



Dalit Subject and the Experiences of Partition: Identity, Memory, Politics

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ABSTRACT:

The year 1947 has a significant place in the history of modern India. A mere gloss over Partition archives is sufficient to suggest that the division was extremely painful. Partition and Caste Politics are often thought of as two separate discursive terrains in the history of modern India. There have been limited attempts in academia to read these two terms in relation to each another. Nonetheless, the idea has gained currency and the revisionist historiography of Partition has started grappling the issues of trauma, loss and collective memory from the lens of multiple identities. While different communities have registered their experiences in one way or the other, the Dalit perspective on Partition seems to have been stifled- both in nationalist historiographies of Partition as well as literature. Even if they do exist, they are largely invisible from the mainstream literature about Partition. This paper aims to discuss the position of Dalits during the freedom struggle and after the Partition of India. It sheds light on the politics of

representation in order to locate the probable reasons for near absence of Dalit voices from the literary domain and asserts that Dalits continue to face identity crisis even in post- Partition times.

KEYWORDS:

Partition, Trauma, Dalit experience, Caste Politics, Nationalist Historiography

Partition and Caste Politics are often thought of as two separate discursive terrains in the history of modern India. There have been minimal attempts in academia to read these two terms in relation to each another. Nonetheless, the idea has gained currency and the revisionist historiography of Partition has started grappling the issues of trauma, loss and collective memory from the lens of multiple identities. Partition carries a history that has been written in official documents but can be and should be rewritten from different vantage points other than that of religion. Urvashi Butalia argues that the generality of Partition has been sufficiently dealt with. One needs to discover the particularities of Partition which exist as private memories and hence, hard to discover (3). A point worth mentioning here is that even though the state's version is available in the public domain and the experiences of different religious communities have been the subject of Partition narratives, the histories of subaltern groups are largely invisible in mainstream fiction and non-fiction about Partition. Nevertheless, there has come a paradigm shift in the scholarship about Partition. From the fact based analysis, the

recent scholarship on Partition has moved towards registering the human dimension of this history. While the writers from the first generation of partition survivors depicted the gut wrenching violence, the communal divide and the political struggle for freedom that ultimately led to Partition, the subsequent scholarship¹ is a deeper reflection upon the multiple issues that paved way for the division of British India into two nation states. Further, attempts have been made to understand the psychology of trauma, living conditions and interpersonal relationships amid different communities. Out of the many, one vantage point of research that has been less talked about is the experience of Dalits during Partition. The trauma of Partition owing to loss of loved ones, homeland, and occupation was common to all the communities. While different communities have registered their experiences in one way or the other, the Dalit perspectives on Partition seem to have been stifled. Even if they do exist, they are largely invisible from the mainstream literature about Partition barring a few like B.R. Ambedkar's *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, Shankaranand Shastri's *Poona Pact banaam Gandhi* (1946), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1976) and Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998). A sensitive approach is needed to locate the voices that have remained in silence for long. Their version of political struggle and their experiences of Partition need to be accounted so that one can bring forth the perspectives that have been

¹ For a comprehensive study of this scholarship, refer Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998; Urvashi Butalia, *Other Side of Violence: Voices from the Partition of India*, New Delhi: Viking, 1998; Suvir Kaul, *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001; Tarun K. Saint, *Witnessing Partition: Memory, History, Fiction*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2010.

neglected so far. This paper aims to discuss the position of Dalits during the freedom struggle and after the Partition of India. In doing so, the enquiries are limited to the North Indian region owing to the sheer diversity of Dalit movement in different regions of India. The paper complicates the idea of Dalit identity in turbulent times of Partition. It begins by challenging the nationalist historiography of Partition that renders the struggle of Dalits for a distinctive identity invisible and tries to subsume their voices within caste Hindu identity. As far as the literary representation of Partition is concerned, the narratives largely revolve around the experiences of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. As Dalit identity has been made invisible by the nationalist history of Partition, their perspectives also remain unseen and unheard. Nonetheless, there have been certain literary attempts whereby writers have tried to give voice to the Dalit characters. The paper looks at Bhishm Sahni's *Tamas* and Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* to assess the human dimension of this colossal tragedy from the perspective of Dalits. In final sections, it talks about the politics of representation in order to locate the probable reasons for near absence of Dalit voices from the literary domain. It asserts that Dalits continue to face identity crisis in post- Partition times and the road ahead is full of obstacles.

The political history of modern India enumerates the struggle for Indian independence from British colonial rule. The mainstream Indian nationalism flourished under the aegis of Congress that was founded in December 1885 and went on to become the single largest political party that played a dominant role in Indian political sphere.

The conventional knowledge about Partition suggests that Congress and Muslim League were the main players during the period of freedom struggle. While Congress stood for unity, League engaged with divisive politics and propounded the 'two nation theory'². Moreover, the identities were fixed for most of the communities by relegating Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other. Even the discussions on Partition related violence mention only Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims as if it happened exclusively to them. These nationalist myths were time and again challenged by marginalized groups within the Indian society. The voice of dissent was raised by communities which felt that the Congress was unable to adequately represent their concerns. For instance, the formation of All India Muslim League in 1906 was an outcome of discontent within Muslim community that had minimal presence within Congress³. Similarly, Dalits also felt the need for a separate political identity because they had been perpetual victims of institutionalized repression and maltreatment within Hindu social structure. The dominance of Brahmins in Congress and their social conservatism made it unable to sensitively address the question of untouchability. This led to widening of gap between Dalit leadership and mainstream Congress politics. This view is shared by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India* where he attempts to engage with the alternative versions of nationalism that existed alongside the dominant discourse of Congress. Through a comprehensive

² For details, see Chandra 258– 270.

³ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay writes: “Between 1892 and 1909 only 6.59 per cent of Congress delegates were Muslims” (334).

study of Dalit participation in 'organized caste movements'⁴, he asserts that these sidelined histories remain extremely important to understand the nuances of identity politics of Dalits during Partition.

Most of the Partition narratives engage with religious identity alone. Such depictions fail to acknowledge that identity formation is a non-linear process which is mediated by factors like caste, class, race, gender and social position. It is difficult to reconcile the terms 'Partition' and 'Dalit identity'. While Partition labeled identities with the marker of Religion namely Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, the entire struggle of Dalits was to seek an organic identity that was away from all available religious affiliations. The political struggle of Dalit community against oppressive caste system and their contribution to the freedom struggle find limited space in nationalist history of Indian Independence. The only way to understand the Dalit political and social identity in the years leading up to Partition is by recovering the alternative histories. One can visualize the strong character of Dalit activism and their betrayal by Congress by closely reading the developments of All India Scheduled Caste Federation. In a scathing attack on the policies of Congress, Shankaranand Shastri describes Congress as 'Brahmin - baniya Company' in *Poona Pact banaam Gandhi (1946)*. He suggests that the Dalit leadership was fairly active around this time and asserted an organic and distinctive identity for Dalit Community. The Communal Award of August 1932 gave separate electorate to minority communities like Muslims, Buddhists, Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians, and

⁴ Caste movements organized under the leadership of Satyashodhak Samaj, Justice Party, All India Depressed Classes Congress, All India Scheduled Caste Federation, etc.

Depressed Classes. This move of British government in India was severely criticized by Gandhi who went for fast unto death to revoke the separate electorate for Depressed Classes fearing that it might disintegrate Hindu society. Dr. Ambedkar was surprised by this move and issued a statement saying: "Separate electorates are granted not only to the Depressed Classes, but to the Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, as well as the Mohammedans and the Sikhs...Mr. Gandhi chooses to let everybody else except the Depressed Classes retain the special electorates given to them". Nonetheless, an agreement was reached between Ambedkar and Gandhi by which communal award for Dalits was annulled and seats were reserved for them within the general electorate. This agreement came to be known as Poona Pact, 1932. Shastri argues that Poona Pact was the final seal on betrayal of Dalits by Congress. From then onwards, there came a change in the dynamics of Dalit politics. While nationalist Indian historiography about Partition suggests that Dalit identity merged with Hindu identity in the wake of polarized situations created by Partition, Dalit historiography has a different story to tell. Once Dalits realized that their struggles cannot end only with the achievement of Independence, their quest for a separate identity increased manifold. Now the focus turned on negotiating for the constitutional safeguards for the rights of minorities in Independent India. The betrayal by Congress was an indication that theirs is the fight with the prevailing system of discrimination that has relegated them to lower social positions. Hence, they must fight not only for Independence from British rule but also from the clutches of the caste system. In his detailed study on SCF and Dalit Politics in

Uttar Pradesh titled "Partition Politics and Achhut Identity", Ramanarayan Rawat takes an exception from the view that Dalits existed merely as supporters of Congress led freedom movement. Rather, Dalit activism and their struggle for social justice became more pronounced during final years of the freedom movement. The volatile social conditions paved way for new opportunities of self definition for Dalits in UP and allowed them to negotiate better with Congress and Muslim League (114). The alliance between SCF and Muslim League, even if for a short while, was the major development that pointed towards the changing fabric of Dalit politics in UP. From asserting a separate identity, SCF apparently came a long way in joining hands with Muslim League and suggesting the similar nature of their struggle for autonomy. Dr. Ambedkar's election to constituent assembly as an independent candidate was supported by Muslim League. However, League's motifs of proselytization became clear when they started appealing Dalits to embrace Islam in the joint meetings. As soon as it became clear that the Punjab province would be divided into two, Mr Beah Lall launched the All India Achhutistan Movement from Punjab in 1946. The major aim of this movement was to demand a separate independent state so as to ensure the rights of Dalits after Partition. At that time, approximately seven per cent of total population of Punjab consisted of Dalits. On similar lines of the demand of Pakistan by Muslim League, this movement demanded that Dalits be given the imaginary homeland 'Achhutistan' consisting of Ambala and Jullundhar provinces that were largely inhabited by Scheduled Castes. The extent of this dynamics was such that Congress was threatened by these developments and tried to woo Dalits with religious reforms while

neglecting their political demands. Dr. Ambedkar hoped for a separate electorate for Dalits from the Cabinet Mission. However, this demand was not met as the “skewed electoral arrangement worked out under Poona Pact ensured that Dalits opposed to Congress would never succeed” (Rawat 126). The nationalist myths of merger of Dalit identity within larger Hindu identity needs to be read in the context of political compulsions which made it impossible to choose differently. Even though this version is less talked about, there is no way one can deny the contribution of Dr. Ambedkar and AISCF in defining the character of Dalit movements in India. Moreover, the active political struggle of Dalits acts as the myth breaker of nationalist discourse.

Unlike political representation which fails to underscore the nuances of Dalit identities⁵, literary representation allows the reader to engage with the complexities involved in the process of identity formation. Despite their active political presence throughout the freedom struggle, the limited presence of Dalit perspective in literature about Partition is striking. Nevertheless, it opens the window to assess the social position of Dalits and question the ‘silences’ that surround Dalit characters. Bhisham Sahni’s *Tamas* is an iconic text of Partition literature. Nathu, the lower caste tanner, emerges as an important figure of the text. His overall persona gives out a picture of immense vulnerability. Being a ‘chamar’, his traditional job was to skin the hides.

⁵ Sarah Hunt uses Spivak’s concept of *vertretung* (stepping in someone’s place) and *darstellung* (to place there) to distinguish between the scope of political representation and literary representation. While the former is simplistic, limiting and homogenizing, the latter is more complex and has the ability to capture the nuances.

However, Murad Ali assigns him the task of killing a pig apparently meant for veterinary surgeon. Since handsome money of five rupees is paid in advance for the task, he could not refuse. Sahni writes: "Even if he had put an eight-anna piece on the palm of his (Nathu) hand, saying the rest would be paid later, he couldn't have refused the poor skinner that he was" (125). This comes as one of the few incidents where Sahni is critiquing the prejudiced face of society and vulnerable position of lower castes. The novel begins with Nathu's rigorous but unsuccessful attempts to slaughter a pig. By slaughtering the pig, he enters into a vicious cycle of events that remain incomprehensible to him for a long time. It turns out that the pig's carcass was deliberately kept at the stairs of a mosque to instigate communal violence. The novel subtly depicts Nathu's anxiety as he considers himself to be the root cause of violence that erupts. Nathu, who unknowingly became the part of conspiracy, is bothered by the events that follow but those who literally hatched that conspiracy are not. It is only ironical that Nathu is having sleepless nights while Murad Ali shamelessly goes on to become the part of Peace Committee. Nathu's vulnerability is also suggestive of the living conditions of Dalits during Partition. Because of their financially weaker position, anybody could throw a little money and get his work done without any explanation. That the lower castes were looked down upon is evident from the immense hatred of Ranvir for 'mlecchas'. He has settled stereotypes about these 'abominable' people: "Mlecchas are unclean people, they don't bathe, don't even wash their hands after toilet, eat from one another's plate..." (Sahni 82). Sahni's depiction of the Dalit perspective is important in the sense that it initiates the discussion around the Dalit

experiences. However, a closer reading of the text would suggest that this depiction lacks depth. When Nathu's wife comes to know that her husband's killing of a pig is the reason behind riots in the city, her heart sinks. She takes up the broom and cleans the house to cast away some phantom who she feels had entered her house. With the deft use of language, Sahni makes it clear that the 'phantom' is here to stay and haunt. Though he mentions that darkness looms large over the lives of Nathu and his wife, he fails to engage with that darkness. Halfway through the novel Nathu goes completely out of the frame and readers are left to speculate what happened to Nathu and his family in the communal violence that erupted and consumed several lives. There is a complete absence of not only Dalit perspective but also Nathu's physical presence in the text. The trajectory of Nathu's story is left in between and the novel goes on to engage with other issues surrounding Partition. It is only in the final chapter that the reader comes to know of Nathu's death. When and how he died; what circumstances he faced before finally succumbing to death; what happened to his family - these are some questions that have been left completely unexplored. This superficial depiction of the Nathu's character foregrounds the lack of sensitivity with which Sahni deals with the issues of lower castes⁶. The caste angle has been touched upon in the novel but fails to capture the nuances of Dalit voices in Partition.

⁶ Sahni's portrayal of Dalit character can be compared to that of Premchand's who was often accused of not being able to capture the variations of Dalit struggle against social violence. His Dalit characters lack courage and turn out to be the mute spectators of caste based oppression. The characterization of Dukhi in the short story *Deliverance* is a case in point.

This picture of social vulnerability of Dalits is further emphasized by Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* where she locates the unheard narratives of untouchables alongside the voices of women during Partition. For her, Maya's story becomes an important trope to read Dalits' experience of Partition because she prefers to speak as a Dalit first and a woman later. Maya's narrative suggests that untouchability acted as a 'protective shield' against Partition violence because it primarily took place between Hindus and Muslims. Since Dalits proclaimed a distinctive identity from Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, there was no apparent danger from these religious communities. Butalia reads this particular narrative with a word of caution because Dalits too had been victims of physical violence at the time of Partition. However, she argues that untouchability indeed offered a bizarre kind of immunity from violence which emerged from the fact that "...harijans had nothing to be looted, nothing to lose" (231). This argument about immunity should be read in relation to other available narratives. For instance, Nathu's character stands in stark opposition to that of Maya's narrative. He is literally used as a tool for initiating communal violence. His socially and economically weaker position pushes him into this vicious trap of Hindu - Muslim rivalry. Even if it might have prevented physical violence, in some cases as that of Maya, it could not really protect from the social and emotional violence that followed. On the political level, Dalit leaders negotiated in the best possible manner for the rights of their community. However, in the social domain, Dalit masses remained largely vulnerable. In the aftermath of Partition, Dalits had to go through oppression of multiple kinds. Primary among these was economic challenges due to

situations created by Partition. There was huge loss of labor due to transfer of the ownership of land. Dalits were merely the tillers of land without any ownership rights. This implied that there was no compensation from the government because all compensatory provisions were meant for the actual owners. Urvashi Butalia engages with the question of biased administrative provisions for compensation and argues: "...there was no way the loss of labor, or indeed the location of that labor could be compensated" (230). The natural outcome of losing jobs was migration. Dalits faced social discrimination in the relief camps as well due to their 'untouchable' status. Partition violence is seen as an equalizer. It is believed that people of all communities suffered equally irrespective of their caste and class status. Butalia contests this notion by arguing that social conditions exponentially increased the suffering of lower classes. Whether it is about compensation, rehabilitation or safety during migration, government policies favored upper classes while the lower classes were left to fend for themselves. It can be argued that Dalits remained the most vulnerable lot despite their strong political presence. This can be accounted by the fact that avenues of education followed by political leadership opened up only for a limited Dalit elite. For rest of the people, the social conditions remained more or less the same.

The imbalance between visibility in political sphere and relatively lesser visibility in literature points towards the politics of representation. Representation or the lack of it is fraught with the literary politics of that period. It will not be an exaggeration to argue that India's literary circles remained dominated by caste politics for a long time.

In a hegemonic society such as ours, the Dalit subject was not considered worthy of being represented; else except to justify his 'untouchable' status through scriptures. He/She was not only 'untouchable' but 'unseeable', 'unhearable' and 'unrepresentable'. The notions of purity and pollution made it impossible for Dalit voices to come to the fore as late as mid twentieth century. Their experiences of oppression, poverty and violence were cited as non-literary and 'too low' to match the high status of literature. As far as Partition is concerned, there is dearth of immediate literary responses from Dalit writers on the issue of Partition. For a community that was fighting a centuries' long system of discrimination alongside the freedom struggle, there were meager opportunities to gain education. The question of literary representation got sidelined as the immediate attempts of educated Dalits were to document their political struggle. This can also be explained via looking at the development of Dalit literature in India. Until India's independence, Dalit cultures consisted of oral folk traditions. Due to stringent caste laws, Dalit population was largely outside the ambit of formal literacy. It was only after the constitutional safeguards given by Article 17 of Indian constitution that social mobility of Dalits got a legal sanction and their literacy rates gradually increased⁷. The word 'Dalit' gained popularity in 1972 with the foundation of Dalit Panthers Movement. 1972 is seen as a landmark year in the history of Dalit movements as it was followed by prominence of Dalit writing whereby registering marginal voices

⁷ The Article 17 abolished the practice of untouchability within Indian Territory. It maintains: "The enforcement of any disability arising out of "Untouchability" shall be an offence punishable by law" (Kashyap 92). This provision came as a milestone in the Dalit struggle for social uplift.

became possible. Since Partition as a phenomenon preceded the foray of Dalits into literary domain, those experiences of pain and trauma have been left untouched.

The identity crisis of Dalits did not end with Partition. For once, Partition brought an opportunity for Dalits of India to uplift their social position via political negotiation under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. In his first address to constituent assembly of Pakistan, Jinnah argued: "You may belong to any religion, or caste, or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State." Other than Muslims, most of the people who remained in Pakistan belonged to Scheduled Castes. Many Dalits migrated to Pakistan in search of a casteless society and better job opportunities. Some were literally stopped by political force. The government of Sind passed Essential Services Management Act which did not allow Harijans to leave the country on the premise of maintaining Karachi's sanitation and cleaning system. Only betrayal awaited Dalits on both sides of the border. In the post-Jinnah Pakistan, the situation of Dalits became even worse. Unlike India, Purbhu Lal Satyani argues, there are no organizations that work for the welfare of Dalits. Moreover, Dalits in Pakistan suffer from acute poverty and rampant illiteracy. They have a near absent representation in legislative assembly (qtd.in Sikand). While Poona Pact was the first major symbol of betrayal of Dalits in India, the subsequent development of Dalit agitation points towards several others. In the last two decades of twentieth century, the Dalit voice grew stronger and they started using their writings as a weapon against their marginalization. It is true that Dalit movements have become more pronounced in

twenty first century. This has improved their position in India up to a certain extent only. They continue to face challenges within their own community. The hierarchy within Dalit sub-castes hampers their unity and shared interests. The caste bias keeps showing its vicious face in one form or the other. In July 2016, four Dalit men were severely beaten publicly in Una district of Gujarat. Their only crime was that they were doing their job of skinning a dead cow. Some 'gau-rakshaks' suspected them for slaughtering the cow and decided not only to punish them on their own but also recorded the video of the whole incident. The extreme visibility of violence in incidents such as these emphasizes that caste based discrimination continues to be a reality. The roots of this discrimination go long way back in history where Partition arrived as an opportunity for Dalits but failed to re-structure the discriminatory hierarchical order of society. It is important to go back to these tropes and register the experiences of Dalits.

Butalia's text is not only an alternative document of history but also a symbolic text which tries to reach the unspoken and unheard narratives. Maya's story is a constant reminder that the Partition narratives of an entire community have been archived in memory and desperately waiting to be heard. The revisionist histories of Partition suggest that their long absence from mainstream representation was deliberate. The politics of literary domain ensured the 'outcaste' status of Dalit voices. It is only necessary that the 'grand narratives of Partition' be seen in relation to the marginalized ones. It is essential to bring in the caste, class and gendered identity in discussions of Partition so that the picture that emerges is a better approximation of

reality and helps in shaping our understanding of trauma, collective memory and political history.

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