

Exhumation

The Life and Death of Madan Lal Dhingra

Leena Dhingra

© HOOPER

SMALL AXES

1.
23 JULY 1909:
PENTONVILLE PRISON,
LONDON

The door shuts with a heavy metallic clang. The sound seems to go on and on, echoing in the prison corridors outside, reverberating from the walls of the cell and through the young man who has just been led in and left. He stands there, rooted to the spot, waiting for the deafening noise to subside, the interminable clanking of keys in locks and the echo of footsteps. He listens carefully, trying to count the footfalls. Are all three leaving? Or is it only two? Soon they are lost among other sounds, more doors opening, slamming, voices shouting. Is he alone? He senses he is still being watched as he quickly surveys the cell: bare brick walls, bed, bucket, window. Three paces long, two-and-a-half wide, he guesses, as he strides across to verify his assessment. A slight breeze catches him. In the window above, a tiny pane, not much bigger than the palm of a hand, is open. He reaches up, and as he does so the coarse cloth of his prison clothing rubs up against his neck. He grips the wall

to balance himself as he feels the tears welling up behind his eyes. The urge to cry out loud is almost irresistible.

‘Hey Ram!’ He implores. ‘Help me God! Help me! I must not, I will not, break down now! Please help!’

He conjures the memory of just a few hours earlier, standing up, erect in the court watching the judge as he put on his black cap for the sentencing.

He’d bowed and said, ‘Thank you, my Lord. I am proud to have the honour of laying down my life for my countrymen.’

He had felt weightless then. Possessed of an energy and lightness from the ether. Now, alone in his cell he willed the memory to sustain him, to help him stay erect when all his body wanted to do was to crumple.

Down the corridors there is a scream, followed by the sound of running feet. From the door outside his cell footfalls move away. He is alone. At last. Then he starts to breathe rhythmically and becomes composed. Straightening himself out, he wipes away the dampness that has squeezed through his clenched eyelids, tidies his prison clothes – a habitual gesture from smarter days – and looks again at the room. His gaze stops at the small parcel of his belongings on the bed: a book, a notebook, some letters and a pencil that he has been permitted to retain – all wrapped, tagged and labelled.



‘Madan Baba, this time you are going properly ...’ Ratan’s words flash through his mind, together with the image of himself three years earlier standing in the outer courtyard of the family house. Alongside Ratan, the old family retainer, inspecting the tags and labels of the trunks that will make the voyage with him from

Amritsar to London. ‘Cabin,’ ‘Not wanted on Voyage,’ ‘Wanted on Voyage.’ Trunks freshly painted with his name: Madan Lal Dhingra. ‘Madan Baba, this time you are going properly, like the son of a noble house.’ Images flash into the mind’s eye: Ratan, with his misty eyes, oil lamps and incense, *kumkum* and rice, flowers and coconuts, blessings and goodwill, embraces, touching feet, taking leave, waving at the station, Bhajan running alongside as the train steams away, darkening the day with its grits and smoke.

‘Madan Lal Dhingra, now prisoner number 9493, is that me?’

The sound of his voice in the cell feels strange, solitary, trapped. What do you do when nothing remains for you of the outside world, other than a slight breeze and a small patch of blue? When images flood your mind of all that you will never do again: laugh with your friends; shadow-box with your brother; embrace your mother; touch your young wife; chase the *jugnu* fireflies on the roof terraces at night to trap them in a bottle to read by their light; walk along the Thames in the moonlight, like that long, last walk.

‘What do you think when they have put you in a condemned cell, taken away your clothes and shoelaces, given you a number instead of your name?’

‘My statement! My statement! Pompous, arrogant hypocrites in your wigs and gowns who wouldn’t read my statement. But how did I forget it then, when I remember it all now?’

The walls slap your words back at you, beating you down from your feet on to your knees and racking your body with breaking sobs, which slowly let way into a great, yawning weariness. You lie crouched on the floor, feeling broken and beaten. How long? Until a faint breeze stirs the stillness and touches your forehead. You move. Slowly. Drag yourself across to and onto the bed. But just before the weariness engulfs you, you invoke the goddess riding

Leena Dhingra

resolutely on her tiger: 'Mother, I vowed my unflinching devotion to you. Help me to fulfil myself.'

You sleep, your damp locks streaking your face. In your dream it is the face of your own mother that smiles at you.

'I fed the sweet rice to the fish, my son. You will have a safe journey.'

Gently she lifts the tangled curls from your forehead to mark it, first with the red vermilion *kumkum* and then with the grains of rice. In your sleep you smile.

© H O P E R O A D

2.

1956: TRAIN JOURNEY FROM BOMBAY

‘When you are in India, you call people who are older than you “uncle” or “aunty” and if they are children you call them “bhai” or “bhen”.’

‘Yes, Daddy.’

I was thirteen, an English schoolgirl in Parisian clothes. I landed in Bombay to go to a new school in South India. It was a two-day journey by train and, having been equipped with the necessary bedroll and clothing from the school lists by family friends in Bombay, I met up with the school party to make the long journey south.

It was my ninth school in as many years and my third in India. There had been three in Switzerland, two in France and one in England. Partition had had left us displaced in Paris waiting to go home. I now felt like a proud trailblazer who had come home and was paving the way for the others.

My parents had informed two family friends of my arrival and both had come to the airport to meet me. 'Uncle' had sent his secretary and 'Aunty' had come herself. It was agreed that I should go with aunty and visit uncle the next day.

Standing there in the muggy heat and bustle of Victoria Terminus – the steam, the whistles, the chatter, the clatter – I wished I'd worn one of the new Indian cotton dresses that Aunty had had stitched for me, as she'd suggested I do. But on the morning of my departure I wanted to put on the special going-away dress that had been bought for me the previous month at Galleries Lafayette. I had gone there with Marie Thérèse, one of my father's friends, 'We'll get something *très jolie, à la Parisienne*,' Marie Thérèse had said. 'Something in which you will feel confident.'

Now my tailored attire made me feel conspicuous. I noticed a group of girls who eyed me with curiosity. Then one of them smiled. A tomboy in plaits, she detached herself from the group and strode over as the others turned to throw side glances.

'Hello! You're new, aren't you? What's your name?'

'Leena.'

'Good. I'm Amrita. Welcome!' She thumped my arm. 'Come!' she commanded, both to the group and me. 'Come on, you guys!' The group of girls moved forwards, and we met halfway for the introductions: 'Charu, Anita, Sheila, Vijaya.' All around my age.



They took in my clothes as discreetly as their curiosity would allow. 'Are your parents posted overseas?' ventured Charu.

'Well, no ... not quite ... but well ... I don't know, but sort of, I suppose. My father works in Paris, actually.'

My flustered reply was because we were not 'posted'. Posted meant that you were sent from somewhere with somewhere to return to, whereas we were displaced by accident. My father, a lecturer in English at Government College, Lahore, had taken a six-month job with the new UNESCO in Paris. My mother had come to join him for a short holiday and six weeks after her arrival, and two months before they were due to return and reclaim my sister and me from the boarding school in which my mother had left us, Partition took place and there was nowhere to return to.

'Your parents are quite right to send you to India for your schooling. This is where you belong.'

It was warming to think that one belonged.

On the train Amrita asked me what caste I was.

'I'm afraid I don't know,' I replied.

'How can you not know what caste you are?!' She sounded incredulous. 'You must write to your parents and find out.'

My father replied by return of post and stated emphatically: caste was not an issue. I was a citizen of Free India and, as such, of the world, and he was surprised that a girl in a Krishnamurti school should ask me about caste. He suggested I should both remember and remind my friend of what Gandhiji had said.

I wasn't quite sure what that was.

Sitting under the tree in the recess, Amrita was diligently working with a penknife, transforming a branch into a staff for herself.

'Your father is modern,' she said, 'and that's good. But your name, Dhingra. Are you any relation to Madan Lal Dhingra?'

I knew that I was, but didn't know what that meant. A few years earlier, in boarding school in England, my older sister had asked me, 'Have you ever heard about Madan Lal Dhingra?'

'I don't think so ... I can't remember,' I'd replied.

‘Well,’ she’d continued, ‘he was Daddy’s uncle, and I’ve just read about him in a magazine series about famous murderers.’

‘Gosh! Was he a murderer?’ I shuddered.

‘Well, that’s what they called him. He shot some important Englishman and was hanged! Funny, isn’t it, that Daddy’s never spoken about him.’

I hadn’t known what to make about this at the time.

Amrita was carving her initials on her staff. ‘Are you?’ she asked again.

‘I think he was my father’s uncle. But I don’t know anything about him,’ I added defensively.

‘Your father’s uncle! Really?’ Amrita stopped and closed her penknife. ‘Well, if Madan Lal Dhingra was your father’s uncle, then you come from the family of a great patriot – and patriots are above caste!’ She smiled at me. ‘Here, have this.’ She held out her newly made staff. ‘They are very useful, you know.’ She sliced the air with it to prove her point as we walked along. ‘You can use it to knock tamarinds off trees and protect yourself from snakes and scorpions.’

I flinched. ‘Snakes and scorpions? Are there many around?’

‘Oh yes!’ she replied cheerfully. ‘But most of the time they hide away – and only a few are dangerous.’ We walked along towards the ‘summoning bell’.

‘Did your parents go to jail?’

‘No. They didn’t. My mother always says it’s her biggest regret.’

‘What is?’

‘That she didn’t manage to get to jail.’

Amrita laughed. ‘Well, my parents only went to jail during the “Quit India” movement, but my grandfather was in and out for much longer and it ruined his health.’

‘Gosh!’ I exclaimed, quite impressed.

‘It was my grandfather who told us about Madan Lal Dhingra and the inspiration he had been.’

‘What did he say?’

‘That he was a great patriot who sacrificed his life so that India could be free, and that we must never forget him and the many others who died so that we could regain our self-respect. It’s our duty to remember.’

Throughout my year at the school in India, Amrita remained my staunch friend, investing me with a respect I felt I hadn’t earned. In the beautiful valley where our school was set we went for long walks. She taught me many skills: how to scale tall trees; how to dig groundnuts and boil them in salt water over a campfire; how to drink water without touching the ladle to my lips; how to avoid snakes and scorpions, and what to do in case I couldn’t; how to wash my feet under a tap without using my hands but skilfully rubbing one foot against the other in an intricate dance that scrubbed them perfectly clean. She also taught me some nationalist songs: *Bande Ma-tar-a-am* *Bande Mata-Rum*. The hills would echo them back.

‘When you grow up,’ Amrita announced on one of our jaunts, ‘you must find out about Madan Lal. We must never forget.’

I wasn’t surprised that I knew so little. I had left India as a small child and been moving around since, so there was lots I didn’t know. My tangle of bewilderment would disappear into a dark well in my mind labeled ‘Partition’, full of fears, confusions and unformulated questions.

‘You might need to go to London for that. Because that’s where Madan Lal was.’

At the time London was nowhere on my radar. My parents were in Paris, I had come home to India and the rest of the family would soon follow. That was the plan.

But life had other plans. My level of maths was way below that of my peers. So I'd have to lose at least a year.

'How could I keep you there,' my mother would explain later. 'They said you would lose a year at least. Rishi Valley was a small experimental school.'

So my mother moved me, probably on the advice of her family – who I can imagine might have said: 'You should send her to a proper school. None of this Krishnamurti experimental nonsense. Send her to MGD, Maharani Gayatri Devi Public School for Girls in Jaipur. That's a good school.'

I was placed in MGD, a school for princesses, which after the magic of Rishi Valley felt like a strange and stifling anachronism.