



IIT ROORKEE



NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 07 – HISTORY OF THE PARTITION OF INDIA

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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



PARTITION

- Gerald James Larson - “Partition was the defining event of modern, independent India and Pakistan, and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that partition continues to be the defining event of modern India and Pakistan...” (*India's Agony Over Religion*, New Delhi, 1997, p. 182-183.)
- The Partition involved the forced migration of about 12 million people who moved across borders to their newly identified homes in India and to East and West Pakistan, cost approximately one million lives in riots and resulted in the abduction of nearly 75,000 women (Butalia 1994; Menon and Bhasin *Borders and Boundaries Women in India's Partition* 1998).
- The communal frenzy not only killed thousands of people, it also uprooted and displaced millions from their traditional homeland, their 'desh'. This displacement forced many to search for a new home away from home. Partition had made their homeland hostile and they started imagining that peace and security were on the other side of the border.



- Partition is remembered as a time of great uncertainty, humiliation, anger, sadness and trauma, but also one of survival and triumph about having recovered and rebounded from the tremendous personal and material loss.
- The work of recovering ordinary people's stories about the Partition necessitated a return to literary representations, survivors' testimonies and unofficial documents.
- These stories avoid portraying Partition as a grand narrative of violence, revealing instead variegated responses of diverse 'Partitioned subjects' and different representations of trauma before, during and immediately after the Partition.
- From the narratives of the past it becomes possible to understand how these displaced persons perceived their own victimization, and to what extent it clashed with the identity 'imposed' on them or the one they accepted.

Conflict between grand and personal narratives

- Adrian Holliday - 'Grand narratives' are those that we inherit and are brought up with – the big stories that are designed to define our heritages and to legitimate the social groups we are part of. They are part of the 'cultural resources' attached to 'particular social and political structures' grammar of culture' (*Understanding Intercultural Communication* 2013)
- Grand narratives are also the basis for Holliday's 'global position and politics,' through which one inherits the stories of nation and race that positions one in relation to the cultural Other. They are ideological in that they contribute to how we structure our thoughts about the world; and promote the ideologies of race, gender and culture.

- Grand narratives may have lost their credibility in the postmodern turn. Personal narratives are those that we form ourselves through everyday experience.
- Holliday refers to 'personal trajectories' as a core element of his grammar of culture. They mediate and filter how we respond to the structures within which we are brought up. In this process, grand narratives and their ideologies and discourses are part of the wider environment that we interact with; and splinters of grand narratives are irrevocably present in our personal narrative.
- Personal narratives can be volatile, help us make shifting sense, engage with the question of identity, and enable reaching out to others beyond essentialist cultural threads. The overall picture of personal narratives is of complex, multifaceted and shifting realities.

- G. Pandey - Official claims and denials supported by the wider nationalist vision can be understood as the 'aestheticizing impulse' of the nation-state. It is a way of smoothening the difficulties involved in writing/fitting the moment of struggle back into history.
- He addresses two questions in his work *Remembering Partition*:
 - a) how does 'history' work to produce the 'truth' – say, the truth of the violence of 1947 – and to deny its force at the same time; to name an event – say, the 'partition' – and yet deny its eventfulness?
 - b) how can we write the moment of struggle back into history?
- History happens not only through excluding time, but the very aspect or moment of struggle – History as an afterthought and as a deliberate product excludes the dimensions of uncertainty, confusion through normalizing and evacuating messiness.

- The way of forming alternative history is through understanding the selective process by which a formal history is constituted.
- Alternative understandings of history make comparisons across space and time, and draws attention to theoretical issues beyond the confines of South Asia, and draw attention to other partitions as a way of restructuring the question of conflicts around borders, refugees and diasporas.
- This has led to rethinking that 'Partition' studies needs a shift from the high political histories.
- Jean-Luc Nancy - the gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer, is the testimony of the dissolution and dislocation.

- Historiography, traditionally formed by the ruling class through establishing their hegemony, is increasingly being challenged by 'historical memory'.
- Modern media and homogenization of culture have led to the formation of a history in terms of national memory. However, such an institutional site of memory also accommodates myths and unofficial records. Within the fold of national memory, the diverse myths are produced as archetypal myths, and a politics of representation could come into play.
- Memory was always a preoccupation for social thinkers, though it was only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a distinctively social perspective on memory became prominent.
- Peter Novick, American historian who studied the Holocaust in American life – 'collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.' (Pandey Intro. 8)

- Pierre Nora – the historical memory’s increasingly institutionalized sites of memory (i.e. history’s appropriation and monumentation of selected aspects from the past) has turned memory into an archive and hollowed its layers. Institutionalized memory replacing spontaneous memory.
- Friedrich Hegel (German philosopher) – The state is the condition of history and defines its purpose. Through self-conscious choice of the subject matter and the prose of history, the state also constitutes itself.
- Garde-Hansen – The concept of memory destabilises grand narratives of history and power, as “memory, remembering and recording are the very key to existence, becoming and belonging” (Media and memory, 2011).



- Halbwachs – memory is not simply an individual phenomenon, but is relational in terms of family and friends, and also societal and collective in terms of the social frameworks of social groups.
- While psychologists were more interested in memory from an individual perspective, sociological theorists emphasise the social and cultural bases of shared memories.
- Individual memory grow outward to focus on broader dimensions of social memory and the politics of public remembering, especially those channeled through communications media.
- The focus has generally been on “how these forms of remembering operate as collective representations of the past, how they constitute a range of cultural resources for social and historical identities, and how they privilege particular readings of the past and subordinate others” (Keightley and Pickering, *Research methods for memory studies*, 2013).

- Halbwachs rejected an individual-psychological approach to memory and developed the concept of collective memory, arguing that it is impossible for individuals to remember outside of their group contexts. He identified individual and collective memories as tools through which social groups establish centrality in individuals' lives.
- Halbwachs - History as "a dead memory, a way of preserving pasts to which we no longer have an 'organic' experiential relation" and argued that "this understanding of the distinction negates the self-image of historiography as the more important or appropriate attitude towards the past: History's epistemological claim is devalued in favour of memory's meaningfulness" (Olick and Robbins 2004, *Social memory studies: From collective memory to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices* p. 110).
- While history is perceived as objective, scholarly memory stands for the subjective; history attains a status of hegemony owing to its recorded and documented nature, whereas memory lingers in the domain of the personal, biased and distorted.

- The concept of collective memory rests upon the assumption that every social group develops a memory of its past, which allows it to preserve and pass along its self-image. Collective memory is a socio-political construct, a version of the past, defined and negotiated through changing sociopolitical power circumstances and agendas (Neiger et al., *On media memory: Collective memory in a new media age*, 2011).
- “Collective memory is not history, though it is sometimes made from similar material. It is a collective phenomenon but only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals... it often privileges the interests of the contemporary” (Kansteiner 2002, *Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies. History and theory* 41(2): 179-197 p.180).



- Pennebaker - “significant historical events form stronger collective memories, and present circumstances affect what events are remembered as significant” (*Collective memory of political events: Social psychological Perspectives* remarks).
- Historians’ history seems to suggest that what Partition amounted to was mainly a new constitutional/political arrangement, which did not deeply affect the central structures of Indian society or the broad contours of its history
- On the other hand, the survivors’ account would appear to say that it amounted to a sundering, a whole new beginning and, thus, a radical reconstitution of community and history.
- While at the official level, India and Pakistan are seen as exhibiting two most militant nationalisms (e.g. the Wagah border), at the unofficial level, the resentment and animosity is coupled with a considerable sense of nostalgia and a feeling that Partition has happened between siblings from the same ethnicity - a love-hate relationship.

- While official historiography treats Partition violence as something extraordinary and even disowns it as a part of any community's history (someone else's history, because such acts are reverse to any community's values), narratives and accounts emerging from different quarters complicate this perception.
- A neat version of history is obtained through considering subjects, such as nation, society, locality and community as pre-determined and fixed.
- Personal accounts and shared experience that one realizes how these categories mutate, develop and transform, such that violence is as ordinary as the everyday language a society/community uses. It is intrinsic to and constitutes human existence and identity.
- When a human agent is brought in to comment on an 'objective' history, the jagged edges (e.g. through multiple perspectives) reappear.

- Memories of Partition constitute a fragmented, multiple, and contradictory vision of the event because “so much depends on who remembers, when, with whom, to whom, and how” (Butalia *The Other Side of Silence* 1998: 141).
- The Indian nationalist approach was to understand Partition as the net result of years of divisive policies adopted by the colonial power. These policies undermined the pre-existing cultural unities and social interaction, which cut across religious identity.
- For Pakistani writers, on the other hand, the creation of a separate homeland arose from the desire of safeguarding community values away from the Hindu majoritarian rule. The ideologically incompatible discourses arising from the 'divide and rule' and 'two-nation theory' understandings of Partition that followed from independence have helped frame the post-independence relationship between India and Pakistan.

- Much of the early Partition historiography was concerned with the 'high politics' that accompanied the process of transferring power. This has partly been directed by the sources that were available; early accounts were dependent on key enactors and protagonists, such as the national heroes, providing autobiographical accounts of their experiences.
- Partition scholarship has grown in the last few decades to accommodate the survivor's accounts, which broadens the fissure between official and unofficial records.
- A glaring omission of ordinary voices and how high politics affected those at the bottom of the society has been debunked through these works.
- Memory-history debunks the historian's personal ties (and thereby biases) to her/his subject, and therefore the possibility of his/her subjectivity, creativity and capacity to recreate.

- Partition can be seen as a renegotiation, re-ordering and resolution of some old problems and construction of new problems. It is a history of struggle, of people fighting to cope, survive and build something new, a history of the everyday in the extraordinary (Pandey 18).
- History's lapses show through areas, where the ruling classes and their instruments have failed to establish their hegemony through persuasion, or where historiography has failed (or refused) to address serious moments of dislocation in the history of particular societies in all their complexity and painfulness. These lacunae have perhaps given an additional lease of life to 'memory'.
- The 'partition of India', which is how the division of the subcontinent in 1947 is universally referred to in Indian historiography, is also (for Pakistanis) the 'independence of Pakistan'.
- The violence of 1947 created new subjects and subject positions: a fact that entails a reconsideration of the standard view of history as a process with an always-already given subject.

- For long 'secular' vs 'communal' and 'national' vs 'communal' have been used in India's official history. To contextualise these terms might entail dispassionately understanding the politics of labels, stereotyping and castigation that shape our narratives of nationalism.
- Fresh interest in Partition Studies was generated through the issues that would not let the religion-based nation borders rest in peace. E.g. 1971- riled the assumption that the Muslim is a unified identity outside language, ethnicity and class-caste. 1984- revisited the Hindu-Sikh unproblematic coexistence. The secure middle-class notions were being challenged in the favor of new voices/accounts that urged re-examination of the Partition.
- The idea of a monolithic history by the powerful is a European notion, the rest of the world such as China and India has, since ancient times, relied on memory and orality for the preservation of a discursive knowledge.

- G. Pandey - Traditional historical methodologies have been dismissive of personal recollections for bearing the imprint of bias, distortion and even exaggeration, and viewed them as imposing difficulties regarding the 'nature of evidence and the modes of analysis and representation employed in historical discourse' (1994: 214),
- Formal history finds it difficult to treat these narratives as 'authentic,' reliable or factual (Pandey 2001).
- The universalizing procedures of consensus history are infiltrated through fragmenting forces of personal remembrance that disrupt the unanimous meanings of historical events.
- Rancière – political struggle is not a conflict between well-defined interest groups; it is an opposition of logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways.

- Since the nation's identity is rendered extremely truncated, impossible, mutilated, and antagonistic during the war, collective memory work and particularly history writing function as a tool to cement a closure.
- National history works to secure for a contingent nation the appearance of a natural unity of the national subject evolving through time.
- Historian Prasenjit Duara - "the subject of History is a metaphysical unity devised to address the aporias in the experience of linear time". Typical of national history writing is that it produces causal and linear temporality, and order events sequentially.
- The time of the nation is progressive in the sense that the nation is seen as a solid community which moves along the line of history in a teleological and linear fashion. This linear temporality, *Chronos*, which is the measurement of time, seeks to produce a coherent and causal origin and a straightforward historical path of development for the nation.
- The time frame suggests coherence with time and equates the past with the present.

Thank You

