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Partition Through Literature: “Toba Tek Singh”

The incredible suffering that partition caused in some areas through exchanges of population has become a favorite topic for Indian, Pakistani, and Sikh writers. Dealing in various ways with the human tragedy endured by people on both sides of this newly created border, these writers, argues Alok Bhalla (editor of one major collection of these stories), share a theme. “There is a single, common note which informs nearly all the stories written about the Partition and the horror it unleashed, a note of utter bewilderment.”

One of the best, and perhaps most famous, partition story clearly reveals this sense of bewilderment. “Toba Tek Singh” was written in Urdu, Pakistan’s national language, by Sadat Hasan Manto, a Kashmiri who left his home in January 1948 and moved to Karachi, Pakistan’s capital. The story recounts the effects of partition on a very particular portion of the population. Excerpts are in italics. It begins...

“A couple of years after the Partition of the country, it occurred to the respective governments of India and Pakistan that inmates of lunatic asylums, like prisoners, should also be exchanged. Muslim lunatics in India should be transferred to Pakistan and Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums should be sent to India.”

One such asylum was located in Lahore, in what became Pakistan. Upon learning of this decision, the inmates could not comprehend its meaning:

“As to where Pakistan was located, the inmates knew nothing. That was why both the mad and the partially mad were unable to decide whether they were now in India or in Pakistan. If they were in India, where on earth was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how come that until only the other day it was India?”

“One inmate had got so badly caught up in this India-Pakistan-Pakistan-India rigmorole that one day, while sweeping the floor, he dropped everything, climbed the nearest tree and installed himself on a branch, from which vantage point he spoke for two hours on the delicate problem of India and Pakistan. The guards asked him to get down; instead he went to a branch higher, and when threatened with punishment, declared, ‘I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree.’”

The protagonist of the story is a Sikh inmate named Bishan Singh who, fifteen years earlier, had gone mad and was committed by his family. Everyone in the asylum calls him Toba Tek Singh, the name of his village. Almost bald, his legs swollen because he seemed to be standing all the time, he also has the habit of speaking this nonsensical phrase, *“Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain.”*

Family members, who used to visit him, now no longer come. He repeatedly asks his fellow inmates whether Toba Tek Singh, his old town, is in India or Pakistan, but nobody seems to know. One day Fazal Din, an old Muslim friend from his village, visits Bishan Singh, who doesn’t recognize the man. Fazal Din brings word that Singh’s family has safely gone to India. Fazal Din speaks of the water buffalos left behind and the calves they have produced.

Singh asks him, *“Where is Toba Tek Singh?”* To which his old friend replies, *“In India ... no, in Pakistan.”*

“Without saying another word, Bishan Singh walks away, murmuring, ‘Uper the gur gur the annexe the be dhyana the mung the dal of the Pakistan and Hindustan dur fittey moun.’”

The transfer of inmates takes place on a cold winter evening. Hindu and Sikh lunatics are placed on buses and taken to the border. When Bishan Singh steps from the bus and is asked to register, he asks the official, *“Where is Toba Tek Singh? In India or Pakistan?”* The official tells him it is in Pakistan, the place Singh is leaving.

“Bishan Singh tried to run, but was overpowered by the Pakistani guards who tried to push him across the dividing line towards India. However, he wouldn’t move.”

The story concludes as follows:

“‘This is Toba Tek Singh,’ he announced. ‘Uper the gur gur the annexe the be dhyana mung the dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan.’”

“Many efforts were made to explain to him that Toba Tek Singh had already been moved to India, or would be moved immediately, but it had no effect on Bishan Singh. The guards even tried force, but soon gave up.”

“There he stood in no man’s land on his swollen legs like a colossus.

“Since he was a harmless old man, no further attempt was made to push him into India. He was allowed to stand where he wanted, while the exchange continued. The night wore on.

“Just before sunrise, Bishan Singh, the man who had stood on his legs for fifteen years, screamed and as the officials from the two sides rushed towards him, he collapsed to the ground.

“There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.”

Questions

1. What political event has upset the inmates of the lunatic asylum?
2. What about this event seems to have made Bishan Singh especially frustrated?
3. At the end of the story, how does Bishan Singh try to resolve this frustration? Is he successful? Explain.
4. The nonsense phrase, which Bishan Singh utters from time to time, changes during the course of the story. Why do you think it changes (what is the significance of the words that are changed)?