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## Wounds Sustained, Wounds Nurtured: Rituals of Violence at Wagah

Monirul ISLAM\*

*“I found it impossible to decide  
which of the two countries  
was now my homeland  
– India or Pakistan?”*

Saadat Hasan Manto

### Abstract

*The Radcliffe Line at Wagah is now a world famous tourist spot where each evening thousands of tourists gather to witness the ritual of lowering the flags of India and Pakistan. Visiting the place is kind of pilgrimage for the Indians, (and must be for the Pakistanis as well), and the Wagah has gradually evolved into a shrine of patriotism. The ceremony of lowering the flag lasts about an hour when on both sides of the border there remain a kind of celebratory atmosphere – and the thing celebrated is nationalism. The patriotic frenzy, however, leads to a menacing display virtual violence as the cry varat mata ki jai (victory to mother India) on the one side and Pakistan jindabad(long live Pakistan) on the other bangs upon the ear and fills the air around. Each side tries to supersede the other; the cry gets louder and louder and the tension rises as if there will be an instant war. It leads the sensitive mind into troubled history of partition of India and to the indelible trauma of communal violence – the wound that the people of the subcontinent sustained during and in the aftermath of the partition in 1947. The paper will attempt to analyse the nationalistic ceremony at Wagah and will explore the problematic nature Indian nationalism and national identity. The objective is to examine the paradoxical nature of the Wagah rituals which though aimed at consolidating national identity ends up disrupting it. In the course of discussion, three cultural texts, namely, the ceremony at Wagah, the memoir of Sadat Hassan Manto’s last days in Mumbai, and Shabnam Virmani’s documentary film Had Anhad (Bounded Boundless) will act as intertexts of the article.*

**Key words:** *partition; identity; nation; ritual; religion*

Sadat Hassan Manto, in his memoir of his last days in Bombay, recounts his experience of the chaos, confusion and violence of 1947. He notes that the declaration of India and Pakistan as two separate countries was greeted

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with much fanfare, but is more concerned with the unprecedented show of hatred, violence and killing after the declaration of independence. The slogans 'Pakistan Zindabad' (long live Pakistan) and 'India Zindbad' (long live India) filled the streets of Bombay, as did the blood spilled in the communal violence. In the ambience of violence and hatred Manto finds himself in no man's land; in the city of Bombay he is suddenly reduced to a position of marginality because of his religious identity: He is Muslim and in India even though a separate Pakistan is created for the Muslims. This sudden change bewilders him like Toba Tek Singh<sup>1</sup>; numerous questions pop up in his mind:

I found it impossible to decide which of the two countries was now my homeland—India or Pakistan? Who was responsible for the blood which was being so mercilessly shed every day? Where were they going to inter the bones which had been stripped off the flesh of religion by vultures and birds of prey? (Manto 1989: 6)

The deeply disturbed author recounts: "India was free. Pakistan was free from the moment of its birth. But man was slave in both countries, of prejudice of religious fanaticism, of bestiality, of cruelty" (Hasan 1989:6). Manto's experience of crisis of identity and his anguish cannot be dismissed as being personal and temporal. The bewilderment and pain of Manto is symptomatic of the post-partition Indian or Pakistani, or later Bangladeshi identity. The questions raised by Manto remain valid for a large group of people on either side of the borders, even after some sixty years of independence. The partition of India on the basis of religion has left indelible marks on the lives of the people of the partitioned nations and has left the nations internally fractured. The post-colonial nations in their discursive and ritualistic practices have directed their endeavours to heal this wound. The paradox of the situation in the post-independence India, Pakistan is that the attempts to heal the wounds end up in sustaining and aggravating the wound, mainly because the partition was on religious lines. Religious minorities on either side of the border who could not or did not leave their homes as dictated by the national/religious borders find themselves in the borderland<sup>2</sup>, marginalised by the nationalistic rituals and discursive practices. One of the issues that makes formation national identity problematic for the post-colonial nations India and Pakistan is conflation of nationality with religion<sup>3</sup>. An analysis of the ceremony at the Wagah border reveals the paradox of the nationalistic desires of the post-colonial India and Pakistan.

The Radcliffe Line at Wagah is now a world famous tourist spot where each evening thousands of tourists gather on both sides of the border to witness the spectacular ceremony of lowering the flag at evening. The ceremony dates back to 1969 and was designed to show the good relations between Indian and Pakistani. Visiting the place nowadays is a kind of pilgrimage for many Indians (and Pakistani) and Wagah has gradually evolved into a shrine of patriotism<sup>4</sup>. The ceremony of lowering the flag lasts about an hour, where on both sides of the border there remain a kind of celebratory atmosphere—and the thing celebrated is nationality or national identity. The patriotic frenzy, however, leads to a menacing orchestra of metaphoric violence as the cry '*varat mata ki jai*' on the one side and '*Pakistan jindabad*' on the other bangs upon the ear and fills the air around. Each side tries to surpass the other; the cry getting louder and louder with the tension rising as if there will be an instant war. The baring of the teeth on either side of the border leads the sensitive mind into the troubled history of partition and to the indelible trauma of communal violence—the wound that the people of the subcontinent sustained during and in the aftermath of the partition. The ritual is, therefore, a sad reminder not only of the partition but also of the conflict of religious identities, since it was a partition on religious line. The communal border created between the Hindus and the Muslims was turned into an international border, and consequently, the religious identities of the people came to be seen as interchangeable with their national identities. Pakistan is a self-proclaimed Islamic country. India is constitutionally a secular democratic republic. Even though Hinduism is not the adopted religion of India, social scientist and historians have shown that history of Indian nationalism has been constructed and conceived chiefly, in terms of Hinduism<sup>5</sup>. The ceremony at Wagah as an event does not remain confined within the performed time and space; its legacy goes back to the pre-independence days of divisive politics and post-partition communal violence. The national/communal border at Wagah is itself a sad reminder of the trauma of displacement and suffering that the people of the Indian subcontinent and the ceremony at Wagah perpetuates the traumatic experience, since its menacing choreography of violence<sup>6</sup> brings back the feelings of enmity thwarting any possibility of amity between two nations. The sad fruit it bears is not only the enmity between India and Pakistan but between two religious communities and this communitarian border, needless to say, is not only international but also intra-national. Thus, the aims of the Wagah rituals go futile since its attempt to create a singular identity in exclusion of all other

identities gets entangled in the valence of partition and perpetuates the intra-national communitarian divide. An example of how the national and religious identities are often conflated by the Indians is seen in Shabnam Virmani's documentary film *Had Anhad* (2008) Virmani documents the reactions of the people coming back after watching the ceremony at Wagah and shows how Pakistanis with Muslims are confused by the Indian spectators and how easy is the transition from the national to the religious<sup>7</sup>.

The ceremony at Wagah has two different aspects: the ritualistic and the spectacular. The ceremony in its present format has become an elaborate ritualistic spectacle. A ritual is normally defined as a formal action that follows a set and respectable pattern and which is expressive of communal values, meanings and beliefs. It has some association with the 'sacred' and according to Durkheim the distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' is fundamental to ritual, which entails crossing the usual boundary between the two. For Durkheim the sacred is expressive of the community within which individual lives. In other words, rituals serve the function of integrating the individual more closely into the social whole (Edgar and Sedgwick 2004: 340). But it does so by creating a dualistic framework. Ritualization orders ambiguities and indeterminacies of experience into distinctions between good and evil, light and dark, spirit and flesh, above and below, inside and outside. This dualistic framework according to Catherine Bell evokes a "redemptive hegemony", "an understanding of ultimate power and order in the world" (Bell 1992: 93; Faber 2002: 87). Moreover, the ritual-space is not a closed space. As Alyada Faber observes: "The framework for understanding the world through ritualization is ... used by individuals to interpret experiences beyond the ritual space" (Faber 2002: 87). It is needless to point out that the nation as a community needs certain rituals to strengthen the communal bond of nationality and the rituals at the Wagah-border is purportedly designed to serve this function. The ceremony at Wagah which involves the performers, the ritual agents as well as a large crowd of spectators creates dualistic framework through its celebration of the sacredness of one own nationality. The dualistic framework of that the Wagah ceremony attempts to imprint upon the mind of the spectators creates a distinction between the 'good' and 'evil', between the 'sacred and the profane' and the definition of the 'sacred' and the 'profane' depends upon the 'positionality' of the individual subject—on which side of the border one stands—and this standing may not always conform to their physical positioning. Seen from this perspective, the rituals at Wagah have a larger spatial dimension, but

there is a kind of temporal fixity; no temporal movement is possible as the very nature of the rituals confine us into the historical past. The rituals at Wagah due to its residual content of religion based partition, ends up making an enemy of the people within the border. The religious minorities on both sides of the border get the status of the enemy within.

Apart from its ritualistic aspect, the ceremony has its element of the spectacular—violence as a spectacle. Amartya Sen in *Identity and Violence* argues that “violence is fomented by imposition of singular and belligerent identities on gullible people . . .” (2007: 2). However, violence creates identity as much as identity creates violence and the spectacle of violence at Wagah is a case in point. Violence as a spectacle can be used as means for propaganda, as a means for imprinting ideas. How violence as a spectacle can be used for propaganda is exemplified by the works Saint Orlan, the French performance artist. She uses cosmetic surgery as a medium of artistic expression amplifying the social pressures on women to conform to the narrowly defined patriarchal standards of beauty. According to Faber, “Orlan uses a medium of violence against her own body to create incontestable images of the open body that force attention of the spectators and to establish the authority of her political protest” (Faber 2002: 89). Orlan’s art develops a transgressive form of ‘prediscursive’ communication by creating “a spectacle of violence” (Faber 2002: 88). At Wagah, the spectacle of violence aims at a form of communication but the idea communicated to the spectators is not transgressive in any sense, but nationalistic—the idea of a singular imagined community—of one border ignoring the multiple other borders we live by. An observation made by the German bio-philosopher Helmuth Plessner is relevant in the context. The ideal of *Gemeinschaft* or community, represents, according to Plessner, an assault on the anthropological reality of human life by demanding the individual’s indifference to his or her own unique nature, above all when it demands complete self-disclosure (1999: 104). The Wagah spectacle with its aim of forming a singular identity attempts at such an assault—it enacts violence upon the self, since the demand is to conform to the nation as a community at the cost of relegating the self. However, this attempt to form a singular national identity remains unsubstantiated. As it is already noted the case of the Wagah ritual and the Indian nationality is complexly fraught with the question of religious identities.

Taking a cue from Plessner’s philosophical view of ‘eccentric positionality’ of man, the particular case of the Wagah can be seen as reflecting general condition of man’s desire for a border to live by and the

simultaneous failure to find one. According to Plessner, the human being exhibits an ontological ambiguity that arises from two fundamental forces of psychological life: the impetus to disclosure – the need for validity; and yet the impetus to restraint – the need for modesty. Thus, human beings want to be seen for what they are; and yet they want just as much to veil themselves and remain unknown (1999: 109–10). Thus any attempt at fixing a singular identity may not be successful because of the typical human situation: the self wants to be a part of the shared world, but simultaneously it wants to preserve its uniqueness. Plessner defines this as ‘eccentric positionality’ of man. He defines human being as that kind of living being that is directly positioned in its direct embodied and unreflected relationship with the environment, and at the same time, as that kind of living being that is located outside of this boundary and is, thus open to the world. From such an eccentric position humans must establish artificial boundaries and embody them. Because of this ‘eccentric positionality’ human beings are artificial by nature. This natural artificiality of man makes him homeless as he has no natural place in the world<sup>8</sup>. The boundary of nationality, thus, clashes with the boundary of individuality and with many other boundaries/identities, and this is a perennial human situation.

The rituals at Wagah and the attempt to control identity through acts of ritualistic violence is the political ambition of the nation but its failure also illustrates the eccentric nature of the human situation that Plessner speaks of. Once having looked through the philosophical model of Plessner, we reach at a new understanding of the situation recounted by Manto in his memoir. Manto laments for being rendered homeless; it mourns the loss of his own unique identity, and the loss is due to the formation of a new collective/national identity that intersects his other identities. Manto’s lament, therefore, is a nostalgic cry for the loss of the border he lived by. The ceremony at Wagah similarly aims at the preservation of a border, and also a form of identity. At the root of both lies the human feeling of ‘rootlessness’ and search for a border/identity to live by. Paradoxically enough, one border unsettles the other.

## Notes

1. Toba Tek Singh is the eponymous hero in one of Manto’s short stories. His original name is Bishen Singh but he is referred to as Toba Tek Singh following the name of his village. He is an inmate of an asylum in Pakistan. At independence he is to be transferred to an Indian asylum as

he is a Sikh. He does not understand the meaning of this partition and wants to know whether his small village is in India or Pakistan. When taken to the border, Bishen Singh refuses to cross the border and dies in no man's land. Apparently meaningless question of the madman are but echoes of the questions raised by Manto in his memoir. See Sadat Hasan Manto's *Kingdom's End and Other Stories* (1989) Trans. Khalid Hasan, 11-18.

2. The term borderland is used in the sense used by Gloria Anzaldúa who defines the borderland both as physical and metaphorical, as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (1987: 3).
3. Amartya Sen in his essay "The Smallness Thrust upon Us" argues that the propagation of a singular identity, on nationality, or religion, or race, or caste has been responsible for a great deal of violence in different parts of the world, including massive bloodshed. He argues in favour of a free play of different identities and each identity can be more or less important depending upon the circumstance, and none of the identities can be privileged one all the time. Sadly, however, nationalism demands privileging of the nation over other identities.
4. For the Wagah ceremony and the patriotic frenzy surrounding it one may see the documentary directed by Shabnam Virmani titled *Had Anhad: Journeys with Ram and Kabir (Bounded-Boundless)*, 2008.
5. Partha Chatterjee, for example, in his article, "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism" argues that that constructed past of India was a Hindu past: "Hindu-extremist political rhetoric today were fashioned from the very birth of nationalist historiography" (1992: 130). Perry Anderson in *The Indian ideology* (2012) argues that Indian National Movement failed bring into its fold the Muslim population of India and draws our attention to the inequalities between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary India. Sudhir Kakar's *The Colors of Violence* (1996) analyses the contemporary social psyche of the Indians. Kakar proffers the argument that values of Indian society are values that have their origins in Hinduism. The Muslims, according to Kakar, feel culturally apart from "India." He concludes that being Indian in effect, amounts, according to popular perception, to being a Hindu.
6. Michael Edward Palin called this ritual at Wagah a "carefully choreographed contempt". Palin is best known for being one of the members of the comedy group Monty Python and for his travel documentaries. Although Palin basically focuses on the comic aspect of the ritual, he did not miss the element of menace and hatred underlying the ritual: the Wagah border ceremony's comic-aggressive strutting has been compared to the courtship displays of peacocks, or to the antics of the Ministry of Silly Walks, as performed by Mr. Palin's fellow Python, John



- Cleese. See Frank Jacob's article, "Peacocks at Sunset." *Opinionator*. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/03/peacocks-at-sunset/>.
7. See 57 to 60 minutes of the 102 minutes film by Virmani.
  8. For the philosophical concepts of Plessner I have used a number of articles and reviews apart from his books: Stephen Grosby's "Helmuth Plessner and the philosophical Anthropology of Civility" published in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* Vol.28 no.5, pp.605-608 ; Concept note to the conference entitled "Artificial by Nature: Philosophy of Life and Life Sciences and Helmuth Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology", IV International Plessner Conference, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, held in 2009; 'Thoughts of Helmuth Plessner' in the official website of Plessner Society <http://www.helmuthplessner.de/seiten/seite.php?layout=bildhome&inhalt=engl> ; and "Positionality in the Philosophy of Helmuth Plessner," an essay by Marjorie Grene, published in the *The Review of Metaphysics* , Vol. 20 No. 2 (Dec., 1966) pp. 250-277. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20124229>

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