

Reminiscence vis-à-vis Reticence: Interpretive Conflict in the Oral Narratives of 1947 Partition Refugees in Kolkata

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Abstract: In the second half of the twentieth century, the introduction of oral history has had a significant impact on the field of Partition Studies in South Asia. The historiography of the cataclysmic event has been thoroughly revised as citizen historians secured interviews of individuals who had witnessed the division of land, recording the experiences and perspective of groups of people who were otherwise hidden from the domain of history. The process of interviewing eye-witness participants for historical *reconstruction* of the past has helped to document particular aspects of historical experiences which, more often than not, remain absent from other sources, such as official archives, the collective memory of a neighbourhood, and these have resonated with subjectivities of various lived experiences. In compliance with these observations, this paper intends to investigate the interpretive conflict in oral narratives. An oral narrative takes shape in the spatial configuration shared between the interviewee and the interviewer. Leaning on my ongoing fieldwork experience, I would bring into consideration two interviews that I had collected to see how a certain memory is initially suppressed to divert the narrative in a different direction altogether. I will argue that reticence while reminiscing serves an important purpose to acknowledge the trauma of the event. It is of a piece with the historiographical contradiction that the politics of recollection seems to offer space in which a woman's narration of the events overpowers/overrules the narration of the man. The paper seeks to explore the argument that an oral narrative empowers an individual inasmuch that s/he can be a source as well as a historian.

Keywords: eye-witness participant, interpretation, Bengal, partition, reminiscence, reticence

The process of decolonization in South Asia was vitiated by the partitioning of the land that resulted in the formation of India, with its newly defined borders, and the birth of Pakistan, with two of its wings, East and West, geographically flanking India. The redistribution of land perilously affected two regions in particular: Punjab and Bengal. In the days leading to the Partition, communities indulged in an orgy of reciprocal communal violence, resulting in large scale migration of people on foot who left their ancestral home under palpable threat to life and limb (Nandy 99). A close look into the history of those years brings to our mind various events that preceded it: growing animosity between the League leaders and the Congressmen, differences in opinion between Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah, and innumerable political developments that decisively drew the leaders to accede to the Partition Plan. Intriguingly

enough, parallel to this political development, there runs a history of human displacement, with people crossing the border to safer regions, somehow nestled together in groups and communities indulging in reciprocal violence commonly known as the Partition riots. To quote Urvashi Butalia:

“The Political partition of India caused one of the great human convulsions of history. Never before or ever since so many people exchanged their homes and countries so quickly...Estimates of dead vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a larger Indian estimate) but that somewhat around a million people died is widely accepted” (3).

Though it was decided that Punjab and Bengal would be partitioned together in 1947, the nature of the vivisection in both these regions was markedly different as the Partition of Bengal had undergone a slower, but a prolonged, effect of the division, stretching for almost three decades. In their edited book *The Trauma and The Triumph*, Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta aver:

“While the Partition of Punjab was a one-time event with mayhem and forced migration restricted primarily to three years (1947-1950), the Partition of Bengal has turned out to be a continuous process. Displacement and migration from East to West that is, from former East Pakistan and Bangladesh to West Bengal, is still an inescapable part of our reality...” (2).

Moreover, the statistics as well as the memory of the event continues to disturb the sense and sensibilities of individuals, especially those from Bengal and Punjab, where generations grew up listening to stories of how a line drawn by Radcliffe resulted in displacement from their ancestral home, leading them to cross borders and establish themselves again in a foreign land. Ironically,

however, it is in this foreign land that individuals and their families would be assimilated as naturalized citizens.

In *Nationalism Reframed*, Rogers Brubaker introduces the concept of the ‘nationalizing state’ to suggest that the nation is a dynamically charged polity which adopts various policies or practices and these, in turn, “make the state a real nation-state, the state of and for a particular nation” (66). The State policies are instated, perpetuated and promulgated in such a manner that the citizens voluntarily adhere to these. Such policies help structure, as Ernest Gellner observes, “the will or consent” of the citizens towards the State and these “constitute an important factor in the formation” of the nation-state (53). In India, “Partition constitutes what Dominick LaCapra describes as the ‘founding trauma’ that is ‘the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective and/or personal identity’” (Leonard 3). Hence various strategies are employed by those in power to consign the memories of the Partition to oblivion. Acts of remembering also bring to light the internalized notions of ‘us’ against the ‘other’ community, and do, in a way, draw our attention to the fact that communal division in India is deeply entrenched in the ‘collective memory’ of individuals. Taking cognizance of the communal division, that instigates communal tension in India, the State intervenes in the scheme of things to strategically appropriate memory. Textbooks of various schools where the Partition is referred to in passing, testify to this conscious appropriation of the political—and the personal—aspects of the tremendous human upheaval (Khan 5). De-legitimation of the catastrophic event suggests that the Partition appears as a footnote to an event of greater significance, the Independence of South Asia. It is precisely here that oral history narratives based on the Partition count heavily for they present a human shape and voice to the struggles of the individuals.

It is interesting to note that the discourses on the Partition have led to new explorations, especially in the last three decades (Gupta 122). The new inquiries have made interventions in the sense that these have moved away from a *nationalistic account* of the event to focus on the lives of ordinary individuals, of what we can call the *people's history*, remembered and recollected in ways which the domain of disciplinary history calls ahistorical and outside its purview (Perks x). The historiography of the cataclysmic event has been thoroughly revised as citizen historians secured interviews of individuals who had witnessed the division of land, recording the experiences and perspective of groups of people who were otherwise hidden from the domain of disciplinary history. University of California, Berkeley based the 1947 Partition Archives (founded by Guneta Singh Bhalla) & Citizens Archive of Pakistan are points to reckon with. The process of interviewing eye-witness participants for historical *reconstruction* of the past has helped to document particular aspects of historical experiences which, more often than not, remain absent from other sources, such as official archives, the collective memory of a neighbourhood, etc., and these have resonated with subjectivities of various lived experiences. In the process, the archiving of these individual stories has opened up new strategies to negotiate with “the selective historicization and fissures in collective memory” of South Asia (Saint, Sengupta, & Jalal 4). The moment of rupture, in both Punjab and Bengal, resulted in an orgy of reciprocal violence but with time, and with the emergence of individual stories from either side of the border, there is an effort to reconcile with the pain and suffering experienced by many during and after the Partition (Zakaria 12).

It is important to note here that though there have been significant developments in discourses on Partition, one often fails to realize that the nature, form, and afterlives of the Partition in Bengal are quite dissimilar to those in Punjab. For instance, writings on Bengal

Partition do not conform to the model of literature that critics are familiar with (Sengupta 188). Writings and recollections of those in Punjab focus on the commonplace pathological violence of the period whereas the stories in Bengal are centered on the “struggles and privations of displaced” individuals (Leonard 5). Interestingly, cross-border migration along the Indo-Bangladesh borderland has not been limited to the Partition years. Jhuma Sen observes that migration from Bangladesh (formerly named, East Pakistan) happened in successive waves with the first batch of displaced individuals relocating in 1947, the second in the years following the Dhaka riots in the 1950s and the third in the second half of 1960s, stretching all the way to 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (103). Moreover, an intriguing feature of border studies in South Asia is that while cartographic boundaries shared between India and Pakistan are considered ‘closed,’ the borders of India and Bangladesh are porous, open to fluid migration that is a living reality for families settled near the barbed wire fence. This strange character of the Indo-Bangladesh borderland leads to the emergence of a transnational network of family, commerce and business that often interrogates the very idea of nationalizing the nation (Ghosh 45). Such multifaceted rendering of the Partition of Bengal complicates the entire domain of collective memory formation so much so that it culminates in the reconfiguration of personal values, familial identities and national allegiance. In compliance with these observations, this paper intends to investigate the interpretive conflict in oral narratives of individuals who migrated during the dramatic decades following the Partition of Bengal in 1947. Kolkata is the site of the fieldwork for the research. Reason being the city absorbed a considerable portion of refugees from East Pakistan along with 24 Parganas and Nadia district in West Bengal (Chatterji 120). The refugees who rehabilitated in Kolkata are often termed as ‘self-settled’ refugees (Chatterji 141). Intriguingly enough that has not always been the case as evident from the experiences I had

in the field. While the government was extremely munificent in its treatment of upper caste Hindu refugees, it adopted different policies when it came to catering to the needs of the Dalits and other marginalized sections (Sen 104). The second interview that I refer to bears testimony to this point. Leaning on my ongoing fieldwork experience, I would, with great moderation of choice, like to bring into consideration only two of the interviews that I have secured to see how a particular memory is initially suppressed to divert the narrative in a totally different direction. I will argue that reticence while reminiscing serves an important purpose to acknowledge the trauma of the event. The paper seeks to explore the argument that an oral narrative empowers an individual inasmuch that s/he can be a source as well as a historian.

In the Introduction to the Oral History Reader, Robert Perks defines oral history as the act of “interviewing eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purpose of historical reconstruction” (ix). Since the interview process is exclusively an act of recollection, it is filtered through an individual’s experience of an event at a particular period of time. It is pertinent to note that there exists a considerable time gap between the event and the time of the interview. In the case of the Partition, this time gap extends for over seventy years. It essentially means that the entire interview process primarily functions through the prism of memory. The importance of memory is that it gives an individual a sense of continuity over time. At the same time, one must remember that an oral narrative shapes itself in the spatial configuration shared between the eye-witness participant and the interviewer. Hence, it becomes equally important to contextualize the interviews—who is speaking, what are the personal and political agenda of the individual and, most importantly, what kind of event they are describing. The agency of the oral historian must also be accounted for. The social conditions that inspire one to collect interviews, his/her political worldview and class-caste position, shape in many ways, the narrative presented in front

of the camera or the voice recorder. The interview, to quote Joan Sangster, emerges “as a historical document created by the agency of both the interviewee and the interviewer” (11). What complicates the matter is that as the interview transpires as a historical document in the form of a transcript/text, there is a tendency to disregard the orality of the oral sources, and this, as Alessandro Portelli opines, has a “direct bearing on the interpretive theory” (64). After all, much of how an incident is being narrated gets lost in the transcribed text.

The tone and volume as also the range and rhythm of memory-speech carry implicit meanings and socio-cultural connotations that is extremely problematic to reproduce in writing. Therefore, one can argue that interpretation is contingent on the spatiality shared between the eye-witness participant and the interviewer. At times, it changes with every other question; some may freely talk, but as soon as the recorder is turned on the interviewee assumes a more professional role. Such slippages in narration make oral narratives extremely complicated and an interviewer has to be aware of it whenever s/he is listening to the stories. Let me elucidate these points by referring to my fieldwork interviews.

I interviewed Mr. Maniklal Adhikary in the capacity of a citizen historian, working in collaboration with the 1947 Partition Archive ¹. I was acquainted with Mr. Adhikary in one of those traditional Bengali *adda* sessions held in my sister’s in-law’s house in Kasba, Kolkata, West Bengal. Dr. Bijan Kumar Bhaduri, my sister’s father-in-law, who also happens to be a close friend of Mr. Adhikary, introduced us. The interview was conducted in the Bhaduri house a few weeks later. Born in the village named Brahminkhara in Comilla in present-day Bangladesh, Mr. Maniklal Adhikary was five years old when the Second Partition of Bengal took place. Though he remembers little of the tension raging due to the division of land and ensuing independence, he was quite particular to stress that Muslim households in their village did not

¹ Interview with Mr. Maniklal Adhikary, interviewed by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay, 27th March 2017

create any problem, instead they protected their home while riots broke out in neighbouring villages. In the initial phase of the interview, time and again his narration was directed to the Hindu-Muslim relationship in his village. His father, who was a doctor by profession, stayed back in East Pakistan along with his mother. They migrated later in 1960, thirteen years after the Partition. He informed me that he twice went to East Pakistan to meet his parents. I was immediately drawn to ask about his experience of visiting the land which was formerly his home but was now part of a different nation-state.

Interviewer: Though the land was divided into two countries, did you ever feel that you were traveling to a different country to meet your parents?

Mr. Adhikary: (quick response) No! No! I never felt that way; neither did my parents. See, we were loved there. People liked us. They wanted us to stay.

Interviewer: So, it did not make any difference that the land was divided?

Mr. Adhikary: No, it did not. Hence, my extended family still lives there. Also, my father being a doctor treated everyone, and he was quite respected. I never felt like I am visiting a different country.

There were various threads in Mr. Adhikary's retelling that he laced together to form his narrative. His father, being a doctor, who treated everyone irrespective of their caste or religion, underscored his popularity among the Muslims who were mere peasants tilling Hindu lands. Hence, the Muslims offered protection to their family and even wanted his parents to stay after the partitioning of the land. Later, on questioning about his awareness of the politics played out between leaders during 1940-50s, he answered very little, dismissing it with a quick, explicit statement like, "I don't remember much", but while reminiscing about his post-partition experiences he could pinpoint the details of his stay in Sealdah, his experience of endlessly

waiting in queue to collect government aid and his schooldays in Hooghly. It did not take long to understand that the narrator's authority over what he was willing to talk about was channelizing the interview. It depended on the questions I was asking as much as on his replies before the recorder. He deliberated at length about the garment shop that he started on the footpath near Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He used to sell innerwear and T-shirts for men. Gradually he started saving money and secured a shop in Jadavpur railway station. What began as a mere small shop has now matured into a three-tier huge showroom in Jadavpur station road. He, along with his sons, looks after the business. Throughout this phase of the interview, he talked of his family but was silent regarding the part played by his brothers in his life.

Interviewer: Did your brothers help you in your business?

Mr. Adhikary: Not really. No. (pause)

Interviewer: You mentioned having an elder brother, did he not guide you in any way?

Mr. Adhikary: He did.

His short, partial, reticent responses influenced me to question about his brothers.

Interviewer: How close were you to your brothers? Did you share a close bond with them?

Mr. Adhikary: I did. However, *Borda* (elder brother) had his own life to look after. My younger brother, however, is missing for the last ten years.

Interviewer: Missing? You mean...

Mr. Adhikary: Well, he did not keep good company when he was young. I was lucky to have Bijan and my friends.

Interviewer: Did you inform the police? Where is he now?

Mr. Adhikary: I do not know. (Pause) I got hold of him, got him married too. (Pause) He left again. As I said, he did not have good friends. I was lucky to have good friends who helped me, motivated me.

Before I could ask him about his younger brother again, he intentionally changed the topic to talk about my sister's father-in-law and others who helped him in his business endeavour. As an interviewer, I was aware of the fact that my eye-witness participant did not want to discuss a specific topic with me. Hence, he resorted to reticence, a common conversational ploy to evade a particular topic. The reticence embedded in the conversation above is pretty evident. It is pertinent to observe that reticence operates as an essential strategy that helps to suppress an unpleasant memory, often directing the interview in a different direction. The argument that the interviewer, by virtue of his/her understanding of the context of the conversation, has the agency to shape the narrative needs to be thoroughly revised as we read into, what Lenore Layman defines as, "[the] narrator's authority" that lies "at the heart of this area of reticence" (212). To argue further, an eye-witness participant, as s/he agrees to be interviewed, has in mind certain subjects and themes s/he considers crucial and worthy of being recorded. Mr. Adhikary discussing the Hindu-Muslim bond in his village is a point to reckon with. On the other hand, memories judged to be indiscreet are carefully avoided by way of short, reticent answers. It follows that by exercising his authority over the shape of the final interview, the eye-witness participant introduces his interpretation that is conditioned by the historical consciousness of the event he has witnessed.

If reticence alters the shape of the interview, as the interviewee controls the narration vis-à-vis the person who is interviewing, an oral history interview also provides space to reconfigure the gendered dynamics of power through the process of retelling. I embarked on a project to

interview couples together to analyze how a man's telling of the story can be different from the woman's narration of events. Urvashi Butalia explores the gendered telling of the Partition, arguing that "from women, I learned about the minutiae of their lives, while for the most part men spoke of the relationship between communities, the broad political realities" (16). Generally, the man keeps talking while the woman remains silent, uttering a sentence here or there to either substantiate the man's argument or to convey her point of view. However, the interview I am about to discuss highlights the fact that an oral history interview opens up a theoretical framework where the woman's retelling of the past destabilizes the man's narration of events.

I interviewed Mr. Bhadro Biswas and Mrs. Reena Biswas at Patipukur, Dum Dum, West Bengal². A fishmonger by profession, Mr. Bhadro Biswas was about ten years old when he migrated to India in 1955. While Reena's family members were traditional fishermen who took to the river to catch fish, Mr. Biswas was primarily a businessman, who did not go to the river but sold fish in the market after buying it from the likes of Reena's family. Both of them do not remember the year they were born, but it was evident that unlike Mr. Biswas, Reena did not see the Partition of South Asia. So, as the interview began, I directed my questions to Mr. Biswas. Interestingly enough, most of the questions were answered by Reena.

Interviewer: Even after coming to India, did you travel back to Bangladesh?

Mr. Biswas: Quite often.

Interviewer: How did you manage to do it?

Mr. Biswas: I walked the entire stretch to cross the border.

Interviewer: It was an international border; how did you manage so easily?

² Interview of Mr. Bhadro Biswas and Mrs. Reena Biswas, interviewed by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay on 28th June 2018

(Reena assumes the narrator's voice to comment)

Reena: Yes, I remember walking over to Bangladesh to attend a family marriage. My maternal aunties, my mother and I crossed the border on foot.

Interviewer: Was the army not posted there?

Reena: They did not say anything. No one even looked at us crossing. Young men took the children on their shoulders. Women walked in groups. We did not even have passports. My brother came last month in Dum Dum. That's when I saw a passport for the first time. However, I've crossed over to Bangladesh three or four times after migrating to India to attend family functions.

Interviewer: These days, things aren't so simple!

Reena: No, not after the terrorist attacks. The government has changed its policy. However, when we were young, it was not so difficult. (Laughs excitedly)

After migrating, Reena's family settled in the fisherman colony, right behind the historical Bandel Church in Hooghly, West Bengal. Mr. Biswas and his family, however, stayed in Hashnabad camp. From there they travelled in government-sponsored trucks to Kurut camp in Madhya Pradesh³. Despite the distance between Madhya Pradesh and Bangladesh, it was intriguing to know that the Biswas family often crossed the border.

Interviewer: Your father decided to move to the camps in Madhya Pradesh. So, why did you go to Bangladesh time and again?

Mr. Biswas: My father decided and so we went.

Interviewer: There must be a reason for it, don't you think?

Mr. Biswas: I never asked my father.

³ The fact that Mr. Biswas, a constitutionally defined Scheduled Castes, had to live in camps instead of getting resettled in the main lands of Bengal testify to the lopsided government policies that pursued discrimination in rehabilitation

(Reena interrupts here to comment)

Reena: Actually, whenever his mother got pregnant, my father-in-law decided to go to Bangladesh. There the mother was taken care of. However, my father-in-law never liked staying there. So, he came back as soon as the baby was born.

(Turning to Mr. Biswas)

Interviewer: What was the reason for your family to migrate in the first place? Did you witness riots? Or, did your family have some other reason?

Mr. Biswas: No, no! We never faced any riots.

(Reena interrupts him again)

Reena: That is not correct. I have heard the stories. His family migrated because the Muslims targeted the remaining Hindu population in Bangladesh. His uncle's family was attacked.

Such interjections were instrumental in framing the narrative. Reena stayed at home after their marriage. She heard the stories of the Partition and remembered them better than Mr. Biswas. Later, she completely assumed the role of the narrator.

Interviewer: Do you have something that you brought from Bangladesh? Some family items, a letter or anything for that matter?

Mr. Biswas: I did not bring anything. I was a child when I crossed.

Reena: Actually, I have something that his father gave to me. I have it in the file. It is the **migration certificate** (emphasis mine). His father gave it to me and asked me to keep it, saying, "This document proves we are citizens of this country [India]. Reena, if anyone says that we do not belong here, show them this".

Tarangini Sriraman's *In Pursuit of Proof: A History of Identification Documents in India* deliberates on the ways the presence of refugees in India altered the State enumeration processes for its citizens (91). At the same time, one understands refugees themselves exhibited a certain administrative ingenuity as they figured their existence through the various documents handed to them after crossing the border. Rather than reading these documents as artifacts of the nation-state, it is possible to think of these ID documents as the "byproduct (sic.) of engagement of subaltern subjects with the welfare establishment" (Sriraman xxxi-xxxii). If we take the liberty to call this the political economy of bureaucratic papers, it appears that the state defined citizenship through the documents one possesses. In the Introduction to his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the Indian state extended citizenship to its people in both the pedagogic and performative registers (9). If the refugees failed to enlist themselves in pedagogical methods of enumeration properly, it would hinder their performative aspect of the right to vote as citizens of India. Read against the backdrop of this observation, one can easily perceive the importance of the migration certificate that Reena talks about. It is Reena who preserved this document underscoring the existential need of the family to get enlisted in the State enumeration process.

It is of a piece with the historiographical contradiction that the politics of recollection seems to offer space in which a woman's narration of the events overpowers/overrules the narration of the man. A narrative inspired by memory is personal, and it tends to make history palpably human, and to an extent, emotional as well. Reena's involvement with Mr. Biswas' familial history attests to her personal engagement with the history of displacement that she considers her own. In the process, her insightful and experiential remarks justify the idea that an eye-witness participant is not just a mere source, but also a historian, of his/her own accord, who

generates an alternative version of history whose objective is to produce a narrative markedly different from the high politics and grand narratives of the Partition (Bagchi & Dasgupta 12).⁴

⁴ A part of this paper was presented at the two-day national seminar on “New Directions in New Humanities Research: Theories, Modalities and Praxis” at English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad

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