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### Public Memory, Personal Memories and the Historical Moment: Rethinking Partition Here and Now

Sudeshna Banerjee\*

[\*Professor Sudeshna Banerjee teaches in the Department of History, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India.]

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*According to the author, "the presentation, is a weave of stray thoughts that shot through my mind when I was composing the first draft of the concept note for this conference." However, in view of the relevance of the issues and a critical thinking generated by the presentation, we took the liberty to reproduce the presentation without giving the author the opportunity to revise the paper. We agree with the author that :*

*"The presentation therefore aims at formulating an activism oriented radical politics of rethinking the significance of partition memories. Such radical politics, of course, involves a radical critique of the dominant hegemonic structures of memorialising the Partition in the first place and then proceeding to enunciate the radical alternative. Radical critique of public memory of the partition has become particularly essential today because of the increasingly communalised atmosphere we live in. By the Partition, I refer in this paper to the partition of India in 1947 and the creation of two independent nation states, India and Pakistan." (Editor)*

#### **The Trauma**

The partition brought in its trail a massive population migration across the newly created borders; 12 to 14 million people migrated, and for the vast majority of them it was sheer displacement; over one million people were killed in violent encounters variously involving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. An estimated 75,000 women were abducted and subjected to sexual violence. It is amply evident from all existing records, reminiscences and oral history that it was the ordinary people from all these communities who suffered from such massive displacement, bloodshed, sexual assault and of course the deep trauma. But the irony is that the agencies that have produced the dominant, hegemonic structures of the public memory of the partition are not the people *per se* but (a) the state (i.e., both the Indian and the Pakistani state and (b) majoritarian nationalist ideologies on either side of the border.

## **Public Memory**

I probably need to clarify what I mean by public memory, the hegemonic postures of which, I argue, need to be resisted. It should be clear at the outset that my use of the word public in no way seeks to reify the public-private disjunction posited by bourgeois liberal discourse that has also been found to be innately gendered. By public memory I mean a selective appropriation of merely certain regularities of the otherwise varied world of peoples' memory. These selected fragments are pressed into a standardised, essentialist narrative that forcibly seeks to homogenise a community's partition memory. This ideological homogenisation at the behest of the state and the elite leadership of communal organisations has two inevitable attributes which are interrelated. One, given its ideological nature, public memory as I define it, is fundamentally audience-oriented and as such makes utmost use of the typical modes of dissemination in the public domain, i.e., print and other media. Two, public memory with its orientation towards publicity and its origin in constellations of power is structured as a co-ordinate of the (imagined) nation.

## **Personal Memory**

For me the 'other' of public memory is what I would call personal memory. The homogenising drive of public memory necessarily marginalised or silenced those memories that disturbed or destabilised the facile essentialisms and the neat binaries constructed by the nation state or majoritarian ideologies. These people's memories marginalised by public memory, however, remain alive, in a space that I refer to as personal, as space where difference with public memory is silently nurtured and protected from being flattened out under the hegemonic grid of public memory. This does not mean that all fragments of personal memories necessarily contradict the principle of hatred towards the 'enemy' that invariably marked public memory of the Partition till very recently. Indeed as has been observed over the last one year or so, the discourse of the state and even of majoritarian ideologies are trying to shift from their invariable affiliation to the hate principle if only out of strategic considerations. On the other hand, personal memories are not exclusively woven around love, friendship and commonalities across the border but are also scarred with hate and resentment alongside deep anguish. But what is fundamentally different about the space of personal memory is its plurality, its complex weave of various sentiments ranging from love to hate and the absence of any single power centre forcing memories to shed their heterogeneous tendencies and suit an exclusive imagining of the nation.

For any radical agenda of resistance to the hegemony of public memory it is important to keep in mind that power insinuates into the domain of partition memory through statist and majoritarian strategies of homogenisation, marginalisation, selective silencing and suppression of the strains of commonality that cut across the borders of nation states. Such strategies of creating public metanarratives of the partition have the effect of denying personal memories their right to difference. The radical critical strategies, therefore, need to question and resist these power-laden strategies. But before that, it is helpful to see exactly how public memory has represented the partition on either side of the Indo-Pakistan border and that too over time.

## **Post-Colonial Experience**

In India, the public memory recounted by the postcolonial state typically revolved round 'high politics': the constitutional and political negotiations between the British government, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League. State-sponsored public memory in Pakistan is committed to showing the partition as necessary for the realisation of nationhood and the creation of a safe homeland for South Asian Muslims.

That the state-sponsored public memory on neither side of the border represented the people's memory is evident in the way the Indian public memory and its Pakistani counterpart, despite their contestational stance, converged in one respect. Neither state felt the responsibility of recording the 'trauma of death, destruction, destitution, displacement and defilement' actually experienced by the people of the subcontinent as a result of the partition. 'The need to construct a glorious biography of the nation, both for India and for Pakistan, required that such a biography should remain unsullied by the memory of the disaster of partition' [Guptoo, 2005]. The agonising aspect of Partition thus was rendered invisible. Partition was officially remembered exclusively in terms of the culmination of a set of political and constitutional negotiations. Wars between India and Pakistan gave state-sponsored discourses on either side a further turn. The border between India and Pakistan, cartographically politicised, came to be inscribed with a spirit of enmity. In both cases imagining of the post-partition nation and its 'enemy' came to fervently invest in the notion of a rigid inviolable border with a prohibitive visa regime sustained in a spirit of mutual distrust and a daily ritual of belligerent gesticulation - 'a pure theatre of difference divorced from everyday life'- routinely performed on either side of the border by the BSF and Pakistani Rangers (Murphy, 2001).

## **Majoritarian Nationalism**

Majoritarian nationalisms on either side have selectively appropriated some aspects of personal memory to create their respective versions of public memory. Thus, the majoritarian nationalism in India, recounts a memory that portrays the partition as a product of an act of betrayal of the national cause by so-called 'separatist' Muslims. In Pakistan majoritarian ideology tried to propagate that Hindus repressed Muslim society, did not grant autonomy to the Muslims and wreaked terrible violence on them, and ultimately forced the latter to flee India. This theme was repeated vociferously during most public gatherings, including Friday sermons.

The question is whether in the context of this politics of public memory, the alternative politics lies in treating partition memories as a closed chapter, thus preventing any selective appropriation of personal memory for the hegemonic purpose of either the state or majoritarian nationalism? The problem is that an injunction on memories, for good for bad, can itself be tantamount to an assault on long crystallised identities and a trivialisation of what millions have suffered. The generations that suffered have a right to their memories. But, an equally great concern, as Urvashi Butalia put it is, 'How do we talk about a violent past in such a way that we do not further increase and exacerbate the cycle of violence?' So even while we need to look at memories in the face, we need to address the problem of remembering amidst a high tide of majoritarian nationalism, indeed the world over. A further problem is that memory - even personal memory - is not pure of unmediated. As such any uncritical recourse to personal

memory may not by itself be radical or emancipatory relative to dominance of public memory. Much depends on who remembers what and when and with what degree of awareness about the power of public memory to homogenise or appropriate the personal.

That is all the reason why the plurality of personal memory needs to be brought out as exhaustively as possible. The recording of personal memory was already initiated from the 1990s, but it is still in need of massive augmentation across the borders in the subcontinent. Indeed the most important alternative politics is to bring the personal into the public i.e., in this case, personal memory into the public domain. The related strategy is to use the vast repertoire of personal memory to demonstrate the plurality of partition memory even within one and the same community if only to destabilise the hegemonic homogeneity imposed by public memory. Whatever personal memory has so far been excavated, already shows that 'remembering Partition does not mean only recalling the violence... For every story of violence and enmity, there is a story of friendship and love'. Bir Bahadur Singh, a Sikh who prior to the partition had lived for many years in Saintha village in Rawalpindi district, went to visit Saintha as an old man not merely to revisit his 'home', but also to seek forgiveness from his childhood Muslim friends and to make amends for his father's failure to trust them at the time of Partition (Butalia). Again the memory of the *Momins* or *Julahas* from Jharkhand is clearly contrary to the standardised public memory in India. Muslims though they were, the Momins of Jharkhand, chose to remain where they have lived for ages side by side with the non-Muslim *adivasis*, even when they were offered the choice of migrating to West Pakistan (Sinha, 2003). What is clearly retained in the personal memory of the Jharkhand Muslims is how these low caste people had given precedence to their regional affiliation over the local elite Muslims' call for a homogeneous Muslim identity supposedly realisable in Pakistan. This memory, thus, also questions the homogeneity of the public memory of Hindu majoritarian nationalism that claims that all Muslims invariably subscribed to the two-nation theory and were eager to transfer their allegiance to the newly created state of Pakistan.

The hegemony of public memory cannot be resisted if we assume the community to be a pre-political cultural configuration - an assumption which only helps communalism to thrive on both sides of the border. Personal memories can help us show how the memory of a community is variegated by class, caste and gender and so on. For example, women's experiences have displayed remarkable commonality across communal divides. Whether the woman was a Muslim or a Hindu or a Sikh, her body was the site where the nation was either protected or violated during the days of post-Partition violence. Again, public memory, whether of the nation states or of communal ideologies, is invariably an universalisation of adult memories; children's perspective on the Partition, with its right to memorial difference, has been simply ignored.

The politics of swamping public memory with the personal also involves identifying the politics of gender that marks public memory from personal memory. Constructed around the notion of the nation that is invariably imagined as a nucleus of virility, public memory is masculinist. In a male dominated ethos, hate is akin to war which is immaculately masculine. Thus, the language of hate is considered as appropriate for dissemination in the public domain. But the language of love is treated differently under modernity. Love is constructed as a soft emotion too 'feminine' to live up to the impersonality of the public sphere and hence

appropriate for articulation only in a private sphere. Thus public memories of the Partition are comfortable with hate-mongering, but very uncomfortable with the 'embarrassingly emotional' with the voice and narratives of affection which they, therefore, choose to silence. Love is destabilising for the established structures of public memory of the Partition also because it has an equalising idiom while hate is implicitly inferiorising. Love, regarded as a soft sentiment, and softness being imagined as an attribute of femininity, it is as embarrassing as treasonous for the proponents of public memory to admit any love or compassion for 'the enemy'. Personal memory having no such compulsion to look masculine has accommodated soft sentiments like love and friendship. The need now is for men and women on both sides of the border to imbibe the 'women's mode' of informal, personalised connectivity to disseminate the so-called soft sentiments of love, compassion and friendship embedded in personal memory.

### **Women-Specific Mode**

Indeed, radical politics of rethinking the Partition has much to learn from what has so long been women-specific, people-to-people mode of connecting. Women of Khemkaran village, through which the partition line was drawn in 1947, have ever since defied the border to meet on Thursdays to share news, exchange gifts, sing together and generally revel just in the spirit of connecting. [Shanti's story as told to Urvashi Butalia and Sudesh Vaid and cited in Chhachhi, 1996]. This spirit has been consciously imbibed and amplified by the women's movement in South Asia in a bid to make women in both countries as well as in Bangladesh aware of the hegemony of hostility-ridden statist discourse of borders. In 1989, a South Asian Feminist Declaration further strengthened the linkage and more and more women's groups have been drawn into the process. In 1995, a number of such women's groups gathered in Dhulikhel, Nepal, and formed a South Asian Women's Peace Bahini to resist militarisation and violence in the region. Sharing at this level is sharply bringing out the commonalities' in our situations as women in a patriarchal society. As we listened to each other's life-stories, there were many instances when, struck by the cultural similarity, one of us would say "if the names and places were replaced, the same story could be my own". Indian and Pakistani women are subject to similar structures of patriarchal control within their families and communities' [Amrita Chhachhi, 1996].

The hard sentiments like hate, nurtured by public memory, are already facing a challenge from a popular stance which, however, is not consciously critical of the masculinism of public memory. Drawing upon a traditional moral concept common in all religions in the subcontinent, persons on the street are evidently developing a discourse on both sides of the border - a discourse that is unfortunately not as sensitively highlighted by media or even peace activists as much as it should be. I refer to the discourse of hospitality. True, that in the discourse of hospitality the notion of 'otherness' is present, but then no radical politics is suggesting the union of the two or for that matter three - countries unless the people will it. Hence such a union is not in the range of realistic possibilities that we are discussing here. What is important here is that hospitality is ethically based on care rather on need, and connotes a responsibility towards otherness. Moreover, in all popular moral discourses in the subcontinent the guest is somehow (for as long as s/he stays as a guest) prioritised over the 'self'. Reminiscences of groups of activists, students and academics that have visited Pakistan from India over the last few years have references to how small traders and food vendors on the streets of Pakistani cities refused to

take money from Indian ‘*mehmans*’ (guests), thus momentarily fore-going the immediate economic interest of the ‘self’.

Public memory of the Partition also deploys spatiality as power. It is important that while neither the Indian nor the Pakistani state has cared to build a Partition memorial, they lost no time in memorialising the Partition through a hectic politics of cartography. And we all know the power of maps in transforming land into territory and investing naturalness upon such territorialisation. It is important that the border that was cartographically normalised, was, however, not the people’s creation. Rather, millions have suffered because of its rigid enforcement. Thus in personal memory the rigidly enforced border has remained a symbol of the amputated self in the sub-continent. Majoritarian nationalism, in its turn, tries to foster a public memory that Muslims per se were the authors of the two-nation theory and were elated at the creation of Pakistan which they claimed as their homeland. Post-partition India, the majoritarian nationalists in India claim, was thus a space that was now legitimately the domain of *Hindutva*. Their counterparts in Pakistan inscribe the space on their side of the border with a monolithic religious identity under Islam. The space on other side of the border has invariably invested with a blanket enmity by both nations. There is another dimension to the politics of space. Both the state and majoritarian nationalism seek to appropriate the entire space of memory and speak on behalf of the nation, thus denying personal memory a legitimate space.

### **Alternative Approach**

The need for an alternative politics of space is already being answered, though it still remains to be seen how effectively it can spread among millions on both sides of the border. I refer to the concept of soft borders. Though this concept is now being reiterated by Indian and Pakistani political leaders, it is not the creation of high politics but of people’s activism in both the countries. But, ultimately, the most effective strategy of countering public memory’s politics of space probably lies in showing the space of the two countries neither as mere national territory, nor as an essentialised configuration of cultural homogeneity but as demographically embodied by very real people who have their own agency and are indeed variegated in terms of class, caste, gender, religious and cultural practices. Appropriation of the space of memory by powers that be, charges the academic community, particularly critical historians, with the responsibility of foregrounding oral history with much greater vigour than has been done so far except by a handful of scholars. However, that by itself may not effectively resist the hegemony of public memory unless the problem of gap between activism and scholarly pursuit is addressed. Public memory is already advantaged in terms of dissemination. However, in absence of a countervailing scale of dissemination, personal memory will remain on the margins in terms of an alternative politics.

One piece of activist literature, however, promises to show the way in positing an alternative spatiality; indeed it creates a radical trope which resists both, the politics of borders and the attempt to appropriate the space of people’s memory. A booklet, published in 2001, carries a letter addressed sarcastically to ‘Dear India and Pakistan’, configured as nation states. The letter then goes on to say, ‘We are writing to you from No-man’s land. From terrain torn by partitioned hearts and poisoned minds. We are writing to you two nations, both of whom we regard as states that have failed their people, their environment and ecology. The two states that have also failed

their religions, that too in the name of *Jehad* and *Rama Rajya!*' [Malik, 2001]. It is very significant that the coinage 'no-man's land' not only situates the authors subjectivity outside the 'rationality' of borders, but also simultaneously configures this critical space as the distinct space of personal memory not appropriable by the state or majoritarian nationalism.

Finally, critical reading has to take note of the timelessness deployed by the majoritarian nationalism's narratives of the Partition. It is as if 'enmity' between Pakistanis and Indians is permanently decreed by the fact of Partition. It is as if long before 1947 the partition was already always inchoate in the 'machinations'/intransigence of the 'other', and that 1947 was just an accidental timing for what was in any case bound to happen. It is as if the Partition is an eternal truth that culturally fixes an essential difference between the two nations, historically binding the people of the two countries to carrying forward their respective essential difference forever. The counterpoise to this politics of timelessness, of course, is an insistence on a politics of historical moments. In other words we need to use history as a tool in sensitising people to the importance of change over time; to generate the conception that the moment of the partition is real and unforgettable but situated in a historical time too different from the present historical moment to hold today's people and their perception of their rights hostages to the sentiments generated at the time of the Partition. The past moments arguably still inhabit the present and, therefore, the politics of the present is not a pure position; nor can it ever be. The feminists, peace activists, human rights activists are working towards this politics of the contemporary by using critical tools to demystify the shibboleths of the past.

### **New Perspective**

Historical change from the moment of the Partition mainly reflects in change of actors and their activities. New generations and new forms of politics have intervened. Just as the generations directly experiencing the Partition has the right to their self-hood shaped by that past moment, the present generations, too, have the right to exert their own agency in the context of their own historical time and formulate their selfhood vis-à-vis the Partition in a spirit of difference from the previous generations.

Similarly, partition memories are being rethought today in an atmosphere shaped by new critical perspectives ushered by the 'new social movements like the environmental movement, the human rights movement, the peace movement, the women's movement, the anti-nuclear movement and so on. It is significant that activists from all these movements in India and Pakistan are represented on Pak-India Forum for Peace and Democracy, which has pledged since 1995 to 'scale the walls of hatred' between the two countries (Manchanda, 1998). These movements have marked a new turn in people's or citizens activism. It is only to be expected that the rethinking of Partition memories will now take place in the light of a perception of rights shaped by these movements among a new generation and not in the light of an essentialised imagining of the nation.

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