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CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 16 – CASTE POLITICS IN PUNJAB PARTITION; MICRO-SOCIETIES AND SUB-CULTURES

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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Caste Politics in Punjab Partition

- Within the master narrative of Partition migration history, the experiences of forced movement and resettlement suffered by the Untouchables are obscured.
- Space and region are factors in the development of refugees. E.g. In Delhi, Rehgar Pura is relatively prosperous compared to other Untouchable colonies in east and north Delhi - because of its proximity to the commercial activities in Karol Bagh - tanning and shoe manufacturing as booming cottage industries.
- Government policies of settlement separated the upper-castes from the untouchables between 1947 and 1965.



- The experience of population exchange varied according to one's caste. However, Hindu refugees are generally identified in terms of religious identity.
- In order to understand the absences and omissions in the Partition history, there is a need to challenge the simplified and compressed version and instead look at the complex, multilayered personal experiences that the migrants recount.
- In Western India, there are two stories prevalent in the mainstream - first part is loss and second part is restoration of this loss through migrants establishing their new homes, businesses, powerful lobbies in local Delhi politics.

- Gyanendra Pandey - widespread meta-discourse of communal violence was historically rooted in British colonial interpretation of violence, community and identity making in colonial India.
- Knowledge of Partition mainly comes from the narratives told by the upper/middle class high-caste protagonists in the forms of memoirs, auto/biographies, newspaper reports and public speech.
- Quintessential refugee subject is spoken of in/as masculine pronoun and as socially respectable castes who construct the master-narrative of Partition. For e.g. Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan is rife with moneylenders, businessmen, landed peasants, soldiers, clerks, preachers and school teachers among Jat Sikhs, who make up the influential upper strata.



- Partition as a mass-produced event - narration authenticated when staged against the anonymous backdrop of masses, where narrator is mostly an upper-caste protagonist telling their own and other's experiences.
- In Punjab too the migrations of the Untouchables happened at the tail end of the population exchange.
- Major Partition narratives have it that many Dalits had to espouse Islam out of expediency, implying that they awaited rescue by Hindu/Sikh upper-castes and loathed Islamic occupation of what became "Pakistan."
- In the same way, Pakistani narratives do not include voice of the leaders that wanted the non-Muslims to stay back.
- In reality, there were roles of liaisons - Muslim officers evacuating the Hindus and Hindu officers evacuating the Muslims that do not get mentioned in the popular accounts/discourse.



- Unlike the upper-caste populace, the Dalits did not move away from the violence-prone areas before the actual Partition.
- Dalits in Punjab greatly benefited from the government's mediation in facilitating resettlement (whereas many upper-castes boast self-rehabilitation). Congress played a pivotal role in designing resettlement policies to socially and economically develop the Dalits. Moreover, because the Dalits had not lost much property (didn't have in the first place), they were not so much entitled to compensation as they were to doles.
- Their rehabilitated spaces/lands were not the best areas, and their mode of earning was only through traditional occupations.

- Pippa Virdee - Lyallpur district had one of the largest populations of non-Muslim refugees to evacuate from West Punjab. The majority travelled by foot convoys. Most of the evacuation had taken place by 15 November. The only people remaining numbered about 17,000, most of whom were the Scheduled Caste population, but they were mostly cleared by the end of November 1947.
- People also started to sort themselves into professional groups. There were doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors, journalists and some government officials (1961: 90), perhaps desperately trying to preserve their previous identity in this period of immense uncertainty.
- Planes were chartered by wealthy individuals. People often paid inflated taxi or tonga fares to reach the airport without any guarantee of flights.
- The flight attendant and the prospective passengers bargained, the latter willing to pay over-inflated prices for tickets like an auction. This was a profitable business for the transporters, but the number of people who could access this mode of transport was very small.
- Such a wealthy population could afford to be more flexible about their departure, taking the time to sell their belongings before flying to Amritsar.

Imagining Unsung Heroes

- Mridula Mukherjee - subalterns are not able to independently carry out insurrections and tend to rely on outside leadership.
- Shahid Amin : Gorakhpuri peasant perceptions of 'Gandhiji' not controlled by the local Congress leadership -these unauthorized struggles had led to the assault on the Chauri-Chaura thana, prompting Gandhi to call off the whole campaign. Hence subaltern action, as Mukherjee asserted, was not a function of elite leadership.
- Dipesh Chakraborty in *Rethinking Working-Class History* - “they would bow to their superiors ... but would demand a certain behaviour on the part of the ‘leaders’, a certain patriarchal benevolence, a certain match of sentiment. They would demand what they thought of as customarily theirs by right but within the encompassing hierarchical culture” (693).
- Dipesh Chakraborty understands ‘subalternity’ as “ the composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of dominance and hierarchy” (693).

- Sumit Sarkar – “assertion-within-deference”- meaning the way in which the subordinate , by evoking notions of benevolent patriarchy, is able to exploit his own subordination to his benefit by contributing towards the definition of what constitutes the correct understanding of the patron’s role(693).
- A subaltern’s “notion of what is fair, just or customary would refer backwards, to the hierarchically structured order of an ideal society” (694) thus contesting hierarchy but taking place within the hegemony of hierarchy.
- Chakraborty – pre-capitalist working culture in India was hierarchical, violent and inegalitarian (696). “A ‘respect’ of a boss derived from a precapitalist culture with a strong emphasis on religion, community, kinship, language and other similar loyalties” (696).
- While Chakraborty sees a monolithic nature in the class solidarity, it assumes culture as static and unchangeable.
- The contradiction in the “educated” leader’s culture - to educate the labourers on the one hand and a more unconscious sense of distance and superiority.

- Resistance is toned down and mechanically applied when it becomes an ever-present quality that hardly comments about the master and servant relationship.
- George Lipsitz - the different forms of cultural expressions of different subcultural groups have a profound impact on mainstream popular culture (*Theorizing Cultural Memory* 829). Instead of bemoaning the disappearance of folk-cultural traditions, Lipsitz shows their ability to express conflicts and contradictions and exert enormous influence as the marginalized to the mainstream, beyond the confines of their specific subculture.
- Similar to how postmodernists reject the distinction between high and popular art/culture (831).

- Jim Collins – demonizing mass culture through ascribing blanket values is hardly Bakhtinian; rather it reflects Frankfurt school fundamentalism (*Theorizing Cultural Memory* 831).
- Such traditional mass culture critique does not consider that at its best, popular culture retains “memories of the past and contains hopes for the future that rebuke the injustices and inequalities of the present”(832).

- A high degree of commonality and homogeneity with respect to images, rhythms etc., which shape the image of the subculture (*Theorizing Cultural Memory* 835).
- Chantal Mouffe: “ the problem is with the very idea of the unitary subject...[w]e are in fact always multiple and contradictory subjects, inhabitants of a diversity of communities...constructed by a variety of discourses and precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject-positions”(837).
- Notion of heteroglossia important in understanding the conflict of competing discourses and the conflicted resonances within individuals who must negotiate a number of different subject positions.
- Lawrence Grossberg - daily life as the site of struggle against “hierarchically organized modes of modern cultural power” (Grossberg 94), rather than a utopic “land of political redemption” (ibid.), and his idea of “micro-level” (96), where power sets off complex and contradictory practices, describe the human relations in a subculture.

- Alok Bhalla - during the Partition period, there are countless attempts by fallible people to abide by the covenants of a civil society. He gives the details of the ordinariness that outlast the gory in many cases.
- “The details are important; their ordinariness is necessary both as evidence and as boundaries against the phantasmagoric. For without being sure that my memory is located in the real world, I cannot hope to make an ethical enquiry into the history of my age and place” (‘Memory, History and Fictional Representations of the Partition’ 3119).
- In the partition times, it is important to record stories about events and people which are instinct with pity and thoughtfulness, against celebratory national victories or chroniclers of community suffering.
- Krishna Sobti and Rahi Masoom Reza, Intizar Husain and Mohan Rakesh, Qurratulain Hyder, Manto render double vision.

- Rahi Masoom Reza, *Aadha Gaon* : “ The tales of riots were concluded, and the stories of life began-these are the stories which never end.”
- Most of the available histories of the Partition - accounts of victory or as nightmares, constructed in the form of compelling narratives concerned with metaphysical identities of different communities and their collective fate(*The Genocidal Mentality*, Lifton and Markusen 1988).
- Focus should also be on the everyday selves of people and their acts in profane times (Ricoeur 1984).
- The fact of the Partition permits the mainstream narrative to arrange a diverse variety of discrete incidents into a successive and logical order, so they inevitably lead to a known and expected end (Bhalla 3120).

- Some of the common tropes are fissure in the old relation between the communities; while supporters of the Two Nation-theory talk of apprehensions among Muslims about Hindu domination, the Hindus talk of British and Muslim collaboration and Muslim treachery.
- Using fragments of incontestable information gathered from government files, police records, newspapers, letters, public speeches, memoirs and reports about communal riots.

- Novelists - take stand for the sufferers, bear witness, offer solace, rememorialise nostalgic communities, speak with bitter irony about the possibilities of life in post-colonial days
- Novelists make connections with the socio-cultural life of a community within a historically specific period without conforming to what the historians already know.
- Unlike the historians' narratives which move with certitude towards a definite end, these fictional accounts "contain all that is locally contingent and truthfully remembered, capricious and anecdotal, contradictory and mythically given" where the ends vary...marking out emotional or ethical maps, through mockery, anger or sometimes crumbling into silence.

- Whether redemptive or pessimistic, they assume that pre-Partition India as a place of tolerant communities, which is a structural counterpoint to the dispirited sense of exile and division.
- A sense of relatedness between the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, not merely a passive acceptance of different customs and beliefs. The fictional and historical texts do not define the metaphysical identity of the different groups.
- Asserts a common social relation between co-existing human beings - no claim of utopia bereft of suspicion and squabbles. Society as a whole could contain such tension, so experience of life sufficiently rooted and secured (Bhalla 3121).
- Taking into account the silenced voices, the entire Partition discourse is seen as ever-changing.

Thank You

