

## Beyond Broken Columns: Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* and the Quest for 'Horizontal Comradeship'

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The attempts to imagine the Indian nation as a united political community are repeatedly ruptured by what Pramod Nayyar calls the processes of 'postcolonial subalternization' which refers to all those forces of oppression that continue to ravage India on the basis of class, caste, gender, creed and of course religion. Alluding to Hitler's notorious plan to annihilate the entire Jewish race, Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* critically intervenes in our communally vitiated socio-political scenario and operates as a caveat against this crisis searches for the ways in which people can bond simply as human beings without being riven by the shadow lines that seek to pull us apart. Striving to move beyond hostile binaries, the play searches for that 'third-space' or 'in-between space' from where may be framed the ties of 'horizontal comradeship' that Benedict Anderson deems essential for national unity.

Keywords: nation, communalism, horizontal comradeship, postcolonial subalternization

The eyes are not here

There are no eyes here

In this valley of dying stars

In this hollow valley

This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

- T.S. Eliot (Eliot 84)

These lines may well be uttered by the agonised family members of Ishrat Jahan and three other Muslims who were killed on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2004, in a fake encounter conducted by the currently jailed IPS officer D G Vanzara who had staged this murderous drama, according to Magistrate S P Tamang, to get promotions and win the favour of his superiors (Times News Network). Just as Eliot's hollow men lament the collapse of an earlier existence marked by the illuminating presence of faith, we along with members of Ishrat Jahan's family, may also mourn the collapse of the secular fabric of India which has been repeatedly ravaged by the spectre of communalism, aided by governmental institutions and members of administration such as D G Vanzara. It is these examples of administrative collusion which exacerbate those forces of marginalisation which push certain sections of the society to the peripheries by subjecting them to various kinds of deprivation and injustice. And these processes thus lead to what Pramod Nayar calls 'postcolonial subalternization' (Nayar 69) which inevitably fosters a sense of unbelongingness in the minds of these subalternized sections that ruptures the 'imagined community' of the nation. These incidents are actually indicative of the conflict between the constitutionally determined secular national structure of India and the discourse of communalism, which obviously threatens to destroy that secular fabric altogether. It is this conflict, along with its terrible consequences, which are insightfully explored in Dattani's *Final Solutions* (FS 2000), which brings into focus the entire discourse which makes possible either the destruction of Babri Masjid or the carnage in Gujrat and also seeks to imagine ways in which a new future beyond fissures may be created.

Such an attempt, however, must always take into account the entrenched discourse of Hindu nationalism which has been cumulatively created by nationalist historiography on the one hand and the rise of Hindu nationalism on the other. As Partha Chatterjee illustrates with numerous examples, a number of major Bengali thinkers and authors began by imagining the nation as a primarily Hindu entity, within which however, even originally anti-Hindu and anti-Brahmin religions like Buddhism, Jainism or Sikhism could be subsumed, and placed both Islam and Christianity as alien forces which could not be included within the imagined community of India. While a Bholanath Chakravarti could claim during a meeting of the Adi Brahma Samaj, in 1876 that: “The cruelty of Yavana [Muslim] rule turned the land to waste”<sup>1</sup> and that “The resumption of good fortune was initiated the day the British flag was first planted on the land”, (Chatterjee 93-94) Tarinicharan Chattopdhyay, in 1878, in the eighteenth edition of the *History of India*, would claim, while castigating the Mahmud of Ghazni, “Of all Muslims it was his aggressions which first brought devastation and disarray to India, and from that time, the freedom of Hindus has diminished and faded like the phases of the moon”.(Chatterjee 103-04) Furthermore as Partha Chatterjee has shown, such remarks were preceded and followed by the construction of Muslims as “fanatical, warlike, bigoted, dissolute and cruel”(Chatterjee 102), who were, time and again, opposed by Hindu kings who would be celebrated as pious, determined, dauntless and yet unfortunate individuals, embodying that heroism which would be required for national liberation. Interestingly, such classifications directly stemmed from contemporary colonial historiography of India which was itself motivated by a vilification of Islam and especially Mohammad, determined by a Orientalist discourse that went as far back as Dante and Spenser. And it was their division of India into a classical Hindu ancient past, a dark Muslim Medieval age and a British induced Renaissance, which was accepted and applied by Indian historians who did not bother to interrogate the categorisations and their bases. Partha Chatterjee therefore notes:

For Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century, the pattern of classical glory, medieval decline, and modern Renaissance appeared as one that was not only proclaimed by modern historiography for Europe but also approved for India by at least some sections of European scholarship. What was needed was to claim the agency for completing the project of modernity. To make that claim, ancient India had to become the classical source of Indian modernity, while “the Muslim period” would become the night of medieval darkness. (Chatterjee 102)

So pervasive was the effect of this paradigm of nationalism that, at least in Bengal, this narrative, as appropriated by schools and colleges and literary creations “went virtually unchallenged until the first half of the twentieth century.”(Chatterjee 110) This is quite blatantly manifested by the later writings of Bankimchandra, especially such novels as *Rajsingha*, *Anandamath* etc. As Tanika Sarkar has shown, these texts present the Muslims as the Hindus’ hated historical adversary who must be confronted to ensure the Hindus’ own survival. Throughout *Anandamath*, therefore we keep hearing the refrain, “Kill the low Muslims”, which is even elaborated into virulent rhetorical questions such as these:

“How does the Muslims ruler protect us? We have lost our religion, our caste, our honour, and family name, and now we are about to lose our very lives...how can Hinduism survive unless we drive out these dissolute swine?” (Sarkar, 180)

Such strategies and statements continued to be adopted in contemporary Bengali theatre as well<sup>2</sup> and all such exclusionary and divisive representations created, from the very inception of Indian nationalism, a certain void that not only widened later but also ensured the eruptions of communal conflagrations which keep harking back to the notion of historical origin as a marker of modern identity. As Partha Chatterjee explains:

Buddhism or Jainism are Hindu because they originate in India, out of debates and critiques that are internal to Hinduism. Islam and Christianity came from outside and are therefore foreign. And ‘India’ here, is the generic entity, with fixed territorial definitions, that acts as the permanent arena for the history of the jati. (Chatterjee, 110)

Unfortunately, such a conception of national community remarkably tallies with Savarkar’s concept of Hindu and Hindutva which are the basis of the attempt to make India a Hindurashtra, almost in the manner of the German Aryan state under Hitler and his NAZI party. Savarkar stated:

A Hindu means a person who regards this land of Bharat Varsha, from the Indus to the Seas, as his Fatherland, that is the cradle of his religion. (Veer 1)

Savarkar’s definition of Hindutva, through the notions of ‘Karmabhumi’ and ‘Punyabhumi’, as Peter Van Der Veer observes, “equates religious and national identity: an Indian is a Hindu – an equation that puts important Indian religious communities, such as Christians and Muslims, outside the nation” (Veer 1). This stance becomes all the more evident when Savarkar, further elaborates his position and states:

A Hindu therefore, to sum up, the conclusions arrived at, is he who looks upon the land that extends from Sindhu to Sindhu – from the Indus to the seas – as the land of his forefathers – his Fatherland (Pitribhu); who inherits the blood of that race whose first discernible source could be traced to the Vedic Saptasindhus and which on its onward march, assimilating much that was incorporated and ennobling much that was assimilated, has come to be known as the Hindu people, who has inherited and claims as his own the culture of that race as expressed chiefly in their common classical language Sanskrit and represented by a common literature, art and architecture, law and jurisprudence, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments, fairs and festivals; and who above all addresses this land, this Sindhusthan as his Holyland (Punyabhu), as the land of his prophets and seers, of his godmen and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage...All these essentials could be summed up by stating in brief, that he is a Hindu to whom Sindhusthan is not only a Pitribhu but also a Punyabhu.” (Savarkar 115-16)

Since, Muslims and Christians, even if they are born in India, have Mecca or Jerusalem as their Holyland, they are thus identified as non-Hindus and by definitions, non Indians, according to Savarkar’s logic. He makes this all the more clear as he states:

That is why in the case of some of our Mohameddan or Christian countrymen who had originally been forcibly converted to a non-Hindu religion, and who consequently have inherited, along with Hindus, a common fatherland and a greater part of the wealth of the common culture – language, law, customs, folklore and history – are not and cannot be recognised as Hindus. For though Hindusthan to them is Fatherland, as to any other Hindu, yet it is not to them a Holyland too. (Savarkar 113)

It is on the basis of this logic that M.S.Golwalkar would go on to assert:

All those not belonging to the national, i.e. Hindu race, Religion, Culture and Language, naturally fall out of the pale of real 'National' life.

We repeat: in Hindusthan, the land of the Hindus, lives and should live the Hindu Nation – satisfying all the five essential requirements of the scientific nation concept of the modern world. Consequently only those movements are truly 'National' which aim at re-building, revitalizing, and emancipating from its present stupor the Hindu Nation. Those only are nationalist patriots who, with the aspiration to glorify the Hindu race and Nation next to their heart, are prompted into activity and strive to achieve that goal. All others are either traitors or enemies to the national cause, to take a charitable view, idiots. (Noorani 20)

Such a vision of Hindu nationalism, as evident from the remarks, refuses to acknowledge non-Hindus as Indians and according to Golwalkar, if these communities indeed must stay, they should exist as completely subservient, subjugated peoples, almost as the Jews were in Hitler's Germany:

The foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e. the Hindu Nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizen's rights. (Noorani 20)

These statements obviously emphasise the fascist nature of such enterprises which becomes further evident from Golwalkar's other statements:

To keep up the purity of the Race, and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her [sic] purging the country of the Semitic Races – the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here...a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by. (Noorani 20)

Such statements form the discursive framework for the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India which has produced a retrograde, revivalist, fascist nationalism which has grown in strength across India and has produced in the minds of religious minorities a haunting sense of insecurity which has only been intensified by such occurrences as the demolition of the Babri Masjid or the burning of missionary Graham Staines. These discursive frameworks and the kind of actions they instigate are integral to the processes of postcolonial subalternization as a result of which the new subaltern begins to feel a sense of unbelongingness owing to the multiple deprivations and injustices that he is subjected to and they may well generate a sense of hostility towards the nation-state in question. This is precisely the context that Dattani seeks to explore in the play where two Muslim boys, chased by a fanatic mob that keeps buying for their blood, seek shelter in the house of Ramnik Gandhi. Considering the fact that Gandhi is called the 'father of the nation', the domestic space of the Gandhi household becomes symbolic of the nation-space of India itself and the issue of the Muslim boys seeking shelter in the house becomes tied up with the broader framework of creating an inclusive secular nation which can accommodate Muslims and other religious minorities as equal citizens. Such an ideal, however, is rudely shattered at the very beginning as the symbolic representation of the nation-space is fearfully disrupted by divisive religious forces. It is these forces which vehemently assert themselves through the chorus as they collectively

assault Javed and Bobby simply for being Muslims after spewing hatred through their frenzied responses and questions:

Chorus 1, 2, 3: This is our land! How dare they?

Chorus 1: It is in their blood!

Chorus 2, 3: It is in their blood to destroy!...

Chorus 1: (pounding with his stick) Send... them...back. *Pause.*

Chorus 4: (questioning) Send them back?

Chorus 2: (pounding with his stick) Drive...them...out. *Pause.*

Chorus 5: (questioning) Drive them out?

Chorus 3: Kill the sons of swine! (FS 168-69)

Through these comments Dattani foregrounds that communal discourse which identifies Muslims as an inimical, hostile group of people who should have all gone to Pakistan after Partition. M.S. Golwalkar had identified the whole Muslim population of Post-Partition India as “internal threats” who had all voted for Pakistan and wrote:

Has their old hostility and murderous mood, which resulted in widespread riots, looting, arson, raping and all sorts of orgies on an unprecedented scale in 1946–47, come to a halt at least now? It would be suicidal to delude ourselves into believing that they have turned patriots overnight after the creation of Pakistan. On the contrary, the Muslim menace has increased a hundredfold by the creation of Pakistan which has become a springboard for all their future aggressive designs on our country. (Golwalkar 119)

These dialogues inevitably register the sense of fear and awe generated by the hateful, vindictive voices of people like Golwalkar who want to ruin India’s secular fabric by making it a ‘Hindurashtra’, following perhaps the same pattern that Hitler’s NAZI party used to create a supposedly pure and powerful Germany by annihilating the supposedly corrupting presence of the Jews. The communal ideology that has been developed through the texts of Golwalkar and others bears uncanny resemblance to the NAZI project and it is as a result of such ideological mobilization that Javed and Bobby’s identity as Muslims endangers their lives in the same way that Ishrat Jahan’s was by her identity as a Muslim. And it is in this context that the oft-repeated concept of one’s ‘own people’ becomes significant. Instead of operating as an inclusive signifier of all Indians the term becomes fractured into communally polarised opposites of ‘us’ and ‘them’ – an opposition that ruptures the nationalist dream of ‘unity in diversity’ – and places the minority communities in that unnarratable space of incomprehensibility where they are identified, in the words of Gyanendra Pandey, as “‘populations’ within nation states” whom the state wishes to “destroy...because they are collectivities with ‘different’ (not to say, abnormal) values, customs and practices”. (Pandey 274)

One of the strategies through which this is done is the repeated reference to the trauma of partition which becomes one of the many available tools of communal polarisation. As Vasanthi Raman notes:

A macabre way, in which partition has resurfaced in the lives of Indian Muslims, particularly since the 1990s, is in the metaphor of a mini-Pakistan. Partition is almost reenacted every time there is a riot and Muslim areas have been affected...The language and the slogans of the Hindu right wing during the series of riots since 1992, when the Babri masjid was vandalized, unabashedly recall partition (Raman 276)

The same process is also highlighted in the play through Hardika, who had herself been victimized by the communal frenzy during Partition and her diary becomes a window through which those troubled times are poured on to the stage:

He said he was happy that we were rid of the Britishers. He also said something which I did not understand then. He said that before leaving they had let loose the dogs. I hated to think that he was talking about my friends' fathers...but that night in Husainabad in our ancestral house – when I heard them outside – I knew that they were thinking the same of us. And I knew I was thinking the same, like my father. (FS 167)

Her fears are concretized by the destruction of the Krishna idol which not only represents the antagonism between warring religious communities but also symbolizes the absence of love which is reinforced by the rupturing of the records of love songs.

Lying about like pieces of glass, Shamsad Begum, Noor Jehan, Suraiya. The songs of love that I had learnt to sing with. Those beautiful voices. Cracked...(FS 167)

Hardika not only adored these Muslim singers but even aspired to be like them in the future. This substantiates that sense of a syncretic culture where so many diverse strands could merge together on the basis of that shared universal human emotion of love which was also the subject of their songs. However, as the records are cracked by the thrown stones we also witness that rupture of our syncretic culture which is also responsible for the ongoing politics of estrangement, hatred and conflict that feeds itself through the resurrection of traumatic memories of the past to harden communal hatred within individuals. Hardika herself has become so prejudiced by these traumatic events that she not only despises the two young boys but even asks Ramnik to shut the door against them so that they may be slaughtered: "How could he let those people into my house? They killed his grandfather." (FS 179)

Her unfeeling, seemingly inhuman prejudice is born out of that binary of 'us' and 'them', generated by divisive, fundamentalist discourses and the opposition to the entry of those two boys in the house, also represents symbolically those aforementioned exclusionary narratives that identify the Indian Muslims as aliens who belong outside the realm of the "real National life", specifically Pakistan. As Hardika says "I cannot forget, I just cannot forget" (FS 223), we are confronted with a vision of entrenched ruptures and we realize why Renan said that "Forgetting...is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation." (Renan 11) In fact, as Hardika demonstrates, lack of forgetting transforms the nation into, what Bhabha calls, "a liminal signifying space that is internally *marked* by the discourse of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending people, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference." (Bhabha 148)

This is definitely true for India and they are most visibly and terribly foregrounded during the riots, which are often found to be instances of organised violence, instigated chiefly, by various militant Hindu fundamentalist organisations in the past three decades. In fact, ever since independence India witnessed a steady rise of the discourse of majoritarian communalism which inevitably developed a sense of fear, humiliation and consequent resentment in the Muslim communities that became all the more acute in the wake of the violent communal politics that gripped India since the 1980s, culminating in such barbaric deeds as the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the consequent riots, as well as the genocide of 2002. It is this mentality which is voiced by the Muslim Chorus:

Chorus 1, 2:  
 They hunt us down!  
 They're afraid of us!  
 They beat us up!  
 We are few!  
 But we are strong!  
 They beat us up!  
 They're afraid of us!  
 They hunt us down!  
 They want to throw us out! (FS 179)

Wrongs without redress breed revenge. Suppression of religious identities because of fundamentalist activities breeds an opposed fundamentalism that can only drag us into an endless cycle of vitiating violence. This is precisely what happens in case of Javed who becomes part of a riot-rousing group with its own fundamentalist agenda as a result of that ambience of unbelongingness which a Muslim often has to face and which is exemplified in the text through the episode involving the delivery of a letter. As Javed opens the gate to deliver the letter, a man comes out and orders him to go back after leaving the letter on the wall. And he only picks up the letter after cleaning and wiping both the letter and the place on the wall where it was kept. Such an incident offers just one glimpse of the kind of prejudice an Indian Muslim has to confront at times which is re-emphasised by Aruna's own reluctance to offer them water or milk and the way in which she delicately separates the glasses touched by the Muslim youths as she considers their touches to be as contaminating as the touch of a lizard. It is these actions and gestures that doubly alienate members of minority communities who find respite through the seductive rhetoric of an opposed fundamentalism which virtually drugs them into an amoral trance that renders possible the committing of immoral acts, including those terrorist strikes which continue to lacerate our times:

I was swayed by what now appears to me as cheap sentiment. They always talked about motherland and fighting to save our faith and how we should get four of theirs for every one of ours...'The time has come', somebody would say. 'This is jehad – the holy war! It is written!' 'Yes', I would say. 'I am ready, I am prepared!' (FS 205)

However, as the tense of Javed's statement itself indicates, he 'is' not any more what he once 'was'. As one who has peered into the abyss and come back, Javed indeed emerges as a heroic character whose very rejection of the fundamentalist indoctrination opens the space for that world beyond communal polarisation which is sheltered alike from the ingrained prejudices that govern Aruna as well as those wounds of past which continue to traumatise the likes of Hardika. It is through the friendship and bonding of Javed, Smita and Bobby that this hope is realised on stage which also indicates Dattani's hope that it is perhaps through the youth that India can dream of a future of tolerance and forgiveness, unfettered by the shadow lines that keep us apart. This is emphatically articulated by Bobby who deliberately places the idol of Krishna on his palm, disregarding Aruna's prejudices, and states:

He doesn't cringe from my touch. He welcomes the warmth of my hand. He feels me. And he welcomes it!...You can bathe Him day and night, you can splash holy water on Him but you cannot remove my touch from His form. You cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being

who believes, and tolerates and respects what other human beings believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world! (FS 224-25)

It is this humanistic faith which unites Bobby, Javed and Smita. Together they represent that sense of 'horizontal comradeship' (Anderson 8) which is supposed to be the foundation of any nation and which can counter those processes of postcolonial subalternization, generated by vertical hierarchies of power, which give rise to various divisive forces. Through them we are taken to those 'in-between spaces' which, according to Homi Bhabha "provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity" (Bhabha 1), away from the binaries of communal conflict. Through his young characters Dattani perhaps seeks to foreground the possibility of a new India, not directly scarred by the trauma of Partition and its aftermaths, which is willing to move beyond engraved barriers in search of better times. And the location of the young characters, as the harbingers of such change also perhaps indicates the responsibility that the youth must shoulder to move beyond the morass of communal hatred. However, as Derrida has shown, all textual strategies of thematic cohesiveness are disrupted by gaps, silences or spectral figures, banished to the peripheries, which haunt our apparently unified structures (Derrida 46). The figure of the dead pujari exercises a similarly 'hauntological' (Derrida 63) presence in this particular play and produces that unbalancing moment which 'exposes the grammatological structure of the text' (Spivak, 1). Where does his corpse lie in this ethic of tolerance and forgiveness? How will his family members respond to either Javed or that acquaintance of his who committed the murder? Will they be able to forgive or remain entrapped in that same cycle of sterile hate? This particular textual ghost thus lays bare a series of unquiet debates about public posture and private response, between forgetfulness and forgiveness, between love and justice. Dattani, as ever, does not provide us with final solutions and faithfully holds a mirror up to the complexities that confront us.

It is as an illustration of these complexities that in the final scene Hardika, after she learns from her son how her family members had burned Zarine's father's shop, is able to ask her son:

Hardika: Do you think...do you think those boys will ever come back?

Ramnik: If you call them, they will come. But then again – if it's too late – they may not. (FS 226)

Ramnik's reply is characterized by a cautious balance that enunciates at once both the possibility of an inclusive future based on forgiveness, tolerance and compassion as well as the difficulties that lie in the way; difficulties that have been further intensified owing to the unprecedented, televised, state-sponsored carnage in Gujrat, the rise of international Islamic terrorism as well as the emergence of Hindu terrorist groups in India. Ashis Nandy, in a seminar after the Gujrat carnage worryingly observed:

The forces the Gujarat violence might have released are a different kettle of fish. They seem to have done what the Partition riots did. Also, given that they have been arguably the first video riots in India – riots taking place in front of TV cameras – their impact will be pan-Indian and international. The minorities all over the country have seen the experiments in ethnic cleansing and the attempts to break the economic backbone of the Muslim community. The sense of desperation brewing among the Gujarati Muslims is likely to be contagious.



I wonder what we should do with 120 million bitter Muslims, a sizeable section of them close to desperation. Will it be another case of Palestine now onwards, at least in Gujarat? Prima facie, Modi has done his job. The Sangh Parivar's two-nation theory is genuine stuff and has already initiated the process of a second partition of India, this time of the mind. We, our children and grandchildren – above all, the Gujaratis – will have to learn to live with a state of civil war. (Nandy, para 25-26)

However, following the example of Barak Obama we should also recall for our reading the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: "I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him." (Obama para 13) Despite the ambiguities raised by the figure of the dead pujari or ceaseless spiral of violence that entangles us, we can still hold on to the image of Bobby, Javed and Smita playing and splashing water among each other as the symbol of that 'oughtness', away from the frictions of our current 'isness'. It can operate as that icon of what Paul Ricoeur calls 'appeased memory' (Ricoeur 11) born out of the recognition of mutual loss and the willingness to move beyond recrimination and prejudice which enables the logic of forgiveness to penetrate the logic of justice on the level of "matters that can only be symbolical" (Ricoeur 9). Just as in the face of widespread despair, following the horrors of World War I, Tagore had uttered the hope of sprinkling the sacred water of worship "to sweeten the history of man into purity and ... make the trampled dust of the centuries blessed with fruitfulness" (Tagore 51), we too may hold on to Dattani's image of youthful conviviality and harmony as the symbolic precursor of a time when, after traveling the wasteland of communal conflicts, we too will find our path to that rose-garden, to learn 'to care and not to care' (Eliot 98) and say with him: "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih" (Eliot 75).

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