

NOKSHA

SUMITA SHARMA

the dead never had it so good DNA-ed
into being uploaded

they slither inside our drives
watch

grandsons great grandsons
watch
with plastic eyes

some say they don't forget forgive
and as the future comes
clichés of death and life
they

undone
recede

the dead the dead
the dehiscent dead

If you're being forced to do this,
flicker twice.

If you're
If

Shanti
Shanti
Shanti

we're rounding up the pandits
new rituals need inventing
we're rounding up the hackers
new codes

Error

we're willing ourselves to
RealDeath®

Error

A VISIT TO PARTITION WORLD

TARUN K. SAINT

The Historian's Story

At last, the long-awaited day had dawned: 15 August 2047. I woke well before my usual time, the anticipation built up over the last few days having culminated in a nervous restlessness. Deepak – that's my son – had not appreciated being dragged out of bed at what was an unearthly hour for him. Too bad – this was a momentous occasion, after all; our very own tryst with destiny.

One hundred years had passed since Independence, and I'd organized a very special visit to Partition World, the new theme park that would allow us to enter recreated memories of that era. This would be the chance for Deepak and my wife Sneha to share with me what promised to be a unique way of experiencing and understanding history. A teacher of history, I had always felt that the younger generation needed to know more about and get involved with the legacy of the past in order to grow up in a mature and balanced way, especially so in this age of erased memories and virtual substitutes, when it often seems that formative events and traumas are becoming irrelevant. Everyone was so preoccupied with the latest trends in virtual reality (as well as disentangling the 'fake news' from the real) that they had begun to disregard their roots. I was not the only one who thought this way. I had no doubt that it was for these reasons – and the recent recurrence of instances of violence the likes of which the country had witnessed during the trauma of Partition – that the proposal for a theme park that would combine history lessons on the travails of post-colonial nation formation with cutting-edge technology had finally been accepted. Visitors would be edified, educated and psychologically rehabilitated at the

same time – that was the promise made in the promotional literature and signed by the Originator.

We bundled ourselves into the e-car and began the long drive to the new theme park, located north of the extended national capital region. The traffic was heavy on the highway, as expected, and we eventually passed two private mega universities en route to our destination, before spotting the turn-off sign. Large billboards became visible, touting the attractions to come.

PARTITION WORLD AHEAD!
RELIVE HISTORY. ENTER A TIME CAPSULE AND RETURN TO
THE MOMENT OF YOUR NATION'S BIRTH.
EXPERIENCE FREEDOM FROM UNWANTED INTRUSIONS FROM
THE PAST.

TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR FAMILY'S DESTINY, AT LAST!

We followed the signs and the line of vehicles ahead of us till we reached the entry point.

WELCOME TO PARTITION WORLD!

The shimmering sign greeted us again as we ascended the escalator leading up to the registration area. Here, our personal details, including any particular family associations with the Partition era, were recorded and a customized sim-pad, prominently featuring our names, was issued to each of us. Evidently, security was still an issue here even though the earlier protests against the park had been quelled. There was a section of naysayers who believed that such theme parks trivialized the past and made a mockery of history. Well, the Originator and her group of investors had won that battle, with support from the government of the day. The team of researchers – including, for a while, Sneha – and technical personnel had been working quietly behind the scenes for years, drawing on earlier efforts to preserve the memories of survivors. The archive of memories, whether the virtual archive of Partition or the Partition Museum that had come up seventy years after the event, had been assiduously delved into to ensure that visitors had a near real-time experience of what their ancestors had gone through. Or so we had been told in countless webcasts

and TV adverts. This simulation was going to be different, we had been assured by drones flying by in the preceding days all over the city carrying *Bladerunner*-style promotions of the park's coming attractions.

The three of us – Sneha, Deepak and I – lined up dutifully, registration details and sim-pads in hand, and moved slowly forward in the queue towards the elaborate map projection that set out the geography of Partition World. There were clearly demarcated regions: Punjab, the North-West Frontier Province, Balochistan, Sindh, Bengal, Sylhet, Assam and the rest of the North-East. Reliving moments before and after 1947 was an additional option; one could choose a timeline from 1940 onwards, leading up to the demarcation of borders by the Radcliffe Commission in mid-August 1947, or a timeline in the immediate aftermath. Since our family was originally from west Punjab, we clicked the relevant section to get a holographic projection, detailing place names and with relevant statistics about families displaced, lives lost, and countless missing. We then ascended via the escalator to the next level, where things promised to get interesting.

Using our sim-pads, we began our retrovision; given our family history (my grandfather was born in Bhera, near Sargodha) we had earlier decided to take on the role of a family about to be displaced from west Punjab. The attendants at hand helped us pick out the appropriate apparel for our chosen scenario for the day: Rawalpindi in March 1947, the venue of the first major outbreak of violence in Punjab, after the great Calcutta Killings of 1946, the Noakhali violence and targeted communal riots in Bihar and Garhmukhteshwar.

We walked through the entry portal into a perfectly recreated Punjabi neighbourhood from that time. We were given the added option of choosing to relive character situations imagined first by the Hindi novelist Bhisham Sahni. This was apt, it seemed to me, since his novel *Tamas*, based on the Rawalpindi massacres, was written by him after a visit he made to Bhiwandi with his brother Balraj Sahni as part of a human rights initiative in 1971 in the wake of terrible communal violence that had flared out of control. It was this field visit that had triggered Sahni's childhood memories of Rawalpindi in 1947, and the writing of the novel. Lo and behold, we would now be able to relive the experiences of Rawalpindi dwellers at several levels, in historical enactments and in scenes derived from the plot of his novel. Memory would be simulated at primary and secondary levels – a psychic re-engraving for us of the reality of Partition

and its attendant trauma like never before. Such a re-engraving would enable the fullest form of catharsis, the attendants had promised, as we were bundled into our kurtas and shalwar-kameezes.

We took our first steps into recreated history as we strode through the portal and saw before us the environs of a Rawalpindi *galli* somewhat bereft of the usual crowds. I discreetly checked the display on my sim-pad: it indicated that violence had erupted in the countryside and the city was beginning to burn. We could see smoke rising from all sides in this area deliberately targeted by arsonists on account of it being inhabited by a minority population. I had a curious sense of *déjà vu* as the acrid smell invaded my nostrils. Smoke and dust filled the air around us, and distant shouts and shrieks of terror could be heard. Through the haze, I saw before us Nathu, a lead character from Sahni's novel, a look of apprehension on his face. It seemed that he had completed the task assigned to him of killing a pig and had just witnessed the results of his deed, of which he had been unaware – the animal's carcass had been thrown by rioters at the steps of a mosque. This was familiar to me from the novel's description, but the tactility and immersive dimension given to it here caused beads of sweat to form on my forehead.

The Student's Tale

Deepak had noted with a degree of discomfort his father's recent morbid preoccupation with Partition and its historical legacy. He had tried to make allowance for this, given the tales from his great-grandfather's time which his father must have grown up listening to. And now this Partition World theme park had come up and unleashed a storm which had just carried everyone along. He had enjoyed earlier family outings, but this one seemed distinctly unpromising. Deepak had never understood the point of raking up unpleasant episodes from the past. It was difficult enough making sense of the present, what with the constantly updated stories on webcasts and on TV about new devices, gadgets and upgrades, and the endless flow of information to absorb. If, on the one hand, there were the algorithms on social media dictating priorities, on the other, especially after escalating tensions on the border, there were the non-stop appeals to be better Indians and exhortations on various channels that 'the nation needed to know'.

Deepak had planned to carry his iPhone with him, but his father had insisted that it be left behind to allow for a more authentic park experience. Instead, he was already getting withdrawal symptoms. At the very least he could have updated his friends about the visit. Here he was, dressed in old-fashioned garb, clutching the sim-pad almost as protection from the sights that greeted them. The narrow street, the flames now rising above the parapets of houses, the look of terror on the faces of people running helter-skelter, barely glancing in their direction – it was all getting rather difficult to navigate as the dense clouds of smoke affected his vision and began to disturb his breathing. He wondered if he would be able to convince his father to use the fail safe option to freeze the simulation and exit the alarming scene.

The Psychologist's Tale

There has to be a limit when it comes to hobby horses, thought Sneha. It was bad enough having to listen to lectures about modern Indian history and the political ramifications of the bloodbath that accompanied the nation's birth at home every other day, without having to go through a simulation of the actual events as a witness, even participant, in a theme park that all too eerily strived for verisimilitude. Indeed, politics and history seemed to rather monopolize discussions at home these days, especially after the announcement of the park's opening date. Over the last months her scepticism about the simplistic psychobabble that had been spouted at them from the day publicity for the park had begun with a massive advertising campaign had simply increased. Sneha had been recruited at the outset as one of the experts who would ensure that the design and make-up of the park would serve the larger purpose, actively promoted by the corporate sponsors who were then brought on board. She had been invited to several consultations with the Originator, a well-heeled lady, a non-resident Indian based in the USA, who had come up with the concept of the park. The emphasis was on the scale of the project, and the dramatic and long-lasting social impact that might be afforded by this attempt to put to rest the spectres of 1947.

Over several meetings, Sneha had argued the case for greater attentiveness to the risks of replicating patterns of Partition-era collective violence using technological means. She had tried to convince the

committee overseeing the project of the need to take a serious look at other instances of commemoration of loss, including the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. She spoke of counter-monuments such as Horst Hoheisel's and Andreas Knitz's 'Book-Mark Bonn 2013', put up in the German city on 10 May 2013, signposting the burning of books by the Nazis in 1933 through an installation of bronze spines with the names of the authors and books marking the place near the town hall where books were burnt, and an archive box cemented in the square's centre. The box contained copies of the books which were handed out each year to passers-by on 10 May, the anniversary of the burning, in an annual ritual still followed, thus becoming a read-orial rather than just a mem-orial. Fresh copies would then be placed in the cavity, which would be closed till the next year. Such modes of counter-memorialization sought to diffuse the effects of historical trauma, yet allowed for the possibility of individual mourning. Sneha underlined in her own presentations, drawing on her several visits to present papers at seminars in Germany. However, realizing that her inputs on the psychological dimension would only be included in a perfunctory way, she resigned soon after, even as buzzwords like 'catharsis' were appropriated by the head honchos.

It was true that over the past decade there had been many reported cases of relapse into Partition-era-like psychic states. With the passing of the generation that had been through the cataclysmic violence and displacement that had accompanied the formation of India and Pakistan, it was as if partitioned time and memory had inexorably begun to bleed into the present. The survivors had represented a bulwark against the sea of traumatic memory and time, and as they passed on, a breach had occurred, unleashing fresh outpourings of hatred and humiliated fury that had seemingly been left behind. While this found the most sharp and vitriolic expression on social media, there had been a steep increase in incidents of lynching and attacks on those perceived as being the 'other'. Along with this came the welling up of numbness, as the time of Partition came to suffuse everyday life for many. While this had been especially pronounced in the case of some descendants of the survivors, the symptoms were widespread, as bubbles of vacant time seemed to rise up and overwhelm people's ability to function in the present. Even those from minority groups who had chosen to stay behind were being afflicted by skewed forms of temporality, pools of dead time.

It was in such a situation that the theme park had seemed like a way out, a convenient means of ridding the nation of the effects that had paralysed so many. Now that they were here in the flesh, on opening day, Sneha was even more uncertain whether this would prove to be a gateway to psychic redemption or simply turn out to be another route into the abyss of melancholia.

The Originator's Story

A feeling of genuine satisfaction, a job well done. At last she could see the results of the planning and mobilization leading up to opening day. They had been at it for 10 years since the first articulation of the plan. Her training in museology and the encouragement of her grandparents had been crucial in generating the impetus for this intervention. There had always been a sense that she needed to reconnect with her family's roots and this was the perfect platform for that to be realized. For she had felt a sense of incompleteness when visiting Disneyland as a child with no way of reliving aspects of her own family's past. Frontierland, Tomorrowland, and so on, were all very well, but there was a need for something more directly related to her Punjabi ethnic background. This sense was confirmed when she had, late in her teens, visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, since the closest equivalent in her family's past would be the Partition massacres in which more than a million people had perished.

A few years after that, she had been thrilled to learn about the opening of the Westworld theme park, even as visitors there replayed experiences of the Wild West with all the elements one associated with the best of Hollywood, this time as participants in the action. However, her only visit there further accentuated her sense of deprivation, despite the inclusion of a section on the British Raj, with all the attendant pomp and glory and the chance of going after a tiger on *shikar*. Such a pity, she had thought to herself, that the initial experiment turned sour. She had instructed the technical personnel on her team to be careful not to repeat the errors of cybernetic designers before them, with their often romantic illusions about machine intelligence and autonomy.

For her, Partition-era stories that had filtered down to her from her grandparents had always seemed rather like the frontier situations of the

old West, albeit with a tragic dimension. And Indian society still faced those age-old problems of recurrent violence, as she could see in the news bulletins on South Asian media networks every day. While the Partition Museum in Amritsar had been a step in the right direction, there was a need for a more direct encounter with memories of the past, she had always felt. So she had assembled a crack team, including museologists, designers, roboticists, specialists in artificial intelligence and cyberneticists as well as historians and archivists, and, after sustained lobbying with the government of the day, she had made the purchase of land with the help of a group of investors. The negotiations had been tense, but eventually they were able to prevail and overcome bureaucratic sloth as well as a sea of paperwork. The invocation of nationalism and the urgency of meeting the deadline of the centenary of 1947 had certainly helped to ensure that the construction of the park was completed on time. What an inauguration it had been the previous evening, leading up to the countdown to midnight! It had been choreographed with meticulous precision as the red carpet was unfurled for politicians of different stripes, film stars, social media icons and other celebrities, plus a sprinkling of descendants, carefully selected from families with a Partition background, from across South Asia and the international diaspora. Now at last the park was open to the public, and they could expect fitting returns in due course – or so she fervently hoped.

The Historian's Story

The rules of Partition World did not allow visitors to be harmed, however much we got embroiled in the scene before us. Nathu had sighted us and was looking at me rather oddly. I realized it was because my clothes resembled his – a deliberate choice. I had wished to feel his pain as he came to terms with the guilt of starting the riot, as he came to believe. No longer just the social scientist hunting for data in the archive, there I was in the middle of the situation I had read so much on and talked at length about to my students. As if on cue, mobs of rioters from different communities assembled on opposite ends of the street and began throwing stones and bricks at each other. Nathu stood in the middle of the road, even as the groups advanced menacingly, seething anger in their eyes. It was as if this simulated riot now had a temporal location outside history.

I found myself pulled back into a memory stream not of the theme

park's creation – my own recollection of growing up in a time of fear, when speaking up could be lethal and lynch mobs roamed with impunity. The scene before me faded as the time of my adolescence came to the fore.

It was a hot day in August 2018 in Delhi, after a disappointing monsoon. People compared the drought conditions with those in the year of Partition, when the monsoon had been similarly weak, contributing to the simmering tension in the air. Then came the news flash about another case of a person being lynched, this time on the capital city's outskirts. The feeling of unease grew – as if one were living out the consequences of another's nightmares; a sense of being caught in a repetitive cycle which showed no sign of ending, despite the protests and marches. I had just begun reading a collection of Manto's stories gifted by my father, seeking at his instance to better understand the workings of minds caught in a time warp of hatred and narcissistic rage. Those stark tales of people on the edge of sanity, unheeding of moral conventions in the wake of the pervasive breakdown of inherited structures of value during the worst violence of 1947 and 1948. Perhaps it was then that I made the decision to study history, while never quite letting go of my fascination with literature.

I struggled to free myself from this train of thought – now was not the time to be distracted from the main purpose. It was then that I realized that the memory stream had developed unexpected dark eddies and currents that were pulling me inexorably backwards in time into the breach. This was exactly the opposite of what I had hoped for. Instead of freedom from the past, to my horror, I was sinking ever deeper into the viscous sea of dead time.

The Technician's Story

What an ordeal it had been, pulling together all the threads of this massive enterprise. He was only too glad to focus on his little patch, the construction and monitoring of the sim-bots that would populate Partition World. He was especially proud of the work he had done on the characters in the west Punjab section, assigned to him because of his family's roots in that area. He had raided family albums, consulted virtual archives of photos and objects, and visited the Partition Museum countless times to get the setting just right. The implanting of memories of that time in the sim-bots had been a delicate task; the loop was designed to run over a fixed time frame

in which scenarios would ultimately unfold interactively as per the visitor's promptings. At least that was the idea. While testing had gone well, he was still not quite sure about the ethics of endowing these humanoid bots with vivid memories that included so much trauma and violence. It meant that a degree of uncertainty had to be allowed for, as the substratum of implanted memory was inherently unstable. He just hoped that the visitors would not extend their curiosity and voyeuristic propensities to the extent of wishing to re-enact the worst episodes of violence.

He looked again at his monitoring screen, which could be expanded to get a holographic representation of the various sectors. On this first day, the crowd was understandably huge. He homed in on the Rawalpindi arena, where something seemed out of joint. Instead of running away from the oncoming mobs of sim-rioters, he noticed that a visiting family was behaving in a strangely passive way, as if they were watching a show rather than participating in a simulation. He knew that they could not come to any harm since the sim-bots had been engineered to follow Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics – a robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; a robot must obey orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; and a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. Even so, it was such a waste for them to miss the participatory dimension offered by Partition World. Ah well, so it goes, he thought.

The Student's Story

He was now feeling rather panicked. His father seemed lost in a reverie of his own as the mobs converged from either side, with malevolent expressions and ancient war cries on their lips. He had not seen such realistic reconstructions in even the most intense virtual reality games he and his friends played. At this point he simply wanted out of there. What if the sensors malfunctioned? Suppose there were flaws in the engineering of the sim-bot psyches? Could they really afford to take that chance? He tugged at his mother's sleeve to get her attention, which was centred on the fear-stricken face of the man standing in the middle of the road, dressed exactly like his father; he really did seem at risk of serious injury.

The Psychologist's Tale

Sneha felt the pull on her sleeve and turned to see the look of apprehension on her son's face, his eyes wide. She had just earlier begun to feel that the level of graphic violence being simulated was inappropriate for a teenager. She realized now, from the look on her son's face, that she was right – this theme park had left him unnerved and clearly out of his depth.

However, as a researcher, her contact with a situation in which a lone innocent was caught in the middle of a communal riot ran contrary to expectations. Rather than a sense of ennui and derision for such mimetic excesses, she had begun to empathize with the forlorn figure before her. Her husband, after all the motivational speeches encouraging them to experience the park, had become strangely still. Sneha was caught between the desire to see the sequence through, and her sense of her son's growing unease.

The mobs on either side were about twenty feet away. Now was the time to act. Sneha took a long stride forward and clasped Nathu's hand; the sim-bot looked at her in surprise, and she wondered if his programming allowed for bodily contact with visitors. She ran down a side street, with Nathu by her side, struggling to keep up. She could sense his shock and bewilderment at this sudden turn of events precipitated by her intervention, in the wake of the imminent threat to his own life, and to his wife at home.

She turned to see that they were being chased. The mob was not going to let go of its prey so easily. For a second the psychological basis for such regressions into collective bloodlust crossed her mind: the erosion of individual ethical standards as identity was subsumed into the larger entity of the rampaging crowd. Before her, the narrow *galli* seemed to taper off into a dead end. There were havelis on either side – she banged at several doors, but all of them had been securely barricaded. Nathu's breathing had become laboured, his face was distorted with fear. She stopped and turned around, waving to her son to get behind her in the alcove. Deepak was just a step or two ahead of the rioters leading the mob, brandishing swords and hatchets.

As the first blow came crashing down on Nathu, standing beside her, she raised her hand. This then might well be the proof of the stability of the simulation as well as a contemporary version of the Turing Test that

might ultimately differentiate the human visitors from the sim-bots, she thought. Her gesture deflected the attacker's aim for a second, but the crowd continued to move in. Her final impression from this moment of mob frenzy was that of Deepak, coming to a halt in the alcove and frantically pressing the fail-safe freeze button.

Immediately, the attackers reverted to stasis, restored to robotic immobility and, as they did, the time bubble began to dissolve. Released from the maelstrom of memory, Gopal shook his head and raised his bleary eyes in their direction. At this very instant, she glimpsed a flicker of consciousness; if not quite human feeling, perhaps a recognition of her intention from the Nathu-bot.

As her heart rate began to slow down and her breathing became easier, she was overcome by a strange sense of loss.

So be it. This was enough.
For now.

DREAMING OF THE COOL GREEN RIVER

PRIYA SARUKAI CHABRIA

Arid wave after wave after wave of shimmering sand. The eye too shimmers. Heat sears. Windblown sand snakes slither across the land. Hissing like curses, sand scales glint through shearing gales. When the wind dies, mirages ripple through the dream of vast water. Far away, a celadon door is barely visible. Like a cave crouched at the foot of a sand dune.

The eye tunnels through the camel-coloured blaze to gaze at the immense door. Everything happens behind its smooth face. Occasionally, under a bloated moon, the silvery sands are raked by swivelling eyes of gold driving towards it. Tanktrucks. Once a month, a lone tanktruck creeps through billowing darkness. It waits for the wind to hush. Then, it slips down the open door, open as a mouth into a throat of deeper darkness.

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'Willie, die for 72 hours,' she says.

'No. Want you.'

He is in his teen avatar, heavy penis ready. Scant hair shadows his stripling body. Black down softens his upper lip.

'Willie, shutdown.' He curls his lip. Shuts his eyes. Stiffens.

The control room is corralled by screens skittering with information. She roller-skates towards the holding area. It echoes down the vestibule. Samsar trots in in the wake of this sound. Lights switch on at her approach. Perish as she passes. Whirring-clicking noises emanate from the holding area. The tanktruck is being stripped. Robots unload the forbidden cargo.

Notes

1. For the work of Horst Hoheisel and Andreas Knitz, on the Art of Memory, including 'Book-Mark Bonn 2013', see http://hoheisel-knitz.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=71&Itemid=143, accessed November 11, 2017.
2. A personal account of the composition of *Tamas* can be found in Bhisham Sahni, *Today's Pasts: A Memoir*, 2004, trans. Snehal Shingavi, Gurgaon: Penguin Books India, 2015.