

Partition in Bengal

Looking back after 70 Years

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The original idea for the conference was mine, but it could not have turned into a reality without the active involvement of and support from my eminent co-convenors and their respective institutions: Prof. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (Head, School of History, Philosophy, Political Science & International Relations, Victoria University of Wellington, NZ; Director, NZIRI), and Dr Jayanta Sengupta (then Director, IM and Chief Curator, VHM). The conference was hosted by the Indian Museum (IM) and Victoria Memorial Hall (VHM), and sponsored by and The Ministry of Culture, Government of India and The New Zealand India Research Institute (NZIRI).

Focus on Bengal

Entitled, *Partition in Bengal: Looking Back After 70 Years*, the conference not only looked back on the momentous events of 1947, but also on their aftermath. We felt it worthwhile to have this regional focus because Bengal's experience of the Partition has been significantly different from that of the Punjab, and because it continues to affect life, especially along the borderlands, to this day.

As is well known, the Partition has inspired two generations of outstanding historical scholarship, with interesting new turns in historiography in the last three decades: the focus of attention shifting from causes to experiences, and from national to regional histories of partition; exploring experiences of women and Dalits; bringing de-colonisation and migration into the discussion; and the digital archiving of oral histories in the last decade. Significant research has also been done on literature and cinema addressing the Partition. The conference aimed to take stock of these achievements, envisage new directions in 'Partition Studies' and broadly discuss the continuing ramifications of the Partition in the cultural and political life of Bengal.

We were fortunate to have two very distinguished Chief Guests for the opening of the Conference: Ms Joanna Kempkers, New Zealand High Commissioner to India; and Prof. Sugata Bose, Member of Parliament, and Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs at Harvard University. The keynote was delivered by Prof. Ranabir Samaddar, Distinguished Chair in Migration and Forced Migration Studies, Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata. Prof. Samaddar enquired afresh into the political categories of 'people' and 'population' – the first considered to be the subject of the nation and the other the subject of government – and showed how, during partition, these categorical distinctions broke down and there was a mutual displacement of roles. His talk forced a re-thinking of the accepted notions of nation, popular sovereignty, and modern statehood.

A new generation of scholars

Aiming for a diversified group of speakers, both in terms of disciplinary and geographical background and age, we invited a variety of distinguished as well as early-career scholars to the conference. Prof. Bandyopadhyay was especially keen on having young scholars participate, as he had recently examined a number of most impressive doctoral theses on the Partition and felt that it was important to include this work by a new generation of Partition scholars. This turned out to be one of the defining and most successful aspects of the conference. In fact, after the conference, a number of senior scholars noted on Facebook that the new work they had encountered was both inspiring and encouraging. Among the topics addressed were, for example, the

2017 marked the 70th anniversary of India's Independence and Partition. In August 2017 in Kolkata, a conference to commemorate the event was held, which focused on the experience in Bengal where the aftermath continues to affect life to this day.

problems of nation-building on the ground: the administrative consequences of the Partition (Anwesha Sengupta, Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata); post-colonial predicaments of migrants and refugees at border crossings (Haimanti Roy, University of Dayton, USA); the difficulties of renewing lost linkages in a partitioned land (Debdatta Chowdhury, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata). These papers were mostly the products of painstaking archival research. Some of their findings astounded us, such as the story of Joymoni, an elephant from the British Forestry Service, who, after the Partition, was stranded indefinitely between India and East Pakistan as bureaucrats on either side of the new Bengal border refused to own him!

Wide range of topics

Other ways the Partition was remembered were through literature and films, oral testimonies of women, and Dalit literature. One of the latest developments in Partition Studies has been the focus on the experiences of Dalits, bringing in a whole new angle to an already complex history. As a pioneer in this field, Prof. Bandyopadhyay presented some of his latest findings in a Panel on 'Partition and Dalits', held together with Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury (Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata) and Dr Sarbani Banerjee (Techno India University, Kolkata). While the two senior scholars focussed on the challenges faced by lower caste refugees stationed in various camps in West-Bengal (1950-1961) and the way they contested government rehabilitation policies, Sarbani spoke about Dalit literature. Through two key texts, a memoir and an autobiographical novel, she examined the role of space (such as trains, railway stations, hospitals and prisons) in shaping the Dalit Bengali refugees' consciousness and how their experience differed substantially from that of upper caste refugees.

Oral testimonies of female survivors of Partition, gathered over several decades, were the subject of papers by Dr Aparajita Dasgupta (Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata) and Prof. Subhoranjan Dasgupta (Jadavpur University, Kolkata). Incidentally, Prof. Dasgupta (along with the late Prof. Jasodhara Bagchi), was one of the first to unearth, way back in the 90s, the stories of Bengali women's trauma and triumph during and after the Partition – which significantly contributed to the feminist turn in Partition historiography.

Quite predictably, there was a lot of attention for history, but, as a literary scholar, I especially cherished the papers on literature and films. One of the most engaging presentations in the conference was by Prof. Krishna Sen (Calcutta University), who spoke about Bangla fictional narratives of the Partition from West Bengal (a series of short stories, a trilogy, and two award-winning novels). Drawing on Toni Morrison's terminology of a special kind of remembering and forgetting in Beloved ('disremembering' and 'rememory'), Sen argued that these Partition narratives either try to disremember a traumatic past in an attempt to adjust to modernity and globalisation in Kolkata or re-create an/other mythic 'East Bengal' that is co-eval neither with East Pakistan nor Bangladesh, even though those locations still exist.

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There were two very interesting papers on film. Prof. Sreemati Mukherjee (Presidency University, Kolkata) spoke on the enduring appeal of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* [*The Cloud-capped Star*], a Bangla novel of the 60s, and its many adaptations over half a century on celluloid and in theatre. Dr Bhaskar Sarkar (Univ. of California, Santa Barbara) engaged with the documentary *Char: The No-Man's Island* (2012) to speculate on the fissured futures on the Bengal border, where life is lived out in a perpetual liminality.

While most papers were directly related to the Partition and its aftermath, there were a few that, very interestingly, engaged with the subject indirectly. Prof. Nandini Bhattacharya (Bardhaman University, West Bengal) revisited Rabindranath Tagore's identity-debates, enunciated in several of his writings (both fiction and non-fiction) as illuminating ideologies of sub-continental partitions. Prof. Ananya Jahanara Kabir (University College, London) invited us to re-think the Partition by exploring an intangible dimension, namely the memories of the sights, sounds and smells of home, carried by migrants to and from the city of Kolkata. Dr Barnita Bagchi (Utrecht University, the Netherlands) brought together feminist utopian studies and memory studies in her delineation of the solidarities between two key feminist figures that emerged in pre- and post-Partition Bengal: Sufia Kamal and her beloved older friend Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who banded together in a desire for the utopian.

All the Panels were followed by vibrant 'Q&A' sessions. We were fortunate to have three eminent Chairs: Professor Emerita, Supriya Chaudhuri (Jadavpur University, Kolkata), Prof. Moinak Biswas (Jadavpur University, Kolkata); and an award-winning filmmaker) and Prof. Bhaskar Chakrabarty (Calcutta University).

Kolkata Partition Museum, media coverage

The Conference ended with a roundtable, during which I formally broached the idea of a Kolkata Partition Museum. Pointing out the resonance of a similar idea in India, where a partition museum in Amritsar opened in 2016, I argued that museums are the next logical

step in Partition Studies, following the digital archiving of oral histories in the last decade. I shared with the audience my vision of such a museum as well as the work I had done so far in its conceptual stage. My museum idea was hotly debated in the open discussion that followed the roundtable. While lauded, its enormous challenges were emphasised. Most present seemed to prefer a digital archive or an archive with a space for exhibitions and public events. This way, the huge budgetary, administrative and logistical requirements of a museum could be bypassed. Not to speak of the political risks, given the sensitive subject-matter. Two of my co-panellists provided some very constructive suggestions for an archive, which I very much found worth pursuing. The museum idea was covered in two local vernacular newspapers ('Anandabazar Patrika' (ABP) and 'Aajkaal') and on 'All India Radio' (AIR), which broadcasted interviews with Prof. Bandyopadhyay and myself. Reporting about the conference, ABP highlighted the museum proposal, while 'Aajkaal' carried a more analytical piece, touching on the other topics covered in the conference.

Conferences are an inevitable part of an academic's life. But seldom are they as inspiring as this one proved to be to me. I learnt a lot over two days of deliberations and it was rewarding to see an academic event being acknowledged in the media, but the best part for me were the new friendships formed as well as a sense of fresh solidarity with a community of scholars united by their common passion for Partition Studies. It was so much more than I could have hoped for!



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