

## PARTITION: TRUTH AND/OR NARRATIVE IN DOCUMENTED HISTORY, PEDAGOGY, INDIAN CINEMA AND LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*Partition is one of the darkest chapters of India's independence. All it took the colonial masters is few strokes in a paper and a line drawn in the map to bring the political leaders of Indian National Congress and Muslim League into a consensus to form two separate countries. What followed was a cataclysmic change in the lives of millions of common people on both sides of the artificially created lines. The traumatic process of forced displacement holds the pain of destruction of one's lived space, cultural practice, and social ties. The reckless decisions at the top in a chaotic time led to millions of broken homes. Just two days after India got its independence, mass migration started. The horror and trauma still haunt the survivors who are old now but carry vivid memory of it. An Exploratory Descriptive Qualitative (EDQ) approach has been used to understand partition from multiple perspectives. The study is divided into four parts. The first part is an understanding of the historical reality of partition from a socio-political and cultural perspective. The second part attempts to analyse history of partition and pedagogy. The third part brings out the partition related emotions in the literature discussing seminal works of Manto, Amrita Pritam, Sunil Gangopadhyaya. The fourth part deals with the films on partition and representation of partition in popular cinema. The conclusion leaves an open-ended space for scholars and readers to engage in meaningful discussion on partition that will focus on the healing of the partition wounds. Because the aim is to convey political and social reality of that period to an entirely new generation in 2022 and beyond who are a part of a new global world. The focus should be on the content in history and pedagogy that includes literature and cinema on partition and helps to bring a higher level of sensitivity and empathy to understand partition.*

**Keywords:** Forced Displacement, Partition, Mass Migration, Partition Horrors Remembrance Day, Oral History, Partition Literature, Cinema on Partition.

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### Introduction

After 75 years of a strange stoic silence in public sphere about Partition of India, on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2021, the PM of India, Narendra Modi declared that 14<sup>th</sup> August would be observed as 'Partition Horrors Remembrance Day' every year. The PM tweeted "Partition pains can never be forgotten. Millions of our sisters and brothers were displaced and many lost their lives due to mindless hate and violence. In memory of the struggles and sacrifices of our people, 14<sup>th</sup> August will be observed as Partitions Horrors Remembrance Day. May the Partition Horrors Remembrance Day keep reminding us of the need to remove the poison of social divisions, disharmony, and further strengthen the spirit of oneness, social harmony and human empowerment." This announcement led to different seminars and events at educational institutions of the country. In 2022, the UGC implored all academic institutions to plan the observance of this day. Educational institutions followed this government mandate that came through a circular. The academia suddenly became active and started looking at the subject of partition from different vantage points.

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### **The History of Partition**

India's independence in 1947 came just after few hours of official declaration of partition. What we get in the documented history is that just few strokes in a paper and a line drawn in the map by the colonial masters decided the fate of India and Pakistan. General public at large had no say in the process. We have seen politics of emotions playing an active role to set the narrative where millions of broken homes and displacement was attributed to colonial designs and unlawful demands by Muslim league to create a separate nation state on religious lines. Just two days after India got its independence mass migration started. The horror and trauma still haunt the survivors who are old now but carry vivid memory of it.

There was a strange silence over common civilisation of the past. (Butalia,2000) The line hurriedly drawn on the map became the only truth. People of both nations were taught to recognise the line as the boundary of their homeland. People of both the countries were now taught to recognise a new enemy.

Some of the questions that remains unanswered in the documented history are the areas that social science researchers must look into. These questions are:

- Why was there a conspicuous silence about a composite culture that was so vibrant before the partition?
- Was it erased because of the gruesome violent incidents and forced displacements?
- Was it because the history that was documented in both the countries needed to portray each other as enemies to gain political mileage and support from the citizens?
- Why was only the colonial government demonised for this sinister plan of partition by the liberals and the political rivalry between the Congress and Muslim league been either undermined or overlooked?
- Why was this silence promoted?
- Why are those memories which never were a part of the narrative of partition in the documented history, is important for the new generation?
- Why should the new generation know about the refugees and their angst?
- What good will come out of bringing out those stories of common people?
- why there have not been any effort to create a platform for these voices to get an expression?

### **Understanding Partition from a Socio-Cultural Perspective**

When we talk of forced displacement, the political narratives come to dominate the documented history that is linear. Both the countries were trying to establish their distinct political hegemony hence blamed each other and held each other responsible for the violence and atrocities that the displaced people faced. But, beyond the political narratives, there have been voices asking for the silent zones to be taken into account.

Urvashi Butalia, in her book 'The Other Side of Silence' tries to fill that gap by compiling the lived experiences of people by keeping their private painful accounts at the centre to give a human face to the statistics of those millions of people who were displaced, and experienced the horror of rape, murder, and violence in their ugliest forms. The accounts were taken from the victims and their family members by conducting interviews over a period of ten long years and examining diaries, letters, memoirs and parliamentary documents. She focussed how the event affected the people on the margins. In one of her interviews on July, 2022 she spoke at length about the silences of memories.

Krishna Sobti, another strong voice on partition maintains that the common threads of the composite culture is just not possible to be erased. Remembering her childhood days, she had said in an interview, "In spite of political tensions, people lived in harmony with each other. Each respected the other's otherness. Both the communities were wholly self-assured about threads that held them together, threads like common language, dialects, and a way of life, none of which bore any reference to religious identities." (Bhalla,1997)

In most of the documented history, the focus is mostly on the partition experience of Punjab in North India. But the Bengal experience is conveniently side-lined by the historians and scholars. It was in 2016 that the book by Debjani Haldar, 'The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders, New Identities' brought out some basic differences between the partition experience of the North and the East. Unlike the

cataclysmic effects of partition in the North, there was a series of migration and counter migration happening in the East over a period of time. The caste equation was far more complex in Bengal where the lower caste Hindus supported Muslim League and had migrated to East Pakistan before 1947. Partition saw a mass exodus from every stratum. Between 1958 to 1964, huge number of landless labourers came in search of work and never went back. This complexity comes out brilliantly in the literature and cinema. (Haldar, 2016)

Sinha and Dasgupta in 2011 brought out a historical study on 'The Great Calcutta Killings and Noakhali Genocide'. This book breaks down certain myths about the Muslim Community in India before partition. They brought out the division between the Ashrafs who are considered the main descendants of the Mughal lineage and the converted Muslims of India known as Ajlafs. It is an irony that much against the political narrative, people were not united by religion during the partition. As both countries celebrated their independence with euphoria and a sense of achievement at the end of a long struggle against colonialism, the personal narrative of every refugee who migrated from their home to a strange land with fear, trepidation, and uncertainty looming large. Suddenly by one stroke of a pen, the thing that became important was their religious identity. (Sinha & Dasgupta, 2021)

### **Partition and Pedagogy**

The books that were written by historians with nationalist and Marxist leanings in 1970's continued till 2005. Historians like Romila Thapar, Bipin Chandra, Satish Chandra wrote about history in general and partition history in particular in such a way that there was no scope for a child to deconstruct from a picture or story or learn history in a constructive way. In contrast to these writings, the chapter on Partition: 'Understanding Partition: Politics, Memories, Experiences' by Anil Sethi that was included in NCERT book in 2005 treated partition in a very sensible way. It had facts, documents, news clippings, oral history and mention of literary works that emerged in the post partition period. Multivocality or Heteroglossia is an important aspect when it is about a historical event that affects multitude in many different ways.

The CBSE removed this chapter from standard 12<sup>th</sup> syllabus in 2020. The decision was taken for the batch of 2020-21 amid the COVID -19 pandemic. HRD minister Ramesh Pokhriyal defended the decision with the argument that because the times were unusual and the problem of pandemic was unprecedented, the burden of students have been reduced by 30% and hence this chapter was deleted along with similar steps taken in all other subjects. Few other chapters that were removed were, 'Democracy and Diversity', 'Caste, Religion, and Gender', 'Challenges to Democracy, Federalism, Citizenship, Nationalism, and Secularism'.

On 08 July, 2020, two articles written by two different authors Vageesha Taluja on republicworld.com and Eram Agha on news18.com disseminating this information had no questions regarding this decision. Because the content and language were not only similar but exactly the same brings genuine doubts regarding the official mandate from the government to be executed. This decision was neither contested nor objected openly or debated in mainstream media. There were few objections made by opposition, but the academia remained almost silent is nothing new because the top-down approach in India's education system is an accepted reality. Parul Srivastava on youthkiawaz.com which runs completely on crowd funding discussed this action taken by the government in a critical way. The focus was on the importance of including history of partition in the syllabus. The announcement by the PM in 2021 came as a mandate to observe Partition Horrors Remembrance Day. At the same time the importance of partition has been kept out of the pedagogy of social science in high school level. When children of class VIII to class X are studying about French Revolution, Russian Revolution, German Holocaust in great details, it is a matter of great academic concern by not including Partition history in the syllabus. Academia must look into this development and discuss it with CBSE and NCERT.

However, the proposal to establish centres for 1947 Partition research in DU and JNU have been announced in August 2022. These centres will encourage to study refugee issues, and gaps in the history about these events. How the idea shapes up and gets executed will depend on the kind of autonomy these centres will enjoy to take up research.

### **Partition Literature as an Extension of Social History**

It is important to read partition's literature to develop an insight towards the social reality of that period and the significant influence of that reality in our present. It is also important to check and question whether our own perception about religious and communal violence during partition is mere reflection of the general public perception and sentiment created through political narrations. But one may also ask how can an imaginative fiction or a memoir written by a person possibly articulate such a gigantic social

churning and violence brought by partition? Do we then not call partition as one event, but many smaller ones because the pain, guilt, and violence faced by different people from different castes, communities, gender brought in different stories with them distinct from one another?

The range of extensive literature on partition includes historical monographs, scholarly articles, memoirs, Novels, Stories etc. where we can see many events indicating the complex social structure of a pluralistic society. A literary historiography brings into the public knowledge domain many voices that often are silent. Literature of the partition period seems to look at the little histories of people in the margins of different communities, the violence within family, the delayed effects of displacement etc. They make more sense at times than the fact sheets of officially documented history.

Literature always gives a nuanced view of history and culture of people. The literary work of different people of that era can bring out the gaps in the linear narrative created by the historians and substantiate them with the accounts and lived experiences of people. The micro events, personal accounts bring out the less visible aspects of the event. (Sengupta,2016)

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in their essay, 'Speaking for Themselves: Partition History, Women's Histories' wrote, "The futility and tragedy of demarcating boundaries, and the impossibility of dividing homes and hearts are the theme of story after story, as is the terrible violence that accompanied forced migration. Nowhere in the thousands of pages of fiction and poetry do we find even a glimmer of endorsement for the price paid for freedom, or admission that this "qurbani" (sacrifice) was necessary for the birth of two nations. Rather, a requiem for lost humanity, for the love between communities, for shared joys and sorrows, a shared past. In the annals of Indian history, Partition is unique for the literary outpouring that it occasioned." (Menon & Bhasin 1998)

Whether it is Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh', Amrita Pritam's 'Pinjr' or Sunil Gangopadhyas 'Arjun', they show multiple emotions that are complex from anger, hatred, pain, revenge, and deceit to love, empathy, longing and forgiveness.

Amrita Pritam, one of the most celebrated literary figures of India, has an illustrious literary career. One of her poems, 'AankhanWaris Shah Nu' and her debut novel 'Pinjar' are cited as the most brilliant work that touched a chord with everyone on either side of the border because of the nuanced description of human emotions. The story of Pinjar is the story of Puro whose life changes suddenly when she gets kidnapped by a Muslim boy Rashid. The reason of the abduction was to take revenge on the family of Puro because someone from Puro's family had wronged Rashid's family in the past. It was terrible for Puro who was happily dreaming about her marriage to Ramchand. She couldn't come to terms with the sudden isolation, rootlessness she faced along with her brutal abduction and rape. After two weeks, when she manages to escape and reaches her own home, her family refuses to accept her. Suddenly she is utterly helpless because the hope of getting back to her own home is completely shattered. She returns to her perpetrator in a state of utter helplessness. A forced marriage to Rashid converts her into a Muslim. She moves with the family to a new place due to partition. A new home in a new homeland Pakistan. The trauma inflicted on her makes her a living skeleton – Pinjar. She would often go back to her happy memories when she was Puro. This is the strange homing desire of the displaced that remains an unfulfilled dream. It was this nostalgia of her own home that kept her alive. But circumstances change when she discovers the gentler side of her abductor. "My home is now in Pakistan" she says when she accepts her motherhood and her new identity as Rashid's wife.

Saadat Hasan Manto's story 'Toba Tek Singh' brings out an emotion of belongingness for one's own village in the most profound way. The protagonist Bishen Singh, a lunatic feels that Toba Tek Singh is not just his village that he wants to go back to, but it is his heart, soul, and essence and his reason to live. This story is about an eternal desire of a safe place called home, a desire to belong, perhaps an idealised world but everyone wants to belong to this place of his own safety zone. No border can draw this line in one's heart where he wants to belong to. In the incoherent gibberish "O par thi, gugur di..." Bishen Singh shows his anger for the government for taking such crazy decision. This is the most effective satire of partition. Even in his lunacy, he feels organically linked to his village Toba Tek Singh - his imaginary beautiful world which is his home and he wants to go there. Manto emphasizes that the cultural identity and mutual love and respect has nothing to do with people's religious identity. The story ends with Bishen Singh refusing to budge from the no man's land. Calling that place Toba Tek Singh, he crashes down and breathes his last. The end symbolically brings a profound point Manto wants to make, no government has the power to rule the heart and mind of the people despite using all the force to displace them and separate them from their own home and their own people.

Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934 – 2012) is regarded as the most influential writer in the post Tagore era. His novel 'Arjun' is one of his best with partition theme. "The partition of India meant many losses for many people. Some lost their lives, some everything they possessed.....I lost the red and blue and silver dreams of my childhood." He carries the pain and horror of discovering the dead body of his neighbour Amladi. Some people in their rage had gruesomely raped and murdered her threw her body in the Jute field. Like their horrified neighbours, Arjun's family too decides to migrate to Kolkata. They learn to live in the platform of Sealdah and beg on the streets. Later, they join few refugees to forcibly occupy an abandoned orchard. Arjun adapts to the new surrounding and takes the benefits of unchartered urban opportunities. While Arjun makes education his recourse to fight with the challenges of displacement, his brother Somnath becomes frozen and trapped in the past. Arjun a bright student wants to do research after M.Sc but such big dreams are not realistic for refugees staying in the colonies. He focusses on the survival. The moral ambiguity that is shown in the story where Arjun abandons his love interest Labonyo in a vulnerable stage of struggle and distances himself from his co-migrants is just a reflection of the reality that we come across regularly. The only aim of this Arjun is to become a 'Nagorik', a citizen of the new metropolitan space and become a part of the city's much desired middle class.

The very fact that Indian author Geetanjali Shri won the International Booker prize for 'Tomb of Sand', the translation of her book in Hindi 'Ret samadhi' in 2022, a novel that uses partition as an important backdrop has come as a surprise to many people. The novel features the story of a woman in her eighties who attempts a journey to Pakistan, where she lived before partition. This proves that the political messages that the literary works give are far more profound than the actual political statements made by politicians or the statistics and descriptions given in the documented history.

### **Cinema Depicting Partition**

Nemai Ghosh's film Chhinnamul (1950) in Bengali language meaning the uprooted is the story of uprooting of a village during the partition. The film starts with the serene and placid visuals of a small village called Naldanga in East Bengal. The Protagonist Srikanto and his young wife leading a life much in love. The first half of the film focuses on the idyllic beauty and languid pace of village life. It is shown that two opportunists one Hindu and one Muslim plotting a conspiracy and the villagers are forced to sell off everything in throwaway price and go to Calcutta. The film was not intended to entertain, rather the only aim was to get the true representation of the life of refugees. It was meant for a larger audience to empathise and the government agencies to take action. The refugees plagued with poverty, squalor, and epidemics shown in the film were real. The shoe string budget and the difficulty he had to undergo to complete the film at such difficult times sadly did not get its due. It is sad that a Russian director Pudvokin bought the rights and dubbed it in Russian and showed to Russian audience, but in India no one bothered to restore it.

RitwikGhatak made the partition trilogy with films – Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960), Komal Gandhar (1961), and Subarnarekha (1965). All three films had depictions of partition. In Meghe Dhaka Tara, life of a middle class uprooted family is portrayed beautifully. The protagonist Nita's character was shown as an epitome of self-sacrifice of a woman to rebuild their life and in the process losing herself. Her disillusionment at her own family's attitude towards her brings around a deeper question about women who are wronged by partition as much as they are wronged by their own families.

His film 'Subarnarekha', not just showed rootlessness of the victims of partition, but brought out how political and economic crisis resulted in moral degradation that touched everyone. The character of Sita who chooses prostitution when she loses her husband symbolises that degradation out of sheer helplessness and desperation to live on amidst poverty.

The film 'Komal Gandhar' symbolises an emptiness in the victims of partition. His own memories of his boyhood haunted him forever. The scene of a drama when the theatre artists were enacting the scene of the impact of political decision where common people needed to accept the status of refugee leaving everything that they called their own. He himself had to undergo the life of a refugee when he reached Kolkata in 1950. In his heart he always carried a hope of an Eldorado, a promised land, a home that is waiting for him.

Partition has been depicted in some Hindi movies where only Punjab is shown as the main affected area because most of the writers and film makers of Bollywood were from Punjab and had come to Mumbai after the partition. Films like 'Lahore' by M.L Anand in 1949, 'Aag' by Raj Kapoor in 1948, V. Shantaram's 'Apna Desh' in 1949 etc. have depicted the horror and trauma of partition as an important part of the story.

But it was not until 'GarmHawa' was made in 1973 by M.SSathyu, that people actually could get to see an entire film in Hindi revolving around partition. The film that IsmatChughtai wrote specifically for the purpose to make a film touched upon those issues that is usually overlooked by people when they discuss about partition. How a joint family is disintegrated gradually and how the family had to face circumstances only because of their religious identity forces the audience to reflect on those people and their state who chose to stay back in India despite all the odds. The film very intelligently brings out the existential challenges of average middle class Indians on the post partition period which were common for people of both religions.

### **The Problematic Representation of Partition in Popular Cinema**

Cinematic image is one of the most powerful ways by which past is made available to people who are farther away from the event of the past. In case of popular cinema like 'Gadar ek Prem katha' or 'Border' where filmmakers made a conscious choice to create a hostile monstrous other became superhits. Parallel can be drawn with Pakistani cinema 'Waar' made with the support of Pakistan Army fit into the scheme of political narrative of the respective countries. In the official history there is a conspicuous absence of the other side of the story. Social evils often are given religious colours for political gains or create and pedal certain narratives. The number of such popular cinema is very high where the audience loves to watch the rhetoric uttered against the enemy country.

The viewers in 2022 are a part of a new global world. They need a higher level of sensitivity and empathy to understand the literature and cinema based on partition. Through every socio political and cultural discourses and literature of that time is reverberated with the experiential legacy of partition, there are not many films on this era. But few good cinemas depicting the stories of refugees and their life speak volumes about different aspects of human psyche - from the most gruesome and ugly to the most beautiful and powerful. They can be included as a part of pedagogy to discuss partition and society during India's independence.

### **Conclusion**

This study was an attempt to bring some insights into the need for multidisciplinary research on partition by the academic fraternity of both India and Pakistan to understand the finer nuances of Partition employing human lenses. The documented history and statistics of the displaced in both the countries looks at partition as violation of rights and mindless violence by the other. Forced displacement is a gross injustice and human rights violation. After 75 years, both the countries have come a long way. The successive governments of both the countries have resorted to propaganda narratives villainising each other.

It is rather strange that in India with all the intellectual discourses on everything, there was no effort made to bring the voices together on partition and have a memorial of partition. The question that often crosses people's mind but never articulated by historians is – "Why people who lived together for so long became so intolerant and violent towards each other? Such ferocity has very few parallels in history and must be studied by social psychologists.

While discussing about the partition, in order to develop an empathetic understanding of the trauma of displacement, it is important for us to remain aware that in 1947, the pace of life was much slower than what it is now, the urban landscape didn't even remotely resemble to what it is now, majority of people relied on agriculture and traditional system of sustenance and lived in rural India. The infrastructure was highly underdeveloped. The administrative system was not in place. Rehabilitation was not even a possibility general populace could even think of. Constitution was yet to be made operational. Technology was an uncommon word. Radio and Newspaper was the only medium of information dissemination which only privileged and literate people could access. Society was highly stratified and there was a power equation based on social discrimination. These are the stark reality of that period when partition took place. A 212 seconds short film by Amit Sharma starring Vishwa Mohan Badola and MS Sathyu came in November 2013 as a Google India advertisement for Google Search. This advertisement had touched upon the sensitive issue of partition that tore apart friends and families. The very fact that this ad touched an emotional chord was evident when social media was flooded with messages from both the countries and the Indian and Pakistani Diaspora living in other countries. Two questions that needed to be asked at this juncture are:

- Will the observance of Partition Horrors Remembrance Day going to be a part of Justice system for the displaced and recognition and acknowledgement of what people lived through?
- Will all these exercises lead to a healing process?

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