

# All About My Mother

Krishna Bose witnessed the ecstasy as well as the agony of freedom. Her memoirs, now translated into English by her son **SUMANTRA BOSE**, chronicle history's passion play

**Krishna** Bose, my mother, is now 84. She was sixteen when India gained Independence. This is her story of how she experienced it.

Her latest book *Lost Addresses: A Memoir of India, 1934-1955* was first published in Bengali in 2014. After reading it, I decided to translate it into English. It's a vivid story of the simultaneous coming of age of an individual and a nation, told from the perspective of an ordinary Indian growing up amid tumultuous events.

Krishna Chaudhuri—as she was then—started reading newspapers aged eleven to make sense of the turmoil generated by the Quit India movement of 1942. In 1943 she was evacuated for several months to the family's vacation home in the Santhal Parganas due to the risk of Japanese air attacks on Calcutta. On her return, she found Calcutta's streets crawling with ragged, starving people from the Bengal countryside—the victims of the famine of 1943-44 which killed 3-4 million of the province's 60-million population. Her first teenage memories are of emaciated columns of villagers staggering across Calcutta begging for morsels of food with haunting cries and dying by the thousands on the streets. As she turned 15, India was convulsed by mass protests triggered by the Red Fort trial of the three Indian National Army officers—Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Kumar Sahgal and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon. The unity between religious and political faiths in late 1945 and early 1946 in solidarity with the soldiers of Netaji's movement dissipated in the second half of 1946, as the countdown to Partition began. In August, Calcutta turned into an inferno, convulsed by the 'Great Calcutta Killings', the communal carnage that began on the Muslim League's 'Direct Action Day' on 16 August 1946. At 15, Krishna was an eyewitness to this as well—of a city under siege, of gruesome killings even in her genteel south Calcutta neighbourhood.

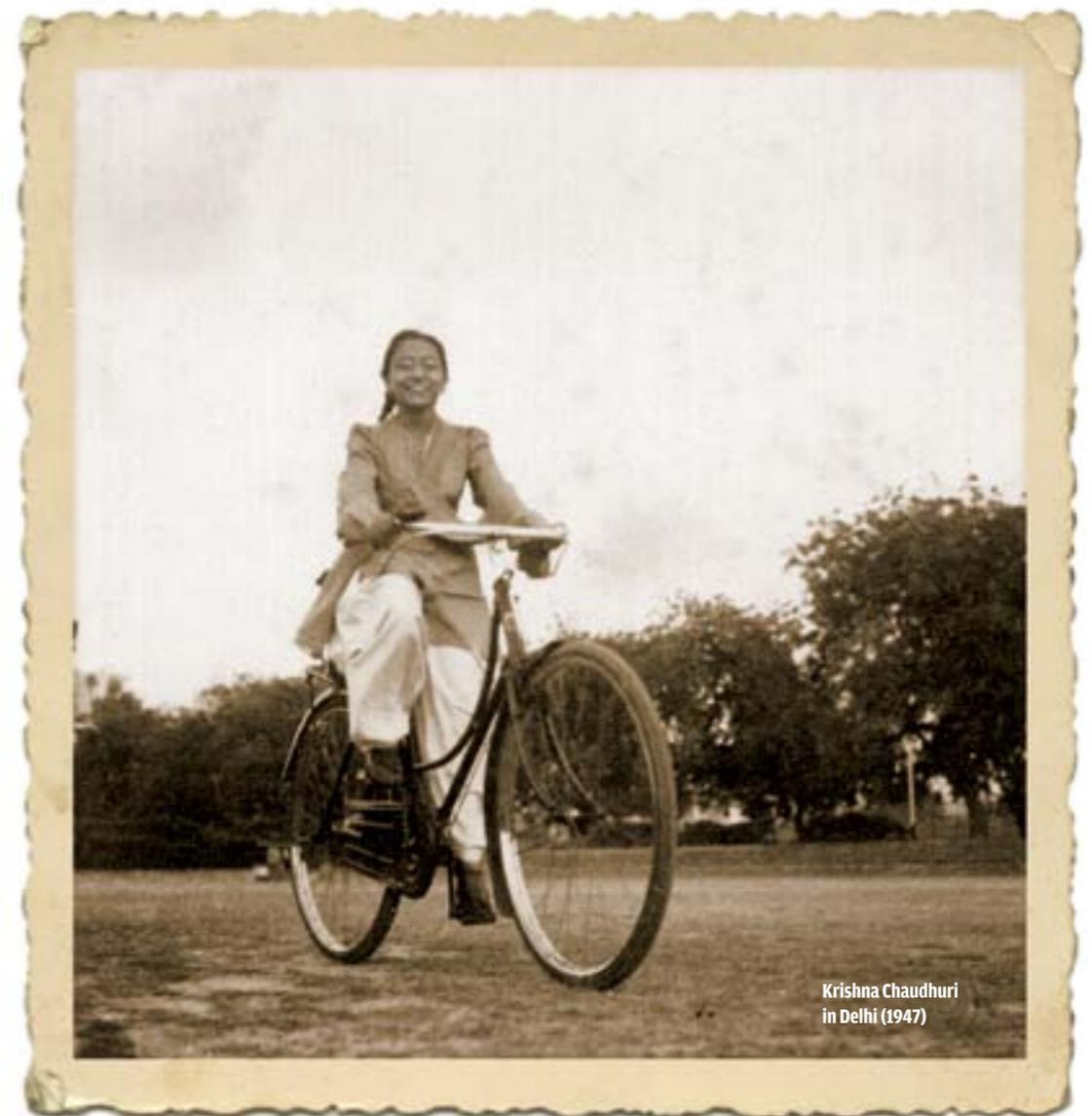
Those were extraordinary times, and a young Bengali girl came of age struggling to make some sense of it all.

A year later, India was free. When the moment arrived, Krishna was in Delhi on an extended vacation after her

matriculation examinations in Calcutta. She was staying with her uncle—later the internationally known writer Nirad C Chaudhuri. The excerpt you are about to read is Krishna's eyewitness account of the celebration and carnage in Delhi in August 1947, and of her equally dramatic train journey back to Calcutta in September.

I think these formative life experiences helped my mother navigate her post-marriage life with my father Sisir Kumar Bose, son of Sarat Chandra Bose—the eminent barrister, nationalist leader, and his younger brother Subhas' life-long confidant and closest political comrade. Sisir, later one of India's pioneering and finest paediatricians, was 20 when he drove his Uncle Subhas overnight from Calcutta to the Gomoh railway junction in today's Jharkhand on the first leg of Netaji's escape from India in January 1941. Subhas and Sisir had planned the escape together over the preceding six weeks. Sisir was arrested in 1942 and held in Calcutta's Presidency Jail, then 'home-interned' after falling critically ill in prison. In 1944 he was re-arrested and held in solitary confinement in underground cells first at the Red Fort and then for months in the notorious Lahore Fort. He was released from Punjab's Lyallpur (Faisalabad) jail in September 1945. After the escape, he had been in touch with Netaji's secret emissaries and helped some of them, who had arrived from Southeast Asia, to link up with Bengal's revolutionary underground.

Sisir, who died in 2000, devoted much of his life to making sure that Netaji's life and work was documented and preserved for India's post-Independence generations at Calcutta's Netaji Bhawan—the family house at 38/2 Elgin Road built in 1909 from where the 1941 escape took place and where Sisir established the Netaji Research Bureau in 1957. Krishna was his main aide in this endeavour. Much later, in the 1990s and 2000s, my mother had the opportunity to serve three terms in the Lok Sabha as MP from the Jadavpur constituency in Greater Calcutta. In that role, too, I think she was helped by her acute sense of the historic, if defiled, significance of India's freedom.



Krishna Chaudhuri  
in Delhi (1947)

## EXCERPT

### Delhi 1947

Meanwhile the instability gripping the nation caused instability in my life as well. The matriculation examinations kept getting postponed. On 20 February 1947 I heard Clement Attlee, the British prime minister, announce on the radio that Britain would leave India by 30 June 1948. This was a reasonable timetable for departure. Lord Mountbatten, who had replaced Wavell as India's viceroy on 12 February, later advanced the date to August 1947.

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My matriculation examinations were again postponed, to start from 19 May instead of 17 April. It was difficult to predict

what might happen next. When I received my admit card on 8 May, it seemed that the examinations would finally be held. I finished my examinations on 7 June 1947.

By that time it had been decided that India would be partitioned. On 3 June a radio broadcast by Mountbatten announcing the Partition of India was aired from London and New Delhi. This caused great worry to my family. Mother had relatives in Dhaka while Father had relatives in Mymensingh. Both these districts would definitely go to Pakistan.

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On 20 June 1947 I wrote in my diary, 'Bengal has been

divided. 'On that day Bengal's legislative assembly met, first as one and then separately in two groups of 'members elected from the Muslim majority districts' and 'members elected from the rest of the Province'. In the joint session ninety members voted for the existing constituent assembly (i.e., India) and 126 for the new constituent assembly (i.e., Pakistan). The vote was almost entirely on communal lines, except for four low-caste Hindu members who voted with the League (there were also a few abstentions). The leader of this autonomous scheduled-caste tendency in Bengal, Jogendra Nath Mandal, moved to Karachi as Pakistan's first minister of labour, law and justice. He was a follower of Dr Bhimrao (B.R.) Ambedkar, one of the architects of the Republic of India's constitution proclaimed on 26 January 1950. Mandal realised within a few years that he had been taken for a ride, resigned in October 1950 and came back to India, where he died in 1968. His resignation letter sent to Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan's prime minister, on 8 October 1950 is a devastating indictment of the top Muslim League leadership and of the very nature of Pakistan as a sovereign state.

As a family we were terribly demoralised by the division of Bengal. Although long-time Calcuttans, Father and Mother were both from East Bengal and had grown up there. It was a wrenching personal blow for them. My diary entry for 20 June records an evening discussion at our flat above Rashbehari Avenue between Mother, Father, my Chhoto kaka (Uncle Benode, the youngest of Father's five brothers) and me. We were all very sad. Father kept saying that after all the sacrifices and contributions Bengal and Bengalis had made to the cause of India's freedom this outcome was hard to accept.

Uncle Nirad wrote to Father that I should be sent to Delhi for a vacation since I was sitting at home after the conclusion of my examinations. I couldn't travel alone so Mother accompanied me. Mother and I reached Delhi on 30 July 1947. We stayed until 15 September. For one-and-a-half months I had a ringside view of Independence and Partition in the national capital. It was a truly extraordinary experience.

Our address during those weeks was the P&O Building on Nicholson Road in old Delhi. Uncle Nirad lived with his family in a flat in this building. The road was named after John Nicholson (1822–1857), a particularly brutal military officer of the East India Company. He led the re-capture of Delhi from the rebel sepoy in September 1857, and died days later of wounds from the fighting. After his death he became a central figure in the British narrative of 1857. An impressive statue of Nicholson in uniform, a very longsword dangling from his

waist, stood on a pedestal at Nicholson Park off the road. After Independence it was removed to Northern Ireland, his place of origin, where it stands today in the grounds of the school he went to as a boy.

At that time Uncle Nirad was writing the book that would make him the internationally known writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri a few years later—*The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951). I would wake early in the morning to the 'clack clack' of his typewriter. Delhi was having a typically hot summer and most of the building's residents would sleep on the roof at night. Because I had a tendency to catch cold easily I would sleep on the flat's south-facing verandah on a rope charpoy (*khatia*). Late into the night Uncle Nirad would sit on the floor beside my bed, reading out long passages from the manuscript. There was a lot about his childhood in East Bengal—tales of the ancestral village of Banagram, stories of life at the turn of the century in Kishoregunj town. My father, two years older than Uncle Nirad, featured very frequently

in the narrative. After a while I realised that I was Father's proxy in these reading sessions. 'Tell dada this is how I've written about Kishoregunj,' Uncle Nirad would instruct me, 'and remember to tell dada how I've described the Durga Puja in the village.' One day he whispered the title of the book in my ear. 'Tell dada, but no one else must know,' he said.

The reading sessions were fine but I would get uncomfortable when Uncle Nirad launched into one of his diatribes about India and its future (or rather, the lack of a future). A fervent, almost

comical loyalist of the British Empire, he was convinced that India had no future whatsoever after British rule. He told me that India would split into many fragments once the British left. The concept of dialogue was unknown to Uncle Nirad throughout his long life (he died aged 101 in 1999 in Oxford, having permanently moved to England in the 1960s). He would simply deliver monologues on a variety of subjects. I was the ultimate captive audience but would occasionally protest. He was adamant that while some individual Indians would certainly shine in the world, India as a country had no prospects. I was especially disturbed by how disrespectfully he spoke about our national leaders. Gandhi was a crafty, scheming operator, a prize hypocrite of *bania* (commercial) roots. Nehru was an opportunist par excellence. As for Subhas Bose, he was a political novice. Uncle Nirad grudgingly acknowledged, however, that Bose had a certain courage of conviction and a willingness to sacrifice himself in his misguided cause.

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Krishna Bose

Uncle Nirad worked at All India Radio (AIR). He went off to his office for a couple of hours and was back by lunchtime. Post lunch, he had more plans for my education. 'Come, let me introduce you to Plato,' he said, plucking a thick, heavy tome from his crowded bookshelves.

My education at Nicholson Road extended to more practical things. On Uncle Nirad's instructions his two older sons, my cousins Dhruva and Kirti, started to teach me to ride the cycle. I was a quick learner and after falling over a few times in Nicholson Park I soon mastered the art of cycling. Then Dhruva, Kirti and I started to cycle around Delhi, a pleasant experience in 1947 when Delhi was an uncongested city ideal for cycling. Our other preoccupation was photography. Dhruva and Kirti have both been excellent photographers throughout their adult lives. At that time Dhruva—who is two years younger than me—was starting to learn photography with a box camera.

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As Independence Day approached my mood became downbeat. I was sure Uncle Nirad would not let me take part in the celebrations to mark the passing of the Raj. I started to miss Calcutta. There I would have joined the prabhatpheri on the morning of the 15th, singing as we walked. Uncle Benode wrote to me from Calcutta promising to send the Independence Day issue of *Anandabazar Patrika*—the staunchly nationalist Bengali newspaper.

A couple of days before the 15th Uncle Nirad noticed my downbeat mood. He said, 'All right, if you want to join in the mafficking you are free to do so. I won't stop you.' I was elated.

A Goanese family, the Pintos, lived in the adjoining flat. The woman's name was Gladys Pinto. At midnight on 14–15 August I listened to Nehru's 'tryst with destiny' speech on the radio in Auntie Gladys's flat. In the morning I joined the throngs celebrating on Delhi's streets. I remember it was very dusty. The hundreds of thousands of people out on the streets were kicking up the dust. Mountbatten passed by in a horse-drawn carriage. Then the Union Jack was lowered and the tricolour raised in its place. Amid the jostling I suddenly realised that I was about to be trampled by a policeman mounted on a horse. Someone pulled me out of the way just in time.

Dusk fell. Dhruva, Kirti and I were still on the streets. Delhi was blazing with light. All the major public buildings and historic monuments had been lit up. As the evening progressed, the streets gradually emptied.

To those born after Independence it is hard to convey what that

day meant to us, those born and raised in an enslaved country.

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Delhi went from celebration to carnage in a matter of days. Hindu and Sikh refugees from western Punjab had been trickling into Delhi for months. Now the influx became a flood. The apartment building on Nicholson Road overlooked one part of the boundary walls of the Red Fort. Refugees camped by and even on the wall. A Sikh family lived in a flat on the ground floor of the building. One day the Sikh gentleman returned in a severely injured condition. He had got into a tonga—the horse-drawn taxis of Delhi in those days. The Muslim tonga driver plunged a knife into his abdomen and fled. He pulled out the knife, took off his turban and bandaged his stomach with the cloth. He then drove the tonga home. He died after three days.

Soon Delhi was put under curfew. The longest spell lasted eighty-four hours, three-and-a-half days. We would go on the roof of the P&O building to try and get a sense of what was going

on. The city was covered with thick plumes of smoke from numerous fires. There was a tin of egg powder at home. I don't recall ever seeing this product again; possibly it was a leftover from wartime rations. Mother and Aunt Amiya used it creatively and a variety of egg dishes appeared at the dining table. Uncle Nirad decreed that the atmosphere in the flat must remain as normal as possible. To that end he banned the use of certain words from our conversations: murder, looting, rape.

At the beginning of the riots I had a hair-raising experience.

The household's domestic help Dhonu did not return home at night from the All India Radio offices, where he had gone on an errand. Early the next morning Dhruva, Kirti and I got on our cycles and set off towards New Delhi to look for him. The streets were really deserted but because it was an early hour we thought nothing of it. My sari was rising up above my ankles in a mild breeze as I cycled. Kirti, all of twelve, said crossly, 'Didi, mind your sari. People are looking at you.' Who could be looking at me? I had been concentrating hard on managing the cycle but now I looked around and upwards. People clustered at windows and on balconies were staring down at us. As we approached an intersection we saw a group of khaki-clad soldiers in front of us. We coolly cycled past them. Then we heard a shrill whistle; they were asking us to stop. We dismounted and they approached us. 'Where are you going?' they asked. 'All India Radio,' we replied. They looked at us in disbelief. 'Are you mad? Do you not know what's going on all over the city?' We had to open fire at this intersection just a



Communal violence on the streets of Calcutta, 15 August 1948

little while ago. Leave this area immediately.'

We panicked. I had never thought I could cycle so fast. We had no idea what direction we were going, we just went. After a while I was overcome with exhaustion and fear. I stopped, got off and sat down by the road. Dhruva managed to find a *tonga-wallah*. We got on the tonga with our cycles and reached home via a circuitous route. By that time the morning papers had arrived and Mother, Uncle Nirad and his wife were on the verandah, looking out for us with anxious faces. To this day it surprises me how Uncle Nirad could have sent the three of us—a girl of sixteen and two boys aged fourteen and twelve—out to find his missing servant, apparently oblivious to the tinderbox situation in Delhi.

One day the curfew was relaxed for half an hour. Dhruva went out to the post office and came back with a sheaf of letters. There were several from Father. Both he and Uncle Benode were very worried at the news from Delhi. One letter contained news of my matriculation results. I had not done very well but had passed in the first division with seventy per cent marks. Father wanted me to return to Calcutta as soon as possible to be enrolled in college.

That was easier said than done. The rioting had subsided but Delhi was far from normal. During the rioting Dilip kaka—Dilip Sanyal, a professor of English at Delhi University's Ramjas College and a friend of Uncle Nirad's—had joined us in the flat on Nicholson Road. Eventually it was decided that he, Mother and I would travel to Calcutta together. On 15 September 1947 the three of us boarded a train at Old Delhi station. The station and its vicinity were littered with putrefying corpses. Uncle Nirad came to see us off. He kept saying that it would have been better to wait for a few more days before travelling. For once he was right.

That train journey from Delhi to Calcutta is one of the unforgettable experiences of my life. A group of Sikhs were travelling in our compartment. A young Sikh girl about my age was sitting on the bench opposite mine. On the way out of Delhi the train got on the bridge over the Yamuna river. The shallow waters on both sides were strewn with corpses. Suddenly the girl said to me excitedly, '*Dekho dekho, kaisa khoon*' (Look, look at the blood). She had spotted the body of a small child that was still oozing blood. I closed my eyes. A bit later she told me that she was the only survivor from her family. Everybody else—male and female, young and old—had been killed in a massacre in West Punjab's Lahore district. She had some distant relatives in Calcutta's Sikh community so was travelling there.

The train to Calcutta continued its journey and after some time

I resumed looking out of the window. Soon I noticed something odd. Pieces of luggage were being thrown out of other compartments. How strange. Then I realised that the bundle-like objects were not pieces of luggage but human beings. A gang of men were roaming through the train, looking for Muslims. Whether they were killing those they found and then throwing them out or throwing them out alive I do not know. They soon appeared in our compartment—five or six men including two Sikhs. Once they learned we were from Bengal they became very interested in us. They seemed convinced that we were Muslim because most of Bengal was now part of Pakistan. A sharp argument broke out between the gang and our Sikh co-passengers. The orphaned girl led the confrontation with the gang. The argument was in Punjabi but I could make out some of it. She gestured towards Dilip Uncle and I heard her say, 'He's a professor.' Then she gestured towards Mother and me, saying that we were from an aristocratic family. The gang was not

persuaded but they moved on to the next compartment with an ominous 'We're coming back.'

A little later the train pulled into Kanpur. Evening had fallen. I looked out on to the platform and saw a large contingent of British soldiers—'Tommies' as they were known then—lined up in formation, guns at the ready. They boarded the train and moved systematically through the carriages. The gang was apprehended and taken away. I had never imagined that the appearance of British soldiers could provide such deliverance.

We had been an independent country for a month at that time.

After Kanpur there was no further disturbance. I climbed on an upper bunk and lay down, but could not sleep. Through the night the train tore across the plains of north India towards Calcutta—no longer the capital of Bengal but the capital of 'West Bengal', a new entity covering just over one-third of the territory of undivided Bengal and containing a similar proportion of the population of the pre-partition province.

Father received us at the Howrah terminus the next day. He was shocked at how pale and haggard I looked. He said, 'I thought I sent you to Delhi for a vacation. ■



Lord Mountbatten, Edwina Mountbatten and Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947



Excerpted from *Krishna Bose's Lost Addresses: A Memoir of India, 1934-1955* (Niyogi Books, Rs 450, 208 pages, September 2015); translated by Sumantra Bose, professor of International and Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science