

REVIEW ARTICLE

Stories about the Partition of India. Edited by ALOK BHALLA. 3 volumes. Delhi: Indus, HarperCollins, 1994. Volume 1: xxxiii, 236 pp. Volume 2: 249 pp. Volume 3: 261 pp. Rs. 195 each.

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE died following the partition of India in 1947. Many more were raped and orphaned. Still more were driven from their ancestral homes and communities. Many chose to uproot themselves, and in a short time grew bitter and disillusioned. Countless lost property and were left destitute. Those who survived the terror faced the daunting task of rebuilding their lives atop the ruins of other lives. They were confronted by the trauma of memory and the temptation of forgetting. And they were left with the profoundly difficult task of describing what happened, telling stories and searching for causes.

Alok Bhalla's three-volume anthology stands as the most far-sighted, comprehensive, and accomplished effort in recent years to gather the short stories on Partition, and through them, to consider their continuing impact. The collection is clearly a landmark for the range of literary output it brings together. Perhaps never before have we been confronted with the insights of writers from every community affected (Muslim, Hindu and Sikh), work done in every major north Indian language (as well as some southern and tribal languages), and work which encompasses so many varieties of anger, negation, confusion, betrayal, lament, consolation, and determination. Above all the collection stands as a moral challenge: to consider both philosophically and, as we read, intuitively, the horror of the events surrounding the tragic event. It also stands as a witness to the hypocrisy, barbarity, and ultimately the absurdity of communalist thought and action—a testimony no less pertinent today than in 1947.

To his credit, Bhalla has selected stories which appeal to the moral imagination of his readers, stories which treat Partition as a human event, a psychological event, not a political occurrence unified over and above personal experiences, but drawn out, fragmented and discontinuous in the way experiences often seem as they happen. We are forced to ask ourselves what we would have done were we faced with the confusion,

mounting hysteria, and violence. Isolated and without complete information, would we have responded self-protectively, aggressively, generously?

Think of it: you hear that bands of thugs are springing up all over the countryside, in every village and town. News of riots are all over the papers. You can see in the sky the smoke from the villages in flames. The word is that the police are protecting the goons. Slowly your own street grows tense. People walk quickly. Doors begin to snap as they shut. Tempers grow shorter. Arguments break out between wives and husbands, parents and children, neighbors. Can you protect yourself? Has your home suddenly become an asylum? Thugs, neighbors ... you begin to wonder just who the enemy is. Who can you really trust in a time like this? Maybe some of the people you live among really don't belong here. Maybe they should go somewhere else. And if they refuse? The news reaches you that the country has ceased to be one country and has become two homelands, Pakistan for Muslims and Hindustan for Hindus and Sikhs. Is the other land really a haven? The dangers of fleeing, the dangers of not fleeing: all choices are dangerous. Death is close to everyone. The movement of hours and days is merciless. Now you have evidence that members of your own family have been killed, and members of friends' families. Your people are dying! You asked yourself: should you also kill? Must you? Can you resist the urge for reprisal? Or if not kill, perhaps you may steal something, lay claim to a house, or a bed or a table. Or if not steal maybe you can protect the prerogatives of thieves by talking confidently, maliciously, menacingly, talking and talking, creating the right atmosphere for pillaging to go on with impunity: your words at least will be arsenic. You take a long look at your society. You begin to partition history with the land, and understand those not exactly like you as others, faithless, guileful, not just different but absolutely different, essentially different. Do you, in the end, offer up this rationalization of essential difference for blood?

S.H. Vatsayan (Ajneya)'s "The Refuge" relates the confusion and betrayal as it affects Hindu and Muslim friends. Rafiquddin, a respected lawyer, promises Devenderlal protection and a refuge in his home as the integrated community of the *muhalla* begins to break down, fear comes to grip people, and neighbors for no reason suddenly appear to one another as enemies. Rafiquddin pleads with Devenderlal, holding on with tenacity to the dictates of universal justice which are for him his first refuge. "We will not let you go," he insists. "We will force you to stay. It is the duty of the majority to protect the minority, and to make sure they don't abandon their homes and run away. If we can't protect our neighbors, how

can we possibly protect our country? I am sure that the Hindus in Punjab, where they are in the majority, must be thinking and acting in the same way. Please don't leave, don't! I'll take the responsibility of protecting you, I promise" (vol. II, p. 73). Devenderlal accepts his friends' assurances even as his Hindu neighbors flee one by one, and he witnesses his own house being broken into and looted by a mob. The atmosphere in the city becomes increasingly vicious. Dead bodies lie rotting in the lanes; looted houses burn. A doctor making his rounds is stabbed in the back. A railway employee who gives shelter to refugees appeals to the police and both he and the refugees are arrested. One evening a group of men come and threaten Rafiquddin, accusing him of betraying Islam. Devenderlal and Rafiquddin argue, caught in an impossible situation: Rafiquddin's honor and sense of principle might get them both killed, and Devenderlal might die if he leaves. Rafiquddin arranges for Devenderlal to stay in a dark and narrow room behind the garage of his friend, Sheikh Ataullah, a clerk in the police department. As the front gate is locked Devenderlal muses that just months before, the foreign government had locked freedom fighters behind bars, and now, after Independence, people must seek imprisonment to avoid being killed. He settles into the situation. In time he begins to identify the muffled voices of the household and draws their personalities in his imagination. He is able to find human warmth even in vicarious contact. Days go by. One day a note falls out of his food with a cryptic message. Hesitant and apprehensive, he gives his food to a stray cat. The cat snarls, spits, whimpers, shrieks without energy, and dies. Devenderlal reproaches himself: how could we have trusted them? One friend had forced him to stay and in the end turned him out; the friends' friend had offered him shelter and given him poison. Suddenly Devenderlal finds reason not to fall into despair: at least he was warned. At the last moment someone slipped a warning in with the poison. The real danger, he realizes, lies "not in the strength of evil, but in the weakness of good." He gathers his things and jumps over the wall onto the road. We are left with the question: can we always count on the small acts of goodness that people may manage in liminal times to protect us against the contagion of violence?

Many of the stories relate the metamorphosis of the society from just and predictable to terrorized and brutal. Umm-e-Ummara's "More Sinned Against than Sinning," Ibrahim Jalees's "A Grave Turned Inside-Out," Yaspal's "A Holy War," Kartar Singh Duggal's "Kulsum," N.G. Gore's "A Mouthful of Water, A Mouthful of Blood," and Ved Rahi's "Death" all powerfully describe the agonizing recognition that people

who in normal times are trustworthy and pacific, in extraordinary times can become predators and killers. Neither friendship, blood relations, nor religious ideals offer the characters in these stories protection from the irrational and hideous deeds their formerly decent friends and relations commit. Bhasham Shahni's "The Train Has Reached Amritsar" and Salil Choudhary's "The Dressing Table" succeed in rousing not just indignation but the feeling of numbness and incredulity at the senselessness and uncontrollability of the violence. These stories in particular work not just on our senses of revulsion and pity, but generate a moral sorrow at the depth of the devastation.

Four stories by Saadat Hasan Manto, "Cold Meat," "Open It," "Mozel," and "Toba Tek Singh," arguably the finest pieces in the collection, relate not just loss—of moral sense, of life, of home, of tradition, of integrated community—but place us in the midst of a depraved, absurd universe. The stories are black, pithy, and tense. Their concentrated and fragmented qualities make them at times phantasmagoric: we are accelerated into the midst of atrocities and then released without disclaimer or palliative commentary. It is Manto's sheer skill and economy of language that keep the tales from devolving into grotesqueries, worlds completely erased of reason, in which people act nakedly out of bestial instinct. Rather, we see how alert and even refined such instinct can be. Manto laces his narratives with a mocking bite that seems if not to assert the triumph of the beast in human beings, then to warn that the beast may appear randomly in any of us, may issue from good or ill intent, and may not beg our forgiveness. In this sense Manto speaks as a cynical prophet, as if foretelling the impossibility of redemption of the crimes already committed, or of the debased impulses in us waiting for their moment to spring.

In "Open It," Sirajuddin wakes up to find himself in a refugee camp. His mind is dull; he stares absently at the sky. Suddenly he is beset by nightmarish visions of flames, people running, a station, gunshots, darkness—and his daughter, Sakina. He begins searching for Sakina in a kind of dementia. Visions of the murder of his wife invade him. Maniacally he asks himself questions about the events, the hours ... Sakina. His tears bottle up inside him; he can't even moan. After some days he pulls himself together and approaches some self-appointed social workers who own a truck and guns. The young men promise to find Sakina and bring her back. At the risk of their lives they comb the countryside, but fail to find her. At last one day they see a beautiful girl by the roadside who flees when they call her. They run after her and catch her. They give her milk

and food. Meanwhile Sirajuddin waits, receiving no news. When he meets the young men again they lie, promising to keep searching for Sakina and to bring her back. Later there is some commotion in the camp—some people are carrying a girl found unconscious to the hospital. Sirajuddin follows. The girl lies motionless on a stretcher in a dark room. When someone switches on the light, Sirajuddin recognizes his daughter. With difficulty he whispers to the doctor that he is the girl's father. The girl slowly moves her hands towards the cord holding up her *shalvār*. Seeing she is alive, Sirajuddin shouts with joy. The doctor breaks into a cold sweat.

While the majority of the stories tell of loss and the vitiation of basic moral values, some describe survival and recovery. Ismat Chughtai's "Roots," Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm," Ashfaq Ahmed's "The Shepherd," Maheep Singh's "The River and the Bridge," Bhasham Shahni's "Pali," and Mohan Rakesh's "The Owner of Rubble" all contain characters whose worlds are not completely ruined, but who manage—through the love of a child, the resilience of friends' affection, or their own faith and integrity—to maintain their sense of civilized conduct when it is all too easy to abandon it. Not that the love or principles these characters sustain and find atone for the pain they and others suffer, but they suggest—contrary to Manto—that life does go on, and that suffering occurs along a continuum, and eventually bleeds into retrieval and rebirth.

Three stories by Intizar Husain, "A Letter from India," "The City of Sorrow," and "An Unwritten Epic," treat the problem of writing as itself an act of moral recuperation. In "The City of Sorrow," Husain offers nameless, identityless figures recounting dryly, shamelessly, tales of their many crimes. They affirm, in Beckett-like fashion, that though they are alive and speak and know, they are in fact dead. The story is bleak and confronts us with the stony qualities of the impossibility of forgetting. The three figures have become shells of human beings, each in his debilitation reinforcing the others' debilitation by prompting the endless telling of horror in a kind of Promethean eternity. The story works on another level as well. Because the killing and raping are reified in the abstract quality of Husain's telling, it is as if the characters' self-realization, their becoming horrors to themselves, places them in an orbit in which there is no more progress to make toward recuperation. They spin around and around, and we, witnessing through reading, gather that a loop of pain is the desert of the culpable. As witnesses we can, perhaps, learn to give our own pain to a place in which it is sustained as a memory, moving through

its own phases, but a place apart from our determination to affirm life.

“A Letter from India” is the attempt of a writer who did not migrate during Partition, to counter what he sees as the alarming loss of continuity for those who migrated to Pakistan, by writing the proud history of his family. “In Pakistan,” he laments, “people seem to have lost all sense of self-respect and forgotten the entire history of their families in just a quarter of a century” (vol. I, p. 89). In the course of the letter he reveals that the partition was not the only instance of the trauma of uprootedness: the family were migrants during the reign of Shahjahan and were “hunted like fugitives” during the troubles of 1857. At one point the writer relates that one ancestor, clutching a bundle of papers containing the family history, was unfortunately attacked by dacoits, and all the papers were lost. Luckily—here we are at the mercy of the writer—the one paper containing the family tree was saved, “and not a word of it was defaced.” The longing for rootedness and unbroken continuity runs deep, and makes uprootedness, which always recurs, seem exceptional. However, as the writer at the end of the letter reveals his world-weariness and his waning desire to live, we are struck by how preliminary and perhaps inadequate his effort has been. Husain seems to say that the act of writing, however well-intentioned or bold, falls short of memory and experience, which must remain unrequited.

“An Unwritten Epic” combines the opening sections of an epic novel with the diary entries of a writer who emigrated to Pakistan. The truncated epic centers around an archetypal hero, Pichwa, whose character is based upon and also confluent with a personal friend of the narrator/writer. Pichwa’s bravery and heroism are pure: he fights on the side of his people out of an intense dedication and a genuine love of battle, “without any fear or thoughts of loss or gain” (vol. III, p. 65). Partition allots his town to India, and so Pichwa migrates to Pakistan, only to find that he is not only not a hero, but cannot even find work. Disillusioned with the new country, Pichwa engages in minor political agitation and is threatened with deportation. Of his own accord he returns to India, to find the name of his village changed. He is killed and his head stuck on a *pīpal* tree (the irony is biting). The writer, receiving news of Pichwa’s death, decides to abandon his novel, and gets a flour mill allotted to him. The writer exchanges his vision of his hero who “could fight the wind with a lamp” (*ibid.*, p. 76) for a job as a “responsible citizen—a dutiful member of a rising nation” (*ibid.*, p. 78). Again, Husain seems to suggest, writing fails to requite memory, and is powerless to recuperate the highest embodiments of virtue once they are lost. The writer sees that Pakistan,

the land of promise and hope, “had no room for Pichwa, but the earth of the former country clasped him to her bosom” (*ibid.*, p. 76). More than that, “people don’t care about human emotions here (in Pakistan)—the mention of human emotions is still an afterthought. The appreciation of literature stems from a concern for humanity. My nation doesn’t value human beings; how can it care about literature?” (*ibid.*, p. 77). Regardless, though, of whether we accept the writer’s claims that abandoning literature amounts in such a place to “coming to (one’s) senses” (*ibid.*), still his work remains a provocation, a register and a source for alertness and memory. But the best the register can be, Husain avers, is incomplete, tentative, and ultimately unwritten.

While many of the stories do, as mentioned, relate the upshot of Partition in terms of a promise unfulfilled, a dream deferred, the high politics of the period do not figure directly in the majority of the stories (Mohan Rakesh’s “God’s Dog,” and Satinath Bhaduri’s “The Champion of the People” do, however, offer critiques of the local leadership and of the bureaucracy of the partition). Rather, the high politics hover somewhere indistinctly beyond the events of the tales, taking shape occasionally as bits of rhetoric, slogans, or rumor.

By contrast, Bhalla’s Introduction to the collection is overtly political and at points polemical. He views Partition not just as a human tragedy but as a political sham: Hindus and Muslims shared—and share—far too much culturally, religiously, socially, and personally to be essentially separate peoples. A long, rich history of cooperation and exchange between the two groups belies any argument that they were or are fundamentally separate. This shared culture is evident, as Bhalla points out, in popular literary forms and plays. The outrage and shock so evident in Bhalla’s own collection is one testimony to the overwhelmingly non-antagonistic quality of Hindu-Muslim exchange over most of its history in the Subcontinent.

The implications of Bhalla’s argument are germane to an analysis of contemporary nationalism in South Asia—and elsewhere. Bhalla presents a fairly straightforward anti-nationalist position: it is only the narrow-mindedly orthodox and the politically opportunistic who cling to supposedly essential distinctions between groups, falsely representing differences as absolute differences, and cultural uniquenesses as matters of cultural purity. It is perhaps obvious but bears stating that being Hindu or Muslim does not necessitate being a Hindu or Muslim chauvinist, or advocating Hindu or Muslim supremacy. Rather, chauvinism and supremacism arise when exclusion and inclusion become the central terms in which a

culture is defined. Criteria of inclusion and exclusion are *not*, however, viable bases for a just society, for three reasons. First, these criteria encourage the belief that those outside the group are not just different but expendable, that allegiance offers immunity against violence committed in the service of the group. Second, the criteria themselves are often arbitrary, opportunistically determined, and liable to shift unexpectedly. Third, they often prejudice and distort historical remembrance. In Bhalla's view, religion, language, or geographical identity construed as a political nation are, in general, blood promises, centered on self-interest, vengeance, and forms of punitive allegiance.

If the logic of Bhalla's Introduction is anti-nationalistic, Bhalla's application of his logic is not so. While on the one hand encouraging heartfelt, exacting self-criticism to avoid the pitfalls of exclusivist nationalism, on the other hand he concentrates his polemic on Pakistani historians who seek to justify Partition as an historical destiny. He says virtually nothing at all about Hindu fundamentalism and its crimes in post-Partition India. Calling for self-criticism and then overlooking the insecurity of minorities in one's own country amounts to a closet nationalism, and perhaps, in a silent way, to an apology. Beyond this, Bhalla bypasses a complexity in communal identity-making. In its vulgar forms, communalism is unquestionably hateful and predatory. But often resistance to that hatred coalesces naturally around the very identity being attacked—so that, for example, if Hindus attack Muslims on the basis of their being Muslim, it is natural for Muslims to band together *as Muslims* to resist. In Bhalla's view, however, this form of resistance is equally communal. Rather, Muslims should resist on some more universal human basis, perhaps loving their persecutors in good Gandhian fashion. Is this reasonable to expect? It hardly seems so, particularly in the absence of a unity-based political movement. Should Muslims not resist violence against them *as Muslims*? Would not the forfeiture of their group-based resistance be tantamount to suicide? While it is true that in certain cases group-identity-based resistance against a communal-minded enemy may itself assume communal dimensions, this is not necessarily so. Not all group allegiance is belligerent identity-mongering. Sometimes it is the best available protection.

Bhalla's view is idealistic in one further sense. He asks why—if the notion that there was always hatred among the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs is incomprehensible—when the killing started, “did we not, as a people, resist?” (vol. I, p. xiv) The stories themselves indicate something of the complexity of resistance. Resistance may fail because some people

discover a sheer pleasure in violence—a pleasure they might never have known before. It may fail when, in particular conditions, extreme views manage to win the tacit or explicit support of moderates. It may fail when general social discontents are explosive in unpredictable ways—as they were at the end of the colonial period. Most of all, to resist violence is dangerous. The aggressions of an organized few are enough to terrorize the many, and it is often difficult to resist violence simply by holding on to calmness and reminders of the glory of universal justice. To be willing to mobilize others and to risk death in the service of moral persuasion requires a courage few can honestly claim to possess.

A word is in order about the editorial policy of the collection. As a whole the collection has been thoughtfully edited. The stories are ordered not by author, community, or proximity in time to the partition, but by their internal qualities, their emotional and psychological dynamics. Such ordering disaggregates the reader's experience of Partition, and calls attention to the subtle differences in perspectives. At the same time it democratizes the stories, drawing out themes across authors, communities, and time. In particular, because the stories vary in their temporal proximity to the partition itself, we gain insight into the ways memory heightens and quiets various aspects of the events. Unfortunately, the stories as a whole are uneven in quality. While the collection can boast of many powerful pieces of literature, it also includes several inferior pieces—stories which are overly sentimental, shallow, and poorly written. The translations are also of varying quality, and some seem hastily done. Perhaps the most questionable editorial aspect of the collection is Bhalla's stated exclusion of stories which are themselves communal in their intent (with three exceptions, which he criticizes at length in his Introduction). Bhalla claims that such stories are generally of poor literary value (poorer than the poorest of the stories included), but the collection cannot truly claim to be comprehensive without them. More than this, without them the reader cannot really judge Bhalla's anti-essentialist, shared-history arguments. Bhalla owes it to his readers not to be tendentious in his editorial policy, even if it is for high-minded reasons.

The complexities of this collection leave us in a place where we must assiduously scrutinize ourselves. Bhalla's anti-nationalism has the force of justice and compassion and must be taken seriously—and if applied, applied thoroughly and without nostalgia. Still we do not want to jeopardize a people's survival if they must rely on nationalism to protect themselves. In some sense making nationalism a crime commits the same mistake as making it compulsory. The stories in this collection do succeed in

prompting us to move beyond anger and remorse at communal violence, to consider the possible bases of a just society in the future. As a set of historical documents they suggest that we return to origins to find these bases: to the knowledge that the unity of peoples, even when they are partitioned, runs recurrently through lives and memories. Still we are left with questions. Can we somehow train our peaceful instincts to be active rather than passive—when passivity is easier? Does such training require more than reading and reflecting? How can we respond to “ethnic cleansing” and genocidal warfare without being polarized by the terms and threats of extremists? One thing is certain: this training will not take effect magically. Only by slow, meticulous asking and re-asking, by reading, discussing, and organizing, can we hope to open ourselves to the necessary changes.

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