

What circumstances led to the Partition of India in 1947? What critique of partition does Manto offer in “Toba Tek Singh”?

“Leave India to God, or leave India to anarchy.”
— Mahatma Gandhi

The Partition of India in the summer of 1947 is the most unprecedented and barbaric event in the history of the sub-continent with catastrophic and inexplicable results. Ten million people had to leave their homes and ancestral holdings, and another million were slaughtered in the most singular civil war in recent history: there were no leaders, no armed forces, no plans, only a spontaneous and visceral ferocity whose possibility was unanticipated and whose legacy is evident even today. Provoked by the hooligan actions of a few, the vengeance that ordinary Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs wreaked on each other coarsened our social sense, distorted our political judgements and deranged our understanding of moral rightness. It was completely unbelievable how the same Hindus and Muslims who had fought hand in hand to topple the very foundation of the British Empire in the country, had suddenly in an inexplicable rage of fanaticism and blind fervour turned against each other unleashing violence of incomprehensible dimensions.

Although in 1923 itself Choudhury Rahmat Ali proposed the idea of Pakistan in his Cambridge Pamphlet, it was only in the Lahore Resolution of 1940 that the idea of a two-nation theory was put forward officially for the first time and the seed of a sovereign and independent Muslim state began to germinate. By 1946, communal politics reached the very grassroots, the villages of India contaminating them with an intensive propaganda with regard to freedom of a different kind than that imagined by most common people of India. The colonizers also played a crucial role in the drama that led to partition. Census operations were carried out with demarcations based on religious identities and even reforms were advocated along community centred lines. Moreover, as a stressed nation after the Second World War, Britain’s hastiness to close their rule in India ended in the whole process of partition occurring way before scheduled time of June 1948.

It needs to be stated here that the two nation theory was resisted by majority of the people in India. The initial response to partition was of sheer disbelief. The absurd and arbitrary division of nations by those in power left the people in utter confusion. For many across community and religious barriers who had lived together sharing a composite culture, at times marked by flared tempers that cooled down and further cemented bonds, the large scale riots that broke out during partition were almost beyond their comprehension. No one was able to

make sense of that madness. It is clear that not only individuals but entire communities could go insane.

Saadat Hasan Manto was among the few writers who had the detachment and humanity to take stock of this tremendous and disturbing eruption of primeval evil, try to comprehend it in all its dimensions and put it in perspective. In Allok Bhalla's words, "*Manto was the finest and perhaps the most sardonic witness to the genocide that accompanied partition.*" The greatest of Manto's 1947 stories is '*Toba Tek Singh*'. Through the clever and double-edged use of the metaphor of madness, Manto offers a sharp critique on Partition in '*Toba Tek Singh*.'

'*Toba Tek Singh*' is a very bitter indictment of partition in a sardonic and ironic way. It crystallizes the entire temper and ethos of the turning point in the life of not just the protagonist, Bishan Singh but the entire society. Sukrita Paul Kumar observes that the story solidifies and concretizes the concept of '*Watan*'— a word meaning more than just homeland— and having a strong emotive nuance, intense longing for roots and deep desire to belong. Manto shows how geography and human psyche identity share a strong emotional relationship build up over years at an unconscious plane. The bond is so deeply engrained in one's mind that a separation of the two can cause psychic disorder. Identity is intrinsically, inherently and inextricably linked to homeland. Thus, Toba Tek Singh is not just a mere name, but Manto's critique on how dislocation caused by partition lead to near physic frantic amongst people. Manto demonstrates the concept of '*Watan*' being lived by the person who comes to acquire the name of the land he comes from. He is the expression of homeland "*Mitti*" incarnate. Partition, hence, lead to the dislocation or exile from one's natural home, to erosion of established deep rooted identities and deprivation from belonging to a certain place. It altered the life of common people in different senses; community was uprooted.

The whole process of birth of a new nation was arbitrary, authoritative, illogical and insane and these new political identities thrust on people led to utter confusion and disarray. The anxieties of the lunatics mirror actual conditions of several 'sane' people who were uncertain about altered national identities. There is a severe identity crisis among the inmates after the changed political scenario. Through the responses of the madmen to partition, Manto launches a strong attack on the vivisection of India by those in power.

Maulvi Saheb who reads the Zamindar, on being asked where Pakistan is, answers confidently "*a place in Hindustan where they make cut throat razors.*" This is Manto's critique on partition, elucidating how people could associate birth of a new nation only with the violence unleashed and could not perceive Pakistan as an independent entity. The confusion highlights the

insanity of creating artificial countries overnight. When a Sikh madman asks another, "*Sardarji why are we being sent to Hindustan? We can't even speak their language*", it shows how linguistic identity was being uprooted, and new political identity thrust upon. Certain common cultural traits in terms of language and identity between communities were being destroyed by this dubious division and a long and peaceful communally shared history was brought to an abrupt end. The Muslim madman shouting "*Pakistan Zindabad*" who loses his balance and faints is again a critique of the absurdity and harmful repercussions of hollow sectarian patriotism involving mindless passion and fervour. The murderers pretending as madmen who could never know the full truth, but heard the explanation involving Jinnah creating Pakistan for Muslims shows how there were no accurate answers, since the entire episode was so gruesome and irrational. It was indeed ironical that the madness created by the confusion was more than the prevailing madness. When a Madman climbs up the tree, and asserts "*I want to live in neither Hindustan nor Pakistan, I had rather live on this tree*" we encounter Manto's most profound comment on partition, symbolic of the sentiments of the common man's denial to belong to politically separatist nations and his refusal to accept arbitrary communal and national identities. In spite of his insanity, the madman's sadness in separating with his Sikh and Hindu friends, expresses how partition brought broke many a bond of love and warmth that earlier existed regardless of caste and religion to a sudden end. The mad Mussalman radio engineer roaming naked, is symbolic of complete withdrawal from any kind of political or communal identity. The human body knows no religious or national identity; all humans are alike being the naked truth. The enactment of communal conflict in outer world within the asylum with one madman declaring himself as *Jinnah* and the other as *Tara Singh*, critiques how people who earlier lived together in an atmosphere of love and brotherhood, suddenly acquired communal identities and saw other communities as enemies. The young Hindu lawyer in love with an Amritsar girl who spurned him shows how love, which knows no religion, no boundaries, too was partitioned. Partition also uprooted individuals from material property and existence, and disrupted their professions. It is interesting to note here that both Nehru and Jinnah were lawyers; this could well be an intended but indirect caricature on Manto's part of these two political stalwarts.

Finally, Toba Tek Singh's gibberish is symbolic of the nonsense of partition, the collapse of human communication in the midst of sheer madness and the failure of language to have any meaning in such times of turmoil. In his demented incantation are encoded the entire range of fictional reasons used to incite people to entertain fantasies of offended pride, retaliatory violence and religious *communitas*.

In Toba Tek Singh, Manto also uses the madness of the asylum as a metonym for the madness that wreaks havoc in the nation at the time of partition. In an ironic manner, the mad are seen as saner than the sane whose reason led them to brutally divide a nation into two. The absurdity of the madmen appears to be humane and reasonable when set against the bizarre scenes of rape, massacre and plunder that were witnessed during the Partition. Irrational actions outside the asylum mark a greater degree of madness. Madness in the story is perhaps then a metaphor for sanity. Also, the perspective of the mad, who are at the margins of society occupies centre stage and in an inverted manner challenges the rationale of the dominant politics of those at the centre of power. To exchange mad people is greater madness, in the process, creating more trouble and disrupting normal life. There's no rational explanation for exchange of mad people. It seemed simply a matter of power assertion, an officious and administrative gimmick, and a rigid and absurd decision. Thus, those who claim to be in powers, who decide the fate of millions on both sides of the border, are shown to act in the most absurd manner. As Md.Assaduddin writes in his introduction to 'Freedom's sake', "*It is the madness of the sane which is million times more destructive than the madness of the insane.*"

Toba Tek Singh's death in the end of the story in no-man's land is Manto's ultimate rejection and critique of the "*vivisection of Mother India*". Toba Tek Singh's death is an act of defiance, a symbol of protest and rebellion, a challenge to history and a refusal to accept the political identity thrust on him by arbitrary decisions of policy-makers. It is his ultimate attempt for liberation from the clutches of fascist politics and communalism. His death marks the culmination of his search for his land in no man's land — an alternate space, an escape from the dislocation imposed. It is a deliberate and forceful repudiation of imposed externals.

In conclusion, it can be said that his masterpiece, "*Toba Tek Singh*", portrays in a powerful and moving manner "*Manto's humanism and his conviction that happiness does not lie in conflicts over religion and nationalism, but on fellowship and caring, on love, tolerance and forgiveness.*" (Khalid Hasan, 'Introduction to Mottled Dawn.') Never were these qualities more in need of in the sub-continent than they are today!!