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978-1-107-00010-0 - The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition

Jisha Menon

Excerpt

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## 1 Introduction

My whole soul rebels against the idea that Hinduism and  
Islam represent two antagonistic cultures and doctrines.

M.K. Gandhi

In July 1993, just seven months after the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and the subsequent riots in Bombay, Sahitya Akademi-winning playwright Mahesh Dattani directed the premiere production of *Final Solutions* in Bangalore.<sup>1</sup> The plot unfolds in the midst of Bombay riots as two Muslim boys, Bobby and Javed, seek refuge in the house of the Gandhis, a Hindu family. Exasperated by their sense of the everyday humiliations of untouchability perpetrated on Muslims, Bobby and Javed expose the insidious exclusions on which the safety of the Hindu home is predicated.

The arrival of these two Muslim boys rekindles the memory of an old family secret. The secret returns us to the scene of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan when, in the rising tide of religious violence, the Gandhis set fire to their Muslim neighbors' shop. Torching the shop was not an expression of religious intolerance but rather a devious attempt to quash the business of their Muslim rivals. As a result, the burgeoning friendship between Zarine, the shopowner's daughter, and Daksha, the young Gandhi bride, comes to an abrupt end. Daksha's father gets brutally murdered in the violence that occurs in the wake of the Partition.

The Partition resurfaces as a repressed historical memory that continues to mold both secular and religious identities. The narrative

Gandhi, in Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, 333–334.

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action moves back and forth between 1947 and 1992, thus illuminating two historical moments that capture the crisis of secularism in India. Unfinished negotiations with the past fuel both Ramnik's generosity and his mother's hostility toward Muslims: Whereas Daksha harbors a festering resentment toward Muslims, her son Ramnik is guiltily aware of the family's complicity in demolishing the shop and repeatedly placates his guilt by overzealous acts of generosity toward Muslims.

*Final Solutions* dramatizes the self-interest that drives the violence in this case. Rather than explain violence as a "natural" explosion of primordial religious difference, Dattani considers the unstable historical conditions in 1947 and in 1992 as catalysts that generate essentialist religious identities. Set in this context, religious violence is a response to anxieties over material resources, insecurities generated by the implosion of former certitudes, and panic over the sudden collapse of long-standing social and political orders. Dattani deliberately invokes the specter of Hitler's "final solution" to the "problem" of exterminating Jews in Europe. By drawing analogies to Hitler's fascist politics, Dattani mounts his critique against violent and exclusivist Hindu nationalism in India.

The character of Daksha – as the grandmother and the young bride – is shared between two actors: The younger one is set in 1947 and removed from the action and other characters of the play, whereas the older one is set in 1993, appearing with all the other actors onstage. The narrative action is punctuated by flashback scenes in which the younger Daksha records in her diary her experience of being a young bride, her anguish when her father gets murdered during the Partition riots, her sorrow over Zarine's betrayal of their friendship, and her love of the legendary singer Noor Jehan's haunting melodies. Daksha's diary bears witness to the intrusion of the nation's public and political life into her private chambers.

In the 1993 Bangalore production, I played the role of the younger Daksha. Inhabiting Daksha's character required taking a leap back into a dark moment in the nation's history. Through her diary, I glimpsed a moment in Indian history, often overlooked in celebratory textbook accounts of India's nonviolent path to independence.

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The character of Daksha offered me a lens with which to traverse the transformation of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed “practices of proximity” into the “politics of identity.” Chakrabarty offers proximity and identity as alternative ways of dealing with difference, where identity refers to a congealed fixity and proximity refers to negotiation of difference.<sup>2</sup> When, for example, does Daksha withdraw from the practice of negotiating difference with her neighbor and petrify Zarine as her absolute other? How does this fixity of identity structure the Gandhi home as Hindu and foreclose the possibility of hospitality to the Muslim boys? By tracing the contingent and particular ways in which negotiated practices of proximity transform into strident and implacable politics of identity, Dattani exposes how Hindu liberals, such as Ramnik Gandhi, are unable to attend to the critique of unthinking Hindu privilege launched by Javed and Bobby.

The character of Daksha reveals the encrusted prejudices of people who grapple with the tenacious hold of the Partition on their everyday life. Embodying the character of a seventeen-year-old bride who experienced the vicissitudes of a violent political history required me to imagine and inhabit the extreme ruptures that the Partition produced in the everyday lives of its survivors. Indeed, it made me ponder how entire worldviews crumble under the weight of tumultuous events. It was during the production of *Final Solutions* that I first considered the enduring ways in which discourses of the Partition interpellated religious and secular as well as regional and national identities.

I vividly recall the sense of political urgency that drove the cast and crew of this production. Our first attempt to stage the play was thwarted when the sponsor – one of the city’s premier newspapers – pulled us out of a regional theatre festival, fearing further clashes between religious communities. When we finally mounted the production in July 1993 – with the support of Maadhyam, a local non-profit organization – the political situation had stabilized and offered the audience the opportunity to speculate on the growing crisis of secularism within the nation. The Hindu right’s disturbing ascendancy to power in the intervening years gradually strengthened the emergent project of the Sangh Parivar to redefine India, both culturally and politically.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the comparatively insipid public response

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to the violent pogroms against the Muslims in Gujarat that broke out in 2002 suggests the insidious ways in which the Hindu right normalizes spectacular forms of violence against minorities. It is within such a political and social context that this present project acquired its critical urgency.

The specter of the Partition returns to mold contemporary subjects of religious conflicts: Survivors and witnesses of post-1947 conflicts evoke the Partition as a recurrent point of reference. For example, in the wake of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 by her two Sikh bodyguards, the widespread pogroms against the Sikh community constituted a pivotal moment that evoked the Partition in public memory. One survivor eloquently describes the betrayal and bewilderment: "The memory of '47 came flooding back, except that I feared this might be much worse.... When the Hindu mobs shouted 'Traitors, get out!' I asked myself, 'Traitors? Is this what I sang songs of Independence for? Was handcuffed at the age of six for?' Which is our home now? ... 1947 was no shock, the shock is now."<sup>4</sup> Pioneering oral historians Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin reiterate the significance of the 1984 pogroms in reviving anxieties about national and ethnic belonging. In their words, "1984 changed the way 'history' concealed our past from us. Here was Partition once more in our midst, terrifying for those who had passed through it in 1947.... Yet this was our own country, our own people, our own home-grown violence."<sup>5</sup> In her groundbreaking work, Urvashi Butalia also acknowledges that the 1984 pogroms played a pivotal role in her undertaking the project of collecting oral histories of the Partition: "It took the events of 1984 to make me understand how ever-present Partition was in our lives, too, to recognize that it could not so easily be put away inside the covers of history books."<sup>6</sup> Another survivor reiterates the sense of panic, apprehension, and deep disillusionment the 1984 pogroms evoked: "We didn't think it could happen to us in our own country," she recalls, "this is like the Partition again."<sup>7</sup> The aforementioned remarks rehearse the eruption of an older memory during a moment of historical crisis; the 1984 pogroms evoked the specter of the Partition.

The diachronic doubleness of these memories that shuttle between 1947 and 1984 reveal that the Partition as "event" had not

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ended – that the religious tensions that sparked in post-Independence India were haunted by the traumatic memory of the Partition.<sup>8</sup> The Partition resurfaced at other volatile moments in the history of the subcontinent. Preceding and during the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the Partition reemerged in the hate speech of the Hindu right. Likewise, Muslims displaced from their homes during the ensuing Bombay riots allude to the Partition in an effort to make sense of the violent ruptures the ethnic conflict produced. Indian novelist Shama Futehally remarks that the Babri Masjid demolition has “made it impossible, so to speak, to keep the lid on Partition any more.”<sup>9</sup> Victims and witnesses of these riots frequently reference Partition as a touchstone of their experience of violence. The 1998 nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan conjured yet again the Partition. Suvir Kaul writes eloquently about the “extraordinary irony” that undid the Partition when the highly policed border between India and Pakistan was threatened into obliteration by “the power of mutually assured nuclear destruction.”<sup>10</sup> Ashis Nandy argues that the Gujarat pogroms in 2002 confirmed that the Partition continues to resurrect “fantasies of orgiastic violence” that taunt us to both exterminate the enemy as well as compel him/her to live in abject humiliation and disgrace.<sup>11</sup>

The uncanny doubleness of memory that mimetically evokes the Partition discloses, rather than closes, the specters of the past. These recurrent associations reveal that it is not only a former time that binds one to the memory of the Partition but also a former self. The Partition simultaneously possesses and dispossesses its survivors: Its spectral memory holds subjects in thrall to the dispossessed dimensions of their self, precluding any possibility of self-possession. Despite the institutional strategies of redress and reparation and the redemptive accounts of the nation’s nonviolent path to freedom, the unruly memories of the Partition resist efforts toward a harmonizing closure. The memory of the Partition continues to shape social relations between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in the subcontinent; conversely, contemporary religious conflicts shape and revise past narrations of the Partition.

*The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* explores the affective and performative

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constitution of the Indian and Pakistani nation in the wake of the most violent chapter of its history: the Partition of the subcontinent. I recuperate the idea of mimesis to think about the mimetic relationship between political history and the crisis of its aesthetic representation. I also consider the relationship between India and Pakistan as constituted through a mimetic relationality, which evokes the fraternal metaphor of twins separated at birth. The particular performances I examine trouble the idea of two coherent, autonomous nation-states of India and Pakistan by pointing to the trope of mimetic doubles that suffuse the dramas of Partition. These performances reveal that the shadowy underbelly of antagonistic politics is constituted by the promise and betrayal of mimetic kinship. This study attempts to recover mimetic modes of thinking to unsettle the reified categories of identitarian politics. First, however, let us turn to a brief history of the Partition of the subcontinent.

**Ruptures of Partition**

In August 1947, when the British finally ceded political interest in India after colonial rule for nearly two centuries, they transferred their power to two separate nation-states: India and Pakistan. Not only did the mounting anticolonial nationalist movement put pressure on the British empire to evacuate India; the economic exigencies that a greatly impoverished Britain faced in the aftermath of World War II also reinforced the British decision to “quit” India. The return of the Labour Party to power in Britain further expedited the decolonization process. The ideological commitment of the Labour Party to postwar reparation and decolonization rapidly changed the Indian political scene. Britain’s desire to relinquish its interests in India to a centralized national government, one capable of defending British economic and political interests in the regions of the Indian Ocean, appeared unfeasible. Lord Mountbatten, the last British viceroy, was sent to India to transfer power and consider alternatives to Partition. Instead of deliberating over these complex issues in the allotted ten-month period, Mountbatten took a mere two months to announce the date for the transfer of power and for Partition.

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The division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan was triggered by a combination of factors in the metropole and the colony: In addition to the shifting colonial position on retaining India as a colony, the demand for Partition was articulated within the context of a colonial state's framing of provincial politics and intra-elite factional conflicts within India that had already prepared the ground for irreconcilable differences. The two-nation theory, driven more by politics than religion, grew in momentum from the fears stoked by democratization in the 1930s, the Indian National Congress's anti-war stance, the growing empowerment of the Muslim League, and the British announcement to quit India. Add to this the more immediate factors expediting the process: Mountbatten's hasty and ill-conceived exit strategies and the rising tide of religious violence.<sup>12</sup>

Between June 3, 1947, when the decision to divide India was announced, and August 15, 1947, the day of formal Indian independence from British rule, roughly 15 million people were displaced. What the government euphemistically called "the exchange of populations" of Muslims into Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs into India resulted in the largest human exodus ever recorded. According to *Millions on the Move*, a report published by the government of India, between August and November 1947, as many as 673 refugee trains moved approximately 2,300,000 refugees within India and across the border.<sup>13</sup> From mid-September to late October, 24-foot convoys, each consisting of 30,000 to 40,000 people, marched 150 miles to cross the border into India. Roughly 32,000 refugees had been flown in either direction; nearly 133,000 people had been moved to India by steamer and country craft boats. The disputed death toll ranges from 200,000 to 2 million: People died as a result of communal clashes, floods, starvation, exhaustion, and the proliferating cases of famine and cholera caused by unhygienic conditions. Approximately 83,000 women were abducted, raped, and killed.<sup>14</sup> Innumerable children disappeared. Many who were unable to travel with speed got left behind: the elderly, the infirm, the disabled, children, and women. Thousands of people were forcibly converted; many others voluntarily opted to convert in order to stay in their homeland. At least 500,000 people were massacred on

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the trains referred to as “gifts” that people were sending across to the new nation.

The official territorial award was announced on August 16, one day after the independence of India and two days after the formation of Pakistan. The massive dislocation, however, had been set in motion by the cycle of violence that began with the Great Calcutta Killings of August 16–19, 1946, which left nearly 6000 dead and displaced 100,000 people. In addition, the Noakhali riots drove out the Hindus from a region where they constituted about a fifth of the population, and the Rawalpindi massacres in Punjab in March 1947 left 40,000 Sikhs homeless. The killings in Bengal in the 1950s prompted a further flood of refugees.<sup>15</sup> People were on the move, uncertain of where they would settle down and whether they would eventually belong to India or to Pakistan.

The Partition was unlike any other religious conflict in the region. Talbot and Singh identify crucial features that distinguish the violence of the Partition from more traditional communal riots: ethnic cleansing of minority populations, political desire for power and territory, sadistic violence, intrusion into the domestic sphere, and organized violence through the use of paramilitary groups, which included the complicity of state agents.<sup>16</sup> Talbot and Singh further point out that the organized violence of the Partition must be located within the framework of the Second World War and the widespread presence of weapons and demobilized soldiers in north India who trained volunteer groups through spectacular parades and drills. Seen in this light, the violence was far more organized than “spontaneous”; not an atavistic feature of fanatically religious groups, the violence was produced in a mimetic encounter with a European fascistic culture of hostility that was refracted ideologically and materially within the subcontinent.<sup>17</sup>

**Colonialism, religion, enumeration**

Edward Said reminds us that “rhetorically speaking Orientalism is absolutely anatomical and enumerative, to use its vocabulary is to engage in the particularizing and dividing of things Oriental into manageable parts.”<sup>18</sup> British administrative policies consolidated Hindus



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and Muslims as separate “enumerative communities” through the introduction of a range of bureaucratic measures, which mimetically reproduced western analytical categories of classification. For example, the introduction of the colonial census throughout India in 1881 had far-reaching effects in the ossification of religious identities. By imposing orientalist grids, such as the census, the British calcified fluid, flexible, and heterogeneous cultural practices into the antinomies of religious majority and minority.

Several South Asian scholars have developed Said’s insights about the relationship between enumeration and the ossification of identities. David Ludden establishes the dialectical production of communalism from its interaction with orientalism when the latter institutionalized oppositions between Hindus and Muslims in colonial administrative, bureaucratic, and legal practices.<sup>19</sup> Gyanendra Pandey argues that British officers treated Hindu-Muslim antagonism as a given “fact” that then became a touchstone in colonial bureaucratic practices.<sup>20</sup> When quantitative technologies of colonial state governance turned their lens to religious identities, it had the result of gradually turning what political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj has termed “fuzzy communities” – “a relative lack of clarity of where one’s community, or even region, ended and another began” – into enumerative communities.<sup>21</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty also accentuates the “pervasive marriage between government and measurement” that he suggests is constitutive of the “deep structure of the imagination that is invested in modern political order.”<sup>22</sup> Arjun Appadurai further develops the relationship between the logic of arithmetic and the production of religious violence: The categories of majority/minority are haunted by an “anxiety of incompleteness,” which diminishes the project of national purity and consequently triggers ethnocidal mobilization.<sup>23</sup>

The interdependence of governance and enumerative strategies was central to the production of religious differences between Hindus and Muslims of British India.<sup>24</sup> By the early twentieth century, religious differences had been institutionalized on the principle of communal representation. In 1861, the Indian Councils Act introduced separate electorates to increase Muslim representation through the system of elective local government. Constitutional reforms in 1919

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and 1937 further democratized and consolidated Muslim political constituency. These changes increased opportunities for the Muslim political majorities in Punjab and Bengal to correct the educational and economic imbalance in favor of Hindu and Sikh populations. The Muslim backlash against the Congress administration in Uttar Pradesh (1937–1939) was to provide the critical catalyst in the demand for a separate homeland. Following the Government of India Act of 1935 – which introduced a substantial measure of representative government through provincial autonomy and represented one of the important efforts at transferring limited power to Indians – provincial elections were held in 1937 based on the notion of a communal representation.

The creation of separate electorates according to religious identity consolidated the idea that people sharing a particular faith constituted an identifiable group with common interests, which marked them off from another group, which practiced a different faith. This particular way of imagining community affirmed certain commonalities through the category of religious identity while underestimating other axes of similitude and association. This idea was embedded in everyday life, “the idea that (Indian) society consisted of groups set apart from each other.... The result was the flowering of a new communal rhetoric, and ultimately, of the Pakistan movement.”<sup>25</sup>

**Performance and the nation**

What can a performative approach to the study of the nation make visible?<sup>26</sup> *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* considers the ways in which logocentric, cognitivist ideas of “the imagined community” acquire their affective and material force through embodied performances. Moving beyond dominant considerations of politics underpinned by institutional policies, theories of rational choice, and Habermasian critical-rational public spheres, this study considers the centrality of performance as a tactic of political power. The relationship between power and performance has been theorized as far back as Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and continues to reverberate today from the quotidian secular Wagah ceremonies to the disruptive *rathayatras* (chariot processions) coordinated by the Hindu right.<sup>27</sup> This book makes visible the double-edged power