

Tricolour on my mini sari

I found three things that took me back 70 years: a photo, a medal, a blue stone

BY SAKUNTALA NARASIMHAN

While hunting for some old receipts last week, I brought down a dilapidated suitcase from the attic. As I rummaged through its contents, I stumbled upon three things that took me back 70 years, to August 15, 1947, when I was a child in Delhi.

The first was a black-and-white photograph taken by my father, of me in a mini Benarasi sari and my younger brother in a mini dhoti. The second was a small, round, metallic medal that was given to all school children around the country to commemorate Independence. And the third was a blue, semi-precious stone, the size of a peanut, which my mother had bought for eight annas in 1947 from a refugee sitting along what came to be known later as Janpath.

I remember August 15, 1947 vividly. I got dressed in the morning in a little white sari with a tricolour border that my mother rustled up. There was no television, our radio was a heavy, table-top model. That period, 1947-48, was a heady time of pride and hope.

The last darshan

I remember going one evening, as a thumb-high child, with my father to Gandhi's prayer meeting at Birla House. I remember sitting through Mahatma's speech after the prayer songs were sung.

On January 30, 1948, my mother had a broadcasting engagement at All India Radio (AIR), and we were waiting to tune in, when a news announcement rang through the air of a shooting during the prayer meeting.

My mother returned home in great agitation; all music broadcasts were cancelled; the elders huddled together in shock.

Sensing that something of great gravity had happened, I got on my small bicycle and pedalled around our colony, which was next to Lady Irwin College on Sikandra Road, yelling "Gandhiji has been shot, Gandhiji has been shot..."

The news announcer on radio sobbed uncontrollably as she read out the details of the incident. Our cook refused to prepare dinner. The adults didn't eat.

My father took us to India Gate the next morning where we joined a mammoth crowd waiting for a last *darshan* of Gandhiji as the



Where did the dreams go Looking back on seven decades of independence. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

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cortège passed. My father hoisted me on his shoulder to let me have a glimpse of the gun carriage and I remember seeing the sun shining on the bald head of the Mahatma, with Nehru sitting in front.

There wasn't an inch of the vast lawns around India Gate that wasn't covered with milling humanity. I have not seen such a massive crowd anywhere, before or after; yet there was no pushing, no shoving, no mob behaviour, no security. Every man, woman and child was in genuine grief. Later

that evening, we returned home and listened to AIR broadcaster Melville D'Mello's running commentary on the progress of the cortège towards Raj Ghat.

Pieces of lives

I remember the Partition—the arson, the riots. And I remember the stories of the 'refugees' we met. There were no souvenir shops along Janpath till the refugees settled down in makeshift kiosks and made a living selling curios and embroidery.

That's where my mother bought the beautiful blue stone and had it set in a ring. It is worth several hundred times what she paid, but more valuable are the memories it holds, of people uprooted and trying to pick up the pieces of their lives in a new land.

One day, an elderly woman turned up at our house offering to embroider something; she then created an intricate pattern of

flowers along a six-yard length of silk my mother had and charged ₹3 for it. She had left a large bungalow in Lahore surrounded by a garden with lush fruit trees.

My father plucked the largest fruit from a papaya tree in our garden and handed it to her. She broke down.

She was a Hindu fleeing Pakistan; years later, I met in Karachi a Muslim woman who had fled Delhi. Two women united in their predicament: uprooted, dispossessed, distressed.

Today, as we revisit some of the same issues of religion, identity and liberty, I, like others of my generation, look back on seven decades of freedom, and wonder what the answers are and where those dreams went.

An award-winning writer and trained classical vocalist, the author turned to journalism for therapy when she couldn't pursue her music.