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Abstract

Long drawn debates in symbolic anthropology have projected the idea of symbols sustaining definitive meanings governed by fixed structures of identity and territory. This paper aims to highlight not only the shift in understanding of symbolism from a structuralist to a post structuralist framework but also to chart the operation of fluid categories of identity, violence and memory by throwing light on how the symbol of 'OM' almost became a harbinger of death on one side of the border and bestowed life on the other for the Punjabi community which moved from Pakistan to India in 1947.

From markers of identity and status to a kind of jewellery, tattoos are part of a centuries-old Indian tradition. Popularly referred to as the practice of 'godna' in different parts of the South Asian subcontinent, this highly symbolic practice continues to be closely associated with various tribal culture, religious and popular cults including the Hindu religion wherein permanent engraving of holy religious symbols and signs on the arms has been widely prevalent. Based on interviews conducted by the 1947 partition archive of the last surviving generation of the holocaust, this paper focuses on the semiotic tradition of tattooing of the spiritual symbol of 'OM' by Punjabis living in north western regions of undivided British India (present day Pakistan) and how this marker of identity operated with varied meanings in turbulent times of Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 on religious lines.

Keywords: identities, symbol and OM.

Author(s)

Mishika Nayyar is currently pursuing her Masters in Modern History from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Following her early interest in the episode of the 1947 Partition, she is closely associated with the 1947 Partition Archive, a California based non-profit organization which aims to document, preserve and share eye witness accounts from all ethnic, religious and economic communities affected by the Partition of British India in 1947. Focusing on the changing idea and roles of identity, violence and memory in the massive migration that took place over such a short period of time, she intends to highlight the larger cultural and social milieu of those times. Having recorded over 30 stories, she is also keen to connect the missing dots underpinning the shared cultural imagination of the Punjabi community living on either side of the border which continues to bear immense significance even till this day. Email: i.mishikanayyar.93@gmail.com

Changing identities of the symbol, 'OM': crossing borders, conflicting identities and violence in 1947

Mishika Nayyar


Image Courtesy: www.1947partitionarchive.org

I

A great deal of duality persists when one looks seventy years back in the history of the South Asian subcontinent. August, 1947 has been viewed from varied set of lenses and spoken about in varied tones. The sun of the British empire[1] had set permanently in this part of the world but the kind of darkness that ensued thereafter would make millions blind in hatred, despair and misery[2]. The binary of celebration and remorse when linked with the idea of achieving Independence and receiving partition as a price of it has been reiterated time and again[3].

Partition cannot be looked at as an event but be termed as a process involving several layers of changes when viewed from a political perspective involving the interplay of varied economic dynamics resulting in alterations of power relations in society fostering changes in the realm of culture. Yasmin Khan in her work, talks about partition becoming a loaded word, with multiple meanings in both English and vernaculars which triggers complex feelings with deep psychological significance[4]. While several scholarly works point out the political, economic and social aspects of partition, it is the popular medium of representations such as stories, movies, theatre and poems that has best captured the essence of rupture in the idea of shared culture, language, rituals and practices along with the emotive aspect of this cataclysmic event.

The last ten years have witnessed a renewed interest in knowing more about the1947 partition holocaust. Several projects have been initiated to document a whole new perspective of Partition by recording and documenting people's history before they are lost to posterity. One such project is the 1947 Partition Archive which aims to document, preserve and share eye witness accounts from all ethnic, religious and economic communities affected by the Partition of British India in 1947[5]. I have been associated with the archive for a couple of months in the capacity of oral history apprentice which entailed recording several life stories from Lucknow, Kanpur and Delhi NCR.

Hearing out the devastating stories of the migrants and experiencing a myriad of emotions like fear, horror and at the same time admiration has contributed to develop a more nuanced understanding of the partition. Partition of the subcontinent signifies the division of

1 But the need to be vary of the brightness of the sun of the British Empire has persisted alongside as it was never meant to impart light in equal measure.

2 Ayesha Jalal in her work, Self and Sovereignty, (London: Routledge, 2000) talks about how coming apart of empires in history has ever been free of turmoil. " in the ensuing loosening of the reins of authority, subjects found their first taste of citizens' power." pp. 473

3 Gyanendra Pandey in his work, Folding the National into the Local: Delhi 1947-1948' in Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), talks about Independence and partition having very different meanings for different groups of people. He postulates both the events as abstractions but partition appears more concrete than the other only because of its immediate physical consequences. "It was in the bloodshed to Partition that ordinary people saw the shape of independence."

4 Yasmin Khan, The Great Partition - The Making of India and Pakistan, Yale University Press (2008), pp. 9

5 http://www.1947partitionarchive.org/

territory, independence and birth of new states alongside distressing personal memories even today. Instances of corpse laden trains, penniless refugees crossing the border, women being abducted and raped, appalling condition at the refugee camps were highlighted by several interviewees.

One startling fact that came out from the interviews was the idea of tattooing a marker of one's religious affiliation on their bodies. This paper focuses on the semiotic tradition of tattooing of the spiritual symbol of 'OM' by Punjabis living in north western regions of undivided British India (present day Pakistan) and how this marker of identity operated with varied meanings in turbulent times of Partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

At this juncture it is important to highlight certain terrains that this paper wants to tread while I entangle them with some critical questions that this paper hopes to engage with. The first terrain is that of migration which has become an intrinsic feature of the modern and the post modern world and how it relates to symbolism. Does a symbol have one fixed meaning in a given spatial or temporal setting or is that with change in spatial settings owing to migration, do symbols also move and undergo transformation with the movement of people?

The second terrain that this paper aims to deal with is violence which underlines the event of Partition. Violence as a conceptual category has been studied in a myriad ways. There not only visible and invisible forms of violence but also has direct and indirect ways of execution. Moreover, violence now includes new and strange forms of mutilation. But when we weave the concept of violence with symbolism, one is forced to wonder what dimensions does interpretation of the symbol takes under dire circumstances of violence? With symbols seeking validation under tensed circumstances of violence which in this study is the incident of partition, do we also end up rearticulating our idea about the self?

The question of the self brings us to our third major terrain on which this paper will tread is identity. Identity is stated partly to be 'socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed' and when tied up with undertaking of systematic study of symbols, it helps us ponder whether it is possible for us to form linkages between symbols and identity keeping in mind the specificity of the self?

This task of questioning assumes critical importance in a time of renewed violence in the world in which most of these 'critical events', to borrow Veena Das' term, are sustained by ongoing processes of "re-essentialization" and boundary-drawing along sectarian, political, religious, and ethnic lines and this is why I believe this paper will play a critical role in highlighting multiplicities and subjectivities as far as symbolism is concerned.

II

All religions are founded upon a clutch of interwoven 'fossil' symbols whose metaphysical references serve to structure otherwise inexpressible intuitions about the origin, meaning of the human world, and guide people's behaviour as well as their spiritual effort. They link together experience at personal, social and cosmological levels. One primary role that symbols play in religions is to mediate between the believer and the focus of the religion; religion also provide a world view or metaphysics, to which one might look for deep links between symbol and the symbolized focus. In other words, symbols bring the believer closer to, or in harmony with the focus of religion which enables the believer in realization of a kind of identity[6].

6 Glyn. Richards, "Symbols and religious language," In the Symbols in Art and Religion: The Indian and the comparative perspectives, edited by Karel Werner. Motilal banarasidass publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1990

The symbol of 'OM' occupies a central place in the Hindu iconography which has a rich debate going on in its own realm. "OM" as a symbol has its specific historical trajectory. Appropriated by various sects under Hinduism, one generalized meaning that 'OM' encapsulates is the primordial sound of the universe. "OM" as a symbol has been widely accepted but how and why are some questions whose answer we may seek in the rich debates in the realm of religious symbolism. Religious symbolism is an arena of study that is extremely fascinating as it contributes to the maintenance and strengthening of the relationships between human beings and the realm of the sacred or holy. The symbol is, in effect, the mediator, presence, and real (or intelligible) representation of the holy in certain conventional and standardized forms. Systems of symbols and pictures that are constituted in a certain ordered and determined relationship to the form, content, and intention of presentation are believed to be among the most important means of knowing and expressing religious facts. Before we go on to talking more about symbolism, it is important to highlight a somewhat precise definition of symbols. 'The essence of a symbol is... that its importance, value or meaning is not inherent in the intrinsic properties of the symbol itself, but in the thing symbolized and that the relationship between the symbol and the thing symbolized is conventional and arbitrary rather than intrinsically caused.' The implication of this definition is that symbols are conceived as developing within social structures and cultural environments. According to Glyn Richards, there are certain characteristics that a symbol must possess, the first being acceptability. A particular symbol must be socially determined and that its creation as well as maintenance must depend on group acceptance. It is also important to realize how symbols are claimed by a particular social group on the basis of its innate power which is followed by a process of attaching a certain character to the symbol which is premised on the idea of naturalness of a symbol within a culture. Since symbols are socially determined and has bearings of its cultural context, it is claimed that symbols are representational and participate in the reality of that to which they point. The symbol not only represents itself but also but also something else. 'it radiates the power of being and meaning of that for which it stands.' Symbols show themselves in such a way that those who accept them and live by them understand what it means to talk of such things as the holy, the ultimate or the aesthetic. Another important characteristic of symbolism is Mediation in the sense that symbols point beyond themselves to something which cannot be grasped immediately and has to be mediated. Any religion involves a process of learning which includes asking questions, reflecting, deliberating and formulating views about the nature of reality. But it is not always easy to formulate views clearly and precisely because of the obscure nature of the world. Symbols, therefore, make us aware of a 'particular kind of reality, different from that of daily life subject to ordinary speech' which requires the use of symbols in order to speak about it at all. It is precisely for this reason that ricoeur can refers to symbols as the meeting point of different realities. Such dimensions of reality that need to be expressed in symbols are not normally encountered in ordinary day-to-day experience. Symbols constitute a form of language which enables us to understand what it means to talk of the kind of world or kind of reality.

An important function of the symbol is to provide a cohesive stabilizing effect in social groups. This characteristic is generally referred to as the integrating power of the symbols. But symbols can have opposite effects as well and this paper will talk about that in great detail focussing only on the symbol, 'OM'. But we must also keep in mind the danger of assuming that symbols are necessarily only a means of communication or mediation. To understand the reality, we need to

explore the grammar of our response to the symbolic language. We need to see symbols as form of language and seek to elucidate the life they have and one of the most prominent processes of understanding symbols as part of some communication is semiotics.

III

Semiotics is the study of meaning-making, the study of sign processes and meaningful communication. This includes the study of signs and sign processes (semiosis), indication, designation, likeness, analogy, allegory, metonymy, metaphor, symbolism, signification, and communication. The semiotic tradition explores the study of signs and symbols as a significant part of communication. As different from linguistics, semiotics also studies non-linguistic sign systems. Semiotics as a field of study is undergoing major crisis in terms of concepts. Where on one hand, Swiss structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure [7] considers a sign as a correlation between a signifier and a signified (or between expression and content) and therefore as an action between pairs, on the hand Peirce defines Semiosis as "an action, or influence, which is, or involves, an operation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into an action between pairs." This confusion which is bound to present at this initial stage has also been extended to what should be called a sign and what should be called a symbol[8]. Semiotics is frequently seen as having important anthropological dimensions; for example, the late Italian semiotician and novelist, Umberto Eco proposed that every cultural phenomenon may be studied as communication. In his seminal work, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language, Eco postulates that "A sign is not only something which stands for something else; it is also something that can and must be interpreted. The criterion of interpretability allows us to start from a given sign to cover, step by step, the whole universe of semiosis."[9] Eco also suggests that the word sign means too many things and points to many functions. Signs are not empirical objects. Sometimes, empirical objects become signs (or they are looked at as signs) only from the point of view of a philosophical decision. When semiotics posits such concepts as 'sign', it does not act like a science; it acts like philosophy when it posits such abstractions as subject, good and evil, truth or revolution. In the fight between science and philosophy, it must be remembered that philosophy has a practical power: it contributes to the changing of the world but fortunately or unfortunately, it does not have a predictive power like the sciences. Just to give you a flavour of this interesting field of study, let us attempt an analysis of a typical semiotic maze. A red flag with a Hammer and Sickle is equivalent to Communism (p = q). But if someone carries a red flag with a Hammer and Sickle, then that person is probably a Communist (p :: q). A man wears a badge with a Hammer and Sickle at his buttonhole. Are we facing a case of 'intended meaning' (the man wants to say that he is a Communist), of pictorial representation (the badge represents 'symbolically' the union of workers and peasants), or of inferential proof (if he wears the badge, then he must be a Communist)? To be able to rightfully deduce this is a tricky stance as one must be vary of the intuitiveness involved in interpreting a sign. For example, there is something 'intuitively' common to the red light of a traffic signal and the verbal order /stop/. One does not need to have

7 Underpinning both structuralism and post structuralism are his insights emphasizing the way meaning in language was produced, not through the intention of the speaking or writing subject, but by interplay of signs. His account of language has been used to argue that all social and cultural meanings are produced within language or system of representation more generally.

8 B. Malmberg in his work Signe.r et symboles. Paris: Picard (1977), for instance, decides to call a symbol any element representing something else, and to keep the term 'sign' to indicate "those units which, like the signs of language, have a double articulation and owe their existence to an act of signification" (where signification means intentional communication). Every sign is a symbol, but not every symbol is a sign as cited in Eco, 1984, 19.

9 Ibid., 46

a semiotic mind to understand this. The semiotic problem is not so much to recognize that both physical vehicles convey more or less the same command; it begins when one wonders about the cultural or cognitive mechanisms that allow any trained addressee to react to both sign-vehicles in the same way. To realize that /stop/ and the red light convey the same order is as intuitive as to decide that, to convince people to refrain from drinking a certain liquid, one can either write /poison/ or draw a skull on the bottle. Now to be able to successfully apply all of this to the symbol of 'OM', we can deduce that there is something intuitively common to the symbol of 'OM' and Hinduism and that a boy donning a tattoo of 'OM' can intend to say that he is a Hindu. Now, the basic problem of a semiotic inquiry on different kinds of signs is exactly this one: why does one understand something intuitively? To look for such a deeper common structure, Eco suggests his readers to look for both the cognitive and cultural laws that rule both phenomena and that what he claims is the endeavour of a general semiotics which differs from specific semiotics[10] . The notion of sign as an expression of identity through which the subject is continuously made and unmade needs to be reiterated. The subject enters a crisis because it shares in the historical crisis of the sign. As subjects, we are what the shape of the world produced by signs makes us become. Perhaps we are, somewhere, the deep impulse which generates semiosis. And yet we recognize ourselves only as semiosis in progress, signifying systems and communicational processes. The map of semiosis, as defined at a given stage of historical development tells us who we are and what (or how) we think. To create interlinks between the notion of sign as resemblance and identity has been charted above but one must keep in mind how starting from the sign, one goes through the whole semiotic process and arrives at the point where the sign becomes capable of contradicting itself in certain locations and under circumstances of violence. In certain communities, this symbol of 'OM' can be as convincing as a necessary sign depending on the codes and on the scripts which the community registers as 'good' but this might not stand true for another community. Therefore, at the semiotic level, the conditions of a symbol are socially determined which in turn shapes our identity. What is frequently appreciated in many symbols is exactly their vagueness, their openness, their fruitful ineffectiveness to express a 'final' meaning, so that with symbols and by symbols one indicates what is always beyond one's reach. Many symbols are characterized by the vagueness of their content and by the fact that the correlation is not pre-coded but invented at the same moment in which the expression is produced. Such is the perspective of Ricoeur's hermeneutics (1962). Symbols are opaque because they are analogic; they are bound to the diversity of languages and cultures, and their interpretation is always problematic. In this way nobody can assign to symbols a final truth or a coded meaning.

Undertaking of systematic study of signs and symbols enable us to understand its wider cultural implications and process of identity formation. Identity is stated partly to be 'socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed'. Structuralism

10 According to Eco, one must distinguish between specific semiotics and general semiotics: "A specific semiotics is, or aims at being, the 'grammar' of a particular sign system, and proves to be successful insofar as it describes a given field of communicative phenomena as ruled by a system of signification. Thus there are 'grammars' of the American Sign Language, of traffic signals, of a playing-card 'matrix' for different games or of a particular game (for instance, poker). These systems can be studied from a syntactic, a semantic, or a pragmatic point of view. The task and the nature of a general semiotics are different. To outline a project for a general semiotics, it is not sufficient to assert, as Saussure did, that language is a system comparable to writing, symbolic rites, deaf-mute alphabets, military signals, and so on, and that one should conceive of a science able to study the life of signs within the framework of social and general psychology. General semiotics was first of all concerned with the concept of sign. Thus a general semiotics is simply a philosophy of language which stresses the comparative and systematic approach to languages (and not only to verbal language) by exploiting the result of different, more local inquiries." As cited in *Ibid.*, 4

and Post-Structuralism, however more assertively emphasize the deeply formative role of language and representation in the making of identity which therefore becomes the underlying methodology of this paper under the broader paradigm of semiotics.

IV

An important symbolic practice that this paper aims to chart is the practice of Tattooing. A huge corpus of literature exists which reflects on how tattoos are becoming more complex symbols of our self and social identities which itself works on the dual premises of being self created and imposed. While the idea and practice of getting a tattoo done is deeply personal and is intricately connected with deeper meanings of one's identity, its social signification turns into a web of ideas, views, emotions and practices which enable an individual to connect to a broader identity of community. Therefore, it is important to mark out certain historical trajectories involved in the idea and practice of tattoos and also to appreciate tattoos as semiotic representations of the individual and public culture it effects and is affected by.

From markers of identity and status to a kind of jewellery, tattoos are part of a centuries-old Indian tradition. Popularly referred to as the practice of 'godna' in different parts of the South Asian subcontinent, this highly symbolic practice continues to be closely associated with various tribal cultures, religious and popular cults including the Hindu religion wherein permanent engraving of holy religious symbols and signs mainly on the arms has been widely prevalent.

Godna, roughly translated to 'a burying needle' is done for a variety of reasons which range from beautification of oneself as bearing permanent jewellery[11] to stating one's social rank, from asserting their religious and communitarian identity to enable recognition after death in a war or fatal accident. Some tribes of the northeast such as the Noctes and Wanchos of Arunachal, regarded tattoos as a sign of strength, courage, and virility because of the pain associated with the piercing process[12].

Bearing a tattoo also meant having some negative connotations in the sense that as a practice it bought shame and disgrace. Two instances that one can list in this category is the practice of tattooing followed by Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh on young girls to make them unappealing to the rival tribes of the neighbouring districts, who could otherwise abduct them. The other instance is of penal tattooing (godna) ordering the marking of the name, crime and date of sentence on the forehead of convicted offenders by the colonial regime. This permanent mark of criminality forms an important part of colonial attempt of textualization of the Indian criminal body as has been shown by Clare Anderson in her work, '*Legible Bodies*: Race, Criminality and Colonialism in South Asia'[13].

To talk about the current time, tattoo and the process of tattooing is now being looked at in a different light. As Clinton Sanders points out in his text Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing, the journey of tattoos from being a ostensibly "deviant" practice to a popular cultural phenomenon has been long and tedious. Sanders in his work attempts to establish deep connections between tattoo as an art form and tattooing as a cultural practice. "Those who define tattooing as

11 Popular belief regarded tattooing in the form of jewellery not only to appeal aesthetic sensibilities but with a reason that no one could take away that jewellery from them even if they were to lose all their worldly possessions.

12 http://www.thebetterindia.com/58170/india-tattoo-tradition-history/

13 "The themes of individualization and categorization are intertwined, for the paradox of identificatory techniques is that the individual is always made part of a collective group. Clare Anderson appropriates Foucault who has famously conceptualized the relationship between scientific disciplines and social practices in the modern age which, he argued, are important 'technologies', or strategies of power implicated in the ordering, classification and control of individual bodies. Knowledge of the body constitutes power relations, and those power relations also constitute a field of knowledge." *Clare Anderson, Legible Bodies*: Race, Criminality and Colonialism in South Asia, Berg, Oxford, 2014

an artistic practice are deeply involved with a process of collective legitimization and later, that —body alteration is culture; it is meaningful to the members of the society in which it occurs, and it is produced within complex webs of collective action."[14] Throughout the text, Sanders stresses on the practice of tattooing being important for social communication, for holding meaning, and as a cultural signifier.

Sanders was one of the first sociologists to hold firm to the idea that tattooing is a practice subject to social constructions and definitions and influenced by the personal biographies of, collective world views held by, and contextual interpretations of individuals. But we must remember that the agency of the individual does not remain totally independent of the structure of social practice. The structure versus agency debate as embedded in Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory has been well applied by Chris William Martin in his paper, Tattoos as Narratives: Skin and Self in which he attempts to apply to the understand the process of becoming tattooed and the meanings and motivations behind the marks.

"Anthony Giddens (1991: 75-77) writes in Modernity and Self-identity that—the self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible. We are, not what we are, but what we made ourselves…." Martin aims to extend the reflexivity of the self to the body, where the body is understood as a part of an action system rather than merely a passive object. How our bodies are connected to the ongoing process of actualizing a self-identity can be seen under the larger paradigm of shift from something that is given to something that can be constructed. The same explanation can also be extended to the concept of 'self' from modernist logical understanding (verifiable reality) to a narrative social understanding (constructed reality) when seen under the larger paradigm of major shift from modernism to post-modernism.

The self is an ongoing autobiography; or, to be more exact, it is a self-other, multifaceted biography that we constantly pen and edit. The self is an ever-changing expression of our narratives, a being-and-becoming through language, symbols and storytelling as we continually attempt to make sense of the world and of ourselves.[15] Self, therefore, is always engaged in becoming, constructed and reconstructed through continuous interactions and relationships.

To extend the concept of self to myriad ways of looking at identity, we must also bear in mind that identity is a process that is always embedded in social practices within which discourse practices have a central role. Both social and discourse practices frames define the way individuals and groups present themselves to others, negotiate roles, and conceptualize themselves. Taking the concept of practice as central to processes of identity formation, this paper aims to look more closely at ways in which definitions of identity change and evolve in time and space, ways in which membership is established and negotiated within new boundaries and social locations, and ways in which activity systems impact on processes of identity construction.[16] What I also want to propose is that the practice of tattooing needs to be situated within this framework of identity formation and culture praxis.

Massive work is being undertaken on this particular theme which is fast gaining ground in the terrain of deepening of one's knowledge about body and its politics. The body, only very recently, has become a subject of enquiry wherein it is being viewed as an integral site where the powers of society display their influence.[17] As both the object and subject of power,

14 Sanders, 1989: 3

15 Anderson, H. (1997), "Self: Narrative, Identity, and Agency Anderson 1997 - in - Conversation, language, and Possibilities: A Postmodern Approach to Therapy", Basic books, a member of Perseus Books group, USA.

16 Discourse and Identity: Edited by ANNA DE FINA DEBORAH SCHIFFRIN Georgetown University MICHAEL BAMBERG: Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006, pp. 2,

17 Foucault, 1977.

the human body is an important unit and is gradually becoming a powerful metaphor in terms of daily usage. Embodied power is evident in moments of violence especially when they kill, mutilate and imprison other bodies in order to control and subjugate them.

V

To get back to the year 1947 and to place the practice of tattooing in a larger paradigm of Hinduism which has a developed system of symbolism and iconography of its own[18], this paper will focus mainly on practice of tattooing of the symbol, 'OM' in the north western regions of the Indian subcontinent (present day Pakistan). The syllable *Om* which represents the *Brahman* and Atman is known to occupy a prominent place in representing Hinduism itself. The invariable, fixed meaning of 'Om' was well established among the people as representing the primordial sound of the universe and as the symbol of divine consciousness. The fixed belief that tattooing of OM is believed to bring Good Karma into their lives and protect the bearer of this symbol from evil forces formed the dominant, unquestionable line of thinking then. Men from all age groups in the Punjabi community were encouraged to bear this symbol which exhibited their belief in One Supreme Almighty, a dominant line of thought promoted by the 19th century Arya Samaj movement. Promoting the values and practices based on the infallibility of the Vedas, the Arya Samaj sect[19] was founded by Swami Dayananda, a sannyasi, on 7 April 1875 whose principal belief in one creator know by name AUM (as mentioned in 40.17 Yajur Veda) is appropriated by far and wide even till date. 'OM' as a sound continues to be chanted mostly in the ritualistic practice of organizing a hawan. Moreover, the Punjabi community which in general was not well versed with Sanskrit as a language was quick to pick up the word 'OM' which in their view packed up all the symbolic values of the Arya Samaj. 'Hari Om' is still a popular way of greeting that the Arya Samajis practice till date. Godna of the symbol was done on the arm or the hand at one of the local fairs for identification and to assert one's religious affiliations mainly recalls Mr. Brij Mohan Chachra and Mr. Uttam Singh Ahuja in their interview to the 1947 Partition Archive. Mrs. Geeta Nayyar in her interview to the 1947 Partition Archive states how this symbol acted as 'uss zamane ka pehchaan patra'. She recalls married women getting the names of their husbands tattooed at local fairs mainly for the purpose of identification as they engaged in the practice of purdah.

Mr. Brij Mohan Chachra who was born in the district of Bannu district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (then referred to as North West Frontier Province) Pakistan while describing his migration to India stated how this symbol of 'OM' put them in great jeopardy in Pakistan owing to the strict checking routine followed by volunteers of Muslim League. "Hindu-Mussalman mein farak karna mushkil hota tha uss samay. Humaari baat karne ka lehza aur kapde pehnne ke dhang mein zyada farak nahi tha." Therefore, to differentiate Hindu from a crowd of muslims and vice-versa was not easy. But in disturbed times of partition, the importance that religion and markers of religious identity assumed for the purpose of differentiating and segregation of people in well-defined categories which became the norm was unprecedented.

The same religious marker that bought such anxiety to Mr. Chachra and and his family on one side of the border also

18 Other markings that form a part of the iconography of Hinduism are the Swastika sign representing auspiciousness, and *Tilaka* (literally, seed) on forehead – considered to be the location of spiritual third eye, marks ceremonious welcome, blessing or one's participation in a ritual or rite of passage. Elaborate Tilaka with lines may also identify a devotee of a particular denomination. Flowers, birds, animals, instruments, symmetric mandala drawings, objects, idols are all part of symbolic iconography in Hinduism. Source: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism by James G. Lochtefeld, The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc. New York, 2001.

19 How this sect has largely been responsible for consolidating religious identities in Punjab and has been blamed for worsening of relations between Hindus and Muslims during the latter part of the nineteenth century. was highlighted by Kenneth W. Jones in his seminal study, 'Communalism in the Punjab: The Arya Samaj Contribution', Source: The Journal of Asian Studies , Vol. 28, No. 1 (Nov., 1968), pp. 39-54

bought immense relief after crossing over to the Indian side. He recalled the strict checking routine followed on the border and in refugee camps by volunteers of RSS and other local organizations so as to ensure that only Hindus-Sikhs enter the newly created space in which they should ideally belong[20]. To assert and outwardly display one's religious identity was a common practice in the landscape of shared spaces of pre-partition times. But then came the year 1947 in which, as Nonica Datta postulates, fluid identities, multiple vocabularies, landscapes and inter-community solidarities were overshadowed by monolithic religious blocs[21].

One of the interviewees recalls a horrifying tale of how his tattoo of 'OM' had put his life in jeopardy. He narrates an incident whereby his family was attacked by a mob but he managed to escape only to hide himself behind the bushes for temporary respite. Soon, he was discovered by members of the mob who not only asked for his name but also began to look for some caste and religious marks to ensure that he was not a Hindu. He managed to save his life by adorning a Muslim name and systemically hiding his tattoo with a thick paste of mud and his urine.

This fixed meaning that was assigned to the symbol 'OM' as practiced by the medium of godna underwent massive instability during the turmoil of Partition and was quick to assume its fixed meaning again but in a different space (India now) and time (post 1947). The meaning of 'OM' was forgotten about during those turbulent times but what was selectively appropriated in terms of its association with Hinduism. To bear this symbol consolidated one's religious identity, belief, ritual and practices which earlier operated with pluralities. This permanent marker of identity among the survivors of the holocaust forms an important part of their psyche and identity even today.

VI

The most important change has been the transformation of tattooing from the ostensibly "deviant" practice as I discussed earlier to the popular cultural phenomenon it is today. From being a marker of identity to being a mural decorating the human body, the journey of tattooing has been an interesting one when seen from an inter-generational perspective. The entire culture of tattooing has far reaching implications among the current generation which thrives on the concept of 'loving your body and self'. The practice of tattooing and its close connection with the hippie culture must also be kept in mind while pondering on this practice.

While conducting several interviews, one observation that stuck me was how the generation that immediately faced the horrors of partition have firmly prevented their immediate next generation from indulging in this practice whereas lament about the loss of control over the lives of their grandchildren who engage and promote this practice as a form of aesthetic expression of self and identity. The nostalgia associated with the strict obedience and unquestioning beliefs of the elders of the house comes up in a myriad of ways in our interaction with the survivors of partition. This can be placed in the larger context of tight-knit kin group, close ties with the larger community which stands in sharp contrast with the socio-cultural milieu of preferred isolation today.

Symbols assume immense importance under the dire circumstances of violence. Symbols not only help us

20 Individuals were caught between the pull of two opposing nationalisms and had their citizenship fixed and settled as Indian or Pakistani. Yasmin Khan, pp. 10

21 "Two important processes were at work which exacerbated Hindu–Muslim–Sikh tension and led to widespread violence in Punjab. By constructing monolithic Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities, the colonial state had given legitimacy to new categories of religious identification and enumeration. Second, religious reformists and community leaders harped on imaginary homogeneous Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim communities with 'pristine' pasts. Consequently, community-based solidarities came to the fore in public and private arenas. And cities, towns and countryside were flooded with shuddhi and gauraksha sabhas, with the Anjuman-i-Islamia's tabligh and tanzim outfits." As cited in Datta, 2008.

clearly categorize different groups of people in clear blocks but also help in distinguishing the target group from the non target one. I cannot help but think of how Jews were forced to adorn a yellow star as a marker of one's Jewish identity which helped the Gestapo to systematically distinguish Jews from non-Jews.

In several narratives of violent circumstances, identity and symbols get closely enmeshed sharing a close semiotic relationship. "As Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, a professor of history in Delhi University put it in his account of his and his family's escape from the university campus in September 1947, the women 'put on Hindu caste marks on their foreheads and put on Hindu clothes'. Not Punjabi or Bengali, even though that too could be misleading, or middle class, or other such classification, but Hindu. The caste marks and the clothes referred to are, presumably, the bindi and the saree, neither an exclusively Hindu attribute then or now; the women leaders of both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka continue to wear the saree as a national dress, as other women from these countries and from Pakistan have done. In 1947–8, no doubt drawing from the actual socialisation of the body even before this, a person's very demeanour came to be read as Hindu or Muslim."[22]

If one assumes that the dynamic role played by symbols can be relegated to violent incidents of the past, then one will have to rethink his formulations as symbols continue to hold immense importance in times of 'post-modern violence' as well. In Nandita Das' directorial debut, Firaaq, she pertinently brings to light how the symbol of bindi when adorned by a muslim woman while crossing a hindu dominated area helps save her life under the broader tensions that ensued the 2002 Gujarat Riots.

Section II of this paper precisely deals with the importance of symbols in religions. The Sikh religion also has its own developed symbolism referred to as The Five Ks (Kesh, Kirpan, Kara, Kangha, Kachhera[23]) which are the five items of dress and physical appearance given to Sikhs by Guru Gobind Singh when he gathered together the first members of the Khalsa on Vaisakhi day in 1699. These symbols give Sikhs a unique identity signifying discipline and spirituality. In several narratives of both, the 1947 Partition riots and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, each of these Sikh symbols assumed immense importance not only in terms of identifying the Sikhs but also segregating them from other groups.

This paper aimed at highlighting that implicit understandings influence every culture's ideas about itself and others and that these understandings, however, are changed by experience in a constantly shifting process that makes such encounters complex historical events and moments of discovery. The varied perception of the symbol 'OM' and its myriad interpretations help us question and reframe our ideas

22 Pandey, G. 'Folding the National into the Local: Delhi 1947-1948' in Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.133

23 Kesh (Uncut hair, which is kept covered by a turban, or dastaar): are a traditional symbol of holiness in India, and the turban is a symbol of leadership.
Kirpan: A ceremonial sword, symbolizing readiness to protect the weak, and defend against injustice and persecution. The kirpan is normally worn with a cloth shoulder strap called a gatra. The kirpan exemplifies the warrior character of a Sikh.
Kara: A steel bracelet, symbolizing strength and integrity. Steel is symbolic of strength yet resilient under stress. In the same way, the human soul must become as strong and unbreakable as steel which has been tempered in the furnace.
Kangha: A small wooden comb, symbolizing cleanliness and order. The kangha is used to keep the hair clean and is normally tucked neatly in one's uncut hair. As a Sikh combs their hair daily, he or she should also comb their mind with the Guru's wisdom.
Kachhera: Cotton boxer shorts, symbolizing self-control and chastity; prohibition of adultery.

of ideas, symbols, practices, identities, self as something that is not given, discoverable or fixed but as something that is constantly changing, negotiating and getting restructured in new ways. The celebration of fluidities, subjectivities, layering, shifts and greys of ideas and practices is what I propose would enable us to see our surroundings with a new set of lenses.

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