An Ambiguous Journey to the City

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ASHIS NANDY
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ASHIS NANDY
To the memory of D.R. Nagaraj (1953–98), literary theorist, classical scholar, cultural critic, political activist, colleague, friend, and the most remarkable Indian intellectual of his generation that I met. He embodied the creative vigour of non-colonized, non-Brahminic, vernacular India, even when he did not write about it.
This book is an expanded version of the first series of Jerusalem Lectures in Indian Civilization, given at Jerusalem in December 1997 under the title of 'Imaginary Journeys'. It tells the story of India's ambivalent affair with the modern city through the myth of the journey between the village and the city and the changes that myth has undergone. The lectures were at the initiative of the Hebrew University and they remain associated in my memory with the fascinating intellectual exchanges I had with psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, philosophers, social and political theorists, anthropologists and, above all, David Shulman, the moving spirit behind the series. This book reflects that cultural context in its concern with uprooting, mega-deaths and, particularly, the fear of the self that has turned the urban-industrial vision into a patented cure for every ontological insecurity and the last word in human civilization—not merely in Europe in the 1930s and India in the 1940s, but also in Israel and India in the 1990s.

I write these words a few months after India and Pakistan have exploded a series of nuclear devices. In India at least, the new generation of well-educated, urbane élite has been bristling for years at the limits imposed by the legacy of the country's freedom movement on hard-eyed political 'realism'. In the fiftieth year of the execution of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi by an assassin wedded to such realism, this élite has now finally shed the cultural and ethical encumbrances associated with his name. In place of
these encumbrances have come the grim instrumentality and rationality of the rootless, deracinated, massified, urban middle classes, and a set of civic virtues that these classes believe will fight the romanticism sired by the region’s nasty, sterile, rustic past. These classes are willing to mortgage their children’s future to dedicated necrophiles in order to ensure that the country does not remain mired in that past. To the psychologically homeless person living in an adversarial neighbourhood, the fantasy of the devastated homes of neighbours does not always seem repellent. They may even be a part of normal political cost calculation.

In the whole southern world, the beckoning magic of the new colonial metropolis frames the mythic journey to the city. Such a city vends a dream of total freedom for the individual and the reasoning self, both organized around an ego so autonomous that it yields agency to nothing outside itself. In the official ideologies of conformity and dissent floating around in post-colonial societies, the journey to the city is a journey from a self buffeted by primordial passions and an authoritarian conscience—the village is seen as the repository of these—to a self identified with fully autonomous ego functions.

This dream of the city usually comes with a cultivated forgetfulness about the violent record of the last hundred years, a record which shows the complicity of the secular city of citizenship, civility, and civic virtues with a particularly ruthless form of self-indulgent, unrestrained, asocial individualism. Such individualism shelters at its centre not the classical, potentially emancipatory Freudian ego, but an overly protected gilded ego that has only apparently shed its encumbrances. For it is now buffeted by another kind of primordiality—the crackpot rationality and objectivity in which the modern public self has specialized, and with which the seemingly autonomous Freudian ego of the western *Homo psychologicus* seems to be deceitfully in league. The imagined city in South Asia symbolizes the belated attempts of defeated civilizations to break into the hard ‘realism’ of the world of winners where, to stretch the metaphor of Ivan Illich, specialist skills in hydrology and water management transform the waters of dream into a scarce commodity called $H_2O$.

The attempts at a controlled ‘regression’ to the village in the South Asian imagination, then, can be read as a form of play with visions that chalk out another possible point of departure for the city. It consecrates the hope—as in the case of Gandhi’s triumphant march to Dandi through the villages of Gujarat in the 1920s, or his magical walk through the riot-affected villages of Noakhali in East Bengal in 1946—7—that the city of the future will be more modest and sceptical about its privileged access to realism, its social-evolutionary edge over other lifestyles, its monopoly on multiculturalism and creative individualism. As some of the most urbane thinkers of South Asia have recognized during the last hundred years, the ‘return’ to the village from the city is often a search for an alternative cosmopolitanism. That cosmopolitanism has a place for the humble vernacular, often incompatible with any iconography of the nation-state, with the compulsions of a global market, and with the demands of a global knowledge industry. What Freud said about war, we can say with minor adjustments about the imagined village that figures in the following pages. With the recovery of the village in the South Asian imaginary, the cities of the region might become interesting again, and we may rediscover their ‘full content’. That recovery has also been the concern of thinkers, writers, and activists who define the underground of contemporary civic culture—from William Blake to Henry David Thoreau to the defiant movements for alternatives that plague global capitalism today—the way dysentery once plagued Europe’s triumphant civilizing missions in the tropics.

Makarand Paranjape has reminded us recently that crosscultural travel, when not a pilgrimage, is often encased in a neocolonial hierarchy. In our times, only some have the prerogative of travelling to other peoples and lands and reporting on them. Contemporary travel presumes the Dostoyevskian opposition between
Journey as a metaphor, however, can also be a way of bearing witness: psychogeographically, it is almost always an expedition to the borders of the self. Al Beruni's journey to India was not so much a one-sided, Columbian discovery of India as a dialogue of civilizations in which the stranger mirrored the self and the self mirrored the stranger. By trying to understand the stranger in the stranger's terms, he not merely confronted his own self but also extended its borders. At this plane, Al Beruni's account of his journey was a play on the double meaning of reflection. His work became a testimony to forms of consciousness to which a philosopher–mystic like Jalaluddin Rumi, not enamoured of terrestrial journeys and clear self–other differences, would have been no stranger. We live in an age of testimony, some have claimed. Perhaps we do, but that testimony should encompass not merely the experience of organized mass violence based on self–other differences in our times. It should also pay homage to the often unheroic, everyday ability to negotiate these differences and the resistance that ability offers to mass violence. To pay that homage, we are obliged to stand witness to the many lost worlds of culture and culturally-based systems of knowledge that have been proclaimed obsolete and, along with the millions of their living practitioners, exported to the past with a remarkable intellectual sleight of hand. So much so that references to these living cultures and to the sufferings and indignities of the millions who live with these cultures are seen as a romantic time travel to the past.

I have finished writing these words sitting in Cochin, a bustling, addictive, medieval city that retains almost nothing of its pre-colonial past in structures and architecture, but still bears the stamp of its distinctive, deviant cosmopolitanism. In Cochin's version of civic virtues, strangers, whom we like to call 'others' these days, can be disliked but not eliminated; indeed they have to be given the right to dislike you without nurturing annihilating passions within themselves or in you. Cochin shows that in many cultures the self can be incomplete without its distinctive notselves; indeed, it is partly defined by these not-selves. What looks like a possibility in the future, the city seems to proclaim, may lie scattered or hidden at the margins today, making the futurist's search a disguised self-exploration in the present. Cochin shows that the journey to homelessness is not yet complete in South Asia.

Cochin also suggests that in South Asia the cultural psychology of space usually ends up as a political psychology of time. As the region's obstreperous cultural diversity has become a political liability in the age of globalized civility, anxieties about the region's persisting cultural 'backlog' have grown. Modern India's response has been a heavy-handed use of the theory of progress as a new psychological defence: its job is to index the unknown and the strange as a new set of the anachronistic and the retrogressive. Gradually, whatever in contemporary India is distant from or incongruent with our favourite intellectual categories has become disposable; it is repackaged as history and banished to the past. We talk of living communities and systems of knowledge struggling to survive now as if we were talking of the distant past. Perhaps in the entire postcolonial world, the 'dream work' of creative imagination establishes an easier convertibility between time and space to turn all psychogeographical journeys into psychopolitical ones. These lectures, which began as a mythography of journey in the Indian imaginary, have imperceptibly changed their course to become a political reconstruction of the passions invested in journeys to and from the city.

A word on the organization of this book. Its first section deals with the vicissitudes of the metaphor of journey, especially the
imagination of the hero as it intersects with the imagined city. The second and third sections profile the hero as he negotiates the journey from the village to the city and from the city to the village and show that, in doing so, he has to walk into the interiors of his self and dredge its resources to cope with the changing landscape of South Asia. Both journeys end up as doomed expeditions into a self that has partly become another country. The last section deals with the violence of 1946–8, in which the independent states of India and Pakistan were born. It is the story of a psychopathological journey from a poisoned village and the splintering of the self in a self-annihilating city. To speak with Christopher Lasch, when everyday life becomes an exercise in survival, 'selfhood becomes a kind of luxury . . . Selfhood implies a personal history, family, a sense of place. Under siege, the self contracts to a defensive core, armed against adversity. Emotional equilibrium demands a minimal self, not the imperial self of yesteryear.' The last section of the book is, on one plane, a story of the abridgement of the self and the dissolution of the hero.

Parts of the first section draw upon an informal presentation made at a samaskriti shivira or workshop on culture studies, Ninasam, Heggodu, Karnataka over 15–28 October 1994. I am grateful to the participants and organizers of the course, particularly M.N. Srinivas and U.R. Anantha Murthy, for the excellent, animated discussion that followed the lecture. The first section is also partly based upon the Tagore–Yeats lecture of 1998, given at the Nehru Centre, London. The comments of some listeners, particularly Indranath Chaudhuri and William Radice, have influenced the present version. The second section bases itself on a paper written for Understanding and Perspective: Workshop on Popular Indian Culture, organised by Chris Pinney and Rachel Dwyer at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 19–21 June 1995. I have gained much from the comments of the participants, especially the detailed critical responses of Rachel Dwyer. Mrinal Durca Chaudhuri was the first to suggest the theme—a 'psychological autopsy' of Pramathesh Barua—and to put me in touch with Debolina Barua, without whose help this section just could not have been written.

The third section owes much to help given by Mrinal Sen. It was first presented at a public lecture in 1996, organized by Murari Ballal of the Department of Humanities, University of Manipal. The last section draws upon a public lecture given at Bangalore to honour the memory of D.R. Nagaraj soon after his death in August 1998. Parts of it are based on a study of the experiences of and resistance to Partition violence, done at the Committee for Cultural Choices by, among others, Chandrika Parmar, Anindita Mukhopadhyaya, Meenakshi Verma, Imtiaz Ahmed, Nandita Bhavnani, Rehan Ansari, Aleeka, and Ameen Mohsin. I am grateful to them and to the Catholic Relief Services, which partly supported the study. An earlier version of the section was written for Postcolonial Studies. Incidentally, the term ‘holocaust’ has a double meaning in this section. It derives both from the literature on modern genocide and from a rough translation of the concept of pralaya which underpins the stories of many victims of Partition violence.

The book as a whole has gained much from the comments of D.R. Nagaraj, Giri Deshingkar, and some of the listeners at Jerusalem and the index from the detailed work of Meenakshi Verma. The idea of a book centring around the cultural psychology of the city was Ravi Sundaram’s. I doubt whether he will approve of the product, though.

Delhi
July 1999
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This is not an age of epics. Epics require epic battles and epic journeys, or at least the capacity to envision them. Indian conventions also insist that such battles should ideally be between persons, clans, or communities close to each other, for only such nearness can ensure that the climactic war will be fought with passion at the margins of morality. The past one hundred years have been a century of dispassionate, well-organized, technicized carnage. They can be the subject of a scientific treatise, not an epic. According to D.R. Nagaraj, by the Indian conventions of epics, the modern West came closest to producing an epic only in the proceedings of the Nuremberg trial after World War II. This was perhaps because the trial brought out, however indirectly, the Dostoyevskian passions that had been missing at Auschwitz, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen.

Epic journeys, too, have been scarce in this century. As the world has been surveyed and re-surveyed, the sense of adventure and glory has begun to attach more to the speed and technique of the journey, less to its geography. The only journeys that have acquired heroic proportions in our times are the ones that have sought to alter the cartography of the self. Ours is the age of Homo psychogeographicus. At one pitch of discourse, probably the greatest circumnavigators of the earth in this century have been Sigmund Freud and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. For both, all great journeys begin when one closes one's eyes and looks within. All landscapes are, by definition, landscapes of the mind. The point of departure for them is self-exile and the crucial mileposts—the ones that tell one whether it is a journey into madness or out of it, whether it is time travel towards the future and self-actualization or towards the past and defensive stupor—are not placed predictably along a road. They too are a matter of discovery.

If the Nuremberg trials can be read as the rudiments of a possible western epic, the closest any South Asian event comes to being the stuff of an epic in the twentieth century are the great Partition massacres and uprooting that took place in 1946–8, when the British empire was being wound up and new states were being created in the region. It involved a journey through violence that would have tested Freud, as it tested Gandhi and, finally, ended in his assassination. Indeed, the events have already written themselves up as an unwritten epic that everyone in South Asia pretends does not exist but are nonetheless forced to live by. That tacit epic, in itself a journey into the self, tells of great battles involving not only valour and sacrifice, but also psychopathic violence, sheer pettiness, and great betrayal. Such an epic dissolves the heroic and the anti-heroic, somewhat in the manner in which the great Mahabharata war did. At the end, once again as in the Mahabharata, we are left with fragments of the hero and the anti-hero distributed over religions, languages, cultures and regions. The listener has to

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reassemble the pieces to construct a private ballad, knowing fully that it can only sound like an elegy to some others.

At the heart of that unwritten epic, there is a great journey to exile, too. That exile lasts not for a decade or two; it ensures a lifetime of homelessness. Suketu Mehta unwittingly acknowledges the presence of that unwritten epic when he writes, 'There are millions of Partition stories throughout the subcontinent, a body of lore that is infrequently recorded in print or on tape, and rarely passed on to the next generation. All over the map of the subcontinent, there is an entire generation of people who have been made poets, philosophers, and storytellers by their experience during the Partition.' This is a glimpse into that unwritten epic, getting more tattered everyday in the minds of the survivors, perpetrators, onlookers, and chroniclers. I bear witness to it without reading it the way those who have lived by it may like me to.

I
THE OTHER JOURNEY

Public memory identifies India’s day of freedom with tens of thousands of people thronging the centre of New Delhi, Nehru’s stirring call to the world in a midnight session of Indian Parliament to acknowledge India’s ‘tryst with destiny’, and the ritual lowering of the Union Jack after two hundred years of British imperial rule. On 15 August 1947 India walked towards a new dawn of freedom; its journey towards nationhood and statehood had begun.

It is in the social sciences, literature, and cinema that beginning and journey have been repeatedly documented and celebrated. They dominate official India even more decisively. Freedom as an event and as an unfolding process is seen as part of a longer journey towards modernity and progress that began more than 150 years ago in India and is still continuing. Indeed, the idea of that journey has framed the Indian imagination so securely that all social, cultural, political and economic experiences of the country are now seen through it. In what is arguably the most influential popular film made in independent India, Mother India, in the penultimate scene the long-suffering, widowed heroine shoots one of her two sons when he is about to abduct a young woman from her own village. That climactic scene seems to crown her lifelong suffering, sacrifice for the sake of her children, struggle against local tyrants, self-denying courage and her allegiance to the community. But that is presumably not enough either for the makers of the film or the audience. For the life and deeds of the heroine have to be fitted—in a social-realist style imported from the erstwhile Soviet Union—with in the frame of the official journey on which India has embarked. In the last scene, she—old, venerated and, as the title of the film attests, symbolizing India herself—institutes, of all things, a brand new water-management system.

However, there is also the other journey Indians do not like to talk about. That journey, closely associated with the birth of India and Pakistan, also frames significant aspects of the political cultures and international relations of these countries, though it does so silently, without anyone seriously admitting or denying it. The journey began with a massive riot in Calcutta in August 1946 that killed around 5,000 and more or less ended in the end of the winter of 1947–8, after another large riot at Karachi and the assassination of Gandhi at Delhi. The ultimate symbol of the journey was the mass exodus of minorities from the new states that began at some places even before the states were in place. On a rough estimate, 16 million people lost their homes by the beginning of 1948. Many more millions were to be uprooted in the next few


4 Mehboob Khan, Mother India (Bombay: Mehboob Khan, 1957).

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years. It was a kind of journey that South Asians had not previously seen. It uprooted people from habitats they had known for centuries, perhaps even for thousands of years. Yet they considered themselves lucky that they were not among the one million killed. (This is the conservative official estimate. Unofficial estimates mention much higher figures.) As an informant said to historian Gyanendra Pandey, 'It was only in the bloodshed of Partition that ordinary people saw the shape of independence.'

Many of the victims did not even know the larger causes for which they were the sacrificial victims. Nighet Said Khan and Anis Haroon interviewed 100 women in urban and rural Sind and Punjab, Pakistan.

Only the 10 women with professional backgrounds said that they made a conscious decision to come to Pakistan. The rest did not come to realize a dream, but fled instead.

Some were even unaware of Pakistan until some years after its creation. Almost all had never heard of the Muslim League, or the movement for Pakistan and only four from urban Sind and one from rural Punjab had worked for it.

The exodus effectively reduced the number of Hindus in West Pakistan from something like 20 million down to 250,000, nearly all of them in Sindh. Punjab and the North West Frontier Province became virtually free of Hindus and Sikhs. In East Pakistan, it reduced the proportion of Hindus from about 29 per cent to 12 per cent. Moni Chadha, a former diplomat, rightly asks: 'Was the elimination of Sikhs from Pakistan in 1947 the clearest and least acknowledged case of genocide in history? Probably. Why is it that international do-gooders from various NGOs who profess to catalogue cases of genocide and wag accusing fingers about them at international fora never spoke about it for half a century? Why the selective amnesia?' The answer is not available to Chadha because he does not seek clues to it in the tricks his own memory plays with him. Being blessed with a diplomat's perspective on human tragedy, he forgets that, along with the Sikhs, almost the entire Punjabi Hindu community was eliminated from West Pakistan and nearly the entire Muslim community from what was the former East Punjab.

The exodus in north India often took spectacular forms; in Punjab caravans of refugees escaping from the carnage and the plunder sometimes stretched for miles. At places it turned pathetically low-key, too, as in Bengal and Bihar, where tens of thousands of poor peasants and artisans trudged their way towards the newly created borders. At both places they used every mode of transport available—planes, ships, trains, bullock carts, camels—but most of them simply walked to the borders in enormously long kaflas or columns. Observers talk of four- or five-mile long columns which, in turn, attracted marauders eager to plunder not only the often pitifully small amounts of belongings the refugees could carry but also the young women among them.


8 Gowher Rizvi, 'Constitutionalism: The Experience of Bangladesh', lecture at the India International Centre organized by the Law and Society Trust, Colombo, 4 August 1997.


10 Mr Chadha does not even care to read the reports of the government he has served. On the basis of the evidence of nearly 15,000 witnesses, given before the Fact Finding Organization set up by the Government of India, Justice G.D. Khosla notes the evacuation of almost the entire Muslim population of East Punjab and concludes that the loss of Muslim life was not less than the loss of non-Muslim life. G.D. Khosla, Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India (1949; rpt. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), especially ch. 7.
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Pandey draws our attention to the memories of one who watched such a column of Muslim refugees going from Kapurthala to Jullunder:

The column was guarded by a few military sepoys. It was ten or twelve deep, the women and children walking in the centre, flanked on either side by men. Groups of armed Sikhs stood about in the fields on either side of the road. Every now and again one of these groups would make a sudden sally at the column of Muslims, drag out two or three women and run away with them. In the process they would kill or injure the Muslims who tried to resist them. The military sepoys did not make a serious attempt to beat off these attacks. By the time the column arrived at Jullunder almost all the women and young girls had been kidnapped in this manner.11

Few talk about this journey or the events that precipitated it, either in South Asia or elsewhere. In a century of mass murders and massive dislocations, reports of carnage and uprooting too have a diminishing appeal after a while. Nothing could be staler for the media than a repetition of yesterday’s events. Also, in a region where life expectancy is still around sixty, many of the victims are already dead. Those who live are often unwilling to talk about their ordeal; they have been silent for years and have seemingly got accustomed to it. Some, after years, have made a reasonable compromise with the past. They too are reluctant to talk. In Pakistan, this ‘eerie’ silence has become a joint venture of the victims, the historians and the state.12 It is not the silence of unconscious memories; it is the silence of a secret self.

Many victims call the carnage and the exodus a period of madness. This helps them locate the violence outside normality and disown their memories. Others call the period evil, when all humanity and all ethical concerns were jettisoned. They prefer not to recount those evil times lest they contaminate their new life. The spirits of the victims and perpetrators, they fear, will enter the life of the living if clandestine memories are reactivated:

Daughter, why talk about evil days? In our religion it is prohibited to even utter or think about evil acts. If you do so, it is like actually committing the acts . . .

If one discusses such acts, one also internalizes them in one’s blood and bones . . . There’s a saying that if you discuss ghosts and snakes, they tend to visit you. This talk is about dead people. Why invite their ghosts? . . . such talks create a lot of pain and stress. I do not like to discuss them. When we had just come here, we the women used to cry a lot, and exchange stories of misfortune with other families in the camp. But today after fifty years, the wounds have healed. Why are you stoking them?13

Yet, at the same time, there is anger and hurt in the victims that their suffering has not been fully acknowledged. After arguing that Partition violence should not be remembered, one survivor says, ‘I do not understand, what I should tell you, and to what extent

11 Khosla, Stern Reckoning, p. 289.
13 Meenakshi Verma, Interview with Rajinder Kaur, February 1997. The interviewee adds: ‘By the grace of Vahe Guru, we are quite comfortable . . . and do not need anything. The misfortune did not happen just to me and my family. Millions of people and families have been devastated. . . . Why do I not want to speak about Partition? The reason is that the murderers could not be caught, nor were they punished. People who killed and looted were strangers. No one could have recognized them. When you do not know the murderers, why this complaint or lamentation?’ Cf. the remarks of a Hebrew writer who survived the Nazi concentration camps: ‘After liberation the one desire was to sleep, to forget and to be reborn. At first there was a wish to talk incessantly about one’s experiences; this gave way to silence, but learning to be silent was not easy. When the past was no longer talked about, it became unreal, a figment of one’s imagination.’ Aharon Appelfeld, quoted in Martin S. Bergmann and Milton E. Jucovy (eds), Generations of the Holocaust (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 5–6).
you will understand? Today your world is very different from mine. But he also adds, 'If you want to talk, why don’t you talk about the thieves who have been in power since 1947? ... this Rajiv, this Indira and this Nehru ... all of them talked about independence. But did they ever mention Partition and the suffering. For them we were just refugees.' The survivor goes on to say:

Honestly, when the experience was raw, I never felt like talking to my children about Partition. The children were too young to understand. When they grew up, so many other things kept coming up. ... It is not that I have not discussed it with others, but they had similar experiences; so they understood. In itself Partition was bitter, but the treatment meted out to us by the Delhiwallas was worse. The word ‘refugee’ has stuck to us; the local people usually do not marry us. It is true that before 1947 even we—the West Punjabis—never thought of marrying people from this side. Even now, they have a certain attitude towards refugees. Often I think that we could have stayed back and given a tough fight instead of fleeing like Bhagoras [cowards].

There are other reasons, too, which are slowly surfacing. Many of the killers are now in their late seventies or eighties. They are venerable grandparents and village elders. For years some of them did not talk about Partition, perhaps partly out of vague fears over legal consequences and social approbation. Others were torn because they had killed, or actively participated in the self-immolation of members of their own families and community. Chaudhuri Mangal Ram claims that he was young and hot-blooded in 1947. As he could not cross the newly created border to avenge the death of Hindus in Pakistan, he had to console himself by killing a few innocent Muslims nearer home. The Hindus of Pakistan were also innocent, he ventures as an excuse. He hastens to add, however, that he is now old and a different person; he would not now opt for the same concept of revenge. Captain Nihal Singh of Rohtak, afraid that he might not able to protect his wife, in an advanced state of pregnancy in 1947, shot her dead and has reportedly never been the same again.

Such people are now less afraid; they have made some sort of peace with their past. This was not so even a few years ago. The case of fifty-three-year-old Jeet Behn, from a large family of Sikhs in Dheri, near Rawalpindi, is not atypical. She provides an example of memories that resist exposure.

A Muslim friend offered shelter to all 21 of us. ... Our Muslim host barricaded the door of the room with grain bags. The mob returned next morning. ... They jeered, yelled that if we came out, ate halal meat, converted to Islam, we’d be spared. Father refused, yelling back we’d prefer to die.

... Father handed each of us kirpans [small ritual swords] explaining carefully that if the mob broke the door we should stab ourselves on the left side. My mother, nursing my three-month-old brother, threw herself at father’s feet saying, ‘Save this child. Agree to convert.’ Father ignored her. When she repeated her entreaty my elder uncle got up, slashed her neck with a kirpan yelling, yeh kehna haram hai [This is blasphemy]. She died instantly. Father put her blood-soaked dupatta on the tip of his sword, rushed out of the door half-crazed. People waiting on the other side literally skewered him with knives and swords. My eldest uncle who rushed out after him was similarly cut down. The doctor cousin got up to fight next, His wife stopped him, demanding he kill her, all the girls, before he went out. He stabbed her, killed his three-year-old son, stabbed each one of us. I still carry that kirpan scar on my scalp; and rushed out as we collapsed around him. He refused to stab his mother saying, ‘No dharma tells me to do this.’ He was lynched in seconds. Last to go was my octogenarian daadi [grandmother]. She tottered out, frail but resolute, saying, Kaisi ladai ladney aaye ho? Mujhe apane baccho ko ek baar dekhna hain. [What kind of war is this? Let me at least see my

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14 Meenakshi Verma, Interview with Ram Narain, a refugee who was a spare-parts dealer at Bhawalpur, Pakistan, in August 1997 at Delhi.
15 Verma, Interview with Ram Narain.
16 Verma, Interview with Ram Narain.
children once.] They ripped out her earrings, bangles, gold chain. And as she stood there bleeding, stoned her to death. Before they left they slaughtered the Muslim bhai.\footnote{18}

Urvashi Butalia supplies even more gruesome instances of such self-destruction.\footnote{19} And the self-immolation of Sikh women in March 1947 in Thoa Khalsa village, Rawalpindi district, where nearly ninety of them jumped into a well to avoid dishonour, has become a legend. Such experiences, after a point, throttle speech. Many respondents can even now smell the rotting bodies of the victims. Others stutter when they try to remember those days.\footnote{20}

These passions, when remembered in tranquillity, do not encourage one to speak; they induce one to distance oneself from those times and be silent. Indeed, they invoke an ‘encapsulated’ self and stories about the past which one cannot live comfortably in normal times.\footnote{21} On the basis of his conversations with Sikh participants in Partition violence, who live near the India–Pakistan border, Suketu Mehta describes the guilt-ridden silence that has come to be associated with memories of the carnage.\footnote{22} They also encourage one to think of those times as essentially sinful, not worth remembering. ‘I shall tell you what is \textit{pap, gandagi} . . . when a man lusts for another man’s blood, and that too without any personal animosity, when a man has a woman at home and yet defiles helpless other women. Don’t you think that is \textit{pap [sin]}?\footnote{23} Among our informants, one couple, married for forty years, have never discussed the Partition violence between them, though both lost their fathers in the violence. Some other survivors have taken the silence to its logical conclusion; they show signs of mutism and dissociative reactions. Still others entered acute anxiety states during the interviews. One became incoherent while describing his experiences; he had wandered around in Pakistan for months after Partition, self-oblivious and probably in a state of dissociation till an army convoy noticed his name tattooed on his forearm in Gurmukhi and sent him to India.\footnote{24} Another respondent, even after fifty years, choked every time he tried to say something about his experiences.\footnote{25}

Probably the last word on that silence has been said by Gulzar, the writer and film director, in his story \textit{Raavi Paar}, recently translated into English.\footnote{26} It borrows, I am told, from an older, central Indian story that pre-dates the Partition. In Gulzar’s version, it is the story of a couple running away with two children, who are twins, in a train from West Pakistan to a city in India. One of the children is already dead but the mother will not part with the body. On the advice of his fellow passengers, the concerned father at one point picks up what he thinks is the body of the dead child and throws it out of the train into the river Raavi while his


\footnote{19}{Urvashi Butalia, ‘Community, State and Gender: On Women’s Agency During Partition’, \textit{Economic and Political Weekly}, 24 April 1993, pp. WS-12–22.}

\footnote{20}{Though survival in some cases did depend on being silent during the Partition riots, there was nothing corresponding to the silence enforced through violence and executions in the concentration camps: ‘Crying or making a face when one was hit in a concentration camp was a crime that would prompt immediate execution. The conspiracy of silence in survivors, persecutors, and their children has many determinants; but, no doubt, it also has as its source the taboo on telling and denial instituted by the Nazis themselves and continued to this day by the neo-Nazis.’ Judith S. Kestenberg, ‘Introduction’, Part III: The Persecutors’ Children, in Bergmann and Jucovy, \textit{Generations of the Holocaust}, pp. 161–6; see esp. p. 162.}

\footnote{21}{Cf. Henry Abramowitz, ‘There are No Words: Two Greek–Jewish Survivors of Auschwitz’, \textit{Analytic Psychology}, 1986, 3(3), pp. 201–16.}

\footnote{22}{Mehta, ‘Partition’.}

\footnote{23}{Meenakshi Verma, Interview with Rajendra Kaur, formerly of Rawalpindi, now at Delhi, August 1997.}

\footnote{24}{Meenakshi Verma, Interview with Darshan Kakkar, Delhi, January 1997.}

\footnote{25}{Meenakshi Verma, Interview with Suchcha Shah, Chandigarh, September 1997.}

wife sleeps with the other child. The scream of the child thrown away tells him it was the wrong child. The child who reached safety is dead; it cannot speak. The living child, who could have spoken, has been lost on the way or left behind.

Given the magnitude of the killings, the fate of those who were merely uprooted has attracted even less scholarly attention. Except for a rewritten doctoral dissertation by Steven Keller, there is almost nothing systematic on the subject. Yet sixteen million is a large number, even in South Asia. They, together with the one million dead, have found ways of insidiously entering South Asia’s political agenda. The public cultures of Pakistan, the whole of north India, Bangladesh, and to a lesser extent east and west India—especially the cities—have never been the same again. They bear the unmistakable stamp of that insidious entry.

My aim here is not to record the memories of victims in order to construct narratives for the historian in a cultural region that mostly does not live by history. It is to identify the way in which South Asians grapple with their trauma, by selectively owning up or disowning their memories, or by reconfiguring them. These then survive in private and shared fantasies, influencing the public life of the region, often without anyone being the wiser.

III
Comparing Genocides

The European holocaust, the most thoroughly studied genocide of all times, had a number of unique features which distinguished it from other genocides and pogroms directed against European Jewish communities in earlier times. Two of these features have been repeatedly emphasized and debated in recent works because of their relevance to our times. Firstly, not only did the state collude—as many states had earlier—with the genocide and pogroms, it systematically built a mega-machine for the final solution. A huge majority of Germans might have supported the killing of Jews, as Daniel Goldhagen’s recent study insists, but that support by itself would not have been enough. ‘Genocide requires well-educated professionals. They are necessary for its technology, its organization, and its rationale. In the Nazi case, members of all the professions—physicians, scientists, engineers, military leaders, lawyers, clergy, university professors, and school teachers—were effectively mobilized to the ideological project.

Second, nineteenth-century science, especially biology and specifically eugenics, has been increasingly identified as the principal source of the legitimacy built for ethnic cleansing in Germany. As with some of its pocket editions—the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the fire bombing of Dresden and Tokyo—the Jewish holocaust was more a pathology of human rationality than of irrationality.


30 This issue has been empirically explored in Robert J. Lifton, Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide (New York: Basic Books, 1986). The classic statement of this position is of course Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965); for a more recent exploration, see Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1991).
another form of evolutionism. In retrospect it seems that, if not the root, certainly the ultimate justification of the holocaust was a concept of knowledge and social engineering that had come to dominate European consciousness. The German attitude to the victims of the final solution was not particularly different from that of a farmer's towards a heap of dead insects after the pest controller has done his job. Nothing reveals that attitude better than the chilling display at the Beit Hashoah Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles, of the small artefacts that were to constitute parts of a projected Museum of an Extinct Race. The Nazis planned to set up the museum after they had finally 'solved' the Jewish problem. The authorities of the Los Angeles museum seem unaware that the project was perfectly compatible with a significant part of the European record in the tropics during the last three hundred years.

Perhaps as a result, while there was resistance to the violence and the totalism of the European holocaust, that resistance was infrequent, unorganized, scattered and usually individual. The inadequate resistance among the Jews, problematized in the 1940s by the likes of Bruno Bettelheim, is well known. However, there has been no comparable interest in the infrequent resistance among Germans to the genocide of Jews. Its infrequency has indirectly fuelled recent works such as Goldhagen's.

The compulsive form which the search for ethnic purity took in the Nazi millennial ideology was also directly legitimized by the nineteenth-century idea of public hygiene. Race was very nearly a sexually transmitted disease. Even young Germans planning to marry had, under the Nazi racial laws, to declare under oath that their parents and grandparents were not Jewish. The fear of racial contamination was a bizarre and comical part of German cultural and intellectual life during the 1930s. Together, these two features ensured that not only were the victims of the holocaust denied human status, there was a cultivated dehumanization of the perpetrators and those who served as cogs in the wheel of the machine built for the genocide of Jews, gypsies and other such groups in Europe. The ideas of dispassionate, rational statecraft and objective, value-neutral knowledge, pushed to their limits, almost automatically led to Auschwitz, Belsen, Treblinka and Dachau.

Both the features—the industrialization of mass murder and the search for its sanction in Baconian rationality and modern biology—were marginal to Partition violence. The attempt to obliterate the other community frequently went hand in hand with attempts to forcibly convert enemies to one's own faith. It is a different matter that two of the main communities involved, Sikhs and Punjabi Muslims, were so close to each other that they had lived in perpetual, mortal fear of losing their identities. Conversion, even when fake or superficial, looked to them worse than death; they often chose death rather than conversion. A large proportion of the abducted women too were not raped and abandoned, nor used as sex slaves. The abductors and/or rapists often ended up by marrying them and integrating them in their community. There are accounts of how, when some of these women were later identified and, consistent with their rights as citizens, repatriated to the 'right' countries according to their faiths, many of their abductors-turned-husbands broke down and stood for days at the borders trying to get a glimpse of their 'victims', and the victims themselves 'resisted their lives being disrupted again by the “state” recovering them.' Admitting these bonds is not an attempt to deny the violence, humiliation and gender injustice in the situation. It is to

31 The inner logic of this attitude found its final expression in the Cambodian holocaust. In that carnage, one-third of a country was liquidated for the benefit of the remaining two-thirds, strictly according to the principles of scientific history as taught by some respectable academics within the portals of the Sorbonne to eager students who later served as ideologues of the genocide in Cambodia.


An Ambiguous Journey to the City

The Invisible Holocaust and the Journey as an Exodus

acknowledge that, at a time when pathological forms of thinking and emotions abounded, at least there was no paranoid search for racial and ethnic purity that characterized the genocidal mentality in the Third Reich. Nor was the killing of the enemy ever turned into an industry or a dispassionate, official duty.

On such grounds, some may refuse to classify the violence of 1946–8 among even the major Asian genocides of our times, such as the Armenian and Cambodian ones. Partition violence began as small, organized skirmishes that escalated into major bloodbaths, often helped by blatantly partisan police and state officials. But the armies were on the whole not involved (though retired army men, in some instances, were) and the infant states of India and Pakistan were complicit more by their inactivity than via active intervention. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the violence in South Asia was that all the victims knew that in other parts of the region, often only a few miles away, people from their own community were doing exactly what was being done to them. As a result, some who were victims of torture or had even lost their entire families retained their moral balance. Even Jeet Behn, the victim from Rawalpindi whom we have met earlier, says, ‘Do I feel any rage? No. Maahaul bura tha. Log bure nahin the. Wo waqt hi bure the.’ [The atmosphere was bad. People weren’t evil. The times themselves were bad.]

That is probably why the violence has not divided the three communities permanently into victims (constantly asking themselves why they could be slaughtered so easily) and oppressors (constantly asking themselves how they could turn killers so effortlessly), both looking to the past with a mixture of guilt and defensiveness. Each major community in South Asia feels that it was cheated by the Partition and more victimized in the riots, but knows that the other also suffered and feels aggrieved. There are also people in each community who paradoxically feel that their community won the battle, for it had inflicted greater and ‘purer’ suffering on the others. ‘Whosoever from the Hindus and Sikhs came in front of us, were killed. Not only that, we got them to come out of their houses and ruthlessly killed them and disgraced their womenfolk. Many women agreed to come with us and wished us to take them, but we were out for revenge.’

Through this wall of pain, fear, hatred, and silence some have at long last begun to look at the birth trauma of India and Pakistan. One of the earliest to work on the subject, Nighat Said Khan speaks on behalf of her collaborator, Anis Haroon, and herself: ‘We were aware that we ourselves, as children of Urdu-speaking migrants, and children of Pakistan, had never come to terms with the trauma of Partition; not because we come from homes that constantly and consciously lived in the past but because we had internalized an ongoing, if silent pain, and had never exorcised the horror not just of the violence, but of being a part of truncated identity.

The hope is that, as with journeys through madness, this journey of exploration too might turn out to be a step towards an alternative, enriched form of sanity, provided one knows how to work through the memories of the journey. Even chronicling the suffering of the survivor, to ensure that cold statistics do not hide the reality of the suffering, can be therapeutic. For it opens up the culture of politics to unconditional empathy and the courage to admit that the recognition of suffering must have priority

35 Jeet Behn, in Mehra and Pajiar, ‘Sufferers and Survivors’, p. 51.
36 There is, however, a feeling in some sections of the Hindus that they did not match the aggression of the two ‘martial’ communities in the conflict, the Muslims and the Sikhs. See B.L. Sharma Prem on this subject later.
over the celebration of fictitious entities such as nation-states and nationalism in South Asia.

What about other instances of ethnic or religious violence in South Asia? After all, communal or religious riots were not unknown in British India. Were the Partition riots in continuity with them and with the communal riots that have since become routine in parts of South Asia?

It is doubtful. First, one identifiable feature of present-day religious and ethnic violence in South Asia is the diminishing component of passion. Most organizers and participants in such riots are professional or semi-professional small-time politicians who deem it part of their job to occasionally provoke or organize collective violence. There are sections in many metropolitan slums that get itchy if no riot takes place for a while. A riot means to them easy access to money and pillaged consumables. It is also a criminal activity for which there is temporary moral sanction, even if it is partial and comes from only a section of the people. These activist-rioters are quite ecumenical. When not engaged in communal violence, they participate in caste riots, extortion rackets and election rigging. Well paid by South Asian standards and well protected politically, they are not spread among different communities randomly. Communities suffering social discrimination are usually better represented in such extra-social groups, for crime—like the entertainment industry, politics, the stock market, and spectator sports—is often a more open system than the more established industries and professions. Also, serious organizers of collective violence tend to maintain excellent relations with others of their ilk on the wrong side of religious, caste and ideological boundaries.\textsuperscript{39} They are professionals and are not entirely taken in by their own language of hate.

This professional status and the absence of malice is recognized by society, and certainly by the political class. It may not be outrageous to claim that not a single major rioter or riot organizer during the last fifty years has gone to jail in any of the four major countries of South Asia that have seen religious or sectarian violence. The late C.V. Subba Rao, a human rights activist who had researched communal violence for years, once said that the official commission that enquired into the fierce riots at Bhiwandi near Bombay during 1992–3 found ten policemen guilty of complicity with the rioters and imposed on them fines of Rs 10 each, payable in instalments.\textsuperscript{40}

In 1946–8, on the other hand, riots had a more impassioned quality about them and, at places, they did involve a degree of fervour, even religious fervour. Those active in the riots did feel that they had to take on the responsibility of defending their kind and teach their enemies a lesson, perhaps the last series of riots in which a majority of the participants might have thought thus. The Partition riots were probably the closest to being large-scale religious riots in the last fifty years in South Asia.

Second, Partition violence was not merely the murder and pillage of others; it also involved massive violence directed towards the self. The mass suicide at Thoa Khalsa was not an isolated instance; ‘stories of this kind of mass suicide, or of women being killed by their own families, are legion’, Butalia says.\textsuperscript{41} We shall not deal here with the important questions Butalia raises in this connection, but one should note that, to sharpen her critique of patriarchy, Butalia underscores the fear of dishonour as the cause


\textsuperscript{40} C.V. Subba Rao, Seminar on the Profile of Communal Violence in India, at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, October 1995.

\textsuperscript{41} Butalia, 'Community, State and Gender'. In the non-fictional writings on Partition that have emanated from India’s modern sector, Butalia is one of the few who have paid serious attention to this part of the story.
of suicide. The data she uses herself show that just as important was the fear of losing one's religion and culture.\textsuperscript{42} That other fear seems to enjoy little respect in Butalia's secularized world.

Third, though only one-fourth of Indians stay in cities, roughly two-thirds of all communal riots in India today take place in cities. If one goes by origin, probably no less than 95 per cent of riots in India originate in its cities. In the last fifty years only 3.6 per cent of the victims of religious violence have died in the villages, even though roughly 80 per cent of Indians have lived in villages during the period.\textsuperscript{43} Religious violence in India—presumably in the whole of South Asia—has a clear urban connection.

Here too the violence of 1946–8 was different. It spread to villages in the whole of Punjab and in large pockets of East Bengal and Bihar. It is true that detailed studies have begun to show that the whole of northern India was not in flames, as many have believed for years. They also show that there were elements of planning and organization in the riots too; that they were not all

\textsuperscript{42} Among the survivors who escaped to India almost all the cases of such mass suicide involved Sikhs. And Khan in 'Identity, Violence and Women' mentions similar instances of self-destruction among Muslims escaping India. This may have something to do with the complex, close relationship and intertwined self-definitions of Sikhs and Muslims in the Punjab. These intertwined self-definitions often go with extreme fears of losing identity. There are clues to this complex relationship in J.P. Uberoi, \textit{Religion, Civil Society and the State: A Study of Sikhism} (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). Also relevant to this issue is Stanley J. Tambiah, 'Obliterating the "Other" in Former Yugoslavia', \textit{Nethra}, January–March 1997, 1(2), pp. 7–35. The same issue emerges in other forms in Gananath Obeyesekere, 'Dutthagamani and the Buddhist Conscience', in Douglas Allen (ed.), \textit{Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 135–60; and Vamik D. Volkan, \textit{The Need to Have Enemies and Allies} (New York: Jason Aronson, 1988). We shall return to this subject.


spontaneity and fanaticism.\textsuperscript{44} But it is also becoming clearer that the riots were not merely a speciality of the cities or a matter of urban slums exploding in violence. South Asian society, including rural South Asia, was implicated in the Partition riots.

Fourth, unlike most recent riots in South Asia, the Partition riots were not one-sided. They were one-sided only at any one point of time and space; otherwise each community knew that in other parts of the region there were others avenging its suffering and humiliation. Some not merely knew this but also saw what such revenge meant:

Shahid Ahmed's train journey ended in Lahore where, he recounts, sections of the waiting crowd proceeded at once to determine whether the train had been attacked and how many had been killed or wounded. They then promised summary justice. 'Wait!', they said, according to Shahid Ahmed, 'we shall settle scores right now, in your presence': and, stopping a refugee special going the other way at Baghbanpura station just outside Lahore, they paid back the killers of Eastern Punjab in their own coin—'with interest'.\textsuperscript{45}

This element of 'balance' did not mitigate the suffering, but allowed many victims to retain their sensitivity to the nature of the violence. There was another additional element of 'equity': sizeable sections in each community continued to believe that their community was the wronged party in 1946–8, victimized and denied justice by those who ganged up against it.

\section{IV

\textbf{Accountability and Resistance}}

History lies not by misrepresenting reality but by exiling emotions. Memories, and the myths that enshrine them, stand witness by refusing to discard human subjectivity. Myths are not

\textsuperscript{44} For instance, Shail Mayaram, \textit{Resisting Regimes: Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

\textsuperscript{45} Pandey, 'Partition and Independence', p. 2271.
people's history or alternative history, their job is to resist history and resist the objectification of suffering and sufferers in the name of objectivity. Thus, the memories of Partition often have little to do with the known reality or scale of riots. Many Sindhi refugees, for instance, are traumatized not by the direct experience of violence but by the loss of their ancestral home and the debilitating fear of losing one's culture and identity in a new setting. Often they cannot articulate this fear, for the culture they are afraid of losing is the one they shared with their Muslim neighbours. That culture included not only a shared past, landscape, and language, but also places of worship and concepts of the divine. Their anguish may seem disproportionate to their loss to us, but to some of them the low level of anguish in younger Sindhis at the loss of their culture is itself a matter of serious concern.

Victims organize their memories in diverse ways, in response to their own inner needs, but the diversity is not random or infinite because the needs are not so. Some patterns dominate. First, there are the sophisticated, articulate respondents supplying highly intellectualized, quasi-academic, socio-economic interpretations of their suffering. At the time of independence, there were areas in South Asia where religious differences coincided with deep divisions of caste, class and vocation. It does not require much perspicacity or moral courage to own up that, in some of these areas, the cumulative rage of the oppressed—being subjected to economic hardships, social discrimination and humiliation—spoke through communal riots.

For instance, some victims who belonged to the erstwhile Hindu elite of East Bengal readily admit that the brutal exploitation and discrimination experienced by the Muslim peasantry found an outlet in anti-Hindu violence in 1946–8. In Noakhali in East Bengal, Gandhi's personal secretary Nirmal Kumar Bose—in his other incarnation a distinguished cultural anthropologist—surveyed the pattern of landholding in the district. Bose found that while Hindus were 18 per cent of the population, they owned three-fourths of the land. Muslims, who constituted 82 per cent of the population, were mostly peasants, directly confronting the disparity in their everyday life and living in dire poverty. Yet Noakhali was a district noted for Islamic activism and fervour. The mix turned out to be volatile. To an extent, the reverse was the case in some pockets of Bihar where, too, the carnage in 1946–7 was fearsome. The victims who mention socio-economic discrimination as the major source of Partition violence, and ultimately of their own dislocation and suffering, may not have direct access to such data, but they somehow sensed, often as children, the bitterness that was gradually building up. Hindsight may have sharpened their convictions.

Second, some victims remember their suffering as an act of fate or destiny. They cannot otherwise explain how, even in places where different religious communities that had lived together in reasonable amity for centuries, inter-communal relations suddenly snapped. To these victims, Partition violence was something like a natural calamity—a cyclone, plague or a holocaust in its older sense of pralaya—that had befallen the country at the time. One Hindu refugee describes how his community, an isolated one living at the margins of near-desert conditions, instead of moving towards India, moved deeper into the wilderness. Some Shia communities of the area joined it once they heard of the violence all around. Apparently, these communities wanted to avoid what they saw as a strange abnormality spreading from the cities, not as a standard inter-religious feud.

Many such victims are not angry with the enemy community for being cruel or homicidal. They believe that for a brief

while, in parts of north India, humanity itself collapsed. They had not averted that their own relatives and friends sometimes took advantage of those chaotic times to cheat or pauperize them. A few victims offset the help they received from friends in the ‘enemy community’ against the way their own relatives, who sheltered them as refugees, quickly got tired of them.

In a couple of cases, these respondents have described how, even when family friends or distant relatives abducted or ran away with a woman in the family, the family had publicly claim that someone from the enemy community had done this. In those troubled times, it was not only believable but had become an accepted way of protecting family honour. At least one respondent claims that her husband, in a drunken rage, killed their two children by throwing them off their terrace at Lahore and then blamed Muslims for killing them.

Third, many survivors remember how, even in those bitter days, when inter-community relations were at their nadir, individuals and communities resisted the violence. Many neighbours did succumb to greed and the temptation to loot, but others risked their lives—and that of their families—to protect friends and even strangers from the other community. A few even died trying to protect their wards. A large number of the

survivors have at least one story to tell about how a member of the ‘enemy community’ helped them or saved their lives. One of them, a Hindu refugee from what is now Bangladesh, remembers: My sister-in-law was heavily pregnant, and the tension suddenly brought on the labour pains. There was no shelter, but finally there was an upper class Muslim family who welcomed them in. The... people were still the same; it was just that terror suddenly spread. . . . They told my sister-in-law, ‘Mother, do not mind, but you have to take off the white bangles [shakha] from your wrists, and somehow manage to take off the sindoor from the parting of your hair [the signs of a married Bengali Hindu woman]. She was then dressed in the dress and anklets [pajeb] of the daughter-in-law of the house. . . . Her hair was rearranged too—she was made into a member of the family without hesitation. She delivered a male child under these circumstances.

There is no biographical or psychological data available till now on the rescuers who defied the atmosphere of hate in 1946–8. One can only speculate about the culture and early developmental experiences that facilitated their moral integrity. Most of them fell—one guesses from the narratives of the victims—in categories that Eva Fogelman identifies as religious-moral and emotional-moral rescuers. It is, however, obvious that such individuals were far more numerous in South Asia. Those who resisted in Germany shared some common traits, the most important being deep religious faith, intact community ties, and positive experiences and memories of childhood. It could be that, in the matter of religious beliefs and community ties at least, South Asian cultures were more fortunate.

Survivors do not all like to remember these moments of generosity. After recounting such episodes, some quickly explain away

48 Meenakshi Verma, Interview with Kalawati Verma, Delhi, March 1997; Dulari Nagpal, Delhi, April 1997; Jaspreet Kaur, Delhi, April 1997; Kantarani Dholga, Delhi, May 1997; Lado Talwar, Chandigarh, September 1997.


50 The concept of survivor as used in this section has a particular slant. While it carries the meaning associated with it in such pioneering works on genocide as that of Robert J. Lifton, it also means in the South Asian context someone who has faced genocidal violence but has also experienced some help from someone in the enemy community, a help that has not merely ensured his or her survival but has also become permanently intertwined with the memory of that violence. A survivor is a witness to both human depravity and human potentialities.


the generosity as an exception that should not be over-emphasized or blown out of proportion. As in other parts of the world, the victims of collective violence in 1946–8 supply a steady stream of easy recruits to fundamentalist and ultra-nationalist politics; they want to make sure that their memories do not cramp their contemporary politics. Defensively, they provide elaborate explanations of why neighbourly gestures by people from another faith must not negate the community stereotypes they have chosen to live with. In addition, thanks to the sensitivities promoted by studies of genocide—many of them done from within a quasi-Freudian framework—there is nowadays a premium on cynicism and a tough-minded interpretation of occasional neighbourliness. At the ground level, such cynicism and tough-mindedness can even be seen as a cover for deeper hatred, jealousy, and greed—a posture compatible with fundamentalist and ultra-nationalist constructions of the past.

Kirpal Raj is a case in point. He does not remember his date of birth but knows that he was about twelve years old at the time of Partition. After he came to India, he was admitted to a middle school at Sonepat in 1948 by an RSS worker. This worker had looked after him and borne his educational and other expenses since he was brought to Amritsar by the Indian army. Raj feels beholden to this man, a practitioner of traditional medicine. This influences his remembrance of things past.

Young Kirpal’s journey began suddenly, without any warning. One day, he went to the fields to relieve himself around twilight and decided to wander till the late hours as he was afraid of being beaten by his father. Suddenly he heard cheerful cries of Allah ho Akbar, the meaning of which, at the time, was not clear to him. He decided to stay back. The evening took a macabre turn when, while standing among the tall sugarcane stalks, he saw a young man running. Kirpal asked him why he was running so breathlessly. The stranger pointed towards the village and said, ‘Don’t go back; they are killing people. They will kill everyone.’ Whenever I have tried to recall and talk about my parents and my brothers, the images that crowd my memory are fire balls leaping high up in the air and very incoherent and mixed cries of various types. The cattle wailed the loudest, especially the buffaloes; this is the strongest memory I have of that evening. . . .

... It had rained heavily. I felt cold and after few hours, I started shivering . . . then I just fell on the muddy ground. . . . After that what I remember is that I was in a bed with people around me.

He recognized the people around him; they belonged to a Muslim family that lived nearby. The head of the family was Rahmat Mian and his wife was Kariman, whom Kirpal knew. Their sons were his friends; their daughter Mehrunissa he used to tease as Mehru. Kirpal guesses that the family discovered him in the field and brought him home. He was not told that his family had been killed along with other non-Muslim villagers.

Kirpal was delirious with fever for a few days. He gathered later that he had typhoid. When he asked about his family, he was told they had gone elsewhere and would return later. ‘One day one of the boys told me that my parents were dead and so were my four brothers. And so were my grandmother, grandfather, and great grandmother.’ Raj guesses that he was the only Hindu who survived. One day he asked Kariman Bee if it was true that the others had been killed. She did not answer. It was again one of their sons who said yes, all the Hindus and Sardars [Sikhs] were killed, and they were burnt too. Raj felt acutely uneasy. Later, Rahmat Mian took him to the nearest camp. Raj does not feel obliged to Rahmat’s family at all:

I have not felt obliged towards the Muslim family which saved me because. . . . I think had I not hidden in the fields even I too would have

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Meenakshi Verma, Interview with Kirpal Raj, Delhi, June, 1997.
been killed... what happened to the Muslim neighbours who did not come to rescue their non-Muslim neighbours when they were being killed. . . . Not rescuing was also a form of participation in killing. How did it matter to them if a kid lived or died. . . . We had known these people for generations?54

Fourth, some victims organize their memories around instances of ‘strange’, culturally imposed limits to violence that surprised them in those amoral times. In one case, some Pathans attacked a Sikh village and offered to spare all if they converted to Islam. The Sikhs being Sikhs, turned down the offer. The Pathans killed all the men of the village but escorted some 200 women and children to a camp set up for refugees. The interviewee who lost her father, uncle, and two brothers says: ‘Pathans are very honest... they will never touch things which do not belong to them.’55 She also indicates that their experience could not even be shared with others, for no one would have believed at the time that they were spared by Muslims at a time when hundreds of thousands of women had been raped and abducted by both sides.56

Less bizarre were efforts to bind anxiety through black humour. Though it perhaps did not turn violence and death into laughter, even metaphorically such humour did probably lessen the guilt that people felt on behalf of—or in identifying with—their own communities.57 The following instance is from what is now Bangladesh:

Suja Khalid had recognized the probable consequence of the political turbulence and communal violence on the life of his Hindu friend—his eventual departure from East Bengal. He requested [Prasanna] Sen to pay a visit to his ancestral home in the village. Perhaps for the last time. Yet he phrased the request in the form of light banter. ‘I have got it; you are going to run off, too! This time I am not going to let you off—you will have to come to our village.’

Prasanna immediately understood the hidden message and he answered in the same vein: ‘You will finish me off if I come with you!’ . . . Suja shot back, ‘If you die at the hands of a friend, you will go to heaven and, if you die in the hands of a stranger, you will go to hell.’58

No wonder Sen, when describing his last journey across the border, expresses in no uncertain terms his pride in his uncle’s decision to stay back at the request of the Muslim inhabitants of his village.

Finally, there is a small group of people who have come to hate their own communities for not hitting back strongly enough. B.L. Sharma Prem, an activist of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) since the age of eighteen and a Partition victim who used to live at Lahore, is a colourful, if venomous instance:

Hindu resistance theek maatra mein nabin hui [wasn’t equivalent]. Hindus were more interested in looting rather than killing. Hindu women produce rats. Not fighters. That’s why we lost our self-respect, our women, our izzat. Punjab, Sindh, Kashmir to the Muslims in 1947... I tell you in hardly 10 years India will be a Muslim country. Muslim men are seducing Hindu women, reducing us to a minority. They know how to seduce: with kohl, bangles, dupattas. Their diet is uttejak [aphrodisiac]. Full of sex. Beef is full of sex. They mix it in liquor to feed their female victims....

I’m a Parshurami pandit. Fundamentalist by birth, instinct, training. We believe politics must be Hinduized, Hindus must be militarized. Yeh aag bujhne nabin deni (we shouldn’t let this fire die out). I only live for the day when the tiranga [the tricolour] will be unfurled on Pakistani territory. We should be like the Israelis. They greet each other with a ‘Next year in Jerusalem’; we should say ‘Next year in Lahore’.59

54 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
Evidently, Sharma’s Punjabi-Brahminic contempt for the non-martial, greedy Hindus—borrowed wholesale from Punjabi-Muslim and British colonial stereotypes—is matched only by his highly eroticized, jealous, angry fear of Muslims tinged with gender confusion and self-hatred.

Where does this impassioned hatred come from? One answer comes from studies drawing mainly upon the European Holocaust. Another, with a different nuance, comes from scholars depending primarily on South Asian data. Stanley J. Tambiah sensitively captures that nuance when he spells out the ‘diabolical riddle’ in ethnic conflicts with an observation of George Simmel: ‘The degeneration of a difference in convictions into hatred and fight occurs only when there were essential similarities between the parties. The “respect for the enemy” is usually absent where the hostility has arisen on the basis of previous solidarity.’ 

Tacitly invoking Freud’s comment on the narcissism of small differences, Tambiah goes on to ask:

Can we push this process of creating and repudiating the intolerable ‘other’ in current ethnonationalist conflicts any further? Can we say that it is because that component of ‘sameness’ that the ethnic enemy shares with you, and because already your enemy is part of you, that you must forcibly expel him or her from yourself, objectify him or her as the total other? Accordingly, that component of ‘difference from you, whether it be allegedly “religious” or “linguistic” or “racial”’ is so exaggerated and magnified that this stereotype “other” must be degraded, dehumanized and compulsively obliterated. 

The two answers are probably not mutually exclusive. For the South Asian experience might not be totally inapplicable to the case of the German Jews, without whom the self-definition of modern Germans and the German culture could not—and perhaps still cannot—be complete in this century. ‘Fear of loss of boundaries is the fear of loss of self, non-being.’

However, everyone who talks like Sharma need not necessarily have the record they themselves would prefer to have. One respondent claimed to have killed a number of Muslims and even gave details. Later, he abjectly admitted that they were all fictitious, designed to protect self-esteem and morale: ‘We ourselves came to India as hungry nonentities that winter. How could we have killed any one?’

V

THE VILLAGE IN AN ABRIDGED SELF

The journey of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as young nation-states cannot be narrated without reconstructing and working through the memories of the other journey that marked the death of the British empire in South Asia. Pandey seems to recognize this. But the story of that other journey, in turn, cannot be told without mapping out the journey which the victims—and others identifying with them—have continued to make in their mind over the last five decades. That third journey, like a dirty unending war, has territorialized and frozen the shifting, fluid cultural and psychological borders among religious communities in South Asia. It is doubtful if the violence was a clash among existing nations, for the nineteenth-century European idea of nationality has never truly conveyed the distinctive South Asian forms of religious or cultural separateness. Indeed, the violence itself helped crystallize nation-like groupings with which...
The Invisible Holocaust and the Journey as an Exodus

In a society organized more around culture than around politics, the survival of such communities was not difficult. But contemporary concepts of the nation-state and nationalism have not much place for them. The conventional ideas of citizenship and democracy have an enumerative thrust; they encourage the delineation of clear borders and well-defined selves. The culture that was a principal feature of social organization has been downsized as a baseline for political mobilization and competition for power in most of the region.

It is no surprise that, during the last one hundred years, no population census in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka has identified a single person as belonging to more than one religion. If the survey led by K. Suresh Singh had not been done, such communities would have been seen only as anthropologist’s delight or exotica. They would not have been considered relevant to larger issues of ethnic, religious, and sectarian violence in Indian society.

The Partition violence can be remembered in many ways—as an obscene instance of religious fanaticism, an aberration from Indian, specifically Gandhian, traditions of nonviolence and tolerance, or even as a fatal administrative failure (including the failure to gauge the dangerous possibilities that the division of British India opened up but need not have). I have bypassed these issues for the moment, concentrating instead on the way the memories of the period are structured today and the ways in which victims cope with them. A crucial element in this story is the way the ideas of the village and the city have been interwoven into the remembered past.

In this respect, there is a distinct trend in the imageries that we have unearthed. Many victims see the village as the source of evil
and the explosion of rural violence as the ultimate proof of society coming unstuck. And they try hard to document that awareness. Jeet Behn says with the confidence of a statistician that 500 people from 15 villages participated in the second attack that killed her family, as if she had done a thorough survey. Is she trying to say that the involvement of the villages was widespread, or that there was serious co-ordination and planning for the mob to have assembled from so many villages? We do not know. We can only surmise that this fear of villages, contaminated by an unknown poison that divided communities and dissolved morality bears some resemblance to the fear of the metropolitan slum exploding during communal and ethnic tensions nowadays.

However, there is a crucial difference. Underneath this fearsome memory of villages exploding in violence is the image of a village, pristine in its ability to reconcile—in fact celebrate—differences, even when that difference is tinged with caste hierarchy and principles of purity and pollution. One remarkable and consistent part of the memories is the fondness and affection with which the survivors remember their multi-ethnic, multi-religious villages. In the context of Indian popular cinema, Chidananda Dasgupta talks of the village that ceases to be real in the life of the immigrant and turns into a dream. The dream is only sullied by the presence of the villain who has to be defeated at the end by the hero. Time and the experience of pain has evidently brought about a different order of ‘dream work’ into the memory of the victims of Partition violence. They have gone beyond the fantasy life of the consumers of popular cinema. Only in some cases is the villain re-discovered, not in the remembered village, but in life outside—in the form of a generic category called the Muslim, the Sikh, or the Hindu. Usually, it would appear that, over the years, all struggle, suffering, and conflicts have been painstakingly erased from the village of the mind. Above all, there is no communal tension in the remembered pre-Partition villages. Along with an easy life, prosperity (which usually means the availability of cheap foodstuffs and articles of daily use), and cultural riches, the village as a pastoral paradise offers a perfect community life.

To realists of all hues such nostalgic invocation of the village is a dangerous myth. It misleads one about the past and romanticizes what have always been ambivalent, if not hostile, social relations. To those to whom the denial of psychological realities is itself an index of objectification and authoritarianism, the victim’s imagination of the pre-Partition village has an entirely different meaning. It looks like a crucial means of coping with post-traumatic stress. It reorders the memory of a journey that constantly threatens to take control of one’s life; it reiterates the ethics of everyday life and multi-cultural living. Resorting to an idyllic past may be the survivors’ way of relocating their journey through violence in a universe of memory that is less hate-filled, less buffeted by rage and dreams of revenge. Survivors remember their victimhood, they live with the trauma; they even re-do in their mind the journey across the border, marking the end of innocence; even the ill-treatment and brutalization at the end of the journey in strange cities, refugee camps, in new vocational situations. Nonetheless, some semblance of restoration of a moral universe is

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66 Jeet Behn, in Mehra and Pajjar, ‘Sufferers and Survivors’.
67 The reality during 1946–8 was more ambiguous. Going to the city as part of a rural mob to rob and kill in the city was not rare. Pandey talks about it in his ‘Partition and Independence’, p. 2264. So do a number of others. It is also the key imagery in a famous short story, Saadat Hassan Manto, ‘Cold Meat’, in Alok Bhalja (ed.), Partition Stories (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 91–6.
possible in the memory of the village from which one has been exiled and the memory of a culture to which one should be loyal. I have already argued that the village at one plane, is the ultimate prototype of Indian civilization and serves not merely as a critique of the city, but also as the anchor of virtually all traditional visions of a desirable lifestyle.

At the same time, potentially, Partition violence becomes in the memory an interplay of two forces—the village that was contaminated or poisoned and the city that regurgitated the poison that was already within it. The city of the imagination had already turned mildly pathological during the colonial times; it was no longer the city of classical Sanskrit plays, medieval trade centres, or pilgrimages. It now symbolized the loss of neighbourhood and community, combined with greed, amoral individualism, and ruthlessness. Its seductiveness was now tinged with a certain sinfulness and the scope to act out one’s private fantasies by living at the margins of or outside conventions and norms. Partition marked the end of innocence because the journey to the new city could no longer be imagined as only a self-propelled one, a product of one’s personal whimsy or capitulation to temptation. One could now be forced to abandon one’s village home and pushed wholesale into a foreign city. One might even be in a situation where an alien city becomes one’s saviour.

If one lived in a city in pre-Partition days and not in a village, the image of the city has been split. For those uprooted, the memory of the abandoned city has acquired—especially if they come from addictive cities like Lahore, Calcutta, Delhi, Dhaka, Lucknow, Hyderabad—some of the features of the remembered village and shed some of the traits that made them antonyms of the village. The memory continues to haunt the victim despite the passage of time. However, that is not the whole story. On another plane, the city that gave one shelter has become witness to one’s humiliating, forced integration into an anonymous mass. This other city of the mind is the one where one became a worker or a professional, where one ceased to have a vocation or occupy a unique, culturally identifiable space as an artisan or craftsperson. On this plane, the city that gave one refuge took away one’s cultural location, only to give one a stereotyped cultural image. For, being a refugee also often made one part of a recognizable, usually endogamous, caste-like group, identified with pushy, entrepreneurial go-getting and cutting corners.

It is perhaps not strange that, for many survivors, the country that was declared their official abode and provided them with a safe haven has still remained a foreign land. Unbelievably, after fifty years, almost all respondents—in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—talked of the abandoned village or city as their homeland, and their adopted land as someone else’s country. For Sindhi Hindus, for instance, as I have pointed out, their migration from Sindh has now come to mean not merely the loss of culture but also the loss of a part of their religious heritage, particularly those traditions that they shared with Sindhi Muslims but not with non-Sindhi Hindus.70

Such imageries ensure that, to the survivors, the violence in 1946–8 remains a partly unexplained chapter of their lives and times. For most there was in the riots a touch of the principle of violence-for-the-sake-of-violence—a necrophilia, the presence of which they tacitly admit. They place their experiences outside the range of normality, sanity, and even comprehensibility. Perhaps that is their way of coping with trauma. It makes the return to normality slightly easier for many.

70 This could be more true of refugees who came to India than of those who went to Pakistan. For the latter, the term watan, homeland, is double-edged—‘the watan is in India but is not India’. Khan, ‘Identity, Violence and Women’, pp. 158–9.
The violence ended in the winter of 1947-8, rather unexpectedly. It ended not through state intervention but, one suspects, through sheer tiredness and the sense of the futility of it all. The assassination of Gandhi at the hands of a Hindu fanatic on 30 January 1948 also played a role. Instead of weakening the forces of tolerance and amity, it strengthened them. Gandhi had walked through the riot-devastated villages of Noakhali with results that could only be called moving and the effects of his ‘fast unto death’ to stop the carnage at Delhi was said to be ‘electric’. Muslims at Delhi talked of his arrival as rain after a particularly long and harsh summer, for afterwards no major riot took place in the city. 

His fast not only brought peace, but also a new self-awareness. Pandey reports that M.S. Randhawa, the notoriously partisan deputy commissioner of police at Delhi, ‘even took a group of Hindu and Sikh leaders to begin repairs to the shrine of the Sufi saint Khwaja Qutubuddin Bakhtiar Chishti, near Mehrauli, which had been desecrated.’ The fast had also revealed that though the infant states of India and Pakistan were born in hatred, Gandhi’s moral stature still cut across the new borders. During the fast ‘there were anxious enquiries about Gandhi’s health even from across the borders and officers and ministers in the Pakistan government sought for ways to offer him support.’

The Muslim League, otherwise a bitter opponent of Gandhi, passed a resolution expressing its ‘deep sense of appreciation’ for his efforts.

However, Gandhi could not be everywhere and, by the end of January 1948, he was in any case dead. How did the people and communities caught in the web of violence return from their journey into madness? Why did peace suddenly descend in north India? Does that uncertain return have anything to say about South Asian cultures and personality and their complex inter-relationship? In the end, I shall touch upon this issue with the help of a real-life parable, a news story reported in The Statesman, the Calcutta daily. To transcend the past, the parable suggests, one need not always museumize, whitewash, objectify or exorcize it; one can live with it and yet exercise principled forgetfulness.

Meharbanpura was a Muslim-dominated village at the time of Partition and when the exodus of the Muslims from the surrounding villages began, a few thousand got together and camped in Meharbanpura. Around this camp were villages dominated by the Sikhs and the Hindus. Hardial Kaur, a villager now in her 80s, recalls: ‘Mutual distrust between the Sikhs and the Hindus on one side and the Muslims on the other was the order of the day. The flames of distrust were fuelled not only by authentic information of communal clashes but also by rumours about each side having acquired asla [ammunition] and that major strikes were being planned by the fanatics on both sides.’ Daljeet Singh, another elderly villager, continues the story. A couple of days after Independence in 1947, a mob of about 200 people from the Sikh and Hindu-dominated villages planned an attack on the Muslim camp in Meharbanpura. The attack was to be led by Bhan Singh, known to be a fanatic. Another resident adds, ‘Bhan Singh had been planning an attack for a number of days, had obtained some

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72 Ibid., p. 2264.
73 Ibid.
An Ambiguous Journey to the City

weapons from Amritsar and had provoked and persuaded the non-Muslim residents into attacking the Muslim camp to drive away the occupants. According to Daljeet Singh, who saw the events from a distance, 'the Muslims in the camp who numbered over 2,000 apparently got to know of the attack and were well prepared to face it. Unfortunately for Bhan Singh, the . . . rifle he was carrying, failed him and after a brief skirmish outside the Muslim camp at Meharbanpura, most of his associates fled while he was overpowered and brutally done to death.'

Bhan Singh's daughter-in-law, Palo, still stays in the village. She picks up the thread of the story. Bhan Singh's son Harbans Singh, she says, was posted as a head constable at Jhabbal in the Khem Karan area. During the course of his duty, he found a helpless young Muslim woman, Nawab Bibi, whose immediate family had been murdered, and the whereabouts of her other relatives were not known. 'As she was helpless,' Palo says, 'we gave her shelter and she was apparently reconciled to staying here.'

However, the official process of repatriation of women who had been kept in captivity on both sides of the border started after the bloodshed had stopped. According to Palo, 'Some person harbouring animosity towards our family informed the authorities and some officials came in early 1949 and took away Nawab Bibi in the absence of Harbans Singh.'

Harbans looked for her at the border and in government offices, but failed. Finally, after a few weeks, he assumed the name Barkat Ali and arranged to cross the border into Pakistan by paying a middle-man the princely sum of Rs 30. In Lahore, under his new name, Harbans produced some papers to show that he was a displaced Muslim from Sultanwind area on the outskirts of Amritsar. He was allotted two shops in a village near Lahore and he started a cloth business. According to The Statesman, 'He kept trying to trace his "beloved" and . . . managed to find her. The list of names of those displaced was available with the authorities and this apparently helped Harbans trace Nawab Bibi.'

The newspaper does not tell us if Barkat Ali, alias Harbans Singh, son of the feared Sikh fanatic Bhan Singh, and Nawab Bibi, the victimized Muslim woman whose whole family had died at the hands of the Sikhs, lived happily ever afterwards. But frankly I would like to believe that they do.

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
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