

Historiography of Partition of India A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract:

Historiography of partition of India has been a subject of wide range of interpretations, approaches and positions. Expressions of all those historiographical interpretations have their tilts according to the circumstances. That range could be classified under many thematic shifts and perspectives. This research paper attempts to study the various interpretations by different historians and writers. By doing this it bring into fore the shifts, every new position brought out. Those shifts would enable the thematic scheme of this article to indulge in the intellectual exercise to comprehend the partition of India in broader level. It would further be studied that how came the current exercise in partition historiography comprehend the partition in far more plausible manner by ascertaining the particularities of that transformation, which still haunts the present situation in India and Pakistan in relevant aspects. Thus an effort is offered to critique to the trends while elaborating them and then to evaluate the focused historiography of the scattered, subaltern and marginal aspects of partition. In that way this research tried to bring all the trends from the onset of partition to the current exercises in thematic integrity. Intended outcome is to bring out the new avenues stemming from the fault-lines of the current literature on partition.

Key Words: Partition, India, Pakistan, Historiography, Violence.

Introduction

Partition of India in 1947 was an atrocious and appalling episode of sub-continental history because it resulted in the displacement of 12.5 million people in the former British Indian Empire and with an estimated loss of life of near to one million. That mega incident had transformed the history and civilization of the whole of Sub-continent in larger way. The process and impact of that historical transformation had been studied since then under range of interpretations. Every school of historiography has tried to visit the partition of India according to different frame of references. Along with that many new positions and human

dimensions has also tried to alter the conception of that mega incident.

In that described perspective, studying the partition of India would definitely entails every single region or locality ethnic aspect, religious grounds, communal position, communitarian perspective to conceive what was actually happened. Those particular experiences with confined definition had a few pertinent features based on its own legacies of regional or localized socio-political frames to move in and manifest many outcomes of the partition. We see some major thematic shifts in the trends of historiography in the domain of partition studies. In that range first trend emerged due to the British official's conception about the process of partition. Second trend emerged with the commentaries on high politics involving partition strategies. Another theme evolved by the autobiographical position of many contemporary politicians active during the end game of the British Empire. Nationalistic aspirations from India and Pakistanis paved ay for the official version of the Indian partition. Finally academic pursuits played their intellectual contribution towards extending an understanding of that whole episode of partition. Thus we come across a comprehensive range of historiography in respect of producing the corpus of partition literature. Let us start with the exercise to differentiate the partition historiographies with shifts spanning over decades.

First Trend: Earlier genre of Partition Historiography

First trend comprised those works which were the earlier genre comprising the memoirs and autobiographies produced by British officials and many of the Indian politicians focusing the haute politique,¹ had produced their memoirs which including the commentary on the communalism scene of India.² It is a known fact that British officials were very conservative while dealing the communal affairs which ultimately led to the partitioning the country. For instance these works emphasis on the neutrality of their responsibilities in the emergency conditions India had face during the tumults times of partition. Those works are not to provide such information which could help the modern day historian to ascertain the actual happenings in the corridor of power. The major emphasis is on the communalism posture adopted by the different rival community. In that way of argument their main focus is to put all blame on the indigenous forces for the

violent happenings. However, their primary source value has been important.

Second Trend; setting of nationalistic dimension

Second trend emerged with the writing of partition affairs in the indigenous perspective. That perspective varied from India to Pakistan positions. Many of the politician had written their memoirs about the partition of India.³ That Pakistani perspective tagged with Pakistan Movement relied on that particular perspective in which both Indian National Congress and British Government were being seen on the same page and Muslims (not merely All India Muslims League) were depicted as the marginalized segment in the larger Indian political scene. In the same way in Indian perspective all onus was put on Muslim League. In that very perspective political and communal happening in each city and region was undermined by the communalistic posture, resulted into the weakening of the Indian freedom movement. This perspective blames Muslim Leagues for the start of communal violence in Bengal and Punjab. Indian side had produced one side version about the violence of partition. This version deals only with the violence in the west Punjab by Muslims.⁴ The Pakistani version on the other side produces a few versions about the proactive role of the various non-Muslim organization and princely states highlighting the planned-conspiracy to annihilate Muslims.⁵ There were some other books as well written by Urdu writers to compile the eyewitness accounts. Such as, Murtaza Khan Maikush had produced a book about the Muslims of East Punjab about the massacres they had faced in various parts of the east Punjab including some princely states.⁶

Third Trend; Starting of Academic Pursuits

The Third trend was set in the sixties with academic pursuits. The publishing of the 'Transfer of Power' series had altered the previously held positions of the historians. New schools perpetuated by different historians of India and Pakistan. A new class of historian emerged on the scene with the expertise works with different angles. Now the region had the centrality as a new theme in partition studies. The provinces of Bengal and Punjab has the more attention as compare to the other regions due to their particular damage in both intensity and far reaching impacts.

In this trend regarding partition studies intends to include various subaltern human dimensions. This contemporary trend is evolving a scheme, focusing on the theme that partition was more than an accomplished episode and it still exists with huge margins to be explored. Those margins could be traced by tagging them with many categories such as gender, community, subaltern segment, cities, localities and others. This trend had shifted the focus from the high politics to the impact of partition at the regional level. Thus much thought was made on the regional studies of the provinces of Bengal and Punjab. Nonetheless Sindh, Assam, U.P., Tripura etc also remained under spotlight. For instance, Yasmeen Khan has studied the responses of the government and extremist to the incoming non-Muslims refugees in U.P. she talks about the ill-treatment and not welcoming response of the RSS and Hindu Maha Sabha in U.P. to the incoming refugees.⁷ However, the noteworthy point here is that those refugees were very different in terms of their ethnic and linguistic composition thus it was not unexpected to face such level of dismal treatment. On the contrary, another research about the Hindu space in west Bengal in the wake of Bengalis refugees from east part was also not a case of warmed welcome. In that research, Ramola Sanyal has explored the evolving hegemonic character, the Bengali refugees had adopted in the immediate course in the urban locale of the post-partition Calcutta. Writer tried to detect the struggling character adopted by those refugees from East Bengal in the urban environment of the Calcutta-locating a 'fault line' in a post-colonial urban center.⁸

Another important study, which is about the immigration influx in Tripura from east Bengal, is helpful to evaluate that particular dimension. That research explores the wide hospitality extended by the authorities of Tripura to the refugees. That study had focused more on the state and central government policies to rehabilitate those refugees. Thus, it was a kind of state version.⁹ Sarah Ansari also explored the rehabilitation process in the wake of ethnic strife in Sindh among the Urdu-speaking migrants in Karachi and other parts of Sindh.¹⁰ According to the writer, that settlement was quite chaotic, because of the lack of resources and appropriate system.¹¹ She has not mentioned the experience of the Punjab.¹²

Another acclaimed historian Gayanendra Pandey examines that an episode of violence was not an outcome of immediate wrong calculations; rather they had involved complicated affairs from all occupations. Starting from the dealings of high politics, writer investigates deep into the complex of communal syndrome.¹³ From that generalized theorization to the localized specialization, Ishtiaq Ahmad has produced a monograph on the character of violence with its ultimate outcome in the city of Lahore. That work intends to produce a theory to understand the violence in Lahore with the applied theory of ethnic cleansing with modifications.¹⁴ Urvashi Butalia had compiled a book, setting the way for many others to dare on the same.¹⁵ This book contains much valuable and important regarding the literature on Partition. The scope of this book limits only to the Punjab. Women writers of India partition are another such attempt to present the finest write-ups about the literary expressions by women writers in the feminist discourse.¹⁶ Community suffering and their role in development also considered an innovative dimension in that trend.¹⁷ For instances, a study conducted for those Punjabi migrants settled in Post-Partition Delhi.¹⁸ The state authorities assisted their settlement in Delhi but the real credit for their successful settlement owed to the long run effort they had produced. Their stories were not only describing the individual's success but also provide in depth assessment of their readjustment in the new society with all the insecurities and hurdles from the locals of Delhi. In that perspective role of different hostile elements and negligence by state authorities also got ample space for the comprehensive understanding of the contemporary frame. . This type of studies also digs out the real background of the façade, state version developed while presenting the partition management. *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* are another important work produced by Wazira Fazila-Yaqoob Ali Zamindar. This work is about the displaced communities in the cities of Karachi and Delhi.¹⁹ With the help of ethnographical material scattered stories of the people migrating to and from Karachi and Delhi with their experiences of Partition. By taking these communities as ethnographic subject, Zamindar places a potentially marginalized history at the center of her text and at the heart of the narrative of nation-state creation, complicating any automatic or easy

assumptions about Indian or Pakistani citizenship. Zamindar seems to be of the suggestive arguments that the nature of the partition is not confined to the violence and genocidal incidents rather it has some other crucial and defining features. Her book shows that bureaucratic violence has also put its role in making the helm of affairs more and more complicated for the incoming migrants from across the border and thus ultimately draw political boundaries.

Iqbal Chawla occupies a prominent place in the latest contribution while challenging some of the stereotypes of the historiographies of Partition of India. In one of his article on the role of Mountbatten, he lamented on the orthodox and conservative position adopted by many of the schools of historiographer.²⁰ He maintains that the violence as the biggest stigma of partition was not a sole responsibility of the higher authorities including particularly Mountbatten. In his well-researched opinion, it was the already existed genesis of polices supplemented with other factors which resulted into the broad based malfunction, for which Mountbatten is blamed. Thus, his research would open the closed avenues for the future course of historicizing partition violence. Another research by Prof. Chawla investigates the real dynamics of the violence.²¹ That article is first of its kind in the domain of historiography of partition violence as it challenged the stereotype of blaming the British authorities as the main responsible of the eruption of the violence. The masterstroke of that article would bring a completely significant and innovative exercise to study the violence in its own perspective of dynamics. Thus, this article invites the new attention of the modern reader of the partition towards studying the partition in a complete new paradigm.

Fourth Trend: Revisionism started

A new scheme emerged in the same progression by the turn of the twentieth century. That is about the specialized studies over the different aspect of partition of India. This is about bringing more focused attention to various aspects of partition. Those aspects could be gender, community, city or locality with limited definitional parameters as in the case of the Locality as a defined scope to investigate specified transformation with specified dynamics and impacts. Locality is the in-fashion focal theme entered in the realm of partition studies. It is indeed a theory incorporated in many studies with various modifications; ranging

from the requirement of the hypothetical limitation and discipline subjectivity.²² Acclaimed academic Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya introduced this trend by incorporating the capital cities of the united India hit by partition violence. They had examined the experiences of different cities through the consideration of the impact of partition on South Asian capital cities. We also see the various shifts in the style and thematic approaches of those works. For instance, Ian Talbot in his landmark book has presented a comparative case study of adjoining cities of Lahore and Amritsar. That effort is far more detailed as it is the study of the processes of violence, migration and resettlement arising from the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.²³ This work highlights that how communalism in Lahore germinated a bloody wave of genocide and communities in Lahore had to go through worst wave of violent incidents. It also sheds light on the future development of Lahore in the post-partition scenario.

The Gynesh Kudisyia and Tan Tai young initiated the concept of locality into that domain and Ian Talbot had come up with the comparative study of the Amritsar and Lahore. On the same research design, Pippa Virdee had presented her comparative study of the Ludhiana and Lyallpur with far more exploration in the theoretical domain of that scholarship. Ilyas Chatha also developed his acclaimed works on the Sialkot and Gujranwala keeping the locality concept in the pivot of his dissertation. Study by Chatha has explored those aspect, a locality was supposed to move on. Transition of partition had amplified that graduation in its own rapid and haphazard way. Somehow, there were some retrospective legacies in that altered change connected with the pre-partition fabric of that locality. Writer laid his emphasis on the factual pieces of history that Muslim perpetrators were all responsible for the atrocities committed against non-Muslims.

Fifth Trend; studying violence with localized approaches.

So far, we had various studies of those violence experiences in different places. Many of those studies are up to the acclaimed theoretical level, providing and well-connected understanding of that violence phenomenon. There is, however, generalization in those studies. For instances such studies have their bases on the generalized paradigms, all works evolve their theoretical frameworks to study the partition violence. Nevertheless, all works had limitation of stretching those theories either all India level or

to the region level in a very categorical way. Its generalization was across the Indian regions. From the North-Western Provinces to the Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Assam were also hit according to their low-level communal precedents, with wide degree of difference in intensity. Violence was national problem thus generalized depiction is justified. Nevertheless, we see the trickling down to the regions and furthermore, it was definitely different even from its next regional counterpart. Apart from the socio-politics, there were many indigenous behaviors, corresponding with the larger Indian communal claims, but still having their own indigenous functions to activate into pre-decided course—violence against the rival community. Those indigenous behaviors need to be out into clear and defined identification in order to make an understanding of the violence in this own spatial frame.

There are four major differences, which should have been on major consideration while making any study over the violence during partition. First is about the spatial /regional variation, which manifests conspicuously different character of violence. Second is about the type of violence that whether it was riots or one-side acts of ethnic cleansing or massacre. There was again spatial variation regarding the occurrence of violence. There were many episodes where riots had turned into one-side acts of violence passing through different phases. Third is about the retributive genocide as propounded by Paul Brass with slight effort of difference. The trains' massacres in east Punjab had provide a new meaning to those transforming character of violence. Fourth difference is about the differed between organized violence and spontaneous acts of violence.

These talked about difference would fall in the domain of each defined area that could be provincial, divisional and district level. In addition, at another level it could vary from geographical landscape such as the difference between the Shimla Hill States and other parts of British east Punjab. Princely states of Punjab have shown its own required form of violence due to the huge Sikh majority in those states. The Pothohar Plateau had shown quite different forms of violence. The massacres in Kahuta and Pir Suhawa villages were occurred due to the deep-rooted antagonism and arranged by the war veterans. It was the landscape where Muslims and non-Muslims villages were stated long each other on separate lines since centuries. In south Punjab, we can see the only

examples of organized raids on non-Muslims. The Muslims of Dera Jaats conducted those raids. In the central Punjab, the violence was more or less urban terrorism, comprising random street stabbing and arson. Urban terrorism was aimed at creating enough panicky to force the non-Muslim leave those areas. The strategy was successful at maximum level. We hardly found any account of the dead bodies found in the burnt houses. All the houses in the arson-hit areas were empty already.

Those urban parts of central Punjab had not seen that fatalistic trends of violence in which number of killings could have gone to horrendous level. By the late July the death toll for the whole of Punjab were not to cross the figures of 4632 in total.²⁴ However, in the later period, particularly after the Radcliff award, the numbers of the killing went on the extraordinary rise. Those figures were from two lacs of conservative level goes to the level of one million roughly. The reasons behind that leap rise falls in the category of different nature. It is no doubt that the large category of all that was happening fits into the generalized category depicting violence. Nevertheless, there are many other concepts, which could be supplementary but still important. One such aspect is the situation in Princely States. In those princely states massacres occurred in which the number s of killing was far greater than the other parts. Those massacres could not be put simply in the same bracket with the other generalized depiction of partition riots. Thus, a question emerged hat how came those horrendous scale of later violence be falls in the theorization of retributive genocide. It is not simple chain reaction involving one incident proactively and counterpoising other reactively. Because conversion of that reactive act into a new proactive affairs causing ultimately into a chain. The larger national political development was causing enough communal antagonism, which had delegated sufficient instigator as sloganeering. There was not specific need for the retribution. If that assertion granted the recognition, then it could be replaced with the localized dynamics in socio-politics involving economic interests to cast an immediate factor to move the things in the pre-realized course of the incidents.

There were certain fault lines both in the theory and in its critique. Such as, Paul Brass was talking about the retribution genocide on the bases of the Evan Jenkins's three phases of violence in Punjab and other source-full studies.²⁵ He was coming

up with major fault lines of the gaps of the 'later-on-phases' of violence could not be substantiated in his theory when relying majorly on the phases. Those phases were drawn in the end of July, when the figures were obviously lesser than five thousand.²⁶ Another theoretical fault line talks about the retribution on the same level involving every partisan group. However, the differentiated forms of violence, which were just elaborated in the start of this part, were not sufficiently justifying the violence with real footing. Rather they produce varying degrees in respect of territory and locality. In that regard the authorities' role and character was also of deep influential nature. That role had played at somewhere detrimental and somewhere they could not perform according to their own job due to the circumstantial difference.

Another point on which those assertion blaming those who executed Pothohar massacre in Rawalpindi region, was that no Muslim League leader had condemned that incident. That silence had sent a strong message to those culprits that 'guilty had no punishment.' It was the major strong statement which had unleashed the chain of bloodshed in whole of the Punjab. Ian Talbot had also of the opinion that due to the non-condemnation by Muslims league the communal powder-keg of Punjab had started to get inflamed which lasted to the all the followed episodes of partitioning the Punjab and of bloodshed on horrendous level.²⁷ That thesis is very power full and need very careful effort to criticize. Nevertheless, at the same time it is also another point that the correspondence of that statement could only supplemented many of the other places in Punjab. It could have national level strong repercussion but how came all the places in Punjab, having their own social-dynamics could influence by that statement as an instigator. This is not a kind of critique to that very statement. However, it will facilitate to indulge academically, in the effort to dig out the internal dynamics of the locality in respect of the socio-political complexion and desires, different classes could exhibits with communal identification.²⁸ That scheme would be helpful to understand the social sources of the violence. In that very proposed scheme, mob formation and resultant acts of violence could be an important cohesive theme to study in details. The urban violence as a distinct category could further be studied according to the locality difference. Such as the continuance of riots in Amritsar until the late July, while Lahore had ended riots

on 11 of March. After that date, no riots occurred in Lahore. It was a major difference which needs to be study as it would set many layers of understanding the localized purpose basing on types of violence. Gurgaon and Delhi had seen many raids by the organized raiders from the surrounding rural areas of their cities.²⁹ While Lahore had not seen such types of aids. There were many massacres even in Wes Punjab but there were no major massacres in Lahore except one or two, which were also debatable due to definitional problems.

In order to study that violence happening in phases needs to be categorized in to dissected form of research. For instance, Ilyas Chatha had studied the role of blacksmith in violence against non-Muslims in Gujranwala.³⁰ That is an important dimension, which clear many ambiguities to understand the culprits in their community perspective with stake and opportunity. It could be applied in Lahore on various clans with far more clarity stratum could also be put into focus. This method could revolve many detailed dimensions behind the violence. In the same line of study it soul also be studied that those groups had also participated in the acquiring of social spaces in the backdrop of violence. Their role in nexus with localities dignitaries, Pehelwans and officials from Magistracy and police would also facilitate ascertaining the local-political motives behind the complete purgation of the non-Muslims from the city of Lahore. Deputy Commissioner of Lahore John Eustace had written a detailed report to Lord Mountbatten in which he stated that the crowd in Lahore was imbibing very peculiar mob psychology needed to be study as a PhD research. "It has been most interesting work: anyone doing a thesis on mob or mass psychology could have got his doctorate."³¹ Thus, the interlinking of crowd and landscape emerged in our study as an important starting concept in local studies.³² This theme is applied through linking those local dynamics including the localized forms of division of labour, residents and commercial premise.³³ In that defined framework, our study needs to substantiate various argument regarding violence relying on the local historical social sources, study moves from the pre-partition public euphoria, with its desire to alter it accordingly, to the capitalizing of that desire.

Conclusion

It was all about a discursive practice. That was to introduce the existing discourse of historiography of partition with all of its

possible contours. Having critically analyzed the different understandings by the historians about the partition of India in larger historical perspective, our study explores the various fault lines found in the margins of all positions. By identifying that faultiness our study substantiated the broader argument that all those trend are important marker towards conceiving a comprehensive outlook of the partition of India in the tapestry of ideas, approaches, and themes. It is studied that nationalistic aspirations, communal approaches, conservative vision, autobiographical accounts all had their share in the broader corpus of partition literature. Therefore an all-encompassing glance towards the polemical positions on plural bases is essential to formulate the current pre-requisite for understanding the partition incident. Those pre-requisites exercise has enough potential for the opening of new horizons in the discipline of historiography while extending new observations on partition of India in far more broader level; by excluding maximum of biases in scholarship. This study is a small claim to burgeon the scholarly strength in the partition studies.

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