



“Toba Tek Singh” and “The Final Solution”: A Retrospection of the 1947
Partition Through the Kaleidoscope of ‘History from Below’

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Abstract:

The Partition of 1947 is one of the most horrific and shameful events chronicled in the pages of human history. The rulers divided the nation according to their own convenience, showing insensitivity to human suffering; their eccentric decision jeopardised the lives of millions. Mainstream history never reveals the actual configuration of the Partition to justify the decision. By rewriting history from the perspective of the victims, who are powerless and subaltern in society, Partition literature challenges documented history by replacing it with a people’s history. Within the discourse of history and subaltern studies, this paper aims to retrospectively examine the 1947 Partition and its consequences from a ‘history-from-below’ perspective by contextualising two famous short stories: Saadat Hasan Manto’s “Toba Tek Singh” and Manik Bandopadhyay’s “The Final Solution”.

Keywords: Partition, Violence, Trauma, Memory, History from below, and Subaltern Voice.

Introduction

The world of literature is a microcosm of the cosmos, echoing the symphony of the universe. Literature is not only a manifestation of poetic imagination but also the medium through which the ultimate truth and universal reality find sublime expression. This is why literature is considered a mirror of life. No literary text is mere fiction; the roots of literature are always grounded in reality. Literature is the lens through which we reflect on the past, project the present, and predict the future. Consequently, it serves as a reliable testament to our antiquity. When historical evidence of ancient ages is insufficient, we rely on literature to conceptualise those periods. The great ancient epics, such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, help us perceive the magnificent and glorious ancient Indian civilisation.

Indeed, literature is a consolidated form of history—a realization that catalysed the emergence of New Historicism in the 1980s. New Historicism propounds that history is not confined to purely historical documents but extends into literary texts. It claims that literature is a gateway to authentic history because no text can escape the influence of the age in which it is produced. Therefore, to understand the history of any period, one must analyse literary texts alongside historical ones. Literature inevitably reflects the socio-political, economic, and cultural conditions of society. Louis Montrose encapsulates this in his essay, “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture” (1989), defining New Historicism as “the textuality of history and the historicity of texts” (qtd. in Chandra & Samy 70). Following this path, Partition literature becomes a living deposition of the 1947 Partition, earning a vital place in Indian historiography. Often, a literary text reveals history more meticulously than a purely historical record. Partition literature unveils a raw, unfiltered history—the ‘skull and skeleton’ of

the event—that captures the psychological loss, physical exploitation, trauma, and lived experience of the victims in a way that formal history cannot decipher.

A Brief Overview of ‘History from Below’

History introduces us to the past, but not all past events become ‘history’. Indeed, only events documented or authorised by rulers, governments, and the elite are typically recognised as such. History is never purely unbiased, as power dynamics operate behind the scenes; often, only incidents that preserve the positive image of the authority in power are recorded. Mainstream Indian history reflects this gap. The documented history of India fails to demystify the disappearance of India’s greatest hero, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, by providing accurate information. Consequently, the fate of Netaji—the most blazing beacon of the Indian freedom movement—remains a mystery. To retain hegemonic power, authorities often deliberately remove controversial elements from the historical record. Mainstream history is rarely a pure representation of the past; rather, it is frequently a modification of events tailored for convenience and wrapped in a ‘golden foil’ of patriotism to awaken nationalistic emotions.

History is the root of human civilisation; without understanding it, we cannot move towards a prosperous future. However, power politics often contaminate mainstream history with misinformation. To address these limitations, theorists of the Subaltern Studies Group employ ‘history from below’, or ‘people’s history’. This methodology explores raw, real history. While popularized in the 20th century by Georges Lefebvre—whose work centred on the lives of peasants during the French Revolution—the concept gained strong academic roots with E. P. Thompson’s 1966 essay, “History from Below” (UNIT 24, n.d.). This approach relies on the narratives of ordinary people, rejecting the refined perspectives of the powerful. In direct

opposition to the ‘elitist’ frameworks of ‘history from above’, this methodology prioritises the narratives of the marginalised, the subaltern, the voiceless, and the oppressed. By rewriting the past through the experiences of the periphery, ‘history from below’ reveals unwritten pages. Scholars in this field study folk tales, folklore, folk culture, folk literature, myths, and local narratives to reach reality. Commissioned history often glorifies the reigning king. In this context, the opinion of the African writer Chinua Achebe is particularly applicable; in his work “The Art of Fiction” (1994), Achebe wrote, “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter” (qtd. in *When Lions*). Following this beautiful expression, we recognise the Subaltern Studies Scholars as the historians of the lions (the oppressed people).

In India, the Subaltern Studies Group applies this methodology to explore the country’s authentic history. The term ‘subaltern’ was coined by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his book, *The Prison Notebooks*, published posthumously in 1947 (Subaltern Studies: A Conversation, n.d.). It denotes those marginalised by factors such as economic condition, social status, race, religion, caste, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Key theorists like Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty rewrite Indian history through this lens. Guha, the movement’s pioneer, explores new horizons in his thought-provoking works, such as *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and Its Implications* (1988), *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (1988), and *The Small Voice of History* (2009). Partha Chatterjee significantly enriches Indian historiography with pathbreaking writings, including *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986), *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), *A Possible India* (1997),

and *The Present History of West Bengal* (1997). Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s contributions to the historiography of ‘history from below’ include *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (1989), *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), and *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (2002). Partition literature resonates deeply with ‘history from below’; within this genre, the celebrated short stories “Toba Tek Singh” and “The Final Solution” authentically encapsulate the psychic anguish of displacement and the bloody horror of the 1947 Partition.

“Toba Tek Singh”: The Unheard Voice

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912- 1955), for his epitaph wrote – “Here lies buried Saadat Hasan Manto in whose bosom are enshrined all the secrets and art of short story writing. Buried under mounds of earth, even now he is contemplating whether he is a greater short story writer or God” (qtd. in Manto’s Epitaph). Although her sister did not finalise these lines as his epitaph, she chose a different one. However, this expression makes clear Manto’s fondness for the short story as a writer. Indeed, he is renowned as a short-story writer, and most of his short stories are molecules of the 1947 Partition. “Toba Tek Singh” (originally written in Urdu), published in 1955, is one of his best creations. As a Partition story, its uniqueness lies in its cantillation of the hidden elegiac chapters of the Partition. Manto had a deep disgust for the insensibility and eccentricity of the Partition, and that is why he described the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan as “overwhelming tragedy’ and “maddingly senseless” (qtd. in *Obscene Writing and Morality*).

The story deals with the lives of mentally challenged people in an asylum in Pakistan after the 1947 Partition. This short story ends with the exchange of lunatics between India and Pakistan, except for one lunatic, Bishan Singh, the protagonist. Bishan Singh is from the village

of Toba Tek Singh, which, after the Partition, became part of Pakistan. Reflecting the name of his village, he is also called Toba Tek Singh. Bishan Singh represents the voice of the voiceless and marginalised. Narrating the story from the perspective of a socially subaltern people, Manto challenges the documented history of the Partition, which skillfully erased the struggles and sufferings of peripheral peoples from the pages of history, leaving their voices unheard.

The 1947 Partition took place solely based on religion, and Manto has subtly portrayed this fact in the beginning of “Toba Tek Singh” – “Muslim lunatics in India should be transferred to Pakistan and Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums should be sent to India” (Manto 11). Pakistan was indeed born as a Muslim country, but in 1947, India emerged as a secular democratic country, which remains a peaceful place for all religions. That is why, during the Partition, the majority of Hindus were compelled to leave their ancestral homes in Pakistan; on the contrary, for Muslims in India, the decision to migrate or remain was—at least officially—presented as a matter of choice. Manto brilliantly illuminated this political dichotomy in the story – “Muslim lunatics whose families were still residing in India were to be left undisturbed, the rest moved to the border for the exchange. The situation in Pakistan was slightly different, since almost the entire population of Hindus and Sikhs had already migrated to India. The question of keeping non-Muslim lunatics in Pakistan did not, therefore, arise” (Manto 11).

Indeed, we do not consider the opinions, feelings, and emotions of any mad person. Still, this beautiful short story challenges stereotypical ways of thinking and prompts us to reconsider, revealing that even a lunatic can sound more reasonable than the so-called normal person. Those in power and authority may not realise that the idea of the uselessness and futility of the Partition was expressed passionately by the lunatics of the asylum. No lunatic supported or accepted the illogical divisions of a single country into two parts. They did not even want to leave their

motherland and birthplace. They were subjected to a forced exchange. The two governments faced many challenges while exchanging the lunatics, as the lunatics refused to go. One lunatic told- “I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree” (Manto 13), and, “When he was finally persuaded to come down, he began embracing his Sikh and Hindu friends, tears running down his cheeks, fully convinced that they were about to leave him and go to India” (Manto 13). This behaviour and this love of lunatics for their own place blur the fine line between sanity and insanity. Moreover, this incident proves that the Partition was not only a physical loss but also a profound psychological pain. It was not only the loss of land but also the loss of people, language, culture, festivals, memories, feelings, and emotions associated with the place. In addition to this aspect, another important facet this story demystifies is communal riots. The dispute between Hindus and Muslims, which functioned as the catalyst in the Partition, was merely a hyperreal incident and political propaganda to serve the political intrigue of the power-hungry leaders. In reality, the people of both religions used to live in the undivided India harmoniously and peacefully with each other, and this is evident in the peaceful co-existence of the Hindu and Muslim lunatics in the asylum. It was only the dirty political game of the country's leaders, who framed the pseudo-problem of communal disharmony to divide the country and fulfil their own greed for power.

The central character of the story, Bishan Singh, neither sat down nor slept for fifteen years. Bishan Singh's behaviour was really strange. His sleeplessness symbolises the political unrest and the exploitation of the Indians in British India before independence. On the other hand, his standing signifies the stillness of the undivided India. Ultimately, when he fell to the lap of Mother Earth on the verge of death, this fall signifies the decline of the glorious territory of ancient, undivided India. However, being a lunatic, Bishan Singh was a peaceful person and

never harmed anyone. What we come to know about him is that he was a village zamindar, and when he became insane, his family sent him to the asylum. Before the Partition, his family regularly visited him, but after the Partition, they moved to India. He talks rarely, and when he talks, he says only one sentence – “‘Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain’” (Manto 14). The meaninglessness of his sentence echoes the nonsensical decision of the Partition.

Finally, the two governments began exchanging lunatics at the Wagah border, and when Bishan Singh's time came, he asked the officials in charge where Toba Tek Singh was now. One of the officers replied to him that it is now in Pakistan. Hearing this, he refused to depart for India, remaining rooted to the spot where he stood. Then, the soldiers tried to convince him that Toba Tek Singh is now in India, but their efforts were unsuccessful. He remained until the exchanges were concluded, left uncoerced by the officers due to his surprisingly calm demeanour. When morning was approaching the place with a new day then the soldiers heard a scream, and, when they reached the place of noise then they found Bishan Singh lying down on the ground – “‘Just before sunrise, Bishan Singh, the man who had stood on his legs for fifteen years, screamed and as officials from the two sides rushed towards him, he collapsed to the ground. There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh’” (Manto 18).

The death of Bishan Singh is the most symbolic incident in this entire story. His scream is the echo of the deep pain in his heart, caused by the fear of separation from his beloved motherland, Toba Tek Singh. Singh's death is a silent protest against the illogical division of the country through the Partition. His death is the voice of resistance, but unfortunately, his voice

remained unheard by the state. He represents the voice and protest of the subalterns of undivided India. By dying in no man's land, he fundamentally rejects the idea of the Partition, proving that an imaginary border drawn by political leaders does not have the power to change the existential identity of a place. The border cannot divide a place from its people. With military power, force, and arms, any government can restrict people's movement, but no government can control a people's love, emotions, respect, memory, and nostalgia for their motherland. No political boundaries can truly sever the bonds between individuals and their native soil, for those connections are rooted in the heart rather than on maps. Bishan Singh has illustrated this profound bond with his village, Toba Tek Singh, by taking his last breath in the soil of his birthplace. The trauma of separation from his beloved village ultimately leads to his death. Hence, this demonstrates that the 1947 Partition was not merely a physical division of territory, but a profound psychological and emotional rupture—one that mainstream history has failed to acknowledge. Bishan Singh is an alter ego of the village Toba Tek Singh. Hence, his death in no man's land signifies that the Partition could not alter the village's position; the village gloriously remains in its own place, and it is impossible to change its position by drawing an imaginary border and dividing the country. Bishan Singh died in his own land by defeating the rulers. No one could uproot him from his own place. He took his last breath where he first cried after his birth. Thus, Singh's love for his village wins. The irony is that where an insane man could feel and value the love for the motherland, the rulers failed to feel it. Therefore, they divided the country mercilessly as a part of their political intrigue by making millions of people homeless. This unconventional short story explores the trauma of the asylum inmates during the Partition—individuals who never found their motherland again within the cartography of postcolonial Indian historiography. Thus, as a subaltern voice, Manto's poignant short story, “Toba Tek

Singh,” serves as an epitome of ‘history from below’. It discloses the suppressed and painful aspects of the Partition that the state has strategically kept hidden from the public consciousness. By making a lunatic the protagonist, who represents the subaltern people, Saadat Hasan Manto deconstructs the central-marginal binary, igniting a passion to reclaim Indian history through narratives from below.

“The Final Solution”: Women’s Voice of Resistance

The authorised history is male-dominated and rarely addresses women’s position and condition during the Partition. If women gain any place in the mansion of authorised history, it is only for the few women of higher status. The mainstream history proficiently avoids the struggle, suffering, and pain of the poor and middle-class women. We hardly find them in the archives of Indian history. Socially categorised as subaltern, these individuals find their narratives frequently marginalised within official historical discourse. However, the famous Bengali writer Manik Bandopadhyay (1908-1956) sought to fill this gap in Indian history throughout his authentic portrayal of the lives of poor women during the Partition. His short story “The Final Solution” (originally written in Bengali) is a mighty brushstroke through which he created a living portrait of the Partition on the canvas of literature, coloured by the hues and spectrum of history from below.

The protagonist of this short story is Mallika, who came to West Bengal from East Bengal with her family after the 1947 Partition, as East Bengal, which had been part of undivided India, became East Pakistan. Now, their only shelter was the railway platform of Sealdah station because at that time, the Indian government failed to provide them with rehabilitation. Manik Bandopadhyay soulfully portrayed the helpless condition of Mallika’s family, which brings tears

to the eyes of the readers – “Mallika’s family had a place, the length of a spread out mattress. Everything, everyone was squeezed in there- Mallika, her husband Bhushan, their two-and-half-year-old son Khokon and her widowed sister-in-law Asha, tin suitcases, beddings, bundles, pots and pans” (Bandopadhyay 19). This description reflects the poverty, helplessness, struggle, and suffering of a refugee family. Moreover, Mallika is not an individual, but she and her family are the representatives of the millions of poor people who were uprooted from their native place due to the Partition.

Mallika’s plight is not only that of a woman but also of a mother, as it reveals the organic and spontaneous responsibility of a mother towards her child. A mother can even accept death to save her child. Mallika is the burning example of it. Her child became a skeleton due to poor nutrition, and he was suffering from hunger. If she could not arrange milk for her child, then her child would die soon. Only a mother can feel the intensity of pain in such a condition. The suffering of her child made Mallika fearless, and she was ready to do everything only to save her child’s life – “Do you think I fear death? I would be ready to die if that could keep my child alive” (Bandopadhyay 23). Her husband, Bhusan, was suffering from malaria. Neither was he able to earn a living for his family, nor to protect them from the threats posed by the foreign land. That is how the situation compelled Mallika to assume responsibility for her child and family. She accepted all the challenges of life in the hope of saving her son and her family. Initially, as a woman, she tried her best to earn a dignified livelihood. However, when she found nothing, then she was bound to take any work only to make her child alive – “Okay, I’ll do whatever you ask: dance naked if you so wish. But you’ll find a room for us first, won’t you? An enclosed space and a drop of milk for the child, otherwise he’ll die” (Bandopadhyay 22).

Ultimately, Mallika was compelled to accept Pramatha’s proposal—a predatory figure whose primary objective was the exploitation of vulnerable, impoverished women. Although Mallika’s intuition warned her that Pramatha would likely coerce her into illicit activities, she was prepared to succumb to his trap for the sake of her child’s survival. However, Mallika never thought that before engaging her in some malicious work, at first, Pramatha himself would exploit her – “She had accepted the fact that Pramatha was going to engage her in prostitution, but she couldn’t tolerate the thought that he had planned to enjoy her first, before introducing her to the profession” (Bandopadhyay 29). Pramatha’s plan made Mallika furious, and out of rage, she decided to kill him in the purpose of saving her honour – “It took Mallika a good fifteen minutes to strangle him to death. She loosened the knot, unrolled the sari and slipped her hands into his vest-pocket and took out wads of banknotes. Some of it was meant for her surely, but why not take the rest as well, she thought” (Bandopadhyay 29). That is how Mallika exhibited female resistance to male exploitation of the female body. By killing Pramatha, Mallika terminated a cycle of villainy, intrigue, and violence against women; furthermore, she secured financial stability for her family. Thus, Mallika saved herself and many helpless women like her, asserting feminine power and agency – ““What did he take me for? Am I weak just because I’m a woman?”” (Bandopadhyay 30).

No historical text reveals how physical violence against women during the Partition changed women’s position in society. It is only people’s history, or history from below, that seeks to explore the real horror of the Partition, echoing the dry crying of thirsty women abducted in a brothel, sketching their pale faces, soaked in tears of trauma, and illuminating the strain of dessicated blood in their clothes. To some extent, we can visualise and feel the psychache of the horrible atmosphere, insecurity of life, physical pain, violence on the female

body, and exploitation; when Mallika told her sister-in-law, Asha – “‘I’ll go to the railway station every evening in my frayed sari, the sharks will come again to pick me up, for sure...’ And lowering her voice Mallika said, ‘But this time I’ll be carrying a sharp knife with me, you understand, Thakurjhi. I’ll hide it so that no one finds out...’” (Bandopadhyay 30).

Through the lens of ‘history from below’, this short story explores the plight of impoverished refugee families and the physical violence inflicted upon women during the Partition. The narrative minutely depicts the dark, blood-curdling truths of this era. While Hindu women were traditionally worshipped as the ‘Lakshmi’ of the home, the callousness of the Partition transformed their lives into a living hell overnight, forcing many into a state of extreme exploitation. Simultaneously, women in India, particularly in West Bengal, are revered as human incarnations of Maa Durga; yet, the hypocrisy of this belief is laid bare by the most scandalous aspect of the 1947 Partition. As a consequence of the state’s failure, survival necessitated the unofficial legalisation of the illicit trade of the body as a means of enduring extreme poverty. This process effectively incinerated the honour and dignity of these women in a metaphorical cremation ground. From those very ashes, women like Mallika incarnate as Maa Kali—the fierce form of the Goddess—asserting a terrifying but necessary agency.

Therefore, the title, “The Final Solution”, evokes a sense of aporia, highlighting the state’s failure to protect basic civilian rights and its inability to address the refugee crisis. In this sense, driven by power politics, the state fails to provide a legitimate ‘final solution’. Furthermore, the title suggests that power-hungry leaders continue their political machinations by exploiting refugee issues to maintain their regimes. Consequently, the only ‘final solution’ for subaltern women in a patriarchal society is to wage a self-declared war against the state and those

predatory men who—like hyenas—sate their thirst and hunger with the blood and flesh of the vulnerable subaltern.

Conclusion

The two short stories “Toba Tek Singh” and “The Final Solution” explore two distinct facets of the Partition by incorporating perspectives of ‘history from below’: psychological trauma and physical suffering. The significance of these narratives lies in their disclosure of the secrets, horrors, and systemic violence of the Partition through the eyes of the subaltern, who were brutally exploited by the event. Thus, these stories provide essential exposure to the discourse of Subaltern Studies.

While authorised history rarely questions the geopolitical decisions of the era or the political intrigue of contemporary rulers, Partition literature challenges the very logical necessity of 1947. By exploring the lived realities of the Partition, this literature rewrites a more authentic national history through the ‘tears and blood’ of the marginalised—those voices often omitted by mainstream historians. As sources of ‘history from below’, these stories inaugurate a discourse on critical issues deftly overlooked by official records. Through a panoramic and kaleidoscopic portrait of the era, these two incredible narratives challenge the foundations of the authorised historical record. Ultimately, by emancipating the suppressed voices of the marginalised, “Toba Tek Singh” and “The Final Solution” open new casements in Indian history, through which every reader may achieve a more nuanced retrospection of 1947 with a synchronous sensation.

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