

A Translation from Rabindranath Tagore's Galpasamagra

# Story of a Rajpath

BY NISHAT ATIYA SHOILEE

It is I, a “*rajpath*” as they say. I had to suffer the same fate as Ahalya who was cursed into becoming the unfeeling being that she was. A snake of stone, God knows for how long I had to sleep still and simply stretch, stretch, and stretch like there is no tomorrow till I found my way through the green miles of mountainous plains, brown meadows lain against lifeless plains uniting and dividing borders at the same time. With the forbearance of a deathless dead I have been gently kissing on ashes and dust, waiting for an end of days. For what seems like an eternity I have been here, resting in a vicious cycle of morbid restlessness. Not a minute of respite I could afford to grow one strand of grass on the stony wasteland I call my home; not a minute to spare so I can grow a wee wildflower of bluish hue at one corner of my crown, nor can I speak though I see it all feelingly. Footsteps—footsteps all over my ancient bones — millions of them repeating in a cacophonic nightmare. But it is also true that I can read their heart as I trace their feet. I know who is going home, who is leaving, who is out for work, who is back from work, who is about to start for a festival or being carried to the cemetery. The ones who are happy — truly happy with their lives— are bound by affection and esteem, have a certain air to their light trots and with each step, they plant a seed of hope as if every course they choose on their way feels favored and sprouts floras of all sorts. And those unfortunate ones with no home or no hopes to live by are desperately lost for I feel the utter weariness their heavy treads seem to tell, wondering just what might be the point of living a life after all. Their hardened pace further flattens the already dried skeleton I loath to call my own.

For all that, I can never claim to hear all sides of a story. For hundreds of years have I been keenly listening to laughter



and songs of so many, but it is never quite the all of it, you see! I long for the rest of what I missed but by then the storyteller is gone. I have lost count of the fragments of unheard stories that died along with my dry dust every now and then. Hold on, did you hear that? Someone just sighed in silence, “If only I could say what needed to be said!” Wait, please! I will listen, I promise! Even if they don’t! But the walker doesn’t look back, leaving behind the story and also me half-fed, vainly searching for clues. That one nameless man and his unheard tale keep me awake till the dawn sneaks in with another newcomer and their share of secrets.

Everything comes to an end on its own accord, but I do not see mine. Not one footprint can I hold onto for long as it is soon replaced by the next and leaves no trace whatsoever behind.

I am not a destination, however, and have never been. I am just the medium you choose as a part of your journey. I do not offer the comfort of a home one seeks, just the route you have to cross to reach your address. I am the one miserable surface of concrete you carelessly tread, never to stay; suffering

an existence ever-cursed and condemned by you for an effort ironically I have to make at your convenience. The hardly audible bits and pieces of your household jokes, laughter and merry songs disappear into nothingness till they reach my cold distant cemented ears, as if I am the last one to appreciate the life that you live, let alone deserve it!

But then again, perhaps it is not a complete loss after all. It’s the little children who seem to enjoy my company the most, the bringers of joy and hopefulness. They play with my dust, utter little sweet things and their light feet fluttering like butterflies all over my rigid frame suddenly seem to fill me up with a yearning for a life I never had. Ultimately, they leave, too for all do.

And I do have to admit here again that I am familiar with each and every pedestrian that walks me by and I know them for who they are. I wait for them and imagine what they might be doing at home the day they are not over here. I clearly remember those beautiful pair of sad anklets shying away from the crowd with her lips pouted and big bright eyes complaining to the evening sky as she

would pace fast along my pavement. I recall her standing often beneath that big banyan which stands still at my left end. Well, there was another who used to hum to himself before making his way straight towards the crowd. He never looked at anyone, never took a break and stopped whistling only when his feet would touch the backyard. Once he had left, the girl would have done the same, ever so softly as if not to awake anyone. When she would be closer to my side, I knew it was the nighttime slowly covering the earth leaving trails of its cold wet touch upon us. Soon it would be way past the twilight and the entire place was deserted.

The evening breeze would then softly stir the evergreen blooming bamboos,

my concrete chest as she left. The next day she was here again but not her companion. That night, she could not walk very far and fell into my lap of dirt surrendering to the inevitable. Who might you be, dear girl, and where are you from seeking refuge in me, the last place on earth to be at such an ungodly hour? What is it the universe is planning, placing you here with me? I wondered.

That was the night I met her for the last time.

Hundreds of stories like these have lived and died with me, and I have tried to keep track as diligently as it is possible. But of course, there are too many. They come and then they leave, never to stay.

And oh, the heat of the summer, if only you had known what I am talking about! Every time I breathe, I tend to forget that the sky is blue, blackened and soiled with my foulsome dirt. Be it the rich, the poor, the happy, the morose, the young, or the ancient, all but just drift, drift and drift away in the sandstorm made of their own feet till there is no sign of their existence left on my broad unkind stomach. Neither I smile, nor I mourn. No nostalgia for the past, no hopes for the present and no plans for the future, I have only got the newest cascade of human feet to entertain. Now who dares to claim a footfall the echo of which will survive the end of times, you ask? The sighs and whispers you so cautiously hide as you make your way on me, will they survive in the airy emptiness you are leaving behind, or will they mark the shadow of the new soon to replace the ghosts of your once told stories? Can the airy nothings survive the weight of the air itself? If you ask me, I will be the wrong one to answer, for all I know is that I am here and now, because I have to be.

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## The Other Side of the Divide: A Journey into the Heart of Pakistan

Sameer Arshad Khatlani. ISBN: 9789353057701. Penguin India, 2020

REVIEWED BY MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

*The Other Side of the Divide* by Sameer Arshad Khatlani journeys through the precarious landscape of people who live on both sides of the divide — the divide caused by the line drawn by Radcliffe in 1947 to split the subcontinent into Pakistan and India. The angst, the wounds linger on through even pandemics like COVID 19.

Was this divide a need of the Muslims or was it a result of politics beyond the comprehension of a common citizen of the Indian subcontinent, irrespective of the religion?

Sameer Arshad Khatlani, a journalist who had been with *The Times of India* during his trip, and then in *Indian Express* and now in *Hindustan Times*, journeyed to Lahore for a Peace Conference in December 2013 and in the process uncovered a story beyond the one given out. Though his book is compacted within that time period, it took years of research to write the book and it was finally published in 2020, just post the riots in Delhi and a little before COVID 19 disrupted our way of life. The book was something he wanted to do. In an earlier interview, he tells us, “I have always been very curious about Pakistan and wanted to write the book because I thought I have a unique, layered perspective that will make it compelling given the straight jacketed approach towards that country in India. The focus in India on issues that reinforce the same old view of Pakistan has left many compelling stories untold. I wanted to narrate those. Pakistan is a complex country and I thought its complexities were worth exploring in

the form of a book.”

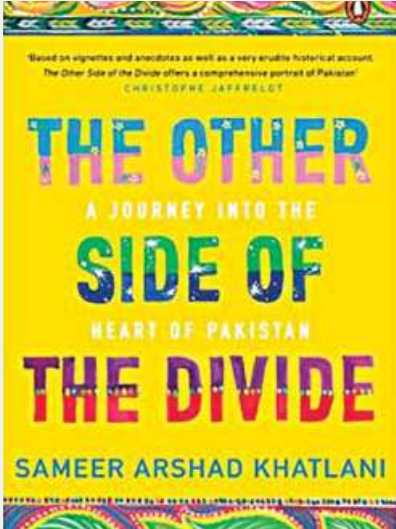
His book starts with the dilemma of Muslims who continued in India. They were not in favour of such a divide as it would upend their lives. And it did. They ended up in refugee camp. The reason given for the divide was politics per se: “Pakistan’s idea as a separate Muslim homeland—which was dismissed as ‘chimerical and impractical’ in the 1930s—now suddenly gathered steam. a tacit British support was at play—the paycheck Muhammad ali Jinnah received for backing the British war effort.”

Khatlani gives a first-person account. His family itself opposed his trip. He clarifies, their reactions or that of many Indian Muslims “can be traced to a latent legacy of wounds the subcontinent’s division inflicted on them and millions of other ordinary people.” They felt visiting Pakistan would be “rash.” Khatlani elaborates, “Like any average Indian, they hear, see and watch nothing that might humanize Pakistan. Not surprisingly, the country comes across as a hopelessly dark land because to its portrayal in the news media, the cinema, as well as the terror attacks that emanate from that country.” When he does journey across, he finds a world where “India’s ‘soft power’, the reach and impact of Bollywood, helps offset anti-India sentiments in Pakistan. It humanizes India among the Pakistani masses; many shared problems besetting the two countries thus appear to be lopsided.”

He takes us through Pakistan weaving in how Partition created ruptures where none had been. The

Radcliffe line split communities and villages. His telling is reminiscent of the fallacy described in Larry Collins’ Dominique La Pierre’s book *Freedom at Midnight* (1975). “Sometimes the line ran down the heart of a village, leaving a dozen huts in India, a dozen more in Pakistan. Occasionally it even bisected a home, leaving a front door opening onto India and a rear window looking into Pakistan.”

Khatlani factors in the human suffering sustained over the years by



the community, the aftermath. He explains how “almost all Bhanu Chak residents have roots in Alwar and Bharatpur. However, none of them had been able to travel to meet their relatives in decades.”

An interesting, fast paced, well written, nuanced to perfection, balanced, journalistic read, much like his articles, the book is an unputdownable one — a bit like a thriller. His exploration reminds

me of Dan Brown’s Prof Langdon, though Khatlani unravels lesser known facets of history and politics, unlike the thriller hero who cracks mysteries by cracking codes. Khatlani journeys through the famed Liberty and Anarkali *bazaars* of Lahore and by lanes and shuttles between taxi-drivers, liberals and artists.

He talks to the driver who was taking him around, Aziz, one of the many people whose family was forced to cross over and had “neither resources nor connections to revisit their roots. so, they relish the rare idea of talking to somebody from ‘that side’. Aziz told me that his grandfather would get emotional every time he saw a visitor from India...No bitter memories of the Partition seemed to have passed on to Aziz from the survivors of the Partition slaughter in his family. Vagaries of life have weighed down the family’s three generations, leaving them with little time to harbour any ill will.”

There are these anecdotes from the times of Mughals and earlier, gems of shared history with Pakistan that he embeds into his narrative, comments and observations of the multiplicity of languages and cultures on the other side of the divide, the open attitude of their liberals and the affection he experienced from common folks. He talks of the terror that runs through Pakistan, terror created by a revival of Kharijites “who have emerged in different forms and targeted Muslims since first rebelling against and killing Prophet Muhammad’s companion and third caliph, Usman, in the seventh century.” He concludes the book telling us “radical Kharijites

were eventually defeated but some survived. Many see a revival of radical Kharijite legacy in the late twentieth-century terrorist activities of groups like the Taliban and al- Qaeda.”

Khatlani brings in plenty of syncretic lore like during Partition, “the rubabis lost their livelihood; they had spent years learning the Sikh holy book by heart for it.” Rubabis are Muslim singers who evolved from Guru Nanak’s times and performed in Sikh shrines, like that in Amritsar. He describes temples across Pakistan, especially the Hingial Shrine in the remote mountains of Baluchistan which hosted pilgrims from across the divide in 2006. He meets Sikhs and Hindus, who have been developing Pakistan just as Muslims like A.P.J. Abul Kalam or Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed had been committed to developing India.

Interestingly, a little before Khatlani’s book was launched, a fiction on the same syncretic theme, Sahitya Akademi award winner Aruna Chakravarti’s *Suralakshmi Villa* (Feb 2020) and Avik Chanda’s best-selling historical *Dara Shukoh, the Man who would be King* (Nov 2019) invaded book shelves, taking India by storm with their focused syncretic telling of the Ganga- Yamuna tehzeeb. One of the things to ponder is why would writers of different genres within a span of four months from varied backgrounds be so focused on the same syncretic thread in Indian lore? Is there really an issue we need to address?

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