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## **The Chronicle of Dread in Fikr Taunsvi's *The Sixth River***

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### **Abstract:**

British India's vivisection was not a mere cartographic exploit, it instead was the most bloodstained geographical dismemberment ever witnessed in the subcontinent's history that heightened the communal tensions to unprecedented levels leading to loot, arson, bloodbath, and uprooting of countless people. Driven by segregating politico-religious ideologies, the socio-political environment turned hazardous for the Hindus and Sikhs living in Lahore (Pakistan). Partition, thus, inked an intensely sordid communal strife in the provinces through which the Radcliffe Line had been marked. All things considered, this paper examines the predicament of religious minorities in Lahore (in 1947) as recounted in the memoir *The Sixth River* by Fikr Taunsvi.

**Keywords:** Partition, trauma, violence, migration, refugee, memory.

### **Introduction**

Indian subcontinent has been a haven for all persecuted communities beyond recorded history. Devotedly observing the Upanishadic concept of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,' the people of this region have imbibed the idea that irrespective of caste, creed, religion, and race, we all are one family. Thus, the ideals of spirituality and generosity were propagated and practised throughout this territory, emphasizing the sense of brotherhood, peace and tolerance among its populace. These ethics of human solidarity ensured the safety of everyone who sought refuge in this 'punyabhoomi.' However, these ideals experienced an immense setback during 1946-7, when the colonial mechanizations of 'divide and conquer' positioned a brother against his brother in the name of communal identity. This foregrounded the religious differences among the Muslims and non-Muslims, facilitating the socio-political arena for the practice of communal animosity and ethnic violence throughout the subcontinent. When the Muslim and non-Muslim communities took cognizance of their

contrasting characteristics, a chronicle of bloodlust and unabashed violence began playing out in the subcontinent. The British policy provoked the indigenous population against each other creating “this new man” whose abhorrence for his brother reached to genocidal levels (Sartre, “Preface” lvi-lvii). Thus, the communally enraged “native ... commits ‘genocide,’ without hesitation or remorse ... undoubtedly” becoming “a torturer;” this ensures that “[o]ur beloved values are lost;” leaving “not one that isn’t tainted in blood” (lviii-lix).

Nonetheless, the ideologies of ‘separatism’ amalgamated with ‘divide and rule’ stationed the Muslim and non-Muslim communities against each other on the issue of the creation of Pakistan, a separate sovereign Muslim nation. The League leaders took it to be a question of their survival, and anyone opposing this demand was to bear the brunt of their communal fervour (Nanda, *Witness to Partition* 27). The aforementioned initiated nationwide clashes among the communities in favor and opposition to the decision of the dismemberment of united India. The socio-political happenings during the Direct Action Day in Bengal province (in August 1946) and the communal riots of March 1947 in the Punjab province made it clear that Partition and Pakistan might soon become a reality. The communal fervor instigated by the League’s representatives for accomplishing their political objectives spiraled out of control. It led to a shamelessly unhindered spectacle of mass slaughter and forced conversions, alongside rapes and abductions of women and children. In such dreadful circumstances British India got severed on the basis of religion into two separate sovereign territories: Republic of India and Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Across spectrum, historians hold consensus on the fact that division of the Punjab province ushered unparalleled massacre that had consumed the lives of around half a million people. Anders Bjorn Hansen terms Punjab’s partition to be a “humanitarian catastrophe” that heralded “the largest ethnic cleansing ever recorded” in human history, responsible for the uprooting of “more than nine million people” (*Partition and Genocide* 1). In such mayhem, the commoners resorted to fleeing from their homes, believing that crossing the Radcliffe Line might ensure their survival. Conversely, the communal zealots hounded the migrating population like wild prey. For the religious minorities in Punjab, it seemed as if an epic of horror had just begun; the situation was beyond anyone’s comprehension, be it the authorities or the political leaders.

In this context, the research paper endeavors to examine the chronicle of dread which transpired in Lahore through the eyes of a victim-cum-witness. Ramlal Bhatia, who wrote

under the penname Fikr Taunsvi, is an eyewitness to the hostile living conditions of Lahore from 9 August to 8 November 1947. He was a famous Urdu columnist whose satiric jibes mark this work to be one of its kind. *The Sixth River: A Journal from the Partition of India* is his memoir that records his experiences of the, above mentioned, months spent in Lahore. The original title of this work was '*Chhata Darya*,' published in 1948. In 2019, Maaz Bin Bilal translated the original Urdu work into English, chosen as the primary text of inquiry in this paper. The objective is to probe into the life experiences of this painful episode of history that continues to bear its mark on the collective memory of the subcontinent's populace. In this regard, people's experiences during the geographical reconfiguration of this region are noteworthy, ergo, as these personal histories foreground their suffering due to communal friction, migration, and violence.

## Discussion

*The Sixth River* calls attention to Taunsvi's struggle of survival in a hostile socio-political scenario. The colorful streets of Lahore that were once a symbol of a thriving culture transformed into a cluster of burning buildings full of looting mobs and piles of dead bodies. The cultural diversity of this composed city and its religious heterogeneity got consumed into the inferno of extremism. Death and destruction marked its presence in every nook and corner of the city. Human lives lost their relevance, and communal hatred became par for the course. Employing sarcasm with dark humor, Taunsvi's journal vividly describes this sordid reality as follows:

...within an hour of bomb explosion close to 150 ... had been murdered in Lahore fifty houses had been burned down to ashes. The bazaars were emptied. Police had been posted to stand watch over the heart-wrenching spectacle of burning houses.... With red-red flames of fire and glowing sparks, the darkness of night was illuminated.

Bomb explosions kept up, gunfire too wet on. People were dying on streets, the curfew continued and the police kept up with its rounds.... One bullet—one dead—fifty rupees! One pellet, one dead, and sixty rupees! Two hundred and fifty rupees to anyone who throws a bomb.... Human bodies were being sold for cheap price in the market. (*The Sixth River* 42-3)

The irony of this disastrous development was that the decision to vivisect British India would bring closure to the communal tussle; the leaders believed that it would stop the

ongoing bloodbath in the country. However, the cycle of communal violence that began with the call of the Direct Action Day by H. S. Suhrawardhy (in 1946) only intensified after the announcement of the Partition. The political leadership had intended to safeguard the lives and rights of minorities, and lay to rest their anxiousness regarding their future. However, the situation took a different course. When communal abhorrence reaches its zenith, the religious minorities have no other option than to migrate; it transpired particularly in the provinces of Punjab and Bengal. Thus, to avoid forceful conversion, loot, and slaughter, the persecuted communities decided to become homeless.

Lahore, formerly a major urban city accommodating individuals of numerous sects and ideologies, could not remain untouched by this genocidal zeal. Taunsvi's beloved city, ruined at the hands of staunch communalists, had to suffer in "sickening and soul-wearying curfew[s]" (46). Those who had earlier thrived in the warm and amiable environment of this urban centre were now dull and fearful. The memoirist depicts this environment of dread and despair in his diary entry of 11 August 1947 as follows:

Layers of terror and fear had accumulated over the roads. People were stepping gingerly over these layers. Doubt and fear—fear and doubt! It felt as if everyone on the road were carrying a bomb or a knife, and would bury it in the back of the enemy in the blink of an eye. All men kept turning around. (*The Sixth River* 46)

The sudden bomb explosions had turned the commoners against each other; people who earlier trusted one another now dreaded their very presence. The communal fire had flared up, making friends and acquaintance unworthy of trust. People secretly held scepticism in their hearts, dreading that they would be the next target. The severity of communal violence left everyone dazed and helpless; the rioters "were giving birth to a new history" enveloped in the blood of innocents (Taunsvi 47). The "city" of Lahore was "headed for its doom" (49). People were nervously running for their lives; the trauma of witnessing such unspeakable violence left them agitated and destitute. Through his friend Jagdish, the writer portrays this situation as follows:

He was in a strong state of agitation and difficulty despite his learned demeanour and writerly tone. I could sense fear in his condition. He said: 'It is not possible for me to stay here anymore, Fikr bhai! I have loved this city all my life. But...but, this city is now running up to claw me. Many lorries filled with injured and dead Muslims have come in today from Amritsar. And ever since their arrival in Lahore, they have

stroked the fires of revenge. Go, look! Look: all the Hindus are being slaughtered like goats and sheep! And are turning up to gather in droves at the camps. No one will live here now.... Come, let's go to India!' (*The Sixth River* 51)

In the maddening times of terrible death and meaningless destruction, "the lanes of Lahore" were teeming with "barbarity and monstrosity" (54-5). This blood-spattered rule of bestiality displayed bloodied humans who lacked any zest for life. To an unbiased observer, it would seem as though humanity was paving the way for its doom. The monstrosity of communal bigots steadfastly worked for the destruction of culture and civilization. The memoirist aptly depicts the hysteria engendered by the brazen display of communal violence in his journal entry of 5 September 1947:

Everyone was shocked. But everyone was silent.... There was darkness [all around]. And in this darkness, mobs of people with their gaping mouths were passing by. They were ransacking homes. They were looting homes in every village, every town of Punjab. And mounds of silk dupattas, jewellery, beddings and corpses were gathered by the railway lines. And with their cavernous mouths, everyone in the mob was trying to satisfy their hunger. All bounds of hunger had been broken today. Today was the day for prosperity. The old law was breathing its last, and the new law was still being organized and arranged, and people were looting people. (Taunsvi 94-5)

Hurriedly running away, the minorities desperately tried clinging to their lives after unsuccessful attempts to sell their belongings. Homeless, hopeless and penniless, they made desperate attempts to remain alive while heading for the other side of the Radcliffe Line. Despite knowing their destination, India, they not know exactly where they were heading. Pertinently describing the condition of such refugees, Robert Young articulates that the lives of these "uprooted" and "unsettled" beings are halted and broken (*Postcolonialism* 11). The "violent disruptions" experienced by the refugees that "fractured" their very being pushes them into an estranged and lonely existence (11). Even after being severed from their roots, the misfortunate refugees tenaciously try to hold on to their past, "damage[ing]" their own "spirit, draining away" any chances to be "content" ever again (Ravikant and Saint, "Introduction" xxii). Being estranged from their homes creates a "void that ... may never be filled" (xxii). They are forced to drag their lives towards its culmination drearily. The monotony of their "fragile" and "uncertain" lives reduces their being to mere "objects" of spectacle whose sorrow and suffering do not stir the hearts of the onlookers (Young 12). The

world is not interested in their plight, nor does anyone sympathize with them. In such hostile environment, crowded with uncaring beings, there is no certainty. In spite of the rigorous efforts of the refugees, they are unable to completely embrace this “new world,” with its “new culture” of which they are a part now (12).

The socio-cultural milieu surrounding the refugees is unique, yet they unwillingly embrace it to acquire a social grounding in these “unrecognizable worlds” (12). For them, everything has altered and partitioned; everything seems to be falling apart. Employing the harrowing potency of his words, Taunsvi remarks that uncertainty surrounds the refugees after their arrival at their destination. Leaving behind the hostile situation in Pakistan does not ensure their warm welcome in India. Being a part of Lahore's intelligentsia, he knows that the newly formed States of India and Pakistan are not well-equipped to handle this mountainous misfortune. He poses these questions before his readers:

Where will we go now? What will we do now? In this independent nation who will give us a place to sleep, bread to fill our stomachs and cloth to cover our bodies? Who is he? Who is that person? (Taunsvi 172)

His un-mincingly precise words paint the painful picture of homeless refugees, showcasing the eschewed mentality of the multitude towards these refugees. Lyndsey Stonebridge in her essay, “‘That which you are denying us’: refugees, rights and writing in Arendt” further elaborates this opinion. She observes that the “speechlessness” of refugees is the “pathos of” their “open wound” existing because of the infringement of their “human rights” (114). The “denial of” their “national, civic and legal rights” is their prime source of anguish (114). Exile, beyond doubt, leads the victim towards inexplicable suffering, where he makes multiple attempts at reframing his course of life. Nonetheless, forced migration is not simply geographical frontier-crossing; it has a colossal impact on the victim's life. He lives through the casualty of ‘otherness’ in his new place of arrival, often on the grounds of linguistic and cultural differentiations (Pandey, “Prose of Otherness”). These differences constantly remind him of his loss; present in the deepest layers of his being, he hides these from the world due to the fear of being dismissed as something insignificant.

The boundaries created by the Radcliffe Line are not for the refugee, as his lost homeland is nowhere to be found; all that remains are the memories. He possesses the past reminiscences of his blissful existence in an amiable surrounding where he was respected and accepted as a part of the community. All that he now possesses is the memory of his ancestral

home where he grew up without any fear of extermination. He hides this secret within, the beautiful memories of the past juxtaposed with that of the terrible violence which uprooted him. The heavy burden of contrasting memories gradually drains his life-force, nonchalantly. His desperate attempts to acquire acceptance and approval at his destination push him into an abyss of disgruntled existence unknown to everyone around him.

Bearing this perspective in mind, one arrives at the conclusion that the ‘historian’s history’ suffers from multiple deficiencies; one of it being the incapability of moving beyond power-politics and statistical data (Pandey, “Prose of Otherness”). It fails to view humans beyond mere figurines in the population-counts and migrating numbers. For the historian, perhaps, the commoners are simply “an amorphous mass” (Ravikant, “Partition: Strategies of Oblivion, Ways of Remembering” 161). Possibly for this reason, “[t]he nation has grown up, ritually counting and celebrating birthdays – its own and of the great souls that won it the freedom – while systematically consigning the Partition to oblivion” (160). Works such as *The Sixth River*, take into consideration this aspect of Partition which has remained into oblivion. These narratives give a despairingly direct, first-person account of heartbreaking details of millions who fled for safety during the Partition. These personal accounts of anguish are waiting to be recounted; the unshed tears and seething anger are longing to be acknowledged.

## Conclusion

One needs to flip the historian’s history in favour of those innumerable beings that are counted merely as numbers in the grand narratives of creation and division of nations. It often happens that amidst the larger scheme of things, the man on the streets loses his footing. More often than not, gigantic socio-political events like Decolonization, Independence and Partition eclipses a regular person's identity and voice. Nevertheless, Taunsvi eloquently warns his readers against its dangers. His detailed descriptions of horrendous destruction in the city of Lahore remind the readers of the potentially disastrous impact of equating power politics with religion, particularly on the populace. In this perspective, the testimonies of victimized individuals prove incredibly significant. Giving agency to the unheard, it explores the earlier uncharted zones of our subcontinent’s collective past. These chronicles of dread expose the un-ventured regions of human consciousness, foregrounding the unimaginable trauma of Partition victims. This research proves why the hesitant individual voices of commoners require a much greater degree of recognition. The brutalized beings, mercilessly



uprooted from their havens, need to be heard and empathized. Understating the plight of these silent sufferers of the terrible catastrophe named Partition facilitates countless diverse implications for the academicians as well as the common public. Devoid of power politics, such personal narratives emphasize on empathizing with the layperson irrespective of caste, creed, religion and nationality, imbibing the idea of the World as one family.

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