



Research Paper

Oral History: A Case for Cultural Identity, Memory and Storytelling

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Abstract

The phenomenon of storytelling is aligned to oral history and folktales. The dynamic nature of oral histories and folktales oftentimes register memories of pain, happiness, struggles, mishaps, incorporating them within the praxis of narration. Prose narratives including folklore, oral narratives reinforce the role of the individual within public spaces and discourse. The generation of stories within a community conveys pockets of historical narratives which escape the ideologue of historical documentation.

Furthermore, historical incidents or phenomena create spaces for stories and possibly poetic renditions to become part of a cultural social identity formation expressing a very personal saga of loss and pain. I would like to look the long history of Bengal's Partition through the twentieth century and at the formation of narrative histories through which articulate the collective memories of people traumatised by displacement.

In fact several folktales and folk songs too have emerged through the expression of grief of separation from their homeland. Bashabi Fraser's Bengal Partition Stories provides one such collection of stories expressed through the retelling of lost narratives. These retellings are marked by narratives of resistance and loss.

Keywords: Oral history, partition, documentation, digital archiving, memory

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Partition narratives refuse to die down, being present and thriving in the social, cultural and political arena of India's socio-historical narrative. With the commemoration of seventy-five years of India's independence the ghostly trauma of people's suffering continues to emerge as an unresolved mathematical problem. Scholars continue to explore into the depths of historical fractures some written but mostly unwritten and conferences like the current one provides a suitable platform and opportunity to once again continue to shift our focus into the pages of history looking to pick up bits and pieces of chronicles that has perhaps permanently changed the socio-political and cultural dynamics of India's two vital border states. Even though the tendency is to look at Partition through the spectrum of a cohesive homogeneity yet a deeper look will bring out a web of histories and narratives within the scope of politics, caste, religion and inter-personal relationships. History or historical documentation is dominated by hardcore facts and figures and in all likelihood points to explore the political depths of social narratives. It is essential therefore that the social scientist looks beyond historical documentation to configure the complexities of partition. In my paper I intend to briefly look at the socio-politics of partition and then focus on the alternative and crucial discourse of the people that essentially focus on inner and deeper expressions of sorrow and pain that comes with the helplessness and inevitability of human tragedy.

The border between the two states of Bengal (East and West) have always remained porous and migration has been a continuous affair evenly spread across the first half of the twentieth century right up to the present day. The focus however, shifts to Partition misery whenever there was a further assertion of the differences and division between the two Bengals primarily on the basis of religion. This long period of undetermined division has left us with a hollowed history of partition and refugee resettlement, reviving with a vigour whenever there is a concurrent political turmoil. The issue of refugees and partition have for long concerned European and South Asian scholars where researchers view the "refugees as an undifferentiated mass whose experience of migration and resettlement are similar" (Roy11-12). This naturally obfuscates the inner factors of caste, religion, social dynamics which create inner personalised histories and goes beyond a

homogenous representative history of a nation. Waves of refugees have crossed borders at various points in history, and according to Sekhar Bandopadhyay around 1949-1950, the wave of refugees who came to West Bengal, consisted of a cross-section of population, some artisans, some agriculturists, and others from the lower middle class, all of whom were affected by the economic situation in East Bengal.

With such a lengthy history of partition and with refugee influx and efflux collectively generates a narrative of uncertainty gripped by terror, apprehension and hope. Stories emerging from oral histories and interviews or gleaned from fiction retell the trauma and the violence but it also includes moments of kindness and of humanity in the unlikely of circumstances. Bashabi Fraser's *Bengal Partition Stories An Unclosed Chapter* published during 50 years of India's independence once again became a clarion call to pin these gaps that creates a collage of narratives and stories derived from a generation that has lived, died, or survived the Partition. Though it is the short story format the stories reverberate with a very personal touch, telling of lived private experiences and in the post-colonial context looks at where Partition leaves the one-time native intellectual of Fanon's theory who have after conscious appropriation galvanised the masses to regain their identity in the process of decolonisation. Franz Fanon explores the dichotomy of displacement and the emotional disruptions that new place brings in. The lost land and the relocated land though geographically separated yet the human mind unites with his experience and involvement.

Thus the native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner...for if, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone (1963: 45) The quoted line is in the context of the coloniser-colonised dichotomy yet the stoic resistance to pain reverberates with any kind of human tragedy of a mass scale. Creating a new cultural and social identity after the violence of displacement is an incredibly daunting task and leaves a permanent mark which impacts the individual with a psychological trauma.

Bengal's history of Partition does not only touch upon displacement it is equally about the narratives of rehabilitation which for Bengal has been long and traumatic. The displaced have never come as a single voluminous group but appeared through decades with groups either rehabilitated or shifted to controversial camps. Caste played a huge role in making a clear demarcation into who is able to fit into the social fabric and who remains as an unwanted entity juggled according to political whims and vote banks. The human tragedy of communities who have lived together through centuries with reasonable harmony were made to confront their own identities within the context of a "new enemy". The story of Bengal's partition becomes a universal narrative since here we speak of ethnic cleansing and religion-based violence which shape the contours of land and a nation state. It is part of a larger global history where genocide, rape, pogroms, abduction, mutilation, destruction and defacing of property become signifiers of assertion and resurrection of a single homogenous, "unreal monolithic" (Fraser 6) identity enforced by the state. Yet within the fissures of a broken land and its people lie stories of untold human suffering, of survival, of defiance, of acceptance of tiny gestures that resurrects the hope for a kinder world. Fraser's book attempts to bring together multiple strands of the such narratives, touching upon bare-footed groups who have to walk miles together to find a space which they may eventually call home, of young established couples who find their personal lives tainted by dark secrets, of people who have to prove who they are (identity verification) through piles of governmental papers, who live in utter fear of violation of someone simply because their religion is different in order to secure a few hours of safety.

Oral narratives which have passed down generations effectively communicate a deep-rooted observation of social circumstances. However, oral narratives are also personal stories which people carry with themselves as part of their lived experiences and unfortunately not all can be found nor documented. Attempts by scholars have always been driven towards creating a corpus wherein as much can be collected before they disappear from memory or the death of the individual. The essential nature of memory and also of folkloric memory is also about effortless remembrance through everyday practices. Songs, couplets and rhymes get assimilated within quotidian memory and continue to survive as without active documentation. The dynamic nature of folkloric memory cannot be denied and the fluidity that it provides becomes an essential part of its existence. This of course is an indispensable nature of oral narratives. Such folkloric practices like songs, rhymes, ritual practices created in and around Partition accord perspectives which are sharply incisive. As an example, the movie from Bangladesh titled *Ontorjatra* (2005) or *Homeland* where an old servant of the family from a lower caste therefore a Hindu, in a post Partition Bangladesh recites a poem:

Gandhi morlo guli khaia

Jinnah admora

Barno Hindu polaia gelo

Charal porle dhara

[Gandhi has been killed by a bullet,

Jinnah is half-dead,
the caste Hindus (Suvarna or higher caste) have fled,
we the Charals (lower caste) have been trapped] (Bandopadhyay 66)

With the passage of time, it has become vital and crucial to initiate and ensure that archives of oral narratives be created in order to document one of history's most unique forced migration of close to 17.9 million people. In this order, digital storytelling is an important field which aims to utilise the help of technology to fill the dots of the past. It offers a powerful framework for incorporating media by applying a new strategy for deploying stories which is fundamental to the way people structure information. These tools are inexpensive and widely accessible and digital storytelling tends to be highly personal, and at the same time universal. As a result, if utilised effectively, it is a powerful form of communicating and documenting. The term digital storytelling was coined by Dana Archley while utilising multimedia during a storytelling performance in the 1980s. He began by using multimedia as a prop and eventually devised a system that allowed him to adapt storytelling techniques in several creative ways. Archley showed the way for the potential of the digital media as a means to recreate and get close to representing situations and narratives in the most effective way. The premise of digital storytelling is designed to aid people to tell stories from their own lives that are meaningful to them and by using media it adds power and resonance, thereby creating a permanent record. Digital storytelling is aligned with the current recognition of the importance of capturing personal, family and community or group memories. As Daniel Meadows (2003) explains:

Digital Stories are short, personal, multimedia tales, told from the heart. Anyone can make them and publish them on screens anywhere. They have the potential to be a very democratic kind of storytelling.

J. Lambert in 2002 contrasts digital storytelling with digital spectacle such as the circus, opera, art exhibitions and film which helped create a sensory immersion, in that state the audience becomes fairly pliant observers. Digitization and display mechanisms like exhibitions, cinema, theatre on Partition is a two-pronged tool which not only creates a repository of oral narratives but also participates with the audience's consciousness stirring them out of their nihilistic stupor, generating a much-needed responsive sympathy. For the future generations before Partition become static paragraphs in history books, it has become vital to keep alive the narratives, memories and the pain that shook the conscience and disrupted and displaced people beyond recovery.

Narratives of identity, memory, carved out of territorial boundaries, trauma collectively attribute to partition narratives, it carves out a portion of history which is gradually eroding from active memory and mostly converted into memorabilia of commemorations and events. The creation of a nation state and the drawing out of barriers do not sever ties with what was once a homeland and it is vital that dilemmas and sufferings of people for whom the international boundaries have little or no relevance be put across. In Fraser's book, the short story form encapsulates individual fates and broadcasts the unfolding of multiple histories. Though fictitious the stories simulate very core issues of Partition and the nuanced stories leaves us with a hollow feeling of the loss and pain suffered. With a Partition history of 75 years there is an urgent need to bring together the scattered pieces left behind before they retreat completely into oblivion and extend beyond recovery. The pieces of history that remains to be resettled become repositories of memory that help create metadata and needs to be researched upon. Digital archiving and data bank architecture along with government initiatives help in disseminating this information providing vital clues that reconstruct the narrative beyond partition. Along with the dual pillars of digitisation in the form of photographs and recorded history through literature, interviews, partition histories receive an important boost for extensive research.

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