



Sikh Research Journal

Vol. 6 No. 2

This article is from *Sikh Research Journal*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies

Sikh Research Journal *Vol. 6 No. 2 Published: Fall 2021.

<http://sikhresearchjournal.org>

<http://sikhfoundation.org>

Book Reviews

Narrating South Asian Partition: Oral History, Literature, Cinema

Anindya Raychaudhuri,

Oxford University Press, 2019,

240pp, \$82 (hard cover) ISBN 978-0190249748; eISBN 978-0190249762;

DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190249748.001.0001

Anindya Raychaudhuri's book *Narrating South Asian Partition: Oral History, Literature, Cinema, OUP (2019)* examines the Partition of 1947 through oral history and cultural representations by integrating those narratives into the present. The author brings to the fore the relationship between private forms of testimony and public forms of cultural representation by elegantly intertwining oral history emerging from Partition memories with those from novels, short stories, memoirs and cinema. Raychaudhuri's data consist of 165 interviews which he conducted over three and half years across India, Pakistan and the UK covering Partition stories of both Punjab and Bengal. By so doing, Raychaudhuri records the voices of all communities affected by the Partition which would otherwise have been segregated accounts creating, and as he notes, "*an artificial and anachronistic divide between the two halves of partition*" (p. 4). As one who has grown up hearing stories of the Partition from the perspective of a Hindu (and implicitly upper caste) victimhood, I found this book especially enriching for its seamless integration of narratives and cultural representations of communities (Hindus and Muslims) and nations that were presumably hostile to each other. The narration by Raychaudhuri, thus, invites the reader to share in the sense of loss, grief, relief, in the stories of struggle and resilience of all affected by the Partition regardless of their identities.

The book has seven main chapters. Each chapter is organised around a specific theme. The first three are organised around the theme of loss: of home, of families, of childhood innocence. In the first chapter, the reader learns about nostalgia for the lost space of home; the second chapter deals with what came to characterise the Partition and its trauma: families separated and the rare instances of families being reunited in the new homeland, the abduction of women and their marriages into the family of their abductors and the resultant relationships that go against the "hegemonic notions of belonging." He locates through narratives and literature, such as that of Amrita Pritam's novels, the patriarchal violence the new nation states unleashed on women, and thereby questioning the statist narratives of abducted women and their "recovery." The third chapter focuses on adults who

look back at the Partition, reflect on their own roles in it, and the appropriation of their childhood experiences and actions by other adults, such as family members as well as writers, like Bapsi Sidhwa and Saadat Hasan Manto. Violence, like loss, has many meanings and the fourth chapter takes up this question of the Partition violence and its many meanings. Chapters Five and Six look at the question of violence and of safe passage through trains and riverways. The train and river spaces were the lines to a safe refuge from the old space that had to be abandoned, they were the lifelines, the links between two nations, the spaces where violence played out and they were also the markers of the Partition: they represented borders. In Chapter Seven, the focus is on broad methodological questions in studying the Partition and its “productive” nature, particularly in terms of refashioning selves and the possibilities the Partition opened up for new imaginations and new forms of existence.

Raychaudhuri begins the book with a personal recollection that is familiar to many refugee families: the legacy of loss and grief and the “ultimate instability of home” has in fact shaped the author’s identity. The lost home is remembered almost always as “the site of blissful perfection and material affluence” and is placed in stark contrast with the new home. The new home is marked by material deprivation, problems of basic sanitation and disease. The lost space is also represented as one of warmth, of coexistence. Here, the emphasis is on attachment and the depth of loss. But as the author underscores, this deep positive emotional attachment with the home that is now in enemy country undermines the national narratives of the Partition, nationhood and belonging in both India and Pakistan. The ultimate instability of the home that Raychadhuri claims had a persistent effect on his identity. It is also something I have witnessed on the maternal side of my family. I have seen first-hand the ways in which this “ultimate instability of home” and the fears it gave rise to converted an avowed leftist-refugee with a background of anti-communal activities into a warrior of Hindutva. And again, in the context of Gujarat 2002 my *mashi* (mother’s sister) sceptical of Muslim ‘designs’ recollected the violence of *desh-bhag* (or division of nation) as a plan hatched by an established Muslim family in their village in Bikrampur, Dhaka. The objective was to abduct her. She also explains and ultimately how that conspiracy was foiled: it was planned and facilitated by their Muslim milk-seller and Muslim boatmen. The leftist-refugee converted to right-wing ideology in his twilight years was my *mesho*, the husband of this aunt and thus, my uncle. The instability of home and its remembering can have different impact on refugee lives and the legacies of the Partition today.

Overall, the book is not intended to be representative of collective patterns of remembering the Partition. Raychaudhuri also makes it clear that he is not interested in finding the historical accuracy of the narratives, but in understanding the legacies of the Partition. He underscores that memory works in multifaceted ways and the narratives both reinforce and undermine the notion of a centralised nationalist narrative. In writing these narratives the author places the narrator as agent. Going beyond limited binaries in understanding agency and victimhood, Raychaudhuri complicates existing scholarship on the Partition. He views the narrator as agent in terms of “*the ways in which people exert narrative control over their memories and refuse to be defined by them*” (p.10). This field of agency is a contested domain where “*competing structures of agency battle for primacy*” (p.11). Almost immediately the author warns us against romanticising narrators as necessarily radical and counterhegemonic. The narratives are layered and messy. It is precisely these characteristics that allows for contradictory stories and opposing extremes to be juxtaposed. Consequently, it demonstrates a narrator’s ability to exert agency over his/her narrative, and, therefore, by extension, over himself/herself. It is noteworthy that the narrator’s agency runs centrally through all the chapters of the book that helps in contesting the falsehoods in nationalist and statist myths around the Partition. It has bearings on the contemporary legacies of the events of 1947 and after.

There is only one aspect that struck me through its absence: caste. Except for a couple of references to caste in three chapters, caste had a peculiar absence. In Chapter Two, through the narrative of Jaswant, Raychaudhuri underscores the necessity of a more nuanced understanding of displacement involving the individual, the family and national borders. There he mentions that Jaswant traced the genealogy of his caste backward to Sri Lanka and his own individual journey forward to that of a Welsh Sikh. We do not get to learn anymore about caste and what significance this backward and forward tracing may have for his narrative of the Partition and his own identity formation. In Chapter Three, he refers to the film *Ramchand Pakistani* where he mentioned that Ramchand was from a low-caste family. In chapter Six, he raises caste with reference to narrations around village structure and taboos of touch when he examines why water symbolizes communal harmony. Yet, that the Partition was also one about and around caste (a good amount of research had established this aspect particularly for Bengal) did not find any noteworthy reflection in Raychaudhuri’s book. Women, men, children, adults, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus all voices have been given representation. But caste remains a (in)visible omission in the book.

The critique of Raychaudhuri's "Narrating South Asian Partition," however, does not undermine its value of the scholarship. The book is a significant contribution because it not only shows the ways in which the Partition works in the present, reinforcing and contesting dominant national and statist narratives, but the book humanises all those who have been affected by the Partition and allows the reader to empathise with them.

Sarbani Bandyopadhyay
Department of Sociology
St. Xavier's College, Kolkata