

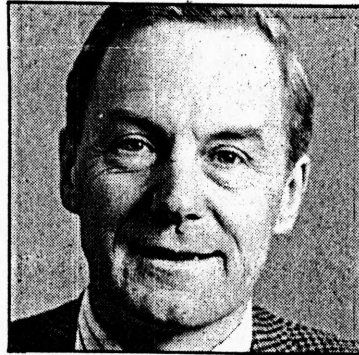
# Break chain of hate, revenge

Many of us will have read, at a safe distance, of the bloodletting in India after the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. I learned this week of the experiences of a friend of mine which brought home the awful reality of those hours. They underline the amazing power of recovery of the human body and the amazing power of forgiveness in the human spirit.

Sushobha Barve, a Hindu dietitian who is responsible for the kitchens at the Moral Re-Armament conference center in Panchgani, India, was traveling in a train with a friend when the news broke of Mrs. Gandhi's murder by Sikhs. In their compartment were two Sikh businessmen.

At first, she reports, there was an almost unnaturally peaceful feel about the continuing train journey. Fellow passengers discounted the fears of the Sikhs. But as the hours ticked by, the train began stopping. There was a rumor that a Sikh had been pulled off the train and shaved, an affront to his faith. Sushobha was concerned how to protect the Sikhs. She moved from the window to the door. They moved to the top bunks.

In one town, a gang of villagers entered the compartment, but she managed to talk them out of mischief. At the next stop however, the train was surrounded by villagers armed with sticks. Three times their compartment was searched. The fourth time the intruders wanted to know who was in the top bunk. They pulled off the sheet and discovered the two men. Sushobha tried to shield them and was seized. One man held her neck and hand. She was asked if she was traveling with the Sikhs. She said she was from Maharashtra, but her costume was from the Punjab, the Sikh homeland. She was wearing



**A DIFFERENT ACCENT**  
Michael Henderson

a silver bangle, but her assailant thought at first it was a steel bangle of a Sikh.

"How dare you assault a woman," she said. He let go and wouldn't look her in the face. The Sikh men were pulled out, beaten until they seemed dead and thrown back into the compartment. Then everything was looted. The train started again. It was discovered that the men were not dead. At the next stop the two ladies could only watch helplessly as the bodies were thrown off, stoned and then set on fire. They had been the only ones who tried to prevent what happened.

Thinking about the events shortly afterward, Sushobha said she hadn't dreamt that her generation would ever witness killings comparable to the period after partition, a period dramatized for us in the West through the "Gandhi" film.

"It was gruesome," she wrote to a friend. "But when the villager held me by the neck I felt comforted by

God's love and protection. God gave me the right words to say which at least convinced one man. "But," she asked, "what was God's purpose in allowing us to go through this? How are we going to repent and cleanse our sins? Is it possible to heal wounds between Hindus and Sikhs?"

A month later she was still feeling anger and guilt. "I was tortured at night by the thought of not being able to save the lives of the two innocent men." She decided to accept the responsibility for what Hindus had done. "It was a painful process," she remembers, "but once accepted, I was shown the steps I should take."

She felt she should write letters to Sikhs, some known by her, some not. As a Hindu, she wrote, she wanted to apologize unconditionally for what her people had done. She asked forgiveness. Khushwant Singh, a well known writer and Sikh spokesman, replied in a handwritten note, "I was in tears as I read your letter. As long as we have people like you around, we will survive as a nation."

It was one thing to write letters of that kind, already a difficult step. It was another to visit Sikhs. This Sushobha also decided what to do. She went to see a Sikh couple whose factories had been burned down. Again she made an unconditional apology for the deep wounds and humiliation. Husband and wife were in tears. Usha, the wife, held her hand. "To hear what you have just said," she told Sushobha, "makes me feel that all we have gone through during the last two months was worth it and is healed."

But still Sushobha could not keep out of her mind the image of the train victims. She tried unsuccessfully to get information about them. Then came word that indicated one of them was alive. She had an impelling sense that she must travel the 1,200 miles to where they came from. She had not been open to it earlier but knew that she would not have peace of heart until she had done so. She was fearful how a Hindu would be received.

"I cannot express the joy I felt when I saw Bupendra Singh lying in his bed," she writes. "I was not greeted with hostility but with courtesy; not formally, but as an old friend of the family." The room soon filled with family members and as

the story was pieced together, all felt that God had heard their prayers and not let them down. "It was a chain of miracles," believes Sushobha. She even discovered that the other passenger, Govinder, had also survived.

As Bupendra had lain on the ground pretending to be unconscious, he had somehow managed to turn on his side and extinguish the fire. Govinder, who had been unconscious, was awakened by his skin burning. He, too, managed to get out of his burning clothes. In what seemed to them minutes, a group of police arrived and did their best to save them — this at a time when most police were inactive.

The Sikhs remember that as they were carried, their bearers chanted mantras for the dead. They were so badly burned that friends at the hospital didn't recognize them. Besides body burns, Govinder needed 152 stitches in his head. The doctor told the family, "Why have you brought me a dead body?" "It was a medical challenge," said Bupendra. "They struggled for two and a half months to put life back into him and he has just returned home."

Sushobha expressed sorrow at not being able to protect them. "We feel bad that you had to suffer because of us," responded Bupendra. "We remember your arguing with those men and saw the first stick hit you. The men who took us talked of finding the women who were with us and we were worried. We had not known what had become of you."

"Bupendra and his family were free of bitterness at a time when they had every reason to be bitter," reports Sushobha. "Even the most inhuman suffering had not killed the fine human qualities of courage, compassion, vision of the future and gratitude to all who helped them — us, policemen, doctors and God for the gift of new life."

At the recent Dialogue on Development at the MRA conference center in India, Sushobha said, "Reconciliation and reconstruction of human lives and relationships is going to be a painful process. But the essential is men and women who are willing and dare to break the chain of hate and revenge."

Henderson is a Lake Oswego-area resident and commentator on KBOO radio who is active in Moral Re-Armament.