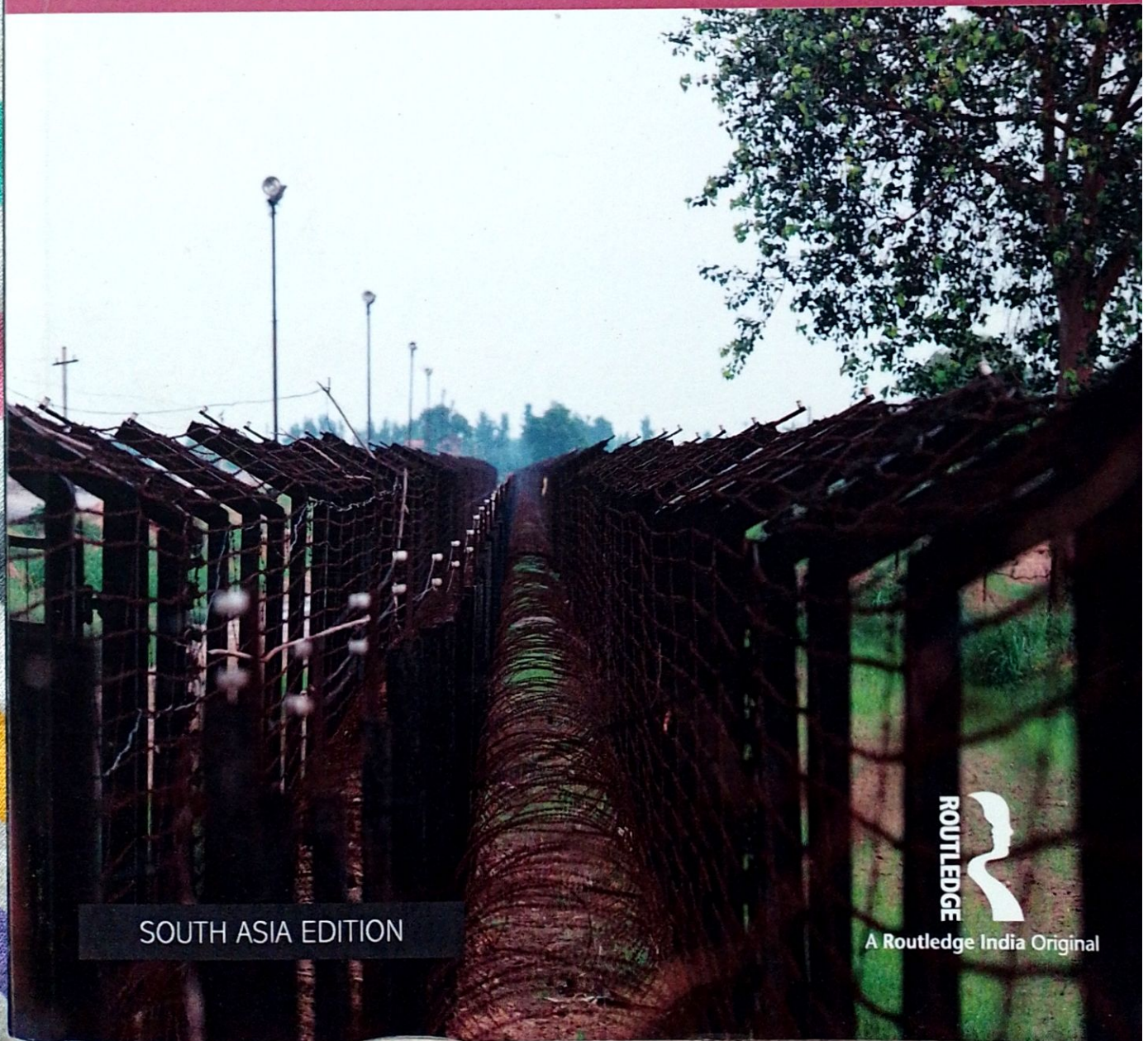


Partition Literature and Cinema

A Critical Introduction

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IDEOLOGY OF HATRED AND THE VIOLENT MAKING OF NATIONS

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

Shirsendu Mondal

It is difficult to conceive of Indian Partition as the inescapable event of our cultural inheritance. To acknowledge that the two modern nation states of today were born in bloody bestiality is indeed an unsettling experience. The task of transcribing Partition violence is certainly more painful as the hauntings of history intrude into the transcribing moment of the temporal 'now.' As such, the remonstrating/writing subject lacks the necessary objectivity that one is likely to possess in his/her engagement with the 'occurred.' Instead, the occurred intrudes into the living present and affects the materiality of the now that contains the remonstrating self. The self encounters an impossibility of transcription. Ted Svensson identifies this impossibility as a probable explanation to the relative silence of the post-1947 Indian scholarship on the human dimension of the atrocities during the days of Partition. Referring to Veena Das's essay "The Anthropology of Pain," Svensson suggests that "the magnitude of violence and pain itself partly extinguished language and the possibility to communicate the experience" (Svensson 2013: 50).

Partition and its climate of violence was a regressive age of animallistic primitivism. It was one of those rare occasions when people recognised the inadequacy of imagination to fathom the extent of cruelty human beings were capable of. We would love to have obliterated the chapter from the register of our embittered memory. Erasing the record clean by way of disowning responsibility of the entire course of events would be one way of negotiating with a traumatic past. But this could be justifiable if the violence was undisputedly proven to have been an exception, an aberration, a rarest of the rare phenomenon, experienced at an unusual juncture of human history and most importantly unprecedented. A distinct line of nationalist historiography followed this agenda of portraying the Partition violence as something extraneous to the essential harmony of Indian pluralism. It emphasised the peace-loving nature of the Indian people and how the community, divided by religion, had been continually living with each other since ancient

times. Only this time, it claimed, something went seriously wrong, loosening the wildest frenzy of violence which, at a later date, was unthinkable even to the perpetrators of it. This particular period was abnormal and therefore, not representative of history. Gyanendra Pandey perceives that this line of thought aimed at "justifying or eliding, what is seen in the main as being an illegitimate outbreak of violence" by denying the truism that "violence and community constitute one another" (Pandey 2008: 3).

The epoch of Partition was a period of diabolical insanity. To date, people experiencing the cataclysm at close quarters find it impossible to explain the reality in a more comprehensive manner. This description of the time attempts to negotiate with an extremity which unhinges mind and confounds reason. It is, however, entirely different from choosing an expression to disown or at least dissociate from the loot, arson, rape and genocide which were committed by those ordinary, sociable, law-abiding next-door neighbours. That Partition became synonymous with violence and at times surpassed the atrocities of the Holocaust can be substantially accounted for by the complete withdrawal of British administrative control and the failure of Indian politics to assess and manage the fallout of this monumental blunder. Neeti Nair argues that more than religious fundamentalism, Partition violence was "a tragic consequence of a breakdown in political negotiations," involving the British, the Congress and the Muslim League. The absence of martial law and the reluctance of the British to stay until the sharing of resources between the Nations were seen through – the shameful hurried scuttle that Churchill had feared – resulted in havoc (Nair 2011: 9, 179–218). These factors had tremendous impact upon the pervasive anarchy and the ensuing dystopia. Nevertheless, the terror was fundamentally bred in and was inflicted by the savage intolerance of the familiar mass. Consequently, the polarisation of social life into communities governed by religious affiliation was complete.

It is difficult to understand why people of different religions, irrespective of provocation and instinctual survival drive, engaged in such a random, thoughtless killing spree. The perpetrators themselves, in retrospect, found no words to explain their acts except that they had no control over the sweeping hatred (Butalia 1998: 71). Partition violence was an encounter with the darker side of one's own being: in a bizarre defamiliarisation of the stable and the known, an ordinary individual could see the potential murderer within him.

To look into ways in which common citizens recognised the explosive revisionism within them for members of another community and how they were utterly transformed by the disturbed imaginings of near extinction makes a relevant study. It is of momentous importance to know how people, sharing similar social-cultural values, were overtaken by virulent hate and suddenly turned into predators. Reading *Train to Pakistan* from this perspective reveals several fissures and faults along the fabric of social relations. If the much-vaunted legacy of a pluralistic Indian culture has been the spontaneous outcome of a broad-based egalitarian society, the seeds of mistrust and intolerance among the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs have also been bred by the dark underside of the same society. The much-vaunted harmony