

Notes

Witness to Liaquat's Assassination

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Some incidents are so haunting that they remain etched on your memory forever. No matter how much you try they never leave you. For me, such an experience with lasting impact has been the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, who was gunned down in broad daylight at a public meeting in Rawalpindi. And I was an eyewitness to this horrifying murder. Even after fifty-five years, I get shudders when I recall that nightmarish incident and the entire scene starts re-enacting in my mind like a slow-motion replay as if watching a horror movie. I do not think I can get over it ever.

It was in the middle of October 1951 that the press and radio had started carrying a series of announcements that Liaquat Ali Khan was coming to Rawalpindi for a visit and that he would address a public meeting at the Company Bagh on the 16th. Rawalpindi then gave the look of a small garrison town with only a small percentage of today's population. The town limits towards the north did not extend beyond Mohalla Waris Khan. There was no Satellite Town, no Rawal Lake and no City of Islamabad on its fringes. Nurpur and Saidpur were distant villages and Murree was further afar linked by a narrow treacherous road. The Cantonment area was spick and span and beyond Westridge only sparsely populated. The traffic was light with few cars but lots of *tongas* and bicycles were around. However, the significance of Rawalpindi lay in its being the location of the Ministry of Defence and the headquarters of the Pakistan Army. Besides, its proximity to the flashpoint Kashmir, especially when relations with India were sour, had given it an added importance. Nawab Mushtaq Ahmad Gurmani's Ministry of Kashmir Affairs was located in Shahzada Kothi, one of the two palatial houses left by the Sikh millionaire brothers, Mohan Singh and Sohan Singh. The other was in the use of the minister himself as his residence.

I was then fifteen and a student of the tenth class in Denny's High School. We lived in the Police Lines because my father, Shafi

Qureshi, was a Police officer. In fact ours is a police family: two of my elder brothers, four of my uncles (father's cousins) and one of my grandfather's cousins, were all Police officers. At that time, I was busy with my examinations but could not resist the temptation of going to the public meeting where the country's Prime Minister was coming all the way from the federal capital of Karachi to address a public meeting. On the appointed day (16 October), I bicycled to the house of my friends, Masoodul Hasan (later Brigadier) and his younger brother Tariq Mahmood (better known as Brigadier TM) for company. Their father, Mir Habibul Hassan, was also a Police officer and a friend of my father's. I was told that they had already left for the public meeting. So, leaving my bicycle at their house I made for the venue on foot, just across the Gordon College grounds.

The Company Bagh (on the left bank of the *Lai nullah*) was full to overflowing with people of all ages with sprinkling of women on one side, all waiting eagerly for the arrival of the prime minister. I scouted for a better view but then settled for a place some distance away from dais. The arrangements were in the hands of the local Muslim League leaders. The open wooden dais, raised about a metre above ground, was without a *shamiana* and was sparsely decorated with a few flowerpots. Towards the back end was a single ceremonial chair with a small rectangular coffee table in front of it and a rostrum with microphone placed strategically towards the audience (about 50,000) that squatted on the *durees* or on the ground at a short distance away without any Police barrier or pickets. However, a few rows of sofas and chairs were placed on either side of the dais for the dignitaries and an enclosure for women and children. The police force was placed mainly behind the dais. More visible were the *lathi*- and spear-bearing National Guards who were deputed at different places though a large number of them had lined up in two rows to form the guard of honour of the Prime Minister.

Around 4 p.m. commotion and slogans near the entrance signalled the arrival of the PM's cavalcade. He was received by the League leaders and the city elders and escorted to the dais where he sat alone on the solitary high chair. He was dressed in a grey *sherwani* and a pair of light trousers and had a *Karakuli* cap on his head. A man sat on the edge of the dais with one leg dangling on the side that I discovered later from the pictures was his political secretary, Nawab Siddique Ali Khan. Liaquat Ali Khan glanced round a while and then sat quietly, reflecting. Here I was, looking in person at the portly figure of the bespectacled popular leader, the right-hand man of the Quaid and now the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The impact was electric and instinctively I was caught up in the enthusiasm of the slogan-chanting crowd, '*Quaid*-

i-Millat Zindabad, '*Pakistan Paindabad*'. The proceedings began with the recitation from the Holy Quran and then Sheikh Masud Sadiq, President of the Municipal Committee, read his welcome address in Urdu in a typically Punjabi accent. Finally, the grey-haired and moustached Shaikh Muhammad Umar, the President of the City Muslim League, introduced the PM and invited him to address the audience. Liaquat Ali Khan rose and walked towards the lectern amid cheers and slogans. Hardly he had uttered his usual greetings of *Baradran-i Millat* that the crackling sound of two shots in quick succession was heard. Before I could realize what had happened, I saw the Prime Minister reel and then fall straight back on the wooden dais with a great thud. There was a third shot followed by a hush. I saw the man sitting on the edge of the dais (Nawab Siddique Ali Khan) rush to the fallen PM followed by the popular and conscientious Deputy Commissioner, J. D. Hardy, who had stayed on to serve Pakistan. His felt hat was visible from a distance. However, moments after the first two shots, I saw SP Najaf Khan, whom I had seen several times at the Police Lines and had met him once, come to the front edge of the dais and gave some orders. There was a brawl going on at short distance in front of the dais followed by a few more shots. Then, there were volleys of shots from the Reserve Guard stationed at the back of the dais. There was a pandemonium and everybody ran helter-skelter. It seemed as if some armed men had attacked the PM and the police were trying to ward them off. Shaken like other spectators, I also ran for cover, took the bicycle from the Mir residence and sped home.

It had been a horrifying experience for a young lad. By the time I reached home my father had already dashed off to his office nearby. I waited for news on the radio but there was none. My father returned home late in the evening and broke the news that in spite of the efforts of the CMH surgeons the Prime Minister could not be saved. The news was shocking. Meanwhile, our orderly, Constable Pehlawan Khan, came running to inform that the dead body of the assassin Said Akbar had been brought to the Police Lines lock-up. I hurried to have a look and found the police photographer, Head Constable Muhammad Akbar, busy taking photographs of the dead body. It had been dragged out of the lock-up and thrown onto the veranda and in the absence of a proper flash an ordinary table lamp was used for the lighting effect. The camera was an old hand held box type but the result, which I saw inquisitively the next morning with Akbar, was astonishingly clear and later appeared in every newspaper. That night I could not sleep. The happenings of the day and the image of Said Akbar never allowed me a wink. As I learnt later, Said Akbar had been shot dead by Sub Inspector Muhammad Shah (who, like

other officer-friends of my father, used to come to our house). Fearing that the assassin might escape he had pumped five bullets into him with his service revolver (actually, the fifth one hit the man who was grappling with the assassin from behind). But Said Akbar would have died anyway because the National Guards, who were infuriated beyond control, had pierced his body with spears at least a score times. But in spite of the torn clothes and multiple wounds, contusions and abrasions, the body was not mutilated. It is ironic that Said Akbar had shaved and dressed that morning knowing that he was going to commit a crime for which there was no reprieve here in this world or hereafter. Some maintain that he intended to escape to some foreign country after the crime which, they say, was apparent from the large amount of money found on his body and the fact that he had taken his young son along to the public meeting.

The next few days were particularly hectic for my father and his colleagues. It was no small matter that the country's Prime Minister had been shot dead in the presence of heavy police contingents and the highest officers of the District administration. There were all kinds of insinuations and the Police were on extra alert. I remember my father was handling cipher telegrams several times a day for weeks together. SI Muhammad Shah and Inspector Ibrar Ahmad who were suspended immediately after the tragedy were asked to report to the Police Lines. It was rumoured that the Lines Officer, Noor Badshah, had forged log entries in the *Roznamcha* on the insistence of Najaf Khan (which later was confirmed by the Inquiry Commission) to show as if the latter had given no orders to open fire. Generally, an impression had taken roots that no matter what the explanation might be some negligence of duty had taken place. The authorities knew that a malicious campaign, especially in the Punjab, had been going on against Liaquat Ali Khan and his Begum and the former had been receiving threatening letters. At Lahore, the opposition had become so virulent as to disrupt his public meeting at University grounds. The cue was not taken either by Liaquat or his officials and their proverbial laxity proved costly.

Shortly after the incident, Said Akbar's elder brother, Mazrak Zadran, was brought to the Police Lines and interned in the Reserve Inspector's vacant bungalow which was not far from our house across the hockey field. I remember he was a thickset man with a black beard and he wore a brown embroidered woollen *chugha* (cloak) over his *shalwar qamiz*. He remained interned for quite some time until the house was allotted to the handsomest Police officer around, Inspector Fazal Mahmood of the Pakistan cricket team who was later to earn fame as the Oval hero. In November 1951, a lot of controversy was generated when

the Munir Enquiry Commission started its proceedings. For months together it recorded evidence of the witnesses. In one of the sessions, my father told me, a shopkeeper of the Raja Bazaar had informed the Commission that as he tried to run away on that day he tumbled over the tummy of a man lying flat on the ground between the chairs. The shopkeeper revealed that the man was no other than Inamur Rahim, the Commissioner of Rawalpindi. There were meaningful smiles in the courtroom and Justice Munir ordered the evidence to be expunged from the proceedings. As to whether the assassination was the result of a conspiracy the Commission did not arrive at a conclusive finale. However, further investigations to that end were entrusted to a fine Police officer, Nawabzada Itazazuddin Ahmad Khan of Loharu, IG Special Branch. My father had worked under him probably at Jhelum and knew him well. It is said that the Nawabzada had found out about definite links involving powerful people at home and abroad for which he used to receive threats from anonymous quarters. His son Izzatuddin, who was an old class fellow of my cousin Dr Waheed Qureshi, once told him that the threats had forced him and his father to sleep with loaded revolvers under their pillows. The Nawabzada did not live long afterwards to disclose the secrets that he had supposedly unearthed. He died in August 1952 in an RPAF transport plane crash near Khewra (in the Salt Range in Jhelum) when he was flying to Peshawar on way to Quetta. All other passengers (six officers and five other ranks) also perished. The plane was carrying ammunition and bombs for a training exercise. The rumours implied that the files in his possession were lost but there is evidence to suggest that his luggage survived and that was how his identity was ascertained. Prime Minister Nazimuddin disclosed that he had asked the Nawabzada to see him in Karachi. Later, in October 1953, Gurmani informed the Constituent Assembly that Itazazuddin had submitted his report to him and there was no question of a conspiracy.

Now that I read and re-read the reports and other material on the Liaquat assassination case more than half a century later, the pieces of the puzzle seem to fall into places, giving a much clearer picture of the whole episode. The Munir commission (for which the state witnesses had been tutored thoroughly in advance by the prosecuting officials) concluded that Liaquat's assassination was a fanatic's individual act and not a conspiracy. Ghulam Akbar (Punjab CID's group officer responsible for Said Akbar's surveillance in Rawalpindi who later retired as DIG) when interviewed recently by me had the same explanation to offer. Conspiracy theories abound, including the one that has re-surfaced recently in the declassified US State Department papers alleging

American role behind Liaquat's killing (*The News*, 20 July 2006). Whether it was conspiracy or destiny one would never know. But there are more baffling questions than answers. Apart from instances of dereliction of duty in not shadowing Said Akbar strictly by the book and attempts at cover up there was no sustained effort to solve the mystery. The unrequited riddles include the role of the Afghan and Indian governments of the time. Said Akbar's brothers who were under surveillance in Kabul had recently been permitted to return to Khost and take possession of the ancestral property. It was possible that a similar approach was made to lure Said Akbar with offers of money that prompted him to commit the heinous crime. The amounts of money recovered on him and from his house in Abbotabad, were too large (Rs. 9,691/-, including 38 pieces of imitation gold of Indian origin) to have come out of his savings. The other mystery concerns the role of some local political circles. The rumours current at the time alleged plots by communists, relatives of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case accused, Khaksars and Liaquat's opponents. Some writers pointedly accuse Ghulam Muhammad and Gurmani of masterminding the conspiracy in which Qurban Ali Khan, IG Punjab, and Najaf Khan were allegedly involved but fail to provide hard evidence. At least, in Najaf Khan's case, Liaquat never doubted his loyalty because of the part he had played in following up the Rawalpindi Conspiracy case. In fact, Najaf Khan was the one who had recovered documentary evidence from Gen. Akbar Khan's wife and in the scuffle had received from her a spiky kick on the shin. The account of the incident and Liaquat's praise for him came from Najaf Khan himself who told my father in confidence after the occurrence, jokingly saying that he had been stung by a wasp. But for a serious investigator the problem is that the files of the case are either missing or locked away. The odd papers that are available for inspection are of little real value. I believe a plausible case could still be made out if all the relevant unclassified files were available (including Itazazuddin's papers) even though most of the concerned people are now dead and gone. On this occasion, I am reminded of Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan's statement of August 1952 that she issued to the press when the Munir Inquiry Commission Report was made public minus its 37 paragraphs (withheld for security reasons). She appreciated the Commission's work but questioned the timing of its appointment which, she thought, had made the officials scramble for absolving themselves of the charges of negligence instead of continuing with the investigations unhindered. The real culprits were thus left untouched.

To add a footnote to the story of Liaquat's assassination, I might mention that when I visited Karachi in the summer of 1999, Ashraf Liaquat, the

elder son of Liaquat Ali Khan, took me to a function at the Museum where a former doctor was to donate his late father's handkerchief. Col. Dr. M. B. Azmi had been one of the surgeons of the late Col. (later Maj.-Gen.) Mian's team which operated upon the dying Prime Minister. The handkerchief had slipped out of Liaquat's pocket and fallen on the floor of the operation theatre from where the surgeon had picked up and kept it as a memento. Now, he was donating it to the Museum.