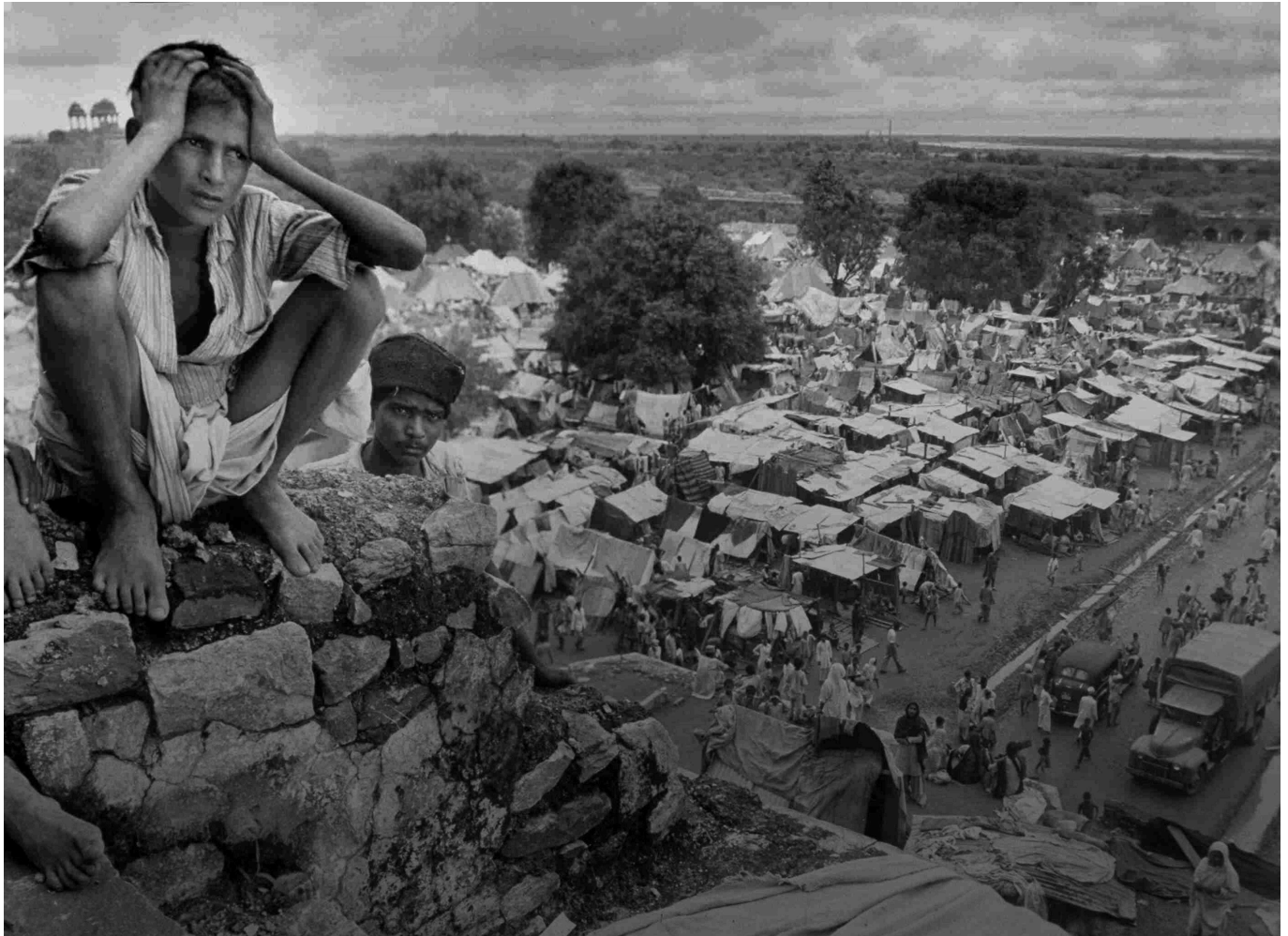


TIF - How Should We Remember the Violence and Suffering of Partition?

URVASHI BUTALIA

November 5, 2021



A boy sitting on the walls of a refugee camp in Delhi at the time of Partition. Photo by Margaret Bourke-White | World History Archive/Alamy

"What does it mean then to remember the 'horror' of partition at a time when identities are so polarised. Do we remember only what was done to us, leaving out all that we did to others and to our own?"

Long years ago, in a crowded market in Amritsar, Mangal Singh, a Partition refugee recounted his story to me. Together with two of his brothers, Mangal Singh had killed — he used the term "martyred" — 18 members of his own family, mostly women and children because of the fear that they could be raped, abducted, and impregnated. And if that happened, the 'honour' of the *qaum* would be compromised.

He was not alone in this. Over the years as I researched Partition, this narrative would appear over and again, In Delhi, in Alwar, in Thoa Khalsa, in Thamali, men killed women of their own families ostensibly to 'protect' them. Today, because of the work of Partition scholars, this violence is known. But at that time, the narrative of Partition violence was so overwhelmingly one where the killers were the 'others' that such accounts had no

place in them. We could not admit that we too had been violent.

The closer you look at the web of violence, the more complicated it becomes.

Seventy-five years later, this is still what holds us back from exploring this history with honesty. Today, when most of the survivors of that time are no longer there to remind us of the complex ways in which history unfolds, the easy route to avoid these uncomfortable truths is to speak of the horrors of Partition by recalling not our cruelties, but those of 'others', in which we become mere victims and they the aggressors. This replacing of the multiple narratives of history with just a single story becomes a convenient way to somehow hold oneself outside of the circle of violence, and to locate responsibility and accountability elsewhere.

And, yet, as every documentary, every eyewitness account, every story of that time shows, the loot, arson, rape, murder that people lived through was not one-sided. Unlike in many other such moments, during Partition there were no easily defined perpetrators or victims. If Hindus killed, so did the Muslims, if people of one community used rape as a weapon to target the other community, this too was mutual. As often happens during times of upheaval, many men took the opportunity to target women of their own community, or use the moment to settle old scores against their own, or use violence to protect their 'honour' by killing women of their own communities. The closer you look at the web of violence, the more complicated it becomes.

What does it mean then to remember that 'horror', especially at a time when identities are so polarised? Do we remember only what was done to us, leaving out all that we did to others and even to our own? Do we remember the violence we perpetrated and exult in it? Or do we, as many did, live with the constant regret of having violated bodies or taken lives?

How do we enter the difficult terrain of memory, specifically at this moment in our time? This is not a question for which there is a simple answer.

Traumatic memories of many forms of violence

Confronting traumatic, violent memories is not an easy task, more so when those memories are hopelessly entangled within a narrative of nation-making and freedom from years of oppressive rule. It is all too easy — and it becomes almost a requirement if the euphoria of the coming into being of a new nation is to be upheld — to retain the convenient narratives and forget the more complex, smaller, hidden stories. To remember those, to admit to our own culpability, requires the kind of courage we in India — and in this we are very like our neighbouring country Pakistan that we love to hate — do not have, and do not want to have.

Sometimes people find their own ways of remembering, of dealing with the violence within themselves. When I met Mangal Singh all those years ago, I asked him how he had dealt with the knowledge and the grief of what he had done, how he had lived with those terrible memories of, yes, mass murder (for no matter how he wanted to describe it, that was what it was, plain and simple). What was it that led ordinary people to do this and how then did they live with their conscience?

"Look around you, at this land of the Punjab. We call it *sone di chiria* [golden bird], we have put all our forgetting into this land, we have irrigated it with our tears," he told me. Later, he took me to the Golden Temple where, engraved on the walls, were the names of the entire lost family. Every year, on the anniversary of their death, Mangal Singh came to the gurudwara and prayed for peace and forgiveness, something he desperately needed and longed for.

[T]o admit to our own culpability, requires the kind of courage we in India...do not have, and do not want to have.

There are other aspects of this history which, for different reasons, are equally difficult to confront. These are the stories of the mass abduction and rape of women, the mutilation of their bodies, the ways in which they were treated as property, and often bargained away in exchange for freedom.

This too was not something we could only lay at the door of the 'other'. Not only did it happen on both sides, but plenty of men of our 'own' did this to our 'own' women (current histories of political violence have shown how practised we are at sexually assaulting our 'own' women). Yet, here too the overwhelming narrative was that 'our' women were violated by 'their' men — the 'we' and 'they' defined quite unproblematically in terms of religion. Many families exercised another kind of violence: they sold or gave away their women in exchange for freedom. They exacerbated this by never mentioning their names again, effectively wiping them out of existence.

How then do we remember and honour the memories of the thousands of women who were thus violated and abandoned? Of those who were killed by their own families? Why does this not count among the horrors that need to be remembered? Perhaps because then we will come up against our own violent selves. This is a question for us, the subsequent generations who have inherited the legacies of this time. What could remembering mean for the women who lived through sexual assault? For them, memories are messy: betrayed by their families, often coercively relocated by the state, sold into slavery by their abductors, sometimes coercively married. How can this horror be forgotten? And yet, how must it be remembered?

[I]t becomes almost a requirement...to...forget the more complex, smaller, hidden stories.

In theory, Partition was done and dusted in 1947. But no historical finish line can be so neatly drawn, nor can memory be contained within such temporal and other borders. But it is only when you start going beyond the obvious stories — and a gender lens provides you a window to this — that you start to see other things that cannot so easily be explained away in terms of '*junoon*' or 'madness'. In recent years for example, the work of scholars and writers has opened up other histories for which we need to hold ourselves responsible, such as that of Marichjhapi island in West Bengal, where 'untouchable' refugees, unwelcome in the eyes of the state, were sent after being moved from place to place before being forcibly evicted from the island in the late 1970s by the Left Front government. Any recall of this history must admit to the continuing caste prejudice and discrimination in our resettlement policies, the long years of being refugees being housed in inhospitable environments, and the inhumanity with which they were treated even a quarter century after the event. This too is a shameful Partition history that we cannot lay at someone else's door.

Traumatic memories are, like life itself, complicated and are often caught in battles over the politics of remembering.

One summer, my travels took me to Ramallah in Palestine. We entered the town on the memorial day of Al Naqba, the catastrophic moment in 1948 when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were expelled from their land. I wondered how this day would be marked, whether there would be anger, fiery speeches, and hatred.

There were indeed some violent confrontations at the borders of the town, where Israeli soldiers fired shots and tear gas shells. But inside the town the mood was different. The remembering was quiet, dignified, and filled with the resolve never to forget the historical injustice they had been subjected to. Two things stood out: the need for peace and the importance of justice.

Traumatic memories are, like life itself, complicated and are often caught in battles over the politics of remembering. For the Palestinians, remembering the catastrophe is a way of keeping alive the battle for justice, the battle for recognition that the land in which they have become refugees is theirs. In this way their battle is similar to that of the women of Kashmir mourning the disappearance of their men and resolving to never forget: that memory is their weapon in the fight for justice.

Ways of remembering

Across the world we have many examples of nations that have put in place important experiments with memory, always with the end goal of healing, reconciling, acknowledging, learning from our mistakes and moving on.

If we had to pick a single such 'experiment' which can be said to have been 'successful', it would not be an easy exercise. Sometimes speaking the 'truth' of being a perpetrator and hoping that will absolve you, without thinking of the need for justice for the victims (as happened in the case of Steve Biko in South Africa), is what has failed such experiments. At other times it is the long arm of history and the distance between two peoples with the oppressed turning oppressor, as in Palestine and Israel, that makes dialogue difficult.

It's not that people don't have stories to tell, it's just that we don't know how to listen.

But not all such attempts are geared towards bring warring parties together. Sometimes remembrance can be reflective, inward looking, a statement. In Japan for example, embracing peace, rejecting warlike armies, and staying by and large steadfast in this pursuit, has brought some measure of healing and peace, even though fault lines still remain and not everyone feels included in this embrace. The important thing though is that an effort has been made, an experiment put in place, and the starting point of such efforts is that the uncomfortable truths of our traumatic histories need to be confronted, negotiated with, if we are to heal and move forward. No 'solution' attempted by nation states has been an unmitigated success thus far, but at least the need to seek a solution has been recognised.

Not so in our countries. Despite many moments of terrible violence in their histories, India and Pakistan have made no such attempts. Instead, they – or more rightly their governments – have time and again replayed the rhetoric of hate and enmity for three quarters of a century, such that it has solidified and settled, sometimes so deeply that it is only thing present. Long years ago the British writer George Eliot spoke of the need to listen to the "roar that lies on the other side of silence" – the roar of the silence of the many as against the vociferous articulation of the noise of the few.

It is not that people do not have stories to tell. It is just that we do not know how to listen.

[S]tates need a plentiful supply of the very thing they do not have...the humility to acknowledge mistakes...and the need to learn.

Exploring and confronting traumatic memories is not easy but it is necessary if we are to move forward. Often, as with Mangal Singh, people find personal and intimate ways to heal — these may involve prayer, sometimes they focus on community service, or on creating literature — and often it is communities who come together, as groups do in gurudwaras across Delhi. But for the larger project of not only remembering, but also acknowledging complicity, recognising injustice, providing reparations, and focusing on rehabilitation, the commitment needs to be across the board: in the media, in academia, in public discourse, among communities, and of course on the part of the state.

In India, our image of ourselves as 'non-violent' has effectively worked to hide what is in plain sight, that we can be and often are a very violent people indeed.

But for this, states need a plentiful supply of the very thing they do not have and do not want to have: the humility to acknowledge mistakes, missteps, sometimes even failure, the understanding that peace and diversity and inclusion are central if we are to survive, and the need to learn. In India, our image of ourselves as 'non-violent' has effectively worked to hide what is in plain sight, that we can be and often are a very violent people indeed. This is precisely why, if and when we are ready, we will need to approach the work of memory with caution, with humility and with the openness to accept uncomfortable truths.

For India and Pakistan to remember

Perhaps the biggest challenge to memory is this: can peoples, nations, remember together? Seventy-five years after Partition, can India and Pakistan come together to share memories of this defining moment in their histories? Is this such an impossible dream? A museum of peace set up by a Japanese foundation in Manipur attempts to do this — to revisit the history of Japanese aggression in the North East during World War II and begin a dialogue on peace with the Manipuris. Elsewhere, the 'teaching divided histories' initiatives have resulted in countries creating textbooks together that provide multiple perspectives on histories that look different from different sides — Israel and Palestine, Germany and France, Germany and Poland. Is it too much to hope that the small attempts made by individuals and groups in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to create similar histories can grow into a larger movement and be embraced as teaching tools by our educational systems?

Is it too much to hope, to imagine that one day, in the not-too-distant future, India and Pakistan may mark a Partition remembrance day together...?

Historical moments that are characterised as moments of violence are never only about violence. They also encompass other stories, of friendship, love, compassion, sharing that need equally to be remembered.

In 1947, two men, a Sikh and a Muslim, an Indian and a Pakistani, both refugees of Partition, built a friendship with each other on the basis of letters they wrote. "I write to you," Harkishan Das Bedi wrote from Jalandhar to Chaudhry Latif in Lahore, "as a human being [...] We are human beings first and Hindu and Muslim only after that."

The friendship between the two men enabled them to talk of everything, to share sorrow, despair, loss, and to begin healing. Is it too much to hope, to imagine that one day, in the not-too-distant future, India and Pakistan

may mark a Partition remembrance day together, that they may share not only the horrors but also the stories of friendship and love? Is 75 years not enough to turn hate into its opposite?

This is an expanded and revised version of an article published in The Indian Express on 27 August 2021 as 'Memories Have Many Faces'.

The India Forum *welcomes your comments on this article for the Forum/Letters section.*
Write to editor@theindiaforum.in

Tags: Partition
Violence
Migration