

Inheritance of loss

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PUNJABIS OF THE "Partition generation" share feelings of guilt and remorse about the genocidal violence of 1947.

ON a balmy afternoon under the monsoon sky in Atalahn village in Punjab’s Ludhiana district, four elderly men sitting under a banyan tree are animatedly discussing Urdu. “A beautiful language, with nuances neither Hindi nor Punjabi can equal,” says one. “It’s our language, forged from Arabic and Punjabi,” says another.

The third one remembers how, when Partition was announced, “all of us in Class III, studying lesson number 14 in Urdu, threw our *Qua’ida* in the air and said, ‘*Urdu ud gaya, Urdu ud gaya*’ [Urdu has flown away].” The fourth friend ruminates: “We used to think Urdu belonged to Muslims; nobody knew it was a language.” Sixty years on, the partition of India continues to cast a shadow on the subcontinent, shaping individual destinies and cultural lives in unforeseen ways – constantly provoking new explorations to unravel its many dimensions. How does a society or a generation culturally come to terms with having lived through a moral vacuum at a time of genocidal violence?

Very gently, through the memories of a generation in its twilight years, film-maker Ajay Bhardwaj’s documentary *Rabba Hun Ki Kariye* (Thus Departed Our Neighbours) excavates the fragile layers of a shared language and a way of life in Punjab that was violently partitioned in 1947.

Loss of a shared universe

The memories that the 65-minute film rescues from the detritus of time reveal something significant – the absence of a shared universe is experienced as a constant, all-pervasive presence.

Travelling in the countryside in Ludhiana, Bathinda, Patiala and Malerkotla districts, among others, in the southern part of Punjab, the Delhi-based film-maker discovered a groundswell of introspection among the “Partition generation”.

In the film, story upon story of Partition, narrated by the “undivided” generation of rural Punjab, has a common refrain: feelings of guilt and remorse about the genocidal violence of 1947. The feeling that “whoever killed or abetted killing suffered before our eyes. They were punished for what they did.” No eulogising the killers, no official memorialising of the victims – just the striking force of a generation’s grief and a sense of atonement. A way of thinking that has had the courage to look within and speak about the futility of violence, about the need to create common ground, not isolating contexts.

To the range of work accomplished on Partition – in literature, art and academia – the documentary adds a distinct note by highlighting these informal narratives that exist in the Punjab countryside.

Screened recently at the Travelling Film South Asia Festival in Delhi, and on October 18 at the prestigious 37th Annual Conference on South Asia, organised by the Centre for South Asia, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Rabba Hun Ki Kariye* speaks as much about the past as about the present, through individuals who contemplate without any “master voice-over” interpreting their words.

Memories unpeel layers in a compelling manner – paradoxically leaping out of intimately composed frames – despite the subdued telling. The architecture of the film is interesting. It is not so much about events that have to be structured; it is about ideas that have to be excavated: memories of the common threads of life lived in pre-Partition Punjab; how that universe was torn asunder; and the acknowledgement of both these ideas in the expression of remorse over Partition violence that defines the present.

The Punjab connection



AJAY BHARADWAJ, THE director of "Rabba Hun Ki Kariye".

The textured weave of interconnectedness that once was Punjab is brought through subtly. For instance, Baba Bhagat Singh Bilga, a towering figure of the anti-colonial Ghadar movement, touching 100, represents a period and its values increasingly under siege in our times.

Baba Bilga lovingly shows a treasured memento: revolutionary Udham Singh's personal copy of Waris Shah's *Heer*, heavily underlined, especially the portion in which Heer questions the qazi. The book accompanied Udham Singh to his prison cell in England, where he was tried for the killing of Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab at the time of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The *Heer* that Udham Singh loved was also the universe of the Sufis and the folk tradition.

Noted Sufi singer Puran Shahkoti knows no roots other than the rich cultural underpinnings that he says still bind the two Punjabs. "They sing *Heer*, we sing *Heer* too. *Balo Mahiya* is theirs and ours too," says Shahkoti. He hails from the community of Mir Alam, who used to be the genealogist as well as the repository of musical traditions and cultural life in rural Punjab.

If *Rabba Hun Ki Kariye* has a centre, it is in the person of Professor Karam Singh Chauhan – who carries within himself the ethos of a shared past, the trauma of having seen that universe destroyed – and his unshaken faith in the humanist perspective. A student of M.A. in Persian at Oriental College, Lahore, in 1947, Karam Singh simply cannot forget the day he saw the name of Mansa station in Urdu wiped out as he returned to Bathinda. It was as if a precious part of his childhood had been erased – the warmth of Shams-ul-Nisa Begum, wife of the village *patwari*, who taught him Urdu, and the reach of affection across any divide.

Siyasat (politics) on both sides instigated and misguided people into perpetrating violence and disowning the very culture that had shaped them, he maintains. This absence of a shared

past that Karam Singh experiences is reflected in the persona of Haneef Mohammad, custodian of a small Sufi shrine near Samrala in Ludhiana district. The film-maker met Haneef in 2003, while making his first documentary on Punjab, *Kitte Mil Ve Mahi* (Where the Twain Shall Meet).

Dalits and Sufism



Kitte Mil Ve Mahi explored the interweave of Dalits and Sufism as a powerful contemporary response to the process of Dalits' exclusion in Punjabi society. Haneef also experiences this exclusion in present-day Punjab. Thus, the story of the shrine unravelled into the story of Haneef, the story of Haneef became the story of Punjabi Muslims in East Punjab, and of Partition. It was the first time in more than 50 years that Haneef had shared his memories of Partition – he was five years old in 1947.

Karam Singh and Haneef exemplify the ethos of undivided Punjab's shared language and culture. Both are strangers to the straightjacket of identities forged in the two Punjabs post-Partition.

One of the most powerful and moving scenes in *Rabba Hun Ki Kariye* is of Karam Singh reading the *kalma* as a prayer of remembrance at a spot near the railway track in Mansa where a large number of Muslims were killed during Partition.

Until the day he died, at the age of 86 in July 2007, Karam Singh read the *kalma* every time he crossed that place, praying for everlasting peace for those killed and also for salvation for their killers, "those who strayed". As he says, "Humans have wreaked such sufferings on other human beings upon which tears shall always be shed by those who have faith in humanity." He could not see one separate from the other. That was the way his universe was. But for successive generations, who lack the ethos of an interconnected life, demonising the other becomes an easier task.

Breaking polarity

Therein lies the significance of a film like *Rabba Hun Ki Kariye*. For, in these voices from rural Punjab is the cultural response of a generation that breaks the polarity in which such debates often get mired.

To look within, admit what we find so difficult to admit and articulate remorse, is the fragile point at which victim and perpetrator meet on common ground – when the memory of suffering holds the promise of becoming a bridge to healing and of moving forward.

The process of law and justice takes its course. But, in the long run, the cultural resources of a society decide whether it retains its inclusive thrust or removes the perceived other from every aspect of lived life, by erasing all socio-cultural patterns of interconnectedness that had developed over time. In our times, we see the latter process exemplified in Gujarat post-2002.