

# Compassion during the Communal Clashes of India's Partition

Tanumoy Kumar Ghosh

Higher Secondary Teacher,

Navrachana School, Vadodara.

## Abstract

Communal clashes during partition of India is considered as the most deadliest and inhuman event in the world by most of the global scholars. The textbooks too carry the negative picture of India's partition. But the intention here is to see the flip side, that is, to see whether the sudden creation of a new identity suppressed the relationship of thousands of years between two religions, the co-habitation, mixture of cultural, societal, traditional habits and behavior. Did compassion reach its lowest level or it was still surviving under the heavy carpet of fanatic identities?

India's Partition refers to the division of British India in 1947 which accompanied the creation of two independent states, India and Pakistan. The partition involved the division of three provinces, Bengal, Sindh and the Punjab, based on district-wise Hindu or Muslim majorities. The boundary demarcating India and Pakistan came to be called as the Radcliffe Line. Partition led to the displacement of nearly 10-12 million people along religious lines, creating a huge refugee crises in both the states. The violent nature of the partition created an atmosphere of hostility.

According to Oxford dictionary<sup>1</sup>, 'Compassion' means "a strong feeling of sympathy for people who are suffering and a desire to help them". In the context of Partition, the term 'compassion' is mainly referred to explain an effort of an individual or a group to help the newly created 'opposition' by overlooking the newly created identities because of their primary identity of being 'human'.

In pre-partition India, there was an amalgamation of people of different ethnic backgrounds as well as different religions. At least till the Pakistan Resolution of 1940, it was never a problem for any community to mix with the other. India's strong tradition of fraternity made it tough for the newly created identities to out rightly overpower the cosmopolitanism deeply rooted in the people. The sudden change in the political condition which led to mass violence and riots couldn't change one's feeling for the newly created 'other'.

In an interview of a partition survivor Manjula Shukla (Born-1938, Karachi), she said, "My father used to give tuitions to a Muslim boy.....During communal riots of Partition, he hid my father inside his house.....in order to save him from the attention of the rioters.....He (father of Muslim boy – a *Rangrez* / cloth dyer) told my father, 'Dress like a muslim. .... Say *Pakistan Zindabad* when you are in public. Otherwise Muslims who were your own brothers few days back will kill you'.....'just when you see the

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/humanity>

gates of the temple, remove this Muslim getup and run towards the temple (Swaminarayan) and ..... scream loudly the names of your Hindu gods. Otherwise your Hindu brothers will kill you’.”

The incidents of ‘opposition saving the other’ are not exceptions. Ashis Nandy says that it was quite a frequent phenomenon. He says, “nearly one-fourth of all survivors (Nandy interviewed) said that they owed their survival to somebody from the opposition. This figure was astonishing because nowhere we have come anywhere near it — in any other genocide.”<sup>2</sup>

Just as Manjula Shukla's father who was saved by a Muslim family in Pakistan, Intikhab Alam (the famous Pakistani cricketer – their first ODI captain) and his family was saved by a Sikh family in Shimla. When riots were at it's peak, they scrambled into their Sikh neighbor's home. In an interview of Intikhab Alam taken by Anam Zakaria, he said “we stayed cooped up in a small room with the Sikh family.....they continued to safeguard us.” He adds that the situation was such where “at one end we were being helped by the Sikhs and at the other end they were attacking us...there was absolutely no logic”<sup>3</sup>. These two interviews clearly shows that both sides of the newly created border had values of compassion and humanity, and neither side was more brutal or softer towards the other.

The whole story of Partition can be seen in a wider context of Nationalism. If Benedict Anderson's theory of Nationalism is applied<sup>4</sup>, then the Muslim-Pakistan was an imagined community which made many Muslims in India believe that they will be safe on the other side of the border & their interests would only be served in their newly created Muslim-nation Pakistan. But even today, Muslims who crossed over are called as *Muhazirs* and are seen as second-class citizens, that too, after 72 years of Partition. Thus, Anderson's theory demonstrates two things – one, Pakistan was formed as an imagined community where Muslims living in India felt imagined connection (Islamic brotherhood) with the greater Muslim population of North-West. Second, even that bubble of Muslim-connection bursted when they reached there. And the fact of the matter is the Muslim Punjabis & Muslim Bengalis even lost their language (atleast till East Pakistan became Bangladesh) and was overpowered by Urdu.

People of a communal-riot affected region can be categorized into three. First, those who either plan it or have vested interest or due to whom a riot starts. They are mostly of an elite class who build the ideology around riots and can be called the ‘*Drivers*’. Second, those who participate on the ground-level and are emotionally driven by the ideology prepared by the ‘*Drivers*’ - can be called the ‘*Emotional Fanatics*’. And third, those who are ordinary people who want to stay neutral despite of their religious identity matching or not matching with the parties participating in riots – can be called the ‘*Helpless Mass*’.

---

<sup>2</sup> *A Psychological Study of India's Partition* – Ashis Nandy's lecture at UC Berkeley, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Zakaria, Anam. *The Footprints Of Partition*, Harper Collins, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*, Verso Publishers, London, 1983.

In the context of Partition, Manjula ji, Intikhab Alam & millions of people who had to migrate, got murdered or raped or survived with traumatic memories - are the '*Helpless Mass*'. This category of people suffers the most in every riot – be it politically, economically or socially. The 'Emotional Fanatics' were the people who wanted separate nations for the Muslims, Hindus and even Sikhs, and were emotionally attached to the creation of a politico-religious identity. This imagined attachment overpowered their human values. Specifically for this category, Ashis Nandy points out that those who engaged in the killings virtually got off scot-free at that time, but paid a price in terms of mental and physical health and some even accepted culpability in their later age. And the first category 'Drivers', in case of partition, were mainly the elite class of Congress and the Muslim League – who had vested interest of many kinds. They are generally the least affected in riots and free of guilt. But in this case, written by Alex von Tunzelmann in her book *Indian Summer*, Jinnah realized and admitted the blunder of creating Pakistan<sup>5</sup>.

While going through the Partition literature, one of the major findings was that those who actually faced the violence, that is, the direct victims, the first generation of victims, those who have seen it first-hand, mostly were those who had lesser prejudice and lesser bitterness about their experience than their own children and their grandchildren. According to Nandy, "They have lived with them and they had very warm memories of that experience. Many of them have said that those were the best days of their lives."

In view of the above, two conclusions can be clearly derived. First, that though the term 'communal violence' in the context of Partition meant the violent clash between Hindus and Sikhs of partitioned India and the Muslims of the newly formed Pakistan, but it should be noted that only a part of the population and not the whole was involved in violence; in fact most were victims of the situation. Second, that to whatever level inhumanity & brutality may reach, compassion, kindness and love will survive. At the most, for a shorter span it may overshadow the human values, but it can never eliminate humanity.

## References

- 1] Zakaria, Anam. *The Footprints Of Partition*, Harper Collins, 2015.
- 2] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*, Verso Publishers, London, 1983.
- 3] Paranjape, Makarand. *The Death & Afterlife Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Random House India, Gurgaon, 2014.

---

<sup>5</sup> Published as article in Dawn Newspaper (The Vision We lost –by Mahir Ali, 14th August 2013)

A few years ago, Alex von Tunzelmann wrote in her book *Indian Summer*: "According to his doctor (Ilahi Bakhsh), Jinnah saw Liaquat [Ali Khan] and told him that Pakistan was 'the biggest blunder of my life'. Further yet, he declared: 'If now I got an opportunity I will go to Delhi and tell Jawaharlal [Nehru] to forget about the follies of the past and become friends again'."

- 4] Tunzelmann, Alex von. *Indian Summer*, Henry Holt and Company, 2007.
- 5] Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence*, Duke University Press, 2000.
- 6] *A Psychological Study of India's Partition* – Ashis Nandy's lecture at UC Berkeley, 2009.
- 7] Overy, Richard. *Complete History Of The World*, Harper Collins, London, 1978.

