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## UNMAKING THE MONOLITH: A CRITIQUE OF PARTITION'S POPULAR CULTURE AND LOCATING THE 'OTHER' IN POST- PARTITION INDIA

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### Abstract

The politico-historical catastrophe of partition of India into two separate nations based on Hindu and Muslim district majorities resulted in the greatest mass migration across the border that witnessed intense violence and loss of life. Memories of pain and atrocity of both the nations due to partition in the name of religion continued to evoke antagonistic attitudes towards each other involving in systematic discrimination of marginalized minorities by egregious caste-based cultural practice where various forms of popular culture of the nations prioritize the culture of dominant castes and tend either to invisibilize or to represent Dalits, Adivasis, the denotified tribes, Muslims and others stereotypically as poor, villains and ugly in cinema, songs, cartoons, tv shows, newspapers etc. This paper, by developing an understanding of Indian popular culture in reshaping the notion of political nationality (under the politics of difference set by the regimes of power till date ) will explore the representation as well as the exclusion of the minorities in the space of cultural artifacts of static popular discourse that we consume each and every day.

**Keywords:** Partition, Migration, Symbolic Violence, Marginality, Popular culture

### Introduction

This paper attempts to present the experiences of marginalized communities and their issues presented in popular culture during and after the partition of India in 1947.

On the eve of 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947 when India got freedom, it gave birth to one more country, Pakistan and this division of British occupied India was in the name of two religions. With a new arbitrary line drawn by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a horrific violence starts between Hindu and Muslim communities as they are forced to migrate across the borders for a new 'home' and Partition, thus becomes one of the biggest mass migration in history with two million people dead and over 75,000 women kidnapped and raped. The term Symbolic Violence is coined by Pierre Bourdieu,



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A sociologist. It is a form of subconscious domination operated in a gentle and non-physical violent way between the two social groups where the dominant one tries to impose their cultural values over the dominated one and normalize and then legitimize it with time. Marginality is a process whereby someone is relegated to the edge of society and granted lesser importance. Popular culture is the culture of the members of society defined by a set of beliefs, practices that are dominant in a society. It connects the diverse cultural groups and influences their perception through films, music, news, tv shows, literature, digital platforms and others. The methodology employed, in the article is one of the descriptive and analytic design with the application of cultural studies theory.

### Critical overview

The entire narrative of partition, documented in popular forms of art and literature made no mention of the plight of Dalit that they encountered during and after the great divide. It is here that the stereotypical representation of refugee identity must be interrogated since the diverse reality of Dalit exodus during the partition is fractured by caste and refuses to identify the narrative as monolithic. In a book named *Since 1947: Partition Narratives among the Punjabi Migrants of Delhi* Ravindar Kaur, the author by making a reference to Dalit refugees as ‘untouchable migrants’, marks that the absence of Dalit from partition historiography is not due to the fact that they were physically absent and they were merely passive actors in the partition drama. The entry of Dalit numbers in the government books of Pakistan showed them in sizeable non-Muslim population and in India they are mentioned as ‘displaced Harijans’ from Pakistan. In popular literature and culture, partition is rather imagined as the migration of upper class Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims on the other. The discursive absence of Dalit exodus from partition or the cultural practice of omission of Dalit writers from having their distinct identity consolidated is resulted from the ‘explicit and implicit mechanisms of Brahmanical oppression’ as observed by Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis in her article (Ch.817). In the book *Caste and Partition*, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay brought into light the caste question in 1950 Bengal where a number of Dalit people, being migrated from Pakistan were viewed with suspicion by upper caste Hindus in India and were treated as ‘other’ in Pakistan also. This is, as the author duo writes, testified by the Marichjhapi incident in India and in Pakistan, by the fact of exposure of some secret telegram messages showing hypocrisy of the state where Jogendranath Mandal, the first Namshudra minister of law and labor in Pakistan was kept under rigid surveillance by the Pakistani top order for allegedly being disloyal to the state. “For the Dalit migrants the experience of displacement had been so very traumatic that it had created for them a permanent rupture with the past. Most of them never wanted to go back to their own homeland.” (Bandyopadhyay 60) Similarly, the cultural



perception of Adivasi as criminal was started with the passing of a British law criminalizing 150 tribes in India. In the discussion of invisibility of Dalits and Adivasi from the academic narrativization of partition, 'Chuhra', a class of Dalit Punjabi Christians must be included for 'Chuhrahs', a caste of scavengers, being socially excluded live outside the villages. They, once called by 'Isai' and later by 'Masih' lack even a proper identity and were treated as 'alien' in pre-partitioned India. At the time of partition, S.P.singha, the prominent leader of the class moved with them in Pakistan as he himself said "In non-Muslim villages we have no graveyards and are not allowed to draw water from wells." But the promise of equality was betrayed since they are forcefully evicted from the places reserved for them. Later he suggested to the government to replace them in refugee camps or to "bury them alive". (Aqueel) The popular novels and films of partition like that of Ritwik Ghatak in Bengal narrate partition as the story of 'Bhadrolok' and omit the Dalits from the entire oeuvre. Bengal partition is often described from the perspective of Upper-caste people or 'Bhadrolok' by the writers like Jyotirmoyee Devi or the filmmakers like Ritwik Ghatak who being the representatives of upper class society produced the romanticized version of partition as the issue of migration and settlement belonging to only the upper caste Bengali migrants. Interrogating this upper class perspective of the mainstream culture, Sarbani Banerjee in "More or Less Refugees? Bengal Partition in Literature and Cinema" pointed that Hindu Dalit was in a disadvantageous position compared to the upper caste Bengali migrants as the latter maintained a distance from the refugees of lower caste migrants despite belonging to the same linguistic group. Most of the wealthier Bengali refugees from upper caste managed to settle in and around Kolkata but mostly the Namasudras (a part of Dalit Hindu) who lived on agriculture were regarded as a burden and forced to rehabilitate in camps, relocated further to Dandakaranya forest areas. Later in the late 1970s when most of the Dalit refugees tried to escape from Dandakaranya with a view to return in Bengal and sought refuge in Sundarbans, they were killed and suppressed by the state and this violence is called Marichjhapi massacre of 1979. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in his book *The politics of Caste in West Bengal* challenged this upper caste majoritarianism and offered the nuances of the partition narrative from the perspective of Dalit exodus. This Dalit perspective is vanished in mainstream popular narratives of partition produced by the majoritarian politics and later found expression in the works of Dalit and Namasudra writers like Manoranjan Byapari and Adhir Biswas. Also the mainstream Hindi films like *Ganga jamuna, Sujata, Damul, Swadesh* and *Article 15* primarily frame Dalits as passive recipients and upper class male as change makers and a Dalit woman as a practitioner of Brahminical notions like endogamy.

The term 'other' in the complex social matrix of India needs to be redefined in the context of minorities who are marginalized by the cultural politics propagated through the popular media that



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serves to indoctrinate a discourse of discrimination among the viewers. The practice of radical Hinduism tends to push off the interests of the Muslim to the periphery as a result of which a trauma of alienation of the displaced subject constantly relegates him/her to non-existence in the entire bio-sphere of the majority. This process of otherization is inculcated tacitly in the post-independent Indian films where an attitude of difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is skillfully mixed up with the narrative of patriotism. In the new millennium patriotic narrative undergoes a shift in mood and tone as the genre is reproduced with anti-Muslim discourse through the silver screen. The idea of nationalism is linked with the job of ISRO and it even involves the current activities of the government like surgical strikes. The real life events like Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 were adapted to the screen in such a way that a hostile attitude grows in the collective psyche of Indian viewers towards the neighbor country. Myth of a new national hero is constructed to concretize the idea of nationalism in films like *Gadar* (2001), an action drama where a non-Muslim (Sikh) character called Tara Singh is found to brandish his martial prowess (melo)dramatically through a hand pump and single-handedly fights a group of Pakistani army off by uttering loudly in Hindu masculine voice “ Hindustan zindabad hai, Hindustan zindabad tha aur Hindustan zindabad rahega!” He is purported to represent the cultural discourse of India where non- Muslim entity is identified with India and Hindus are projected as rational with muscular strength and Muslims as villains. Thus the practice of ‘masculine Hinduism’, as referred to in the book *Make me a man* by Sikata Banerjee, obliged the Muslims feel politico-national ‘other’ in their own homeland. Later in the films like *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019), *Tanhaji* (2020) Hindu heroes are portrayed as “ smart, loyal, brave, diligent and dedicated to their motherland” and Muslims are presented as “violent, cruel and irrational” (Molaei, 2021). Of late, *The Kashmir Files*(2022) and *Gadar2* (2023) underline the distinction between two religions by intentional propagation of Islamophobia. Seemin Hasan, a professor at Aligarh Muslim University, once said, “The projection of Muslims as uneducated, misguided and ruthless communalists reflects anxieties...The Muslim identity is trapped in the image of the terrorist... a new stereotype of the Muslim is born- as a ruthless stranger with an anti-nationalist agenda.”(Chatterji)

The traumatic experience of partition is also felt through the intensely layered intra-community distinctions exemplified by the rivalry between East Bengalis or *Bangals* and West Bengalis or *Ghatias* where the wretched *Bangal* refugees are perceived as ‘ other’ by the settled *Ghatias*, a social



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group native to West Bengal of India. Here partition (of Indian subcontinent and of Bengal province on the basis of religion and language respectively) casts its indelible impact on the way the Bengali people observed themselves over the question of cultural superiority or inferiority of one community over another. The antagonistic relationship between a Ghati and a Bangal must be critically discussed under the theoretical framework of symbolic violence. In the aspect of Ghati – Bangal rivalry a Ghati being migrated from Purba Banga or ‘home’ due to partition finds him/herself in a disadvantageous position in West Bengal. A *Bangal*, linguistically categorized as a person originated in Purba Banga is looked down upon by a *Ghati* as a person of loud and coarse speech with crude manners having unrefined harsh dialect ( as they have a distinct accent) and often lacking sophistication or fine tastes. In contrast to this stands the *Ghati*- culture or babu-culture which they mean as gentleman’s culture. (Gangopadhyay,1989, p.317) In the name of redefining the ‘correct’ culture, ‘proper’ manner and ‘pure’ taste often a representative of Ghati ridicules, otherises and excludes a Bangal from his society, if a Ghati refuses to adopt and internalize this cultural capital produced by the dominant groups. The dominated groups here misrecognize the exclusion as personal failure and unconsciously give an ‘unwilling consent’ to the dominant group through which the social reproduction of power is ensured and operated in a smooth way. In general the concept of East or West has already been existing in the common Bengali psyche for centuries preceding 1947 as they look themselves hailing from “this side” or “that side” of the river Ganges and long before it emerges as a separate political entity the river was the great divider. But it is only after the partition schism that the bitter sweet rivalry takes a different turn bordering on hostility, an antagonism mounted with waves of East Bengali migrant refugees in Calcutta after partition in 1947 and in 1971 and it is in this context that the attitudes of the *Ghaties* should be studied. Did the indigenous population come forward to heal the wound of East Bengalis who are just uprooted from their ancestral home or did they by deriding and joking about their customs make them feel unfit for and alien to the urban society of Calcutta that belonged to ‘them’? Unfortunately enough, the *Ghaties* used to hurl insults and slurs at *Udbastu Bangals* through popular rhymes like -Du char lathi parle ghare ./ tabe Bangal bujhte pare or Dhopa janee kon jon kangal, / Shekra jaane kon jon Bangal etc.(Ghosh) That the local population refused to sympathize with the “fortune-seekers from across the borders” of the time on the basis of their lack of affinity to West Bengal is evinced in the facts described best in a book named *Negotiating Borders and Borderlands: The Indian Experience* edited by Gorky Chakraborty and

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Supurna Banerjee. There is also a mention of an article from “Prabasi”, a widely known Bengali journal of the time that helps to study the behavior of the then Bengali people the journal happens to offer. The ‘highly provocative article’ written in the journal, some three years after the catastrophe, treats East Bengalis as *atithi* or guest who should remain always unconditionally grateful to the state and its local people to have bothered and provided them with refuge and shelter. Sri Vishnu Sharma, the author of the article mocks at the government for ‘dissipating its precious time and money in refugee rehabilitation, at the cost of the welfare of local residents’.(Ghosh) The writer even instigated the *Ghatis* to behave otherwise by shedding off their image of tolerance and citing the example of anti-Bengali agitations of Assam he warns the locals that West Bengal is for West Bengalis and urges them to cling to their *Vitas* and not to surrender an inch without a fight as the outsiders are preoccupied with the heinous plan to snatch their province away from them. He also accuses the *Bangals* as escapists and coward for leaving their birthplace. Popular culture down to this time permeated with the theme of tensions between the two diverse groups portray in one hand the reluctance of the former dwellers who might not have wanted a different kind of people amongst themselves and the problems of the latter seeking to settle in a hostile new land, on the other.

The division of Indian subcontinent also affected the rich legacy of music in India where a group of musicians felt isolated from ancestral tradition which was fragmented to pieces by the newly drawn Radcliffe line. Undivided Punjab was famous for classical music, especially *Khayal* and *Dhrupad* but the tradition was lost after the division. Partition in the name of religion compelled the majority of Hindustani music practitioners (Muslim singers like Amanat Ali-Fateh Ali and Salamat Ali-Nazakat Ali who were representatives of the *Patiala* and *Sham Chaurasi* gharanas, respectively) to go to Lahore. Even the legendary sarangi player Ustad Bundu Khan of the *Delhi* gharana and Roshan Ara Begum, the great vocalist from *Kirana* gharana migrated to Pakistan. But disillusioned with the discursive practice of Islamicisation of music in Pakistan, practitioners like Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan decided to move to India in 1957 leaving his family in Kasur and Lahore. He was once instructed in Pakistan to omit the words ‘Hay Ram’ from the lyrics of his famous classical *Thumri* “Yaad Piya Ki Aaye” to which he did not conform. Though his move to Bombay brought him ‘greater professional acclaim and opportunities’ the pain of separation made him feel like an outsider in India. The potency of music to avert partition was alluded by him when



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he asserts “If one child in every home had been taught music, India would never have been partitioned.”(Kapuria)

## **Conclusion**

The exclusion, depicted through this article, of ‘others’ from the mainstream urban politics and popular culture has its germination in the past days of partition and when we look at the trajectory we understand how the discriminatory attitude of the society to the marginalized subjects results from the discursive practice of difference. It should be addressed not only by community engagement and integration but by proper state policies securing their residential area and accessibility to services.

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