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The Creative Side of Partition

by
Partha S. Ghosh



INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
40, MAX MUELLER MARG, NEW DELHI-110 003
TEL. : 24619431 FAX: 24627751

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The Creative Side of Partition*

Flashback

Even after almost seven decades of Partition, the event is recalled in India almost everyday. Not only do literary writings keep pouring in, even new doctoral dissertations are being written on the subject. There is no dearth of Bollywood flicks on the event, the latest being *Kya Dilli Kya Lahore*. But was Partition all about tragedies? Did it not push human creativity as well? Also, what happened to those who were neither refugees nor hosts, like the Muslims of Delhi? They suffered both as refugees as well as migrants. In this short essay let us try to understand two of these phenomena: one, what happened to the then Delhi Muslim society, and two, how did Partition influence Indian cinema as produced in Bombay and Calcutta, the two film industries that Partition influenced. While the choice of Calcutta is obvious because the city was destabilised by the massive flow of refugees from East Bengal, the choice of Bombay is because of the fact that though the city was not a destination for the Punjabi refugees, yet the arrival of a large number of performing and technical artistes from the Lahore film industry did matter in no small measure.

Culture and the Memory of Violence

Both culture and memory are difficult constructs. Culture encompasses both everyday life and the psychic realm which is largely intangible. It requires anthropological perspectives to grapple with. There is also another dimension of it, that is, cultural expressions, which are tangible and are expressed through

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Since history and myth-making go side by side, collective memory is seldom authentic. It is often the case that history is invented to suit the requirements of the power elite. Likewise, memory, in this case the memory of violence, also is a complex phenomenon. How does that memory influence cultural creativity? The focus of memory discourse all over the world is on collective memory: Who remembers what? What part of the memory is selected, highlighted, amplified, modified, or, just not mentioned? Since history and myth-making go side by side, collective memory is seldom authentic. It is often the case that history is invented to suit the requirements of the power elite. Martha Minow writes: 'To seek a path between vengeance and forgiveness is also to seek a route between too much memory and too much forgetting. Too much memory is a disease' (Minow, 1998: 118). Ariel Dorfman, the playwright of the famous British–French drama film of 1994 called *Death and the Maiden* which dealt with post-terror revenge and justice wrote: 'How do we keep the past alive without becoming its prisoner? How do we forget it without risking its repetition in the future?' (quoted by Minow, 1998: 119).

Impact on Delhi Muslims

It is intellectually challenging to relate the impact of Partition on the psyche of Delhi Muslims. It should encompass both everyday life and the psychic realm. We must consider the more intangible yet palpable aspects of their cultural life, a good example of which could be their encounter with the rudeness of the immigrant Punjabis, which was indeed the manifestation of the refugees' post-Partition stress. The Delhi Muslims also found it difficult to adapt to the rapid commercialisation of the city that the marginalised existence of the refugees resulted in. But this marginalised existence of refugees had a positive effect too. To make ends meet, many Punjabi women had to come out of the confines of their kitchens and join the work force, leading to women's emancipation in general. It had a lasting impact on Delhi culture. Sociologist Supriya Singh tells this story through the life of her mother which was a profile in courage and determination (Singh 2013).

The growing veneration of *jinn*¹ among the Muslims could as well be linked to the trauma of Partition, and the nature of the post-colonial project to remember as little as possible of Delhi Muslim culture and archaeology because the same project also had the larger agenda of making India a secular nation. The fear was that too much remembering of Delhi's Muslim past might come in the way of rehabilitating millions of Punjabi refugees whose problem was acute. So much land was required for refugee rehabilitation that the best policy for the government to follow was: 'authorised forgetting'. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was reluctant to check its own archives or allow scholars to look into them lest some uncomfortable facts might be unearthed to the advantage of the Waqf Boards and to the detriment of the government's rehabilitation plans (Taneja 2013: 147).

Impacts on Bombay Cinema

Among all art forms, probably cinema has the largest popular appeal for it can be viewed and watched by all for which no particular appreciative faculty is needed. Ingmar Bergman had said: 'No art passes our consciousness in the way film does and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls' (quoted by Tagore, 2013). In the aftermath of Partition many Hindu and Sikh artistes belonging to the Lahore film industry left for Bombay. Lahore's loss was Bombay's gain. Hindus and Sikhs were prominently placed in Lahore where they owned 80 per cent of the city's modern buildings and all its cinema halls and studios. Even outsiders like D.M. Pancholi, a Gujarati, and Himanshu Roy, a Bengali, had started their careers in Lahore as a producer and a director, respectively. The exodus of Hindus and Sikhs coupled with the general stifling atmosphere generated by the Islam-centric politics of Pakistan encouraged even some progressive minded Muslim artistes to leave Pakistan and settle in Nehruvian India that promoted secular temper. One such ideological refugee was

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Sahir Ludhianvi (Abdul Hayee 'Saahir') for whom it was actually a second migration. He and his family had fled from Ludhiana in India to Lahore to escape the wrath of the Hindu–Sikh violence. But soon he realised that Islamism would come in the way of his left-oriented poetry. Some of his lyrics in Bombay films are legendary. Here are a few samples: '*Jinhe naaz hai Hind par wo kahan hai*' (all those who are proud of India, where have they gone) (from the film *Pyasa*, 1957); '*Chin-o-Arab Hamara, Hindustan hamara/Rahne ko ghar nahi hai, sara jahan hamara*' (China and Arabia are ours, India is ours/there is no home to stay, yet the whole world is ours) (*Phir Subah Hogi*, 1958); '*Tu Hindu banega na Musalman banega, Insan kee aulad hai insan banega*' (you would neither become a Hindu nor a Muslim, you are the child of a human being, you would end up becoming a human being only) (*Dhool ka Phool*, 1959). Certainly this last song would not have been possible in any Pakistani movie of 1959.

Interestingly, however, the trauma associated with Partition was not sufficiently reflected in contemporary Bombay cinema. As Bhaskar Sarkar has noted in his 2009 study, only a handful of the approximately 1,800 Hindi-Urdu movies produced between 1947 and 1962 dealt directly with the Partition. These movies were: *Lahore* (M.L. Anand, 1949), *Nastik* (I.S. Johar, 1954), *Chhaila* (Manmohan Desai, 1960), and *Dharamputra* (Yash Chopra, 1961). In some other movies the trauma found an indirect presence in terms of physical injury resulting in bodily scars and wounds, reunion of separated families, the loss of near and dear ones due to accidents or natural disasters, and the dishonoured woman, the illegitimate child and suspicions of paternity. These movies were: Bibhuti Mitra's *Shabnam* (1948), Raj Kapoor's *Aag* (1948), and Yash Raj Chopra's *Dhool ka Phool* (1959) and *Waqt* (1965). About *Aag*, Raj Kapoor's first film, Sarkar writes that it:

[C]annot ignore the deep wound inflicted by the national amputation and the accompanying violence; the tone of the film, which casts a shadow over its youthful idealism, intimates the shock more eloquently than the narrative's single direct reference to Partition. *Aag* cues us to the cryptic ways in which Indian popular cinema engaged with a portentous historical

horizon inescapably constituted by the trauma of Partition. An array of indirect, tacit figurations come into play: conscious displacements; subconscious, even unintended allusions; indexical citations; accidental traces; evocations of broad, analogous sentiments (Sarkar, 2009: 92).

This indirect connection that Sarkar mentions is to be found if one compares it with a similar connection in the West between wars or holocausts on the one hand, and art and literature on the other. He borrows from Dominick La Capra's reference to collective trauma when people's art rendition 'departs from ordinary reality to produce surrealistic situations or radically playful openings that seem to be sublimely irrelevant to ordinary reality but may uncannily provide . . . insight into that reality'. People suffering from trauma cannot remember the source of the trauma yet they remember it through other means. In this connection Sarkar quotes from Joshua Hirsch's insightful book on Holocaust films:

As trauma is less a particular experiential content than a form of experience, so posttraumatic cinema is defined less by a particular image content—a documentary image of atrocity, a fictional image of atrocity, or the absence of an image of atrocity—than by *the attempt to discover a form for presenting* that content that mimics some aspects of posttraumatic consciousness itself, *the attempt to formally reproduce* for the spectator an experience of suddenly seeing the unthinkable (Sarkar, 2009: 23, emphasis in original).

Thus, 'Hirsch is essentially arguing for a mode of representation that is more adequate to the charge of conveying a traumatic experience; in a sense, his is a hyperrealist quest for appropriate forms, given the task at hand' (Sarkar, 2009: 23).

Psychoanalysis recognises trauma through this non-remembering the source. Any description connected to the original event may get transformed into other events. The traumatised persons tend to feel secure only when they are able to bring back past events into the realm of their transforming capacity. Indian cinema, therefore, may not have dealt with Partition directly, but it has done so in

transformed narratives which often has taken the form of melodrama (Biswas, 2008: 210-11; Viridi, 2010: 1-2; Vasudevan: 2010: 152-55). In this context, the Raj Kapoor persona on the screen is of importance.

The Raj Kapoor character immediately alerts the film public to a certain populist, even agitprop view of the street personality as the vehicle of meditations on issues of social injustice and community bigotry. The figure is at a crucial level produced through a desire to distance the public from investments in a social field shot through with the claims of lineage. This was particularly important not only for an imagination of a more egalitarian society, but one also unencumbered by the anxiety arising from a scrutiny of blood ties which could compromise the 'purity' of ethnic religious communities in the wake of the Partition (Vasudevan, 2010: 71).

Bengali Cinema

Partition severely affected Bengali films. They lost their East Bengal market which had provided about 40 percent of their revenue. Later, the overall Pakistani ban on Indian films in 1952 harmed them further. But in terms of ideas, Bengali films gained. The woes of Partition encouraged many Bengali directors to make some path-breaking movies. One notable name in this regard is that of Ritwik Ghatak who, in his films, narrated how Partition struck at the roots of Bengali culture. In the eight films that he directed he sought to express the nostalgia that many Bengalis felt for their pre-Partition life. Reproducing the last part of the screenplay of his movie *Meghe Dhaka Tara* ('The Star Veiled by Clouds', 1960) it has been said:

If you are asked to choose a single film which captures the trauma and tragedy of the Bengal Partition with unmatched power and sensitivity, you choose, without a question, Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Star Veiled by Clouds, 1960). This classic is built on a simple story line: how the eldest daughter of an uprooted family, in a stifling, desperate environment, turns into the breadwinner and ultimately sacrifices her life. In fact, Nita, the protagonist in the film, has become a deathless symbol of Partition

itself and the uprooted woman's tragic struggle against it... [Ultimately] Nita after fulfilling her mission succumbs to tuberculosis. Her piercing cry 'I wanted to live' sums up the essence of all displacements, exodus and partitions (Bagchi and Dasgupta, 2003: 219).

Some of Ghatak's outstanding films, besides *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, were *Nagarik* ('Citizen', 1951—the movie was released in 1977, a year after his death), *Bari Theke Paliye* ('The Runaway', 1958), *Komal Gandhar* (meaning a soft note on a sharp scale, 1961), *Subarnarekha* ('The Golden Line', 1962) and his penultimate film made in Bangladesh in 1972 called *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* ('A River Called Titas'). About this last film, Partha Chatterjee writes that it 'does not deal with the Partition, but it tackles the moral, ethical and political problems connected with displacement' (Chatterjee, 2002: 67). Ghatak was the quintessential Bengali of undivided Bengal. On hearing about his death on 6 February 1976, Satyajit Ray had said: 'Ritwik was out and out a Bengali director, a Bengali artist. He was much more Bengali than what I am' (as told to Chakrabarty, 2014: 7).

Another notable film in this genre was Nemai Ghosh's *Chhinnamool* ('The Uprooted', 1950), which tried to portray as realistically as possible the havoc that Partition resulted in which was to be seen on the streets and across the city of Calcutta. To do so, much of the movie was shot on location at Sealdah railway station, then swarming with refugees under temporary sheds. This sort of emotively charged documentation of the refugee exodus is rare, however extensive is the catalogue of relevant Indian cinema. Compared to *Chhinnamool*, Ghatak's *Nagarik*, which was ready for release a year later, 'had extensive faults due to Ghatak's initial lack of command over filmic language and his overtly Marxist pedagogy' (Chattopadhyay, 2007: 266).

The question, however, remains why Ghatak, who was a self-professed Marxist and who was in a way obsessed with the trauma of Partition and in a position to directly connect his experience to his creations, took recourse to melodrama like the Bombay films which we have discussed above. Probably the answer is: 'A key difference between realism and melodrama is that realism posits a material

universe while melodrama includes a metaphysical/occult component—often a moral order which rewards and punishes—driving the narrative and manifesting itself in devices like coincidences’(Raghavendra, 2014: 86). Ghatak, who has been called ‘the troubled signature of epic melodrama in Calcutta’(Sengupta, 2005: 121), took recourse to melodrama in both his *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, particularly the latter. In this movie, through the characters of Ishwar and Sita, the director combines two tragedies, one of family dislocation and the other of millions of displaced people groping in the dark as refugees on Calcutta streets. It was not easy to narrate this complex interconnection for it would inevitably remain incomplete. It was, therefore, necessary for him to find the solution in some melodramatic sequences like Ishwar visiting a prostitute only to find that the prostitute was none other than his lost sister, Sita (Biswas, 2008: 213-14; Chattopadhyay, 2007: 266; Vasudevan, 2010: 30). Vasudevan writes:

The event [Partition] marked his work deeply, generating a highly innovative inquiry into the ramifications of this violent rupture. Using mythic and epic resonances in his delineation of characters and settings, his work documented how displacement had blighted attempts to put a world together again, whether on the basis of the household, the radical collective, or the ground of a realist and rationalist ontology (Vasudevan, 2010: 306).

There were other popular melodramatic movies too in this genre, such as *Agneepariksha* (‘A Ritualistic Swearing in Front of Fire’—in *Ramayana* Sita had to undergo *Agnipariksha* to prove her chastity after having spent time in Ravana’s captivity, 1954), *Harano Sur* (‘The Lost Tune’, 1957), *Bipasha* (the Bengali name of Punjab’s Vyas river, 1962), and many others, most of which starred the legendary duo Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. The duo ‘lent its name to the era [1950s and 1960s] and can be used as a sign for a large number of films that did not actually feature the stars together’. Several of these movies fell in the category of the ‘Comedy of Remarriage’ talked about by Stanley Cavell in the context of Hollywood films—by meeting just once is not the complete

story, the couple must re-meet to complete the story. In many of the Uttam–Suchitra movies of this generation, the hero and heroine were without parents or at least their presence was negligible. Compared to the present-day TV serials where families are so prominent, this parental absence is easily noticeable (Vasudevan, 2010: 306).

Nostalgia of Bygone Harmony

Against the background of Nehruvian secularism and the continued existence of Hindu–Muslim psychological trauma over the pains of broken families in north India, the necessity was ever felt by Bombay producers to somehow highlight the coexistence of the communities. As a result, Muslim culture was a prominent theme in several contemporary movies, particularly their emphasis on '*tehzib*', '*sharafat*' and '*nazaqat*' (gentlemanly/womanly ways of life rooted in the cultural ethos and the use of sophisticated language). This was exemplified in the life of nostalgically remembered Lucknow which underlined the Hindu–Muslim appreciation of each other's culture. Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* ('The Thirsty', 1957) reflects the nostalgia about Hindu–Muslim coexistence on the one hand and the frustration with the way things were in contemporary India on the other. In a significant sense, the poet–hero in the movie, Vijay, was representing the ambivalence of Sahir, the lyricist of the movie to whom we have referred above—ambivalence about progress and modernity. Guru Dutt made Sahir modify his original poetry for the movie to make it more emphatic for contemporary times. Taneja writes:

'Jinhe naaaz hai Hind par who kahaan hain?' asks Vijay in an iconic song from *Pyasa*, as he drunkenly wanders through the red light district. Where are those who are proud of India? This song has a telling history. Saahir had already published the poem (*Chakle/Brothels*); the song is based on his collection *Talkhiyaan* (Bitterness), before he was hired to write the songs for *Pyasa*. When the poem was brought to Guru Dutt's notice by his assistant, he said, 'Raj! This is it! This is *Pyasa*!' The song as it appears in

the film is a slight but significant modification of the poem. The earlier refrain of the poem was '*Sanakhwan-e tasdeeq-e mashriq kahan hain?*' Where are those who extol the holiness of the East? The story goes that Nehru had given a speech in which he had remarked, 'I am proud of India.' Guru Dutt asked Saahir to work this line into the refrain of the song (Taneja, 2009: 7).

Secular Ethos of Bombay Cinema

Amongst the leading characters in successful Bombay movies there had to be a Muslim character, and all the better if a Christian was added to it. Manmohan Desai, who produced several blockbusters, had once said that if a movie was rejected by India's Muslims it was a commercial failure. It went to the credit of the Bombay film industry that it did not allow itself to be touched by the fire of Hindu–Muslim communalism and for this the credit should go to both the Hindu and Muslim film fraternities which traced their pedigree to Bombay and Lahore. One of the best examples of this secular ethos was a song sequence in the 1954 flick, *Amar* (meaning, the immortal), an otherwise box office flop. The song, *Insaaf ka mandir hai ye, bhagwan ka ghar hai* (this house of God is the temple of justice), was an all-Muslim affair against a Hindu backdrop. The temple scene of the song was directed by Mehboob Khan, enacted by Dilip Kumar and Madhubala (both Muslim), the lyrics were by Shakeel Badayuni, and it was sung by Mohammad Rafi on the tune of Naushad Ali.

Several years later *Garam Hawa* (1973) was released. Based on Ismat Chughtai's story and adapted for the screen by Kaifi Azmi, the movie was directed by M.S. Sathyu. It dealt with the tensions within a Muslim family torn between two forces, one arguing for leaving India for Pakistan and the other for remaining in India whatever be the difficulties. The movie forcefully depicted the tensions that Partition generated both within families as well as among communities. Here is a crisp description of the theme:

Misfortunes start piling up on the stoical [Salim] Mirza [owner of a shoe factory in Agra]: orders to deliver shoes are cancelled; his employees refuse to work for him or banks to loan him money for fear that he will escape to Pakistan; his ancestral home, in the name of the now-absent elder brother, is declared evacuee property and allotted to a Sindhi businessman; Mirza is forced to move to cramped rented quarters; Mirza's eldest son also leaves for Pakistan when the shoe business is on the verge of collapse. But worst of all is the pain that Amina suffers as a result of the political changes. Her lover, Kazim, secretly returns to India to marry her, but before the ceremony can take place, the police arrest him for having entered India illegally. Mirza watches helplessly as his beloved daughter sinks into despondency. Shamsad takes advantage of her situation and woos her; a lonely and vulnerable Amina succumbs to his blandishments. But Samshad too escapes across the border with his opportunistic parents. Still, Amina hopes for his return, only to have her dreams shattered once more, and this situation culminates in her suicide. Mirza's family has now shrunk to three, a progressive decrease that is signified by the number of plates set during mealtimes, once shared by the whole family. Unable to avoid the move he had resisted so far, Mirza too sadly prepares to leave. On the way to the station, their *tonga* is stopped by a procession of people out to protest injustice. Sikander [Mirza's younger son], drawn to the cause, jumps off the carriage and joins the rally, as, after a few moments, does Mirza. They decide to stay on and struggle for communal harmony and social change (Chakravarty, 1996: 250).

In 1987, against the background of the Babri Masjid controversy, a six-part TV serial called *Tamas* was telecast. It was a slightly modified version of the novel by Bhisham Sahni of the same name published in 1974. Sahni was a Sikh refugee from Rawalpindi in West Pakistan and the serial was directed by Govind Nihalani, a Sindhi refugee from Karachi. It was a very powerful statement against communalism and showed how communal riots could be manufactured by vested interests if the circumstances were conducive.

Government Documentaries: Selling Development

There was a marked contrast between the post-Partition cultural representation in Bombay cinema on the one hand, and the Indian state's representation of the national project on the other. The Films Division of India produced as many as 1,742 documentaries during the first 20 years of Partition. Those days all cinema theatres were required to screen these documentaries before the start of a movie. In contrast to Bombay films, these documentaries were conspicuous by the absence of the Hindu–Muslim story. Their emphasis was on the symbols of modernism as tools of nation building, massive developmental projects and public services that the state was committed to provide in the fields of education, health and social welfare. Drawing from the theories of memory research, one may argue that probably the memory of Partition was too cruel to recall without any purpose being really served; forgetting them and emphasising the tasks ahead in building the nation on a modernist line was considered more meaningful.

Inter-marriages still a Far Cry

It must, however, be noted that though it was popular to talk of Hindu–Muslim coexistence, it is probably too much to think of their cultural integration. Seemingly it was so even in respect of Hindu inter-caste integration. While many eminent lyricists, singers, actors and directors were Muslim—Dilip Kumar (Yusuf Khan) and Nargis (Fatima Rasheed) were adjudged the most popular actors in a 1952 magazine poll—Hindu–Muslim romance on the screen, leave alone marriage, was unthinkable. It took almost half a century after Partition that the movie *Bombay* (1995) showed such a possibility for the first time. More importantly, cinema as such was looked down upon by the political class that included such eminent leaders as Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel. Even a path-breaking movie like *Achhut Kanya* (1936, 'Untouchable Maiden') which showed a Brahmin man's love for an untouchable girl could not evoke any enthusiasm in Gandhi, the great crusader against untouchability. He did not even want to watch it in spite of its producer Himanshu Rai's best efforts (Guha, 2007: 721-38).

Conclusion

Any event, however tragic, has a positive angle. It inevitably releases creative energies. The Partition of India was a colossal tragedy that resulted in a mass massacre resulting in a huge human exodus in search of security. It left its mark on almost all spheres of life, including cultural, as expressed in creative efforts in the fields of literature, music, cinema, drama, painting, architecture and food. In this paper I have discussed only one of them besides some other human elements. Given South Asia's post-colonial story of 25 million people displaced across national boundaries and many more within the national territories, several new cultural spaces are being created everyday. They encourage all kinds of artistic responses. These post-traumatic creativities cannot but lead to a significant amount of academic research and theoretical explorations.

Note:

1. In Islamic cosmology, the *jinn* are a separate species of being, different from and older than humans. "He [Allah] has created man from dry clay and created the *jinn* from smokeless fire and made them invisible to the eyes of men" Formed of a completely different substance than humans, they are also said to be physically stronger and to have the ability to shape-shift and to travel vast distances very quickly. Like humans, and unlike angels, they exercise free will and can choose between good and evil. The *jinn* are mortal, like human beings, but live far longer lives; some of the *jinn* alive today are counted among the *sahaba*, the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, having seen him personally, and heard his recitation of the Qur'an' (Taneja 2013: 140-41).


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Partha S. Ghosh is a Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. Till recently he was Professor of South Asian Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. His academic interests include South Asian politics and foreign policies, ethnicity, and majority-minority relations. He can be contacted at: parsarg@hotmail.com, parsarg@gmail.com. Website: www.parthasghosh.com



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