

Partition, Fiction, History Redeeming/'Re-deeming' Divided Lives*

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Partition: the word itself is so inadequate. Partition is a simple division, a separation, but surely what happened in 1947 was much more than that.... Not only were people separated overnight, homes became strange places, strange places now had to be claimed as home, a line was drawn to mark a border, and boundaries began to find reflection in people's lives and minds.... You had to partition your mind, and close off all those areas that did not fit the political division around you (UB: 271).

Butalia begins her work on the partition of India in 1947 by characterising it, accurately enough, as 'one of the great human convulsions of history' (UB: 3). Figures of loss of life, honour, livelihood and home speak for themselves. Even by the most conservative estimates, two hundred thousand people were killed. Many believe that the actual number might have been as high as two million. Seventy-five thousand women were abducted and raped. The number of those who lost their homes and means of livelihood was staggeringly larger. Twelve million people crossed border in both directions. Between August and November 1947, 673 trains moved 2,800,000 refugees within India and across the border. For the poor, and for those who did not or could not otherwise get access to trains or road transport, the only way to leave to seek new homeland was on foot, in massive human columns known as *kāfilās*. Initially 30,000 to 40,000 strong, *kāfilās* grew in size. The largest is said to have consisted of some 400,000 people, and it took as many as eight days to cross a single point. It is estimated that a million people crossed the border on foot.

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I

Tragedies and traumas of this magnitude should haunt managers of the statecraft for centuries. So should they haunt historians. Thus far, there has been no sign, however, of this happening in the case of the former. As Butalia points out, 'In India, there is no institutional memory of partition: the State has not seen fit to construct any memorials, to mark any particular places . . . as has been done in the case of the holocaust memorials or memorials for Vietnam war.' The explanation for this 'lapse', she believes, is not far to seek, for she adds immediately thereafter: 'the question . . . is, how can it be memorialised by the State without the State recognising its own complicity?' (UB: 272).

Butalia calls partition, therefore, the 'dark side of independence' (UB: 272). Many others will agree, but not necessarily blame the State *per se* for it. They will argue that while statehood, in the strict juridical sense of exercising sovereignty, was important to the two countries, what India and Pakistan claimed in 1947 was much more than that. Their first and foremost assertion was that they were *nation-states*. Someone like Alok Bhalla would, therefore, raise the issue differently: ' . . . even though the Partition was a decisive event (*a kairos*) in our social and political life, it has *yet to become* a part of our *nationalist discourse*' (AB: xi, emphasis added).

But, is it merely a matter of time? Rajeev Bhargava would certainly not think so, nor would someone like Ranabir Samaddar. In a recently published article, Bhargava cites Renan approvingly to the effect that 'a nation is dependent both on the possession of rich remembrances and a shared amnesia, a collective forgetfulness' (RB: 193). Samaddar makes a telling point, not directly about victims of partition, but about the manner in which *nation-states* inevitably end up treating refugees and migrants: 'A nation . . . cannot and will not guarantee rights of migrants and refugees because it is the very process of nation-formation . . . which produces them' (RS: 43). Refugees and migrants are those, in other words, which a forming nation designates as the 'Other' in constructing its own 'Self'. Samaddar's insight, modified suitably, hints at another reason why *nation-states* ended up adopting a stance of amnesia towards victims of the partition. We might argue, then, that partition was not so much the dark side of independence as it was of nation-formation. Designating millions as the 'Other', denying them their human rights, forcing them to move, and then forgetting them were all part of this process.

II

So much, for the time being, about the South Asian managers of statecraft who were also the makers and breakers of 'nation(s)'. But managers of statecraft are not the only makers of nations. Historians can play a crucial part in that act, and have done so while marginalising partition. Ian Talbot notes how 'Partition suffered a major historical neglect. It was . . . regarded as little more than a footnote in the triumphant progress to independence in much of Indian nationalist historiography. In Pakistan, it was deployed merely as device to build up the heroic and sacrificial struggles which had accompanied the birth of a nation' (IT : 311-12).

Focusing on historiography in Pakistan, Talbot reviews several examples of this kind of nationalist historiography. Bhargava does the same in the case of Indian nationalist historiography and shows how both 'communal' and 'secular' historians were driven by the same force: 'Since Indian intellectuals felt part of the national movement and were compelled to advance its cause,' they went about 'mixing cognitive interest with ephemeral nationalist passion or more enduring national sentiment'. The result was that they wrote 'manipulated, over-politicised, and abnormal histories'. Bhargava refers to 'the play of lies and distortions in the birth and growth of nations' (RB: 193,196-97). Not surprisingly, Bhalla finds that 'there are hardly any chronicles of those days, written with any degree of objectivity and trustworthiness. . . . Most of the available histories of the Partition . . . are written by either the apologists of Pakistan or by its bitter opponents . . .' (AB: xi-xii).

In such histories there was certainly no place for the 'Other'. Less obviously, there was in them no place for the 'fragments' of the national 'self' either. Those who were caught unaware in the high politics of nation making and breaking were either fragments or were reduced to fragments. Nations do not, as a rule, build memorials for fragments. Nationalist historiography does not write their histories.

III

Indian historiography has in recent years just begun, and that too in a marginal sort of way, to piece together histories of the people(s) as well. As a result, a subject like the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 is no longer subsumed so easily in the 'history of the nation' as a

mere unfortunate episode.

Using the language of social sciences, Samaddar notes how the 'sudden displacement of millions influenced the psychology of post-coloniality' (RS: 70). Bhalla uses the more direct language of a literary writer: 'The memory of those days is branded so deeply in *our* souls that it still provokes us . . .' (AB: vii). Which 'we' is Bhalla referring to when he talks of 'our souls'? Memories of the partition, we have seen, do not provoke the soul of the collective 'national' self. The souls which are provoked are of the fragments, which saw themselves being marginalised and manipulated. Butalia quotes a letter dated 14 May 1947 written by one such soul to J.B. Kriplani: 'Your advice to Punjab minorities that those who cannot defend themselves may migrate is extremely shocking. . . . We fully realise that *you* have secured independence for *your* seven provinces at *our* cost and *you* care a hang for what may happen to the Bengalis and the Punjabis . . . if *you* cannot protect *us* and if *we* are to protect *ourselves*, then for God's sake keep *your* hands off from *our* affairs.' The letter goes on to say that conversion of religion might be a better option for the minorities than to migrate and 'be beggars to peep for alms at *your* doors; and be scorned by *your* descendants' (UB: 54. Emphasis added).

It is this 'we' of the people and of the 'communities' which people's history tries inevitably to grasp. Partition disrupted the life of such communities which 'had flowed through time even as the world *outside* had fought its political battles and spoken on their behalf . . .' (AB: xxii).

We may borrow here a stance again from Samaddar who says that the focus of his study 'deliberately remains not on migration but on migrants'. People's history has to focus, then, not on partition but the partitioned. Partition in that case remains no longer only 'a political development' (UB: 5-6), something that could thereafter be seen as 'over and done with' (UB: 6). Partition is now seen as 'division of hearts' (UB: 7,271), as the experience of 'human beings, real flesh-and-blood figures' (UB: 71) for 'people changed, and not only in their locations' (UB: 55).

IV

Sources and techniques used for doing this kind of 'people's history' are naturally innovative and unconventional. 'Readers will not find here . . .' warns Butalia, 'much about the major players . . . Gandhi,

Nehru, Patel, Jinnah, Laiquat Ali Khan, Mountbatten' (UB: 9). 'My focus here is on the small actors and bit part players' (UB: 69). Thereby, she not merely views partition as the dark side of independence, she also prefers to look at what she calls 'the underside of partition' (UB: 263). This involves reliance on oral history, for 'oral narrative offers a different way of looking at history' (UB: 10), even if the memories are 'shifting, changing, unreliable' (UB: 11) and even if people are reluctant to remember: 'Every time I was faced with this . . . I came up with a question of my own: why...were people so reluctant to remember. . . . Surely, this reluctance pointed to something?' (UB: 8-9). Using this method, she finds 'the tools of feminist historiography to be enormously enabling because it allows you to listen to that most unheard of things, silence, and to understand it' (UB:264).

Hermeneutic use of memories in constructing oral history of partition, even though these memories are 'shifting, changing, unreliable', lends validity to another source now increasingly in use: fiction written around the theme of partition. Hardcore historians are naturally sceptical about the validity of such sources, be it oral history or fiction, alleging that rather than reflecting the complexities of the actually 'lived' lives of the people, such recordings/writings reflect more often the attitude of the author: always subjective, always preconditioned, secular and humanist at its best but also sentimental in a puerile way at its worst.

There is no way meeting these objections to the satisfaction of those who have them, except to point out that archives of *any kind* need interpretation, and involved almost always in such interpreting is making sense not of one particular text or the other but of their 'intertextuality'. Given this, a large body of fiction with diverse authorship appears as a good source of history writing as any other. It is with this understanding that the present paper also makes use of fiction to seek answers to some questions that it poses for itself.

V

The body of fiction we use is the three-volume compilation of stories put together by Alok Bhalla. The volumes contain more than sixty stories written by nearly as many authors. Based in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, most authors write out of first hand experience of the partition, and, read together, bring a vast range of perspectives on partition to the reader.

In a detailed introduction, Bhalla himself divides the stories into four major types: communally charged stories; stories of rage and hopelessness; stories of lamentation and consolation; and stories of retrieval of memories. One suspects that Bhalla also puts the four types in some sort of ascending order based on how he evaluates '... the ways in which writers tried to make sense of events which were otherwise unimaginable' (AB: xv).

Our purpose in this paper is not to judge the authors for their integrity or for the quality of their fictional imagination. Our purpose is also not to map the range of emotions felt by people caught in sweep of partition, or to depict their tragedy and trauma. We lean on these stories to make an entirely different kind of inquiry that should interest the disciplines of political geography and borderland studies. Put simply, we wish to know how people come to 're-deem' their lives after new borders are, like orders, arbitrarily imposed on them from above.

Some explanations and clarifications become necessary immediately, however. First, we must clarify that the hyphenation in the term 're-deeming' is a deliberate device. It is meant to connote on the one hand the conventional meanings of the word 'redeem', which are: (i) preventing an unpleasant situation from being completely bad or unacceptable; (ii) doing some thing that will give others a better opinion of a person after he/she has behaved badly; (iii) getting something back after paying back the debt, or paying back the debt itself; (iv) freeing someone from sin and evil by giving him/her faith in religion and church (*CCELD*: 1207). At the same time, however, the hyphenation is meant to suggest another intended meaning. Redeeming would mean here (v) the act of deeming (again) life to be 'whole' after it, has been disrupted and truncated. It is our belief that, read as the play of dialectics among these five meanings, the stories can yield unexpected insights.

Secondly, we must explain what we mean by 'borders from above'. Apparently, the phrase is no more than a statement of a fact. The borders between India and Pakistan were not natural, nor had they evolved historically. These were literally man-created, the name of the man being Cyril Radcliffe, a 'lawyer of great legal abilities...and wide administrative experience', who was summoned for the purpose from England, and given mere five weeks to decide (UB: 63). Transfer of power occurred before Radcliffe could finish his task, so that the independent 'nations' were 'to learn the geographic limits of their

territories later—and to dispute them for many years' (UB: 57).

The borders were thus certainly imposed from above, not only on the people but also on the states which were to claim these people as two distinct nations. But while these were hurried and contentious borders, they were neither imposed arbitrarily by a conqueror of superior force nor were they the product of a civil war. They were legal as well as 'legitimate'. Of these two features, the latter is politically and psychologically more important. They were legitimate because Radcliffe's competence to arbitrate had been acknowledged beforehand by the leaders of the two contending 'nations': 'On my arrival I told all political leaders that the time at my disposal was very short. But all leaders like Jinnah, Nehru and Patel told me that they wanted a line before or on 15 August. So I drew a line' (UB: 65-66). The line was seen as a 'solution' by some: 'We were so tired and fed up with all the to-ing and fro-ing . . . that we were grateful some decision had been taken at last. We thought, well, here's a solution finally and now we can relax' (UB: 53). But even if not a solution, the line could at the most be disputed over later, but not dismissed.

We believe that is how people came to see the borders as well. They could not, in their hearts of hearts, dismiss the borders as another Machiavellian mechanisation of the imperialists, a 'parting kick' so to speak. These were the borders that had been drawn with the consent (or complicity) of their own leaders. The emotion which these borders aroused among people could not be described as outrage; the emotion was more of helplessness, the kind one feels on receiving 'orders from above'. The orders may be to one's utter disliking, but they cannot be dismissed for they come from a legally and legitimately constituted authority. It might well be because of this helplessness that 'all that men of good sense could do was endure, console, be generous' (AB: xi).

VI

Having combined the multilayered notion of redeeming/re-deeming with borders from above, there is one more prefatory but crucial comment we need to make before we move on to the stories themselves. This has to do with two distinct, apparently conflicting, but in our view comprehensibly linked responses witnessed among the people even now, more than half a century after the partition.

There are, on the one hand, people whose experiences made Butalia recognise 'how ever-present Partition was in our lives too . . . that it could not be so easily put away inside the covers of the history books' (UB: 5). These are the people who, when asked even now where they are from, respond with a question: 'Are you asking about now or earlier?' Much more than nostalgia which is even more widely shared there is in these people a constant and overpowering sense of loss: loss of home, youthful dreams, age-old friends. There is in them a longing to cross the border and connect again with the 'roots', to go back instantaneously in time if the rigid borders of the present do not permit that.

But, then, this is not the only response. There is another that comes alive on the border checkpoints every evening. As the sun sets, the 'national' flags are lowered for the night, as if in a symbolic truce, by the uniformed men of the border security forces guarding sacred territories. There is an elaborate show of patriotic aggression, however, before that happens. As if to mark the national domain with inerasable stamp, the soldiers of the two sides stamp the heels of their military boots on the ground as hard as they can, each side trying to out-do the other. This is loudly cheered by the civilian visitors who travel miles to observe the ritual, the muscles of their own faces tightening in participation. It is a scene that can appear only bizarre to an 'outsider' who does not 'belong' to either country, but it is menacingly real nonetheless. This is South Asian cold war, not only between two states but also among the people of these states.

Can people's history wish this second response away, or shut its eyes to it? Are the people who participate in this ritual any less real than those who experience the loss and long to transcend the borders? More importantly, are these two completely different sets of people, those who suffered the partition and those who never had any direct experience of the suffering? Is it the passing into oblivion of one generation, their space being increasingly taken over by the next? Does it take merely one generation to forget, or are these the children of those who themselves preferred to 'forget'. Is forgetting merely a psychological defence mechanism found among the traumatised, or can it be seen as representing something else?

Our understanding is that there is indeed something more to it. If partition is not a subject only of history books, if partition is 'ever present' in our lives, then this is the other face of the 'presence' of partition, and while we must lament the neglect partition has suffered

in the hands of nationalist historians, we too must not swing to the other extreme out of humanist sentiment or political correctness.

VII

Let us now return to Alok Bhalla's division of partition stories into four types. Our purpose in doing so is to see, first, how this typology can be related, if at all, to the typology we suggest in terms of redeeming/re-deeming of divided lands and lives as a new 'whole'. Doing this exercise may provide us with a more insightful way of reading fiction as an intertextual historical archive.

Probably the best way of finding a connection between the two typologies is to take up Bhalla's third type first: the stories of lamentation and consolation. These stories are, in Bhalla's own words, 'concerned with *survivors* of those genocidal days'. By that, he means 'those people who refuse to give in to rage and struggle to discover ways of living which could restore us to sanity and *redeem* us' (AB: xxiii-xxiv). A little later, Bhalla speaks of the 'their struggle for coherence and . . . determination to avoid facing anything which could remind them of the blind forces unleashed by jingoism, hateful invective, chauvinistic nationalism and religious pride' (AB: xxvii).

It is interesting to note the way in which the word 'redeem' occurs in the passage cited above, and the way in which it is exemplified by the stories Bhalla lists under the type. In one story, a woman, abducted and forced to marry the killer of her parents, lives with such scrupulous regard to her 'duty' as a wife that she soon comes to be *respected* as a *devi* of the family (AB: xxiv). In a second story, a man, once violent and lustful towards his wife, is a changed person, not only kind and generous but also solicitous, once she is restored to him after having been abducted. In the third story, a woman, whose own child was killed adopts as her own a lost child, but later agrees to restore the child to real parents. Still later, the man she had started living with asks her to return to her husband when the husband turns up to claim her. In yet another story, a woman discovers that she is pregnant with the child of her rapist, wants to abort it initially, but comes finally to 'own up' the foetus. By sheer coincidence, two long lost friends meet while on a hunt, and while they share their experiences of the violence of partition, they come to recognise hunting as violence and renounce it.

The way the characters in these stories redeem themselves or

the situations in which they are caught is typical of the conventional meanings of the term 'redeem' as we have listed earlier: preventing an unpleasant situation from being completely bad or unacceptable; doing some thing that will give others a better opinion of a person after he/she has behaved badly; and getting something back after paying back the debt, or paying back the debt itself. They search for sanity and coherence, and also for a moral order in which sanity and coherence are embedded. They are survivors, thereby, not only in physical and emotional terms but also in a moral sense as well. These are *exemplary* characters but, and this is important, not necessarily *typical* characters.

VIII

The distinction is extremely important because if we do not maintain it, we end up not only not understanding the latter kind of characters but also misunderstanding them. These characters are also about survival although not in the exalted moral sense of the term. These are the characters which *re-deem* their lives in the sense we introduced in this paper a short while ago: deeming life as a 'whole' again, life that was once 'whole' but has been disrupted, truncated and even shattered.

The methods these characters adopt may be repugnant to liberal, non-violent humanism but these are effective methods nonetheless, adopted not so much out of free choice as out of desperation, when survival—physical and emotional—is at stake. Hatred for the communal 'other', vengeance and violence could be therapeutic, as Frantz Fanon, among others, pointed out.

This brings us to Bhalla's first category directly: the 'communally charged' stories. The designation itself is interesting, for the term 'communal' has come to acquire in India a meaning different from the conventional sense. Communal does not refer in this second sense to what belongs or pertains to a community but to the sectarian and prejudicial attitudes communities develop and maintain against one another. It needs to be only pointed out that in the dialectics of the 'self' and the 'other', the two meanings are actually intimately related. The dialectic can operate in substantially different ways under different conditions. We should be interested in 'communally charged' stories to understand this dialectic as it operated under conditions of partition.

Bhalla, unfortunately, does not do that. For him, 'communally charged' stories are the 'opposite' of the stories of the moral 'survivors', and he judges them accordingly. He goes on to the extent of calling them 'graceless' stories. He includes just a few of these in order to acknowledge that they do exist, and then declares: 'I have deliberately excluded from this anthology other communal stories.' If this does not amount to moral censorship on the part of the editor, we have no other explanation for such an editorial policy either. Such attitude certainly helps in lending credence to the charge of the sceptics that fiction fails to provide firm enough archival base to write history because fiction reflects more often the attitude of the author (or the editor), always subjective, always preconditioned, secular and humanist at its best but also sentimental at its worst.

Communally charged stories are important to those of us who want to understand how the partition is 'ever present' in our lives, and is present in myriad ways: during cricket matches between India and Pakistan, each one of which is viewed by viewers on both sides as another war; during the boot-stamping ritual on the border checkposts that we earlier described; on the inhospitable Siachen glacier where lives are lost everyday to maintain vigil against threats to the 'sacred land', and in the hysteria created during the Kargil conflict. In all these situations 'nationalism' and 'communalism' (religious sectarianism) are so completely blended that it is impossible to separate them at all. Partition produced these two kinds of emotions together, or even as one two-sided emotion. Call it ugly or what you will, these are two ways in which people have typically redeemed their lives as a whole, not by personal redemption but by merging, even dissolving the personal self into the communal/national collective self.

If those who study history of the partition through the oral narratives or works of fiction have failed to take note of this kind of redeeming, it is not because its instances are difficult to find, for these are everywhere, but because they decided not to take notice. In making such selective reading, they are no less guilty than the conventional nationalist historians who 'in their patriotic fervour . . . magnified the virtues and minimised the defects of their own people' (RB: 196).

IX

Bhalla includes in his anthology the largest number of stories belonging to his third type: the stories of rage and hopelessness. Is this incidental

or deliberate? Is that how more writers were given to respond to the partition in this way, or is it that such writers are the editor's personal favourites?

We might get a clue if not an answer to these questions if we take notice of what Bhalla finds common to these stories: 'these stories offer no historical explanation for the carnage and see no political necessity for the suffering . . . as if Partition had not only shattered the narrative continuity of the traditions of the nation in which the Hindus, the Sikhs and the Muslims had defined their individual and communal identities, but it had ensured that it will never again be possible for anyone to imagine a community in which serious moral and political choices valid for all can be made' (AB: xix).

When we read this statement closely, we see in it several strands of assumptions and inferences. First, there is the assumption of a pre-existing *nation* with its traditions and continuities. Second, it is assumed that individual members of different communities and the communities themselves, defined their self-identities *within and as part of* this preexisting nation. Finally, when both these assumptions were proved false with violence and finality by the partition, the writers are left with no political or historical explanation whatsoever, or even with the possibility of constructing explanations. No wonder that the writers are driven to write what is at best 'ironic in tone' but 'still fragmentary in nature' (AB: xix).

Why did so many writers of fiction subscribe to these assumptions which led them sadly but inevitably to write stories of sheer 'rage and helplessness'? One answer that comes to my mind immediately is that, barring exceptions, writers of fiction are, as a rule, politically naive in that their fictional imagination works within the hegemonic political ideologies of the time. Even though not very complimentary to the writers' own sense of creative autonomy, this does sound like a fairly good explanation for this kind of fiction. The fiction writers made such assumptions because the dominant ideology of the time was indeed nationalism which presumed that as an 'ancient nation' India possessed what nationalist historians generally described it as 'composite culture', a culture which not only tolerated but also accommodated within its fold diverse communal and personal identities. After naming some prominent literary personalities which upheld this view, Bhalla thinks it no longer necessary to mention more because 'one could add endlessly to the catalogue of the people who thought that the notion of a unified state, with its multiplicity of religious,

social or moral ideals, had legitimacy, not only because it made good sense, but also because it was derived from a long practice of living together' (AB: ix).

Bhalla is clearly a part of this 'endless catalogue'. He believes in this theory of composite national culture as an incontestable historical truth: 'Indeed, one can assert with confidence that the dominant concerns of the Hindu and Muslim intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century and until about 1935, were more with creating free spaces for enlightened thought than with confining people within their narrow religious identities' (AB: ix).

X

Bhalla's fourth set of stories are about 'retrieval of memories'. What distinguishes this set from the previous one is that writers here 'accept without ambiguity the fact of the partition as an irreversible part of our geopolitical reality', and having done that, 'draw upon their historical, cultural and personal memories to *organise* their narratives in the hope that such narratives would humanise us and so persuade us to find a way out to a *different* future' (AB: xxvii). As an example of this genre, he describes Intizar Husain as a writer who 'like all fine writers, . . . wants to give back to us a world in which we can cultivate reason and our moral goodness; but like all fine writers, he also knows how difficult that task really is and how often we fall into evil' (AB: xxix).

'Cultivating reason and moral order' and 'falling into evil' are Bhalla's descriptions. Our suggestion would only be that rather than juxtaposing these two scenarios in opposition as if one was the potential and the other the pitfall, we should recognise that they are two alternative ways of redeeming/redeeming lives that survivors have to choose between the two. If one fails, they inevitably turn to the other. Having made this point, one could not agree more to his conclusion: 'How do we read . . . these stories . . . will determine the kind of politics we choose to practise in the future' (AB: xxxiii).

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