

Introduction

Nearly eight decades after the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, most discussions in academia and civil society still converge upon a specific question - was it a cultural mobility or cultural murder? To most South Asian citizens, the cataclysmic Partition probably lives on as a fissure or a hole in the collective livelihood of the region; its manifestations and perceptions taking countless hues as time goes on. The recent conference on the theme “Memoryscapes: Historiographies & Methodologies around the 1947 Partition” on 17-18 February 2025, was one such occasion organised to remember the Partition through multiple approaches and cultural expressions. ‘Memoryscape’ as a term employs multiple spaces and characteristics in which memories negotiate with each other; and mutually shared memories bridge cultures and nations. The conference intended to bring together researchers across ages and nationalities from the Indian subcontinent and around the world working on the Partition of South Asia in 1947 and processes of its decolonisation. A series of workshops on the theme of partition in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh was planned, and as part of BRAC University’s commitment to an international collaborative project on “Memoryscapes” initiated by the University of British Columbia with several partners in India and Pakistan, the department of English and Humanities has taken the initiative to publish select papers from the conference in the current special issue of the faculty journal.

The lasting effects of Partition are unmistakably visible in the recent ultra- and neo-nationalist turn in South Asian countries, especially in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Since 1947, migration and displacement on a massive scale, communal conflicts resulting in arson, murder, abduction, rape and so on, have caught the headlines at irregular intervals, leading

Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar to call it a “long partition”. On 12 February 1949, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the first Home Minister of independent India, delivered a public speech at Chennai's Island Grounds, where he commented, “It is our great good fortune that we have here a rare opportunity to build our own country in our own fashion. History will record what we are doing today” (1949, 2024)ⁱ. He further said,

I have never repented my agreeing to partition. From the experience of one year of joint administration when we have not agreed to partition, I know we would have erred grievously and repented if we had not agreed. It would have resulted in a partition not into two countries but into several bits. Therefore, whatever some people may say, I am convinced and I remain convinced that our having agreed to partition has been for the good of the country. (Patel 1949, 2024)

Even though in his speech Patel claimed that the Partition was good for India, and probably the same emotion works among the leaders of the other two nations [Bangladesh having achieved its liberation from (West) Pakistan in 1971], Partition visibly did not bring any permanent solution to common people's crises. It is of course another question if the problems and aspirations of the common man in British India ever had any resonance in the perceptions of the high and mighty who ordained in overt and covert ways that Partition was the only way out. On the other hand, the passage from colonial rule to the evolution of nation states, rather than ushering in the cherished goals of independence, often complicated people's lives in unforeseen ways. One cannot overlook the fact that in some cases, we have also been witness to permanent damage to sanity in the socio-political practices of the region in ways that have affected lives of communities. Saadat Hasan Manto's portrayal of micro lives in

fiction show how Partition not only failed to establish democracy and justice in the name of liberty, but also violated cultural sanctity. Indeed, in the long span of time following Partition, the two (and eventually three) nations that took birth at the end of two hundred years of colonial rule, could not stand on solid grounds of democratic sovereignty. All grand designs went awry and power imbalance of all sorts remained an overarching reality disrupting citizen right and the values of human worth.

In South Asia we have a complicated history of confusion over identity, multiple entanglements of economic and cultural subservience in the name of neoliberalism, lack of ethics in politics and governance, mistrust and exploitation, violent ruptures of cultural identity and slow but steady rise of right-wing conservatism. All this is the undeniable aftermath of a Partition that was framed by a few ‘elites’ whose perspectives and ambitions had neither the capacity nor the intention to be inclusive of the dreams and desires of the majority of population in these countries. As the Grant Description of the Memoryscapes project refers to Zamindar’s remark that the Partition brought about the migration of up to 20 million people between 1946 and 1948, and more than 1 million killed, with an estimated half a million women abducted and many more subjected to sexual violence (Zamindar 2007). It must have had a lasting impact on people’s shifting identities and struggles. Making scholarly inquiries into these people’s changed lives is always counted as a necessity.

The project of UBC has been focused on such individual subjects and micro memories. The multiple approaches and methods that can take Partition studies beyond the trajectory of grand historical narratives have been targeted in the conference, and hence, the papers taken up for publication are of a diverse nature. The key thread in this issue, at a very broad level is

memory, which is itself very tricky, and can invite interpretations across many interfaces of public and private interactions within Partition studies. As Anam Zakaria suggests, memory becomes selective over time. She comments that "...it [memory] filters out information, it gets influenced by metanarratives, by tragic life of experiences. When something as huge and traumatic as Partition happens, other incidents and memories recede to the background" (2015, 7). The current volume has tried to capture multimodalities of such memories that are spread in the papers – migration and displacement, loss of language and culture, new cultural flows in and around the newly formed states, diaspora and transnationalism – explored in papers written in the field of literature, oral history, anthropology, museology, archival studies, film studies, migration, displacement and diaspora. Representing Partition violence in academic papers is quite difficult because tracing of violence either begins with official records from which grand narratives of history originate, or with personal recollections of the kind that are represented either in fictional art across mediums and personal memoirs. For the first, in most cases the role of the state in perpetrating violence and erasing the sins of the powerful shrouds much of the reality. Conversely, people's memory is fluid and strongly political. Individual memory contributes to but also collides with public memory. Triangulation of historical claims is thus needed to decipher moments of great historical turns, and multidisciplinary approach helps to conceive of Partition as a multidimensional event that affected multiple lives. An array of Partition voices echo in Fayeza Hasanat's paper included in this volume that traces intergenerational trauma and displacement of communities. Hasanat displays a gradual process of trauma being theorised as part of memory and also the manifestation of trauma in Partition literature. Beginning from historic to mediatised trauma, the paper lays the terrain of trauma theories for the readers. Her discussion of Partition novels is enriching because she opens new

trajectories of interpretation. For example, she talks of the railway spine symptom in some early novels that brings episodes of violence through the massacre done on the trains. The railway can become a significant motif in Partition studies as many other objects can too – a teacher’s fountain pen, a Tulsi tree, a small box of vermilion or blood stained prayer cap – objects that are trampled a million times in history but are archived in oral history projects. Thus, methodology and research tools in Partition studies are too diverse in nature and too difficult to rearrange within the covers of a volume.

Partition studies connect objects as sentimental items – sparking memories and inspiring memoirs – to human subjects whose lives were permanently influenced in positive or negative ways. In his contribution to this volume, Asif Iqbal concentrates on the secular ethnolinguistic vision of Bengalis via personal memoir of Professor Anisuzzaman. Iqbal’s take on Bengali Muslims reminds us of Zamindar’s remarks, “it [the term “Muslims”] refers to a constructed category of community and political mobilization that emerged under colonial conditions, and which was to become substantially transformed through the years of the long Partition” (2007, 4-5). The focus of the paper is on the revisionist history in the early twentieth century South Asia that witnesses increasing Hindu-Muslim antagonism. The shift of Bengali Muslims’ status from that of subalterns to the elites who replaced the colonial Hindu ‘bhadralok’ section, is quite intriguing. Solvent Bengali Muslims of East Bengal, added by a large number of migrated West Bengali Muslims to Dhaka, were, indeed, the privileged class in East Pakistan. According to the opinion West Pakistani government held, these Bengalis were not “Muslim enough” and the “vernacular cosmopolitanism” they built later became the core of Bangladeshi culture – a direction towards new cultural routes.

Apart from the elites who migrated to the cultural centres of the newly constructed states, and continued to narrate their own individual memories and represented others, there was a large number of migrants who needed to voice their challenges. Pippa Virdee comments that since the 1990s, oral history as a methodological tool helped Partition study shift from great men to people's history (Virdee 2013). Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman's paper deals with some of these people outside of the 'elite' narrativisation and searches for micro narratives on the fringes of history. 'Real' people's unheard voices are charted in the paper, while Praggnaparamita Biswas and Anup Shekhar Chakraborty carry the queries about common people's plight even further. They zoom in on the zero-line villages that represent the 'collateral damage' for countries on both sides of the barbed wires. Adiba Amreen's take on non-Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh reveals the multimodality of generational trauma and identity crises that Partition has caused.

The journey of Partition memory is a circular one, and hence we repeatedly arrive at the same kind of dilemma and conflicts. Partition is like a never-ending game that increasingly attracts players from following generations who not only carry its legacy but also offer new moments of eruption. Fresh political engagement with Partition history is a demand in the Indian subcontinent, and the special issue covers the new moments of arrival through Aniruddha Kar's paper on Museums and Sukriti Bhukkal's paper on Partition archives. Both papers throw light on memorialisation and digitalisation of Partition trauma, and show how the state plays a role in creating a 'national' memory. In turn, these papers posit a range of possibilities available through explorations into material memory. Absences of course are equally important as the pressing presence in this specialised field. Memory and the process of memorialisation are of an exclusivist nature, and hence, absence of complete truth is always a disturbing factor in Partition studies. Reconstruction of memory

is thus essential through connecting multiple dots across cultural interfaces, and it is challenging to adhere to a single discovery that creates bias. Ideological divides put forth further challenges to an unbiased discovery of historical events in a post-truth and post-ideological time. Israt Jahan and Mahruba Mowtushi look into the cultural representations of Partition – how radio and film captured the essence of the changing atmosphere. Mowtushi’s research on the radio, and her claim that “the sonic story of 1947–1952 foreshadows impending dissonances and the fragility of the nation” makes it easy for us to understand the necessity of another partition in 1971. Through a study of Tanvir Mokammel’s films, Jahan comments on the unresolved trauma that seeks a remedy in forgetfulness. Suvir Kaul wrote on the long effect of Partition a quarter century ago:

The destructive legacies and nightmarish memories of Partition—its afterlife—still guide our public policy and inhibit our ‘progress’ from colonial state to post-colonial democracies. We have not forgotten, for we memorialize selectively, and thus produce the authorized histories of the tire, histories that are sanctioned by the state and its institutions, or by smaller social collectivities. (2001, 2)

The special issue is a combination of critiques of both state-sanctioned initiatives that are manifested in archives and museums, and also of the smaller social initiatives of fiction, media and oral narratives. The interdependence of these is inevitable, and what becomes the priority beyond all classifications is the willingness to remember. Kaul talks about “mushroom cloud that now blights our collective imaginations (and) seems the apocalyptic return”, which is still visible in the sky of the Twenty-first century Indian subcontinent. The more we will remember, the more the mushroom clouds will be cleared and we can regain a sane political unconscious.

Do we need a rerouting in Partition studies? Are there new methodologies that we need to adopt? Interdisciplinarity, undoubtedly, holds the beacon for us. Divergent sources

need to be brought together to see the magnanimity of the aftermath of an event like Partition that drew multiple lines between political states and fractured the idea of cultural rootedness in the region. Bridging all these sources through a single method is impossible and hence in addition to including people's voices, avid collaboration among historians, literary researchers, anthropologists and political scientists is necessary. With the hope of inspiring thoughts of stabilising citizenship and ensuring existence of small numbers, the papers of the volume are dedicated to serve readers' queries at large.

BRAC University Journal (Humanities and Social Sciences) is being published after a long interval, but it has a mission of dedicatedly working towards publishing regularly from now on, providing space for newer findings in the academic fields that connect to human dignity, freedom of thought and cross current research in the humanities. This issue is published in loving memory of Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam who we lost recently, and who was one of the editors of this journal.

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ⁱThe speech of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel is part of *The Print's* "Great Speeches" series.

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