

# **Marginalized Minority Voice in the Partition of India: A Study of *Ice-Candy-Man***

Kazi Md. Siful Aspea<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

The popular history and the grand narratives of the partition of India are constructed mainly around the communal riots, violence, and the deeply rooted animosity between Hindus and Muslims. This animosity is seen as one of the main reasons for the partition. The popular history and the grand narratives of the partition mainly constructed to serve the nationalistic purposes of the two countries, India and Pakistan. Therefore, it is evident that the popular history and the narratives are serving the purpose of the majority population of the respective countries, Hindus and Muslims. But in British India, besides these two major religious communities, there were also other religious and ethnic minority communities. The voice of these communities is muted and marginalized in the state-endorsed official history and the grand narratives of the partition. The Sikhs and the Parsis are two such communities along with many others. Bapsi Sidhwa, in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), has tried to project the voice and anguishes of these two religious minority communities. In light of *Ice-Candy-Man*, this paper examines the involvement of the Parsi and the Sikh communities in the dynamics of the partition, and how their voice is disregarded and marginalized in the partition process.

## **Keywords**

Indian partition, Disregarded voice, Minority, The Parsi, The Sikh

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, School of Liberal Arts and Social Science, Chittagong Independent University, Chattogram, Bangladesh

Corresponding author:

Kazi Md. Siful Aspea, Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Liberal Arts and Social Science, Chittagong Independent University, Chattogram, Bangladesh

Email: kaspea@ciu.edu.bd

## **Introduction**

The Partition of the British India in 1947 is one of the most dreadful events in the history of South Asia. It gave birth to the two new countries, India and Pakistan, accompanied by unmatched genocide, violence, and one of the largest migrations of people in the world history. It was the result of the series of deadly violence and riots across the British India in the name of religions of the two major communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, for decades before 1947. The ferocity of riots and violence were most shattering mainly in its two most distinctive provinces, Bengal and Punjab. There are numerous narratives along with the state projected popular history of the partition. The popular history and the grand narrative of the partition mainly project and represent the conflicts and differences between the Hindus and the Muslims and serve the nationalistic interest of these two communities of majority population of India and Pakistan. Besides these two major religious communities- the Hindus and the Muslims, there were many other religious and ethnic minority communities in the British India. The popular history and the grand narrative of the partition of India are almost silent regarding the voices of those religious and ethnic minorities. “Seen largely as an aberration in modern Indian history, this Partition is little memorialized by the state or by those affected by it” (Daiya, 2008, p. 7). The voices of the other religious communities are muted because the partition is projected as the fighting between the two major religious groups, the Hindus and the Muslims, only. Beside this grand narrative and the popular history of the partition, there are many other meta narratives, such as various personal memoirs and regional histories, that give voices to the other religious and ethnic communities of British India. Bapsi Sidhwa’s famous partition novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is one of the finest examples of this kind. The novel mainly focuses on social demolition, psychological impact and the approach to the historical

moment of the partition that signifies the loss and displacement of the two minority religious communities of British India and their marginalized voices.

### **The Parsis in the Partition Process**

The Parsi community is a very small community in India who was forced to migrate to India almost more than a thousand years ago from their original homeland, Iran, by the Arabs for their religious belief. As Luhrmann (1996) mentioned, “Modern Parsis are a tiny Indian community settled in Bombay. They are an old people who emigrated from Persia a thousand years ago, probably to preserve Zoroastrianism from Islam” (p. 1). They were living in India for centuries in peace and harmony, but in the turmoil of the partition they were put into the crisis of existence again as they had no clear idea about their position in the partition process. They were haunted by the fear of forced displacement again in the time of the partition. As a very small minority community they were very severely immersed in the Hindu- Muslim chaos of the partition, and the voices of the Parsi community were muted and disregarded as the voices of other minority communities were obscured and marginalized. As they had no clear idea about their position in the partition process, the Parsi community was forced to be submissive about the situation. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, the situation of the community is very much clear in the speech of the Parsi community leader Colonel Bharucha who utters, “Let whoever wishes rule! Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian! We will abide by the rules of their land!” (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 39). Being a minority community, the Parsees had little to do in that situation except watching and following the waves of the turmoil. As a minority community, they knew very well that they were not capable to bargain on their share and the position in the partition process with the English or with the Hindus and the Muslims. Thus, they knew it for sure that if they too joined in the race of power they would be crushed up. As a

consequence, the Parsi leader very rightly measured the situation and their vulnerable position on that particular situation to set their steps in the partition process. He very rightly warned his fellow Parsis, “Hindus, Muslims and even Sikhs are going to jockey for power: and if you jokers jump into the middle you’ll be mangled into chutney!” (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 36). The Parsi community always maintained a neutral position in the partition process even though many members of the community faced the forced migration and displacement for the partition. As the popular narratives of the partition violence, forced migration, and sufferings are largely built around the history and narratives produced by the two major communities, Hindus and Muslims, those narratives excluded the traumatic experiences and sufferings of small minority communities like the Parsis.

It is said earlier that though the partition process mainly focused on the interests of Hindus and Muslims, the interests of other minority communities were untenably ignored and disregarded. The interests and the fate of those minority communities were left in the hands of the leaders of majority communities. Therefore, when the question of joining with the majority communities came to the Parsis – which stream the Parsi would join, Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs – they were in a total puzzle and disappointment as none of these three communities were very indifferent and were also not sympathize to the cause and the demand of the Parsis. Later, it is seen that even the Sikh community also had to leave the demand of their own land and was forced to join either Pakistan or India. In that condition, the leader of the Parsi community had given a suggestion to his community, and that suggestion was the finest example of minority insight in the midst of the fighting giants. Colonel Bharucha said,

Don’t forget, we are to run with the hounds and hunt with the hare. No one knows which way the wind will blow. There may be not one but two –or even three- new nations! And

the Parsees might find themselves championing the wrong side if they don't look before they leap! (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 37)

### **Disregarded Parsi Dream**

It is very evident that the entire Parsi community was in the utter darkness about the partition process and its outcomes. The community had no clear vision about their condition in the process, and that lack of clear vision led them to a very daunting trauma of displacement again. The British Raj was negotiating the issues of the partition mainly with the leaders of majority communities by keeping aside the leaders of minority communities. The Raj had given the option to the leaders of minority communities to join either with Hindus or Muslims. On the other hand, the leaders of majority communities had different proposals and plans on the partition issue. In that complex time and situation, it was not surprising that the partition process was not only obscure to the various minority communities, but it was also obscure to its propagating leaders of the majority communities. Even the leaders of the majority communities had not the clear idea of their position and share. They were also in an utter confusion about what was going to happen in the partition process. A famous historian Joya Chatterji (2002) claims in this regard that,

Jinnah, it is true, never clearly defined his demand for Pakistan, even to his closest colleagues, and the famed Lahore Resolution made no mention of partition. In fact, the very vagueness of the 'Pakistan' idea made it a slogan of inordinate power. It could mean different things to different people and there were almost as many images of Pakistan as Jinnah had followers. (p. 226)

The leaders of the majority communities were not satisfied with what they had got in the partition. They had the very different vision from what they were forced to acknowledge by the Raj. As the leaders of the majority communities were not sure of their share and their communities' demands

in the partition process, they became desperate; they only concentrated on the interests of their own communities. Hence, the demand and dream of the minority communities were not in their consideration and consciousness.

The consciousness of the spatial belonging of minority communities became an increasingly important and visible character in the question of the partition process as they understood that their ability of owning a region, a state or its leadership would not be feasible, and they were destined to go with the demands of the majority communities. The sense of belonging stresses the importance of the spatial entity, or to put it differently, the sense of belonging boosts the standpoint that captures the people of their communities and the place of their living. In the partition process, the sense of belonging of the minority community and the question of their own land became hesitant as they had a strong perception that their demands and dreams would never be entertained by the majority communities' leaders though they, the minority communities, had all kinds of supports and cooperation in the independent movement of India. The Parsi community was very much aware that, being a very little minority community, their all demands would not be fulfilled but they had to adjust with the situations and plan for the post-partition future. Afshin Marashi (2022) comments,

While large swaths of the Parsi community were active supporters of India's independence movement, others were also uncertain about what a post-independence India might mean for the Parsis. [...] and the growing momentum of the independence movement therefore posed a dilemma for how the community should plan for its future. (p. 74)

The emotional aspect of this sense of belonging knotted with the space and their leadership, but the leaders of the majority communities failed to conceptualize the dream of the spatial and social belonging of the minority communities. Those leaders of the majority communities became

a kind of alien to the people of the minority communities as they not only failed to understand the feelings and emotions of the minority communities but also were reluctant and apathetic to the demands and dreams of minority communities. In *Ice Candy Man*, Lenny's observation on the matter is noteworthy: "Mother, Father and their friends are always saying: Gandhi said this, Nehru said that. Gandhi did this, Jinnah did that. What's the point of talking so much about people we don't know?" (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 29)

### **The Sikhs in the Partition Process of Panjab**

Sikhs are the third largest religious community in India, after Hindus and Muslims. Like the Parsi community, the Sikh community was another ill-fated community which was almost ruined in the partition process. The Sikh community found that they would suffer most in the partition process mainly from the proposed arbitrary boundary line because Punjab was their traditional homeland for centuries and the partition of Punjab posed a particular crisis to the Sikhs. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa shows that for a very long time, historically Sikhs were living in Punjab with their own culture, tradition, and religion. In the beginning of the partition process they were hopeful, like Bengal, to make a separate Sikh State. Like the leaders of Bengal, the Sikh community leaders were also trying to keep Punjab undivided to keep their own identity undaunted. Against the sharp religious division of the Hindus and the Muslims, the Sikh leaders were trying to make a kind of alignment in between the religious and ethnic identity to keep their motherland, Panjab, undivided. In this regard the comment of Tanweer Fazal (2015) is worth mentioning as he states, "The idea of Sikh nationalism promised to align religious and national identity. In the perceptions of most Sikhs, however, religion and nation emerged as two distinct entities that may not necessarily be in conflict" (p. 178).

In the novel it is seen that the community leaders were trying to stir the people for undivided Punjab, and they were hopeful about their standing for their land, but the Inspector General of Police advised them to go with the Muslim League to save their land. He advised,

My dear man, don't you know the Congress won't agree on a single issue with the Muslim League? The Cabinet Mission proposed a Federation of the Hindu and Muslim majority provinces. Jinnah accepted it; Ghandi and Nehru didn't! [...] those arrogant Hindus have blown the last chance for an undivided India [...] Ghandi and Nehru are forcing the League to push for Pakistan! [...] if you Shiks plan to keep your lands in Lyallpur and Montgomery, you'd better start fraternising with the Muslim League. If you don't, the Muslims will throw you off your rich lands. (Sidhwa, 1999, pp. 62-64)

Therefore, it was not surprising that Sikhs were integrating themselves and tried to keep their right on the land of their origin. To translate their desire into reality, they had to take practical steps, and they took all kinds of measures, but all their efforts went in vain in race with the aspiration of the two other major religious communities. It is important to note that when the Inspector General of Police Rogers said to Mr. Singh about the dislodgement of their land, Punjab, he became very angry and said that, "That mother-fucker isn't born who can throw us out! We will throw them out! And you out!" (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 64). This angry reaction of Mr. Singh clearly shows that the Sikhs not only had the angst against the British, but also they had not any plan to go with the Hindus or the Muslims, and they had their own plan for their Sikh Land- The Azad Panjab. But, the British plan to divide Panjab made the Shiks dishearten about the dream of their quest for an independent Shik state under the Khalsa flag. Chhanda Chatterjee's (2019) observation on the issue is very important as he observes,

For the Sikhs this amounted to an ultimatum threatening perpetual subjection to a dominant Muslim majority in their own homeland, the land of their Gurus and the land where Maharaja Ranjit Singh had carved out a large Sikh Empire, uniting the distant parts of the Punjab under the Khalsa flag. (p. 114)

But in return the answer of Mr. Rogers to Mr. Singh is worth mentioning and the answer becomes a prophecy in the history of the partition. He said, "Rivers of blood will flow all right! Nehru and the Congress will not have everything their way! They will have to reckon with the Muslim League and Jinnah. If we quit India today, old chap, you'll bloody fall at each other's throats!" (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 62). Not only the river of blood flowed all over the Panjab, but also it was divided in two parts by diminishing the century long dream of the Sikh land, The Azad Panjab, for the voluptuous demands of the Hindus and the Muslims.

### **Azad Panjab, the Unattained Sikh Land under the Khalsa Flag**

As it is said earlier that the whole Partition process was mainly focusing on the interest of the Hindus and the Muslims, the Sikhs interests went in vain. The drawing of the borders by the Radcliff Boundary Commission was mainly based on the demands and the interests of the Hindus and the Muslims. The Sikh interest, their demands and their concerns were not at the forefront in the border drawing. Drawing borderlines based on the population concentration and the demands of the Hindus and the Muslims became so horrifying that even Redcliff was in a bewildering situation. The Boundary Commission was in utter dilemma because if they met the interests of Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs would find them in a wretched way on the both sides of the border. So, the chairman of the boundary commission, Radcliff found the whole situation in puzzles as it

was very difficult to fulfill the demands of all three parties in the division of Panjab. Jeff Hay (2006) perfectly lined out the situation by commenting on Radcliff's position,

To his despair, Radcliffe quickly found that the principle of drawing borders based on population concentrations could hardly be done clearly or evenly; Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs (who mostly hoped to live in India) were simply too dispersed. Some areas had a clear majority, but in thousands of villages, especially in the Punjab, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs had lived side by side for centuries. Inevitably, large numbers of people were going to find themselves placed in countries where they did not wish to live or where they might not be welcome. (p. 75)

The crucial point about the Radcliff Boundary Commission was that it not only failed to fulfill the desire of the existing fighting majority communities, but also totally disregarded the interest and desires of the minority communities of British India. So it was sure that, the boundary criterion would occur dangerous disaster over an extended period of time. As a result, the boundary was not published neither to the people nor to the leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League even after the day of independence. The boundary line was to be expected that it will give a solution to the desires of the millions, but it left a lifelong nightmare to the people of the Indian subcontinent. Jeff Hay (2006) notes the situation and its consequences as he comments,

The border was revealed to the public on August 17, and those Punjabi villages whose residents had cautiously flown both Indian and Pakistani Flags on August 15, now know their status. The immediate effect was to vastly increase a torrent of migration toward India or Pakistan that had begun already within weeks, 11.5 million people were on the move. (p. 83)

It is clearly seen that the Boundary Commission not just failed to fulfill the expectations of the major religious communities, the Hindus and Muslims, it rather shattered the dreams of the Sikhs by dividing their own land into parts for ever and dispersed the community for ever too.

Appraising the consequences of the Partition discards all the shown rationalities behind the Partition as it proved a failure to fulfill the desires of all the majority and minority religious communities, the Hindus, the Muslims, the Shiks, and the Parsis, negotiating independence. The Partition turned futile as it made an inappropriate spatial allotment based on the interests and the religious stand-point of the majority communities. Minority communities lost their own space where they could express themselves as distinct communities. It also crushed the dreams of the major communities, the Hindus and the Muslims by not satisfying their long cherished demands. As Khan (2017) comments,

In some ways, the final settlement was a true compromise, splitting land, resources and people between two entities, yet it satisfied no one. The League was handed a scarcely viable, 'moth-eaten' state to run, the Punjab and Bengal (ironically perhaps the two Indian provinces with the most distinctive regional cultures and interwoven populations) would be wrenched apart. (p. 88)

Again, in the process of prioritizing the Hindu-Muslim interests, the religion based Partition ignored the rights of other minority religious communities like Parsis and Sikhs. Later the futility of religion-based division was exposed as it could not meet the dream of the major religious community of Pakistan. Religion which was the prime cause of the partition became a farce in 1971, in the time of the war of independence of Bangladesh and proved that religion could not be the basis of a nation. In this regard, the comment of Ayesha Jalal (2013) is very significant, as she comments, "If the religion was indeed the primary driving force in the Partition of India, it proved

to be utterly irrelevant twenty-four years later to the political dynamics that led to the emergence of Bangladesh” (p. 6).

## **Conclusion**

From the point of view of both minority and majority communities, we can question the partition in the same manner of Pandey (2001) who questioned, “Shall we continue to think of 1947 as a constitutional division, an agreed –upon partition of territories and assets? Or, shall we face up to the enormity of the violence and the incredible acts of rape, torture, and humiliation?” (p. 15). The question is mainly for the reason that the partition could not bring the problem to an end, but it still remains problematizing the life and politics of the sub-continent by the name of religion-based nationalism. The partition not only disregarded and muted the voices of minority communities but also put them into a perpetual victim of majority communities. As Sen (2018) commented, “Partition deepened the vulnerability of minorities by recasting them as people out of place. Yet, the founding fathers of India and Pakistan neither anticipated nor encouraged the movement of minorities” (p. 6). The muted voices of those minority communities were not heard in the popular history of the partition, but only in some meta narratives of fiction, novel, personal memoir or in oral history. Parsis and Sikhs are the two such communities who had been largely forced to be assimilated with the major religious communities, even their identity, and place had been forced to merge with the major communities. Although their voices had been erased from the popular history and the grand narratives. However, their dying voices are heard in the *Ice-Candy-Man* where Sidhwa is still representing the distinct voices of those minority communities.

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