

Interrogating the Partition in Rahi Masoom Reza's *A Village Divided (AadhaGaon)*

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ABSTRACT

A substantial part of scholarship on the partition literature overlooks the constructive role played by the villagers against the idea of the partition. RahiMasoom Reza's *A Village Divided (AadhaGaon)* shows how the commoners wisely interrogate the division of the Indian sub-continent along religious lines. Their unflinching love for the homeland renders the idea of partition illogical and absurd. The age-old cultural institutions and traditions, nurtured by both Hindus and Muslims, question the idea of the partition in many ways. The novel foregrounds the humaneness and farsightedness of the villagers in the face of betrayals and shortsightedness of the people sitting at the helm of affairs. They interrogate the irrational claim of the hardliners that distinct modes of worship need different geographical, social and cultural territories. They are too committed to the homeland to embrace the idea of migration to the utopian land. The way Moharram is celebrated introduces us with the sense of communal harmony and cooperation between Hindus and Muslim. Though they suffer tremendously, they refuse to submit to the allurements given by the political outfits, religious groups and university educated youth.

A substantial corpus of criticism on the partition literature focuses on the causes and consequences of the historical event, exposing the role of religious, political and elite groups played in the division of the country and the subsequent gory incidents. Most of the scholars and historians have overlooked the constructive role played by the rustic people against the partition. The present paper seeks to examine the role of common people against the partition in RahiMasoom Reza's *A Divided Village (AadhaGaon)* (1966). The novel shows how common people react and respond to the logic behind the creation of Pakistan. Their responses are based on the shared memories, shared traditions and shared experiences of India's pluralistic culture. They wisely interrogate the division of the Indian sub-continent along the religious lines as it is the division of their identity and the self.

The novelist uses the village of Gangauli in Uttar Pradesh as microcosm to present the attitude and stance of the villagers to the historical event. The novel also shows how socio-cultural institutions form a cohesive village society in the pre-partition period. The village of Gangauli largely inhabited by the people of Shia sect is divided into two rival factions--- DakhinPatti and Uttar Patti. Despite the individual differences, they partake in the socio-cultural and religious ceremonies of one another. The age-old cultural traditions question the idea of the partition in many ways. Though they suffer tremendously, they do not lose faith in human values. They make efforts to maintain the long-tradition of communal amity and brotherhood.

Primarily, the novel narrates the stories of the Muslims who continue to be committed to the motherland even at the cost of intimate relations. Most of them refuse to leave the place even though some of them migrate to the new land, leaving behind the wailing kith and kin. The ones who keep staying in India undergo various socio-economic hardships and the ones who migrate to the new land are strangers even in the so-called their own land. They interrogate the idea that Pakistan will be a

paradise for Muslims. Thus, the villagers reject the claim of the Muslim League "that the new state will deliver a sense of security for those practising sacred rituals" (Saint 147). The villagers strongly and angrily oppose the idea of the partition as it goes against the collectively nurtured and shared culture.

The novel depicts great shock, intense anger, sheer helplessness, boundless patience, and infinite fortitude of the people in the face of the historical tragedy. The novel also castigates the violent forces that attempt to disrupt the communal harmony. It is not only the geo-political division but also the division of common tradition, culture, heritage, home and self. In fact, the idea of partition is the outcome of narrow interests and shortsightedness of both the Congress Party and Muslim League as many historians argue that the partition owes to the discord between the Congress and Muslim League. "The Partition of the subcontinent was the product of a process, which had been unleashed in 1937 in U.P. If there had been a coalition between Congress and Muslim League, the Partition might have been averted" (Mishra 138-39). The socio-cultural crisis caused by the partition interrogates the wisdom of the people who try to rationalize that the partition is inevitable.

Both Muslims and Hindus in the village are opposed to religious hostility, intolerance, any kind of violent passion. In other words, the way they uphold the composite culture of India rejects the cult of communalism and fanaticism. They have a firm faith in the pluralistic character of the Indian culture with enough space to accommodate regional, religious, ethnic and language diversities. The village is symbolic of continuity and integrity of historical legacy, human experience and tradition. Though partition is conceived and concretized along religious lines and by extension linguistic lines, Urdu and Hindi continue to be the languages of both Indian Muslims and Hindus in post-partition period. The partition has failed to destroy Urdu as it continues to have a pride place and the lasting cultural link between the two lands.

To Muslims, India as home is associated with safety, security, dignity and respect. Without home they are without the self. John McLeod argues that "to be at home is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves" (210). Home stands for a way of life, way of thinking and even existence. Parting of home does mean parting of the mutual bonds, harmony, oneness, self and memories. "Loss of home signifies loss of self." (Quoted in Behera 116-120). In the similar vein, Gyanendra Pandey also points out, "Even the historical studies of Partition itself are not a history of the people who lived through it. Their experiences are not charted and the identities and fears that the Partition created and reinforced are not considered" (194).

The novel also traces the social-cultural process that forges Hindu-Muslim amity over the time. They evolve out the system of brotherhood and security over the years by actively participating in the commonly-held traditions and festivals, rising above the narrow concerns of the social backgrounds and religious connections. The long tradition of caring and sharing between Hindus and Muslims creates a culture that accommodates and appreciates ethnic and religious differences. That is why, the villagers are proud of the composite culture not only in the pre-partition years but also in the face of the partition. Even the disruptive and divisive forces fail to shake their faith in the age-old composite culture. The novel, thus, foregrounds the humaneness and farsightedness of the villagers in the face of betrayals and shortsightedness of the people sitting at the helm of affairs.

In the pre-partition times, they would live together with an essential feeling of oneness through thick and thin. In the process of living together, they forge their essential identities as human beings, not as Hindus and Muslims. The village of Gangauli with "collective rites and traditions, songs and legends, names of birds and trees" (Walzer 8) establishes its essential supportive and enriching traditions over the time. The lasting quality of the composite culture is that it inculcates in its inhabitants a sense of security, stability and self-respect. The way the role commoners play provides vast possibilities of meaningful harmonious life for both Hindus and Muslims. Even in the face of disruptive forces they attempt to make their lives meaningful, taking recourse to the long-established traditions. They refuse to give in to the temptations offered by the selfish politicians and elite groups and continue to live in the land of selfhood and identity. Their experiences teach them how to live with pluralities and develop, in the process, a sense of responsibility to lessen the catastrophic impact of the historical event.

The unparalleled appalling experiences, untold pains and privations suggest the almost altered social scenario in the partition days. Commoners are presented as victimizers as well as victims but more victims than victimizers. Despite the violent situation, ordinary people challenge the rationale of hardliners and fundamentalists behind the partition. They interrogate the irrational claim of hardliners that distinct modes of worship necessitate different geographical landscapes. Both Hindus and Muslims "remain deeply attached to their homes, their village landscapes, their ancestral graveyards, and their

rights of conversation with people of all sects" (Husain 90). They do not want to leave the homeland as it is the only source of their existence, strength, security and livelihood. Anne Carson aptly remarks: "Only a fool, they think, can be tempted by distant political horizons" (Carson 144).

The village is proud of its Ganga-Jamuni culture evolved over the time. Commoners suffer in various ways on account of the partition but they keep up hope and zeal for living together. The ordinary people, namely Ali Kabircha, Haji Ghafoor Ansari, Mighdad, Phunnanmiyan, Hakim Sahib and Tannu stand united despite the individual differences to protect the long-established socio-cultural traditions. They refuse to give in to the sparking and swaying speeches delivered by the university students in the praise of Pakistan. Ali Kabir-cha while arguing with them retorts, "Our forefathers lived here...our tazia platforms and imambaras are here...our honour and self-respect is here! Gangauli means something to us!" (Reza 40). Hakim Sahib refuses to accept Jinnah as Muslim leader, saying "When Jinnah Sahib doesn't meet anyone... then why won't we vote for Allah Miyan?" (Reza 233).

Haji Ghafoor Ansari, the weaver, rejects the idea of partition on religious grounds: "I think that there's not the slightest need to make Pakistan-Akistan for the sake of our prayers" (Reza 226). Phunnanmiyan uses Bhojpuri Urdu to abuse the supporters of Pakistan, "Eh, bhai, our forefathers' graves are here, our tazia platforms are here, our fields and homes are here. I'm not an idiot to be taken in by your 'Long live Pakistan!'" (Reza 149-50). For him, the new nation is "just a game for filling stomachs" (Reza 241). Despite the loss of his two sons, he questions the idea of Pakistan. The novelist embodies the character of Phunnanmiyan with the notion of belongingness which is essential for collective survival. .

The novelist keeps a firm faith in the Ganga-Jamuni culture of the village which is carried forward by both Hindus and Muslims. Tannu, despite the massive political changes, maintains his deep love for the village with all its landmarks. He becomes emotional as soon as he has a glimpse of the village, returning from the battle-field. "When he saw the old indigo godown his eyes filled with tears.... Before him was...his mother---Gangauli" (Reza 178-79). He identifies himself with the village, "I love this village because I myself am this village" (Reza 234). To him, the world "constructed on a foundation of hate and fear cannot be auspicious" (Reza 235). The novelist, through the character of Tannu, displays deep love for the homeland, "There must surely be some relationship between man and the land" (Reza 207).

The close connection between the villagers and the native land is unquestionable. Chikuriya, a dalit, rejects the view that Imam Sahib is a Muslim by faith. He strongly refutes the view that Hindus and Muslims are two different communities with different cultural traditions and belief systems. Through Chikuriya, the novelist questions the existence of Pakistan: "Eh, where is this Pakistan being made? If it is made in Ghaziapur then I can go and see it. I'm thinking that it must be some mosque or other" (Reza 74). The novel, thus, interrogates the discourses of the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha

that misconceive the idea of the partition along the religious lines.

The novelist uses Moharram as a central metaphor to illustrate the communal and religious harmony between Muslims and Hindus. The festival is presented not as sacred one but the one with secular character as it transcends the narrow bounds of region, religion, class, colour and language. Moharram, is the symbolic of Ganga-Jamuni culture that brings together in its secular fold all the villagers irrespective of their different faiths. This culture is the source of their philosophy of life and value system. It acts as a platform for all villagers to renew their bonding with each other. Thus, it assimilates them more firmly into the pluralistic culture of the area which is reflected in the way Tazia is taken through the village by the people belonging to all religions and backgrounds. Thus, the celebration of Moharram introduces us with the sense of communal harmony.

Both Hindus and Muslims of the village visit the mosque and Hindu religious places. Muslims donate money for the celebration of Dusshera and Hindus take part in the celebration of Moharram. Zaheer Miyan donates a piece of land for a Hindu monastery. The conversation between Chikuriya and a Hindu teacher manifests the wisdom of rustic people and exposes the politics of educated people. Chikuriya retorts to the view of the teacher that Imam Sahib is Muslim, "Don't say all these things...if the Imam hears there'll be hell to pay" (Reza 160). Similarly, Hindus, namely Bhars, the Ahirs and the Chamars refuse to be swayed by provocative speeches of religious hardliners, refusing to take revenge on the Muslims of Gangauli and other places. They fight for the dignity and integrity of the village or by implication the dignity and integrity of the nation.

The novel manifests the view that the partition was an absurd, man-made and an unprecedented tragedy in the history of the subcontinent. It shows how the masses suffer in various ways. "One major and pressing need to review and analyze the partition arises from the standpoint of those who were mainly non-actors in the political and religious realms but whose lives were completely changed by the epochal event" (Menon 16). Ordinary Muslims refuse to leave the village for the new place as they are very much attached to the land of their birth. They fail to understand the rationale behind the partition and Muslim nationalism. The only thing they

understand is that Gangauli is their home and Imam Husain is their protector and benefactor.

Structurally, the novel evinces the attachment of the novelist to his birth place. He places the 'Introduction' of the novel towards the end. It shows that the notion of creating a new country is born in the mind of the university-educated breed, especially those who speak in pure Urdu whereas the rustic and ordinary people oppose the idea of creation of Pakistan as they are attached to the homeland on emotive, cognitive and physical levels. It is the spirit of endurance, sense of brotherhood and love for the land that teach them to bear the partition tragedy.

The way the novelist prides in being a Gangaulian rejects the Jan Sangh's view that Muslims are outsiders. "I must say that I belong to Ghazipur. My bonds with Gangauli are unbreakable. It's not just a village, it's my home" (Reza 273). It is evident that Gangauli is a real and indivisible part of his existence. He further asserts, "Why should I go? I would not go at all" (Reza 297). Despite the untimely demise of some of the villagers, the novel ends with a positive note, "Outside the morning was most beautiful. In the courtyard a cock was chasing a chicken and a crow was sitting on the ridge of the roof....A young child, a schoolbag over his shoulder, ran past at great speed" (Reza 327). The ending underscores the rejuvenating powers of the shared cultural heritage. The novel, thus, introduces us with the positive role of villagers in their attempt to restore communal harmony in the face of senseless partition.

The foregoing discussion reveals the fact that the idea of partition is absurd, senseless and illogical as it goes against the commonly nurtured and shared culture over the ages. The villagers interrogate the idea of the partition as conceived and propagated by religious leaders, politicians and elites. The use of Bhojpuri dialect—a fine blend of Urdu and Hindi—rejects the idea of the partition along the linguistic and religious lines. The pains and privations of ordinary Muslims question the relevance of creation of Pakistan. The novelist finds the partition completely without historical or social reason, and this fact is authenticated and substantiated by the role of villagers. The novel underscores the virtues of brotherhood, tolerance, unity and dignity go a long way to preserve the shared language, culture and heritage and integrity of the country.

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