



"Toba Tek Singh" Seeking Identity Beyond the Borders

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Abstract- The Partition of India into two independent states emerges as a dark and grotesque chapter in the annals of history. The grand narrative of liberty lay rotten and unrecognizable. What was dreamt to be a free India, smouldered instead with the stink of corpses and mutilated self esteems. The section of women pitifully stood erased with their identity in shreds. The entire scenario spoke of the heartless animality human kind could be subjected to while harbouring fanaticism and communal hatred. Though Pandit Nehru's historical speech 'Tryst with destiny' carried no mention of the fate of millions who were butchered, the innocents who were targeted and killed, but surely as we look back, we cannot deny that Independence was tainted with the blood of millions.

Keywords: Borders, history, Independence

I. INTRODUCTION

The Partition shook the country down to its roots and a free India or a free Pakistan, which witnessed this manslaughter was certainly not the dream of a Gandhi or a Bhagat Singh. The two communities which had fought hand in hand against the mighty British empire had suddenly turned bestial. The Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who had lived in allegiance to the standards of peace and fraternity, all of a sudden became blood thirsty. The communities where earlier, even anger and misunderstandings paved way for cementing the bonds with greater strength, suddenly saw the emergence of religious bigotry and disappearance of secularism.

Gandhiji had initially said,

"My whole soul rebels against the idea that Hinduism and Islam represent two antagonistic cultures and doctrines. To assent to such a doctrine is for me a denial of God."¹

Perhaps, not only the Mahatma, but all true nationalists had nurtured the dream of peace and harmony as a manifestation of true freedom in an independent India. None could have predicted the unprecedented, catastrophic and inexplicable doom which resulted as a consequence of Partition. The Partition resulted in the brutal massacre of almost 1.5 million people. About 15 million people were displaced with absolutely no assurance of safety. The biggest trauma these people faced was that of uncertainty where dangers loomed around them, with no hope or promise of resettlement. As Richard Symonds says and I quote,

"They were either Hindus or Muslims, nothing more than that."²

Humanity, ethics, morals and tolerance, in fact all positive ideals vanished from the face of Mother India, as if they never existed. Ironically, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, had initially been one of the most active members of the Indian National Congress. He had, moreover, been engaged in strengthening the position of the Congress party during the ripe days of the freedom struggle. The desire for emancipation had never been subjected to interference by the ambition to secure a separate state for the Muslims. Both India and Pakistan today have their own stances with regard to those turbulent times. But it cannot be negated that an entire innocent race was wiped off by the wave of antagonism and spite which ended the golden aspiration of our patriots. Many a poets and writers have penned down the heart rending situation of the victims of Partition but Saadat Hasan Manto stands out as a true spokesman who presents the turpitude heaped upon people as a part of the strategy of the cruelty of those times.

Manto was born on the 11th of May at Samrala in Punjab. As we read his stories, we come across a narrator whose heart bleeds with shame and sorrow at the perpetration of evil in a so called free India. His stories do not merge into the assumed, preconceived ideas which eulogize freedom, at whatever possible price humanity paid. His stories rather project the devastated souls, the dilapidated homes and the tattered, dehumanized eternal sufferers. The women in his stories seem to cling to their own identities as if shamefaced to behold their own bodies, as if being born a woman was a sin. They are waxen statues, burning with self contempt as if their bodies, head to toe were unnatural. The women, may it be young, blossoming lasses or virtuous wives, or old mothers, none were safe during the traumatizing times post Partition.

In the story "Toba Tek Singh", Manto presents another universal human paradox, the love for one's native land, the yearning to cling to one's roots. Toba Tek Singh is not merely a village, it is rather an individual's heart, soul and essence. It is human nature's eternal desire to belong, it is the symbol of the emotional upheavals of a human being essentially glued to the conception of an idealized world.

The protagonist symbolizes the traditional villager whose entire sustenance in an agrarian set up depends primarily on the love he nurtures for his land. And secondly, what sets him going is his affection for the flora and fauna, particularly characterised by the animal world. Bishan Singh is an ordinary hero with an extraordinary mind. This is what transforms him into a tragic hero, whose essential goodness and simplicity leads to his lunacy. In most of the texts translated from the original Urdu version, we as readers are not able to comprehend the reasons of Bishan Singh's madness. But lately in a film produced by Bimal Dutt and directed by Shakti Prabha, we find an extended interpretation of Bishan Singh's madness.³

Though this does not find authentication in the text, but it may prove useful to place the story in the context of the larger paradigm of Partition and its aftermath. As per the film, Bishan Singh's conflicting situation arises from a family feud. His younger brothers are shown asserting their right for the division of the ancestral land. But for Bishan Singh, the land is a collective symbol of tradition and heritage. It is purity personified. He cannot even dream of its division. The very thought makes a chill run through his spine. He rather feels that filial fights should not be termed the reason for divisions because these fights were also as much a necessary part of their filial bliss as anything else. The film portrays a worried Bishan Singh who stands with his arms set apart like a scarecrow guarding his piece of land. Ironically, here is a man who cannot bear the thought of Partition at such a subterranean level. And how are we to imagine him identifying with the concept of conceptual reality of the Partition of India into two free states? An idea which was imposed upon him, and the idea which dismantled his idealized vision of Toba Tek Singh, his fantasized view of the ideal reality.

As we delve deep, the reason for Bishan Singh's madness may not be so significant. But what is significant is the universal desire to be in oneness with the land of one's origin, a land where one is born and brought up. India and Pakistan may appear free states or are free states in the historical context but the story "Toba Tek Singh" challenges the official status of these two nations.

The story thus acquires a stark distinctiveness because it is based not only on a historical reality, but emerges as a questioning of certain patterns of thought which were truly not in tune with the idea of humanity, large heartedness and religious tolerance which are the pre requisites of any culture or tradition.

There are a few aspects of Bishan Singh's personality which deserve mention and impart fullness to the narrative. Firstly the loss of basic human needs i.e. sleep and language. Bishan Singh is seen in a state of insomnia with swollen legs and feet, with his arms extended as if in a posture of protection, viz-a-viz performing his duty as the saviour of his piece of land. He also is seen uttering incomprehensible gibberish. His anger at the lunacy of those in power gets manifested through incoherent refrains 'O pardi gur gur di anekas di.....' He substitutes some expressions in his typical refrain in order to portray his views on matters pertaining to the political scenario. And he being a member of the Sikh community, uses cultural and contextual language to assert his opinions. Even in lunacy he appears to be wearing a garb of his rural set up where there is a perfect communion with his name Bishan Singh and his village Toba Tek Singh. So much so that this identity is almost interchangeable.

He is indeed insane, and so essentially marginalized but still he seems to share an organic relationship with the Toba Tek Singh of his imagination. With this thought, his mental faculties lie totally in assimilation with. As a routine, he being in a static, and stagnant state, does not observe hygiene or cleanliness. But telepathy tells him of his family's prospective visit and he always bathes and dresses up for the occasion. Instinct guides him every time. Fazal Din's visit is especially important. Manto wants to ascertain that cultural identity of the beings does not depend upon religious identity. And this was a common, ingrained feature of the kaleidoscopic variety of our country before Partition and the same communities had observed a cultural unity with respect for the other. But during Partition, the other was deemed to be hell. And hence the rigidity of the sects multiplied by leaps and bounds.

"Toba Tek Singh" is thus a powerful satire and a bitter indictment of the political processes and behaviour patterns that caused Partition. It is a factual, non judgemental chronicle of the barbarism of those times. The story progresses in a haunting milieu. The author narrates the situations with wonderful subtlety and literary restraint.

As we infer from history, the first to make the demand of a separate state for the Muslims was Allama Iqbal. As referred to earlier, Mohd Ali Jinnah had worked hard for Hindu Muslim unity initially. But Iqbal, Jauhar and others persuaded him to demand a separate nation for the Muslims.

The biggest tragedy was that in this power play of politics, the common multitudes became the victims. The ones in power failed to create order and the riots worsened though India and Pakistan were garlanded as free nations. The fundamentalistic tendencies increased considerably and in the current scenario, the Kashmir dispute emerges as a huge crisis emanating from the hatred and ill will of the sects after Partition ripped up the country into two.

The nuclear powered arms race, the two wars, Pakistan sponsored terrorism, tensions on the LOC, Kashmir as a point of hatred all these issues emerged as an aftermath of Partition. The lunatics in the story are essentially human beings. Humanity is their sole identity. The story is thus not placed in a transient context. It is as relevant to contemporary times as it must be when it was written.

Manto shows a bleak and desolate picture of reality where the common people had no access to the boundaries which created India and Pakistan as two different entities. The reality is that years have passed but the pain of the victims persists, the hurt and the loss still exist.

The end of the story is also symbolic and can be seen in the light of a real incident. Walter Benjamin, a noted philosopher, who was a Jew and belonged to Germany had committed suicide in 1940 on the border between France and Spain. He had actually gone to Paris ahead of the Nazi advance. At the Spanish border, an official claimed that refugees would be forced to return to France. Benjamin took an overdose of morphine and died. Everyone next morning was allowed to proceed through the Spanish territory. This incident is relevant to our context because the author says and I quote,

"In the no man's land between the two barbed wire fences lay the body of Bishan Singh of village Toba Tek Singh."⁴

It appears as if Bishan Singh chooses to die. Even in a state of mind which is not in tune with the parameters of normalcy he emerges as an existential seeker. In a tragic posture, he seems to seek his identity by falling down on the no man's land between the two borders. He emerges victorious in death. His death invokes a tragic serenity where a reader explores and seeks his identity beyond the borders. For Bishan Singh, his identity begins and ends in the folds of his native village. His land for him is a pilgrimage. Madness, here has actually been used as a metaphor for sanity. Were the power possessors normal? Were the power seekers normal? Was the decision a thought after move? Or was it merely an anarchaic disaster? These mad men in the story actually present a microcosm of society and question the ambiguity of the two nations and their nationhood. The ferocity witnessed during this period raises these fundamental questions.

Another important issue was the shady role played by the British rulers. Britain had actually been turned economically weaker after the Second World War and Russia and America emerged as stronger forces. In deliberate moves, the English people made attempts to distort the composite culture of India. Communal politics was made to operate at the grass root level. Census operations were carried out with demarcations based on religion. So much so that reforms were also carried out on community centered lines. Manto was thus writing in this era of social turmoil. And he took stock of this tremendous eruption of primeval evil spreading in the Indian scenario. So the story crystallizes the temperament and ethos of the entire social set up.

Sukrita Paul Kumar observes and I quote,

"Geography and human identity share a strong emotional relationship build up over years at an unconscious plane. The bond is deeply ingrained and separation of the two can cause psychic disorder. Identity is thus intrinsically, inherently and inextricably linked to homeland."⁵

It is this identity which is a part and parcel of Bishan Singh's being that lends him sagacity, that lends him tragic grace. Toba Tek Singh for him is not a material reality but signifies his emotional collective consciousness. And this is why he is not able to cope up with the dislocation and deprivation from his 'MITTI' or 'Janam Bhoomi.' Bishan Singh's love for his village is spontaneous. It makes him sensitive and adds meaning to the incoherent, scattered reality of his mind. While the new political identity thrust upon the people lacks truth and emerges as an imposed construct which adds to the suffering experienced by the people. The story is thus a strong critique of the vivisection of India.

There are two references to the newly created Pakistan; one is that it is a place where razor blades are made and second it is a place where language cannot be easily understood. Razor blades is again a metaphor depicting violence. And secondly there is an inadequacy in understanding the language spoken there?

The people were absolutely uncertain about their altered national identities which in a way challenges the absurdity of the very decision to split the nation into two. Even the patriotic fervour of the people appears stereotypical. The bonds of love and warmth disappeared and masks of caste and religion existed. Two of the lunatics pose as Jinnah and Master Tara Singh. These two lunatics had earlier lived in harmony but suddenly they saw each other as enemies. In a nutshell, love was also partitioned. There is an indirect caricature on Manto's part referring to these two political stalwarts. Rather it appears as if language fails in the times of turmoil. Several meanings can be encoded from the mumblings of Bishan Singh.

"Madness of the asylum is used as a metonym for the madness that worked havoc in the nation."⁶

As against the bizarre scenes of rape, massacre and plunder, even the Partition appears reasonable, though not humane. The mad people who are marginalized in society appear centre stage. Troubles are

shown disrupting human life. Mainly it is a matter of power assertion where the officious, administrative gimmicks disappear. Madness of the people in power here is more destructive than the insane ones.

Manto's story is thus a protest against the arbitrary decisions of policy makers. He thus refuses to accept the political identity thrust on him. The protagonist seems to search his land in no man's land. No man's land is an alternate space and is a move against imposed externals.

It is reported that there were 30 mental hospitals in India at the time of Partition, 27 in India and 3 in Pakistan. It is estimated that 450 patients were transferred to India in Dec 1950 and 283 Muslim patients were sent to Lahore. The story reflects Manto's humanism. He seems convinced that happiness does not lie in conflicts, be it on religion or on nationalism. What was needed was fellowship, tolerance and forgiveness. In this sense, Partition was a cataclysmic event. The bonds with home, family and friends were cut off and violence in the shape of a monster survived.

Even those who survived could not get rid off the memories of Partition which altered their lives both physically and psychologically. This is how Manto explored the dilemma of identity. Fromm says and I quote,

"A displaced person needs rootedness and relatedness to avoid the pressures of being an alienated individual."⁷

Bishan Singh also wants to combat this alienation. His repeated query as to where is Toba Tek Singh is a plea to remain associated and thus build relatedness with his roots. This oft repeated question adds to the poignant effect in the story. This story can never be blunted with the passage of time also because it shows how patriotism got transformed into jingoism. Even in the present context, the hatred between India & Pakistan lives on, as if it has congealed permanently into a chronic state of suspicion.

The story opens with a satirical observation,

"Whether or not this was a sane decision, we will never know." (p. 110)

The author thus builds upon the parallels between the physical aspect of lunacy and a mental and spiritual stagnation of the people in power then. The mob hysteria was a weakness which unruly elements exploited and which resulted in riots. All the mad men in the asylum undergo habitual changes when the decision to shift them is announced. One lunatic recites a doggerel, another gives up bathing altogether, yet another climbs up a tree, two of them pose as Jinnah and Master Tara Singh and many such changes in behaviour can be observed. A lunatic is also seen embracing his Hindu and Sikh friends and shedding bitter tears. A Muslim inmate took off all his clothes and started to behave in a mysterious manner. The Anglo Indian inmates were worried about their future status in the asylum. And Bishan Singh is seen mumbling his incoherent speech time and again. All these changes in behaviour indicate how the lunatics lost their sense of security in the asylum when they are informed about the exchange. They do not feel safe anymore. They rather feel a continuous lurking threat as to what will happen next. Ironically, the author expresses this bewilderment and I quote,

"— who could say with conviction that there was no danger of both India and Pakistan vanishing from the face of the globe one day." (p. 113)

The author explains the agony of the times. He hints at the impending dangers this communal hatred is exposed to. The mad men are the author's mouth pieces. But these are people with real mental health problems. But what about the proclaimers of justice? What about the leaders who made endless promises? Why could not the situation be controlled? Where from did so much hatred appear all of a sudden? How could humans behave as animals? Manto raises these questions but with composure and subtlety.

Another significant aspect is Bishan Singh's physical condition. A man who never sits or sleeps, a man with swollen legs, a father who does not comprehend his child, a man who has no concept of time and yet waits for his family and daughter, and above all a man at peace with only one dream and that is the pristine shade of his village, Toba Tek Singh. Fazal Din's answer to Bishan Singh's, is evocative. His answer is,

"Its in the same place where it always was." (p. 118)

The irony is that there is no contextual change in the place to which our protagonist is bonded. But the mental make up of human beings has undergone a drastic change. A few unruly elements have infected the entire human race. Significantly, whenever riots shame a nation, it is only a select few who are cruel. But the consequences have to be faced by innocent multitudes.

Bishan Singh's answer is equally penetrating.

"O Pardi, gud gud di, anekas di, bedhyana di, moong di daal of the Pakistan and Hindustan of Dur Phithey Moonh." (p. 119)

Notably, the phrase used at the end is a typical phrase of abuse in Punjabi household. It is used to express hatred, irritation, extreme anger, dejection and dismay. Cultured people would mind this utterance even if it is used for a dog. But here an insane man uses this term for the governments. His outburst points out the latent anger, peevishness and grief visible in his words even in a mentally deformed condition.

The hazy chaos of these lunatics suggests the haziness and bleakness of those times. All the lunatics are shown confused because they cannot make sense of why they are being uprooted from one place and why the hell are they being flung into another. And hence, their noisy squabbles towards the end signify the boisterous state of their confused minds.

The story ends on a heart rending note. Even in lunacy and even in death, Bishan Singh raises questions and his body on the no man's land answers these questions. After all, how much land does a man need ? Yes, the borders are there and will be there. But what about human identity? What about our roots?

"Toba Tek Singh" is thus a journey. A journey of the self. A journey of exploration seeking an identity beyond, much beyond the borders.

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