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Severed Ties: The Rise of Communal Conflict During The Partition

Abstract

Partition literature is mostly governed by narratives of violence, chaos and turbulence. The Partition was undoubtedly one of the most calamitous events of mass violence which introduced and aggravated tension between different religious communities such as Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs for years to follow and led to an endless debate and an unsolvable issue for their subsequent generations. Till date, there have been attempts to comprehend the existence of traumatic instances of genocide in the subcontinent ever since 1947. The division also led to an unbelievable exodus. Camaraderie, relationships and togetherness went for a toss. It thus becomes crucial to analyse the expression of conflict among communities and its resulting violence which reached an unreasonably soaring level during the creation of the border.

Writers like Mohan Rakesh, Intizar Hussain, and Kartar Singh Duggal delineate the trajectory of unexpected and irreversible conflicts among various communities in their short stories. Their work is a clear reflection of the distressing impact of heightened bitterness in society.

Keywords: Partition, conflict, dispute, communal riots

1947 saw the most turbulent times in the history of a nation. It was guided by unforeseen events of certain political decisions. As a result of which, the definition of nation and nationhood got outlined in tandem with the newly created sub-continental border within a nation. It resulted in the creation of an all-Muslim nation-state which came to be known as Pakistan. It constitutes four provinces; Sindh, Punjab, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Out of these, Punjab got divided into eastern and western provinces. In other words, East Punjab became a part of India and West Punjab went to Pakistan. Division of the nation in this manner resulted in one of the highest numbers of migrations ever witnessed in history. People were asked to relocate, re-identify and redefine themselves along the lines of the two newly demarcated nation-states. The sudden imposition of a remodeled reality forced them to re-mould their established sensibilities. People were rendered homeless. It led to an unbelievable exodus wherein “the numbers killed, displaced and dispossessed in the partition of India is unknown. Anything between 200,000 and three million people may have lost their lives. Between 1946 and 1951, some nine million Hindus and Sikhs crossed over into India from Pakistan and about six million Muslims went to Pakistan from India” (Singh 1). Religious animosity left no space for humanity. The construction of a new nation therefore opened another chapter in human acrimony.

The introduction of the schism ruptured relationships to an extent where the entire population got carved into two clearly defined watertight compartments. That is to say, the concrete identities which were forced to exist and which somehow also came into being as the inevitable result of communal conflict prevalent during that time were only Muslims and those who were not. People’s awareness of their affiliation to their respective religions escalated as it seemed to be the only factor which provided them with a sense of identity.

This manner of grouping of people which highlighted one's belongingness to a particular religion gained intensity resulting in religious animosity. Relationships and friendships gave way to bitterness and resentment. The divide gave rise to a never-experienced-before sense of separation. It was a human tragedy in which thousands of people were affected emotionally, mentally and psychologically. Yasmin Khan writes in her work *The Great Partition*,

“India and Pakistan were built on messy and turbulent foundations. Partition set in motion a train of events unforeseen by every single person who had advocated and argued for the division... The grave implications of this stretch into the present day for these two vitally important, and now distinctive, countries.” (10)

Every citizen's culture, sense of being, existence and identity were connected to one nation. Communal conflict brought forth the issue of identity crisis on both sides of the border. This event brought genocide, mass destruction and plunder as a consequence. The ignorance and impetuosity contained within the fabric of the Partition got highlighted only when it was too late to hold the catastrophe. Paranoia and chaos got fabricated in the life of every individual in the years preceding, during and after Partition. This human tragedy involved cataclysmic human cost which disseminated an entire population across the (un)known land.

Markers of religious identity and communal difference could be found everywhere. “A Muslim traveler would be redirected to the ‘Mohammedan refreshment room’ at a train station and drinking taps on railway platforms were labeled ‘Hindu water’ or ‘Muslim water’.” (Khan 19) It was made sure that new customs, myths, taboos, and practices were installed collectively within one community along with establishing prejudices towards their religious counterparts. The new rituals were made quite distinct from the ones practiced earlier to make sure that if anyone thinks of going beyond their communal boundaries, they will be subject to strict censure. There was a constant pressure to be aware of this difference. If Partition is looked at in retrospect, its trajectory can be easily charted beginning from social

cohesion transforming into a sense of difference till genocide in a frame of a couple of months preceding Partition.

The attempt therefore is to locate the presence and representation of the aforementioned communal fissures in the short stories produced on both the sides of the border. Since such riots left indelible marks on the pages of Indian national history, it is imperative to underline how one fragmenting event can be looked at and interpreted differently through a collection of short stories penned by both Indian and Pakistani writers. It will highlight and clarify how such times become tragedy-strewn which both mock and condole with humanity.

Mohan Rakesh's "The Owner of Rubble" ("*Malbe Ka Malik*") is about the ruins of communal violence and how the Partition generation is trying to gather what is left of it. The story begins with a return to homeland. A group of people have just returned to Amritsar from Lahore seven and a half years after the Partition. There were a few Muslims in this group who were "forced" to leave Amritsar during the Partition. The beginning of the story echoes with a sense of separation. It was their land once upon a time. Now, they have returned "to see the houses and the bazaars which they had known seven and a half years ago and which now belonged to the strangers" (Rakesh 67). It is clear in the story that not only has the city changed, the people and the circumstances surrounding them too have taken a new unrecognizable shape. Amritsar to them is now a place of wonder and surprise.

The story is about the return of the "old and frail" Gani Miyan who fled the city months before the Partition leaving his family behind. He wanders the city to arrive at the spot where he used to live, where he had built his house with much toil. "He felt as if he was lost in a labyrinth" (Rakesh 74). After he reaches where he used to live, he is shattered to see only a seared door-frame. To his dismay, "there is nothing left but that heap of dust!" (Rakesh 74) Resting on his cane, he tries to comprehend the nothingness present in front of

him in the form of ashes, dust, and rubble. To his satisfaction, at least a heap of stone and ash remained which made him nostalgic. The ashes of his house become the symbol of the hatred and agony which came to reside in the hearts of many who turned against their peers, friends and fellow brethren. The family Miyan left behind; his son, Chiragdin, daughter-in-law, Zubaida, and two granddaughters, Kishwar and Sultana, were murdered in a brutal manner by one of their neighbours, Rakkha Pahlwan.

Rakkha is told to be the trustworthy best friend and savior of Miyan and his family. He too changed with the changing times. Miyan tells him that Chiragdin used to say that “as long as Rakkha was around, nobody would dare to hurt him” (Rakesh 75). Who knew that Rakkha would be death personified for the entire family! Not only did he murder everyone, he didn’t even let them die together. The women’s bodies were found in the canal nearby. The reiteration of “You want Pakistan, don’t you! I only want to send you there! Now go!” (Rakesh 72) underlines the agony contained within Rakkha. He was blinded and guided by the fire which burnt the city and took residence in his heart. He forgot years of friendship and his cordial bond with the family because of the religious difference between the two. Rakesh brings to light the antipathy which gets voiced through the actions of the once known and friendly neighbourhood. Rakkha is just one example in the story. The neighbours too who are natives of Amritsar voluntarily fail to recognize Miyan. They shut their doors on seeing him. Mothers rush to their children playing outside to keep them away from this old man and bring them home because of the fear of them being kidnapped and taken to Lahore by him. He no longer belongs to Amritsar. For the entire neighbourhood, his true affiliation is with Pakistan. “The Partition” thus “[broke] all the affective and communal bonds which had once existed between different communities” (Bhalla xxxi).

Rakesh plays with the two names; namely, Chiragdin and Rakkha in order to heighten the impact of the violence. Where ‘Chirag’ is an Urdu word for lamp, ‘*Rakh*’ means ash. As a

character, Rakkha lives up to his name. He murders Chiragdin, the one who was the breadwinner of his family. With the death of Chiragdin, Rakesh brings to the forefront the death of social and moral values which once guided social behavior. Not only this, he plunders their property and burns the entire building to ashes. Though, it is believed that it is the government that owns the seared rubble. Rakesh clarifies that it is the goons and bullies like Rakkha who got power in their hands to control and exploit the nation after the Partition. People like him incited Hindu-Muslim enmity.

Intizar Husain's "The City of Sorrow" speaks volumes of betrayal and distrust. The expression and portrayal of communal hatred in this story delineates moral and cultural decline swiftly. The manner in which the three men discuss at length their 'adventurous' stories of how they raped women and murdered people ceaselessly without shame before the Partition is nightmarish. Though they are guilt-ridden as a result of their atrocious actions, Husain highlights how the vicious circle of degeneration was set off by such men during that time. They could have also functioned as the protectors of society by preventing such circumstances from coming to surface. Firstly, it was the girl with "a red *bindi* on her forehead" (Husain 85) who was raped by one of the three men followed by "a woman in a burqa who was running away in fear" (Husain 85) raped by the brother of the Hindu girl. To say 'that's how one thing led to another' would be too simplistic to ignore and avoid the whole issue. Husain underlines communal conflict without naming anyone in the story. He cleverly places the markers of religious difference where communal friction cannot go unnoticed.

"The City of Sorrow" cries of scattered dead bodies, corpses, stripping of women and blood. The three men find it difficult to find a grave to bury their own corpses on earth. There is no place left where they have not murdered or raped. Husain indicates that it has become impossible for them to hide their faces anywhere because of the level of degradation which

they put into motion. These men should be read as the epitome of the sinful perpetrators of the day. The story at least does not provide any hope of escape for them. They are imprisoned in the world of their own mess.

Kartar Singh Duggal questions mankind on having completely lost the notion of humanity. The title of his short story is “*इन्सानियत*” or in other words, ‘humanity’. Duggal’s story is important with respect to the changing circumstances of society. He rightly questions mankind and offers a satire on the changing norms and rules of society. He paints a horrible picture of policemen killing people on the streets irrespective of their religious background. On the basis of the circumstances of the day, the readers expect them to be biased towards people of their own religion at least. But the story acquires an even more tragic tone when these policemen of Baluchistan run over Muslims on their way to Pakistan. The expectation of the readers hits rock bottom. These men are excited to kill women and men alike on the streets. All men and women are treated equally as animals. Killing them gives them an incomprehensible adrenaline rush. The supposed saviors of society take liberty to run over as many people as they can before they cross over to their safety zone, Pakistan.

“Head constable Ramzan Khan was lost in a reverie when a dreadful scream from the street was followed by the noise of the policemen. On enquiry, he found out that after the truck passed by a Sikh riding a bicycle, one of the policemen cut his throat using his bayonet... they were laughing at this incident.” (trans., Duggal, 122)

Their remorseless behavior gets underlined as they turn from protectors into criminals. The reiterated moments of mocking at the innocents highlight the brutal circumstances through which people had to sustain themselves during the Partition.

“They hadn’t stopped laughing yet when they heard another scream on the road. This time it was a woman’s voice. And the sound of laughter of all the men on the truck increased.” (trans, Duggal, 122)

Screams, groans and loud cries are carefully placed against careless laughter of the soldiers. It pricks the bubble that is set around the saviours of society. Duggal succeeds in trapping the readers into the vicious circle of bitter humanity.

“*इनसानियत*” thus offers a unique perspective on what went wrong during the days of Partition. Duggal’s short story is a reflection of the society of the time. It did not matter to the religious zealots whether they killed or crushed anybody coming in the way of exercising religious freedom. A glimpse of inhumanity in this form is enough to reveal the brutality and trauma that a society had to go through during the catastrophic events of 1947.

The Partition thus witnessed various unforeseen incidents. Breakdown of the nation into two led to a further breakdown of relationships. Conflict among communities arose because of the upsurge in the urgency to prove one’s affiliation to a specific religion in order to belong to a chosen side of the border. This resulted in the creation of ‘the other’ within groups of friends and acquaintances who now came to be perceived from a violent and stereotypical standpoint. Its obvious by-products were riots, arson, and inhumanity. Human ties got severed to the extent that there is no scope of looking back at the convivial past.

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