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# The 'Great Lahore airlift'

IF YOU have ever visited the Walton Railway Station, it would make sense to stand there in silence and just imagine hundreds of blood-soaked trains coming in from the eastern parts of the subcontinent in August, 1947, the doors would open and out fell scores of human bodies, all hacked to death. Something similar was happening in Amritsar, a few miles away. An entire subcontinent, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, all of them, had just gone mad.

The blood-soaked events of the partition of the subcontinent seem to have been forgotten. So great was the shock that we have still not broken out of it. If you walk through the walled city of Lahore, you come across scores of old men who sit and discuss almost every event under the sun, but never the events of 1947. It is, as if, there is a conscious effort to 'partition' the past. I know an old aunt who just

refused to tell what happened to her, and she walked barefoot from Chawinda with her two sisters, her house in flames. It seems, like here, we all just refuse to record our history. The practice of recording our past has been poor in the subcontinent save for the folk tradition of songs and ballads, but now that we are a 'literate' nation, there is a need for a conscious effort.

To my way of thinking, Walton is sacred soil, as is also the Shahalami Gate area, which was burned down completely. In one mohallah alone, over 4,000 Lahoris were locked in and burned alive. "I saw burning children jump from rooftops and we clapped in delight," informs a grim old man in Tehsil Bazaar. He was with the crowd that torched the place. It was in retaliation to a Muslim women's hostel in Amritsar being attacked, the inmates raped and burned alive. It was a gruesome event, as were

all the ones, hundreds of them, that followed. It was unstoppable. Humanity had gone mad. The greatest exodus in human history was under way. The murder and rape that accompanied has seldom been equalled by any civilization.

Even that was unrivalled. Yet all this remains unrecorded. There are no monuments to the grief and suffering through which everyone went and emerged as a 'free nation'. Makes you think.

The idea is not to blame any one sect or religion, for that is a futile exercise. Everyone is equally to blame. The point is to stop and think and then to record. There is very little that we can do about what happened, for what has happened cannot be undone. Two nations were created, which within a quarter of a century became three nations. The secular among us blame communal politics on hate.

"Communalists need to be faced and defeated in both countries if we are to have a relationship," says an Indian expert.

But then historians in all three countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, agree on one thing, and that is that the geography of nations was ultimately decided by their market access. In the end, economic progress, non-communal as it is by its nature, and market access proved to be a greater binding force than the hate of beliefs. All this creates an even great need for information about what happened. That is why recording the events of 1947 is very critical today, for given just one more generation, and none among us will be eyewitness to the event.

There is a need for several small museums dedicated to special events. For example, how many people know that from Walton Airport, most of which is now armed forces plots

and buildings (another misguided pastime of those with muscle), the largest airlift ever took place. It was an event that has never been recorded. However, a former RAF pilot has written an interesting piece in what he calls *The Biggest Airlift Ever*. Flt-Lt Michael Kidd, from Ashcott in England, is a famous aviator in his own country. "Aviation was my life," he says. After serving in the Fleet Air Arm during World War II, he joined BOAC as one of just six trainees, and rose to become station manager for the corporation. One of his most interesting postings took him to Walton in Lahore in 1947, the year of partition, when he took part in the biggest human airlift ever, the flying of refugees to and from Pakistan and India.

Mike Kidd himself flew the Dakotas designed to carry 28 people. By removing the seats they were able to take an average

69 people each trip. 169 members refugee lighting cabin to cook their food. He is proud that there were no accidents and no loss of life except for one memorized this time with a Bristol Blenheim of carrying 119 people, one woman died en route, another had a baby; that on arrival the pilot reported the same total of 169 people on board as were started. The British Ministry said to be preparing information about this event, an Airport will be the focus of national attention. I also show the houses sprung up in the 'across' area.

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independence. If a small muse-  
um at Walton Aerodrome record-  
ed the "Biggest Airlift Ever", and  
another one at Walton Railway  
Station recorded the "Biggest  
Rail Movement Ever", the shift-  
ing of millions burying hundreds  
of thousands in the land of their  
dreams, or another one at Walton  
where the refugee camps once  
stood, or yet another one at  
Shahalami Gate to record the  
manner in which Lahore burned  
down and its citizens killed by  
one another. There is a need to  
record the thousands of stories of  
our elders, so that future  
researchers can piece together  
just what happened where. We  
owe it to our children. Now that  
the basics have been accepted be  
one and all — minus the lunatic  
fringe — it is time to tell and  
record and keep them to remind  
future generations of the collec-  
tive madness that the entire sub-  
continent went through. —  
**MAJID SHEIKH**