

"Changing Tracks and Charting New Territories: The 'Train' Motif in Bengal Partition Stories of 1947"

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The 'train' has figured as one of the salient tropes in the narratives of the Indian Partition. When separation along religious lines became imminent in 1947, most people realized that crossing over to their respective 'safe-zones' was the only means of survival. Even then, this journey was not in the least free from perils; attacking hordes swooped in on the fleeing multitudes travelling in trains, trucks, bullock carts or walking on foot. It is estimated that majority of the migrants moved through trains, which became the preferred mode of transportation owing to both availability and affordability. It, however, made them the target of recurrent attacks by members of the rival communities.

Consequently, the most dominant images of Partition violence are perhaps inscribed in the 'train'; for as in history, so in literature, it were the railway bogies which bore the greatest brunt of the rioters. Punjab registered veritable genocides on its tracks with members of the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu community bent on exterminating their rivals. The first of these incidents was reported on 22nd July 1947, though the first actual sabotage of a train took place on 9th August when a Pakistan Special Train, carrying Pakistani government employees and their families from Delhi to Karachi, was derailed about a quarter of a mile outside the princely state of Patiala by planting mines on the tracks. In Lahore city, retaliation from the Muslims was swift,

and in addition to derailments, attacks and stabbing of passengers in trains began on a regular basis (Tucker 122).

Swarna Aiyar in her essay "August Anarchy: The Partition massacres in Punjab, 1947" has expounded at length on these 'trains of death'. Informants on railway platforms would observe members of the 'enemy' community entraining, and enter the same carriages. After the train's departure, they would single out and push the passengers out of the doors and windows, at pre-decided spots, where their accomplices waited to complete the job. Else, they had their agents on trains who pulled the communication cord between the stations, and the killers then operated throughout the train (178-81).

Partition fiction-in both its longer and shorter formats-has ample illustrations of these ambushes. *Train to Pakistan*, the well-known Partition novel by Khushwant Singh set in Punjab, is replete with episodes of violence on the 'deathly wheels'. Larry Collins and Dominic Lapierre's novel *Freedom at Midnight* reproduces testimonies of survivors of train massacres which parallel these accounts of brutality. As one survivor remembers it, her train was separated from the engine by a mob, which proceeded to throw passengers onto the platform where they were murdered by others. Those who tried to escape were followed and murdered or flung down wells. There were two thousand people on the train; only one hundred made it to their destination (346-47). Sindh, adjacent to Punjab, saw sporadic instances of such attacks. In September 1947 a train carrying Hindus from Punjab passing through Nawabshah was assailed and looted by non-Sindhi Muslim refugees, most probably the mohajirs (Kothari 75). Other parts of the country were not left unscathed either. The Grand Trunk Express, also known as the Great Indian Peninsula Express, was attacked by rioters in the wake of the Partition in September 1947, and Aziz Ahmad's Urdu story "Kali Raat" ['Black Night'] relates the tragic journey of a Muslim family travelling from Delhi to Hyderabad by this train. Krishan Chander's Urdu story "Peshawar Express," has a personified train narrating its fetid tale of corpse-laden journey unleashed by massacres en route at Taxila, Rawalpindi and Wazirabad.

However, as far as Bengal was concerned, the few cases of violence on train in the province was limited to the August 1946 riots when, according to General Francis Tucker, the Head of the Eastern Command in Calcutta, 'a local train carrying mostly Hindu babus (clerks), which had habitually stopped near Entally for the driver to throw out a present of coal for his village, was attacked by Muslims at this spot and one

Hindu killed. The next day a train was stopped by Hindus who killed ten Muslim passengers' (Tucker 422). The focus in Bengal Partition stories, hence, shifts from the violence-marred journeys of other regions to one of anguish and misery. The plight of the minorities as they attempt to escape persecution at the hands of the majority community is no less heart-wrenching, even if the virulence is of a somewhat lesser degree. These migrants were shattered in mind and body, having fled in the face of certain death or dishonour, perhaps at the hands of their friends and neighbours.

Their affliction is depicted in two short representative pieces from the region: "An Evening of Prayer"-an excerpt from the opening sections of Selina Hossain's novel *Gayatri Sandhya* ['The Pious Evening'], and Hasan Hafizur Rahman's short story "Deaths on the Night Train" [it has also been translated into English under the title "Two More Deaths"]. In the former, a group of Bengali Muslims from the Rangamati village of Murshidabad district which had come under West Bengal as per the Radcliffe Award try to reach Rajshahi across the border after being hounded out by the local Hindus. One of them, an elderly woman who was addressed as 'Khala' [aunt] by all, had lost sixteen members of her family and was now left with only one surviving son-Fazale Gazi. The premise of the story might initially sound a tad unrealistic, considering the fact that Murshidabad was, and still is, Muslim-dominant, with the population of the community heavily outnumbering the Hindus. Yet, records reveal that a few pockets did witness some outflow of Muslims owing to the looming sense of insecurity.¹ The protagonist, Ali Ahmed, a 31-year old man, belonged to one such group, and was travelling along with his 24-year old wife Pushpita² and six-year old son Pradipto. Pushpita was pregnant and at the end of her term, yet threat to their lives had compelled the family to take flight even in her delicate condition. Midstream, while being ferried across the Mahananda river, she realized to her horror that she was about to go into labour, and tried to delay it as long as possible: 'Pushpita's face bore the ravages of pain. Tears forced their way into her eyes. When she bit her lip, her breath got caught in her chest, as if her end was near' (145). Sitting near her was the village headmaster Nasurullah with his wife Hasina Begum and two sons. Like Pushpita, Hasina too was unwell, suffering from fever and almost semi-consciousness. They were, thus, literally and metaphorically, 'in the same boat' along with nine other passengers.

When they reached the bank, the group went to the nearest railway station for the onward journey. The small non-descript station at Rohanpur was suddenly

abuzz with these rag-tag band of people, huddled in a corner waiting for the train. The strong stink of urine that filled the air was overpowering, and Pushpita felt her stomach churn, making her feel all the more nauseous. As soon as the train arrived, there was a frantic scramble to secure seats; Nasurullah's two sons Mafizul and Tarikul too jumped into the fray and managed to reserve places for everyone in their group. Ali Ahmed desperately hoped that they reached Rajshahi as early as possible, so that they could be rid of the constant fear of death. Even though he had earlier asked his wife to be patient through this ordeal, in his heart he knew well enough that it was 'futile to tell Pushpita to be patient-how could you ask a baby about to be born to hold back? When the time came, it was bound to emerge surging, tearing at everything. The journey, the river, the boat, people, mortification-nothing mattered to it. The only truth it knew was to take birth, to cry loudly and proclaim its existence' (145-46).

His apprehension soon proved true when the jerky motion of the train coupled with the stench of urine and overall exertion hastened Pushpita's labour, eventually breaking her water. Feeling utterly helpless, she began to cry quietly, not in pain, but in the face of great uncertainty. When Khala noticed her silent tears, she immediately comprehended the gravity of the circumstance and came forward to the rescue. Aged and experienced, she promptly took charge and instructed Ahmed to pull the chain in order to stop the train. She also asked the menfolk to get off and go to the next compartment. There were murmurs of protest as some of them started arguing, but her strong personality was enough to silence them. When the train's guard came there to enquire about the incident, it was once again Khala who assumed responsibility for the action. She also told him to instruct the driver to wait till the delivery, at which the guard was similarly stunned by her authoritative voice, but quite unable to refuse on humanitarian grounds.

The train had stopped in an open field where the plaintive cries of a jackal floated through the dark. It instantly reminded Ali Ahmed of his precarious existence: 'He was like a hunted animal, lungs bursting, legs pumping-like a dog being driven out of his territory' (154). He also felt a 'gut-wrenching pain' when thoughts like "Would Pushpita live?" (154) and "What if Pushpita died now?" (155) crossed his mind. He stood outside the stationary train like a 'statue, as though a dense darkness surrounded him' (155). However, all his fears were laid to rest when his wife eventually gave birth to a boy with Khala playing the role of the mid-wife. Ahmed dug a hole in the ground and buried the placenta, the significance of the act resonating in his heart. While the

cutting of the placenta symbolized the separation of the baby from the mother analogous to the Partition, the burial marked a simultaneous re-rooting in the new land which Ahmed and his progeny must now call their own. The train resumed its journey thereafter and reached Rajshahi in the early hours of the dawn. The reddening horizon brought about a salubrious effect on him as the light of the morning pierced the darkness inside his mind. In the concluding lines, Ali Ahmed spoke to himself: "My son, born to a new life in this country with a new name. Image of my heart, let me call you Prateek. Prateek Ahmed" (156).

Hossain's narrative thus ends on a positive note, with the Ahmed and his party managing to reach their destination despite hurdles encountered on way. That they received co-operation from the train driver and guard as well as the other passengers when Pushpita was about to deliver the baby was certainly an important factor in this ultimate happy outcome. Unlike other instances when chains were pulled and running trains stopped to ambush those inside, the story offers a welcome change from the beaten tracks of train massacre that have become almost a constant fixture in stories set in northern India. Not all migrants, however, fared so well as the Ahmed family; Hasan Hafizur Rahman's "Deaths on the Night Train" attests to this, perhaps more insidious, aspect of those turbulent times. In course of an overnight journey from Dhaka to his native village of Bahadurabad, the unnamed though clearly implied Muslim narrator comes across an elderly Hindu gentleman boarding the train along with his younger brother's wife and niece. They had already been refused entry in the next compartment by other passengers citing lack of space and were similarly discouraged in the coach the narrator was travelling, but somehow managed to enter at the last moment. Even though the guard had blown his whistle and the train had started, the man first thrust open the door and threw in a bundle. Securing a foothold for himself, he then very carefully lifted the woman into the compartment. The girl followed last, and she had to hurry because the train had started to chug along by then. The passenger who had earlier barred the door 'was so astonished that he let go of the door and stepped back' (31), evidently taken aback by their desperation.

The compartment meant for 'only twenty-one passengers', was packed with people 'one on top of another' (32). Yet the exigency of their situation had made the Hindu family to force their way into the train, ignoring all the objections and difficulties that came their way. The narrator was quick to perceive the reason for this rush, he being aware of the riots that had gripped Dhaka and other parts of eastern Bengal in

the wake of the communal tension in Calcutta. He had gone to visit his daughter and son-in-law in Narayanganj, Dhaka, where they lived in the railway colony. The vehemence of these clashes was unprecedented; as the narrator himself admits: "I had never before experienced that sort of terror. I had never known it in my forty-year existence" (32). The riots had caused him to extend his stay at Dhaka, and he had been able to make the return journey only when there was a let-up. Seeing the urgency of the Hindu family to board the train, he realizes that like many others, they too were 'taking advantage of the lull in the storm to escape along with his two companions to some place of refuge' (33). The narrator rationalizes that the law-and-order situation must have improved, reflecting that '[T]hanks to human nature, riotous conditions are not permanent', and that although 'the mischief of hooligans and ruffians had not ended', there were 'clear signs that peace was imminent' (33). Such optimism is, no doubt, indicative more of his own compassionate nature than the actual ground scenario which continued to be dangerous for the Hindus, as recorded in the annals of history.³

Immediately on boarding the train, the Hindu gentleman had spread out their boarding-stuffed with all sorts of household goods-on the floor and gently helped the woman accompanying him to sit down on it. The narrator observed that the man's touch was pure and delicate, 'as if he was handling some sacred object' (33). The young girl had sat down on the remaining portion, leaning against the woman whom she addressed as 'Kakima' [wife of paternal younger uncle in Bengali], but the elderly man remained standing, almost on guard. The other passengers were mostly asleep or too indifferent, but the narrator felt distinctly uncomfortable seeing their woebegone faces. It also occurred to him that there was no reason to believe that the 'train was absolutely safe', since 'blood was being spilled on trains' (34). Although they did not make any effort to hide their religion, the narrator felt that for 'a Hindu there was danger aboard trains' (34). He was also aware that the few passengers who were still awake were 'acutely conscious of the three' (34). The apparent silence in the compartment was not only of tiredness, cold and sleep but also of fear and a palpable sense of foreboding.

The plight of these people evokes commiseration in the narrator, born out of his innate fellow-feeling; as he admits, 'a strange compassion moved me towards these three' (34). Seeing the elderly gentleman staring at a 'lota' [water-pot] hanging from a

bedding on the shelf opposite him, the narrator beckons him to come and sit beside him, while also offering him a drink (35). The man refuses water [it could have stemmed to the Hindu taboo about receiving food or water from Muslims] but accepts the seat. Even then, he could not relax as he was deeply worried about the woman who was in terrible pain. The woman was pregnant and suffering from pangs of labour, and with the jerking motion of the train, she shuddered, as if she was 'snatching herself away every time from the jaws of death' (37). The narrator is initially shocked to learn of her condition from her companion, and wonders: 'To make a woman walk in that advanced state, subject her to the rattle of a train, take her somewhere distant was a most extraordinary thing to do....What sort of a man was he? I wanted to rebuke the man, curse him' (37). But he immediately remembered about the riots which must have compelled them to flee from their native place with their lives, since 'death surrounded them on all sides' and 'there was nothing else for them to do' (37).

The woman was holding herself so taut that from her every limb her pain shrieked forth. She was hiding her head between her knees and moaning, though no words escaped her lips. Writhing in agony, and realizing that delivery was now imminent she, somehow, made a supreme effort to crawl her way to the toilet, slowly dragging her pain-wracked body.⁴ The minutes went past by, culminating in the hour but there was no further movement or sound coming from the toilet. The narrator, known for his altruism in his village where he looked into people's illnesses and dispensed homeopathic medicine, feels concerned about her critical state. When it was almost dawn and most of the passengers had got off the train, he could hold his suspense no more and suggested the Hindu gentleman to enquire how she was doing. The young girl went inside the toilet and was at first dumbfounded at the sight she encountered there, only to start shrieking thereafter: "O Kakima!...Uncle, O Uncle, Please come here. What has happened...Kaki..." (40). The man stiffened at her howling and grew still, unable to move from his spot. The import of her urgent cries was not lost on the narrator either; he envisioned the terrible scene inside: 'Darkness, in which a woman's corpse floated. A bloodied corpse, with its mouth open. Its stomach bloated. Its eyes upturned, contorted in its effort to withstand the pain that racked it. A mother. A woman about to give birth, who had fought to the end for life. In her bloated stomach the foetus that had been living a moment ago was dead' (40).

The narrator became deeply distressed by the turn of events, especially the 'helplessness' of the elderly gentleman caught in the throes of this extreme crisis. The

very thought of those corpses in the toilet sent a chill down his spine, contracting his chest with 'excruciating pain' and 'disgust' at this 'destruction' (41). The original Bengali title of Rahman's story, "Aro Duti Mrityu", insinuates at the disquieting fact that these 'two deaths' were a part of the long and sinister chain that ultimately and inevitably led to similar tragic fates for religious minorities during the Partition disturbances. Though not quite killed in any explicit attack, the woman and her child were caught in the maelstrom of religious violence which robbed them of a fair chance to lead their lives—something that would have been possible under times of normalcy. Towards the end, the narrator wonders about the potential of the unborn child and the sheer waste of human life: "Perhaps there was much he could have done, had he been born. He could have breathed freely in a new world. Who aborted this birth?" (40). The story speaks of 'a pervasive melancholia that comes from a cramping sense of guilt' suffered by men like the narrator who are conscientious enough to discern the moral and ethical wrongs associated with these riots but incapable of finding a remedy (Sengupta xvii).

This inability to reconcile one's inherent sensibilities with the external environment marked by viciousness and chaos is also to be found in Syed Waliullah's story "The Escape", though in an oblique manner. A young man travelling in a train in course of his journey across the border was feeling highly restless, and the stifling atmosphere inside the crowded compartment further made him edgy: 'The vacant mood disturbed him. The jerky movement which seemed undefined and purposeless filled his mind with desolation and despair. Something choked him; the vacant mood engulfed him and he gasped. Immediately he shook himself violently' (7). In order to distract his mind, the man started observing his fellow-passengers. Seated opposite him was an old man with a beaked nose and a white, but slightly soiled, embroidered cotton cap—foregrounding his Muslim identity. He was accompanying a little girl with an 'innocently grave face' which caught the interest of the young man. He looked at her and saw 'the whites of her lustrous, big eyes and the innocence. First his nostrils twitched. Innocence was fragrant. Then all of a sudden he was all smiles. He smiled expansively and his eyes glistened like water under the blazing noontide sun' (8).

In an endeavour to impress the girl, the man initiated a conversation with her. He asked her name, enquired whether she liked to hear stories, and then without bothering for her reply, he offered to tell a 'nice thrilling story', declaring himself to be a 'great storyteller' (8). She was startled at his unsolicited attention and turned away her face, but the man was not to be discouraged. Doubling his efforts, he scratched his chin and

back of his head, screwed up his eyes and looked out of the window 'in an apparent effort to recollect the promised story' (8). However, this act of remembrance inadvertently brought back dreadful memories of the communal riots, characterised by gruesome images of dead bodies with 'stomachs cut open, entwined entrails mixed with blood and dust' (10).

His horrific reverie was shattered only when a wide-mouthed, bulky, middle-aged woman who had been sitting in the corner with her short legs on the bench suddenly began to wail. She was one amongst the many who had to leave their native land in the midst of religious strife. The young man gets rather angry at this abrupt display of emotional outburst; glaring towards the woman, he said in a thundering voice: "Why do you weep, mother? Pray to God, just pray to Almighty God. Besides, we have crossed the border and there is no fear anymore" (11). The man believed himself to be strong and courageous, capable of withstanding great hardships and misery. Earlier in the story, it was even claimed that although he too had suffered like the other refugees, he had not broken down completely like them (8). Yet, as the story advances and his behaviour grows more and more erratic, it becomes increasingly apparent that he had been gravely affected by his traumatic experiences.

When the train halted at a station, the young man got down on the platform, ostensibly to buy some food for the girl who he assumed must have been feeling hungry on account of the long journey. However, the sight of two policemen guarding a partly covered body of a dead man with his skull completely battered unsettled him completely: 'The young man saw the corpse and, in an instant, froze like a statue' (12). It distorted his grip over reality to the extent that on returning to the compartment, he informed the girl that at the station he had met a 'dear friend' under arrest, closely guarded by two policemen. Resuming his previous attempt at narrating a story by leaving out demons altogether or making them behave like 'decent, well-meaning persons' (10), he slips into the past, though his attempt is once again marred by flashes of 'a broken leg, a battered head, a silent, yellowish mouth which no longer foamed in anger and desperation' (13-14).

All this while, these harrowing reminiscences, unwittingly though, had resulted in an array of weird expressions flitting across his face. Seeing the man alternately smile or lose himself in a trance, the girl eventually started to scream, taking him to be mad. In a bid to protect her, the young man promptly began a frantic search for this 'mad

man' (14), little realizing that she had grown scared of his odd behaviour and was now afraid of him. He scanned every nook and cranny of the coach and scrutinized all the passengers, but to no avail. As a last resort, he thought the mad man was outside and so, 'opening the door, he stepped out of the running train' (16). The loss, of perhaps a beloved, a child and even a dear friend—all of which are implicitly hinted at throughout the narrative—seemed to have had a thoroughly disorienting impact on the man, resulting in his nightmarish visions. This is greatly compounded by his heightened sense of conscience, an attribute also shared by Rahman's narrator in the previous story, which makes it all the more difficult for such characters to retain their equanimity.

Thus we find that narratives from Bengal revolving around train journeys generally strive to capture the complex human condition(s) manifested in the actions of a motley group confined within a closed space, i.e. the railway compartment, for a particular duration. The dynamics of their mutual interaction qualified by resentment, curiosity or empathy form the crux of their narratives. Bhisham Sahni's story "The Train has Reached Amristar" [originally in Hindi, it has also been translated as "We Have Arrived in Amritsar"] has a similar setting and plot-line, inspired by the author's own experiences while travelling in a train from Peshawar to Delhi on the eve of Independence in August 1947. Blatant violence rarely figures in these stories; as such, even those stories which describe the occasional train ambush are mostly syncopated accounts sans gore, like Nazmul Alam's "The Amulet". In the story, attackers wearing masks barge into a compartment of the Delhi Express en route from Delhi to Calcutta after it had crossed Gaya. It was a night of July 1947, when trouble had already started brewing in some parts of the country and 'people could not totally dismiss their fears' (26). The narrator, a Muslim, initially suspects them to be dacoits, but when they rush towards the sole burka-clad woman present, it immediately becomes clear that they have a different agenda. The woman who was travelling alone, however, shows exemplary nerve and boldly faces them. She warns them in a stern voice that she would kill anyone who moved towards her, while simultaneously putting her 'hand inside the burka, as if to bring out something' (30). The men presume that she was about to pull out a knife or a pistol, and jump off the compartment in a bid to save their lives. Curious to unearth the mystery behind her bravado, the narrator enquires about it and is pleasantly surprised when it is revealed that the woman was merely holding her taabiz or amulet strung with black thread. Alam here adds a clever twist to the conventional subject of a train attack through the actions of the woman which ingeniously

ward off the ruffians without any bloodshed. Even though the stories taken up for discussion here were all written by authors based in East Bengal/Pakistan/Bangladesh, this feature is distinctive of most Partition stories from both the Bengals which generally have a tangential approach to the subject, tending to avoid the crude and raw aspects and focussing more on the emotional and psychological fallout of the communal strife.

Notes :

1. In Rajshahi, Muslim riot refugees arrived throughout the period between 1947 and 1965, and particularly in large numbers during the years 1950 and 1962, in the wake of large-scale disturbances in neighbouring West Bengal that coincided with similarly violent developments in East Pakistan (Rahman and Schendel 566).
2. Interestingly, Pushpita or the nickname Pushpa, by which her father called her as a girl, are common Hindu names, as are Pradipto and Prateek, the names given to her two sons.
3. There was a continual flight of these Hindu minorities from East Bengal/ Pakistan/ Bangladesh due to the deteriorating communal situation, and 'on the whole, the net inflow of refugees to West Bengal ...[was]...estimated at about 6 million upto 1973' (qtd. in Sengupta 186).
4. This was not uncommon among expecting refugee women owing to the physical exertion of the journey, as documented by Sukhbir Singh and Manmohan Singh Gill in their article "Social and Psychological Trauma of the Displaced: A Study of Partition of India" (6). The Urdu story "Ya Khuda" ['O God'] by Qudrat Ullah Shahab has a similar episode where the female protagonist Dilshad gives birth to her daughter in the train compartment while fleeing from eastern Punjab to Lahore.

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