study, and your land isn't enough? Build a gurdwara, invent a rea-

question gets old quite quickly.

Then, of course, you notice the army. At the time of writing this story, the border was still jumpy and the natives restless, and in December, the army was being mobilized. Every truck on the road was ferrying young jawans to the forward areas, and civilian transport had been commandeered for the purpose. Young faces of men in green peeked out from the backs of trucks carrying the mystic OK TATA on their backsides. The conversations were full of war, the need for it, the inevitability of it, what the outcome

shooting at each other.

The third thing that strikes you is how monotonous the Punjab landscape is. There are no, or very few and small forests. Punjab is the triumph of the till over nature. Everything is planted, and everything is in shades of green. And yet, I think monotonous may be too strong a word. To the eye of the tourist, perhaps, so much flat green is dreary.

But to me, this landscape is coloured by the memories of other men and women, memories that I grew up with and knew instinctively were meant to be my own.

Kerala, or the hills of North India that change colours with the passage of the sun, might shake his head and ask what the fuss is about. But to me, it's truth itself. That song played and played again in my head all through my stay in Punjab.

So I stayed on in Muktsar a couple of days, eating my friend's country butter and driving around his part of the world. Tucked away there in Muktsar, he owns a cruiser motorcycle that has more bhp than a Maruti. In his defence, the roads in Punjab are better than anywhere else I've been in India, and the traffic light,



once you're off the GT Road. It's probably the safest place in the country to own a big cruiser like his.

He took me down to his village. Though he lives in a modern home with all the fixings in the middle of town, he still maintains his home in his village. We went there after night had fallen. He had already shown me the proud new cane harvester standing in his fields, worth more than a crore, that the local sugar cooperative had imported to streamline the cane harvest of the area. In his village home, where his grandmother lived till her infirmities forced her to come to town, he showed me the implements of a past era. Big tills meant to be dragged behind bullocks, blades from tractors owned in the past. He took me up to the terrace of his home. The whole family would sleep here in summer, he said. My father was *sarpanch* of the village, until it was designated as a reserved women's panchayat. So what happened, I ask.

Silly question, really. I should have guessed.

Now, my friend's wife is the *sarpanch*, and his family maintains its links with its home. His wife goes to the gym, has friends, helps my friend in his business and tutors their daughter; every now and again, she stops by the village and runs its life. His dad's still the *Sardar* of the village, he knows what his duties are. So does his daughter-in-law.

Later that night, as I tied one on with the boys and the stories were flowing freely, I heard about a friend of my host's, a man

old enough to have been in college at the time of partition. Then, he was famous for having asserted that if India hadn't been divided, Malot would have been the capital of India, or at least of Punjab. Well, I still don't quite know where Malot is. I suppose you could say that us Sikhs deserve our reputations for arrogance, to a certain degree.

One evening in Firozpur, I was at the home of another friend, and I learned there that his father had been in school with my dad, in Lahore. My friend's father was a fine old gentleman of the old school, his mustache curling up fiercely. He had just returned from a progressive farmer's meeting in Fazilka, a town on the road to Rajasthan. Both he and his son were in jackets and ties. We're farmers, he said, not *maalis*. Some of the technology we've implemented in these fields is truly pathbreaking, our yields in certain crops the envy of the world. Besides, he said, I've never dressed any other way.

Fair enough. And it wasn't as if he was out of the ordinary. The average *Sardar* farmer who owns his own land lives a life that the man who works in his fields, on forced sabbatical from his own fields in Bihar and UP, can only dream of. He owns a car, or at least a scooter, is educated, has a solid home in a village with most civic amenities, and can look forward to a future where his life will be curtailed, most probably, by old age. True, the men I moved amongst were the western educated and inclined cream of the crop, men who spoke English at home and went

abroad on vacations. But they know who they are, and their attachment to their lands. To put it another way, they know where they're from.

And in all honesty, it isn't such a bad place to be from. Hard work, that cornerstone of the Sikh ethic, made a success story out of the large-scale emigration out of Punjab that was, prior to the green revolution, and through the entire course of the 20th century, the Sikh peasant's ticket out of poverty. Now, as you drive from Jalandhar to Chandigarh along the Nawanshahr road, through the heart of the Doaba—the region between the Sutlej and the Beas—you see the roadside stalls crowded with things designed to appeal to homesick Londoners and Vancouverians visiting their grandparents in their villages. Chocolates and mineral water fight for space, while the homes sport improbable facades and big satellite dishes. Every village has its own school, its own dispensary. And that isn't only in the Doaba.

And the clarion call of *Punjabiyaat* and being a *Khalsa* has made the jump through the generations. I've met hip young men and women in bars all over, who'll slide up and say *Sat Sri Akaal*, and ask me, where you from? And when I tell them, they'll nod intelligently, even if they've never been to Punjab, and tell me of their own villages. Actually, I've always found it quite irritating, but I've bobbed my own head in greeting to too many turbaned strangers in streets around the world not to recognize the feeling.

So. I had bought the *desi juttis* that Muktsar is famous for and had my feet shredded by them. I had noted the Damdami Taksal calendars hanging in the Hindu shop that sold me the *juttis*. The Damdami Taksal is the organization that spawned Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, and their calendar is an exercise in hagiography, making saints of the men who symbolize, even now, the Punjab 'troubles' of the past two decades. I wondered what made this shop hang this calendar on its walls: could it be only a desire to tell the passage of time? I noticed the same calendar outside Baba Farid's dargah in Faridkot. Baba Farid's verses find a place in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and his dargah is sacred to Sikh pilgrims as well. A *gurud-*

wara shares one wall with the dargah. Perhaps it was innocuous, perhaps Punjab conceals as much as it reveals.

I didn't pay it too much mind. Finally, I was on my way home.

I approached Amritsar from the south. As I crossed the Sutlej at Harike, I was in the *Majha*. Even the people looked different to me. My excitement increased as I passed Sarhali, then Thathiya. I knew men who called those names home. Finally, after Tarn Taran, I was in Amritsar itself, and at the Golden Temple.

I believe I was named there, but I can't be sure. The devout filter through *Hari-mandar Sahib*, the gold-leaf covered sanctum at the heart of the complex that gives it its name. The *Akal Takht* looms over the complex, the bullet holes left by *Blue Star* and *Black Thunder* now filled in. I took my photos, ate my fill of the *parshad*, and was ready to head east on the Grand Trunk Road. Back home.

Yes. Home, where I'm from. Home is a village called Chajjalwadi, a kilometre off the GT Road from a village called Tangra, 25 kilometres from Amritsar on the way to Jalandhar, in the heart of the *Majha* region of Punjab. My grandfather was born, far as I could tell, in a room in the old family home in Chajjalwadi itself. Memory had pulled me back there, my father's memories, the memories of my friends in school telling me about their own villages; a memory of rootedness that

sufficed to sustain me without ever having been made tangible.

At Tangra, I asked a fruit seller on the road where Dera Mai Jio Ji was. That's the name of the home my grandfather built in his mother's memory: her name was Jio. He looked at me, asked me if I was *Sardar Bahadur's* grandson. I said yes, and he said *Ji Aiya Noo, Kakaji*. Welcome home.

At Mai Jio Ji, an old servant was waiting, a guard and his family standing by. The old man came running up, the same formula on his lips. He took me by the old house in the village, where a branch of my family still lives. My cousin took me around Chajjalwadi, pointing out the school my family built, the illicit booze still that had made its proprietress the most popular woman in the place, the brand new homes of the families that had children abroad, or had sold their lands.

I had tea with his family, educated teachers all of them, who run their own school in Tangra. I walked to the part of the old house which was where my great-grandmother raised her children alone, after her husband's death left her a widow while she was still young. It was still standing, but it was overgrown with trees. Broken old furniture crowded the corners; there might have been snakes inside. It showed all the marks of a house that had ceased to be a home. And yet I, standing inside the house that had contained the beginnings of what I consider to be my

own family, could barely contain my own heart.

I took no pictures inside. You see, I carried the memory of it inside me already.

As the sun set, my cousin brought out the customary bottle. We were sitting outside Mai Jio Ji, a modern home built by a modern man in his mother's memory. I looked out over the fields that adjoined it, fields that hadn't been farmed by me but I still felt a deep bond with. The sun was setting, and though the house's electricity was off and the water for our drinks came from a well, I had a deep and utter sense of contentment.

My cousin yarned on about Osho and the status of women, my friend got loudly drunk. I suppose I got drunk too as the sun set around me in Dera Mai Jio Ji, 25 kilometres from Amritsar, in the heart of the *Majha* region of Punjab.

If memories are ghosts, I was surrounded by shades. My grandfather's, who left Chajjalwadi; my father's and his brothers', who would visit their grandmother there; the memories of my cousins and my sisters, who had been back and had come back bubbling with stories.

Memories. Stories. Ghosts.

I was surrounded by friends.

I was home. ©

The author is the Assistant Editor of *Man's World*. His first novel, *The Beauty Of These Present Things*, is available from Penguin India

