

Citizenship in an Age of Combative Nationalisms

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The predominant theme of my work is the crossing of frontiers of nationality, culture, and language in three areas of the Indian subcontinent: India, Pakistan, and Kashmir. To that list, I would add my attempt to cross the barrier of citizenship as a self-conscious political philosophy. I hope, through my work, to make my readers aware of the humanist response to the ridiculousness of war, a response that transcends national boundaries and barriers.

In the summer of 2017 I got a chance to go to Attari Railway Station and Wagha Border, on either side of which the flags of India and Pakistan are brandished with pride as well as a belligerent ferocity. I witnessed the histrionics and performativity of the Border Security Force of India and Pakistan Rangers. Disregarding the sweltering heat, frenetic and excited crowds waving the flags of their respective countries and dancing to Bollywood songs that evoked a frenzy. The complex and elaborate performance of the two sides, which I saw, was symbolic of the combative and truculent narratives of nationalism in the subcontinent.

It was a sentimental visit for my mother, because that was the closest she got to the city of her birth and the city where her maternal grandfather is buried: Lahore. In her mind's eye, she was traversing spaces created by political, cultural, and religious differences. Such memories and stories challenge the notion of nationalism as an alliance that is forged with people from the same linguistic, cultural, and religious background.

Many aspects of the era of the Partition of 1947 are repressed into the political unconscious of the people of the Indian subcontinent. As a Subaltern Studies scholar, Shail Mayaram, reminds us, during the Partition of India various state authorities rigidified borders and boundaries that were once flexible, and people were forced to opt for one nation or the other, India or Pakistan, or one religious identity or the other, Hindu or Muslim. And in many cases the choice was imposed on them (128). We require a vision that questions the ethnolinguistic and cultural divides created by the fiery resurgence of nationalist ideologies, and interweaves that vision with human stories. I seek to elaborate on the larger politics of postcolonialism in affirming the identities of common people and their cultural anchors. I have attempted, in my previous and current work, to interrogate the authenticity of colonial and nationalist historiography by, on the

one hand, recording the vivid and verifiable details of individual memories that do not necessarily correspond with the documented version of history. It is now that I am able to integrate fragments of my memory and experiences into a composite whole. I consider it incumbent upon responsible and creative scholars of the subcontinent to engage with the cultural and historical past by rejecting the process of historicizing the imperial past in favor of personal memory and imagination.

Unfortunately, some of us take a rather limited and restrictive view of nationalism by portraying the concept of the nation as an invention that breeds heinous crimes and relentless violence. The nation is rendered all the more threatening when the war that leads to its construction is internecine and does not bind Muslim to Hindu or Punjabi to Kashmiri, but rather sunders Punjabi from Punjabi and Kashmiri from Kashmiri. Such an irregular war polarized these ethnic groups into Hindus and Muslims who are required to disaffirm their cultural, linguistic, and social unities. As one of the characters in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Shadow Lines* wonders, "And then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory?" (247).

The political and social upheaval that followed upon the creation of the dominions of India and Pakistan in 1947 has left legacies that continue to haunt the two countries. The Partition enabled the thunderous forces of violence and displacement to tear the pre-existing cultural and social fabric so systematically that the process of repair hasn't even begun.

It is an unfortunate fact that all the historical, political, and social events that led to the catastrophe of 1947 can best be understood within the explanatory frameworks of religious and familial obligation. This molding of collective subjectivities by the evocation of pan-national religious affinities results in the stifling of minority voices that express divergent cultural and social opinions. The narrator of Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* observes, "As always, there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally in India of Hindus sheltering Muslims" (229-30). Such people demonstrate the "indivisible sanctity that binds people to each other independently . . . , for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples" (230). Since these two nations were founded on the idea of religious difference, the religious agendas of right-wing organizations and militaries now rule over the Indian subcontinent.

In addition, “official” accounts of the Partition discount narratives that do not contribute to the deepening of the breach caused by the fracture lines of nationalist collective subjectivity and religious identity. This exclusionary tactic deployed by nationalist historiography, according to which the populace of the Indian subcontinent was a passive recipient of the repercussions of the nationalist struggle valiantly fought by the Western-educated elite, is articulately interrogated in the inaugural statement in *Subaltern Studies 1*: “What is clearly left out of the un-historical historiography is the politics of the people” (Guha 1).

I observe that the Partition is a vivid manifestation of the claim that postcolonial nations are founded in a bloody severance of the umbilical cord, one that fortifies borders between nation-states with irrational and remorseless violence. The discourse of nationalism, however, affects to make sense of the absurd loss of lives that occurs.

Works Cited

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