

(*Modern Asian Studies*, 30, 3 1996, pp.681-737)

Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of 'Communalism': Partition Historiography Revisited

Ayesha Jalal

Scholarship on the partition of India has produced more conflicting arguments than can be synthesised neatly to provide a definitive view of this watershed event in South Asian history. Apart from the very complex nature of the subject, its continuing role in fanning inter and intra-state tensions in contemporary South Asia has led historians to privilege the gloss of nationality rather more than the thrust of scholarship. The few intellectuals who have sought to transcend the limiting constraints of their nation-states are constantly reminded of their national origins in the critiques and counter-critiques that have characterised partition historiography. Even non-partisan scholarship rarely escapes being labelled 'made in India' or 'made in Pakistan'. To be relatively immune from the politics and emotionalism that have so mired the debate on partition and its aftermath requires a none-too-easy negotiation of identities centred around the nation-state which the tortuous process of division left in its wake.

During the past decade or so a new generation of scholars has been questioning received 'national' wisdoms on partition. Yet even as old orthodoxies recede before the flood of fresh historical evidence and earlier certitudes are overturned by newly detected contradictions, the bitterness that for so long vitiated meaningful debate on the subject shows few signs of abating. Far from healing the multiple fractures which turned the promised dawn of freedom into a painful moment of separation, the march of time in many instances has cast partition historiography into a more rigid mould. The psychological legacy of partition has left a much deeper impact on people's minds than the social, economic and political dynamics that led to the division. Whether the two dimensions should be separated quite as surgically as India was dismembered by the partitioner's axe is itself an issue of considerable disagreement among historians. If secularists still acknowledge the significance of historical context and contingent events, albeit by reaffirming the stigma of 'communalism',¹ the recent subaltern intervention deems the pain and violence that attended the lives of ordinary people to be far more important than the political fact of partition.² The apparently irreconcilable, yet partially imbricated, secularist and subalternist positions with their loud claims and equally deafening silences afford an opportunity to rethink the notion of 'communalism' and reappraise the debates over the history and meaning of partition.

In his edited anthology in OUP's 'Themes in Indian History' series Mushirul Hasan sets about surveying partition historiography, especially as it has developed over the past two decades, but also incorporating selections from the writings and speeches of some of the key actors in the drama. With a welter of writings on Muslim politics to his credit, Hasan is a worthy candidate for the task. He has made his selections judiciously, capping the project

¹Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization*, Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1993.

²Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Prose of Otherness', in David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds.), *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha*, Delhi, 1994.

with a broad ranging introduction which delineates the main contours of an ongoing debate and highlights aspects that have remained understudied. Rather than extract sections from major books, Hasan has generally preferred to select essays and review articles from journals. This collection of over a dozen previously published pieces - including Asim Roy's masterly review of works on the high politics of partition; several important articles on Muslim politics in U.P., Bengal and the Punjab; a translation of Sadaat Hasan Manto's much acclaimed short story *Toba Tek Singh* and a useful annotated bibliography - will be welcomed by students of partition in particular and of South Asian history in general. Whether scholars of partition will be entirely satisfied with the end result is more open to question.

Explanations of why the subcontinent came to be partitioned had long remained trapped within the rival paradigms of the 'two-nation' theory lauded on the Pakistani side of the divide and the 'secular/composite nationalist' world view hailed in India. The debate on partition was advanced during the last decade or so through an exploration of the regional and class dimensions of the so-called Muslim 'communal' problem. Interpretations of the 'Muslim problem' in pre-partition India, it came to be recognised by some scholars, diverged more on account of the very different requirements of Muslims in areas where they were in a majority and those where they were in a minority rather than purely ideological or post-1947 'national' affiliations. While taking a charitable view of their contributions, Hasan does not appear to be altogether willing to depart from the nation-state-centric views of the 'great divide'. Given that the most perceptive part of Hasan's analysis is a product of his own detailed research on the politics of Muslims in the minority province of U.P., his inability to analytically disaggregate the 'communal' and regional components of Muslim identity is especially regrettable. And this despite the clear recognition of the internal differentiations and contradictions in the political category of Muslims at the all India level. True to his ideological leanings in favour of Congress's 'secular nationalism', Hasan ends up lumping under the rubric of 'religious communalists' all those Muslims who for a variety of reasons - political, ideological, regional or class based - rallied to the Muslim League's demand for a 'Pakistan'. This insistence is the more surprising since Hasan's endorsement of the Congress's secular nationalist position is shrouded in ambivalences. He records instances of Hindu right wing ideologues seriously compromising Congress's commitment to the secular ideal. Despite a barely disguised distaste for the principal protagonist of 'Pakistan', Hasan notes that Mohammad Ali Jinnah was not a 'religious bigot' (p.10) but one of the strongest advocates of Congress's secular creed. Moreover, there were powerful secular strains within Muslim politics. Indeed, men who later swung to the Muslim League's side - the Raja of Mahmudabad, Liaquat Ali Khan and Khaliqzaman to name but a few - hardly formed the star studded gallery of religious ideologues to justify portraying the supporters of 'Pakistan' as the 'communal' opponents of Congress's secular nationalism.

But then why persist in presenting the political differences between the Congress and the Muslim League as a simple battle between the noble ideal of 'secularism' and the nefarious construct of 'communalism'? Hasan provides no satisfactory answer, leaving one with the unfortunate impression that loyalty to a national ideology can get the better of even the most knowledgeable and well meaning scholar. He is, to be sure, utterly fair to the votaries of other national ideologies. An ardent believer in the virtues of secular nationalism, Hasan nevertheless gives much credence to Farzana Sheikh's contention that Muslim political history in the subcontinent was influenced by 'the belief that Muslims ought to live under Muslim governments' (p.32). This does seem a stretch removed from Hasan's premise that the

theory of a separate Muslim nation 'hardly reflected the consciousness of a community, for it was conceived by a small group, in a specific context, as an ideological counterweight to secular nationalism' (p.1). These slippages might have been avoided if Hasan had investigated the extent to which Muslim 'communalism' was an ideological construction of the politics of secular nationalism.³

Yet such ironies should not distract from some significant additions to the burgeoning literature on partition that Hasan has done so well to compile into a single volume. By far the most interesting is the attempt to highlight the period 1937-1940 during which Jinnah and the Muslim League managed to gain a foothold in Indian politics which they never previously possessed. Contrary to the confirmed Indian nationalist position, Hasan is not dismissive of 'Muslim grievances' under the Congress ministries. Yet in treading gingerly on this issue, mindful no doubt of its close proximity to the ignoble domain of 'Muslim communalism', Hasan ends up equivocating on the actual Muslim experience in Congress ruled provinces between 1937 and 1939. Consequently, one is not absolutely sure why Hasan considers this phase to be so critical in the evolution of Muslim 'separatism'. Was it the fact of 'continued oppression of Muslim minorities in the Congress provinces' (p.25) or merely the Muslim League's well orchestrated 'communal' propaganda that made these years so crucial in the enunciation of the demand for a Pakistan? Hasan also says nothing of how the predicament of Muslims in the minority provinces shaped, if at all, the politics of Muslims in the majority provinces. Here again the failure to unpack the notion of an all-India Muslim 'communalism' to create analytical space for the conflicting regional strands in Muslim politics which fashioned the League's demands confuses the author quite as much as the issue.

It is this confusion which leads Hasan to take curiously inconsistent positions on the role of minority province Muslims in the politics that eventually culminated in the creation of Pakistan. On the one hand, he is keen to emphasise that 'even after the resistance in Bengal and Punjab had crumbled Pakistan was not everybody's dream and Jinnah not everybody's Quaid'. He strenuously claims that as late as the 1946 elections the performance of some

³The exclusionary results of Congress's inclusionary and singular nationalist ideology have been analysed in my article 'Exploding Communalism: the Politics of Muslim Identity in South Asia in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (eds.), *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: Reappraising South Asian States and Politics*, Delhi:Oxford University Press, 1997.

'nationalist Muslim' groups in U.P. was 'comforting' (p.40). This is almost like saying that a cricket team which suffered an innings defeat nevertheless played admirably. On the other hand, Hasan complains that in my book there is little recognition of the 'part played by the U.P. Muslims' in 'making Jinnah the "sole spokesman of Muslim India"' (p.42). There is something paradoxical in Hasan's view of the U.P. as an emerging base of secular nationalist Muslims as well as the pivot in the political projection of the Muslim League's 'two nation' theory. This is precisely because he does not probe the clashing dialectic of Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority province interests and the historical shift in their relative weight during the final decades of the British raj in India.

More intriguing still is Hasan's view of the relationship between elite and mass politics in the history of Indian independence and partition. He laments the limitations of my perspective 'based on high politics and diplomacy' (p.39). Yet he swiftly changes his mind to state with passion that 'asking the people to sit on judgment on the Partition plan, which had already been thrashed out during the prolonged confabulations at the viceregal lodge, was an act of deception, a monumental fraud...Never before in South Asian history did so few decide the fate of so many' (p.41). In Hasan's analytical scheme the role of the subaltern, whether as agent or victim, remains unclear to say the least.

Gyanendra Pandey's essay 'The Prose of Otherness' in *Subaltern Studies VIII*, a richly deserved tribute to Ranajit Guha, not only attempts to place the spotlight on the consciousness and experience of subordinated classes but also locates partition historiography within the larger framework of colonialist and nationalist historical writings. Pandey must be commended for noticing, even if somewhat belatedly, the 'paradoxical position' that the question of Partition occupies in Indian historiography. The marginalization of what 'may indeed by [sic (e)] described as the single most important event in the history of the twentieth century' stems, as Pandey correctly points out, from its location in a historiography dominated either by 'the story of the British Empire in India' or 'the career of the Indian nation-state' (p.204). As a result, the history of partition and Pakistan not only 'gets extremely short shrift' but 'as the Other of genuine nationalism' is painted 'in entirely negative colours' (p.204). Pandey takes to task various branches of colonialist and nationalist historiography for being complicitous in this process of marginalization. One pre-eminent school of historiography that escapes his close attention is the 'subaltern collective'. Considering that the subaltern school has been in the publication business for more than a decade, one wonders what might explain its long silence on the history of partition. Could it be that its project too was largely framed around the question of the failure of the 'nation' to come into its own, making it trifle awkward to recognise the subjecthood of the 'Muslim Other'?

Pandey nevertheless should be congratulated for underlining the subalternity of the history of partition in Indian nationalist historiography. This history has been 'presented separately' or as 'a subordinate' in the recounting of the 'larger drama of India's struggle for independence' (pp.204-5). What Pandey misses however is the extent to which the history of communalism is presented separately from and yet succumbs to a teleological view of the history of partition. He is right of course in noting that historians of communalism have written their histories as 'pre-histories of Partition' (p.204). Yet this overarching teleology has prevented them from exploring the connections and analysing the discontinuities between communal consciousness and the moment of partition. After all, Pandey's own book *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, (Delhi, 1990) does not have much to say about the division of India ostensibly along religious lines in 1947.

Part of the problem is that Pandey seems to be uncertain about what historiographical emphasis should be given to the recurring episodes of violence in Indian history and to a specific moment of violence like 1947. The problem is compounded by his insistence on the need to write a history of violence on its own terms without reference to particular historical contexts or any notion of broader historical change. Sectarian violence of the sort, if not of the scale of 1947, has been an all too familiar feature of the subcontinent's history. Yet Pakistans and partitions along religious lines have so far singularly escaped the plurality of recurrence. But then the causes of partition or indeed of sectarian violence are not likely to engage Pandey's attention. It is the history of the experience and especially of the pain of violence that he would like to see written, even though he gives few clues in his essay as to how this might be accomplished.

In section one of his article, Pandey makes the not so original discovery that modern states, especially the colonial variant, are fountainheads of organized violence. Apart from a few strawmen representing colonialist historiography it is doubtful that serious historians would regard modern colonial or post-colonial states to be benign sources of law and order. All violence that is not the violence of the state becomes for Pandey an undifferentiated category. He would presumably like to uncover the 'will and reason of the mass of the actors' which 'count for little' in histories of popular violence (p.192). But it is Pandey's refusal to differentiate within the mass of non-state actors which leads him not only into a methodological cul-de-sac but some startling conclusions about the agency of subalterns.

His critique of the historiography of violence in general and that of partition in particular seizes upon the dichotomies of reason and unreason, and more dramatically, of civilization and primitiveness. All of his caricatures of existing historical writing are forced into these dichotomous schemes. However Pandey himself is unsure whether he wishes to undertake a relentless critique of reason as a sign of modernity or make a case for the reason that informs the consciousness of the subaltern agent. He lurches awkwardly from railing against reason in general to proclaiming the inherent reasonableness of subaltern violence.

Pandey no doubt has a point when he shows the striking convergences between colonial and nationalist accounts of popular violence. But there are contradictions in the positions he takes on the question of manipulability and agency. For instance, criticising the Congress's Kanpur Enquiry Committee's attempt to lay the blame for sectarian violence at the door of criminal elements, Pandey complains that '[t]his is to deny the involvement of those who employ and support the "criminal elements"'. At the same time he objects to the assignment of the history of violence 'to the distinctly Other' and 'not the ordinary residents of the towns and villages, hard-working and God-fearing Hindus and Muslims - in a word, not people like us'. Within the space of a few sentences Pandey has assigned the history of sectarian violence both to the employers and supporters of the 'criminal elements' and to 'the ordinary residents of the towns and villages' who sometimes regard 'these elements as protectors and even heroes' (p.200-1). This is a powerful critique of colonialist and mainstream nationalist discourses on violence which leaves out of account the social critique that surely existed of violence committed by hired hands on people who were weak and vulnerable.

Pandey's most trenchant attacks are reserved for the historians' history of violence and of partition. He begins by considering a contribution to partition historiography by the 'nationalist' Y.Krishan and the 'colonialist' Ian Talbot. The latter in particular is seen as representing that form of the historians' history which seems irremediably infected by colonial

prejudices. It may well be that Talbot's history reads in part like an apologia for the work of 'rational, white men in India', ignoring the systemic violence embedded in the structures and ideologies of the colonial state (pp.207-8). But even Jalal, the historian of the 'subaltern' other of Indian nationalist historiography on whose behalf I can reasonably claim to speak, fares no better than the 'colonialist' apologist. Jalal, Pandey declares revealingly, is concerned 'as one might expect' with 'a very different set of heroes and villains'. Why one should have that expectation is best known to him. But the charge here is that even Jalal can barely avoid invoking those 'primitive, disorderly forces - not altogether unlike Talbot's fanatical Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, "out to destroy themselves" '(pp.208-9). Concerned with 'causes' rather than the experience and pain of partition, my cardinal sin is in relegating to the margins the will and reason informing communal passions and violent outbreaks that have been constitutive of subcontinental history.

Pandey bases his critique of my work on the title and a few passages entered in the index under the 'Calcutta killings'. This enables him to quite remarkably portray the book as one about 'a great man' and quote a number of phrases describing violence out of its historical as well as narrative context. Only someone steeped in the demonology surrounding Mohammad Ali Jinnah in Indian official discourse would miss the critical stance of my book in assessing the contradictions inherent in the political strategies of the leader of the All-India Muslim League. And only someone prepared to uncritically celebrate subaltern agency in horrific sectarian violence can superimpose on my work the motif of 'primitive India threatening Civilization' (p.210).

My history, as constructed by Gyanendra Pandey, is 'in the end' (a telling phrase) 'the history of Good against Evil, the Rational against the Irrational, Great Men against the Mob. Only the identity of the Great Men (Man) is different. And, of course, only the history of the Great Men can or need be written' (p.210). Let us take a moment to consider this sneer. Pandey indulges in an ecstasy of self contradiction unless of course elites magically turn into subalterns when historians of the subaltern school choose to write about them. His own argument about the 'construction of communalism' as it unfolds in the last two chapters of his book rests on an analysis of the writings of Romesh Dutt, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai, Dayanand Saraswati, Syed Ahmed Khan, Mohammad Ali, Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel. Great and honourable men all. The seventh volume of Subaltern Studies of which he was co-editor opened with Sudipta Kaviraj's overture to Bankim followed by Partha Chatterjee's obeisance to Ramkrishna. Ranajit Guha, himself a great man, then sifts through the prose of Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru before a devotional offering by Saurabh Dube can be made to Balakdas and Ghasidas, the gurus of the Satnami sect. Amitav Ghosh's fortuitous recovery of the slave of MS.H.6 from obscurity saved the subaltern series from having to change its name in an acknowledgement of its metamorphosis.⁴ If the identity of one of the elite actors in the partition drama is what is

⁴Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (eds.), *Subaltern Studies VII*, Delhi, 1992.

really bothering Pandey, one wonders how far he has actually cut loose from the dominant strands of colonialist and nationalist historiography which he denounces so vociferously.

Pandey is not the first to have made reference to the work of Sadaat Hassan Manto, particularly his short story *Toba Tek Singh*. Long before I made the 'error' of looking at the first document stored in official archives, the searing experience of the partition had been conveyed to me through Manto's stories, *Thanda Gosht*, *Kali Shalwar*, *Khol Do*, to name only a few. The pain of these stories of rapes, abductions and murders persuaded me of the need to understand the causes of partition and its horrors and not simply echo in historical non-fiction what had been so graphically portrayed by the more sensitive creative writers and artists. I was also led to question the self-definition of the new state that emerged out of the partition process and which had prosecuted Manto on charges of obscenity when he wrote about the experience of raped and abducted women. Pandey wishes to be questioning of an Indian historiography that assimilates and subordinates the history of partition and its violence to the career of the Indian nation-state. *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge, 1985) was an attempt to challenge the claims of the official historiography that saw partition as the crowning achievement of almost a century of Muslim aspirations and sacrifices in the movement for a Pakistani nation-state. And it did so without losing sight of the calculations of the departing colonial masters and compromises by the Indian nationalist leadership which inherited the centralized apparatus of the colonial state.

In arguing that Islam was not the only driving force behind the creation of Pakistan, my purpose was to draw the links between the twin dialectics in modern South Asian history - all-India nationalism and religiously based communalism as well as centralism and regionalism. One cannot unproblematically relate the 'communal consciousness' in the subaltern mind and periodic outbreaks of inter-communal violence in the 'public arenas' of localities with the outcome of partition. An historical analysis of the level of high politics and the arena of the state is indispensable in unravelling the dynamics of the post-colonial transition.

Over-centralized state monoliths have to be subjected to searching critiques which must do more than simply and uncritically celebrate the fragment. It is necessary to track the historical

Chatterjee has written persuasively about the 'subalternity of the Bengali middle class'. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his essay in *Subaltern Studies VIII* (Delhi, 1994) honestly confesses that he is writing about 'a small group of people' belonging to 'the so-called Hindu bhadralok, the respectable people of the middle classes' (p.53).

shifts in 'communal consciousness' rather than treat it as a cultural given. Partition historiography can only be enriched by investigating the relationship between the social and cultural formation of communities as they interact with political processes and structures of colonial and post-colonial states at the local, regional and central levels. Only then can the subjecthood of subordinated social groups in the making of history be fully restored while appreciating that even their active agency cannot always prevent them from becoming tragic though not passive victims of 'monumental frauds' perpetrated by the claimants, makers and managers of states.

Having noted the culpability of colonial and post-colonial states in institutionalized violence, the historian must differentiate between the contexts and categories of violence by non-state actors. Pandey disapproves of the references in my work and an essay by Sumit Sarkar to the 'underworld' or the role of the *goonda* or lumpen elements in sectarian violence. Beyond supplying copious quotations from one short story by Manto and Begum Anees Qidwai's recently published memoir, Pandey tells us precious little as to how a peoples' history of violence in general or of sectarian violence in particular might be written. In another article he had related some of the difficulties encountered in collecting evidence about the 1989 riots in Bhagalpur very soon after the event.⁵ He found a narrative construction of collective memory of the community, whether Hindu or Muslim, erasing the experience of individual pain and tragedy. This narrative construction invariably sought to treat the instance of violence as an aberration from the norm of inter-communal co-existence, often at the instigation of and in complicity with outside elements. The peoples' history of violence we learnt from Pandey himself was not much different from what he derides as the historians' history.

Pandey cannot expect to make any historiographical breakthrough so long as he clings to his undifferentiated and ahistorical category of violence. It is one thing to berate Sumit Sarkar for his lack of balance and his undue privileging of certain class based strands in the nationalist movement. But it is quite another matter to denounce the differentiation in some strains of 'radical' or not so radical historiography between different kinds and contexts of violence. Pandey questions 'the distinction between the "good" and the "bad" subaltern' in 'radical' historiography. Extending his distaste for public school manners to a disregard for linguistic elegance, he writes: 'Implicit in this procedure is a move towards the Otherization of actions that are not centred on state-building or seen as otherwise contributing to the march of modernity and progress' (p.214). I would simply submit that if the intellectual purpose is to question the self-representation of 'modernity' and 'progress' it will not do to look at an autonomous domain of violence divorced from a critical history of the formation of modern colonial and post-colonial nation-states.

⁵Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today', **Representations**, 37 (Winter, 1992).

Yet the most surprising feature of Pandey's essay is its disconcerting implications for understanding the consciousness of women as well as any potential project of feminist history. After all, Gayatri Spivak had partially reconstructed and redirected the subaltern project so that it did not wholly ignore the subalternity that operated on gender lines. Few would have expected a leading subaltern crusader to have made such a travesty of the violence experienced by women. Pandey surely cannot claim that all forces of disorder constitute the binary opposite of the pernicious concept of colonial public order. Is it unreasonable to draw a distinction between revolutionary violence directed against an oppressive state and cowardly violence perpetrated on helpless, displaced women? Pandey does not like the implication in much of historians' history that depicts the behaviour of the perpetrators of sectarian violence, especially rapes and abductions, as not only singularly out of order but palpably criminal!⁶ It would seem slightly odd to concentrate the new radical historians' fire on the insensitivities, inefficiencies and inactions of the Indian and Pakistani governments in their recovery and repatriation programmes for abducted women and simply recover the will and reason of the mass of actors (still 'protectors and heroes'?!) who had committed the unpardonable crimes of rapes and abductions. In the immediate context of violence against women in 1946-7, who were the subalterns - the attackers or the victims? Pandey is probably

⁶Noting that demobilized soldiers often played the leading role in the violence directed against the weak and vulnerable is not to consign such events 'to the realm of an Other history (p.213)'. It simply means paying a little more attention to the changing historical context. Crimes against women, generally speaking, had not been a key feature of 'communal violence' until the upheavals of 1946-47. For example there was no violence against women in the Kishoreganj of 1930; but rapes and abductions were common in attacks led by demobilized soldiers in Noakhali and Tippera in 1946. See Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, (Cambridge, 1986), chapter 6.

not aware that certainly in Pakistan it was womens' groups which had to take the initiative to prod a callous and unresponsive government to do something about the plight of abducted women who were the worst and most tragic victims of a partition which, alas, great men had inflicted on them.

Historians of partition on all sides of the lines of 1947 may have something to learn from Manto's character Bishan Singh's comment to state officials as they attempted to extend the principle of partition to the inmates of a lunatic asylum: 'Apar di gur gur di anks di be tehana di moong di dal of the lantern of violence mordabad'.