



From Mano Majra to Faqiranwalla: Revisiting the *Train to Pakistan*¹

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Khushwant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan* was published in 1956, almost ten years after the partition of India/creation of Pakistan in 1947. Its publication inaugurated what has been called 'South Asian Partition Fiction in English' (Roy 2010). It remains, to date, one of the most poignant and realistic fictional accounts depicting the welter of partition and saw a sensitive screen adaptation in 1998 by Pamela Rooks. It captures one of the most horrific symbols of partition—that of the burning, charred and lifeless trains that moved migrants and evacuated refugees from one side of the border to the other. The trains that previously served to bring people and goods from disparate worlds closer together were overnight turned into targets of mob attacks and transporters of mass corpses. They thus became an emblem, a much-photographed representation (Kapoor 2013) of the wider violence and ethnic cleansing that was taking place in Panjab (Ahmed 2002: 9-28); one of the two regions divided to make way for the two new nation-states.

Carriages of conciliation and communication in colonial Punjab were 'reeling on the rails' in the aftermath of August 1947 (Chatterjee 2017). Today, as travels (train/road) across the line that partitioned



India have perforce trickled down to a minimum, literature too is limited to 'gazing at neighbours' (Ghosh 2017).

The fictional village of Mano Majra in Singh's novel does not merely narrate the story of a village on the border of India and Pakistan; it encapsulates in miniature the story of a society on the cusp of a change that would re-define its once sleepy and peaceful village life. In doing so, Singh brings forth characters, which in their complexities also highlight that partition cannot just be understood in simple communal terms but needs to be forever/ always contextualised within the wider socio-economic and cross-cultural changes taking place during this political upheaval. The characters are flawed and complex as was the reality from which they emerge. The line between "good" and "bad" is blurred in the text, subverting the hard reality of partition and the-then newly marked Radcliffe Line. The manner in which the perception of borders and boundaries underpin and signify a contested community's identity(s) and interactions has been well-examined in contemporary anthropological scholarship on nationalism and localism (Cohen 2012) and these are precisely the themes that are at the heart of both Singh's novel and our article.

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By revisiting the fictional village of Mano Majra and juxtaposing it with a real counterpart in Faqiranwalla, this article hopes to reflect upon, what has been called in a related context, 'generations of memory' of partition and its lingering impact (Greenberg 2005). Faqiranwalla is located 25 kilometres from the city of Khanewal in Panjab, Pakistan. It is a small village of not more than two hundred houses. Among its dwellers are people of varying backgrounds. Some are cattle-herders whereas others spend their time and money in the fields, growing and tending their crops under the scorching sun. Seventy years from partition, through the prism of this small sleepy village, we probe the preserved memory of partition here and present its *afterlife* drawing parallels with its fictional equivalent.

Selecting some key individuals in the village, relevant to and representative of our efforts to excavate myths and memories associated with partition, and situating their sensibilities vis-à-vis the sentiments exhibited in the novel, we conducted interviews to collect and compare experiential accounts. An attempt in the Wildean spirit to attest that 'life imitates art far more than art imitates life', the article, located in the Faqiranwalla of 2017, looks back to the Mano Majra of 1947. In doing so, not only does it reflect on this intervening time-span and what it has done to those remembrances, but, also brings to fore the



well-remarked realisation that, in this case too, 'the past is another country' (Judt 1992). Like in the novel then and life today, the connecting link in this article too, between Faqiranwalla and Mano Majra, is the train, as both share the overweening presence of the railways in the village, through which its life is/was governed.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*/the village of Mano Majra

The fictitious village of Mano Majra is located on the banks of the river Sutlej and is particularly known for its railway station. The village has all the trappings of a typical Panjabi village of its time, with its mix of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Time in the village is regulated by the mail train in the morning and the goods train at night. The novel 'portrays multiculturalism, political idealism, communal violence, pain, agony, trauma of partition, humour, bribery, hypocrisy, drunkenness, unfair police, bureaucratic functioning and customs, love and sacrifice' (Nehera & Bhabad 2014: 387). It has all the melodrama, but it represents the menial and the ordinary too. Yet, underlying this ordinary and everyday life is a subversive strand. Through the thoughts of Hukum Chand, the local Magistrate, we get a sense of the tension that is building up and his indifference towards both those in seats of power and/as well as the ordinary people of Mano Majra. The Magistrate declares

Where was the power? What were the people in Delhi doing? Making fine speeches in the assembly! Loudspeakers magnifying their egos; lovely-looking foreign women in the visitor's galleries in breathless admiration. "He is a great man, this Mr Nehru of yours. I do think he is the greatest man in the world today. Wasn't that a wonderful thing to say? 'Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure but very substantially.'" Yes, Mr. Prime Minister, you made your tryst. So did *many* others. (Singh 1956: 176, author's emphasis)

The *many* also had expectations, dreams and aspirations of what partition would deliver for them. They were not directly asked about their wishes but they were the ones to be directly affected by it; inevitably, this would transform the political and social environment around them. In re-exploring the *Train to Pakistan*, this article recaptures some of these dreams and expectations and relocates them within the sentiments coming from contemporary Faqiranwalla.



The village of Faqiranwalla

It has been almost a decade now that no train has chugged out of the railway station in the calm and remote village of Faqiranwalla. Previously, the village railway station used to be a busy place as people from Faqiranwalla and the neighbouring villages depended heavily on the trains for their movement across the country. However, with the advent of other modes of transport such as spacious vans and faster buses, the villagers have changed their habits altogether and the railway station wears a deserted look now. Ever since trains stopped arriving there, the villagers appear to have lost touch with the tales narrated by their elders that used to feature the passing trains as an almost necessary reference point.

The arrival of the railways in the countryside during the British Raj invariably shaped the village life in many ways. Like many other places in colonial India, trains transformed the local economies and everyday life of people. From carrying/conveying goods, posts, people, intelligence and army personal, trains were to form the backbone of the colonial project in India (Prasad 2013: 1252-82). They opened up the landscape to transport new ideas and eventually instil a sense of nationalism that was impossible without the proximity that changes in transport brought (Kerr 2003: 287-326). Indeed, they were 'purveyors of destiny' (Chatterjee 2017) for villages like Faqiranwalla; perhaps the first, and for decades the only, interaction with "modernity and mobility" that the villagers had in their cultural set-up (Aguiar 2011).

The villagers tried to comprehend the arrival of trains in their own ways. For some, it provided the enticing prospect of seeking employment in the Railways Department and thus, earning a respectable living. Others, as in the *Train to Pakistan*, simply timed their daily activities to the arrival and departure of trains, which provided a stable reference point. Gradually, the trains evolved into becoming an important point of reference in the popular memory of the villagers. This can be gauged quite easily, when one comes across the tales from the past as narrated by the elders in the village. They have perfectly timed their memories to the arrival and departure of the trains through the village and one can discern the apparently inaudible sound of a moving train, constantly lurking in the background, as the train of their thoughts goes on to unwind the history of the village.



The railway worker

There are several people in Faqiranwalla today who remember the days of partition of India in 1947. Although the villagers seem to have lost interest in their stories, they have taken care to preserve these and narrate them wherever and whenever the opportunity arises. It is accounts such as these that have fed the 'post-partition acts of fiction' (Kamra 2007: 99-115). Muhammad Abbas (2017) is one such village elder. It is hard to determine his age from his physical appearance. He himself is not very sure about it. His best, a touch exaggerated, estimate is one-hundred-and-ten years! Though the wrinkles and lines on his face testify to his longevity, his agility and fitness defy his bold claim. To lend credence to his story, he makes an even bolder assertion that he had already grown white facial hair in 1947. When asked to reveal more, he seeks refuge in the narrative that he attributes to his mother. She used to say that he was born two years before the railway bridge had been laid over the nearby canal. Exhorting us to verify his claim, he points to the direction where the bridge lies. Our host takes us to the bridge and after a short walk we manage to come across a plaque worn by the bridge. Not very clear, our host rubs it clean with a piece of cloth lying nearby to reveal the year 1906. Abbas, as this plaque announces, was born in 1904. But is he really that old? That is, perhaps, beside the point. There is something else in this engaging and adventurous narrative that is relevant here. The fact that old Abbas traces his personal history by referring to more-than-a-century-old bridge proves the inroads that the railways had made into the lives of the villagers.

As expected, railway stations and the trains find a notable mention as Abbas goes on to share the memories of his life. One obvious reason for this is that, like many other villagers, he had been working as an employee in the Railways Department and was responsible for clearing the railway track between the Khanewal and Faqiranwalla stations. As Abbas narrates his account, he recalls the days when India was partitioned into two new states and shares stories about the major events that took place in his village in the year 1947. He starts with describing the overall social makeup of the village at that time. Hindus, he says, were in minority but maintained a stronghold over the economic affairs; a fact that allowed the Panjabi Hindus to successfully seek minority rights in the province (Nair 2011). Hindus were the traders and owned many shops in the village whereas, most of the Muslims and Sikhs were farmers or tenants. They used to purchase their monthly ration from the Hindu shopkeepers.



Abbas tells us proudly that he had many Hindu friends and that the Muslims and Hindus used to attend the religious and cultural rituals of each other quite liberally; this has been well documented in other research such as Talbot (2006a) and Ahmed (2012). The politics of separatism had not yet made its way into the village life. However, the villagers were certainly aware of the Hindu-Muslim divide that was increasingly affecting the political dynamics in British India. Abbas, being a railway worker, was better informed as compared to the rest of the villagers as he interacted with people from all over India on an almost daily basis. Still, there was nothing to worry about. Abbas refers to the bonhomie among the Hindus and the Muslims in the village that was as much shaped by the economic interdependence as by mutual respect.

Then, in the memory of Abbas, the whole landscape changed, seemingly, all of a sudden, in similar ways as it does in the fictional village of Mano Majra. The 3rd June Partition Plan was put forward by the British Government, paving the way for a two-state solution and hence a division of British India. By 14 August 1947, the British Government had passed on the reigns to two independent dominions, including the responsibility to deal with the long repercussions of that great division (Khan 2007; Talbot & Singh 2009; Zamindar 2007). Abbas insists that this process seems to happen almost overnight and his worm's eye view is not entirely wrong. Villages like Faqiranwalla and villagers like him were hardly considered, let alone asked for their opinions; they were not even properly and directly informed of the outcomes, often it was rumours and village news that stubbornly spread first and prevailed. Abbas is himself at pains to explain the factors responsible for this. Although some news was trickling in from surrounding villages that the Hindus had started to leave their houses and move to India, he recalls no such incidents like this in his own village. Among his memories though is a train full of 'Hindu' passengers that was stopped just outside the village and 'the Hindus' were ruthlessly slaughtered. Across the Panjab, partition was bringing in its wake such 'death train(s)' (Aguiar 2011: 73-99).

The train was stopped by the villagers of Faqiranwalla along the canal. In those frenzied days of rumour, mistrust and uncertainty, it was assumed rather impetuously by the Muslims that the passengers were Hindus. The train had started from Sargodha and people from the villages, adjacent to Faqiranwalla, had also boarded the train to get across the newly-defined border. During the interview, when we asked Abbas about the precise reasons responsible for this mayhem, he



described that there was news from other villages that many Muslims travelling by train trying to reach Pakistan had been killed and it was in a pure spirit of retaliation that the Muslims in the (now Pakistani) villages were conducting this massacre. Probing this point further we asked Abbas as to how the villagers ascertained the veracity of these claims and how the news travelled from one village to another, to which he replied that the villagers came to know of the killing of Muslims in India through a loud "kook". Literally meaning "whistle", kook refers to the public announcement of an important happening so as to warn people to prepare themselves for its consequences in advance.

The references to the "kook" here are significant as it operates in the same way that a train may whistle to warn of its arrival. A person with the loudest voice was asked to perform this duty. The pitch and frequency of this "kook" used to be adjusted to forewarn the neighbouring villages as well about the looming danger, much in line with the communal sense of living that characterises the life in a village. According to Abbas, a similar "kook" travelled from village to village in the summer and autumn of 1947, making everybody aware of the killing of Muslims in India. This "kook" helped solidify the resolve of the Muslims in the village to seek the rightful revenge of their brothers whom they may not have come across ever in their life, but whose death they were ready to mourn in the most brutal way. Hence, as the news of a train, full of Hindus and arriving from Sargodha reached them, the Muslim residents of this village prepared themselves for the final moment. The train was stopped and all the passengers on board (and there is little chance of knowing who exactly the victims were) had been massacred. Even children and women were not spared.

In much the same way, the utopian/ idyllic village of Mano Majra in *Train to Pakistan* is disrupted by the ensuing violence around and so the summer of 1947 brought about major change to the lives of the villagers. Like much of the Panjab, it is the arrival of a train filled with corpses that leads to reprisals and revenge. Inciting violence, the villagers of Mano Majra are challenged for their docility, 'Do you know how many trainloads of dead Sikhs and Hindus have come over? Do you know of the massacres in Rawalpindi and Multan, Gujranwala and Sheikhpura? What are you doing about it?' The audience is captivated and looks down in shame (Singh 1956: 148).



'What can we do, Sardarji?' questioned the Lambardar. 'If our government goes to war against Pakistan, we will fight. What can we do sitting in Mano Majra?'

'Government!' sneered the boy contemptuously. 'You expect the government to do anything?' (ibid.: 148)

The Sikh soldiers are manipulated into attacking a train that leaves for Pakistan, with Muslims from the village on board. Former friends now turn into foes. 'You need not bother about the military or the police. No one will interfere. We will see to that,' answered the lad looking back at him. 'Are there any volunteers?' 'My life is at your disposal,' said Malli, heroically. ... 'Bravo,' said the speaker... 'Who else is willing to lay down his life?' Four of Mallis' companions stepped over the threshold. They were followed by many others, mostly refugees. Some villagers who had only recently wept at the departure of their Muslim friends also stood up to volunteer. (ibid.: 151f.)

Many refugees have testified to having similar experiences, whereby it was often incoming refugees who instigated or prompted revenge attacks, further it was carried out by "outsiders" rather than local villagers; often they would target other villages rather than their own. Yet any sudden aberration in violence fails to account for the much wider, planned nature of the violence that enveloped the region (Virdee 2007; Talbot 2006b). Furthermore, the casualty numbers are based on rumour and repetition, which continue to reverberate (Pandey 2001); there is little chance of knowing exactly how many were killed during this period. Somehow, perhaps illogically, people have come to accept that about one million people died during these violent days of partition. Yet there is no way of measuring the true cost of this human tragedy.

The Muslims of Faqiranwalla however, had been further emboldened when they came to know that their village was now in the geographical bounds of a newly formed Pakistan. They suddenly found themselves rightly disposed to avenge the killing of their Muslim brothers in India. It is due to this, perhaps, that Abbas takes special care to absolve the Quaid-e-Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah from blame and responsibility. Abbas concludes his story on a passionately didactic note and blames the 'humans' for killing 'humans'. The Quaid-e-Azam himself would never have endorsed the act of killing the Hindus, Abbas maintains, yet the Muslims also participated in revenge and reprisal killings that became such a key feature in the bloodshed of August 1947. Scholars such as Paul Brass (2003) would be highly critical of this type of 'blame displacement', which helps to justify the actions by placating and absolving personal responsibility. In a more intimate sense, this



'politics of memory' reflects the political and psychological needs of the protagonist. The contestations of the past play out in diverse ways and had profound implications for inter-community relations then and inter-national relations today. As in post-89 Europe, so in post-47 South Asia too, remembrances are primarily filtered through national frames of reference (Dobos & Stan 2011).

The groom

Not very far from Abbas lives Mr. Fateh Muhammad (2017) who, like Abbas, also worked in the Railways Department in the 1940s. Similarly uncertain about his date of birth, he states rather proudly that he was young and muscular enough to participate in the fighting competitions held in the village. During the interview, we discussed the other people who lived in the village, particularly the non-Muslims; he mentions the name of his teacher, Lala Hemraj, who used to travel from another village nearby. Although Fateh is not an educated person, he admired the efforts made by his Hindu teacher to convince others to gain education. As a dedicated school teacher, he would make sure that his students, both Muslims and Hindus, studied properly and offered help to them if they needed, even outside school. Fateh also reminisces about the good old days when he used to steal sweetmeats from the shop of a Hindu, who he refers to as Balla. Whenever Balla went to the city to purchase material for his shop, Fateh and his friends would steal things from his shop in his absence. Balla would never mind for, as Fateh tells us, those were different times and there was much more harmony between the Muslims and the Hindus in the village.

Yet a common theme, which has been brought up by many Muslims in other testimonies—the issue of food—crops up in Fateh's memories too. That although the Muslims used to eat whatever was cooked by Hindus, the Hindus were less forthcoming in consuming food prepared in a Muslim household (Ahmed 2012). The notion of purity, especially in food preparation was something that had permeated from high-caste Hindus into the broader sub-continental society. Increasingly, and in a politically charged environment, this became a source of much resentment and indifference to "the other". Fateh remembers the year 1947 very well because that was the year he got married to a lady from the neighbouring village. It may seem strange that normal life just continued while all-around there was political turmoil, but this was also another reality. While Fateh recounts the details of his marriage



ceremony, he asserts that he was aware of the political conditions but, at that time, did not understand the gravity of the situation.

Certainly, the latter is something that many fleeing refugees experienced; the gravity and permanence of this new political arrangement, in which they were made into national citizens from imperial subjects (Gould, Sherman & Ansari 2013), only became apparent later. Life in all its ordinariness carried on despite the political turmoil and the re-arrangements going on around the lives of people; births, deaths and marriages, the everyday relationships that mattered to millions of people, like our "groom" from Faqiranwalla, continued.

Like Abbas, Fateh also remembers the train that was stopped by the villagers. He recalls the time when many unattended dead bodies were found on the railway tracks as the day of partition was nearing. Similarly, in *Train to Pakistan* we find out how these events unfolded in front of the villagers:

One morning, a train from Pakistan halted at Mano Majra railway station. At first glance, it had the look of the train in the days of peace. No one sat on the roof. No one clung between the bogies. No one was balanced on the footboards. But somehow it was different. There was something uneasy about it. It had a ghostly quality. ...The arrival of the ghost train in broad daylight created a commotion in Mano Majra. People stood on their roofs to see what was happening at the station. (Singh 1956: 77f.)

Fateh came across a Hindu woman who was lying on the track and needed help. Draped in a dupatta, she was bleeding profusely and was calling for water. He goes on to describe how he took some water for her but before she could drink it, she died. When we asked him about the fate of her dead body, he told me that it was thrown off into the nearby canal under cover of night. He finds it difficult to explain as to why these dead bodies were left on the railway tracks but does admit that the occurrence of such deaths on the railway tracks did convey a message, not only to him but to the whole village that a calamity of epic proportions was about to befall/had fallen upon the country. On the incident of the train massacre, he independently corroborates the events narrated by Abbas.

Fateh does not feel that he has anything to be remorseful about because he did not sympathise with the killing of the Hindus. He certainly blames the villagers for the killing of the innocent "human beings" but does, on the other hand, allude to the fact that a lot of Hindus from the villages, where they held a majority, also killed



Muslims. So, he feels that he can rationalise the act of killing the Hindus aboard the train. Again, we see the form of 'blame displacement' used to rationalise and justify these positions. But if no one can be held accountable, then whom do we blame? A question that is often asked by refugees themselves. One should remember that memories retain ramifications for the dealing with "the other"—external and internal—as well as the consolidation of 'the core, inner self'. They, no matter how individualised as in the cases shown here, are also formed and institutionalised.

The pious one

There were also some Hindu households living in Faqiranwalla at the time of partition. Mr. Salman (2017), who lives not very far from Abbas's residence, is another elder from the village who witnessed the carnage as the train was stopped by the villagers. Relatively reserved and not very keen to share the memories that he had regarding the incident, he is revered by the villagers for his piety and religiousness. Salman would easily fit into the character of the Imam Baksh, the mullah of the mosque in Mano Majra. His appearance commanded respect and bore the dignity with an aura of righteousness (Singh 1956: 79).

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Throwing light on the political make-up of the village, Salman tells us that the political affiliation of the villagers was not uniform. Some of the villagers, like the Qureshis, used to support the Punjab Unionist Party, whereas an overwhelming majority was associated with the All-India Muslim League. Salman's family belonged to the latter group. He describes very proudly how the Hindus and the Muslims used to live on the same *khooch* (literally "the Persian Well", but here it refers to "the village" as a whole). Much like Abbas, he testifies to the Hindu-Muslim *bonhomie* in the village prior to partition. For him, nothing has changed much since 1947, as his section of the village was not disturbed much during the violence that followed the news of the killing of the Muslims in India. The reason for this, as he explains, was that there were only three Hindu households in his immediate vicinity. Further, they were in a weak economic position and worked as tenants in the village farms. The prospects of moving to a country that they knew nothing about were decidedly bleak for these people. But living in the village, especially after they had heard about the train massacre, seemed to have even more disastrous repercussions.



The Hindus, as Salman recalls, came to his father and expressed their desire to embrace Islam. This would, they thought, make life better for them. His father responded positively and arranged for these Hindus to become Muslims overnight. This act of conversion abridged the wide chasm that had been created between the Hindus and Muslims in the village after partition. Salman relates that to further solidify the credentials of these new converts, they were given the epithet of *deendar* (religious, pious). He takes immense pride in his role in the conversion of these Hindus. These Hindu convert, now Muslim *deendar*, households still exist in the village. Their economic conditions have not changed much. However, one prominent feature of their locality is the existence of a mosque that they had built immediately after their conversion. The mosque stands and serves as a testimonial to the faithfulness of the *deendar* Muslims. Most of them still work as tenants in the nearby fields whereas others run grocery shops to earn their living.

The potter

Karim Hussain (2017) belongs to a family of potters that has been in the business of making bronze pots. He was ten or twelve years old at the time of partition but has meticulously accumulated the tales passed down by the elders around him. He remembers the Hindus who had lived there in the village during his childhood. Hindus, Karim explains, did not buy bronze pots from them because they used to prefer clay pots rather than the bronze ones. Otherwise, Muslims shared a very friendly relationship with the Hindus. He remembers a certain Hindu landlord, Ladda Khurana, who owned quite a large piece of agricultural land in the village. Among his tenants were Nandu and Ganesar, two Hindu brothers who later converted to Islam and adopted the names of Ghulam Muhammad and Ghulam Rasool respectively. The influential Hindu families in the village, Karim claims, had already come to know about the impending partition and had left for India whereas the rank-and-file Hindus were left there and many of them converted to Islam.

Ravinder Kaur's research (2006) also highlights this class dimension and difference in how well-to-do families could prepare much more to ensure a safer passage across the border. Prior knowledge of what was happening certainly helped in this case, as they could transfer their properties or at least plan beforehand rather than completely abandoning their properties. The average rank-and-file, however, was



either forced to flee—taking only what was possible to carry with them as they walked across the border in *khalifas*, large-scale convoys of people—or had to convert and assimilate.

Karim's statement about local Hindus converting is an interesting one because this is an area that has been less explored. Much more has been written about forced conversion, particularly of women who were abducted and converted (Butalia 2000; Menon & Bhasin 1998), but there is insufficient scholarship on the mental universe of those who retained an element of agency, a sense of self, if not out rightly volunteered, to convert to "the other" religion. This presumably does not fit more neatly into the nationalist ideologies that are promoted and perpetuated because of an enforced "othering". Yet Faqiranwalla provides us with several examples where local Hindus decided, out of a combination of compulsion, necessity and perhaps even choice, to convert to Islam. There are many other anecdotal accounts of people who converted to either save their land, whereby often most in the family migrated but one member remained to keep the ancestral land. Others, as we saw above, converted because it was the lesser of the two evils, especially when the people concerned were marginalised in their *own* social hierarchy. For women though this was often a completely different experience, as the film *Khamosh Pani* (2003) most poignantly and delicately shows, resulting in the brutal reality of being abandoned, abducted and converted.

There is also much nostalgia in the account provided by Karim. He reminisces about how Hindus cared for Muslims as much as the latter for the former. He vividly remembers how he had caught smallpox during his childhood and the Hindu women from the neighbouring houses came over to see him and sang devotional songs ("chhanna") to him. They did this for two days continuously and 'Allah saved me from this'. In a bid to reconcile his apparently disparate observations, he says that after all even the Hindus believed in God. Yet ultimately, partition is justified because it was necessary and an inevitable outcome of the "two-nation" theory, as he asserts approvingly.

The cobbler

Some of the villagers also remember the plunder and looting done by the villagers as they came to know of the villages that had been vacated by the Hindus *en masse*. Mr. Fazil (2017) was a cobbler in 1947 but he was also a dairy farmer and used to supply milk to people in the nearby villages. Irrespective of their caste and profession, it was



customary for the villagers to rear animals. Unable to speak much about his memories on the eve of partition due to a speech impairment that he has suffered recently, he nevertheless manages to convey one such incident in proper detail. While he used to go to other villages, he came to know about the properties that had been damaged by people belonging to his own village. He identifies people from two castes who, in his observation, had been largely responsible for this namely *Hiraj* and *Nakiana*. They brought home many valuables that they had stolen from the derelict properties in the nearby villages. Fazil justifies this, almost in an under-class/ sub-altern analysis, as Muslims in the village were not particularly affluent and were economically subservient to the controlling Hindus. Hence, Muslims exploited the opportunity as soon as they came to know of it.

Fazil goes on to state that some of these villagers also went to the city to make their fortunes over the abandoned Hindu properties. However, he does not say much about the fate of these looters. Evidently, people were taking advantage of the unstable environment in which law and order was difficult to enforce; 'sketch after sketch in *Margin- alia* document the pillage and looting that occurred during the rioting in 1947, questioning the putative ideological motives for this violence by suggesting that the logic of commerce triumphed over all other ideologies during the riots' (Misri 2014: 39). Fazil proved to be a very valuable source regarding the local history of Faqiranwalla but his inability to speak in detail about the period meant that much of that knowledge remained locked away from us. His description of the power dynamics in the village is particularly insightful as he used to travel across several villages and knew the people very well.

His son tells us that he used to share stories from the pre-partition days, to which he paid little attention, due to a lack of interest. Of course, many of these accounts have been and most likely will be lost with that first generation that witnessed a different age and time from today. Though it may seem surprising, many of the relatives/ children have remained oblivious to what their parents had to endure, either lacking an interest in the past or finding that those who fled do not want to share or disclose this tragic history, choosing selective amnesia instead. Reflecting the amnesia of the two nation-states, it is sometimes easier to forget the past than to deal with a traumatic history.



The lady of Faqiranwalla

There were plenty of old men who reside in the village and remember the violence that ensued after partition. However, there are not many women around who were willing to share their experiences about the partition. One reason for that is the demise of a lot of women who had witnessed the event of partition, as opposed to their male counterparts who continued to age and walk around. Another reason is more endemic, the general silencing of the female voice (Virdee 2013: 49-62). "Women and the Partition" remains an under-written feature of the postcolonial literary landscape, which is dominated by the 'heroic national masculine' on all sides of 1947, as highlighted by recent isolated and sectoral exceptions (Mookerjea-Leonard 2017: 24-76, 145-65).

This silence from the female side is somewhat broken by only one woman, named Mrs. Hajra (2017), who was a child when the partition of British India took place. She does not remember much about it but she recalls only one significant event that she had witnessed first-hand at the time of the partition. She says that she was on her way to the house of the *Sahoo* (Jat caste) family to collect her Eidi (money given to children on Eid) from them when she heard a "kook" from the village. There was an announcement to the effect that the *kirars* (local word for the Hindus) were about to arrive and the villagers must prepare themselves for any possible danger. She does not disclose more about this incident. It is difficult to understand why there would be a "kook" specifically forewarning the villagers against the onslaught of the Hindus, when other villagers know of no such incident. It may be so that the "kook" in question was meant to announce the arrival of the train, full of Hindu passengers, but we do not have any concrete evidence to back up this claim. Hajra further describes that, a man named Hashim, from the *Hiraj* clan, who was passing by her as the "kook" was announced, 'picked me up and took me back home' to safety. She says that she does not know more about the effect of partition on the village because shortly after Pakistan was formed, she went on to live with her maternal grandparents in Mian Channu, a town almost 35 kilometres away from the village itself (because her parents had died). She came back to live in the village only after her marriage.

Hajra was a child at the time and it is understandable that her recollection of that period is limited. However, for many village women it is typical to internalise the silence, not because they cannot speak but because they have never been asked to speak. The reticence and



hesitation in their voice is palpable because they have been conditioned to remain quiet, particularly when it comes to matters and affairs that are deemed to be masculine. They often find it hard to articulate their experiences and views, not because they do not have any, but because often they do not have the vocabulary to express these thoughts.

In *Train to Pakistan*, women are largely presented in weak and submissive roles. The young and vibrant Nooran, daughter of Iman Baksh, who is having an affair with the local *badmash* (troublemaker) Jugga and pregnant with his child, is ultimately unable to confront her father. Forced to flee Mano Majra for Pakistan, she reconciles to this fate rather than admit to her father that Jugga, a Sikh, has promised to marry her. Women are very much objectified with little agency of their own. And even when they do speak it often sustains the patriarchal system they inhabit. When Nooran goes looking for Jugga before leaving for Pakistan, she goes to his house and is confronted by his mother:

'I can't leave. Jugga has promised to marry me.' 'Get out, you bitch!'... 'You, a Muslim weaver's daughter, marry a Sikh peasant! Get out, or I will go and tell your father and the whole village. Go to Pakistan! Leave my Jugga alone'. (Singh 1956: 130)

Jugga's mother is the gatekeeper and maintains that the fault is with Nooran and not her son and so despite the religious difference, it is the cultural context that maintains the subordinate position of women.

The saviour

During the fateful days of 1947, not every Muslim in the village was convinced that the Hindus must be killed in retaliation for the murder of Muslims. There were some latent sympathizers, who simply could not understand the logic behind the senseless massacre and the brutalisation of the vernacular culture and social space of British colonial Panjab in the whirlpool of partition politics and partition violence (Mir 2010). Mr. Hussain (2017) also remembers the train massacre but has different stories to tell. Almost 85 years of age, he remembers his friendship with Hindus and Sikhs in the village. Hindu girls used to come to his house, played with his sisters whereas he himself used to play with the Hindu boys of his age group. Sikhs were generally of a strong build and used to win many titles at the village games tournaments. They were also quite good at farming. The location where the villagers had halted the train was not very far from his house. They



were ruthless in those days, he tells us; children and women were killed mercilessly without regard for the common laws of humanity.

Confirming the occurrence of a train massacre, he relates a very interesting story of one of the survivors of the carnage. After the passengers on board the train had been brutalised, people from the neighbouring villages went out to see what had happened. He also remembers going there with his parents. There was one child lying among the heap of the dead. His parents felt the pulse of the child and noticed that he was alive. The boy was brought home and offered water. After three to four days, he spoke about himself and told them about one of his aunts who lived in a nearby village. It was also revealed that the parents of the boy had been murdered in the train massacre. The lady looked for the little boy and finally traced him successfully. The boy was taken to her aunt's village. However, soon the villagers (in the aunt's village) felt that offering refuge to a boy, who had survived the train massacre was potentially dangerous and they threw the boy into the canal. The aunt was kept unaware of this incident. Instead, she was told that the boy had run away. In a biblical turn to the story, Syed Ameer Hussain who was making ablution along the bank of the canal and lived in the adjoining village picked up the boy. With few qualms himself, he adopted the boy and took him to his home. However, barely two to three months had passed that the military officials traced the boy and took him away. As the news reached the boy's aunt, she was taken aback and expressed her desire to cross over to India, which was duly complied with. After that, Hussain says, he knows nothing more about the boy and his whereabouts.

The Hindu Bania

Syed Ameer Hussain's (2017) account is uniquely helpful as he discusses in detail the economic status of the Hindus in the village; much as it was in rest of the undivided Panjab at that time. Prakash Tandon, one of the richest among them, titled his chronicle of 1857-1947 as *Punjabi Century* (1961); the Panjabi he meant was the Hindu Khatri *Bania* (businessman/ moneylender). In rural settings, such as Faqiran-walla, they used to lend money to Muslims, who often went to them for small loans and thus were invariably indebted to them. Upon this principal amount of credit they would seek *biyaz* (interest; periodic returns on the original amount), which would be very difficult for the Muslims to pay. The Hindu Bania usually maintained a register of accounts where he would record every loan that he had given out to



the local villagers. This register was very important as it would form the basis of the legal proceedings against the villagers who would default on their loans. In such cases, the Banias used to present these registers before the magistrates as a means of evidence.

Hussain also related to us some popular anecdotes in local history showing that the villagers often found themselves in the magistrates' court and they looked for ways to escape such shameful episodes. One such person from the village, according to the legend transferred onto the posterity, employed a novel strategy to resolve the crisis. He made a passionate *cris de coeur* to his Bania to let go of the principal that had been multiplying at an unbearably exorbitant rate. The Bania, duly humbled by the submission, let go of the principal. He thought it advisable to retain only the interest money as the interest was ever multiplying and would offer good returns for him as compared to the principal amount of money that would stay the same.

However, when the moneylender asked the person to return the long-overdue interest money, the latter refused to do so. Instead, he argued how can there be interest money when there is no principal. By striking off the principal amount of money in favour of the villager, the Bania had let go of his right to collect the interest money that would, by definition, incur only on the principal money. The old man is not sure how likely was this incident ever to have taken place in the village; however, it does highlight the economic-power relationship that the Bania had with villagers, and it was often for this reason that much of the political animosity began to impede on the harmonious relationship between the different communities.

Hussain also remembers the nearby village of Hanuman which, as the name indicates, was predominantly inhabited by Hindus. There, Muslims were not allowed to slaughter cows because that would hurt their religious feelings. However, the Muslims in Faqiranwalla used to eat beef and the Hindus never protested. The prevalent trend in those days, according to him was that the Hindus could impose a virtual ban on cow-slaughter in the villages where they formed a majority. Otherwise there was no restriction on a practice, which had seen sectarian strife around this 'sacred symbol and sacred space' since the early-1890s in colonial rural north India (Yang 1980: 576; Robb 1986).

In 1947, Hindus migrated from that village in droves. Numerous Muslims from the neighbouring villages went to Hanuman to look for the valuables the Hindus had left behind as they were in a hurry to leave for India. He also remembers two Muslims from Faqiranwalla,



one of them being from the *Nunari* caste whereas the other one from the *Nakyana* caste, who went to Hanuman in search of treasure but were instead attacked by Hindus, perhaps in self-defence. The Hindus had mistaken these two for the attackers, who had repeatedly attacked the village after partition had taken place. One of them succumbed to his wounds afterwards. It is very hard to ascertain the accuracy of these incidents but the underlying theme in these seemingly independent incidents is the expression of the economic divide that had plagued the village. Not able to verify these "anecdotes" the old man, however, does point out to the strong economic disparity at play between the two sections of the village; this of course has been documented elsewhere (Chatterjee 1995: 611-3).

At this point, he launches himself into a passionate defence of the creation of Pakistan. From a personal perspective, he finds the creation of Pakistan an extremely positive development as it gave a fillip to the economic status of the Muslims living in the area. Once the Hindus left the village, the Muslims could find their feet in the village market. They would start trading and the curse of interest/ usury that had kept the villagers under the servile bands for so long would be abolished from the village. Indeed, this is a popular narrative across West Panjab, in which the Pakistan state is justified on the basis of breaking away from the economic and political stronghold of Hindus only after which it was possible for them to prosper. Without this they would have remained suppressed under the Hindus and unable to reach their full potential. This simplistic narrative however fails to consider the loss many of the refugees (and residents) endured, or the fact that not everyone has benefitted or prospered.

Conclusion

In the wide landscape of 'memory, history and fiction' on partition (Saint 2014), Khushwant Singh's *Mano Majra* and Pakistan's *Faqiranwalla* present us with yet more ways of embedding their micro-history in that wider historical event. While the novel is fictional, *Faqiranwalla* is very much a living village. With its own peculiarities, we get a glimpse into the ordinary and everyday lived experience of partition/independence, how it was witnessed then and how it is remembered now (Kamra 2002). The events of seventy years ago still resonate with the villagers, which is a testimony to the fact that this event still reverberates in popular historiography. The idea of Pakistan was an imagined construct, which came to be realised on 14 August 1947, but few



had imagined what the reality of this would be. The idealism and aspirations for self-sovereignty and recognition of nationhood was imagined in a different place and a different time but for the villages of Faqiranwalla, as well as Mano Majra, these totally remote places hardly connected with them. Yet they were the "beneficiaries" of those decisions and subsequently the torchbearers of the nationalism and patriotism needed to sustain the project.

Nationalist historians see 1947 as the end of colonial rule emerging out of the collapse of empire and the rise of Indian and Pakistan nationalism; a watershed in the history of the sub-continent and a marker of the transition from colonial rule to the post-colonial period. We can understand it and deconstruct it through archival sources and the accounts of and on politicians who bifurcated the vast and expansive land. In search of alternative archives and voices, what are the memories and lived experiences of people? How do we unearth the ordinary and the extraordinary of everyday life as it accompanied the pain and trauma of this moment? Faqiranwalla is that small micro history in which villagers played out their different roles, realising and defining that national history in their own lives. The train, which is symbolically both the saviour and transporter of corpses, is cloaked in patriotism. No singular person is responsible for this violence in which there is collective acceptance of justifying the actions taken by the villagers. Gyanendra Pandey's (2001) work here is important in understanding how both history and memory allude to the differences that exist in private and public, the micro and macro, the personal and the national. All are truths but they tell us different stories and histories.

Endnotes

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