

# #TalkPoint: Should we relegate Partition to history books?

7 August, 2017

THEPRINT TEAM



India's 1947 partition has long been in school textbooks, but thus far personal stories from the event have been largely absent. In the past two decades or so, books, oral history initiatives and online archives have shattered the silence around Partition's private pain. This month, the Partition Museum will open in Amritsar. Should India consider Partition a history project or does its legacy continue to impact the country today? For today's #TalkPoint, we ask the experts for their take.

Is partition an event in history or is there a continuing legacy and pain of partition that bedevils the countries even today? We ask experts.

**A historical 'moment' that impacted millions and created long term antagonism can't be put away between two sets of dates — Urvashi Butalia, author of 'The Other Side of Silence' and 'Partition: The Long Shadow.'**

A few weeks ago, a close friend of mine, a Pakistani, died in her home in Lahore. We'd spoken on the phone shortly before she went. "Can you come?" she asked me, "I don't have long."

I couldn't go of course, although travelling to Lahore and back across the Wagah border can easily be done in a day. But the obstacle wasn't distance, it was something else altogether. It was that elusive and impossible thing, a visa. Perhaps one can say this is a part of the bitter and ongoing legacy of Partition.

A historical "moment" that impacted the lives of millions of people, and that created long term antagonism and hostility between two neighbouring nations is not something that can be done and dusted and put away between two sets of dates.

Nor can its painful legacies be dealt with unless there is a willingness to accept their existence and talk about them. In India and Pakistan, the terrible violence of the moment of the birth of the nation, has been swept under the carpet because our states do not want to sully the nationalist narrative of independence.

But it hasn't gone away. You can't obliterate memory, it has a way of coming back to haunt people. And it's not only memory that remains unsettled: there's people, there's river waters, there's questions of property, of self-determination and so much more.

India and Pakistan like to rehearse the rhetoric that Partition is a thing of the past. That it was over in 1947. But if that is the case, here's my question: why then are we still behaving like two badly brought up children and refusing to talk to each other?

**It is not the past if it still oppresses the present — Asif Farrukhi, writer and Associate Professor, Habib University, Karachi**

When I was a schoolboy growing up in Karachi, we almost exclusively used the term "Independence" for the events of August 1947. It was a sombre occasion, the kind you were expected to write an essay for the class later on. It had nothing of the carnival-

like festivity you see on the streets of the very same city nowadays with children having green and white face paintings, giant size flags and special songs.

Not that I grudge them this officially sanctioned occasion to exhibit their happiness publicly, but I notice that the term Partition is gradually being used more nowadays.

Previously, it was only my grandmother who would use this term and in a rather matter of fact manner to mention how she came here and why.

Rather like departures and arrivals, but the story got more complicated as I talked to other family members. I heard such things being talked about not so much with a sense of remoteness of past things, but as matters which continued to be relevant. Aerial bombing and running to hide into makeshift shelters during 1965 and 1971 are vivid memories for any such thing to be relegated to the faceless anonymity of the past.

My generation grew up on memories handed down to us, not only by parents but the writers I had discovered by that time. Reading, writing and later on teaching around such themes determined my complex response. I kept myself away from one-sided reactions, which I see giving rise to monolithic narratives growing oppressively like hydra-headed monsters all around. I know it cannot be the past if it oppresses the present in this manner.

**I see the partition of 1947 as an ‘opus de profectus,’ or a ‘work in progress’; its consequences are still unspooling — Rakhshanda Jalil, co-author, “Looking Back: The 1947 Partition of India, 70 Years On”.**

Sometimes I like to use the analogy of butchering meat for human consumption to describe the Partition of the Indian sub-continent: the *batwara* on the western border was like *jhatka* whereby one sharp stroke severs the head from the torso. On the other hand, the partition of Bengal in the east is like *halal*; it was slow and prolonged.

Having said that, the Partition — both along the eastern and western arms — cannot be seen purely as a historical event or a simple act of severance that caused new countries to come into being. I see the Partition of 1947 as an *opus de profectus* or a “work in progress”; its consequences are still unspooling. Both contemporary and recent literature offers us an excellent opportunity to understand the socio-psychological significance. This genre of literature, known as ‘Partition literature’, runs the gamut of the Partition experience — from the harsh brutal reality of the gory events of 1947, to the wars that were fought between India and Pakistan, to the communal ill-will and mistrust that was bequeathed as a bitter legacy of the *batwara*, which continues to be felt most acutely in the state of Kashmir.

Reading stories of loss and displacement, stemming from partition, lends a new meaning to the old adage “The Personal is the Political”.

**There has been no formal commemoration of Partition experience, no acknowledgement of the courage, grit and resilience of survivors: Kishwar Desai, founder Partition Museum.**

The Partition was too cataclysmic to be just an ‘event’. It ripped through communities, homes, lives, culture. Many Partition survivors prefer to talk only about ‘pre-Partition’ as being idyllic and cohesive. Their own reluctance to publicly remember the Partition experience can be definitely linked to the universal silence around their suffering. They were even made to feel a sense of shame —for the communal violence that followed even though the genesis of that was very political.

In the world’s first Partition Museum at Town Hall, Amritsar, we are pulling together different strands of a very scattered official and unofficial narrative. The fact that there has been no public acknowledgement of the agony has led us to request the Punjab Government to declare 17 August (the day that the details of the Radcliffe Award were declared) as Partition Remembrance Day . This is the first time, after 70 years, anywhere in the world, that a formal commemoration ceremony will be held . This is partly why the pain has had no balm — because there has been no space to collectively memorialise. Nor has there been a place to acknowledge the courage, grit

and resilience of those who lost everything and yet rebuilt their lives and the life of new India. And they did this, largely, in silence. We owe them a debt, which we are repaying through this “people’s museum”.

As the poet and Partition survivor, Gulzar said, when he visited the Museum: in order to deal with this terrible grief, it is important to “hang it out there”.

**The lingering legacy that the third-generation of refugee families have inherited is a complicated and skewed one — Aanchal Malhotra, author of ‘Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory’.**

I am a grandchild of Partition refugees from both sides of my family, and yet the very first time the word consciously entered my vocabulary was when I decided to pursue it academically. Before that, there had never been a conversation at home about *it* or even of a life before it. Within the realm of Partition memory, the act of forgetting — either inevitably or purposefully — seems to play as much a role as remembering itself. For the most part, those who witnessed it have either consigned parts of their memory to old age, or have sheathed it in utter silence, not knowing how to detangle what they had been witness to. Only in recent years, through various Oral History projects, has “Partition” been made an utterable word.

So, the lingering legacy that we, as third-generations of refugee families have inherited is a complicated and skewed one, the silence of our grandparents largely having affected our impressions of “the other” across the border. If there is no conversation about the memory of Undivided India, what we will remain oblivious to is the syncretic culture that once existed, and how 1947 fractured that culture for almost every community. Memorialization must not be a passive practice, but an active conversation, so that we may rid ourselves of the prejudice around the word Partition, and perhaps realize, by these first-hand recollections, how much shared tragedy there exists on both sides, how we are much more similar than different to our neighbours.

## **People declare they want to bomb Taj Mahal or Ghalib's mazar because it now belongs to India, who is our "Eternal Enemy" — Zaheda Hina, novelist, Karachi**

There are many people, especially of the younger generation, who think that Partition is a chapter in their history books.

For me, Partition is a wound which hasn't healed till today. Partition uprooted me and my family. It ripped apart our human relationships, literary links and traditions which went back thousands of years. We can't imagine our literary treasure without Ratan Nath Sarshar in 19<sup>th</sup> century and in 20<sup>th</sup> century Krishan Chandar, Balwant Singh and Jogindar Paull and many others. How can I forget Pandit Nawal Kishore who was the pioneer of Urdu printing press.

The boundaries of our two countries were drawn by sword of the British and it was soaked in blood, millions perished in this bloodbath and millions lost their identities.

I belong to a divided family but till today my memories of united India are warm and loving. I know it is insane to talk like this when soldiers at the border between both the countries are killing and being killed by each other.

Some of my friends think I am a lunatic, few of them forgive me and call be a romantic. But I want to remain so.

I have heard people say that they want to bomb Taj Mahal or Ghalib's mazar because it now belongs to India who is our "Eternal Enemy". I don't understand their logic of "Eternal Enemy". How can one destroy one's own identity and heritage? Hate has blurred the vision of both sides. With impaired vision we cannot see the real picture of our selves.