

Gendering the Partition Narrative: a Reading of Bindu Bhatt's *Akhe Patar*

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The partition is a traumatic event in the history of Indian subcontinent. In March 1940 the Muslim League formally proposed the establishment of separate states for the Muslim-majority regions of north-western and north-eastern India. In early 1946 elections were widely represented as being a plebiscite on the issue of Pakistan. The Muslim League fared well in the majority of Muslim constituencies across the subcontinent. A momentary agreement between the Congress and the Muslim League came to be in the summer of 1946 on the Cabinet Mission Plan to establish a loose federation in India, with the Muslim-majority provinces and states of north-western and north-eastern India being grouped initially into two of the federating units, and the rest of India into a third. There was provision also for a constitutional review after ten years. But it collapsed due to continued suspicions and reservations in both Congress and League camps. Congress leaders were not happy with the compulsory grouping of provinces and states into regional units as the Muslims held a majority in two regions. Further, they were extremely concerned to preserve the sovereign authority of the proposed Constituent assembly. The Muslim League decided on 'Direct Action' in August 1946—the first extra-constitutional action in a wholly constitutional movement. This received Nehru's apparent retraction of commitments made by his party in accepting the 16 May Cabinet Mission Plan, and the threat of the installation of a Congress-controlled Interim Government at the centre. Violence broke out in Calcutta and Bombay, and culminated later in the partition (Pandey: 2003, 21-22).

Akhe Patar (The inexhaustible begging bowl) (1999) is the first Gujarati novel on the theme of the partition, awarded by Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, in 2003. A huge corpus of the partition literature has been written responding to the traumatic partition of India in 1947, and obviously the language-areas directly affected by the partition contributed a great deal to it in Hindi and Urdu. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) in English, Nanak Singh's *Ag de Khed* (the Play of Fire, 1949) in Punjabi, Gobind Malhi's *Asu* (Tears, 1952) and *Man Jo Milu* (Beloved to My Heart, 1953) in Sindhi, and Nabendu Ghosh's *Phiars len* (Fierce Lane, 1947) in Bangala are quite known. Sadat Hasan Manto's stories like *Khol Do* expressed the agony of the partition in a pointed way. Later, Khadija Mastoor's *Aangan* (1952) in Urdu, Yashpal's *Jhootha Sach* (1958-60) in Hindi, Abdullah Hussein's *Udaas Naslein* (1963) in Urdu, Qurratulain Hyder's *Aag Ka Dariya* (1958) in Urdu, Rahi Masoom Reza's *Aadha Gaon* (A village divided, 1966) in Hindi, Jyotiroyee Debi's *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* (1967) in Bangla, Bhishma Sahani's *Tamas* (Darkness, 1973) in Hindi, Intizar Husain's *Basti* (1979) in Urdu, Manzoor Ehtesham's *Sookha Bargad* (1983) in Hindi, and Jogindar Paul's *Khwabrau* (1990) in Urdu, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988) in English, Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1995), and Shiv K. Kumar's *A River with Three Banks* (1998) also add to the partition literature.

The partition has various senses in relation to history and human experience. As Gyanendra Pandey informs:

Akhe Patar refers to the third kind of the partition—the agony of displacement and dislocation related to the historical event of the partition. Further, Gujarat too was affected in the partition to an extent. As Yasmin Khan informs, Indian cities which were “declared riot zones at different times between 1946 and 1950” included “in the province of Gujarat, Ahmedabad, Godhra and Vadodara” (Khan: 2007, “Introduction: The Plan,” 8). Further, Sisir Kumsr Das notes about the partition literature in India:

The two major aspects of the partition of the country that concerned the people, are the brutalities perpetrated by both religious communities against one another and the agony and suffering of leaving one’s home and familiar surroundings forever. (Das: 2010, 370-95)

Akhe Patar does describe the cruelty of the religious communities, but explores more its aftermath in the context of close relationships. *Akhe Patar* is a novel by a woman novelist on the theme of the partition from a woman protagonist’s viewpoint. The story of the novel unfolds itself retrospectively through Kanchan ba’s memory of the past during her coming back to the native place Jashapar, fed up with the worldly affairs. Kanchan’s father Jeshtaram leaves for Karachi after quarrelling with Mahadevprasad, his father, who insults him for being unemployed. At his next visit to home, his children Kanchan and Vishvanath also accompany their father to Karachi, a big city. Jeshtaram is a clerk at the firm of Devshankar Shukla in Karachi. Eventually his wife Reva, very poor in health, also comes to Karachi, burdening Kanchan with more responsibilities. Kanchan eventually marries Amrut, Devshankar’s son. Jaya, Amrut’s sister, instilled with the revolutionary spirit for freedom struggle under Lalita’s influence, sneaks out of the house at night for a prearranged bomb blast, but before it could happen, Lalita is shot dead by the police, and Jaya manages to run away. But she cannot come back to the house out of shame. But this shocks Devshankar, a businessman, a supporter to the British government, into mental derangement. The communal riots compel Kanchan to leave Karachi, and Amrut plans to follow her later. She comes to Okha by a steamer with her elder son Chandrakant, losing her younger son Gautam in Karachi itself and her mentally unstable father-in-law Devshankar during the sea voyage. While looking for Devshankar’s dead body washed out on the sea beach she is raped by the guard at the port. She comes to the native place Jasapara, struggles for livelihood with Chandrakant and Kartik, the latter born in the village. After many years she meets Jaya, now known as Zarina. Later Kanchan lives with her son Chandrakant, his wife Vishakha and their son Anand in Ahmedabad. She comes back to her village Jasapara finally for peace and solitude, staying in a temple. But Jagadish, the temple priest, fears losing the possession of the temple, plays politics, and Kanchan ba finally leaves Jasapara without any quarrel or complaint.

The narrative adopts the mode of memory, with its necessary strategies. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes:

There are then two aspects to this memory that concern us here: the sentiment of nostalgia and the sense of trauma, and their contradictory relationship to the question of the past. A traumatized memory has a narrative structure which works on a principle opposite to that of any historical narrative. At the same time, however, this memory, in order to be plausible, has to place the Event—the cause of the trauma, in this case, the partition violence—within

a shared mythic construction of the past that gives force to the claim of the victim. (Chakrabarty: 2002, 319)

Though Kanchan ba has her happy memory of Karachi, she is less nostalgic as at present she stays in her native place, and able to withstand the dark partition memory. Jasapara is an important location for Kanchan ba's remembering of the partition agony. Kanchan ba has had various stays in Jasapara during the narrative. Her first stay covers her early childhood, her second stay, full of struggle and trouble, refers to her living in Jasapara after she is forced to leave Karachi, and her third stay is the present time in the narrative, when she leaves Ahmedabad for Jasapara to find peace and solitude. Thus, the remembering of the partition events is circumscribed by two locations: on the one hand, Kanchan's present stay at Jasapara at the sati temple with some land adjoining, donated by Thakoresaheb Kirpalsinh Harpalsinh Rana to the Brahmin family of the village, Kanchan's ancestors; and on the other hand, the alluring city of Karachi, where Kanchan ba spent some of her happy childhood and later also married life, blackened only by the partition riots at the end. Further, the agony of the partition events is brought out by the contrast between the earlier prosperity and happiness of the in-laws' family in Karachi, and later poverty and helplessness during her second stay in Jasapara.

Kanchan's in-laws belonged to Rampura. They have had business there since long. Her father-in-law Devshankar was born in Karachi itself. For Kanchan, going to Karachi also means seeing the world outside the village for the first time. She and Vishvanath are quite thrilled by seeing a railway station itself at Rampara for the first time (61-62). The journey to Karachi is through Rampara, Kamp (Surendranagar), Palanpur, Barmed, Chhor, the change of a train at Sindh Hyderabad on the evening of the third day, and reaching Karachi. Devshankar's office is at Kyamadi port road in Karachi. He has the agency of exporting and importing goods by ships. They became rich with "the grace of the *gora* sahibs" during the first World War (75). Along with lending money, the family prospered a lot. "Dev villa," Sheth's bungalow, is near Ratantalav, looking from a distance like "a large bird about to fly with its wings spread out" (75). The image is quite significant in view of entrepreneurship and prosperity of the family. Prosperity is evident in the bungalow itself:

As soon as you enter the room, you feel like standing in a big hall. The feet sinking in the carpet; high ceiling; the middle of the room; two chairs as big as thrones on the other end; a high, large wooden seat in the middle; and the seating of bolsters and mattress surrounding this; a big wall painting behind on the wall opposite. (75)

After Kanchan's marriage with Amrut, times begin to change in Karachi. The event of Bhagatsingh's hanging provokes a great deal of resistance to the British government. Till then Amrut's firm would export cotton and import in return "things like foreign cloth, paper, medicine, shoes, toys, cigarette, wine, and soap," but due to political unrest, "*gora* sahebs no more trusted the Indian businessmen as earlier" (104). But the shrewd Amrut diverts his business: he buys shares in State Bank of Bikaner, and gets appointed on the Board of Directors. He buys theatres, and eventually owns three of them: "Victoria," "Kanchan" and "Lakshmi" (104).

But Jaya, influenced by Lalita, Kanchan's maternal uncle's daughter, leaves the house, leaving Devshankar in delirium: "The mayor of the city, hobnobbing with the British officers all the time, a well known personality in the city, turned a fool, alienated from the contexts of time, place and family relationships" (113). At the shocking news of Jaya's leaving the house, Kanchan happens to deliver a baby girl, Aruna, just in the house only. One evening Amrut tells her "to get ready to leave" as "Karachi will belong to Pakistan" (115). He plans for himself "to wind up the business here, go to Kampala and bring them over there later" (115). It is arranged for Kanchan to reach Kemadi port to board the steamer "Sonavati." Rehmat, a Muslim driver drives her to the port:

As the car passed by the fourth lane at Sadar market, a sound roared like an approaching hurricane. Kanchan quickly slid up the window glasses. She saw through the window glass behind a crowd of five hundred-odd people with burning torches.(118)

Then Rehmat gets off the car as the Harishankar Shastri's building is set on fire: "the burning rags have been thrown," "All say that they were the people who have come from Bihar, and someone says that they are from the Punjab" (119). It is violence which defines religion and community. Gyanendra Pandey comments:

Violence happens—and can only happen—at the boundaries of community. It marks those boundaries. It is the denial of any violence 'in our midst,' the attribution of harmony *within* and the consignment of violence to the *outside*, that establishes 'community.' Violence and community constitute each other, as it were.(Pandey: 2003, "Constructing community," 188)

Unfortunately Gautam follows Rehmat out of curiosity, and found missing by them too late. All the people of the city have reached Kemadi port: "Fear from the different directions of the city, a flood of terror rushing to the pier of the port, colliding, drawing, being drawn:"

Every year a fair would be held on the full moonlit night of Sharadpurnima at Kemadi port. At the place of this sea god, a swing would be created, with the cloth of the sky, strings of the moon light. People would dance between the two ends of enthusiasm and joy. Today it is the same sea beach and the same place of the sea god. It just cannot contain people. The ants are surging out in abundance. Sensing clouds in the sky and humidity in the air, all ants have come out of the anthills many years old. Any time these clouds can pour out, and it could bloody too. No one knows where these uprooted from the roots will plant themselves again! No one has heard so far the trees uprooted sprouting again. The saplings must survive, even if the trees die. The kids are clinging to the waist, the shoulder, the fingers of those of whom they are born. The bags to sustain life are on the heads. The frightened eyes and the pursed lips would wish only to save a few breaths either theirs or others. (122)

On the other hand, Rehmat goes back to look for Gautam. The whole city of Karachi is burning:

All Karachi had turned into a jungle. The communal fire was engulfing the green and dry areas of the city. The people being baked, crackled, burnt, twisted with pain were neither Hindus, nor Muslims, nor Sikhs. They were just poor, pitiable; they were running here and

there just to survive. Many others were crushed coming across them by chance. The mercenary hunters waiting for a chance would pounce upon a lone person and kill him at one go. Beard or moustache, sandalwood paste or frankincense, turban or cap, were the same to them. They feared neither Allah nor *Parmatma*, neither could the Quran or the *Granthaheh* stop them! (122-23)

Rehmat cannot meet Kanchan again at the port, nor can he find out the lost Gautam. He is set on fire along with the car by a frenzied mob (125).

Having lost Gautam and the father-in-law during journey, Kanchan arrives at Okha, stays in a refugee camp. The news comes in the evening about a dead body washed out on the sea beach. Kanchan thinks about the possibility of it being the father-in-law's body. Lest the dogs and foxes mutilate it at night, she goes to the sea beach at night:

Kanchan came back to the camp in the early morning. She had gone to bring the dead body and she returned as a dead body. Her legs were stumbling. Dishevelled hair, scratched cheeks, the frozen blood on the torn lobe of the ear, the twisted and crushed body . . . an unfortunate chapter in the lives of many women like her! Aruna asked her, "*Ba*, where is your *mangalsutra*?" Kanchan did not answer and kept sitting staring at her bare hands.(144)

Later Kanchan faces a tragic ambiguity: she is not sure about the father of Kartik. It could be either Amrut or the guard at the port, the rapist. The birth of Kartik also works as an allegory for the birth of the Indian nation: He was born in the seventh month, a son born at a premature time and with a defect in the left leg. The child's bone of the ankle was slant. Both the legs had as if different directions. Kanchan felt, this child is the product of this age. India has got freedom but the free India, a child of Mother India like me, is not destined to stand firmly.(152)

She could reach Jasapara almost after a month with Chandrakant and Aruna. Her grand parents had died. All things of any value inside the closed house had been stolen. She begins living again, trying to absorb the shock of the partition. She picks up the ancestral begging bowl for earning her livelihood as a Brahman woman: "the inexhaustible bowl of sorrows" (156).

Since it is the memory of a woman protagonist in a novel by a woman novelist, gender consciousness operates in the narrative. Further, a feminist voice is heard in its critique of the feudal, patriarchal life style of the family of Thakoresaheb in Jasapara while describing Darbars' houses:

Big houses and high surrounding walls. Splinters of coloured glass were planted on the walls to prevent thieves. A large courtyard and then a house with an upper floor. Light would reach the drawing room only. The reign of darkness and smoke inside. Suffocation inside would sometime reveal itself as a fire or bursting of an appendix, but power and money would cover up all in no time!(17)

Haripriya, the wife of the liberal son Pravinsinh (Vilayatibabu) of Thakorsaheb has lived a suppressed womanhood: "I am forced to see through the window net my husband and children eating, escaping from the spying vigilance of the servants fanning my moter-in-law: I have gulped down bitter draughts" (154). Further, Kanchan's birth makes her mother cry, and the birth of her brother Vishvanath after two years makes her "My

kankupagali (auspicious) Kanchan!" (53). It is Kanchan who has to leave her study to look after household affairs (94). Further, girls are brought up with the fear of the in-laws:

No soil, no air, no fertilizer or water to let a thought of rejection grow!
From the birth just one refrain to be followed. "Only submission.
Submission alone is fate. (98)

Aruna, grown up and marriageable, refuses to marry. She works at a Vikas Gruh, home for the helpless women, and familiar with a woman's tragic destiny in a patriarchal society:

Ba, I see many women in this Vikas Gruh from the morning to the evening. I find not a single example of a woman who has been happy after marriage. To be constantly suppressed, exploited, crushed. To suffer all the time someone's autocracy. I have begun to hate the word marriage now. You tell me, *ba*. What did you get by marrying? You bore the household burden. And my father? Did he think while marrying again about his wife and children? He was away, he wanted to roll, and got the slope. (241)

Aruna refers to Amrut's marriage with Eve, the daughter of a rich family in Kampala. They have deposited one and a half lakh for Kanchan, and fifty thousand more is added by Eve herself to that amount. Chandrakant has written a letter in the name of Kanchan *ba* answering to Eve and accepting that amount, keeping Kanchan *ba* in the dark:

Kanchan *ba* found it difficult to keep sitting in the chair. She felt insulted. She had been living till that day with dignity and self confidence, but Chandrakant as if took away the base to stand on from under her feet. Her legs below the knees turned just mud. The husband made her waiting meaningless by marrying again. The son had lied in league with the co-wife. He crossed Kanchan's motherhood out too. Fifty years of her life were wasted. (270)

It is the moment of discovery and self-knowledge when Kanchan *ba* decides to leave Jasapara for an unknown place. It is notable that the partition narrative in the novel focuses on violence, including woman's easy subjection to this violence. But Aruna's decision to remain an independent woman; Jaya's decision to be known as Zarina, acknowledging the Muslim young man Anis's kind help in the riot-torn Karachi, and to marry him; and Kanchan *ba*'s courage to live alone with dignity point out a woman's discovery of her rich self, enough to live on without patriarchal support. It is significant that Kanchan *ba* does not quarrel with Jagdish for her legitimate claim to the Sati temple. In a way Jagdish's local politics in league with Virbhadrā is patriarchal to possess the Sati temple space, and he has no moral claim to this sacred place, as Kanchan *ba* finds him:

Jagdish's appearance, dressing and vocation did not match one another. Colourful shirt with broad design and pants, long tuft of hair on the head and the protruding lower lip with tobacco in the mouth. (31)

Further, Kanchan *ba*'s stay at Jasapara allows her a closeness to her roots, and being rooted at her native place she negotiates with the dark partition memories. Thus, her uprooting from Karachi due to the partition is being healed by her present symbolic stay at her native place. She discovers the self through the act of remembering, a subjective process. Earlier, she

finds “memory” as “violent,” like “some wild animal scratching your face with nails,” “becoming an addiction,” and gets one “a transparent layer of the self, provided there is enough patience to face the self” (52). Sometimes for her memory means splitting of the self: “I see get myself wet and also see myself getting wet?” (59) But finally, she feels that her “memories” have become her “co-travellers” (275). It is this journey from memory as the wild animal to memory as the co-traveller that earns Kanchan ba a new meaning of the begging bowl. The inexhaustible begging bowl, which was earlier “the begging bowl of sorrows,” now becomes a source of revelation:

Krishna had given the inexhaustible bowl to Draupadi. Pandavas could live out the difficult period of life in the forest with its help only. In that way, Rukhibhabhi, a simple hearted honest woman gave me this inexhaustible begging bowl. This inexhaustible bowl is my support for living and struggling in life. Let the flames of time keep testing me. This bowl is the reason why the stream of my life has not dried up. I see it and my feet remain firm in the earth. This bowl keeps me reminding that there is no power greater than time. If the cool shade of happiness does not last, the lava of sorrow too will not last. I have learnt from it that that submit everything to time and never leave struggle in life. This bowl is the lesson in history. (265-66)

Her remembering, a non-historical, mythical, subjective process reaches out to Krishna’s gift of a begging bowl to Pandavas. Kanchan ba observes *anushtan*, a religious worship and ritual, during her stay of three days and nights at Jasapara, and her act of remembering the partition experience and its aftermath turns the inexhaustible begging bowl of sorrows into that of insight into history and fate.

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