

1947 Partition Archive: Contextualising the Narratives of Trauma and Postmemory of the Community of Survivors

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Abstract

Over a period of seven decades after the Partition of India, the survivors (and their younger generations) of the event have created a community of post memorial trauma survivors. The research paper endeavours to study this community of survivors of postmemorial trauma of Indian Partition through selected oral histories available on *1947 Partition Archive*. The online archive contextualises the memories of those who have been a part of the postmemorial trauma of Indian Partition. These oral histories reiterate a common theme that resonates with Partition histories from 1947 to the present day: the marginalisation of the common man, nostalgia for the lost homeland and a state of perpetual fear. This research seeks to study the role of memory in reinterpreting the community of traumatic survivors and their succeeding generations and providing a varied set of identities, against the backdrop of Indian Partition. It borrows the concept of post-memory by Marianne Hirsch to study the relationship the “generation after” bears with the trauma of survivors before them. The study will utilise the methodology of qualitative content and discourse analysis. It further aims to understand the relationship between memory and history and its impact on the South Asian community.

Keywords: 1947 partition; Collective trauma; Cultural memory; Intergenerational trauma; Postmemory; Oral histories.

Inheritance of home navigates through the ever-changing dimensions of family spaces and belongings across borders. Family is the foregrounding unit in an individual’s quest for identity. From family comes associations, ethnicity, race and roots. A family unit represents an individual’s identity wherein he/ she inherits certain character traits, cultural norms and tra-

ditions from other family members. If one knows about family traits they know about their history, tradition, culture and roots. New generations are born out of the stories of inheritance, transmission and attachment from the older generation. The experiences of older generations carve an identity for the younger ones. Family stories provide an opportunity to draw an association between the two generations, and also establish an identity for the next generation.

The past of older generations creates a present for the new ones. This transmission of the past from the old to the new takes place in the form of storytelling, anecdotes, art, poetry, photography, images and objects. The new generation inherit habits, traits, livelihood and even trauma endured by the older generation. Traumatic events that older generations witness or experience are transferred to the younger ones through unbearable, intoxicating memories. These memories that revisit the survivor in the shape of hallucinations or flashbacks are introduced into the family space. The trauma arising out of these memories often divide or destroy identity (Balaev 149). Identity is the interplay of several biological, psychological and interpersonal dimensions that tend to coexist. Every individual trace his/her identity through family roots, history, culture and tradition. The transmission is a result of transferred memories both good and bad. The bad memories give rise to intergenerational trauma that raises questions of identity and home.

Unfinished Partition Histories: Memory's Role in Intergenerational Trauma

Memory is often treated as a debatable concept due to its malleability. It is a fragile concept based on remembering and forgetting. Remembrance can be fragmentary as the event returns in flashbacks. The trauma is ignited through these memories. Trauma that is transferred between generations is best studied in the form of transgenerational, intergenerational and multigenerational trauma through the theoretical framework of postmemory. Memory in case of historical events is often cited as being collective. Aleida Assmann contests this idea of collective memory by categorising it into three broad categories: social, political and cultural. Social memory identifies with a society or community's response to the historical event, resulting from intergenerational trauma. The political memory is based on transgenerational communication of trauma, it helps to build national identity which is based on careful selection and symbolic construction. Lastly cultural memory is of two kinds; canon and archival. The former being the active canon of long-term storage of information. It perpetuates

what the society has chosen and considers vital for common orientation, exhibited in museums, etc. The latter form of archival memory is the forgotten, excluded and discarded yet deemed worth to preserve. It lingers into a state of latency. It is essential for preservation as it holds relevance in the present context. Memory, thus, exists in various forms of intergenerational, transgenerational trauma and postmemory.

Transgenerational trauma and postmemory were first studied in light of Holocaust survivors and their preceding generations. Marianne Hirsch introduced the term “postmemory” in relation to second and third generation Holocaust survivors. Studies confirmed that many second and third generation children inherited trauma from the survivors of the Holocaust. With postmemory, Trauma Studies took a leap towards post-traumatic stress disorder from victims to their second-generation offspring who seem to have inherited the trauma. This form of trauma is not lived by the younger generations but forms an ideal part of their life as it exists in the form of postmemory. Literary trauma studies argue that such kind of trauma causes a fissure in the identity of younger generations. It leaves the individual confused about their true identity and often raises issues of ethnicity. With the expansion of trauma studies, postmemory can also be applied to other historical traumatic events to study traumatic effects under family spaces. The paper seeks to apply this concept to the Indian Partition of 1947, the oral narratives under study help to unravel the generational pain of migration and loss. Intergenerational trauma is basically a concept of transmitting the emotional and psychological impact of trauma to subsequent generations.

The year 1947 marks a catastrophic day in the history of the Indian sub-continent. It represents the myriad plight of countless individuals who suffered the division of India and Pakistan. The memory of the event is essential to study the struggle common masses underwent during the formation of a nation. The independence of the nation caused a fracture to the socio-political life of the individuals. The fracture resulted in sufferings and trauma that is either expressed slowly or silenced. Ashis Nandy argues that this silencing of suffering adds to the violence of the trauma. How one inherits the memory of or narrates the Partition is grounded in one’s linguistic register, and the values prejudices, and dispositions that arise thereafter.

The Partition of India is atavistic in nature and therefore erupts in phases. The paper seeks to understand the trauma of individual’s oral histories of Partition available on the *1947 Partition Archive*. The archive is a non-profit

oral history organisation established in Berkeley, California and a registered trust in Delhi, India that collects, shares and preserves first hand accounts of the Partition of India. The archive commenced when Dr. Guneta Singh Bhalla started recording videos of Partition victim survivors. The aim was to preserve the memory of the event that would profoundly shape South Asia along with curating a platform for creating a community of survivors who would foster reconciliation and healing.

The 1947 Partition Archive crowd sources the collection of Partition witness interviews that are documented in diverse languages and dialects. The website showcases a story map covering the pattern of migration undertaken by the interviewee. These oral histories narrate the struggles of people across both sides of the border in East and West India. The stories provide glimpses into the varied experience of Partition. The interviewees in various oral histories add to the discourse of counter history on Partition. The particular paper aims to analyse the role of memory in creating a community of traumatic survivors of the Partition. It takes into account oral histories of individuals born between 1941-47, though alive during Partition, this group of people because of their young age did not have personal, first-hand experience of the event. They form the second-generation interviewees of the Partition and their memory is treated as a form of postmemory.

From Trauma to Testimony: The Journey of Postmemory

Postmemory is “precisely the guardianship of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a living connection and that past’s passing into history or myth” (Hirsch 1). The “post” in postmemory has many different meanings like positive, negative or appearing after a particular period and it works like a ‘post it’ that sticks to the surface of texts and concepts, adding and transforming these concepts, but it can fall off like a post it falls off and it is then that it can persist on its own and acquire an independent quality so the post is fragile and tenuous (“*Intellectuals of memory*” 00:33:46-34:45). Postmemory marks the transfer of ethical matters through generations. This transfer prevents the fading away of any traumatic event between generations. In postmemorial transmissions between generations, memory forms a central figure. Postmemory can often lead to re-traumatization of various post generations. Memory is not only inherited rather mediated through imagination, projection and creation (Hirsch 5). Postmemory is a form of social memory which is inherited from the survivors, however is subject to continuous change due to death of individuals. Social memory creates a social generation that, As-

smann implies, acquires a distinct profile as a result of shared experiences of incisive events that lead to self-thematization (41). Social memory also helps to create a generational identity that people belonging to a society that underwent trauma can completely associate with. This identification results from the intergenerational communication taking place within individuals and society.

History is often seen as objectively reporting the truth or reality of a situation. However, this objectively is also based on a system of careful selection and deletion. The history of Partition is often overshadowed by the idea of nationalism and Indian independence. The narrative of separation and loss are not depicted thoroughly in history books. This is a result of the political memory associated with the event. History is a form of political memory aiming to create an ideology to maintain a certain level of governmental hegemony. Political memory, as Assmann states, is a part of collective memory, and plays a significant role in understanding how the state commemorates and interprets memories of historical event, particularly those based on trauma, conflict and injustice. Political memory is essential to the study of memory politics. The latter refers to the deliberate shaping of political memory by institutions and governments to serve major national or ideological goals. In such a situation, memory moulds the historical narrative through a tool of repression by silencing the inconvenient truths. The collective memory can thus be contested, leading to divided memory, where individuals from different groups recall the event differently.

Collective memory is identified in two forms; communicative memory and cultural memory. The former is passed down through everyday interactions, limited to a few decades (roughly 70 years), while the latter is institutionalised memory, embedded in cultural artifacts, texts, and practices that endure across generations (Assman). Political memory often transitions from communicative to cultural memory when events are formalised in education, monuments or state rituals. Partition memory when passed down from one generation to another also exists to fill the crevices left from careful selection of information in historical context. The history of partition has been dominated by the narratives of nationalism and independence. The primary focus of historian post-independence revolved around the narratives of freedom struggle. The birth of a new nation brought with itself; challenges ignited with partition. These challenges were often overlooked in historical texts. Partition Studies took a leap in the late 1980s when oral historians invited common man to share their experience of the events. These oral histories were like Greenblatt's

counterhistory, that created a bridge between history and memory. Counterhistory involves narratives that challenge, undermine or run counter to dominant historical accounts. These oral histories are essential at revealing exclusions, challenging authority and opening space for dissent.

The oral histories rely on new media and communication technologies that have shaped the postmemories of the post-partition generations and the virtual ways in which they choose to remember, recover and engage with the past of their families and nations. The archive is a digital space that allows for digital manifestations of histories of Partition that delve into the violence and complexities of the division of India and the creation of Pakistan. It becomes an alternate space for citizens to document their stories and ideas of Partition. The community is built on certain shared memories of violence, migration and lost homeland. It creates a community of survivors who along with their family members experienced an event that is personal rather than political. The interviewees recall the struggle entailed in crossing the border, the issues of displacement and rehabilitation.

From Silence to Voice: Unearthing Hidden Histories

The narration of traumatic memories to the next generation is a complex process influenced by cultural, psychological, and interpersonal factors. Some survivors choose to document their experiences in diaries, letters, memories or autobiographies, creating a tangible legacy for the next generation. These memories exist in written accounts, as opposed to verbal narratives that survivors recount their experiences through spoken words, often in family settings over dining tables, especially on significant moments like anniversaries of events or repetition of cultural rituals. Trauma is embedded in rituals, prayers or commemorative events, for instance, families may observe moments of silence or light candle to honour victims of a traumatic event.

The foremost concern for the community was of displacement and refugee resettlement, Taj Begum one of the interviewees, who migrated from Delhi in India to Lahore in Pakistan, shares the deplorable sight of refugee camps;

“The refugee camp was miserable: “There was no food getting distributed there, and no roof on top of our heads. It was raining. Once we hid under one of the army trucks to avoid getting wet from rainwater.” ((Stanford University., “Oral History with Taj

The sights of camps across both the borders were same. The trains presented an even worse imagery of berths that were completely stuffed with people and the windows were sealed shut. Taj Begum recalls how her baby cousin's mouth was stuffed with a cloth to avoid any noise. Many literary narratives also present a deplorable state of the trains during Partition in India. The scale of bloodshed was massive on trains plying between Lahore and Amritsar in the West. Along the eastern border, the Sealdah railway station represented a deplorable state during Partition. The narrative is rooted at exposing what is omitted in the dominant narratives of migration studies. Taj Begum's experience of the partition highlights the changing landscape of South Asia, where individuals cope with the loss of homeland. This loss further leads to generational trauma, as the younger generation finds it hard to trace their roots back to a unified nation that no more exists.

The younger generation hears stories of Hindustan during the pre-partition days and finds it hard to understand the struggle of those who lost their home within a night. The story of Taj begum interplays with the intergenerational memory, affecting how younger generations perceive their identities. The refugees and their children often suffer from identity fragmentation, and their relations are splintered due to the scars left behind. Her story brings forth the perspective of the marginalized due to religion and political dissent. These refugees felt like potted plants that could be put up anywhere, having "no roots" recalls Zafir Afaq Ansari in his oral history. The same lack of rootedness that the refugee encountered is then transmitted to the younger generation leaving them to grapple with the sense of loss they never endured. The young South Asian individual, decades later, is unable to reconcile with the turmoil faced by his/her preceding generations. The traumatic memory has a deep-seated impact of the psyche of the individual, as they grow up under a dual identity, confused between the ancestral homeland and the adopted one.

The Partition of 1947 is viewed as a catastrophic event leading to massive violence and bloodshed. The oral histories account for such episodes of gruesome violence, the images are explicitly conveying the magnitude of destruction and raw violence suffered on the western border. Baljit Dhillon Vikram Singh recounts gory imagery of violence in the form of butchered bodies lying on the road. She migrated on road from Lahore to Amritsar and shares anecdotes of raw violence she witnessed during her journey. Her mother covered her daughter's face with a *dupatta* to

protect her from the scenes, however she recalls the imagery to be vivid in her mind. The extent of violence was widespread and massive. She saw the dead lying in ditches along the road and floating in canals (Stanford University, "Oral History with Malika Ali, 2016 March 4"). Baljit Dhillon's narration is an example of a non-linear narrative as she narrates the incident in a non-sequential manner, reflecting the disjointed nature of the traumatic recollection. The essential element in this is that emotions are prioritised over chronology; proving that memory often returns to the individual in fragments.

The magnitude of violence shattered individuals and brought them together under one refugee. Malika Ali who migrated from Hyderabad in India to Karachi in Pakistan recalls how her mother cried for the plight of refugees coming from India to Karachi. The tears are a symbol of the empathy associated in individuals who suffered a similar fate. Her mother set up the Women's Refugee Rehabilitation Association and helped thousands of people in acquiring housing, education and jobs (Stanford University, "Oral History with Malika Ali, 2016 March 4"). Violence was not only limited to physical and sexual being; it was made political. The plight of refugees was worsened by the issue of citizenship, refugee rehabilitation and bureaucratic violence. The latter is a form of organised violence against individuals who have migrated yet not considered citizens of both the nations (Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar 23).

The metaphor for lost homeland runs through these oral histories. The recall ignites a form of nostalgia that one associated with their place of birth. This nostalgia in certain cases turns to fear as narrated by Taj Begum, who never travelled back to India post migration, as she recalls that "more than the love for my birthplace, I have fear of it. I can never forget those awful days of Partition." (Stanford University, "Oral History with Taj Begum, 2017 February 6"). The event marks a sense of trauma that one carries forward for generations. It is important to note that such narrations of the event, ignite an image of horror for the succeeding generations who have not directly experienced the trauma of it. The digital archive weaves a network of survivors that associate with the pain and the longing of lost homeland.

Oral histories of the Indian Partition help understand how individuals and communities experienced the forces of history. The narratives bring together survivors of a catastrophic event to understand the issues of loss and suffering. The divide caused a fracture in the social fabric of household and society. Taj Begum and Malika Ali recount how they were not

personally affected by the violence of the event, however the destruction and bloodshed was always feared. The divide caused a change in status for many individuals, the loss raised an economical debt for many individuals. Baljit Dhillon Vikram Singh recalls the loss her family suffered while moving from Nanikie in Lahore to Amritsar in India. Her father was allotted a small amount of baren land in Punjab, in lieu of the hundreds of acres left behind. She further adds how “overnight her family became refugees living off the land, eating turnips and saag, wearing simple clothes and riding bullock carts and camels instead of in jeeps and car” (Standford University, “Oral History with Baljit Dhillon Vikram Singh, 2016 January 1”). Partition changed the economic status of many individuals, like Mr. Jain who migrated from Pakistan to Amritsar with his two siblings, as a ten-year-old boy, went from living with privilege to being identified as refugee, living in an orphanage, and later, becoming a child labourer to support himself and his family (Standford University, Oral History with Kidar Jain, 2015 December 26). The issues of financial loss in the form of property personal and commercial weighed down individuals. The compensation received was nothing close to the amount lost during the division. The resettlement process was long and tedious, while its impact lasted for later generations.

Conclusion

The Partition of 1947 echoes the loss of livelihood and personal relationships, mental health issues and distorted memory in these oral histories available on the archive. The curation of such histories often results in postmemorial transfer of memory and trauma to individuals not directly affected by the event. The interplay of memory and history of the Indian Partition profoundly impacts South Asia, shaping its social, political and cultural landscape. IT manifests in diverse ways; how nations and communities perceive themselves, their neighbours and their shared past. The South Asian identities are shaped in complexed ways. The younger generation too experiences a sense of loss, reunion and nostalgia for a past they have never personally known for places across borders they have never been to. The subsequent generation grapples with the angst to long as a necessary complication to the need to belong. The archive becomes a window to preserve for future generations a sound portrait of who we are in the present and what we remember about the past.

The memory of the Partition remains engraved in the conscious of the Indian subcontinent and has an entrenched impact on the political economic and social life of the present generation. The partition memory that

is carried forward through these oral histories continue to shape identity, people's relationship with the past and social structures across, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Politically, it fuels lasting tensions between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, evident in border disputes like Kashmir and riots arising due to communal disharmony like India's Babri Masjid demolition, Gujarat Riots of 2002 in India, Noakhali riots of 2021 in Bangladesh. Economically, Partition disrupted trade routes and resource sharing, creating long-term economic debts and challenges in connectivity, while displaced refugees reshaped urban centres like Delhi and Karachi. These centres remain a witness to the decade long turmoil that the displaced individuals had to endure while reinstating themselves under tough economic circumstances. Culturally, the suffering and trauma of the partition lives through pieces of art, cinema, literature and oral histories, highlighting themes of violence, resilience, loss and shared heritage. While these memories foster communal identities, they also perpetuate intergenerational trauma and mistrust. The upcoming new and digital media strategies create a global world for survivors and their succeeding generations of individuals, trying to reconnect and culturally unite through shared cuisines, music, literature and the arts.

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