



# The invisible holocaust and the journey as an exodus: the poisoned village and the stranger city<sup>1</sup>

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This is not an age of epics. Epics require epic battles and epic journeys, or at least the capacity to envision them. Indian conventions also insist that such battles should ideally be between persons, clans or communities close to each other, for only such nearness can ensure that the climactic war will be fought with passions at the margin of morality. The past 100 years have been a century of dispassionate, well-organised, technicised carnage. They can be the subject of a scientific treatise, not an epic. According to D. R. Nagaraj, by the Indian conventions of epics, the Western world came closest to producing an epic only in the proceedings of the Nuremberg trial after World War II.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because the trial brought out, however indirectly, the Dostoyevskian passions that had been missing at Auschwitz, Dachau and Bergen-Belsen.

Epic journeys, too, have been scarce in this century. As the world has been surveyed and resurveyed, the sense of adventure and glory has begun to attach more to the speed and technique of the journey and less to its geography. The only journeys that have acquired heroic proportions in our times are the ones that have sought to alter the cartography of self. Ours probably is the age of *homo psychogeographicus*. At one pitch of discourse, probably the greatest circumnavigators of the earth in this century have been Sigmund Freud and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. For both, all great journeys begin when one closes one's eyes and looks within. All landscapes are, by definition, landscapes of the mind.<sup>3</sup> The point of departure for them is self-exile and the crucial mileposts—the ones that tell one whether it is a journey into madness or out of it, whether it is time travel towards the future and self-actualisation, or towards the past and defensive stupor—are not placed predictably along a road. They, too, are a matter of discovery.

If the Nuremberg trials can be read as the rudiments of a possible Western epic, the closest any South Asian event comes to being the stuff of an epic are the great partition massacres and uprooting that took place in 1946–1948, when the British empire was being wound up and new States were being created in the region. It involved a journey through violence that would have tested Freud, as it tested Gandhi and, finally, ended in his assassination. Indeed, the events have already written themselves up as an unwritten epic that everyone in South Asia pretends does not exist but nonetheless are forced to live by. That tacit epic, in

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itself a journey into the self, tells of great battles involving not only valour and sacrifice, but also psychopathic violence, sheer pettiness, and great betrayal. Such an epic dissolves the heroic and the anti-heroic, somewhat in the manner in which the great Mahabharata war did. At the end, once again as in the Mahabharata, we are left with fragments of the hero and the anti-hero distributed over religions languages, cultures and regions. The listener has to reassemble the pieces to construct a private ballad, knowing fully that it can only sound like an elegy to some others.

At the heart of that unwritten epic, there is a great journey to exile, too. That exile lasts not for a decade or two; it ensures a lifetime of homelessness. Suketu Mehta unwittingly acknowledges the presence of that unwritten epic when he writes:

There are millions of Partition stories throughout the subcontinent, a body of lore that is infrequently recorded in print or on tape, and rarely passed on to the next generation. All over the map of the subcontinent, there is an entire generation of people who have been made poets, philosophers, and storytellers by their experience during the Partition.<sup>4</sup>

This is a glimpse into that unwritten epic, getting more tattered everyday in the minds of the survivors, perpetrators, onlookers, and chroniclers. I bear witness to it without reading it the way those who have lived by it may like me to.

### **The other journey**

Public memory identifies India's day of freedom with tens of thousands of people thronging the centre of New Delhi, Nehru's stirring call to the world in a midnight session of the Indian Parliament to acknowledge India's 'tryst with destiny', and the ritual lowering of the Union Jack after 190 years of British imperial rule. On 15 August 1947 India walked towards a new dawn of freedom; its journey towards nationhood and statehood had begun.

In the social sciences, literature and cinema that beginning and journey have been repeatedly documented and celebrated. They dominate official India even more decisively. Freedom as an event and as an unfolding process is seen as part of a longer journey towards modernity and progress that began more than 150 years ago in India and is still continuing. Indeed, the idea of that journey has framed the Indian imagination so securely that all social, cultural, political and economic experiences of the country are now seen through it. In what is arguably the most influential popular film made in independent India, *Mother India*, in the penultimate scene, the long-suffering, widowed heroine shoots one of her two sons when he is about to abduct a young woman from her own village.<sup>5</sup> That climactic scene seems to crown her lifelong suffering, sacrifice for the sake of her children, struggle against local tyrants, self-denying courage and her allegiance to the community. But that is presumably not enough either for the makers of the film or the audience. For the life and deeds of the heroine have to be fitted—in a social-realist style imported from the erstwhile Soviet Union—within the frame of the official journey on which India has embarked. In the last scene, she—old, venerated and, as the title of the film attests,

symbolising India herself—inaugurates, of all things, a brand new water-management system.

However, there is also the other journey Indians do not like to talk about. That journey, closely associated with the birth of India and Pakistan, also frames significant aspects of the political cultures and international relations of these countries, though it does so silently, without anyone seriously admitting or denying it.<sup>6</sup> The journey began with a massive riot in Calcutta in August 1946 that killed around 5000 and more or less ended at the end of the winter of 1947–1948, after another large riot at Karachi and the assassination of Gandhi at Delhi. The ultimate symbol of the journey was the mass exodus of minorities from the new States that began at some places even before the States were in place. As a rough estimate, 16 million people lost their homes by the beginning of 1948. It was a kind of journey that South Asians had not previously seen. It uprooted people from habitats they had known for centuries, if not for thousand of years. Yet, they considered themselves lucky that they were not among the one million killed. As an informant said to historian Gyanendra Pandey, ‘It was only in the bloodshed of Partition that ordinary people saw the shape of independence.’<sup>7</sup>

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

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

Some were even unaware of Pakistan until some years after its creation. Almost all had never heard of the Muslim League, or the movement for Pakistan and only four from urban Sind and one from rural Punjab had worked for it.<sup>8</sup>

The exodus effectively reduced the number of Hindus in west Pakistan from something like 20 millions down to 250,000, nearly all of them in Sindh. Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province became virtually free of Hindus and Sikhs. In East Pakistan, it reduced the proportion of Hindus from about 29% to 12%.<sup>9</sup> Moni Chadha, a former diplomat, rightly asks:

Was the elimination of Sikhs from Pakistan in 1947 the clearest and least acknowledged case of genocide in history? Probably. Why is it that international do-gooders from various NGOs who profess to catalogue cases of genocide and wag accusing fingers about them at international for a never spoke about it for half a century? Why the selective amnesia?<sup>10</sup>

The answer is not available to Chadha because he does not seek clues to it in the tricks his own memory plays with him. Being blessed with a diplomat’s perspective on human tragedy, he forgets that, along with the Sikhs, almost the entire Punjabi Hindu community was eliminated from west Pakistan and nearly the entire Muslim community from what was the former east Punjab.<sup>11</sup>

The exodus in north India often took spectacular forms; in Punjab caravans of refugees escaping from the carnage and the plunder sometimes stretched for miles. At places, it turned pathetically low-key, too, as in Bengal and Bihar

where tens of thousands of poor peasants and artisans trudged their way towards the newly created borders. In both places, they used every mode of transport available—planes, ships, trains, bullock carts, camels—but most of them simply walked to the borders in enormously long *kafilas* or columns. Observers talk of four- or five-mile long columns which, in turn, attracted marauders eager to plunder not only the often-pitifully-small amounts of belongings the refugees could carry but also the young women among them.

Gyanendra Pandey draws our attention to the memories of a person who watched such a column of Muslim refugees going from Kapurthala to Jullunder:

The column was guarded by a few military sepoys. It was ten or twelve deep, the women and children walking in the centre, flanked on either side by men. Groups of armed Sikhs stood about in the fields on either side of the road. Every now and again one of these groups would make a sudden sally at the column of Muslims, drag out two or three women and run away with them. In the process they would kill or injure the Muslims who tried to resist them. The military sepoys did not make a serious attempt to beat off these attacks. By the time the column arrived at Jullunder almost all the women and young girls had been kidnapped in this manner.<sup>12</sup>

### The silence of the journey

Few talk about this journey or the events that precipitated it, either in South Asia or elsewhere. In a century of mass murders and massive dislocations, reports of carnage and uprooting, too, have a diminishing appeal after a while. Nothing could be staler for the media than a repetition of yesterday's events. Also, in a region where life expectancy is still around 60, many of the victims are already dead. Those who live are often unwilling to talk about their ordeal; they have been silent for years and have seemingly got accustomed to it. Some, after years, have made a reasonable compromise with the past. They, too, are reluctant to talk. In Pakistan, this 'eerie' silence has become a joint venture of the victims, the historians and the State.<sup>13</sup> It is not the silence of unconscious memories; it is the silence of a secret self.

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

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

If one discusses such acts, one also internalises them in one's blood and bones ... There's a saying that if you discuss ghosts and snakes, they tend to visit you. This talk is about dead people. Why invite their ghosts? ... such talks create a lot of pain and stress. I do not like discussing them. When we had just come here, we the women used to cry a lot, and exchange stories of misfortune with other families in

the camp. But today after fifty years, the wounds have healed. Why are you stoking them?<sup>14</sup>

Yet, at the same time, there is anger and hurt in the victims that their suffering has not been fully acknowledged. After arguing that Partition violence should not be remembered, one survivor says, ‘I do not understand, what I should tell you, and to what extent you will understand? Today your world is very different from mine.’<sup>15</sup> But he also adds, ‘If you want to talk, why don’t you talk about the thieves who have been in power since 1947? ... This Rajiv, this Indira and this Nehru ... all of them talked about independence. But did they ever mention partition and the suffering. For them we were just refugees.’<sup>16</sup> The survivor goes on to say:

Honestly, when the experience was raw, I never felt like talking to my children about partition. The children were too young to understand. When they grew up, so many other things kept coming up ... It is not that I have not discussed it with others, but they had similar experiences; so they understood. In itself partition was bitter, but the treatment meted out to us by the Delhiwallas was worse. The word ‘refugee’ has stuck to us: the local people usually do not marry us. It is true that before 1947 even we—the West Punjabis—never thought of marrying people from this side. Even now, they have a certain attitude towards refugees. Often I think that we could have stayed back and given a tough fight instead of fleeing like *Bhagoras* [cowards].<sup>17</sup>

There are other reasons, too, which are slowly surfacing. Many of the killers are now in their late seventies or eighties. They are venerable grandparents and village elders. For years some of them did not talk about Partition, perhaps partly out of vague fears of legal consequences and social approbation. Others were torn because they had killed—or actively participated in the self-immolation of—members of their own families and community. Chaudhuri Mangal Ram claims that he was young and hot-blooded in 1947. As he could not cross the newly created border to avenge the death of Hindus in Pakistan, he had to console himself by killing a few innocent Muslims nearer home. The Hindus of Pakistan were also innocent, he ventures as an excuse. He hastens to add, however, that he is now old and a different person; he would not now opt for the same concept of revenge.<sup>18</sup> Captain Nihal Singh of Rohtak, afraid that he might not be able to protect his wife, in an advanced state of pregnancy in 1947, shot her dead and has reportedly never been the same again.

Such people are now less afraid: they have made some sort of peace with their past. This was not so even a few years ago. The case of 53 years-old Jeet Behn, from a large family of Sikhs in Dheri, near Rawalpindi, is not atypical. She provides an example of memories that resist exposure.

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

... Father handed each of us kirpans [small ritual swords] explaining carefully that if the mob broke the door we should stab ourselves on the *left* side. My mother, nursing my three-month old brother, threw herself at father’s feet saying, ‘Save this

child. Agree to convert.' Father ignored her. When she repeated her entreaty my elder uncle got up, slashed her neck with a kirpan yelling, '*Yeh kehna haraam hai*' [This is blasphemy]. She died instantly. Father put her blood-soaked soaked dupatta on the tip of his sword, rushed out of the door half-crazed. People waiting on the other side literally skewered him with knives and swords. My eldest uncle who rushed out after him was similarly cut down. The doctor cousin got up to fight next. His wife stopped him, demanding he kill her, all the girls, before he went out. He stabbed her, killed his three-year-old son, stabbed each one of us. I still carry that kirpan scar on my scalp; and rushed out as we collapsed around him. He refused to stab his mother saying, 'No dharma tells me to do this.' He was lynched in seconds. Last to go was my octogenarian daadi [grandmother]. She tottered out, frail but resolute, saying, '*Kaisi ladai ladney aaye ho? Mujhe apne bacchon ko ek baar dekhna hain.*' [What kind of war is this? Let me at least see my children once.] They ripped out earrings, bangles, gold chain. And as she stood there bleeding, stoned her to death. Before they left they slaughtered the Muslim bhai.<sup>19</sup>

Urvashi Butalia supplies even more gruesome instances of such self-destruction.<sup>20</sup> And the self-immolation of Sikh women in March 1947 in Thoa Khalsa village, Rawalpindi district, where nearly 90 of them jumped into a well to avoid dishonour, has become a legend. Such experiences, after a point, throttle speech. Many respondents can even now smell the rotting bodies of the victims. Others, when they try to remember those days, choke on literally every word.<sup>21</sup>

These passions, when remembered in tranquillity, do not encourage one to speak; they induce one to distance oneself from those times and be silent. Indeed, they invoke an 'encapsulated' self and stories about the self with which one cannot live comfortably in normal times.<sup>22</sup> On the basis of his conversations with Sikh participants in Partition violence, who live near the India–Pakistan border, Mehta describes the guilt-ridden silence that has come to be associated with the memories of the carnage.<sup>23</sup> They also encourage one to think of those times as essentially sinful, not worth remembering. 'I shall tell you what is *pap*, *gandagi* ... when a man lusts for another man's blood, and that too without any personal animosity, when a man has a woman at home and yet defiles helpless other women. Don't you think that is *pap* [sin]?'<sup>24</sup>

Among our informants, one couple, married for 40 years, have never discussed the Partition violence between them, though both lost their fathers in the violence. Some other survivors have taken the silence to its logical conclusion: they show signs of mutism and dissociative reactions. Still others entered acute anxiety states during the interviews. One became incoherent while describing his experiences; he had wandered around in Pakistan for months after Partition, self-oblivious and probably in a state of dissociation, till an army convoy noticed his name tattooed on his forearm in Gurmukhi and sent him to India.<sup>25</sup> Another respondent, even after 50 years, choked every time he tried to say something about his experiences.<sup>26</sup>

Probably the last word on that silence has been said by Gulzar, the writer and film director, in his story *Raavi Paar*, recently translated into English.<sup>27</sup> It borrows, I am told, from an older, central Indian story that predates the Partition. In Gulzar's version, it is the story of a couple running away with two children, who are twins, in a train, from a village in west Pakistan to a city in India. One

of the children is already dead but the mother will not part with the body. On the advice of fellow passengers, the concerned father at one point picks up what he thinks is the body of the dead child and throws it out of the train into the river Raavi while his wife sleeps with the other child. The scream of the child thrown away tells him it was the wrong child. The child who reaches safety is dead; it cannot speak. The living child, who could have spoken, has been lost on the way or left behind.

Given the magnitude of the killings, the fate of those who were merely uprooted has attracted even less scholarly attention. Except for a re-written doctoral dissertation of Steven Keller, there is almost nothing systematic on the subject.<sup>28</sup> Yet 16 million is a large number, even in South Asia. They, together with the one million dead, have found ways of insidiously entering South Asia's political agenda. The public cultures of Pakistan, the whole of north India, Bangladesh, and to a lesser extent east and west India, especially the cities, have never been the same again. They bear the unmistakable stamp of that insidious entry.

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

### Comparing genocides

The European holocaust, the most thoroughly studied genocide of all times, had a number of unique features, which distinguished it from other genocides and pogroms directed against European Jewish communities in earlier times. Two of these features have been repeatedly emphasised and debated in recent works because of their relevance to our times. Firstly, not only did the State collude, as many States had done in earlier instances of genocide and pogrom, it systematically built a mega-machine for the final solution. A huge majority of Germans might have supported the killing of Jews, as Daniel Goldhagen's recent study insists,<sup>29</sup> but that support by itself would not have been enough.

Genocide requires well-educated professionals. They are necessary for its technology, its organisation, and its rationale. In the Nazi case, members of all the professions—physicians, scientists, engineers, military leaders, lawyers, clergy, university professors and school teachers—were effectively mobilised to the ideological project.<sup>30</sup>

Second, nineteenth century science, especially biology and specifically eugenics, has been increasingly identified as the principal source of the legitimacy built for ethnic cleansing in Germany. As with some of its pocket editions—the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the fire bombing of Dresden and Tokyo—the Jewish holocaust, too, was more a pathology of human rationality than of irrationality.<sup>31</sup> Even the Stalinist terror, which killed an estimated two million, derived sanction from scientised history, serving as another form of

evolutionism. In retrospect, it seems that if not the root, certainly the ultimate justification of the holocaust was a concept of knowledge and social engineering that had come to dominate European consciousness. The German attitude to the victims of the final solution was not particularly different from that of a farmer's towards a heap of dead insects after the pest controller has done his job.<sup>32</sup> Nothing reveals that attitude better than the chilling display at the Beit Hashoah Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles, of the small artifacts that were to constitute parts of a projected Museum of an Extinct Race. The Nazis planned to set up the museum after they had finally 'solved' the Jewish problem. The authorities of the Los Angeles museum seem unaware that the project was perfectly compatible with a significant part of the European record in the tropics during the last 300 years.

Perhaps as a result, while there *was* resistance to the violence and the totalism of the European holocaust, that resistance was infrequent, unorganised, scattered and usually individual. The inadequate resistance among the Jews, problematised in the 1940s by the likes of Bruno Bettelheim,<sup>33</sup> is well known. However, there has been no comparable interest in the infrequent resistance among Germans to the genocide of the Jews. Its infrequency has indirectly fuelled recent works such as Goldhagen's.

The compulsive form which the search for ethnic purity took in the Nazi millennial ideology was also directly legitimised by the nineteenth-century idea of public hygiene. Race was very nearly a sexually transmitted disease. Even young Germans planning to marry had to, under the Nazi racial laws, declare under oath that their parents and grandparents were not Jewish. The fear of racial contamination was a bizarre and comical part of German cultural and intellectual life during the 1930s.

Together the two features ensured that not only were the victims of the holocaust denied human status, there was a cultivated dehumanisation of the perpetrators and those who served as cogs in the wheel of the machine built for the genocide of Jews, gypsies and other such groups in Europe. The ideas of dispassionate, rational statecraft and objective, value-neutral knowledge, pushed to their limits, almost automatically led to Auschwitz, Belsen, Treblinka and Dachau.

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

trying to get a glimpse of their ‘victims’, and the victims themselves ‘resisted their lives being disrupted again by the “state” recovering them.’<sup>34</sup> Admitting these bonds is not an attempt to deny the violence, humiliation and gender injustice in the situation. It is to acknowledge that, at a time when pathological forms of thinking and emotions abounded, at least there was no paranoid search for racial and ethnic purity that characterised the genocidal mentality in the Third Reich. Nor was the killing of the enemy ever turned into an industry or a dispassionate, official duty.<sup>35</sup>

On such grounds, some may refuse to classify the violence of 1946–1948 among even the major Asian genocides of our times, such as the Armenian and Cambodian ones. Partition violence began as small, organised skirmishes that escalated into major bloodbaths, often helped by blatantly partisan police and State officials. But the armies were on the whole not involved (though retired army men, in some instances, were) and the infant States of India and Pakistan were complicit more by their inactivity than through active intervention. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the violence in South Asia was that all the victims knew that in other parts of the region, often only a few miles away, people from their own community were doing exactly what was being done to them. As a result, even some who were victims of torture or had lost their entire families retained their moral balance. Even Jeet Behn, the victim from Rawalpindi whom we have met earlier, says, ‘Do I feel any rage? No. *Maahaul bura tha. Log bure nahin the. Wo waqt hi bure the.*’ (The atmosphere was bad. People weren’t evil. The times themselves were bad.)<sup>36</sup>

That is probably why the violence has not divided the three communities permanently into victims (constantly asking themselves why they could be slaughtered so easily) and oppressors (constantly asking themselves how they could turn killers so effortlessly), both looking to the past with a mixture of guilt and defensiveness. Each major community in South Asia feels that it was cheated by the Partition and more victimised in the riots, but knows that others also suffered and feel aggrieved. There are also people in each community who paradoxically feel that their community won the battle, for it had inflicted greater and ‘purer’ suffering on the others.<sup>37</sup>

Whosoever from the Hindus and Sikhs came in front of us, were killed. Not only that, we got them to come out their houses and ruthlessly killed them and disgraced their womenfolk. Many women agreed to come with us and wished us to take them, but we were out for revenge.<sup>38</sup>

Through this wall of pain, fear, hatred and silence some have at long last begun to look at the birth trauma of India and Pakistan. One of the earliest to work on the subject, Nighat Said Khan, speaks on behalf of her collaborator, Anis Haroon, and herself:

we were aware that we ourselves, as children of Urdu-speaking migrants, and children of Pakistan, had never come to terms with the trauma of Partition; not because we come from homes that constantly and consciously lived in the past but because we had internalised an ongoing, if silent pain, and had never exorcised the horror not just of the violence, but of being a part of truncated identity.<sup>39</sup>

The hope is that, as with journeys through madness, this journey of exploration

too might turn out to be a step towards an alternative, enriched form of sanity, provided one knows how to work through the memories of the journey. Even chronicling the suffering of the survivor, to ensure that cold statistics do not hide the reality of the suffering, can be therapeutic. For it opens up the culture of politics to unconditional empathy and the courage to admit that suffering must have priority over the celebration of fictitious entities such as nation-states and nationalism in South Asia.

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

First, one identifiable feature of present-day religious and ethnic violence in South Asia is their diminishing component of passion. Most organisers and participants in such riots are professional or semi-professional small-time politicians who deem it part of their job to occasionally provoke or organise collective violence. There are sections in many metropolitan slums that get itchy if no riot takes place for a while. A riot means to them easy access to money and pillaged consumables. It is also criminal activity for which there is temporary moral sanction, even if it is partial and comes from only a section of the people. These activist-rioters are quite ecumenical. When not engaged in communal violence, they participate in caste riots, extortion rackets and election rigging. Well paid by South Asian standards and well protected politically, they are not spread among different communities randomly. Communities suffering social discrimination are usually better represented in such extra-social groups, for crime—like the entertainment industry, the stock market and spectator sports—is often a more open system than the more established industries and professions. Also, serious organisers of collective violence tend to maintain excellent relations with others on the wrong side of religious, caste and ideological boundaries.<sup>40</sup> They are professional and are not entirely taken in by their own language of hate.

This professional status and the absence of malice is recognised by society, and certainly by the political class. It may not be outrageous to claim that not a single major rioter or riot organiser during the last 50 years has gone to jail in any of the four major countries of South Asia that have seen religious or sectarian violence. The late C. V. Subba Rao, a human rights activist who had researched communal violence for years, once said that the official commission that enquired into the fierce riots at Bhiwandi near Bombay during 1992–1993 found ten policemen guilty of complicity with the rioters and imposed on them fines of Rs. 10 each, payable in instalments.<sup>41</sup>

In 1946–1948, however, riots had a more impassioned quality about them and, at places, they *did* involve a degree of fervour, even religious fervour. Those active in the riots *did* feel that they had to take on the responsibility of defending their kind and teach their enemies a lesson, perhaps the last series of riots in which a majority of the participants might have thought thus. The Partition riots were probably the closest to being large-scale religious riots in the last 50 years in South Asia.

Second, Partition violence was not merely the murder and pillage of others; it also involved massive violence directed towards the self. The mass suicide at

Thoa Khalsa was not an isolated instance; ‘stories of this kind of mass suicide, or of women being killed by their own families, are legion,’ Butalia says.<sup>42</sup> We shall not deal here with the important questions Butalia raises in this connection, but one should note that, to sharpen her critique of patriarchy, Butalia underscores the fear of dishonour as the cause of suicide. The data she uses show that just as important as this was the fear of losing one’s religion and culture.<sup>43</sup> That other fear seems to enjoy little respect in Butalia’s secularised world.

Third, though only one-fourth of Indians stay in cities, roughly two-thirds of all communal riots in India today takes place in cities. If one goes by origin, probably no less than 95% of riots in India originate in its cities. In the last 50 years, only 3.6% of the victims of religious violence have died in the villages, even though roughly 80% of the Indians have lived in villages during the period.<sup>44</sup> Religious violence in India—presumably in the whole of South Asia—has a clear urban connection.

Here, too, the violence of 1946–1948 was different. It spread to the villages in the whole of Punjab and in large pockets of east Bengal and Bihar. It is true that detailed studies have begun to show that the whole of northern India was not in flames, as many have believed for years. They also show that there were elements of planning and organisation in the riots, too; that they were not all spontaneity and fanaticism.<sup>45</sup> But it is also becoming clearer that the riots were not merely a speciality of the cities or a matter of urban slums exploding in violence. South Asian society, including rural South Asia, *was* implicated in the Partition riots.

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

Shahid Ahmed’s train journey ends in Lahore where, he recounts, sections of the waiting crowd proceeded at once to determine whether the train had been attacked and how many had been killed or wounded. They then promised summary justice. ‘Wait!’, they said, according to Shahid Ahmed, ‘we shall settle scores right now, in your presence’: and, stopping a refugee special going the other way at Baghbanpura station just outside Lahore, they paid back the killers of Eastern Punjab in their own coin—‘with interest’.<sup>46</sup>

This element of ‘balance’ did not mitigate the suffering, but allowed many victims to retain their sensitivity to the nature of the violence. There was another additional element of ‘equity’ sizeable sections in each community continued to believe that their community was the wronged party in 1946–1948, victimised and denied justice by the others who ganged up against it.

### **Accountability and resistance**

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

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

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

For instance, some victims who belong to the erstwhile Hindu élite of east Bengal readily admit that the brutal exploitation and discrimination experienced by the Muslim peasantry found an outlet in anti-Hindu violence in 1946–1948. In Noakhali in east Bengal, Gandhi's personal secretary Nirmal Kumar Bose, in his other incarnation a distinguished cultural anthropologist, surveyed the pattern of landholding in the district. Bose found that while Hindus were 18% of the population, they owned three-fourths of the land. Muslims, who constituted 82% of the population, were mostly peasants, directly confronting the disparity in their everyday life and living in dire poverty.<sup>47</sup> Yet Noakhali was a district noted for Islamic activism and fervour. The mix turned out to be volatile. To an extent, the reverse was the case in some pockets of Bihar where, too, the carnage in 1946–1947 was fearsome. The victims who mention socio-economic discrimination as the major source of Partition violence, and ultimately of their own dislocation and suffering, may not have direct access to such data, but they somehow sensed, often as children, the bitterness that was gradually building up. Hindsight may have sharpened their convictions.

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

of the violence all around.<sup>48</sup> Apparently, these communities wanted to avoid what they saw as a strange abnormality spreading from the cities, not as a standard inter-religious feud.

Many such victims are not angry with the enemy community for being cruel or homicidal. They believe that for a brief while, in parts of north India, humanity itself collapsed.<sup>49</sup> Their exposure to the dishonesty and betrayal by some members of their own community has confirmed this belief. They have not forgotten that their own relatives and friends sometimes took advantage of those chaotic times to cheat or pauperise them. A few victims seem to offset the help they received from friends in the 'enemy community' against the way their relatives, who sheltered them as refugees, quickly got tired of them.<sup>50</sup> In a couple of cases, these respondents have described how, even when family friends or distant relatives abducted or ran away with a woman in the family, the family had to publicly claim that someone from the enemy community had done this. In those troubled times, it was not only believable, but had become an accepted way of protecting family honour. At least one respondent claims that her husband, in drunken rage, killed their two children by throwing them off their terrace at Lahore and then blamed Muslims for killing them.

Third, many survivors remember how, even in those bitter days, when inter-community relations were at their nadir, individuals and communities resisted the violence. Many neighbours did succumb to greed and the temptation to loot, but others risked their lives—and that of their families—to protect friends and even strangers from the other community. A few even died trying to protect their wards.<sup>51</sup> A majority of the survivors have at least one story to tell about how a member of the 'enemy community' helped them or saved their lives. One of them, a Hindu refugee from what is now Bangladesh, remembers:

My sister-in-law was heavily pregnant, and the tension suddenly brought on the labour pains. There was no shelter, but finally there was an upper class Muslim family who welcomed them in. The ... people were still the same; it was just that terror suddenly spread ... They told my sister-in-law, 'Mother, do not mind, but you have to take off the white bangles [*shakha*] from your wrists, and somehow manage to take off the *sindoor* from the parting of your hair [the signs of a married Bengali Hindu women]. She was then dressed in the dress and anklets [*paijeb*] of the daughter-in-law of the house ... Her hair was rearranged too—she was made into a member of the family without hesitation. She delivered a male child under these circumstances.<sup>52</sup>

There is no biographical or psychological data available till now on the rescuers who defied the atmosphere of hate in 1946–1948. One can only speculate about the culture and early developmental experiences that facilitated their moral integrity. Most of them fell, one guesses from the narratives of the victims, in categories that Eva Fogelman identifies as religious-moral and emotional-moral rescuers.<sup>53</sup> It is, however, obvious that such individuals were far more numerous in South Asia. Those who resisted in Germany shared some common traits, the most important being deep religious faith, intact community ties, and positive experiences and memories of childhood. It could be that, in the matter of religious beliefs and community ties at least, the South Asian cultures were more fortunate.

All survivors do not like to remember these moments of generosity. After recounting such episodes, some quickly explain away the generosity as an exception that should not be over-emphasised or blown out of proportion. As in other parts of the world, the victims of collective violence in 1946–1948 supply a steady stream of easy recruits to fundamentalist and ultra-nationalist politics; they want to make sure that their memories do not cramp their contemporary politics. They defensively provide elaborate explanations of why neighbourly gestures by people from another faith must not negate the community stereotypes they have chosen to live with. In addition, thanks to the sensitivities promoted by holocaust studies, many of them are done from within a quasi-Freudian framework, there is nowadays a premium on cynicism and a tough-minded interpretation of the occasional generosity of neighbours. At the ground level, such cynicism and tough-mindedness could even be a cover for deeper hatred, jealousy and greed—a posture compatible with fundamentalist and ultra-nationalist constructions of the past.

Kirpal Raj is a case in point. He does not remember his date of birth but knows that he was about 12 years old at the time of Partition. After he came to India, he was admitted to a middle school at Sonapat in 1948 by a Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) worker. This worker had looked after him and borne his educational and other expenses since he was brought to Amritsar by the Indian army. Raj feels beholden to this person, a practitioner of traditional medicine. This also influences his remembrance of things past.

Young Kirpal's journey began suddenly, without any warning. One day, he went to the fields to relieve himself around twilight and decided to wander till the late hours as he was afraid of being beaten by his father. Suddenly he heard cheerful cries of *Allah ho Akbar*, the meaning of which at the time was not clear to him. He decided to stay back. The evening took a macabre turn when, while standing among the tall sugarcane stalks, he saw a young man running. Kirpal asked him why he was running so breathlessly. The stranger pointed towards the village and said, 'Don't go back; they are killing people. They will kill everyone.'

Whenever I have tried to recall and talk about my parents and my brothers, the images that crowd my memory are fire balls leaping high up in the air and very incoherent and mixed cries of various types. The cattle wailed the loudest, especially the buffaloes; this is the strongest memory I have of that evening ...

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

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

Kirpal was delirious with fever for a few days. He gathered later that he had typhoid. When he asked about his family, he was told that they had gone

elsewhere and would return later. ‘One day one of the boys told me that my parents were dead and so were my four brothers. And so were my grandmother, grandfather, and great grandmother.’<sup>54</sup> Raj guesses that he was the only Hindu to have survived. One day he asked Kariman Bee if it was true that the others had been killed. She did not answer. It was again one of their sons who said yes, all the Hindus and Sardars [Sikhs] were killed, and they were burnt, too. Raj felt acutely uneasy. Later, Rahmat Mian took him to the nearest camp. Raj does not feel obliged to Rahmat’s family at all:

I have not felt obliged towards the Muslim family which saved me because ... I think had I not hidden myself in the fields even I too would have been killed ... what happened to the Muslim neighbours who did not come to rescue their non-Muslim neighbours when they were being killed ... Not rescuing was also a form of participation in killing. How did it matter to them if a kid lived or died ... We had known these people for generations?<sup>55</sup>

Fourth, some victims organise their memories around instances of ‘strange’, culturally imposed limits to violence that surprised them in those amoral times. In one case, some Pathans attacked a Sikh village and offered to spare all if they converted to Islam. The Sikhs being Sikhs turned down the offer. The Pathans killed all the men of the village, but escorted some 200 women and children to a camp set up for refugees. The interviewee who lost her father, uncle and two brothers, says: ‘Pathans are very honest ... they will never touch things which do not belong to them.’<sup>56</sup> She also indicates that their experience could not even be shared with others, for no one would have believed at the time that they were spared by Muslims at a time when hundreds of thousands of women had been raped and abducted by both sides.<sup>57</sup>

Less bizarre were efforts to bind anxiety through black humour. Though it perhaps did not turn violence and death into laughter, even metaphorically such humour did probably lessen the guilt some felt on behalf of—or in identifying with—their own communities.<sup>58</sup> The following instance is from what is now Bangladesh:

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

Prasanna immediately understood the hidden message and he answered in the same vein: ‘You will finish me off if I come with you!’ ... Suja shot back, ‘If you die at the hands of a friend, you will go to heaven and, if you die in the hands of a stranger, you will go to hell.’<sup>59</sup>

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

Finally, there is a small group of people who have come to hate their own

communities for not hitting back strongly enough. B.L. Sharma Prem, an activist of the RSS since the age of 18 and a Partition victim who used to live at Lahore, is a colourful, if venomous instance:

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

I'm a Parshurami pandit. Fundamentalist by birth, instinct, training. We believe politics must be Hinduised, Hindus must be militarised. *Yeh aag bujhne nahin deni* (we shouldn't let this fire die out). I only live for the day when the *tiranga* [the tricolour] will be unfurled on Pakistani territory. We should be like the Israelis. They greet each other with a 'Next year in Jerusalem'; we should say 'Next year in Lahore'.<sup>60</sup>

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

Where does this impassioned hatred come from? One answer comes from studies drawing mainly upon the European holocaust. Another, with a different nuance, comes from scholars depending primarily on South Asian data. Stanley J. Tambiah sensitively captures that nuance when he tries to spell out the 'diabolical riddle' in ethnic conflicts with the following observation of Georg Simmel: 'The degeneration of a difference in convictions into hatred and fight occurs only when there were essential similarities between the parties. The "respect for the enemy" is usually absent where the hostility has arisen on the basis of previous solidarity.'<sup>61</sup> Tambiah goes on to ask:

Can we push this process of creating and repudiating the intolerable 'other' in current ethno-nationalist conflicts any further? Can we say that it is because that component of 'sameness' that the ethnic enemy shares with you, and because already your enemy is part of you, that you must forcibly expel him or her from yourself, objectify him or her as the *total other*? Accordingly, that component of 'difference from you, whether it be allegedly "religious" or "Imaginistic" or "racial" is so exaggerated and magnified that this stereotyped "other" must be degraded, determined and compulsively *obliterated*.'<sup>62</sup>

The two answers are probably not mutually exclusive. For the South Asian experience might not be totally inapplicable to the case of the German Jews, without whom the self-definition of modern Germans and the German culture could not—and perhaps still cannot—be complete in this century. 'Fear of loss of boundaries is the fear of loss of self, non-being'.<sup>63</sup>

However, everyone who talks like Sharma, need not necessarily have the record they themselves would prefer to have. One respondent claimed to have

killed a number of Muslims and even gave us details. Later, he abjectly admitted that they were all fictitious, designed to protect self-esteem and morale. 'We ourselves came to India as hungry nonentities that winter. How could we have killed any one?'<sup>64</sup>

### **The village in an abridged self**

The journey of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as young nation-states cannot be narrated without reconstructing and working through the memories of the other journey that marked the death of the British empire in South Asia. Gyanendra Pandey seems to recognise this.<sup>65</sup> But the story of that other journey, in turn, cannot be told without mapping out the journey which the victims—and others identifying with them—have continued to make in their mind over the last five decades. That third journey, like a dirty unending war, has territorialised and frozen the shifting, fluid cultural and psychological borders among religious communities in South Asia. It is doubtful if the violence was a clash among existing nations, for the nineteenth-century European idea of nationality has never truly conveyed the distinctive South Asian forms of religious or cultural separateness. Indeed, the violence itself helped crystallise nation-like groupings with which the ethnonationalists, the fundamentalists and even their modern secular foes, operating from various nineteenth-century European social-evolutionist positions, have gone to town. In South Asia at least, the new national boundaries are built not on the earlier distinctions, but on their ruins. To tell that part of the story, a word on that distinction and the plurality that has traditionally underpinned it.

South Asia has about 2000 languages and dialects, of which at least 20 are spoken by more than a million people each. It has nearly 250,000 villages, 20,000 castes and endogamous sub-castes, and virtually all the major religions of the world. Some of the religions not usually identified with the region—such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Zoroastrianism—all have histories longer than a thousand years in the region. Two of them, Indian Christianity and Judaism, claim a history of about 2000 years. Within its present boundaries, India includes more Muslims than any other country except Indonesia. Bangladesh, despite the massive exodus of Hindu population at the time of Partition and the continuous trickle of Hindus from it into India, is still the world's second largest Hindu country.

This diversity is organised not only territorially but also in intricate structures of interpenetrating, layered lifestyles, cultures and self-definitions. According to a survey done in 1994 by the Anthropological Survey of India, about 425 communities in India have more than one religion.<sup>66</sup>

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

It is no surprise that, during the last 100 years, no population census in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka has identified a single person as belonging to more than one religion. If the survey led by K. Suresh Singh had not been done, such communities would have been seen as only an anthropologist's delight or *exotica*. They would not have been considered relevant to larger issues of ethnic, religious and sectarian violence in Indian society.

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

In this respect, there is a distinct trend in the imageries that we have unearthed. Many victims see the villages as the source of evil and the explosion of rural violence as the ultimate proof of society coming unstuck. And they try hard to document that awareness. Jeet Behn says with the confidence of a statistician that 500 people from 15 villages participated in the second attack that killed her family, as if she had done a thorough survey.<sup>67</sup> Is she trying to say that the involvement of the villages was widespread, or that there was serious coordination and planning for the mob to have assembled from so many villages? We do not know. We can only surmise that this fear of villages, contaminated by an unknown poison that divided communities and dissolved morality, bears some resemblance to the fear of the metropolitan slum exploding during communal and ethnic tensions nowadays.

However, there is a crucial difference. Underneath this fearsome memory of villages exploding in violence is the image of a village, pristine in its ability to reconcile—in fact celebrate—differences, even when that difference is tinged with caste hierarchy and principles of purity and pollution.<sup>68</sup> One remarkable and consistent part of the memories is the fondness and affection with which the survivors remember their multi-ethnic, multi-religious villages. In the context of Indian popular cinema, Chidananda Dasgupta talks of the village that ceases to be real in the life of the immigrant and turns into a dream. The dream is only sullied by the presence of the villain who has to be defeated at the end by the hero.<sup>69</sup> Time and the experience of pain has evidently brought about a different order of 'dream work' into the memory of the victims of Partition violence. They have gone beyond the fantasy life of the consumers of popular cinema. Only in some cases is the villain rediscovered, not in the remembered village, but in life outside—in the form of a generic category called the Muslim, the Sikh or the Hindu. Usually, it would appear that, over the years, all struggle, suffering and conflicts have been painstakingly erased from the village of the mind. Above all, there is no communal tension in the remembered pre-Partition villages. Along with an easy life, prosperity (which usually means the availability of cheap foodstuff and articles of daily use) and cultural riches, the village as a pastoral paradise offers a perfect community life.<sup>70</sup>

To realists of all hues such nostalgic invocation of the village is a dangerous myth. It misleads one about the past and romanticises what have always been ambivalent, if not hostile, social relations. To those to whom the denial of psychological realities is itself an index of objectification and authoritarianism, the victim's imagination of the pre-Partition village has an entirely different meaning. It looks like a crucial means of coping with posttraumatic stress. It reorders the memory of a journey that constantly threatens to take control of one's life: it reiterates the ethics of everyday life and multi-cultural living. Resorting to an idyllic past may be the survivors' way of relocating their journey through violence in a universe of memory that is less hate-filled, less buffeted by rage and dreams of revenge. Survivors remember their victimhood, they live with the trauma; they even re-do in their mind the journey across the border, marking the end of innocence, even the ill-treatment and brutalisation at the end of the journey in strange cities, refugee camps, in new vocational situations. Nonetheless, some semblance of restoration of a moral universe is possible in the memory of the village from which one has been exiled and the memory of a culture to which one should be loyal. I have already argued, at one plane, that the village is the ultimate prototype of the Indian civilisation and serves not merely as a critique of the city, but also as the anchor of virtually all traditional visions of a desirable lifestyle.

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

If one had been living in a city in pre-Partition days and not in a village, the image of the city has been split. For those uprooted, the memory of the abandoned city has acquired—especially if they came from addictive cities like Lahore, Calcutta, Delhi, Dhaka, Karachi, Lucknow, Hyderabad—some of the features of the remembered village. It continues to haunt the victim despite the passage of time. However, that is not the whole story. On another plane, the city that gave one shelter has become witness to one's humiliating, forced integration into an anonymous mass. This other city of the mind is the one where one became a worker or a professional; and here one ceased to have a vocation or occupy a unique, culturally identifiable space. On this plane, the city took away one's cultural location, only to give one an identifiable cultural stereotype. For, being a refugee also often made one part of a recognisable, usually endogamous,

caste-like group, identified with pushy, entrepreneurial go-getting and cutting corners.

It is perhaps not strange that, for many survivors, the country that was declared their official abode and provided them with a safe haven has still remained a foreign land. Unbelievably, after 50 years, almost all respondents—in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh—talked of the abandoned village or city as their homeland, and their adopted land as someone else's country. For Sindhi Hindus, for instance, as I have already pointed out, their migration from Sindh has now come to mean not merely the loss of culture but also the loss of a part of their religious heritage, particularly those traditions that they shared with Sindhi Muslims but not with non-Sindhi Hindus.<sup>71</sup>

Such imageries ensure that, to the survivors, the violence in 1946–1948 remains a partly unexplained chapter of their lives and times. For most, there was in the riots a touch of the principle of violence-for-the-sake-of-violence—a necrophilia, the presence of which they tacitly admit. They place their experiences outside the range of normality, sanity and even comprehensibility. Perhaps that is their way of coping with trauma. It makes the return to normality slightly easier for many.

### Settling scores

The violence ended in the winter of 1947–1948, rather unexpectedly. It ended not through State intervention but, one suspects, through sheer tiredness and the sense of the futility of it all. The assassination of Gandhi at the hands of a Hindu zealot on 30 January 1948 also played a role. Instead of weakening the forces of tolerance and amity, it strengthened them. Gandhi had walked through the riot-devastated villages of Noakhali with results that could only be called moving and the effects of his 'fast unto death' to stop the carnage at Delhi was said to be 'electric'. Muslims at Delhi talked of his arrival as rain after a particularly long and harsh summer, for afterwards no major riot took place in the city.<sup>72</sup> His fast not only brought peace, but also a new self-awareness. Pandey reports that M. S. Randhawa, the notoriously partisan Deputy Commissioner of Police at Delhi, 'even took a group of Hindu and Sikh leaders to begin repairs to the shrine of the "Sufi" saint Khwaja Qutubuddin Bakhtiar Chishti, near Mehrauli, which had been desecrated'.<sup>73</sup> The fast had also revealed that though the infant States of India and Pakistan were born in hatred, Gandhi's moral stature still cut across the new borders. During the fast 'there were anxious enquiries about Gandhi's health even from across the borders and officers and ministers in the Pakistan government sought for ways to offer him support'.<sup>74</sup> The Muslim League, otherwise a bitter opponent of Gandhi, passed a resolution expressing its 'deep sense of appreciation' for his efforts.<sup>75</sup>

However, Gandhi could not be everywhere and, by the end of January 1948, he was in any case dead. How did the persons and communities caught in the web of violence return from their journey into madness? Why did peace suddenly descend on north India? Does that uncertain return have anything to say about South Asian cultures and personality and their complex interrelationship? In the end, I shall touch upon this issue with the help of a real-life

parable, a news story reported in *The Statesman*, the Calcutta daily. To transcend the past, the parable suggests, one need not always museumise, whitewash, objectify or exorcise it; one can live with it and yet exercise principled forgetfulness.<sup>76</sup>

Meharbanpura was a Muslim-dominated village at the time of Partition and when the exodus of the Muslims from the surrounding villages began, a few thousand got together and camped in Meharbanpura. Around this camp were villages dominated by the Sikhs and the Hindus. Hardial Kaur, a villager now in her 80s, recalls:

Mutual distrust between the Sikhs and the Hindus on one side and the Muslims on the other was the order of the day. The flames of distrust were fuelled not only by authentic information of communal clashes but also by rumours about each side having acquired *asla* [ammunition] and that major strikes were being planned by the fanatics on both sides.<sup>77</sup>

Daljeet Singh, another elderly villager, continues the story. A couple of days after Independence in 1947, a mob of about 200 people from the Sikh and Hindu-dominated villages planned an attack on the Muslim camp in Meharbanpura. The attack was to be led by Bhan Singh known to be a fanatic. Another resident adds, 'Bhan Singh had been planning an attack for a number of days, had obtained some weapons from Amritsar and had provoked and persuaded the non-Muslim residents into attacking the Muslim camp to drive away the occupants.'<sup>78</sup> According to Daljeet Singh, who saw the events from a distance:

the Muslims in the camp who numbered over 2,000 apparently got to know of the attack and were well prepared to face it. Unfortunately for Bhan Singh, the ... rifle he was carrying, failed him and after a brief skirmish outside the Muslim camp at Meharbanpura, most of his associates fled while he was overpowered and brutally done to death.<sup>79</sup>

Bhan Singh's daughter-in-law, Palo, still stays in the village. She picks up the thread of the story. Bhan Singh's son Harbans Singh, she says, was posted as a head constable at Jhabbal in the Khem Karan area. During the course of his duty, he found a helpless young Muslim woman, Nawab Bibi, whose immediate family had been murdered, and the whereabouts of her other relatives were not known. 'As she was helpless,' Palo says, 'we gave her shelter and she was apparently reconciled to staying here.'<sup>80</sup>

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

Harbans looked for her at the border and in government offices, but failed. Finally, after a few weeks, he assumed the name Barkat Ali, arranged to cross the border into Pakistan by paying a middle-man the princely sum of Rs. 30. In Lahore, under his new name, Harbans produced some papers to show that he was a displaced Muslim from Sultanwind area on the outskirts of Amritsar. He was allotted two shops in a village near Lahore and he started a cloth business.

According to *The Statesman*, 'He kept trying to trace his "beloved" and ... managed to find her. The list of names of those displaced was available with the authorities and this apparently helped Harbans trace Nawab Bibi.'<sup>81</sup>

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

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is the third in a series called 'Imaginary Journeys', delivered as the Jerusalem Lectures on Indian Civilisation in Jerusalem, 19–28 December 1997. The lecture draws upon an ongoing study of the memories of and resistance to Partition violence, being done at the Committee for Cultural Choices by, among others, Anindita Mukhopadhyay, Meenakshi Verma, Aleeka, Rehan Ansari and Amena Mohsin. I am grateful to them and to the Catholic Relief Services and William Canny, for supporting the study. Additional resources have come from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. I am also thankful to Mahua Chaudhuri of NDTV for allowing me to use her interviews with victims of Partition notes and to Giri Deshingkar, Vinay Lal and some of the listeners in Jerusalem for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> D R Nagaraj, 'Ethics and aesthetics of representation of violence', Indo-French Colloquium on Representations and Uses of the Sense of Belonging. Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, 2 November–December 1996.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf S Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, New York, Harper Collins, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Suketu Mehta, 'Partition', *Communalism Combat*, 420, April 1998, pp 8–12; see p 12.
- <sup>5</sup> Mehboob Khan, *Mother India*, Bombay, Mehboob Khan, 1957.
- <sup>6</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'Too painful for words?', *The Times of India*, 20 July 1997.
- <sup>7</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'Partition and independence at Delhi: 1947–48', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32(36), 6 September 1997, pp 2261–2272; see p 2262.
- <sup>8</sup> Nighat Said Khan, 'Identity, violence and women: a reflection on the Partition of India 1947' in *Locating the Self* Nighat Said Khan, Rubina Saigol and Afia Shehrbano Zia (eds), Lahore, ASR, 1994, pp 157–178; see 158–159.
- <sup>9</sup> Gowher Rizvi, 'Constitutionalism: the experience of Bangladesh', Lecture at the India International Centre organised by the Law and Society Trust, Colombo, 4 August 1997.
- <sup>10</sup> Moni Chadha, 'Partition: a surgery sans anaesthesia', *The Hindustan Times*, 31 August 1997.
- <sup>11</sup> Mr Chadha does not even care to read the reports of the government he has served. On the basis of the evidence of nearly 15,000 witnesses, given before the Fact Finding Organisation set up by the Government of India, Justice G. D. Khosla notes the evacuation of almost the entire Muslim population of East Punjab and concludes that the loss of Muslim life was not less than the loss of non-Muslim life. G D Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1949, especially Ch 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Khosla, *Stern Reckoning*, p. 289.
- <sup>13</sup> Khan, 'Identity, violence and women', p. 157.
- <sup>14</sup> Meenakshi Verma, Interview with Rajinder Kaur February 1997. The interviewee adds: 'By the grace of Vahe Guru, we are quite comfortable ... and do not need anything. The misfortune did not happen just to me and my family. Millions of people and families have been devastated ... Why I do not want to speak about partition? The reason is that the murderers could not be caught, nor were they punished. People who killed and looted were strangers. No one could have recognised them. When you do not know the murderers, why this complaint or lamentation?' Cf. the remarks of a Hebrew writer who survived the Nazi concentration camps: 'After liberation the one desire was to sleep, to forget and to be reborn. At first there was a wish to talk incessantly about one's experiences; this gave way to silence, but learning to be silent was not easy. When the past was no longer talked about, it became unreal, a figment of one's imagination.' Aharon Appelfeld, quoted in Martin S. Bergmann and Milton E. Jucovy (Eds.), *Generations of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 5–6.
- <sup>15</sup> Meenakshi Verma, interview with Ram Narain, a refugee who was a spare-parts dealer at Bhawalpur, Pakistan, in August 1997 at Delhi.
- <sup>16</sup> Verma, interview with Ram Narain.
- <sup>17</sup> Verma, interview with Ram Narain.

- <sup>18</sup> Meenakshi Verma, interview with Chowdhary Manta Ram, 1997.
- <sup>19</sup> Jeet Behn, in Sunil Mehra and Prashant Pajjar (with Azhar Abbas, Mazhar Zaidi, Arshad Mahmood, Soutik Biswas and Pritha Sen), 'Sufferers and survivors', *Outlook*, 28 May 1997, pp 32–51, see p 51.
- <sup>20</sup> Urvashi Butalia, 'Community, State and gender: on women's agency during Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 April 1993, pp WS-12–22.
- <sup>21</sup> Though survival in some cases did depend on being silent during the Partition riots, there was nothing corresponding to the silence enforced through violence and executions in the concentration camps: 'Crying or making a face when one was hit in a concentration camp was crime that would prompt immediate execution. The conspiracy of silence in survivors, persecutors, and their children has many determinants; but, no doubt, it also has as its source the taboo on telling and denial instituted by the Nazis themselves and continued to this day by the neo-Nazis.' Judith S Kestenberg, 'Introduction, Part III: The Persecutors' children, in Bergmann and Jucovy', *Generations of Holocaust*, pp 161–166; see p 162.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf Henry Abramowitz, 'There are no words: two Greek-Jewish survivors of Auschwitz', *Analytic Psychology*, 3(3), 1986, pp 201–216.
- <sup>23</sup> Mehta, 'Partition'.
- <sup>24</sup> Meenakshi Verma, interview with Rajendra Kaur, formerly of Rawalpindi, now at Delhi, August 1997.
- <sup>25</sup> Meenakshi Verma, interview with Darshan Kakkar, Delhi, January 1997.
- <sup>26</sup> Meenakshi Verma, interview with Suchcha Shah, Chandigarh, September 1997.
- <sup>27</sup> Gulzar, 'Raavi Paar', in *Raavi Paar and Other Stories* Alok Bhalla (trans.), New Delhi, Harper Collins, 1997, pp 42–47.
- <sup>28</sup> Stephen Keller, *Uprooting and Social Change: The Role of Refugees in Development*, Delhi, Manohar, 1975.
- <sup>29</sup> Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* New York, Knopf, 1996. For a critique of Goldhagen from a point of view not incompatible with that of this paper, see C Fred Alford, 'Hitler's willing executioners: what does "willing" mean', *Theory and Society* 26(5), October 1997 pp 719–738. For an excellent, systematic, empirical assessment of this issue, see A D Moses, 'Structure and agency in the Holocaust: Daniel J. Goldhagen and his critics', *History and Theory*, 37(2), 1998, pp 194–219.
- <sup>30</sup> Robert J Lifton and Erik Markusen, *The Genocidal Mentality: Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat* New York; Basic Books, 1990, p 98.
- <sup>31</sup> This issue has been empirically explored in Robert J Lifton, *Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, New York, Basic Books, 1986. The classic statement of this position is of course Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Harmondsworth Penguin, 1965; for a more recent exploration, see Zigmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca, Cornell University, 1991.
- <sup>32</sup> Its inner logic found its final expression in the Cambodian holocaust. In that carnage, one-third of a country was liquidated for the benefit of the remaining two-thirds, strictly according to the principles of scientific history as taught by such respectable academics within the portals of the Sorbonne to eager students who later served as ideologues of the genocide in Cambodia.
- <sup>33</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays*, New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1979.
- <sup>34</sup> Khan, 'Identity, violence and women', p. 165. For detailed work in this area see Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995, ch 3.
- <sup>35</sup> Veena Das and Ashis Nandy, 'Violence, victimhood and the language of silence', in *The Word and the World: Fantasy, Symbol and Record* Veena Das (ed.), New Delhi, Sage, 1986, pp 177–196.
- <sup>36</sup> Jeet Behn, in Mehra and Pajjar, 'Sufferers and survivors', p 51.
- <sup>37</sup> There is, however, a feeling in some sections of the Hindus that they did not match the aggression of the two 'martial' communities in the conflict, the Muslims and the Sikhs. See B L Sharma Prem on this subject later.
- <sup>38</sup> Letter to a relative from a subaltern in the Punjab Regiment, quoted in Gyanendra Pandey, 'Partition history and the making of nations', Delhi, Department of History, Delhi University, 1995, unpublished manuscript, p 10.
- <sup>39</sup> Khan, 'Identity, violence and women', p 167.
- <sup>40</sup> On the dominant political culture of communal violence, see Ashis Nandy, The politics of secularism; recovery of religious tolerance, *Alternatives*, 13(3), 1988, and 'The twilight of certitudes', *Alternatives*, 22(1), 1997, pp 177–194.
- <sup>41</sup> C V Subba Rao, Seminar on the Profile of Communal Violence in India, at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 1995.
- <sup>42</sup> Butalia, 'Community, state and gender'. In the non-fictional writings on the Partition that have emanated from India's modern sector, Butalia is one of the few who have paid serious attention to this part of the story.
- <sup>43</sup> Among the survivors who escaped to India almost all the cases of such mass suicide involved Sikhs. And Khan in 'Identity, violence and women' mentions similar instances of self-destruction among Muslims escaping India. This may have something to do with the complex, close relationship and intertwined self-definition of Sikhs and Muslims in Punjab. These intertwined self-definitions often go with extreme fears of losing identity. There are clues to this complex relationship in JPS Uberoi, *Religion, Civil*

- Society and the State: A Study of Sikhism* Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996. Also relevant to this issue is Stanley J Tambiah, 'Obliterating the "Other" in former Yugoslavia', *Nethra*, 1(2), January–March 1997, pp 7–35. The same issue emerges in other forms in Obeyesekere, 'Dutthagamani and the Buddhist conscience', in *Religion and Political Conflict in South Asia* Douglas Allen (ed.), New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp 135–160; and Vamik D Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies* New York, Jason Aronson, 1988. We shall return to this subject.
- <sup>44</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'Coping with the politics of faiths and cultures: between secular State and ecumenical traditions in India', Presented at the meeting of the Culture and Identity Project of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 8–9 July 1995.
- <sup>45</sup> For instance, Shail Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes: Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997.
- <sup>46</sup> Pandey, 'Partition and independence', p 2271.
- <sup>47</sup> Nirmal Kumar Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, Calcutta, Nishana, 1953, p 33.
- <sup>48</sup> Meenakshi Verma, interview with Sukhvinder Nijhawan, Chandigarh, September 1997.
- <sup>49</sup> Meenakshi Verma, interview with Kalawati Verma, Delhi, March 1997; Dulari Nagpal, Delhi, April 1997; Jaspreet Kaur, Delhi, April 1997; Kantarani Dhingra, Delhi, May 1997; Lado Talwar, Chandigarh, September 1997.
- <sup>50</sup> For instance, Jagdish Prakash, 'End of Innocence', in 'Train From Pakistan', *The Pioneer*, 26 January 1997.
- <sup>51</sup> The concept of survivor as used in this paper has a particular slant. While it carries the meaning associated with it in such pioneering works on genocide as that of Robert J Lifton, it also means in South Asian context someone who has faced genocidal violence but has also experienced some help from someone in the enemy community, a help that has not merely ensured his or her survival but has also become permanently intertwined with the memory of that violence.
- <sup>52</sup> Anindita Mukhopadhyaya, 'The humane face', *The Hindu*, 31 August 1997.
- <sup>53</sup> Eva Fogelman, 'Victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers in the face of genocide and its aftermath, in *Genocide, War and Human Survival*, Charles B Strozier and Michael Flynn (eds), New York; Rowman and Littlefield, 1996, pp 87–98; see pp 91–92.
- <sup>54</sup> Meenakshi Verma, interview with Kirpal Raj, Delhi, June 1997.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Meenakshi Verma, 'The survivor's story', *The Hindu*, 24 August 1997.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Anindita Mukhopadhyaya, 'The last journey', *The Hindu*, 31 August 1997.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>60</sup> B L Sharma Prem, in Mehra and Pajjar, 'Sufferers and survivors', pp 38–39. Prem has recently, presumably out of disgust, converted to Sikhism.
- <sup>61</sup> Stanley J Tambiah, 'Obliterating the "Other" in former Yugoslavia', pp 7–8. Also Ashis Nandy, Shikha Trivedy, Achyut Yagnik and Shail Mayaram, *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>63</sup> Avner Falk, 'Border symbolism revisited', in *Maps from the Mind: Reading Psychogeography*, Howard F Stein and William G Neiderland (eds), London, University of Oklahoma, 1989, pp 151–160; see p 157.
- <sup>64</sup> Meenakshi Verma, interview with Aman Singh, Delhi, May 1997.
- <sup>65</sup> Pandey, 'Partition, history and the making of nations'.
- <sup>66</sup> K Suresh Singh, *The People of India* New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994, vol 1. Such figures seem strange to only those unacquainted with Asian realities. Japanese census data tell us that in Japan the total number of people owing allegiance to different faiths exceeds the total population, mainly because many who claim to be Shinto also claim to be Buddhist. It might be fairly safe to presume that whatever kinds of violence Japan may suffer from Shinto-Buddhist strife will not be one of them. But few countries are as successful as Japan. What is seen as a charming aberration in Japan's case enjoys no status or legitimacy among the South Asian élite.
- <sup>67</sup> Jeet Behm, in Mehra and Pajjar, 'Sufferers and survivors'.
- <sup>68</sup> Going to the city as part of a rural mob to rob and kill in the city was not rare. Pandey talks about it in his 'Partition and independence', p 2264. So do a number of others. It is also a key imagery in a famous short story, Saadat Hassan Manto, 'Cold meat', in *Partition Stories* Alok Bhalla (ed), New Delhi, Harper Collins, 1997, pp 91–96.
- <sup>69</sup> Chidananda Dasgupta's. See his *The Painted Face: Studies in India's Popular Cinema*, New Delhi, Roli Books, 1991, p 13.
- <sup>70</sup> Cf Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Remembered villages: representation of Hindu-Bengali memories in the aftermath of the Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10 August 1996, pp 2143–2151; and Pandey, 'Partition and independence'.
- <sup>71</sup> This could be more true of refugees who came to India than of those who went to Pakistan. For the latter, the term *watan*, homeland, is double-edged—the *watan* is in India but is not India. Khan, 'Identity, violence and women', pp 158–159.

<sup>72</sup> Pandey, 'Partition and independence', p 2266.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p 2264.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Dilip Simeon, 'The futility of commonsense: an essay on Ahimsa', *The Eye*, 5(1), October–December 1997, pp 15–23; see p 20.

<sup>76</sup> 'History's forgotten doubles', *History and Theory*, 1995,

<sup>77</sup> 'Romance in the days of Partition', *The Statesman*, 6 August 1997.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.