

Ripples of Psycho-social Violence in the Aftermath of 1947 Partition

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Abstract

The year of 1947 is the defining moment in history of the Indian subcontinent, when the British left and created Pakistan and India. These new states emerged carrying huge human suffering as violence forced millions of people to migrate. Even after 64 years, the experiences of partition continue to affect not only the survivors, but also the socio-political structures. This paper explores different currents in psychosocial sequelae of forced migration from a social violence perspective and focuses specifically on the post-migration experiences. It begins with the analysis of direct encounters of partition process and gradually takes the debate into wider sociological context. The struggles of remembrance and forgetfulness, socio-cultural norms aggravating the existing pain, counter-productive relief efforts, and the problematics of creating a social memory are some of the key aspects that will be examined.

Keywords: Forced Migration, Pakistan, India, Social Violence, Partition, 1947

“The wind was playing with the disturbed waters of the pool. But it seemed only surficial. Somebody threw the stone of 1947 in the middle of it. A thousand ripples erupted from the bottom of the pond. Every ripple had a story behind it ...”¹

Gulzar
(Indian Poet and Writer)

The partition and ensuing process of forced migration was a turning point in the history of Pakistan² and India. When the British left the subcontinent by dividing it into two parts, many found themselves on the wrong side of the border. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims had to abandon their homes and move towards their new belonging side. Muslims had to

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migrate to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs to India. Amid uncertainties and conflicting struggles to end the British rule, the bloodiest episode of recent history was written. 18 million Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus crossed the newly created border of which approximately 1 to 2 million people lost their lives. More than 90,000 women were abducted and raped by men of opposing faiths; no account has been made of those who went missing.³

Mujahid Taj Din, a Muslim resident of Lahore (now in Pakistan), was one of the perpetrators of the 1947 violence on Sikhs and Hindus. He was involved in the attack on a *Gurdawara* (Sikh religious place) and was responsible for the killing of many Hindus and Sikhs. Fifty three years after the incident, Taj Din's interview shows his struggle of remembrance-forgetfulness and meaning making. Taj Din describes,

*"The attack on the Sikh gurdwara – Chhaveen Padshahi – was masterminded by thanedar Malik Maqsood (sub-inspector or Station House Officer) of Mozang Police Station. He trained some of us for four days ... He told us that our Muslim brothers and sisters were being killed in India, and the main objective of the training was to protect Muslims and to take revenge...When we attacked, there were not more than 20 to 30 Sikh men and women in the temple. All of them perished in the inferno...We were told that Pakistan would be an Islamic state where the nizam (system) established by Allah and his Prophet would be again revived...once Pakistan came into being, I, like many others, began anxiously to await the revival of the true and just Islamic state and society... However, we never got our Islamic state. Every ruler looted us. Pakistan is a very corrupt society. If all this were to happen, then why were we asked to do what we did? ... It happens quite so often that I pray to God to give me mafi (pardon) for the murder of those Sikhs and Hindus. I have a feeling that Allah understands me and has forgiven me. We were misguided and used by our politicians"*⁴

Taj Din's narrative shows the trouble of remembering the past and creating meaning out of it. His description of past events is oscillating between his desire to forget and create sense out of chaos. It is very difficult to accommodate the inconsistent feelings of pain, guilt and confusion into a single memory. The remembrance is never a fixed and articulate account of past actions. It is shaped by the present conditions

and often takes place within ever-changing social and political paradigms.⁵ Taj Din's acceptance of violence is embedded in the socio-political realities of the present. He is admitting the responsibilities of his horror but at the same time, refusing the accountability by blaming dirty politics. He has framed his memories in socio-religious background. For him, his actions were motivated by his desire to seek an Islamic country. In a way, he contends that whatever he did was for the greater good of Muslims and he should not be held responsible alone. He tries to connect the failures of current politics with his own actions that happened 53 years before. What would he have said – let's say – if Pakistan had become a truly Islamic republic and just society? Taj Din's remembrance seems inborn with forgetfulness and anchoring with his present situation.

Taj Din is drawing successfully on religion as his coping strategy. Religion has a great usage to deal with the traumatic events. Use of religion, cognitive processes and support from family and social networks are among the commonly held measures of contending with past traumatic events.⁶ Taj Din has found a complete solace in religion. He believes that God has forgiven him due to his repentant and repetitive prayers and because of his actions in a particular context.

In the patriarchal society of India and Pakistan, women's sufferings have been multifaceted during and after the partition process. Socio-cultural norms strictly regulate their role and behavior in society. After partition, many displaced women found themselves at great trouble in re-building their lives. Some of them were not directly affected by the violence but even then, the social structure, of which they were the integral part, was torn into pieces.

Veena Das shares the experiences of a woman, named Asha who migrates to India during the 1947 partition and finds herself struggling in a new social space.⁷ Before partition, she had been widowed, yet well settled in her life. She was happily living with the family of her deceased husband; she was given the adoption of a child by her husband's sister⁸ and was raising him peacefully. After the migration, she found herself on the disposal of her relatives on the Indian side. As the previous stable family structure collapsed, her sufferings began. After makeshift living in their relatives' home for four years and while being sexually harassed, she (being a single woman) found no other option than to remarry against her true wishes. Her son and others in the family kept on disapproving and ridiculing her as this was against Hindu cultural norms that discouraged re-marriage of any widow. Such a disruption in Asha's life would never have happened, if the forced migration of 1947 has not occurred.⁹ In this narrative, Das has shown the violence of partition penetrating into everyday life. Asha had to get married against her

profound will and on the top of that, had to face the ridicule of her relatives. The partition experience had deeply disrupted the normal flow of Asha's life and caused her melting agony and suffering.

In the aftermath of partition, the governments of India and Pakistan agreed to find the abducted women and missing persons, but in some cases, these efforts only created more havoc in the lives of the survivors. Social suffering is caused by the political, economic and institutional power structures in the lives of ordinary human beings and sometimes "bureaucratic responses to social violence intensify suffering".¹⁰ Social suffering can also lie in the very responses of institutions and programs that try to address the problems¹¹ through "intended and unintended effects".¹² During the 1947 partition mayhem, hundreds of thousands of women had gone missing. The governments of Pakistan and India agreed to search such women and return them to their families. Although a majority of the abducted women had been abused during the partition process, some of them had nonetheless been treated with compassion. After being left alone, such women had got remarried and even had kids. In the exchange process, both the governments showed a high level of insensitivity to the present situation of such women. Some of them were forcibly transferred to their original places without their consent. This insensitivity has been termed as a 'second violence' as the women were again uprooted against their will.¹³

In a study on refugee determination process, Rousseau and Foxen emphasize that in order to identify with a person (with the objectives of comforting), one needs to correctly understand his/her needs.¹⁴ The government authorities who were given the task of recovering and restoring abducted women acted oblivious to their situation. In cases of women being relocated, deep psychological pain was inflicted which, in one known case, even led to commit suicide.¹⁵

Socio-cultural implications have been instrumental in aggravating the sufferings of survivors of the 1947 partition. If the targets of physical and psychological terror are the same cultural models through which people seek meaning, an effective cultural redemption is difficult to be found.¹⁶ In the Indian subcontinent culture, women represent the honor of a family and community. In the partition violence, "Women were especially targeted, not only because of their vulnerability but more importantly because they were seen as upholding community 'honor'".¹⁷ Many of these women were not accepted back by their original families and continued to face stigmatization due to the cultural code of 'dishonoring'.¹⁸

The partition process shattered the social geography of Indian subcontinent, and consequently created unprecedented psychosocial

problems. Traditionally, caste and professions were connected in pre-partition era. Each neighborhood, urban or rural, was built around a particular caste or a clan; each neighborhood had its own community organization (*punchayat*) to help each other, settle the disputes and protect from others.¹⁹ Living in such an arrangement, a sense of security was manifested in these community organizations. During the partition process, people tried to move in family caravans and afterwards, attempted to recreate the secure bonds of community. However, this was not always possible. Living in isolation from their communities created an extreme sense of vulnerability in them.²⁰ Social problems also began to surface with the creation of divisions such as Locals vs Migrants. Local people were usually reluctant to get their daughters and sons married to migrants. The migrants, being already under economic stress, were stigmatized on a social level as well. As social suffering affects low income and powerless groups of people more than others²¹, the social exclusion intensified the migrant's feeling of attachment with their homes, friends, community bonds, physical objects and places. The first generation of partition has kept on dreaming about visiting their homes again; some were able to go back for short visits but the majority couldn't. Despite religious similarities and coping strategies, people have undergone severe psychological pain and distress in their lives after partition.²²

The efforts to create a coherent public memory of partition have given birth to a body of poisonous knowledge that keeps on shaping the communities on religious lines. Soon after the partition, the two newly emerged states, Pakistan and India, found themselves to be each other's best rivals. Uncongenial relationships, disputed territories, three wars and sour diplomacy have marked the history between India and Pakistan up till now. The official memories built by the both countries, especially in the case of Pakistan, have aided in the communal divide on religious lines. A single social memory is very problematic to be constructed due to ever-changing socio-cultural and political conditions, and conflicting memories of violence.²³ The term 'partition' was hardly used in the official accounts of Pakistan government and Hindu nationalist thought. Pakistan's official discourse has been dominated with the understanding of partition as 'independence' and 'freedom'. It premises on 'Two Nation Theory' constructing 'Muslims' and 'Hindus' as two different nations who were destined to live independently.²⁴ The social sciences curriculum taught in the government schools of Pakistan has been laden with the contention of 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' as separate and thus essentially conflicting communities. The violence of 1947 has been represented as Hindu and Sikh aggression against Muslim victims. In

Pakistan, the 'history is pressed into service as evidence bolstering the two-nation theory'.²⁵ Pakistan has even gone frantic with the idea of dissipating Hindu existence. An official policy has existed to change the names of the places, roads and hospitals that were built by Hindu philanthropists in pre-partition era.²⁶ The official Pakistani discourse has created Hindus and Sikhs as 'others' – distant, strange and incomprehensible. 'Othering' is a method to define and secure one's own identity through detachment from and stigmatization of the 'other'. It builds up one's own self by creating and reinforcing distance from the 'other'.²⁷ The second and third generations of Pakistan have been particularly affected by the agenda of seeing Hindus and Sikhs as 'others'. [Presumably the same sort of mental conditioning might have been engineered on the other side of the border as well. An exercise of this nature might have been deemed essential for keeping alive the ever simmering hostilities and tensions on both sides of the divide]

The disastrous consequences of this poisonous knowledge have been visible in the last few decades. Any small scale incident of religious confrontation can easily trigger widespread bloodbaths. The Babari Mosque incident and the consequential reaction on Hindu communities in Pakistan, the Gujrat Massacre, Bombay violence, and Mumbai attacks are but a few examples. In Pakistan, the hatred has been so momentous that the few Hindus who stayed after partition were forced either to change their religion or use popular Christians names so as to avoid easy detection.²⁸ The social sufferings initiated by the partition process have continued in new shapes.

The hopefulness, positivity and faith of people in their states, both in Pakistan and India, as it was displayed on the eve of partition, has slowly transformed into despair and a sense of betrayal. In an effort to know the aspirations of people during the 1947 partition, Urvashi Butalia has adopted a different approach of study. She has gone through the official archive of communication that happened between people and government authorities during and soon after the partition. The archive was full of different types of letters, requests and complaints. Some people asked for financial help in settling up new businesses, others sought for a job and yet others who wanted to help the newly arrived migrants. The archive study has been an interesting way to realize the concerns, beliefs and attitudes of people at the partition time. Butalia finds that people had confidence and faith in their state. They had a feeling of belonging to the state and an assurance that their claims would be heard. On the same level, people had the sense of contributing towards the state's efforts of rehabilitation. Several letters were found in the archive offering help in building refugee homes and people wanting

to take care of orphans and re-settlers. Several decades later, during her interviews with the partition survivors, Butalia found that people were left with very little faith in their state. The sense of betrayal and disenchantment with the state is widespread among the survivors of the partition who initially hoped that their sufferings would be rewarded.²⁹

Conclusion

The survivors of partition have long kept on facing the sufferings of forced migration and social violence on psycho-social level. Individual difficulties in coping, disruption of social geography and socio-cultural implications have been distressful. Decades after partition, we see that the violence of 1947 is starting to gradually penetrate into the entire social fabric and thus, affects even those who were never part of the partition process to begin with. The construction of a misfit public memory has taken the 1947 violence back into the whole community. The ripples of violence still keep on hitting and hit back the individual and collective existence.

Until recently, the social and psychological aspects of 1947 violence have not been studied properly, as the focus has been on political and demographic dimensions.³⁰ It is very pertinent to scientifically study the human dimension of 1947 violence and expand the existing knowledge.

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Notes and References

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³⁰ This concern has been expressed by many scholars including Urvashi Butalia, *An Archive with a Difference: Partition Letters*, op.cit.; Ian Talbot, *Partition of India: The Human Dimension*, op.cit.; Arif Hasan, *The Unplanned Revolution: Observations on the Processes of Socio-economic Change in Pakistan*, op.cit., & Ahmed, *The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed*, op.cit.