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Reconstructing a New Partition: An Analysis of Popular Literature and Oral Sources

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Abstract:

The transfer of power to the natives of the Indian sub-continent came with the formation of two nations: India and Pakistan. The breaking up of the sub-continent that has been called the Partition of 1947 became a major catastrophic event that saw violence, destruction and chaos on a large scale along with a huge displacement of population on the Punjab border and the East-Bengal border that opened towards the West-Bengal and Assam. This event has been also a part of academic research that looks to create its historicity and often in doing so has only presented constructions that have an iconoclastic ring to them. However, recent Partition historiography marks a change in its reconstructions where it has started to increasingly focus on the lived experiences of the people and how this shaped different aspects of social, cultural and economic existences in the post-partition period. This paper seeks to look at two new sources that are used to construct these new narratives of Partition.

Keywords: *Partition, oral sources, literature, experiences*

1. Introduction

Few years back, the writer witnessed something which in a way was intriguing yet deplorable. Around the Hudson lane area of New Delhi, an old man sitting on a chair in his veranda suddenly jumped up swearing and cursing an autowala who was a Muslim, he was the hated 'other'. The reason that made the old man angry was because of the head gear that the auto driver was wearing, which revealed his religious identity. The old man was shouting out the fact that the 'other' community people attacked his family during the Partition riots. The poor auto driver who seemed to be a calm person, left without saying a word.

Partition is an event that not only transformed the geographical and political landscape of the Indian sub-continent, but it also led to dislocation of population on both sides of the newly created border triggering massive changes in the lives of these people. There are many studies of the Post-Partition period that draw the causality of the Partition assigning various reasons for its occurrence. Scholars have tended to engage in a discourse of the Partition that was personality driven, focusing on major figureheads that were instrumental in the Colonial political landscape, and to whom the British would leave the baton of the Indian sub-continent upon their departure. It was rather popular literature that first focused on the impact of Partition on masses, in bringing to light the experiences thus generated from the momentous displacement of people that somehow had escaped the 'serious' researchers. But there has been a shift in scholarly literature in recent times focussing on various other aspects such as experiences of violence, especially on women. There has also been a shift in the way the role of the State is viewed in rehabilitation, and how it did not always mean a positive impact on the people. It sometimes curtailed the personal choices of people, and at times traumatized them holding essentialist considerations like the symbolism of women's bodies as nation's pride to guide State policy.

The Partition itself as an event was kept alive in the memory of people not only as experiences that were felt, but also to create the 'otherness' against which each nation, in this case India and Pakistan could be evoked. It is time to clear the air as new historians and writers are constantly working to re-write the history of the Partition where nation as a marker was used to garb its horrors of violence that did not recognize nationality, community or gender. A significant aspect that comes to light in the new works on the Partition motif is a question that is increasingly being posed about the idea of Nation, and its ability to be inclusive, give voice to the marginalised.

These new aspects of understanding Partition have been afforded by the use of two sources: Oral Narratives and Popular Literature. The following paper would be an attempt to analyse the two mentioned new sources and how they are used in reconstructing Partition history. It will attempt to bring to perspective new aspects of this event, especially experiences that were generated in terms of violence, the role of the State and new processes of identity formation. The paper is divided into three sections: the first looks at the use of popular literature as a historical source; the second discusses oral narratives as historical source; and the third summarises the argument of the paper.

Popular literature provides a rich tapestry of the Partition narrative giving us glimpses of experiences of people woven into rich narrations. It has various images and stories of experiences that a lot of people affected by this tragic event underwent. The cinematic

medium which today is very popular has been used by many to display a lot of these stories as well. The stories penned down by a lot of the authors about this event were also the people who had themselves been a part of it directly or indirectly. Saadat Hasan Manto being one such writer whose stories have been widely analysed by a lot of scholars writing on the new Partition narrative. This article picks up selected works, which have used popular literature as a source to put forward a new history of the Partition.

The use of these new sources like literature is to focus on aspects of experience that were instrumental in new social formations may it be gender, class or community. The question of identity as a new perspective of Partition has been dealt by Bodh Prakashin an article- *Nation and Identity in the Narratives of Partition*.ⁱ Discussing the widely acclaimed work of Saadat Hasan Manto- Toba Tek Singh, Prakash highlights the miseries of those people whose lives and identities were transformed due to Partition. The story reflects how Partition not only affected the physical state of an individual but also devastated his/her psyche. In analysing the idea of identity from the story, Prakash argues that the story revolved around Bishan Singh and it was his response to Partition. His identity being established by a pseudonym: Toba Tek Singh, the namesake of his village. Doing this, Manto is able to merge the individual and the communitarian identity. Bishan Singh is an inmate of a mental asylum who expresses deep concern for his native place Toba Tek Singh and refuses to shift to India after he realises that Toba Tek Singh now lies in Pakistan. His unwillingness to cross the border shows his fear of the loss of identity. It is this aspect of identity crises that Prakash in his article brings to the fore with the help of this story.

Alok Bhalla challenging conventional histories uses literature of the Partition to analyse the changed notion of 'home'. He argues that the refugees settled in new areas which were 'strangely godless spaces'. What Bhalla tries to assert is that the new notion of 'home' that developed was devoid of the aura of being a sacred space. Analysing the story of Basti (Hussain, 1995), Bhalla drives home the fact how the displaced individuals, families strived to find familiarity in their new living spaces. Bhalla picks out a conversation between Zakir (Protagonist), his poet friend Afzal and his mother where they talk about how their new home does not offer the 'bliss of Nirvan' as their oldⁱⁱ.

A second story that figures in Bhalla's article is that of Dekh Kabira Roya. He talks about the spiritual ruin that followed Partition, a destruction of the Religious sentiment of people. Religion which was played into concepts of identity inaugurated a violent streak of identity politics. Raging to protect the Maan (honour), against Kafirs, people forgot the common inheritances, such as the Duragrahas (Sufi shrines). It was only later that did they realise how they had been betrayed by the communally-charged politics of the days.

Dekh Kabira Roya is a story by Mantoof the great saint-poet, Kabir, who witnesses the spiritual ruin of Lahore after 1947. At one instance, Kabir sees a street vendor tearing pages from a book of religious poems, written by Surdas to make paper bags which saddened Kabir. On being questioned by the vendor about his sadness, Kabir said that the pages contain poems written by Surdas and therefore one shouldn't make paper bags out of them, to which the vendor replied that 'a man who is named Soordas can never be a bhagat'. An attempt has been made to point out the foul pun on the words 'sur' and 'soor'. The former in Sanskrit means melody, and the latter is a word used for pig in Punjabi.ⁱⁱⁱ Bhalla is asserting that the usage of language in a particular or sober way to address spiritual leaders or other aspects of religion was no more a matter of concern after the ghastly Partition. Bhalla explains how it is a commentary over the division that occurred in the name of Partition, which did not only mean bifurcation of the subcontinent but the collapse of a thousand year old existing culture, and certainly division of hearts and age old values. Through both these works Bhalla is trying to analyse aspects of Partition that go beyond conventional history and re-create aspects of experiences that shaped modern identities of nation, community, and religion. is giving voice to the unheard marginalised individuals.

Bidyut Chakrabarty in his work, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam 1932-1947*, dedicates a chapter-*History of Partition or Partition of History? -The Fractured and Wounded Voice of the People*, to analyse creative writings, particularly from Bengal to map out a new Partition narrative.^{iv} He uses various stories to create a picture of the feelings, experiences of the common people. One particular story that Chakrabarty highlights is Samaresh Babu's *Adab*. It is a powerful portrayal of the agony that human beings go through in a riot. Set in riot-torn Dhaka, the story revolves around a Hindu weaver and a Muslim boatman as they meet in suffering, while escaping police firing. Both take shelter in a dustbin having lost their sources of livelihood. In that dustbin the religion of the two did not matter as both were equally affected by the events of violence and destruction that were occurring. The story according to Chakrabarty portrays the non-religiosity of Partition, an event that was based on the religious division of the country. Thus bringing to light hitherto ignored aspects of the Partition motif.

A powerful representation in Chakrabarty's work is the story '*In search of Ismail Sheikh*' by Homen Borgohain (translated by M.Asaduddin). It is a story that talks about the plight of the refugees who were evicted from East Bengal and also the failures of the Rehabilitation programmes that were offered by the state. The first part of the story revolves around a Brahmin father, and daughter who after Partition arrive in Calcutta as refugees. The father becomes a destitute and the daughter is pushed towards prostitution. The second part of the story is about a Muslim immigrant who leaves East Bengal in search of better opportunity in Assam, but in reality only found disappointment when he lost the land he thought he could cultivate and make his own in Assam where he migrates to. This story shows that victims of poverty or Partition have no nationalities. Partition affected people who belonged to different caste, religion, economic backgrounds, and gender. It did not mean that if, for example, a Hindu returned to India, he/she was assured of stability or safety^v.

The scholars and their works analysed in this article gives us a new understanding of Partition. We can now find acceptance of the view that this event was just not about the politics of the time, neither was it only about the actions of a few principal actors. Rather, it was about something much more, it was about the millions of people who were displaced from the places that had been their homes for generations, it meant a loss of identity and the search for new ones, last but not the least it meant the loss of not just the physical but of the psychological. This new perspective also looks to study these losses and changes of the common man/woman through their experiences which find reflection in some way in the stories that the scholars have used in their works. Thus, these stories turn to be

not just simple narratives, but valuable pieces recording the experiences of the common masses. It provides the reader with a deep understanding about the impact of Partition, which is seldom represented. The translation of experiences like loss, despair, grief, and for that matter violence into stories which form the bulk of popular literature do offer us a new platform, a new source and a new framework to understand Partition.

Another powerful medium to gain knowledge about the experiences of the people related to the Partition event is through oral sources-interviews, memoirs, diaries, newspaper reports, letters, etc. This is a medium which has been used by scholars. The stories that are derived from these sources are used to draw a new picture of the Partition which focuses on not only the marginalised sections, but also various aspects of human existence such as violence, and how these in turn generate new identities.

James F. Young, whose work on Holocaust testimonies discusses the issues of oral histories at length is of the opinion that Oral history is a matter of memory, reconstruction and imagination. Unlike written history that tends to hide its lines of construction, oral testimonies retain the process of construction, the activity of witness. He further notes the “nature of all evidence” including that which is rhetorically objective like photographs, trained schedules or eye witness accounts from the era. Historical theorists now acknowledge that the legitimacy of historical sources cannot rest on the factual element, in which case readers would be endlessly troubled by conflicting versions. Critical readers, thus, instead of disqualifying competing accounts learn to read difference and to incorporate that dimension in their analysis. It would not be incorrect to say that oral sources provides a rich forum through which hitherto unknown experiences of people can be put forward. In fact, literature was the earliest medium, which made an attempt to give voice to the stories of common masses, which was otherwise neglected^{vi}.

Urvashi Butalia has talked about the hardships of the poor people who had to cross the border due to Partition^{vii}. A million people crossed the border on foot, as at times they could not or did not get access to any form of public transport. Thousands of women were abducted, raped, paraded naked in streets, and at times their bodies were tattooed with marks of the ‘other’ religion. Butalia asserts that it was not as if women’s bodies were only violated by men belonging to other religion, there were times when the families themselves traded in their women for exchange of freedom^{viii}. Sometimes the male head of the family killed their own women in order to save them from dishonour. There is, however, no record of the number of women and children who were killed by the men of their own families, or community. She has presented an account of a man named Mangal Singh, who along with his brother killed 17 members of his family before crossing the border. He insisted that the women themselves wanted death in order to escape rape and conversion. He used the word ‘martyred’ for them.

Apart from the issue of violence, that the women faced, there was another kind of trauma that the women had to go through after Partition. After the division of the sub-continent, both the nations engaged themselves in the work of recovering their abducted women. In the process of doing so, the abducted female was not given any choice or voice in choosing which nation she wanted to settle. There were many instances when the abducted female did not want to return to her natal family. Anis Kidwai, (Butalia, 1998) who worked with Muslim refugees said that poor women who were abducted, ended up with men who provided them with all the comforts of life, and hence did not want to go back to their old poverty stricken life. Therefore, forcible evacuation of women resulted in more pain for them, another trauma. There were also situations when women were not accepted by their own families because of the notion of purity. Thus, the honour of the nation and of its men was given utmost importance. The wishes of the woman did not count^{ix}.

Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon have also dealt with the recovery question in great detail. They have also used the medium of oral narratives to reconstruct the dimension of Partition. They have argued that the situations under which the women were abducted differed widely. Some women were left behind deliberately for the safe passage of their families; some got separated while crossing the border. A Sikh school teacher, whom the writers met shared an interesting account in this regard. After Partition the former had spent six months with a Muslim neighbour in Muzaffarabad, before crossing over to Srinagar. Later, in the mid- 1980’s she returned to Muzaffarabad, and visited every Hindu and Sikh woman who got left behind. It was stated by the school teacher that out of the 25-30 women she met, only one confessed of being unhappy. Other women were nostalgic about their natal family, and there were some whose living conditions, in fact, improved^x.

The Indian State dealt with abducted women and widows differently. Widows were redefined as victims of a national disaster, and an attempt was made by the State to provide them vocational training, employment, housing, food and education not only for them, but for their children as well^{xi}. However, the State adopted a conservative approach to deal with abducted women. Kamla Bhasin, who was associated with the recovery and rehabilitation programme of abducted women, disclosed important information. Pregnant women were made to go through a complete medical check-up before they went back to their families, because otherwise the families would not accept them back. An important point to note is that during that time abortions were considered illegal^{xii}.

In midst of the chaos and violence, there are also stories which suggest that humanity did not disappear completely during those hard times. A Pakistani newspaper, *The News*, published an article which covered a moving story about Harkishan Singh Bedi, a school teacher from Lahore, who had to leave for India because of the Partition violence. He had to leave everything behind, which included his books and papers. He contacted the new occupant of his old house, Chaudhry Latif through a letter and requested him not to destroy his books and papers. Latif, send those books and papers to Bedi, and stayed in touch with each other^{xiii}. This particular story moves away from the depiction of Partition as a violent event, but rather portrays the rare instances of humanity. The humanitarian values like friendship which the two people belonging to different religions and nations shared.

Popular literature and oral sources have served as a medium to portray the happenings during and in the aftermath of Partition in ordinary people’s lives. The stories not only talk about the hardships that the people faced, but shows the failure of the State

machinery at various levels. It demonstrates the fact that a political decision that was made by a few under several political constraints affected a million people. It is through the medium of popular literature and oral sources that we can gaze at the past to uncover the hidden stories, experiences and emotions which have been either forgotten, or shrouded beneath several layers of silence. The Partition narratives being presented by the writers makes one point very clear that the women had to go through different layers of torture- losing one's family while trying to cross the border; abducted by men and raped; settling with the abductors, and then forcefully being restored to the natal families by the organs of the State. All these incidences show how the women were deprived of any agency, and that how the State, and the men tried to mould women's lives according to their own dictum. During any instance of violence women are targeted first. The 1971 liberation struggle of Bangladesh,(earlier known as East Bengal, and erstwhile part of Pakistan) also saw innumerable brutal incidences of rape and violence that the women had to go through.

This medium has been used by scholars to showcase different kinds of human response to a situation like Partition. Both the mediums have over the years enriched our understanding of the Partition event and is continuing to do so. What a lot of these scholars, who have used these sources have done is to weave a post-colonial response to the earlier Partition narrative that viewed the affected people in figures and thus undermined the experiences that were generated. It is these experiences that shower light on hitherto unknown aspects of this tragic event related to various aspects of settlement issues, migration, identity formation, and gender, among others. There are obvious shortcomings to these sources like its reliability, and authenticity, but as Young has put it "the aim of testimony can never be to document experiences or to present facts as such. Rather it is to document both the witness as he makes testimony and understanding and meaning of events generated in the activity of testimony itself"^{xiv}.

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