

Amity at the Time of Violence: The Other Side of Partition

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Abstract: India's freedom at midnight, Nehru remarked sadly in his Independence Day speech, was won at the intolerably high cost of a communal holocaust. Partition's most tragic casualty was the man who had led India to Independence. Mahatma Gandhi was shot ... [dead] in January 1948. (Kumar 2005: 22-23) However, a fact which must, on no account be disregarded, is that, in spite of the ensuing violence, there persisted, on both sides, memories of a syncretic culture, of a shared cultural heritage.

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Unlike Punjab, where post-partition rioting was rampant, in Bengal the violence, although in evidence, was on a much more moderate scale. Suranjan Das, commenting on the nature of the violence in Bengal opines:

Amidst this inhuman communal frenzy, there were, however, instances of inter-communal help, even though the people who offered such help often incurred the wrath of their coreligionists. Nearly a hundred Hindus were given shelter in a central Calcutta Muslim bustee. In a letter to the editor of *The Statesman* (27 August 1946) Mumtaz A. Toor referred to the 'selfless', help and 'boundless human sympathy' received from the Sikh and other Hindu neighbours. (Das 1993:181)

Women, especially, in most cases, did not participate in the riots, and were, except for a few cases, not affected by it, except as victims. They were not active participants, of their own free will, in this orgy of violence. Moreover, a few women of both communities did come forward, and attempted to stem the tide of the escalating violence, the merciless butchering of hapless innocents, many of whom were helpless women and children. Also, many of the more conscious citizens came forward and formed peace committees consisting of members of both the communities at war with each other. These peace committees organised peace processions in an attempt to rouse the better selves and the better sense of the rioters. The peace committees and peace processions appealed to the good sense and saner selves of the rioting members of the two communities involved, and tried to bring to an end the mindless mayhem that had been unleashed by Partition. Sometimes they succeeded in their mission and a semblance of sanity and peace returned, but at times their efforts were rebuffed, and they themselves were attacked by the excitable crowd. The Kolkata riots, following the Muslim League call for the 'Direct Action Day' on 16 August 1946 were the worst among those which had taken place. However, even amidst those horrific riots and terrible killings, there could be traced undercurrents of humanity and friendship. As Nitish SenGupta points out:

...there were still signs of sanity and humanity as shown by many stories of how in the midst of the carnage; when some Muslims were killing Hindus

and some Hindus were killing Muslims, others tried to save innocent victims from their coreligionists. There was still a gleam of light in the midst of the gloom. All over the city, examples of Hindus who had died trying to save Muslims, of Muslims who had sheltered Hindus at the risk of their own lives and, towards the end, bands of young Muslims and Hindus marching through the streets, dispersing mobs, crying *Hindu-Muslim ek ho* (Hindus and Muslims unite), with the flags of the Congress and the League tied together, came to light. In her memories *From Purdah to Parliament*, Begum Ikramullah records a moving account of how a Hindu doctor risked his life to provide medical help to her critically ill father in a Muslim locality. There is also the well known story of how some Hindu neighbours saved Dr. Quadrat-i-Khuda, principal, Presidency College, who was attacked in his home in Bhawanipur, and escorted him and his family to the safety of a Muslim locality, endangering their own lives. (SenGupta 2007:127)

Events and actions such as referred to by Sengupta illustrate the fact that there was still some humanity left in the hearts and minds of the people who apparently seemed capable only of hatred and destruction. Also, it points to the existence— in both communities—of people who were secular minded; people who came together, in spite of their religious differences, and fought together to uphold the principles of a common humanity. Malcolm Lyall Darling has commented in this context: “If only propaganda had not poisoned the air with hatred and distrust, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh could have continued to live happily in the villages, as they had done for over a hundred years.” (Darling 2011: 302-3) The amicable relationship between the two communities that Darling refers to is glaringly evident in Rabindranath Tagore's story “The Solution” (“Samasya Puran”). This particular story is set in pre-partitioned India, where the very cordial relation between the members of the two communities is highlighted. Krishnagopal Sarkar is the benevolent zamindar, who has tenant farmers of both communities. He treats all his tenants in a kind and sympathetic manner, never discriminating between his tenants on the basis of caste or religion. His son Bipin Behari is however of a different temperament. Not only does he not believe in showing compassion towards others, he also believes in indulging in active acts of meanness towards members of the other community. He treats Achimaddi Biswas, son of the kindly old woman Mirjabibi especially harshly—firstly because he cannot bear to withstand the fact that a member of the lower class can even harbour thoughts of defying him, let alone actually carrying out those ideas inaction; and secondly, because Achimaddi is also guilty of belonging to the “other” community, and therefore undeserving of any sympathy or kindliness. Krishnagopal is finally forced to intervene, and advises Bipin Behari to treat Achimaddi in a more compassionate manner—not only because he himself has always behaved in that manner towards all his tenants, but also because the latter is his half brother by Mirjabibi. In this story, the amicable relationships between the two communities who coexisted peacefully for generations— before the Partition come about— are highlighted. Also the fact that members of the two different communities also indulged in romantic liaisons—cutting across both religious and social stratifications is

emphasised. Tagore's story deserves a foremost mention especially for this particular reason. As Alok Bhalla, in his introduction to the *Stories About the Partition* of India points out:

The real sorrow of Partition was that it brought to an abrupt end a long and communally shared history... The Hindus never ceased from paying homage at the dargahs, the Muslims continued to participate in Hindu festivals, traders of both the communities carried on with their usual exchange of goods and services at the bazaars, learned men sought each other out to gather information and knowledge about the best of both the traditions, and princes never stopped to consider the religion of the mercenaries they recruited into their armies. (Bhalla 1994: xvi-xvii)

Annada Shankar Ray's story "The Protector" ("Je Banchae") also highlights inter-communal harmony by showcasing the friendship between the Muslim Assistant Magistrate Hafiz Mehdi, and the Hindu judge—who is the unnamed first person narrator of the story. Hafiz and the narrator share a rare and precious friendship, within which they discuss everything freely. They even indulge in lengthy discussions about religion, the crux of the discord between the two communities. Each is deeply respectful of the other's religion as is evinced by the following discussion between the two friends: "Do you read religious texts of the Hindus as well?" I asked him with surprise. "Of course I do. And from time to time I also draw inspiration from them." (Fraser 2008: 103) Ray's story illustrates how respect for the other's religion was not a mirage it is often portrayed to have been; and how inter-communal friendships flourished even in those riot-ridden days of Partition. Innate integrity, a deep humanism, a high esteem for all religions was capable of building the much required bridge between the two communities— so often dismissed as a completely untenable proposition.

It would perhaps be relevant, to note, in this context, the observations of the eminent scholar from Bangladesh, Niaz Zaman: "... the stories that emerged from Bengal are not about looting, killing, and rape, as about leaving and loss, about changed relationships ..." (Zaman 1999:128) Zaman pinpoints the exact point of divergence of the Partition experience in Bengal and Punjab, and their subsequent reflection in literature. Nabendu Ghosh's story "Insignificance" ("Ulukhar") showcases the secular mindset of rational and thinking people like Aziz, a conductor, and a member of the tram workers' union, which is on strike. Aziz is portrayed as a man of principles, who refuses to withdraw from his position as a member of the striking union and rejoin work, although that would rescue him from his rather dire financial straits. Aziz does not believe in communalism, and repudiates the divisive communal politics, reiterating volubly: "The poor have only one community—they are neither Hindus nor Muslims..." (Fraser 2008: 121) Aziz distrusted both the League and the Cabinet equally: "The League? The Cabinet? Aziz smiled to himself. He knew them in and out. They were teaching people to hate each other. They were handing over shining knives to young Muslim men, in order to safeguard their own narrow interests." (Fraser 2008: 121-22) Although the riots rage all around, Aziz, along with a wise elder, is able to maintain peace in his slum. It is sane-thinking people like Aziz who acted oases of peace amidst the mayhem of violence all around.

Mushirul Hasan, the widely acclaimed subaltern historian remarks in this context:

In fact, 'India and Pakistan' were mere territorial abstractions to people who had no sense of the newly demarcated frontiers, and little or no knowledge of how Mountbatten's Plan or the Radcliffe Award would change the destinies of millions and tear them apart from their familiar social and cultural moorings. 'The English have flung away their Raj like a bundle of old straw', [said] a peasant... 'and we have been chopped in pieces like butcher's meat'. This was a telling comment by a 'subaltern' on the meaning attached to the Pakistan movement. (Hasan 1997: 34-35)

The common people on the streets were more often than not clueless about what the actual political scenario was, about what was actually transpiring, and what the final outcome of the ongoing turbulence would be. More often than not, they participated in violent acts unthinkingly, led astray by canny and self-seeking political leaders—as Aziz had so clearly realized. Mushirul Hasan's article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* testifies to the same irrefutable truth:

The politicians, Hindu and Muslim alike, exploited the fears and prejudices of their respective followers to warp political issues. They gave a communal colour to personal differences and tacitly encouraged revivalist groups to spread the virus of communal hatred. The effects of this were seen in the increasing number of communal riots. (1980: 1399)

Gour Kishore Ghosh's story "Loss" ("Jaha Jae") showcases a unique aspect of the Partition violence. The story depicts how Ranu, a conservative middle-aged Hindu woman, was forced to spend some time in close proximity of a Muslim shop owner, who had offered her refuge from the riot which had flared up all of a sudden, without any warning. Both resented the other's presence—the shopkeeper could not get rid of the unwanted company soon enough, while Ranu was acutely uncomfortable at being cooped up with an unknown Muslim man. Fear on the woman's part and humanitarian considerations on the man's part compelled them to suffer each other's unwelcome company. The story goes on to depict how, in the course of the few hours spent in each other's company, both ended up revising their opinions of each other—the two strangers progressed from regarding each other with annoyance and fear to being acquaintances who were comfortable with each other, and looked upon one another with trust and respect. T. K. Oommen, noting his observations on the nature of the Bengali society, has commented on the syncretic nature of the Bengali society, and has unequivocally stated: "Bengali society is spread over West Bengal, Tripura and Bangladesh, having a common language and being participants in a shared cultural heritage even as they profess different faiths." (Oommen 1997:90) Oommen points to the most fundamental difference between the Partition processes in Bengal and Punjab. The people of Punjab had multifarious points of dissidence. They had different religions, different languages, and different cultures. In Bengal, the situation was markedly different. People subscribed to different religious faiths, but they shared a common language, and a common culture. As a rule, each respected the other's religion, and sometimes, religion and culture overlapped, and

each community participated in and found enjoyment in the others religious and communal life. Annada Shankar Ray, the distinguished Bengali intellectual noted in this context:

[On visiting East Pakistan] Maulana Bhasani welcomed everyone warmly. At one point of time he pointed towards the village and said “Look, all around there is silence, there is darkness. When the Hindus were here, there was kirtan, bhajan, one festival followed another. All around, there was light. Now, the Hindus have gone away. With them have departed all the golden days of joy. Can't they come back once again? (Ray 1999: 5; my translation)

It therefore becomes imperative to make a note of the fact that in the case of Bengal, the experience of Partition was much more traumatic and harrowing than in the case of Punjab—because in the case of Bengal, Partition meant not only a physical uprootment from the land of one's forefathers, but intense psychological trauma as well, for one was being torn asunder from people with whom they shared emotional and cultural bonds. Language, culture, and emotions bound those tormented souls together, even as unreasoning violence in the name of religion tore them asunder. Mushirul Hasan's account of the introspections of one such victim of Partition may be pertinently referred to in this context:

“Tears began to flow”, wrote a distraught eye- witness of the killings in East Bengal during 1946—7, when she realized that: ... the part of Bengal which had been my home was no longer my home. It was a foreign land and I was not very safe in those difficult days. [...] I was more angry than sorry and vowed never to enter the country and see the people who tore me away from my home. The underlying feeling was that we were being driven away from our own country. Bengalis are first and foremost Bengalis—then Indian. We were angry with both Nehru and Jinnah for not handling the situation properly. (Hasan 1997: 30)

The realization that “Bengalis are first and foremost Bengalis”, (Hasan 1997: 30) was lurking somewhere in the deepest unconscious of every Bengali—whether Hindu or Muslim—and it is this very realisation which acted as a somewhat moderating influence even in the era of Partition, when communalism and communal violence was being deliberately fanned by self-seeking political leaders belonging to both communities.

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