

**Modern Indian Writing in Translation**  
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**Crossing the Ravi Part – 1**

**Length: 36:13**

Student: Hello and welcome to the session on Crossing the Ravi written by Gulzar. I will be reading the first section of the story. “It is a wonder that Darshan Singh did not go mad. His father had died. He had had to abandon his mother in what remained of the Gurdwara, and his wife had given birth to two babies at the same time, twins, both boys.

Darshan Singh did not know if he should laugh or cry. Fate had dealt him in a strange deal, taken away with one hand what she had given with the other. It was rumoured that freedom had come or was coming. So, it was hard to tell when it would reach Todar- Todarmalpur. Hindus and Sikhs were surreptitiously making their way into the safe haven of the Gurdwara. Shahini had been moaning in pain for the past few days and nights. These were the last days of her pregnancy. It was the first time she was giving birth.

Everyday, Darshan Singh would tell the family a new story about the riots, everyday his father would comfort him. ‘Nothing will happen son, nothing at all, has any Hindu or Sikh home being attacked so far?’ ‘But the Gurdwara was attacked, Bappaji, it has been set on fire twice and yet you want to go there.’

Student: Hello all. I will be reading the second session of the story Crossing the Ravi by Gulzar. “Darshan Singh felt silent. But all around him people were leaving their homes and making their way to the Gurdwara. ‘It is comforting together in one place. Bappaji, there is not a single Hindu or Sikh left in our alley. We are the only ones here.’ One night, 10 or 15 days later, the sound of Bappaji falling down in the courtyard woke everyone up. Cries of “Jo bole so nihaal” could be heard from the Gurdwara in the distance. Bappaji had been woken up by the noise and had gone up to the terrace to investigate. On his way down, he had slipped and tumbled down the stairs into the courtyard where his head had smashed into an axe that was lying there. Somehow or the other, they had managed to perform Bappaji’s last rights. Then they stuffed whatever little they possessed into a pillowcase and three of them made their way to the Gurdwara.

There was no dearth of frightened souls inside the Gurdwara. Nevertheless, Darshan Singh felt a little safer. He said, 'After all, we are not alone. If nothing else, we are close to our Blessed Guru.'

Groups of arm young volunteers petrol outside constantly. People had collected flour, dal, ghee from their homes and the community kitchen churned out meals throughout the day and night. But for how long could their provisions last? It was the unvoiced question everyone had. However, they tried to be hopeful, surely the government would send some help.

But which government someone would ask. The English have left, Pakistan have, has been created, but there is no Pakistani government in place yet. I have heard that the military is everywhere. They are taking caravans of Sharanarties up to the border under their care. Who are the Sharanarties? Refugees. We have never heard these words before.

Student: A group comprising two or three families who could no longer tolerate this burden of anxiety decided to set off for the border. 'We are leaving, we have heard that there are trains leaving from the railway station. How long can we sit about waiting? After all brother, one has to find the courage. The Blessed guru will not carry us on his shoulder.'

Another quoted from the sacred book to strengthen his argument. Nanak is the ship; he who boards the ship will cross safely. No sooner had the people left than a bubble of emptiness would form in their absence. But as soon as a fresh set of people came with news from the world outside, the bubble would burst.

Do you know a huge camp has been set up at the railway station? People are dying of hunger and because they have been eating rotten food, diseases are spreading. Five days ago, a train passed this way, there was not even room for a seed of sesame, people were even packed on the roof.

The next morning was Sankrat. Verses from the holy book were being recited throughout the day and night. Shahini gave birth to her twins at a very auspicious moment. Of the two; one baby was extremely weak, it had little chance of survival, but Shahini kept it alive through sheer force of will. That night someone said, a special train has come to get the refugees, let us go.

A large mass of people set out from the Gurudwara. It included Darshan Singh and Shahini who, though extremely weak decided to leave for the sake of sons. The mother refused to

budge, 'I will come son, I will leave with the next load. You take my daughter-in-law and my grandsons and go.'

Darshan Singh tried to dissuade her from staying but the priests intervened. 'The volunteers in the Gurudwara too try to bolster his courage. 'Leave now Sardarji, one by one we shall all go across the border, we will bring your mother with us.' And so Darshan Singh set out. He put his two babies in a roll top wicker basket, as though he was a street hawker who had set out with his family on top of his head.

Student: The train was at the railway station, but there was no space inside the train. People seemed to be growing out of its roof like grass. People saw the weak and sickly mother and her newly born babies, pulled her onto the roof and made some space for her. After about 10 hours, the train shuddered and began to move.

The evening was red as though bloodied, its face livid and ablaze. Shahini's breasts were suckle dry by her babies, she would lift one baby away, then put the other to her breast to suckle. The two infants wrapped in filthy rags looked like something that had been picked up from a garbage heap.

After sometime, as the train slowly pushed its way through the night Darshan Singh noticed that while one baby moved his arms and legs and even let out the occasional cry, the other was absolutely still. He thrust his hand inside the bundle and found it was stone cold. When Darshan Singh burst into tears, the people sitting around him realized what had happened. They tried to take the baby away from Shahini, but she seemed to have turned to stone too. She sat there with the wicker basket clasped to her chest, "No, one does not drink without his brother". Despite everyone's efforts, Shahini refused to let go of the basket. The train stopped 10 times and moved 10 times.

Student: "People kept speculating about the progress they were making, although no one could see anything in the dark. 'I am sure we have just crossed Khairabad.' 'Surely this is Guj-Gujranwala.' 'Just an hour more... as soon as we reach Lahore, it will be as though we have reached Hindustan.' In their nervous exhilaration, they began to chant religious slogans, "Har har Mahadev!" 'Jo bole so nihaal".

A wave seemed to ripple through a crowd as the train climbed a bridge. 'It is the Ravi River', 'It is the Ravi! That means we have reached Lahore.' In that clamour, someone whispered in

Darshan Singh's ear, 'Sardarji, throw the dead baby into the Ravi. That will be the end of its journey. What good will it do to take it across the border?'

Gently, Darshan Singh extricated the basket from his wife's grasp. Then, in one swift move, he plucked one of the bundles of rags out and flung it into the Ravi with a loud cry of 'Waheguru!' The faint cry of a baby was heard in the darkness. Terrified, Darshan Singh turned to look at Shahini. A dead baby was clinging to her breast. A way of noise erupted all around him "Wagah! Wagah!" 'Long live India!'

Professor: Hello Mridula, let's unpack the text analytically a bit more. So, what are your thoughts on this very brief story on the partition?

Student: So, the very first lines of this short story is very captivating, and the author is giving us a hint of, about what to expect from the story. In the very first paragraph itself, I think you get the crux of the story in the very first paragraph itself.

And the story is talking about the Partition of India and Pakistan and I think that it is not just talking about the loss of country as a whole, because we have lost so many lives because of this Partition and we had to go through a terrible phase that was one of the most terrible phases that as a country we had to go through.

And this, this short story also talks about the personal loss of the protagonist, who had to go through a lot because of the Partition, not just as a father, but as also as a son, as a husband.

Professor: Correct.

Student: As I said, the very first line of this short story, 'It is a wonder that Darshan Singh did not go mad.' The writer is expecting, the author is giving a verdict that although he has gone through so much, it is a wonder that he had not gone mad. So definitely as readers will be expecting, that we will be expecting something terrible must have happened. So, the scene is set already. When we read it will, as we read it will, we will know what is going to be the result.

Professor: Correct. You have rightly pointed out that the first paragraph is significant. In fact, it's like the chorus, it's like a classical chorus, in the sense that it gives you a little bit of context and all that kind of, gives an anticipation of the things to come. So we do know that madness is the kind of reaction that we would associate with historical events such as these, there is no way of making sense of all these political shifts that are happening, right? So, either you go

mad, or you completely shut down. So, these are the kind of the stereotypical responses or the usual responses to cataclysmic events, such as the Partition.

And you also point out quite rightly, that this story gives us a massive loss on a personal scale too. It's a political loss because two nations are split up, but it is also a personal tragedy for many people who have been caught up in this big divide. And in a sense that, the pregnancy, giving birth is also symbolically connected to the birth pangs of these two nations.

So, this paragraph is quite rich in that regard. And I am also interested in the idea of fate, which is mentioned there. 'Fate had dealt him a strange deal, taken away with one hand what she had given with the other.'

So, what does Fate give? If we kind of break it down, Fate gives him two sons, perhaps to good parents right? The two sons are the tangible concrete details that we get. So, it's a real blessing to get two sons at one go. It's a kind of a rich harvest to a male, isn't it?

So, he has been blessed in that regard, but Fate is also taken over in the sense that, we are told that the father has died, right? The death comes in the narrative a bit later, but that information is already, chorus-like, given in the first paragraph. So there is a personal reward and personal loss. But to come back to the idea of Fate, if you want to think about the reasons behind the death of the father, then it becomes a little bit more complex, isn't it?

So, we'll hang on to this idea of fate because if you read the story a bit closely, you will realize there is no pointing the finger of blame at any political administration or any political figure. So, the only reference to any kind of authority is this figure of Fate. So, embedded in the figure of Fate, we can kind of interpret so many other political dimensions if we want to. So, Fate can be seen as a kind of a shorthand to talk about really a problematic political administration and related political figures. So, thank you Mridula for your valuable insights.

Student: Ok Ma'am.

Professor: Hello, Sanchar. Welcome. What are your responses to this Partition text?

Student: Well actually, I would like to find out something more striking like the beginning paragraph. The last line of the paragraph and the end of the story. I think that there is a sharp symbol of irony there like when he says that fate has chosen him to engage in a strange deal where he is given something and he is taken something in opposite. And in the end when he mistakenly throws his living child outside into the Ravi and mistakenly keeps the dead child.

It is basically an irony which is spoken here. So, I think transcending the borders of what he is talking about Partition and religion, and how once the people are leaving their homeland and amidst a terrible trauma, they are crossing the border and everything. Aside of all these things, there is a personal turmoil, which is more concerning this one. So, perhaps for this attachment of the personal turmoil to this grand scheme of things, the other is heightened. So, vice versa. It's a very, I mean, there is one part, which is ironical, and the other part it is definitely noting on the political social situations of the then partition.

Professor: Yeah, you are quite right. In the sense that we are made to forget about the political decisions, the grand decisions which are taken in boardrooms, we forget that when we read the story, it's a story which really focuses on the minutiae of a particular man going through this agony. You know, perhaps he does not care really, I mean, we are not told in the story, whom he blames, whom he kind of finds to be the responsible figure behind this mass migration that. All those political details are in the margins or kind of non-existent and the personal loss, we begin with personal loss, don't we? In the sense that the father dies quite unexpectedly, and if you go back, I wanted to go back to that section.

The father doesn't want to go to the Gurdwara, but the son does. And then later on we are told that there are a lot of noises outside and this old man, the father of Darshan Singh, has been woken up by the noise and he had gone up to the terrace to investigate. On his way down, he had slipped and tumbled down the stairs into the courtyard, where his head had smashed into an axe that was lying there.

So, it's an accident, plain and simple. He just wants to find out what are those noises, and on the way down, he slips and cracks his head against the blunt, against the sharp axe. So, it is a very strange moment I would think, in the sense that this figure is not attacked, nobody is attacking him.

So, Gulzar has kind of consciously pushing the real communal violence outside of the text in the sense that they are all reported. We hear about them. So, the father dies of an accident and the two babies. Nobody attacks them, even though we know that there are real incidents of women being attacked, babies being murdered, and so on and so forth, within this text, when we are following this personal tragedy, one child dies because that child is ailing. So, there is a lot of symbolism here in this story, which perhaps Gulzar wants us to kind of think about deeply. Of course, there is violence, of course there is riots and so on and so forth, but how do you kind of generalize, how do you kind of, you know, look at these things in a larger fashion.

So, that death is very interesting to me and I would compare that death with the accidental or, you know, the death by malnutrition of that little child, the new born baby. And then we have another death that you point out, that is homicide in the sense that the father mistakenly takes the live child and throws it to the darkness. And my question is, you are pointing out to the irony. My question is, did this woman know, you know? How far was she aware about this kind of confusion? Look at, let us go back to those lines.

She has the basket in her hands, right? Gently, Darshan Singh extricated the basket from his wife's grasp, then in one swift move, he plucked one of the bundles of rags out and flung it into the Ravi with a loud cry of "Waheguru". And then he turned to look at Shahini, a dead baby was clinging to her breast. By the time that the baby is in the air, she knows that she is clutching a dead baby, maybe.

So, this question, the question that did she know, what was going through her mind? And I returned to the point about madness that Mridula first started out with, did she go mad in these kind of chaotic situation? There is a lot of personal turmoil. Madness is the only reaction to this kind of cataclysmic circumstances.

So, I am kind of provoked to ask these questions. And the funny thing is, she is not giving up on that dead baby early on too. She sat there with a wicker basket clasped to her chest, "no one does not drink without his brother". So, we may not get the answer to this question, but we are provoked to ask this question, how far she knew, which baby was flying out of the train from the rooftop. So, that thing is kind of very painful and tragic to read. I want to kind of go further into the reactions of the other figures but we will do that later after I move from here.

Student: I believe that this, the inaction apparently which is representing the characters right now, like the mother, as well as I mean, the way she had been like, inactive, it's an effect of the trauma. So, by far the other circumstances about knowing the fact that they are leaving their homeland forever and everything, these things have rendered them basically passive.

So, this passivity or this traumatic experience which they are undergoing, I mean initially, it is already a traumatic experience that they have to leave their origin. They have to leave the place where, which they have known since their childhood and they are leaving to a different land. And added to that, they have this problem of a child who has died already, because of malnutrition. And the weak mother. And there are so many things which are psychologically overburdening them. And in the middle of everything, when there is nothing for them to hold

except to their faith, I mean which is the only thing that people comes face to face in front of danger and crisis.

So, this is something perhaps here it is, as I said like, since it is an irony, perhaps when he said, “Waheguru” he is offering it probably to the highest deity or to the highest God, which he believes. But on the other hand, he gets something which he never expected to, like he gets the country, like the shout about the Wagah border and getting into India, he gets the country, but he never gets the child.

So, he goes to a homeland, but he loses probably the only thing that would make them live for the rest of their lives. So, I think that maybe it’s more causal, the psychological trauma is more causal due to all the things that have happened earlier. And that is what the story doesn’t speak, but that is more underlining there. That’s the thing.

Professor: Correct. I like the point about, he moving on to this new country without, no progeny, you know. Which is kind of prefigured or foreshadowed in this comment that fate gives with one hand and takes with the other. So, she blesses him with sons, but both sons are taken away quite ruthlessly, right? And in such a fashion that he cannot face the reality. So, it is a very cruel fate that he kind of comes across on that train top, so that is one thing.

The other thing I want to go back to is the speed with which the narrative moves. It’s a pretty fast moving story. If you if you think about it, there is a lot of action, there is a lot of movement, and you kind of sense the urgency of the people. And that was kind of made evident in the number of remarks that kind of keeps coming up while they are making up their minds to leave the gurudwara. And look at the number of rumours and hearsay and reports, and somebody says, “Do you know which camp has been set up by the railway station?” And then there is another one, “People are dying of hunger because they have been eating rotten food.” And then “Five days ago, a train passing...,” So many reports, not really connected, yet not so unconnected as well, one after the other and people move on based on these rumours and reports, and there is no way they can ascertain whether this is fact or fiction.

And when he tries to get the mother to come, the mother refuses and then he goes with his family. And the priest intervenes and says, ‘Leave now Sardarji one by one, we shall go cross the border.’



The funny thing is, he doesn't have the time. He doesn't have the time to think through decisions, and he just follows the advice of others because it is easy to, and which I am going to connect with that comment made in his ear, "Sardarji, throw the dead baby into the Ravi".

Here some priest says that leave her alone, you go she will follow later, the mother will come later. And once again there is a kind of repetitive tendency in the story that this man is made to follow the advice of others. "Sardarji, throw the dead baby into the Ravi". Somebody says that, we cannot know who exactly this is. It is some unidentified figure in that crowd. So it is the crowd's advice that this man follows.

"Throw the dead baby into the Ravi that will be the end of its journey, what good will it do to take it across the border?" What good is a dead baby, it is no longer useful, get rid of it. And gently he follows orders. To disastrous consequences. So, I was just following that narrative pattern of this figure being led by a larger community.

Student: I feel that this is actually more metaphorical. In the sense, these two issues which you just mentioned right now, like the mother who is of the opinion that you should, that the character should move forward with the family and the other person generally in the crowd who is saying that you should leave the dead baby. Something, it is a third person's voice.

I think equally we have the situation that the country before dividing, nobody asked what is there? What is the inhabitant's choice where they want to live or something? So, that was also a third person intervention, where they are basically asked or rather forced to move out of the country due to their political and administrative considerations. So that is also a third person speaking.

So, I think that here in this narrative, where the two persons are being a third person narrative. The unspoken narrative, which is there which is talking about the partition, the real life situation there, which is outside the personal circle of their lives. That is also like an outsider who is actually suggesting or rather forcing them to do something which they actually do not want. So, I think that this is a common characteristics both in these two narratives.

Professor: Yeah, it is very metaphoric. I agree. It is metaphoric in a really larger sense. Let me give it concrete shape to the idea that you have just pointed out. The British administration was supposed to stay on in India until 1948, they preponed it by a year. Mountbatten says, the last Viceroy of India says, "I'm going to leave early". And when they asked him why, they said,

“Why should I stay?”. Britain were exhausted by World War 2, their finances are completely gone because of that massive war and they want to get out as quickly as they can.

And what they do is they bring in this advocate, this barrister, Cyril Radcliffe from Britain to do the carving up of territories. And the very ironic thing here is that, I am just trying to connect it with this metaphoric point that you were raising that this Darshan Singh is being advised by others, so, this advice literally comes out from the voice or from the figure of Cyril Radcliffe who has never been to India before then. When he arrives in India on July 8, I think July 8 1947, he has never set foot in India before. That is the first time he is coming to India and he does the job in five weeks. Five weeks is all that Mountbatten gives him.

And he kind of pores over outdated maps and then he just draws line across villages and other regions, cutting up people's lives. And what he does is, he gives the divided territory to Mountbatten, I think on August 9, a couple of days before the independence. And Mountbatten, India doesn't release it until well after the independence.

So, by August 17, I think if I am not mistaken, so people were completely confused. Confused to the extent that they were driven mad as to the loss of identity for their places that they did not know whether this was Pakistan, whether this was India. And Lahore, the place that is referred to here, they did not know Lahore was going to stay with Pakistan or going to go to India. Hindus thought it was going to go to India, and at the last minute, it was revealed that it was going to Pakistan.

So, there was a lot of bloodshed and chaos because of that, you know, that suppression of information. And Mountbatten didn't want to do that, because he didn't want to be responsible for the loss of law and order. He had his own selfish interest to protect. So what he does is, he just gets out of the country and then chaos descends.

So, all these political turmoil that are outside of the pages, kind of informs our reading too in a way. And we kind of like symbolic meaning out of all these commentary that we get. So, we really need to see that this figure though he is following the advice of the others, he is kind of caught in this.

Student: Yeah.

A conversation between two students starts:

Student 1: I would like to start with, I am trying to place this in the conversations that we were having. So, I think that all the readings of the story goes into the nationalist narrative. So, especially with the happenings, or the factual happenings. So, I think it is centred around nation and its construction. But also as it was mentioned earlier, the national action has been pushed out into the border and it is more or less focusing at the human condition.

So, I think like how we have read Tagore before, especially since the main moment, where he throws the baby out into the Ravi river. So, it's sandwiched between the 'Long live India!' and 'We are reaching Hindustan.' So the narrative function of that part, I think it makes us, as mentioned earlier, the irony part of it makes us see that it is less about the nation and more about family.

Student 2: I mean, like you said, the bit where he throws the baby out, does this sentence, where it says he did not know whether to laugh or to cry. You kind of feel that way at the end of the story. That's, I mean, I read it slightly differently. I thought the bit where they talk about refugees, and they say, who are the Sharanarties, and they say refugees, and the comment is, 'We have never heard these words before.' Which means that, I suppose, they have never had these categories before.

So, at the moment of naming something, you are also creating it. Which in a sense is I mean, if you theorize extensively, you can see you can draw it out to the moment of nation-making as well. But, I mean, you're not even sure that they have reached Hindustan, because you remember, it is dark and they cannot see anything. Which is why he accidentally throws out the baby that he is not supposed to throw out.

So, it could just be speculation that it's the Ravi river. So, I think the way he has written it, makes you want to, I mean, it is easy to say that, 'Yes, as they are crossing Ravi river, he throws it out,' But they are not even sure that it is the Ravi. So, the way he talks about, or the way he shows how uncertain everything is, it's just very well written. Yeah. I mean, stories like these are always taken into, use it to see what's going on in the nation in the bigger context thing, but like you say.

I mean, this is a man who is living somewhere in Pakistan, possibly, what is today Pakistan in what seems like a small village. And he and his wife and his family go to the gurudwara and they put their things in a pillowcase, which shows that they are not concerned with big things

like nation-making, or opening things out. They're worried about their lives and he is not even sure what happens to his mother, because there is no closure in that sense.

Student 1: Also I think the passage about his father dying. So, I am not sure of what the narrative function is; the father is dying, but also the child is dying. So almost as if the past is also on and his future is also getting stuck somewhere. But other than that, I do not see why that bit is inserted into it.

Professor: Wonderful discussion. I just want to come back to this confusion as to whether we are even sure that they are crossing the Ravi. That's the point you were kind of talking about, right? Yes. I think it's absolutely night time as well, which adds to the confusion. And they are kind of throwing out names of places that they are passing through.

'Surely this is Gujranwala!' and 'Just an hour more, we will be in Lahore.' And this nervous exhilaration and excitement in that night time and which also leads to this man's confusion about which is the live baby and which is the dead one.

There's also clamour. Everybody is shouting as well. So we need to kind of pay close attention to all these minor details there in terms of the diction to kind of recreate that atmosphere. So, it is the Ravi, somebody kind of ascertains, Ravi is really significant because the river which kind of is separating as well as kind of bringing two communities together.

And it is also a moment of transition, right? They are crossing the Ravi on a train, which is connecting to or dividing. Either way you look at it, it's either connecting or dividing people and communities so Ravi has a very symbolic function. And there is also this idea of immersing the dead in the river. So that tradition is also kind of subtly evoked there.

And I want to come back to the point about the destruction of the family that Ananthajith was raising. It's a very good point that you notice that the father was dead, the two grandchildren are dead. So, both the past and the future is futile and hopeless and bleak, and there is also a general breakup of the family, the mother is left behind, as you pointed out.

So, in that period, families were completely broken up. They were kind of left behind deliberately because they couldn't take them together for various practical reasons. People were left behind, mothers left behind the children, and husbands their wives and things like that for safety, security, logistics, and so on and so forth.

So, we also get a kind of a reference to that in Toba Tek Singh, right? Where Toba Tek Singh is put in that asylum and his family moves on. And then there is talk about the daughter and the safety of the daughter and things like that. So, you can also read Toba tek Singh together with this particular story.

So, breakup of the family is symbolic, and it connects us to the breakup of the larger nation too and the psyche itself. The human psyche itself is shattered by these events by these, for want of a better word, for these fights over land. So, how the psyche is kind of destroyed is the subtext of this story too. Is there anything else you want to revisit?

Student 2: You were wondering about the narrative function of the Father, I think it serves to highlight that both the father and his son, I mean he is able to give a proper ceremony for his father's ashes with the last rites and everything but with the son he doesn't even give the son last rites, he ends up killing his son. I mean, it's a superficial observation.

Professor: So, another thing is that new vocabularies are being coined, new words come up. The name for refugees, right? These historical events create new words and new figures, new ways of committing atrocities and things like that. So, we knew, we see human beings in a completely new light, not an admirable light but a very, very new light as well.

And is the community feeling always the best safe feeling? That idea is also kind of evoked. He says that there are safety numbers. But we realize that there is also, you know, a threat when you are being advised by a guru, so if you think that you can eat together, pray together and do other things, you might also need your own individual mind to make rational decisions to come to a clear conclusion. So that is also kind of indicated in that advice there. When somebody says 'Throw it,' he does it. So, we need the individual to function in a rational way for things to be more rational and less the other way.

Any other thoughts? Okay. Thank you for your ideas.

The conversation between the two students and the professor ends.