

A Critical Study of Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* in the Context of a Modern Approach to "Religion"

Ramani Naik
Ph. D Scholar,
P.G. Dept. of English,
Sambalpur University,
Jyoti Vihar, Burla.

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Abstract:

The momentous event, Partition of Indian Subcontinent (1947) as an action-packed event still continues to haunt many direct-indirect victims (of the event), many historians, authors, poets, novelists, short story writers, research scholars etc. and many common people of India, Pakistan and abroad as well. The turbulent event has been documented in not only in history but also in a wide range of literary genres -fiction, non-fictions, poetry, memoirs, oral history etc., (known as Partition Literature) published in many languages in many countries. The authors try to capture the immensity of the tumultuous event through their degree of experiences as victims or as observers through their traumatic memory and meticulous observation of the magnitude of event. Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* is a noteworthy literary source in this regard to understand the vastness of the cataclysmic Partition. The present paper aims to deal with the ancient notion of "religion" from a modern approach with special reference to Brent Nongbri's modern idea of the ancient concept of "religion" and to discuss Partition of India as a thought-provoking outcome of the prevailing anachronistic(ancient) approach to 'religion' instead of modern through Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning: A Partition novel*.

Keywords: Indian subcontinent, modern, Partition, religion.

1. Introduction

The Partition of Indian Subcontinent (1947), an event of great magnitude (in the history of Indian subcontinent) is the outcome of appreciably more remarkable events,

concepts and reasons that include : Prevailing 'anachronistic' approach to 'religion' instead of modern ; Growing religious animosity between two major religious sects (Hindu-Muslim on the basis of their historic roots of discord) ; Involvement of three sects in communal conflict(Hindus and Muslims as subjects and Christians(British) as the ruler; Impact of many foreign invasion of the subcontinent ; Painful anti-colonial struggle by Indians for achievement of freedom ; the rise of the narrative for the demand of two different 'ethnic', 'religious', or 'communal' nationalism (Hindu nationalism and Muslim Nationalism) for the first time in history of the subcontinent; Politicization of religion ; Gandhi's application of personal religious biasness as a strategy of freedom struggle ; Burden of WWI and WWII on British as well as on Indians ; Suddenness of decision for Partition on the basis of religious majority and minority ; Delay in the announcement of Boundary Demarcation Line(Radcliffe line) ; Lack of development and spread of massive secular thought among the frontline political leaders (except Jawaharlal Nehru) as well as among the masses ; Lack of application of the great, ideal concept "Unity in Diversity" (the state of togetherness in spite of presence of immense diversities for larger interest of society and nation) in reality etc. With the persistent flow and developments of these events and concepts, the tragic Partition was made inevitable. The vastness of the event was so high that it has an immense impact on the generations of memory that gives rise to form a different literary paradigm termed as Partition Literature. The frontline authors of Partition Literature include- Khuswant Singh, Amrita Pritam, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Sadaat Hasan Manto, Monohar Malgonkar, Chaman Nahal, Bhisham Sahni, Bapsi Sidhwa, Salman Rushdie, Nisid Hajari etc

2. Partition of Indian Subcontinent: A thought-provoking outcome of the underlying anachronistic approach to 'religion'

Brent Nongbri concisely discusses the ancient notion of "religion" from a modern point of view in his book *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. Understanding Brent Nongbri's view of "Religion" as a modern concept appears itself as a thought- provoking topic because it is very often considered as an ancient topic. The concept of "religion" seems to be more contested, re-descriptive and confusing to many scholars, scientists, researchers of many disciplines and for common men even in this modern world. This is because of the vastness of dominance of "metaphysics" on "language", "culture" and "social behavior." John Herman

Randall in the article “Metaphysics and Language” critiques, “Now language is very important for philosophizing, and, as we shall see, especially important for metaphysics.” It seems true that the preoccupied belief on metaphysics guide people in many ways to see “how things are said to be” and how ‘the world is to be defined’. Not yet, Darwin’s scientific theory of ‘origin of life’ has been ingrained in the psychology of the people worldwide except some people who believes in science and experimented truth.

It is a noteworthy point that the number of religious people is more than the number of atheists and agnostics. Nongbri advocates the people to be modern in their approach to life unless it will not be possible to understand the progress of modern world. Especially, while dealing with ‘religion’, he emphasizes, one must be modern in his/her approach. As per his critical analysis, the advent of some remarkable events (the Reformation, the invention and spread of printing press, the discovery and colonization of the New World , intra-Christian sectarian disputes and John Locke’s argument of “isolating” beliefs about god in a private sphere and “elevating” loyalty to the legal codes of developing nation-states over loyalties to god etc.,) brought a radical change in reorganizing the material as well as intellectual lives of people all over the world. At this juncture, the very concept of ‘religion’ formed into a “recognizable category” (Nongbri,12) on the basis of ‘religious/secular’ division. Nongbri emphatically says during that time ‘religion’ has been discovered as a ‘modern’ concept not because of reification rather for its disjointedness when the very concept ‘being religious’ for the first time discovered its binary counterpart ‘not being religious’ i.e the idea of “secular”. Since then ‘religion’ was considered as an isolation part with reference to modern secular nation state that invaluable opts to handle the matter of ‘religion’ privately and apolitically in order to experience a better life-sustaining environment.

However, in course of time, due to lack of mass spread and practice of secular ideas, the age long blind religious beliefs and prejudices are still found there almost in every part of world whether it is developed, developing or underdeveloped. As a serious outcome of this, the growth as well as the spread of science and scientific temperament in global context has not yet been reflected up to the mark till date. In fact, it is remarkable that those nations who provide much attention on the principle of separation of ‘religion’ from ‘political affairs of state’ are found as highly developed (for example- some European nations like U.S.A , France etc.) and then other

nations (for example- some Asian nations like India, Pakistan etc., some Middle East countries like Israel and Palestine). In this regard, Khuswant Singh rightly points out in *The End of India*, "In Europe, secular forces had to wage battles with the church and compel it to restrict its activities to matters spiritual. This didn't happen in the Islamic world. As a consequence, Muslim nations remained backward and largely undemocratic" (Singh, 7). In fact, it is objectively assumed that a widespread cosmopolitan culture can't be imagined by avoiding secular ideals.

However, critiquing 'religion' as a problematic category, Brent Nongbri justifiably highlights one of the most crucial point:

The problem with using "religion" to talk about the ancient world is not anachronism. All of our concepts are modern and hence anachronistic when applied to the ancient world. The problem is that we so often suffer from a lack of awareness that we are being anachronistic. Informed and strategic deployment of anachronism, on the other hand, can have unexpected and thought-provoking results (Nongbri,158).

Nongbri's thesis appropriately and justifiably claimed that due to the prevailing 'anachronistic' perspective to 'religion' and due to lack of practice and establishment of modern secular and social behavior in worldwide context many untoward incidents still are getting emerged. The horrendous Partition of Indian Subcontinent in 1947 and its terrible consequences (forceful mass migration, rape, murder, loot, loss of humane human identity of millions), the dramatic narrative of "demolition" of Babri Mosque and "construction" of Ram temple in the disputed site in India's Uttar Pradesh, the shocking 9/11 in U.S.A and the recent 11-day Palestinian- Israeli violence in 2021 and many more remarkable incidents are the apt examples of it. Thus, from Nongbri's sensible observation, it can be emphatically stated that the informed and strategic deployment of 'anachronistic' approach to 'religion' has its far-reaching consequences which is a crucial point of concern today when the objective reality of some kind of 'better' life-sustaining environment is expected from the present modern, secular, democratic society.

3. The thesis of Partition: A failure project

The thesis of Partition becomes a failure project in eradication of communal and religious disharmony in spite of formation of two separate dominions, India and Pakistan. The same problem still continues to exist in society in a much more dynamic way than earlier. The

problem is no more confined with respect to border (Radcliffe Line) only rather it is happening inside the two respective borders too. In fact, partition of humanity on the basis of any taboo subject-religion, ethnicity, color, creed etc is not possible and not desirable too in modern society which prefers to be heterogeneous for more creative possibilities and for better living condition. In this regard, Gopal Krishna rightly points out:

In India partition had appeared to have resolved the communal problem through the drastic solution of creating a separate state for the Muslim majority areas. It was however, not a complete solution to the problem because the residual India still remained a pluralistic collectivity. While partition was the solution to one aspect of the, secular democracy was envisaged as the solution to the structural problem of plurality within the Indian union. This still remains our best hope . . . The Hindu communalist ideology. . . its hostility towards Muslims had hindered the integrative process and if persisted in, could undermine the democratic state” (Krishna,63).

The whole analysis on the infamous Partition revolves around the mostly dominating ancient concept of “religion”. It has been a matter of serious concern in the domain of politics in India since Partition. Stating the reason of communal conflict, Gopal Krishna expresses his view, “Communal conflict does not seem to me to originate in the ignorance of ‘true religion’ but in the struggle for autonomy on the part of one or more groups and there is an inescapable conflict between their drive for autonomy and the cohesion of the state in a multi-religious society” (Krishna,63). Although Krishna does not define “what is the meaning of ‘true religion’ in words, but this is the basic theme that deals with many conflicts, confusions, puzzles and peculiarities that are found in modern society even.

However, the Partition of Indian subcontinent is not a simple geographical Partition. It includes millions of massive migrations, lakhs of deaths, murders, loots etc. Many houses were burnt, thousands of women were raped and lost their identity getting homeless due to serious outcomes of communal violence and religious antagonism. The furies, suspicions, and hatreds spread everywhere among Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Nisid Hajari aptly sums up its legacy at present context, “Nearly seventy years later, *Partition* has become a byword for horror. Instead of joining hands at their twinned births, India and Pakistan would be engulfed by some of the

worst sectarian massacres the modern world has ever seen" (Hajari, xvi). Thus, the Partition of the subcontinent is very often considered as a great 'holocaust'.

Many notable scholars- Beverly Milton Edward, Salman Rushdie, Gurpreet Mahajan, Paul R. Brass etc. agree with a basic concept - religion, ethnicity, clan and tribe etc stand at the foundation of ancient hatreds that symbolize the sacrificial behavior of modern secular ideals. Analyzing the rising conflicts and violence in this regard, Beverly Milton Edwards points out, ". . . the politics of ancient blood and nation, religion and ethnicity . . . are a challenging and uncomfortable reminder that perhaps all is not well with the modern age. Perhaps the liberalization or abandonment of old taboos, norms and values and rites and rituals does not necessarily bring us to a better place where violence is reduced or increasingly absent" (Edwards,20-21). In fact, liberalization of old taboos, rites and rituals is not a solution to build up a healthy society. Building up of scientific and humanitarian attitude through proper education is important. The traditional concepts of metaphysical world such as - "the existence of god", "creation of universe", the concept of afterlife etc still needs to be taught in a more informed way with the special attitude in order to develop a scientific temperament among masses. Darwin's theory of evolution still has its significance in order to understand the evolution of man. But it's alarming that due to lack of progress, lack of spread and inculcation of scientific attitude (up to the mark), the concept of "religion" still is being used in *less informed way but more in anachronistic sense*.

Jyotirmoyee Devi in *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* points out some crucial questions foregrounding Partition which seem much relevant even today while the world of intelligentsia as well as common men engage themselves actively to study and discuss partition.

4. *The River Churning: a Partition novel*

Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* is a remarkable contribution to Partition Literature. Partition Literature deals with the heartrending event of 1947 much profoundly. It provides sufficient grounds to its readers to rethink and re-evaluate the historical, socio-political, religious and cultural aspect of Indian society prior to, during and after the Partition holocaust. Sutara, the protagonist of *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* got appointment as a lecturer in History at Hastinapur, Jajnyaseni Womens' College, Delhi almost

after a decade of the holocaust. In her flashback memory, Sutara recalls that night in 1946 which shattered her familial world and transformed her identity from a simple, innocent teen aged, matriculate village girl to a sensible personality, a lecturer through massive pain and struggle designating her as a social outcaste. Her continuous migration from a neighboring village of Bamunpara of East Bengal to her brother's custody in Calcutta (West Bengal) and subsequently to a missionary school hostel and then to a college hostel and finally her appointment in Delhi portrays her tragic struggle as a survivor of Partition. The author describes, "The more Sutara studied, the more she wondered- why did things happen the way they did?" (Devi,77) She could imagine the bitter truth that being socially ostracized twice by "the other community" as well as by her own community, she would never have a home of her own. She lived in an unfamiliar environment accommodating herself among the people of mixed identity, the partition survivors in Delhi. Devi as an early modern feminist writer championing the concept of modern 'New Woman' shares her opinion in the context of Partition thus:

"Women these days were educated. Since, there was nobody to support them, these Yajnasenis were forced to fend for themselves. Molested, without shelter, money or power, they were victims of Partition. Some of the teachers and professors too, belonged to that category. Some were from Punjab, some from the South . . . a few Bengalis" (Devi,69).

As the days passed by, the matured Sutara becomes more submissive in expressing the extreme painful story rather she tries to find out more victims like her as ammunitions for her existence. In course of her post-traumatic growth in an unfamiliar environment among other victims, the grown up Sutara wanted to discover some answers, "Had they experienced the same kind of humiliation? Did they also leave their own people behind including the abducted, helpless women?" (Devi, 74). The author critically points out, the Hindus worship women as some kind of "devi" (goddess), so how could they get indulge in collective torture of women in reality. Is it only because of their attitude of hatred towards "otherness" or they might have done so getting influenced by their so-called holy scriptures? Devi assures her readers that of course there is no doubt that Hindu mythologies contain many instances of barbarism of patriarchal society about humiliation of women since ages. The sensible Sutara focuses her attention in finding out answers of many core questions related to the barbarous event that include - "Whose

fault, was it? Who was actually to blame? Why did it happen? And for what? Were the Hindus at fault or the Muslims? What was the use of all this now? After all, each side had received a share of the spoils so why rake up the past?" (Devi,68). Through all such questions, the author tries to make a brief assessment of the cataclysmic event Partition and prepares her readers to rethink about the past and somehow intends to guide the next generations not to rake up the past which is all about many more sorts of losses- lives, properties, language, culture and above all humanity in inhumane way.

Devi justifiably highlights the modern humane human outlook towards the meaning of existence of life by recalling the celebrated lines of the ancient Persian philosopher and poet, Omar Khayyam in *The River Churning*:

The voice of the muzzein calls from the

darkness of death

Fools! What you want is nowhere

To be found.

What does man crave? What is his desire? (Devi,105)

Society is not possible without being sociable. Man exists in society by blood, flesh and body. Modern society can't be treated as a "chemical compound" rather as a "chemical mixture" where each "individual" has its identity as an individual and "humane human identity" in general. Thus, the idea of construction of "purity" or "some kind of superiority" of humanity is a vague and peculiar concept. Nowhere this can be established in this modern world maintaining the very human values- love, care, compassion, kindness, truthfulness, intelligence etc. in a fair way. Moreover, the enlightening ideas of liberty, equality, fraternity, justice, gratitude, integrity, democracy, socialistic approach etc. broadens the dimension of human lives to live in a dignified manner with due respect as a humane human being.

However, it's the human values above all that play a crucial role in constructing a better desirable life in society. But crisis in the development of human values welcomes intense disorders and hence the dignified status of humanity is threatened highly at its heart and

becomes badly unproductive and instigate to grow the rotten ideas. Literature tries to many extents to inculcate human values through its creative power of imagination through its unique appealing characteristic in dealing with emotion and feelings. So far as pangs of Partition is concerned, the narration of the holocaust and the victims engage many authors, readers and common men to understand meaning of life in a much better way giving much to the healing properties of literature. The plight of Sutara appeals the very human values to reread and revisit Indian Subcontinent's Partition and somehow tends to heal the turbulent mindscape of the victims as well as the individuals who feels at least a little concern for the tragedy in a given social space.

5. Burden of Partition in Sutara's life:

The River Churning: A Partition Novel seems auto- biographical to many extents as the widowhood makes Jyotirmoyee Devi alone, so also Sutara as a victim of violence of Partition, experiences the burden of 'solitude'. "Frequent migration" as a lasting burden of Partition takes a permanent position in Sutara's life. Although Sutara finally came across an eligible candidate, Promode for her marriage but it remains a suspense in the novel whether she got married or not. The "institution of marriage" is found as another burden for Partition victims like Sutara, Pramode, Sailen, Ajoy in *The River Churning* and many others like Damayanti in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*. Untimely pilgrimage in Sutara's life is also a great burden of Partition for Sutara. However, Butalia says besides religious discriminations, acute gender discrimination prevails there in the name of protecting honor of family and community.

Devi points out the future of violent Partition. Devi says in course of their discussion among friends after the holocaust, Pramode raised a crucial point, "I wonder, what ideal would this nation live by?" (Devi, 119). Samar although was not a direct victim of Partition, but he put a relevant point referring to King Solomon's story from Hebrew Bible. Highlighting the misery of millions, Samar said, "This reminds me of the story of Solomon who ordered a child to be cut in two" (Devi,119). Ajoy responded immediately, "Yes, but the real mother did not agree to this. She couldn't. In this case the butchered people had no parents" (Devi,119). Sailen reacted sensibly, "But Gandhiji didn't want Partition". Samar responded to Sailen with a smile, "But he accepted it" (Devi, 119). However, in spite of strong opposition of vivisection of the land by Gandhi, it was made possible. By that time, no way was left for him to check it. In fact, Gandhi

himself was subjected to a victim of the long process of violence agenda relating to Partition and was targeted for killing four times in pre-partitioned India and twice in post-partitioned India. According to S. R. Praveen's data, out of those six attempts, the final assassin, Nathuram Godse, a Hindu fanatic was involved in three including his last attempts on 31st January, 1948. It is observed that there seems no boundary to check the communal violence because it lives in the very distorted psychology of human mind in a given distorted atmosphere-may it be social, political or cultural. For example: Jonathan D. Greenberg in the article entitled, "Generations of memory: remembering partition in India/Pakistan and Israel/Palestine", writes on the legacy of communal mindset referring to Godse, "echoing Godse in word and deed," Yigal Amir, a Jewish religious militant, a law student assassinated Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli Prime Minister on 4 November, 1995 in order to prevent Rabin's Labor government's peace initiative through Oslo accords between govt. of Israel and Palestine. However, Gandhi's role in dealing with 'religion' in the context of Indian freedom struggle has a great significance in shaping the freedom movement in the prevailing "ancient(traditional)" concept of religion.

6. Gandhi's uncritical role in 'politicizing' religion

By the time of Partition, communal tension had already reached at its peak on Direct Action Day on 16th August, 1946 and the seeds of communal poison were already sown in many ways much before the decision of Partition. On the one hand, many Hindu political leaders like Gandhi, Savarkar, Patel etc. and some Hindu fundamentalists organizations (Hindu Maha Sabha, RSS etc.) and their very strategies of works to attract huge masses; on the other, many Muslim political leaders like Shaukat Ali, Mohammad Ali Jauhar, Mahammad Ali Jinnah etc., and their respective strategies to attract many Muslims and others played a significant role in politicizing 'religion'. According to Gail Minault, the Ali brothers too prepared the ground to blend religion with politics, getting influenced by Gandhi's speech, "Politics cannot be divorced from religion" (Minault, 56). The Ali brothers got ammunition in the same line to attract Muslim masses like Gandhi who could attract Hindu as well as Muslim masses using 'religion' as a major tool of organizing masses. Dilip Hero writes in his seminal work, *The Longest August: The Unflinching rivalry between India and Pakistan* that Gandhi drew much of his nationalist inspiration from the traditional myths, beliefs, and symbols of Hinduism. Moreover, Hero claims in his work *The Timeline History of India*, Gandhi once explained, "My bent is not political but religious. And I

take part in politics because I feel there is no department of life that can be divorced from religion” (Hero,256).

However, Gandhi’s religious bent of mind was not communal as it was in the part of other leaders like Savarkar and Patel etc. According to Jaswant Singh, when Jinnah advised Gandhi “not to encourage fanaticism of Muslim religious leaders and their followers” especially for his way of encouragement for the leaders of Khilafat movement, Gandhi spurned his advice. It was due to his lack of critical thinking on the aftereffects of politicization of ‘religion’ and due to his religious biasness towards Hinduism, his strategy of non-violence made some frontline political leaders (like Jinnah and Subhas Chandra Bose) dissatisfied. Jinnah who once called by Gopal Krishna Gokhale as an ambassador of Hindu- Muslim Unity in 1920s in his early political career turned into a communalist by 1940s and hence remained far away from his advocacy of Hindu- Muslim unity and Subhas Chandra Bose led Indian freedom struggle in his own way.

7. Shibdas Ghosh’s perception of Gandhi

Shibdas Ghosh, an Indian communist politician, compares Gandhi in the chapter, “Cultural Movements in India and our Task” with an affectionate, superstitious mother indulged in rigorous fasting, worshipping God to cure her sick child, ‘colonial India’. According to Ghosh, Gandhi was not class conscious, as a result, his activities supported massively to Indian capitalist class to grow massively and hence he was supported by them in every way. Moreover, his ideology was a fusion of religion, Indian traditionalism, the bourgeoisie humanist thoughts and ideas that couldn’t help Gandhi to understand the flow of ‘religious nationalism’ trend in pre-partitioned India.

However, irrespective of any class approach, Gandhi was considered more a humane human being than a politician. Moreover, it is truly observed that without pressure of WWII on British and without the absence of Indian extremists’ movement, it would not have been so easier to gain independence from British only through the ‘non-violence’ principle of Gandhi. Shibdas Ghosh critiques rightly on Gandhi, despite of all his efforts to do good to the people of the country, the mission of a people’s democracy seems a failure project in India without a strong secular root. As a result, the world’s largest democracy struggles a lot to exist in a dignified way and thus seems fragile in many ways.

8. Conclusion

The turbulent chapter of Partition of India still remains as a curious topic for many. There is still found a huge gap in filling up the reasonableness of the event if it is not considered as an event happened in the background of *anachronistic* approach to 'religion' instead of *modern* in modern context. The way Partition and its terrible consequences took place was due to the simultaneous antagonism among three sects- the colonial power (Christian) and their subjects (Hindus and Muslims). It seems true to many extents, when political, economic and emotional exploitation coincide, grieves become immeasurable. Devi intends to point out a crucial question-What is the ultimate outcome of Partition at the cost of valuable human lives, love, trust, and honor? Partition of a land is possible but partition of humanity in order to preserve some kinds of traditional privileges for some on the basis of some taboo subjects- race, religion, gender, politics, culture, language etc. should be viewed "something" that is seriously and sensibly avoidable. The influence of such peculiar thoughts has already been proved as failure in many ways and hence lags behind in providing strenuous support for the lasting impact of modern cosmopolitan society from a modern, secular, humanitarian point of view.

However, in order to avoid any thought-provoking outcomes (related to 'religion') like Partition of India in 1947, 9/11 attack in USA and recent Palestinian-Israeli violence of 11 days in May, 2021 etc., the complete abolition of *ancient influence of religion* both in *thought* and *practice* can be imagined as the only possible way for a better progressive society in modern heterogeneous world.

Karl Marx too aptly emphasizes on the complete abolition of "religion" from social life. Because it is treated as some kind of "illusory happiness" and thus has an exalted importance for many people all over the world. Thus, Marx's emphasis on the abolition of illusory happiness in order to achieve real happiness is still appears one of the most relevant idea for a better social life in modern society. Moreover analyzing Marx's comparison of "religion" with "opium", Beverly Milton Edwards directly points out, "religion is not so much an opiate of the varying

masses but is harnessed by the state elite into the fabric of the state- to varying degrees – as a means of force and order”(Edwards, 29).

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