



IIT ROORKEE



NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 12 - HISTORY AND ALTERNATIVE MEMORY WRITINGS

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- Different political parties tried to exploit Dalits for their own interests. Dalits who refused to follow these major groups were attacked and subjected to brutalities.
- Dalits were seen as “empty in their own identity” and therefore best suited for proselytization and for replenishing and enhancing numerical strength of any religious community by converting them into it. This trend continued during the Partition. In West Punjab (Pakistan) they were forced to accept Islam. Ravinder Kaur writes, “untouchables who remained socially marginalised were nationalised in this process.”
- Gyan Pandey endeavours to unravel how the violence of Partition was ‘conceptualised and remembered by those who lived through Partition - as victims, aggressors or onlookers’ (Pandey, *Economic and Political Weekly* 1997: 2261-2272).

- A series of studies have followed since then, focussing mainly on the refugees in Punjab (e.g., Singh 2000, Butalia 2000, Kaul 2001, Pandey 2001, Kaur 2007, Zamindar 2007) and Bengal (e.g., Chatterjee 1992, Samaddar 1997, 2003, Chakrabarti 1999, Bagchi and Dasgupta 2003, Chatterji 2007, Roy 2007), explore their experiences, their struggle for citizenship, the politics about their rehabilitation, and the impact of the memories of Partition violence on communal relations in the subcontinent.
- Urvashi Butalia - “In its almost exclusive focus on Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims, Partition history has worked to render many others invisible. One such history is that of the scheduled castes, or untouchables” (Butalia, *The Women’s Movement in India Today* 2000: 235). Butalia (2000), Kaur (2007) and Rawat (2001, 2003) have sought to make the Dalits visible in the history of Partition in north India.

- Sekhar Bandopadhyay - The multiple layers within the agricultural peasant communities of East Bengal obviated any blanket categorization of Dalit-ness, as Dalits were further divided in terms of class.
- While the poverty-stricken Dalits were more concerned with economic upliftment and abolition of social hierarchies, many among them who had already availed upward mobility presented regressive views, willing to be institutionally accepted among traditional upper caste Hindus. So while on the one hand, most of the Dalits faced subordination by the Hindu *bhadralok* and the elite Muslims, on the other, the interest groups bargained with mainstream political leaders.

- By the 1940s, the Hindu-Muslim atrocity no longer remained a high-caste political affair. The poor Scheduled Caste masses mostly supported the mainstream Hindu sentiments. Influenced by Congress and Hindu Mahasabha politicians, they proposed integrationist positions, by agreeing to see themselves chiefly as citizens of a Hindu majority nation-state. However, to their betrayal, the Partition had not resulted in the inclusion of Namasudra (Dalit) provinces within India. They became part of East Pakistan (Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, and the Rajbansi areas of Rangpur and Dinajpur).
- Dalits were not prepared with socio-economic capital to resettle themselves in a new land. The political decision, which misused their ignorant support, resulted in undoing their social mobility and caste-based unity, causing them to migrate in destitute conditions to India. Starting from the scratch, they could possibly gain foothold in West Bengal only by fighting with the local *Goalas* (milkman community) and Muslims in West Bengal.

- In the mid-1940s, as scapegoats involved in elite Hindu-Muslim strife, Dalits from the Namasudra, the Rajbanshi and the Santhal groups were admitted to the Hindu community through compelling indoctrinations, and deployed in the vanguard of Hindu militancy. Such a strategy helped the Bengal Congress to win most of the Scheduled Caste seats in the Assembly elections of 1946.
- The death of Jitu Santal in a police encounter while enacting a “debased” form of Kali worship in the Adina mosque (1932), which he and his band of men had seized after assaulting the local Muslims, is one amongst the numerous incidents of aggression that involved the Dalits and the Muslims.

- How Dalit autonomous politics was appropriated to make Hinduism the foundation of the emergent Indian national identity is an aspect conspicuously underplayed in officially sanctioned narratives of the subcontinent's Partition [Chatterji 'The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52', *Modern Asian Studies*, 33(1), pp 185-242 ,1999].
- The extent to which such understandings are eclipsed by mainstream narratives of partition is underscored by the distinction made by Pandey between history, that is "national", "rational" and "progressive", in contrast to the "local", "inconsequential" and "particular" - that which can be neither narrativised nor theorised [Pandey 2001: 119].
- The concern with negotiating a relationship with the nation by reconstructing a new memory of the past informs the proliferation of Dalit newspapers and journals in north India. Through interrogating received histories, a Dalit sphere aimed at effecting Dalit awakening is gradually coming into its own [Tiwari 'Domination: How the Fragments Imagine the Nation: Perspectives from Some North Indian Villages', *Dialectical Anthropology* 29, pp 123-40, 2005].

- The feminist oral history emerges from the neglect of women's voices in traditional sources; oral history has therefore provided an opportunity to integrate women into historical scholarship.
- Sheila Rowbotham - women's experiences in historical discourse were often 'hidden' and new methodologies, such as personal testimonies, [which] allows us to challenge 'historical' interpretations based upon the lives and documentation of men'.
- As a methodological tool, oral history has complemented official documentary sources rather than competed with them.

- The oral stories can complement the official source material, providing an altogether more comprehensive analysis. Moving away from the statistics of how women's lives were uprooted and how they rebuilt their lives; they enable us to document the aftermath and not just the event itself.
- The use of oral testimonies are important source of information as they allow us to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of ordinary lives. Moreover, with women's voices that are often marginalised, oral history has become even more important as it has the ability to empower those unexpressed utterances, which would otherwise remain undocumented. At the same time, this process democratises the discourse which had, until recently, remained concerned with high politics.

- Documenting, recording and recounting the oral stories also presents the researcher with ethical dilemmas. The subject matter in many cases concerns stories of trauma, forced migration, violence, rape and loss of one's homeland. These are emotive subjects that can evoke strong responses in some cases, while others find it hard to re-live that painful experience again.
- This interaction and the interview process create a new historical document by the agency of both the interviewer and the interviewee.
- Bornât et al – “for the oral historians the interview is always more than the recorded and transcribed words, it is a process in which the narrator, the interviewee, is actively constructing and creating an account'."
- There is also in many ways a power imbalance between the two agents; it is ultimately the interviewer who has the ability to interpret, recount and analyse the interview before narrating it and the interviewee has no power or control during this process (*Oral History*, vol. 37 no.1 ,2009 p.82).

- Though it has democratised history and enabled hidden voices to be incorporated into our wider understanding of society, there is a dilemma about the use of these accounts and the radical potential of oral history to reclaim the history of ordinary people.
- Priya Kumar - it may be apt to describe the "past-in-present-ness of partition as a history that is not done with, or refuses to be past" [Kumar , 'Testimonies of Loss and Memory: Partition and the Haunting of a Nation', *Interventions*, 1(2), pp 201-15, 1999].
- In the Indian subcontinent, an understanding of borders was a result of the geopolitical imagination that lay at the heart of Partition. As Samaddar suggests, in this area, the hour of partition was marked as the beginning of a territorial consciousness (2001, *A Biography of the Indian Nation 1947* , pp 29).
- Gilmartin - For "both India and Pakistan, it was Partition, far more than Independence from Britain, that irrevocably fixed the territorial definition of the nation state as the colonial era ended" ['Partition, Pakistan and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative' in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 57(4), November, pp. 1089].

- At different junctures in history, Indian micro-societies have witnessed different forms of groupism – the share-croppers against the upper-class Hindu zamindars and Muslim elites, the Dalit Hindus against the Hindu elites, the gwala (milkman) community against both Hindus and Muslims. Yet out of all sorts of heterogeneity, the communal divide had never before loomed as such an exceptionally undefeatable problem, which could upset the harmony of shared life and living, and ultimately precipitate the greatest exodus of the century.
- “Partition was integral to the emergence of the nation state. However, silence on the theme of this violence in official discourses of nationhood legitimises the state's claims to represent the entire Indian populace [Kumar 1999: 207].

Partition in Literature and Media

- Derrida - “Literature serves as real testimony.... It is a fiction of testimony more than a testimony in which the witness swears to tell the truth” (2000: 19).
- Fiction opens the possibility for ‘truthful’ testimony. ‘Truthful’ testimony is one that announces its own inability to tell the truth and tells the story of its own failure.
- While the testimony may assume the autobiographical voice that writes about a singular experience, the fiction uses creative license to create the illusion of an ‘I’ who is able to fully bear witness to the unimaginable and unnameable.

- It is uncertain as to what kind of methodologies Partition studies should entail, particularly in the humanities.
- Anna Bernard - bildungsroman and fragmented narrative are the two forms to critically replicate the processes through which the event of Partition is memorialized (*Forms of Memory*).
- Memorialization is effected not just by testifying to the physical and psychic violence inflicted by the Partition and its aftermath, but also by creating “counter-factual” representations of pre-Partition history or the post-Partition present (82-86, Gopal).

- Critical counterfactualism challenges the inevitability or the necessity of Partition, encouraging the reader to consider other forms of social and political organization that could have or could still come into being (Bernard 11).
- Partition literature is not necessarily contestatory that “destabilizes” (Didur, *Unsettling Partition* 11-13), “interrupts” (Pandey, *Routine Violence* 15), “exposes” (Hasan 59) the new national narratives formed in the wake of Partition, but inherently counterfactualist (Cleary , *Literature, Partition and the Nation-state*).
- Partition literature’s capacity to “gesture towards and, in some cases, formally construct, vision of collectivity and nationhood, based on solidarity, not separation”(12).

- *Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh memorializes the gaps and silences that underlie the origin of the nation-state and such silences when articulated put unified imagined community into a disarray (204), as a result of which national memory evades them.
- The novel commemorates stories of ordinary Hindus and Muslims who sheltered people from 'other' community, risking their own lives (206).
- Grandma(Tha'mma) brought up with the dream of nationalism who has internalized the language of modernity that demands the state to be the only legitimate purveyor of violence(206).
- Tha'mma's geographies of nationhood called to question as she is a Hindu from East Bengal, and with Partition, her home and nationality are at odds with each other(206).



- Partition narratives can be compared in terms of their effort to either advance the goal of complete separation or promote convergence and integration.
- The common genres of partition literature include – romance, bildungsroman, fragmented narratives.
- A)Romance – lovers on opposite sides of the Partition, tragically thwarted or realized in exile-narrative resolution achieved typically through confirmation than refutation of the divide between the ‘national’ groups- an irreversibility of the pre-partition innocence.
- Desired union among the lovers intensify rather than undermine the divide (Gopal 73).

- B) Bildungsroman : aligning the narrators coming of age with the event of the Partition itself. For instance, *Midnight's Children* figures coming of age as an awareness of the legacy of partition.
- Pre-partition period implies childish innocence whereas post-partition implies disillusionment . The pre-lapsarian age before partition is like childhood irrevocably lost, and the dystopia of the present seems extremely difficult to overcome(18).
- Nostalgia for that time of innocence is constitutively anti-partitionist, and it holds onto the possibility of a different kind of future.

- Bildungsroman form features a semi-autobiographical protagonist, who simultaneously anticipates and averts the seeming inevitability of partition.
- Partition bildungsroman while depending on partition's historical trajectory for the momentum of its plot, also challenges the belief of permanent communal divide. It insists on the agency of individuals to assert the existence of a difficult past and promote more inclusive forms of nationality(22).

- C) Fragmented Narrative : Fragmentation represents the protagonist's inability to apprehend the totality of the post-Partition order.
- A counterfactual potential to reconnect the fragments a desire for reunification, or an imaginative deconstruction and reassembly undertaken to undo the exclusionary forms of national identity(23).

- Manto refuses to connect fragments in favor of a reconciled and complete historical memory that counters man's forgetting.
- Pandey - fragments in literature, diaries, testimonies bear the perspectives of the marginalized groups, act as a rupture in the self-representation of particular totalities.
- Manto's stories 'undecidability' refuses the ethical closure of the horrors of Partition as in celebratory narratives. Instead, he questions the very possibility of narrative.

Thank You

