

## PARTITION MEMOIRS AT MICRO LEVEL

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### Abstract

The academia remains obsessed with Partition studies. However, the word 'Partition' connotes a special meaning –an emotion for a South Asian. It goes much beyond the simple narrative of a geo-political division of the landmass and creation of a separate nation of India and Pakistan in 1947 with the transfer of power from the British to the native Indians. After seventy-seven years of independence, there is no closure. In this present paper, I have tried to relive the personal, familial memories of my own family members who remain 'silent', and undocumented in conventional history of partition.

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The academia remains obsessed with Partition studies. However, the word 'Partition' connotes a special meaning –an emotion for a South Asian. It goes much beyond the simple narrative of a geo-political division of the landmass and creation of a separate nation of India and Pakistan in 1947 with the transfer of power from the British to the native Indians. After seventy-seven years of independence, there is no closure. The term reminds a third generation passive inheritor of partition like myself of violence, bloodshed, death, pain, loss, displacement, dislocation and hatred, due to the oral narratives of my grandparents who were the direct victim/survivor of partition.

Conventional history records a series of political events in a chronological order. The historian does archival research to reconstruct the past based on official records. In recent times, social scientists have explored diaries, memoirs, autobiographies to uncover the 'silent' voices of partition in both the western and eastern side of India. Phenomenal work exists of Urvashi Batulia (*The Other Side of Silence-Voices from the Partition of India*); Jasodhara Bagchi, (*The Trauma and the Triumph : Gender and Partition in Eastern India*); Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (*Caste and Partition in Bengal*); Anindita Ghosal (*Revisiting Partition: Contestation, Narratives and Memories*) on reviving partition stories. However, partition stories remain unending. It is difficult to capture the vast colossal experiences of the victim/perpetrator in a book or in a film.

In this present paper, I have tried to relive the personal, familial memories of my own family members who remain 'silent', and undocumented in conventional history of partition. Such oral narratives of partition were my '*ghum parano golpo*' –tales retold by my grandparents as sleeping lore. Oral narratives offer a different lens of looking at history, a different perspective but one-sided- in this paper the partition of Bengal. Even though unreliability of memory is subjected to criticism, it cannot be denied that oral narratives have helped to remember, recognise group of marginalized, ignored people including women, bringing them to center stage. The subjectivities of memory hint at clues, give meanings to historical experiences, as well as help to listen, comprehend and empathise the relationship between

past and present, between memory and personal identity. It helps us to synthesize individual and collective memory presenting a broader matrix of culture. The oral narratives of my family members have helped to make sense of the past, connect individual experiences with the socio-political context of partition. Through reminiscences, oral narratives, the lived experiences of my family members get expressed. The individual tale becomes a collective story. Human beings cannot be understood if they are taken out of the context of time and space of which they are always a part. Thus the 'human being' is not a universal empty signifier: rather 'it' is always stuffed full of culture and the historical moments of which it is a part and this history and culture is always in the process of changing. Human beings are dialogic, inter subjective (i.e. with others and not simply subjective) and have selves that are capable of reflexivity and reflectivity (Plummer, *Documents of Life*, 2001). Perhaps through repetition, my family members reminisced about their lost home at Bikrampur village in Dhaka, of their childhood days spent among lush greenery, fields looted, family uprooted. My grandparents vented out the unprecedented scale of violence, destruction, death they witnessed in their youth. Thus the micro environment within the all-encompassing macro environment of the said period gets reflected.

The political partition of India caused one of the greatest human convulsions of history. In the space of a few months about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan (Butalia, *The Other Side of Violence*, 2017). The Hindu-Muslim riots had started in pockets of Bikrampur village in Dhaka. On a stormy night in July 1947, my maternal grandfather's brother came out with the property papers. He wanted to give the property papers to his second brother, who stayed in another village adjacent to Bikrampur village, dominated by the Hindu religious community. He had promised his wife that the next day they would board the steamer and travel to Calcutta. However, he never returned. The immediate family members comprising of his wife and two children waited for two –three days for him to return. In the meantime, the extended family members lodged a missing diary at the Dhaka sadar police station. The local Hindu volunteers advised them to move out at the earliest. So leaving their home –*sasurbarir bhita/paitrik bhita*, all the material possessions and carrying only limited accessories, dry foods, the family members 'left' the space forever. They had to walk miles, change their course of travel as riot had spread to other nearby villages. They were left without food and drinking water. As they travelled through dark, dense forest in midst of dark night with a dimly lit hurricane to see the immediate pathway, their bodies would be covered with thorns, insects. The scars in my maternal grandmother's face and body reflected the physical pain she suffered. There were scratches all over her body and everyone in the family would refer her as '*Khabla jaal*' –because of the portions of muscle /skin which had come out while they were secretly escaping from the present Bangladesh. The emotional pain would get reflected on her face as people referred her with the 'new name of *Khabla Jaal*'. She had no money, stayed at refugee camps for months with no future at sight. After few months as refugee, she was 'discovered' by another relative, who was a LMS doctor treating patients at refugee camps. However, there was no trace of her husband. After independence, a few of my family members did travel to Dhaka and tried to trace him. It seems he was 'slaughtered' but there was no concrete evidence. The family members waited for twelve years and then following the Hindu rituals performed the *shradh*.

The individual experience of this pain never got reflected in post-colonial Indian history. However, in private sphere every time there was violence –the Naxalite movement, Sikh riots of 1984 following the assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the Babri Masjid Demolition in 1992, my grandmother would recount those gory days of partition. Her greatest

regret remains not 'seeing' her husband for the last time, not knowing what really happened to him as well as paying her tributes.

In this orgy of violence, women were the recipient of 'internal' and 'external' atrocities perpetrated by their own family members as well as outsiders. With Partition, one part of the body of the nation was forever lost, effectively converted. But inside the bodies of women and children, the boundaries remained fluid. Hindu women were in mythical harmony with their Muslim counterpart in individual Bengal – often were in relationship –apparently voluntary of both love and desire with Muslim men. One of my mother's aunts was in love with a Muslim man. During the political turmoil of partition, it seems she had eloped with the Muslim man, It created a huge fury among the family members, some of whom were staunch 'Hindu Brahmins'. On 6<sup>th</sup> December 1947, three and a half months after partition, the two newly formed nations, India and Pakistan came to an agreement popularly known as the Inter-Dominion Treaty, on the question of recovering those women who had been abducted and rehabilitating them in their native place. No effort was made to find out what 'these abducted' women wanted. The Indian state at macro level played a paternalistic, patriarchal role in the garb of seeking welfare of such abducted women. At micro level, Brahmanical patriarchy gets revealed time and again, as no endeavour was made by my immediate family members to find out about her well-being. A 'loved' daughter of the family was pronounced 'physically dead' by my family members. Local rumours were that she had fled to Lahore with her male partner. Till date it is not known to us, whether she had converted to Islam, relocated to Lahore, whether she had survived the onslaught of partition in form of rape, murder.... Did she really find a new home with her male Muslim partner or was her 'new home' a brothel?

The political partition of the country had a deep impact at a micro level – in a middle class family in Dhaka. It separated family members at psycho-physical space, disintegrated families, changed the internal demography of the family, creating unending trauma at psychological level. Such Partition stories reflect bitterness, enmity, prejudice, ignorance. At a time when Right Wing government is at centre, 'otherization' of the minority community is rampant, it is for the next generation to remember that violence, bitterness and enmity has no end. We should learn from our past history of partition and move forward towards a united India.

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