Partition: Many meanings

Listening for Echoes
Partition in Three Contexts

The experience of partition as a political and territorial separation of groups and societies is shared by a number of states in contemporary times. As many societies have been shaped in significant yet uniquely different ways by partition, this essay examines its relevance in facilitating conversations across cultures. In moving beyond contexts and cultural specificities, this essay searches for comparative insights and approaches with the potential for fruitful dialogue. The authors suggest that the shared experience of partition could provide the incentive to search for and facilitate “listening for echoes” that connect the diverse settings of India-Pakistan, Israel-Palestine and Germany. The theme illustrates the range and complexity of analytical challenges for the disciplines of social anthropology and sociology.

I Introduction

Even while receding into a past of over half a century, partition remains a reality, more so as it becomes a concentrated metaphor for violence, fear, domination, difference, separation and the unsatisfactory resolution of problems; a metaphor, in one word, for the past, one that goes on making the present inadequate [Samaddar 2001: 22].

Partition, commonly understood as the violent territorial and political separation of groups also conjures up images of forced evictions and migrations of populations at immense communal and personal cost. While the governing imagery of partition draws upon the specific context of India and Pakistan, it has been the organisational basis for many other contemporary societies as well, e.g., Israel-Palestine and Germany. In all these contexts, partition, the historical event with its own specific sets of conditions, has deeply influenced communal patterns, generational dynamics and individual life-courses, long-term identity, work, memory and inspiration. As the fabric of social life of communities was shaped for over half a century by this defining event or process, how partition continues to be a reference point in these states and societies is of profound sociological implication.

This paper is concerned with long-term consequences and commonalities rather than the specifics of partitions in various geographical contexts. We seek to investigate how analytical perspectives or theoretical concepts developed within one case may illuminate other instances. While our point of departure is partition, i.e., events and processes that began during the crucial years after the second world war in three regions: India/Pakistan, East/West Germany and Israel/Palestine, we also move beyond these specific cases to explore issues of wider sociological concern for partitioned societies.

In the three cases under scrutiny, partition and conflict with the “separated other” became an organising principle on which a variety of exclusions and inclusions were based. Indeed, the terms and images used to depict partition are very similar in the cases under discussion: “trauma”, “disaster”, “break”, “disruption”, “dislocation” or “rupture”. Underlying such depictions is a strong assumption of an essential fracture or break that has to be grappled with.

Despite the fact that these cases are different from each other in size, historical circumstances, and the overtness of conflict, placing them in a comparative framework, we suggest, helps elucidate the special characteristics of the partition motif. If comparative analysis includes both the classic sense of teasing out differences and similarities in an explanatory mode and the use of one case in order to think through another, we propose that analytical frames developed could also serve to illuminate other cases where partition has figured prominently: the two Koreas, China and Taiwan and Hong Kong, Vietnam, Yemen, Cyprus, Ireland or the former Yugoslavia for example. The shared theme of partition then becomes a search for cross-cultural resonances designed to facilitate “listening for echoes” that connect these diverse settings.

Two purposes are served by this kind of analysis: First, the development of a comparative perspective that is long overdue as it serves to refute the stress on the uniqueness or peculiarity of the Indian subcontinent; and second, an exploration of how partition continues to influence social processes and phenomena in some contemporary societies. Salient issues and themes that could serve to facilitate conversations across cultures are outlined below.

II Memory and Witnessing

Thus history works “to produce the ‘truth’ of the traumatic, genocidal violence of Partition and to elide it at the same time” [Pandey 2001:45].

In the Palestinian and Israeli arena, the war of 1948 has been the event (respectively) constituting Palestinian identity and the
Das writes: the multiple patriarchies at work in women’s lives (ibid: 125). Departed from its impartial position and by assigning values, due to the problem of forcible conversions, the state also and political significance of the abduction of women was not lost in family narratives while women who were recovered from the abductors and returned to their families or who were converted to the other religion and made new lives in the homes of their abductors hardly ever find a place in these narratives, although they occur frequently in literary representations [Das 1997: 84].

Yet more widely in the Indian case, the near denial or erasure from public consciousness of the trauma of partition and the frenzy of violence that accompanied it, continues to remain a puzzling fact. How the memory of groups is conveyed and sustained becomes significant since control of a society’s memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power [Connerton 1986: 1-3]. Contemporary Hindu-Muslim violence in the Indian nation cannot be understood in isolation from Pakistan as

Partition was integral to the emergence of the nation state. However, silence on the theme of this violence in official discourses of nationhood legitimates the state’s claims to represent the entire Indian populace. Therefore, to speak of partition is an acknowledgement of the presence of groups, events or experiences that remain historically displaced within the boundaries of the nation [Kumar 1999: 207].

More complicated is the link between partition as forgetting and as cause. Halbwachs contended long ago that the past “serves” the needs and interests of the present. Schwarz (1982), by contrast, argues that in many cases the past has its own power to define or delimit the kinds of issues dealt with in the present.

III

Outcomes and Causes

Common images evoked by partition are “trauma”, “disaster”, “catastrophe”. These characterisations are used to refer to partition both as an outcome and as cause. Such usages are found in the characterisation of partition as rupture or adversity since partition is seen as the outcome of certain historical, political and social forces. The understanding of partition as outcome has been at the centre of many studies in history, political science and political sociology. In India, the association of local territory with group is an achievement of partition, has exemplified this kind of thinking [Jalal 1985; Talbot 1988; Hasan 1994].

Pandey has argued that in transferring the history of the event into a history of its causes and origins, distance is created from the fearful moments of the past – a disciplinary device widely adopted by historians [Pandey 2001: 45]. Moreover, while partition historians in India have remained overwhelmingly concerned with causes, it is not suffering nor issues of nationalism and nation-building, but questions of India’s unity, that have motivated these concerns. In the “real” history of India of the late 19th and 20th centuries, the history of partition has thus appeared as an intrusion (ibid: 51). No wonder then, that Indian postcolonial historiography, driven by the need to demonstrate the unity of India’s diverse peoples and traditions, placed undue emphasis on causes.

The counterpart of the claim about partition as a result, is one about it being a trigger or instigator. Such a claim phrased in causal terms, is that the Al-Naqba – the disaster of 1948 – created a Palestinian diaspora [Lindholm Schultz et al 2003], as it did a whole set of border zones and contact areas between Israel and its neighbours. Yet by far the most common contention is that partition produced other problems – at national, communal and personal levels. In India, scholars have tended to speak of the violence and riots that “accompanied” partition in 1947, thus making a separation between the “Partition” that was history and the violence that was an aberration. The battle against communalism was Indian
historiography’s reason for “making the emphatic distinction that it makes” [Pandey 2001: 52-53]. Partition was such a traumatic event that it produced a set of issues and questions that much of the literature, arts and film of the subcontinent have been trying to grapple with.

As constitutive experience, partition creates a different experiential reality. For many Palestinians, life in Arab villages on the border of Israel can only be understood as living in a permanent state of emergency. The ethnographic and literary portrayals, especially during the initial period of partition where violence occurred, underscore the unique experience it engendered.

IV

Public Rhetoric and Narratives

At least where partition history was concerned, there was a contradiction in the history we knew, that we had learnt, and the history that people remembered [Butalia 1998: 350].

Germany provides the case of partition festering underneath the public rhetoric of unity and the everyday life of “one” country. Describing the initial response of most east Germans to the opening of the Wall for instance, Borneman found “a meeting with the other that was a resurrection of the repressed past that was not challenge but flight, away from the murderous pasts and uncertain Futures into a consumers’ fleeting and slightly drunken present” [Borneman 1991: 7]. Consumer behaviour as a sort of collective forgetting was expressed in its busy rituals of getting and spending that could “repress the troubling reflective moment that follows upon remembering” [Borneman 1991: 8].

In a twist on this theme, the psychiatrist Maaz [cited in Bleiker 2005: 30] observes that the demands of the market economy were virtually the opposite of what people from a communist socialisation brought with them. Rather than submission, adjustment and restraint, they were suddenly required to be critical, creative and full of initiative. As a consequence, many felt overwhelmed and many experienced psychological problems of anxiety or depression.

In the case of Israel and Palestine two very different master narratives, as Peteet (2005: 155-56) observes, are formulated in and around the events of 1948. In the Israeli narrative, a small besieged and brave group of Jews faced and overcame a massive, coordinated Arab assault. In the Palestinian one, well-armed, well-trained and well-supported military and state institutions faced a disorganised, ideologically disparate, under-armed and leaderless group of Palestinians.

Folk understandings of the partition of the subcontinent emerging from booklets and pamphlets available at fairs and rural settings could provide rich source material to investigate the multiplicity of voices in which partition is narrativised in semi-literate rural settings and small towns. In the Bhojpuri-speaking belt, especially during the initial period of partition where violence occurred, the need to be wary of political vested interests that seek to divide the country on the basis of religion, as at partition [Tiwari 2002].

While in both Arab and Jewish culture, active remembrance is seen as a guarantee of cultural survival, each has evolved a distinct set of narrative codes to transform individual memory into public history [Slyomovics 1998: xiv]. Palestinian grand narratives interact in diverse ways with the lived experience of Palestinians as in the large and imaginative literature – a sort of folk history and folk ethnography – in which destroyed Palestinian villages are remembered and celebrated. Palestinians use “memorial books” to commemorate villages, towns and districts and document their destruction through creating a narrative discontinuity arising from war, dispersion and traumatic loss. Kanaana (2003: 41-42), adding a gender perspective contends that after 1948, men’s narratives disappeared while women’s narratives became stronger. In the refugee camps, it is women who tell stories about the 1948 war and the “...good old days in the lost country. They do not relate long, highly structured stories but rather anecdotes from the personal lives and the lives of members of their families, illustrating the destruction, dispersion, injustices, and oppression that fell upon their people...

There are differences among these narratives according to the age, education, and political orientation of the female narrators, but they are all told in the style and structure of the women’s traditional folktales” [Kanaana 2003: 42].

Kanaana echoes observations on feminist perspectives in partition research by Butalia who “found the tools of feminist historiography to be enormously enabling because it allows you to listen to that most unheard of things, silence, and to understand it, to work with it” [Butalia 1998: 351]. In reclaiming voices from the margins, the publication of two separate and influential sets of women’s testimonies and memoirs in 1998, also first brought to light in stark, startling and path-breaking ways, some of the darkest truths about India’s partition [Butalia 1998; Menon and Bhasin 1998].

Feminist research promises rich potential for future cross-cultural comparisons. The recording of historical memory in such cases seems to approve and sanctify both what has been lost in the past and as it is present in contemporary life. As Kumar puts it in regard to the Indian context, it may be apt to describe the “past-in-present-ness of partition as a history that is not done with, or refuses to be past” [Kumar 1999: 204].

The diverse understandings of the war in 1948 or the partition in 1947, in turn, efface or erase traces of the perspective of lower status groups within each society. The dialogue between memory and community touches on questions of whose memories have been suppressed in shaping the mainstream “national” narrative. For instance, the particular plight of the Bedouin tribes within Israel has been effaced by the strong national narrative of Israeli independence.

In postcolonial India, the nationalist discourse aimed at creating a singular narrative, ended up silencing other voices except those with a majoritarian orientation, thus, marginalising the Muslims and dalits. For instance, how dalit autonomous politics was appropriated to make Hinduism the foundation of the emergent Indian national identity is an aspect conspicuously underplayed in officially sanctioned narratives of the subcontinent’s partition [Chatterji 1999]. The extent to which such understandings are eclipsed by mainstream narratives of partition is underscored by the distinction made by Pandey between history, that is “national”, “rational” and “progressive”, in contrast to the “local”, “inconsequential” and “particular” – that which can be neither
narrativised nor theorised [Pandey 2001: 119]. It is precisely the concern with negotiating a relationship with the nation by reconstructing a new memory of the past that informs the proliferation of dalit newspapers and journals in north India [Tiwari 2005: 123-40]. Through interrogating received histories, a dalit sphere aimed at effecting dalit awakening is gradually coming into its own (ibid).

Textbooks are the means by which nation states naturalise their power over populations and territories and thus, once internalised, they become repositories of “truth” and taken-for-granted assumptions about reality. States where partition has taken place, offer a unique view of such processes. In the Indian subcontinent, an understanding of borders was a result of the geopolitical imagination that lay at the heart of partition. As Samaddar suggests, in this area, the hour of partition was marked as the beginning of a territorial consciousness (2001: 29). Indeed, for “both India and Pakistan, it was partition, far more than Independence from Britain, that irrevocably fixed the territorial definition of the nation state as the colonial era ended” [Gilmartin 1998: 1089]. Among Jewish Israelis, to take another example, the mental geography of people sometimes associates partition with the year 1967 rather than the conventional one of 1948.

After partition, Pakistani textbooks were used to create a nation – and indeed to unite the two parts of the country – but the problem was how to create a textual beginning for a nation created out of the violence of partition. In Pakistan, the meaning of the Pakistani ideology and in India, distinctions between secular and communal perspectives, informed debates on history textbooks. Further, in Pakistan the sphere of “social studies” was complicated and diluted by the introduction of Pakistan Studies. In India, the teaching of social sciences has been increasingly critiqued in recent years by Hindu-revivalist efforts to replace the pluralistic vision of curriculum policy [Kumar 2001: 242]. Similarly, both Korean states have gone to considerable lengths to promote historical narratives in school texts that legitimise their own regime while discrediting that of their rivals:

Central here are understandings of the origin of the Korean war. No other event on the peninsula has shaped the past and present as profoundly. Each side sponsors an entirely different narrative, one that remains dominated by pain and death, as well as a desire to overcome this trauma through an annihilation of the other side [Bleiker 2005: 101].

Apart from the ubiquity of textbooks and their power, the place of popular culture in depicting partition needs to be understood. The master narrative of the regrettable “inevitability” of partition and the glorious role of the Indian nation’s founding-fathers found in school textbooks, have gone hand-in-hand with an unstated, though virtual ban on any explicit reference to partition violence, a fact that “discouraged attempts to make connections between the past events and the present” [Ravikant and Saint 2001: xxi]. Despite Bollywood’s recent interest in the collective trauma of partition (Gadar, Hero, Sarfarosh), Indian cinema has yet to challenge received narratives in any serious way. As Ravikant and Saint point out (2001), in many Bollywood movies, “the vivisection of the subcontinent becomes a metaphor for the separation of lovers in the wake of communal tension” [as for example, in the film Pinjar].

The power of national narratives also reaches into academia. Tamari (1999) for example, states that while Arab secular historians tend to create a portrait of exaggerated harmony between Arabs and Jews in pre-1948 Jerusalem, Zionist historiography tends to suggest that the conflict is perennial. Thus, grand narratives of partition influence the ways in which scholars depict these same events. This complex process is important because of what Giddens (1984) refers to as a “double hermeneutic” in which academic theories about society feedback into society and constitute the very phenomena which these theories purport to study.

In the context of India and Israel’s first few years, academic scholarship often took on a consensual guise in terms of national narratives. Thus, for instance, the post-independence vision of sociology as a science of society in the service of the Indian nation, was informed by a consent on nation-building which could only be achieved by securing a respectable distance from the trauma, the pain and guilt – the “underside” of independence. Moreover, in the interests of ensuring “objectivity” and “neutrality”, the underpinnings of a “value-free” sociology, the emotive violence of partition, appears to have been sacrificed as a subject worthy of sociological study. In Israel’s first few decades, social scientific studies of the state and the military were also based on such a consensus, which meant that critical work began to appear only during the state’s third and fourth decades [Ben-Ari and Lomsky-Feder 2001; Maman, Rosenhek and Ben-Ari 2003].

V

Frameworks and Discourses

In India, partition lingers in the collective imagination and has entered and shaped discourses of nation-building and secularism, caste and religious identities, ideas about majority-minority relations, and a range of issues touching upon refugees and border migrations. Processes of “othering” at the societal level – Hindu vs its Other, the Muslim; the forward castes vs the backward castes – have acquired normative status, legitimised in society’s conscience collective, in part, by the “event” of partition. The spatial separation of Hindus and Muslims carries over today into the phenomenon of “mini-Pakistans”, a “hostile” Hindu term for Muslim neighbourhoods, particularly in the riot-affected towns of the country.

While not termed “partition”, in Germany the division (Teilung) following second world war, provided a framework for articulating contrasting memories, and particularly for discussions of “fascism”, “totalitarianism”, “capitalism” and “communism”. In other words, through discussing specific regions or territories – and their attendant qualities – people constantly advanced or denigrated certain visions of what Germany is like and what it should be like. Such classifications, however, often map onto older schemes: The east-west dichotomy as expressed in the dichotomy of the two countries is older than that engendered by the cold war for it reverberates with the twofold idea of western and eastern Europe (and correspondingly higher and lower status, more and less civilised, and more and less democratic). As Borneman (1991) has suggested, the unification of the country involved a claim about “civilising” the east as citizens of East Germany were expected to adopt the etiquette, work ethic and modes of behaviour suited to the west.

Furthermore, we need to recognise the culpability and agency of nationalist leaders who were deeply involved in the creation of classifications based on partition [Chatterji 1999: 186]. The view of those who directly experience partition may differ radically from the intentions of politicians and decision-makers. Kaul (1999: 9) observes that the state constantly needs the discourse on partition and the fear of future partitions to justify its authority and maintain its investment in externally and internally repressive
regimes. Similarly, Berlin in its divided state, was useful to all parties and the fall of the Wall marked the collapse of a symbolic system [Borneman 1991: 10].

Classifications based on partition are not “neutral” but rather create socially defined grades and hierarchies. In the Palestinian case, claims as to who is more a “legitimate” Palestinian, an authentic victim of partition, are based on one’s (or one’s family’s) proximity to the events of forced migration in 1948. In this sense then, partition forms the basis for the creation of a hierarchy of suffering or victimhood (who has suffered most?). Given the pride of place attributed to suffering in today’s world [Kleiman and Kleinman 1997], the question of how partitions have formed a moral economy of suffering is raised.

The post-partition field is marked by interests and potential material gains. In Israel and Palestine, a social field sometimes referred to cynically as the “peace industry”. Donors, NGOs, foundations, grant-giving bodies, research circles, study centres, dialogue groups, or social movements are active in preparing the ground for, or actualising the crossing of barriers. In Germany, the ecological movement and ecumenical movement were important during partition (enabling easterners to go to the west). After unification, it was the pro-peace and coexistence groups that became active while others were marginalised, and later, much of the business of unification was taken over by political actors.

In fact, it seems that such fields have been developing elsewhere, such as between the two Koreas [Bleiker 2005]. This field then, becomes a “business” complete with its own corporate logic: how to compete for the tens of millions of dollars expended each year and (for some institutes and associations) how to fight for organisational survival, etc. Another aspect involves tourism. Berlin, for example, offers tours of the route of the wall, much like the tours along Hadrian’s Wall separating England from Scotland.

VI
Partition as Ongoing

The German experience suggests that partition is a never-ending story and undergoes permutations within concrete historical circumstances. Recent scholarly research cautions against viewing the partition of the Indian subcontinent as a single definitive act, a clean-cut vivisection. As Chatterji (1999: 186) observes, it was, in fact, a messy, long-drawn out process which remains “still unfinished today”.

The division of territorial sovereignty between states is most explicit at the point where the fields of power meet: there must be no overlap and no uncertainty about the borders of the territory [Neocleous 2003: 411]. Yet as recent Palestinian experience shows, borders and border zones are much more processual than is commonly understood. Partition is constantly produced and negotiated through migration and infiltration. Despite partition, Palestinians still have an ambiguous attitude towards borders and towards home, as many have undergone multiple forced migrations. The separation barrier recently erected between Israeli and Palestinian territories might be seen as an extension of the partitions of 1948 and 1967. Today, one cannot speak of partition without referring to the mobility regime Israel had instituted and within which the movement of Palestinians is severely curtailed. In fact, the very “never-ending-ness” of the partition between Israelis and Palestinians is expressed in the constant efforts of the Israeli state to “fix” or regularise the border through the separation barrier. The erection of the barrier here is best seen as a zone where there is constant interpenetration between two distinct societies.

VII
Organising Principles

If partition forms a set of categories for organising societies and states, these are principles and not merely cognitive classifications as they imply concrete relational and material consequences. It is fruitful to focus on partition societies or states in order to rethink what constitutes an entity such as society or state. For example in the case of Israel, Ehrlich (1987) suggests that textbook renderings of this society must take into account how the conflict with Palestinians and other Arab groups seeps into the very way that Israel is organised. This goes for the constant war preparation and ongoing mobilisation, as it does for internal exclusions and inclusions. Thus, people in Israel live in a segregated society in which place of residence, the educational system, or marriage patterns are set apart.

The very logic of state surveillance through the gathering of statistics or monitoring of movements of Palestinians are predicated on the idea that Palestinians within the boundaries of the state are somehow linked to Palestinians outside it. In this sense, Israel belongs to what may be termed a family of partition societies or states where partition becomes constitutive of social organisation. In such societies, groups define themselves in terms of each other: the link between external and internal dynamics of societies is then part and parcel of the way they are organised. As Borneman (1991) has suggested, during the cold war, East and West Germany created the effect of being outside each other but were actually involved in a mimetic relationship of devouring – conquering – each other. Or, as Hart [cited in Bleiker 2005: 101] contends, following the Korean war, a process of the incorporation of a “national other” has become an integral part of identity politics on each side.

The geographer Paasi (1998: 76) suggests that, “A boundary does not only exist in the border area, but manifests itself in many institutions such as education, the media, memorials, ceremonies and spectacles. These are effective expressions of narratives linked with boundaries and border conflicts and serve as reference to the Other.” These are understandings that may be relevant to all the cases we are dealing with.

Current trends in India suggest that the logic of partition – the tensions between multiple identities and the search for moral community that was itself at the heart of partition, continues to influence the fabric of Indian society. This is evident from the way in which representations of collective pasts are transmitted across generations and have contributed to the construction of violence in India [Brass 2003: 20]. The collection of testimonies of Indian women affected by partition [Butalia 1998; Das 1997; Menon and Bhasin 1998] show that violence against women was shaped on the basis of seeing women as “repositories” of their communities or as “territories to be occupied”. Hence, this kind of violence became an expression of domination over another community and underlined its humiliation. In the case of women, “murder, abduction, conversion, and forced migration became signs of the moral appropriation and purification of territory and incorporation into a new state” [Gilmartin 1998].

Recent research into riots has shown that while people address caste, class and gender inequalities by rioting, their violence
A legacy of the way partition violence has been understood in the subcontinent is the tendency to see riots as the unplanned action of crowds and as conflagrations ignited by a “spark upon a bed of combustible material”. This approach fails to focus on the dynamism of riots and factors such as historical timing and the roles of individuals and groups that contribute to converting events into full-scale riots [Brass 1996: 7]. The perpetuation of communal disharmony and maintenance of the very conditions that ensure the persistence of riots by vested interests; the anonymity provided by riots; the multiplicity of narratives about causal events; and, most importantly, the seeming inability of the judicial system to identify culprits and deliver justice, parallels the horrific events of 1947 and their aftermath. In this manner, periodic riots mimic partition riots and the separation of Pakistan from India continues to reverberate through Indian society.

Evidence from Germany suggests that partition brought about the construction of two kinship systems centred on the conjugal family with the cross-border exchanges between them creating the parallel existence of the extended family. Yet it is the category of the “private” that enabled individual Germans to cross formal state boundaries: this category, ostensibly opposed to the “public”, was actually a state-mandated one. This “private” sphere allowed private links that traversed borders created by partition, but also necessitated state surveillance and gathering of intelligence by the two states created by the very same process of separation. The ultimate irony, perhaps, shown by the German case, is that during the post-partition phase, partition continues to provide a set of organising principles: for the allocation of resources, for “self” and “other” identification, and for political allegiances.

**VII**

**Project of Modernity**

With the consolidation of the international state system during the 20th century, the territorial state became the political form adopted by all nations, an ideal that many groups aspire to [Anderson 1991; Neocleous 2003: 411]. If sovereignty “implies a space against which violence, whether latent or overt, is directed – a space established and constituted by violence” [Lefebvre in Neocleous 2003: 412], then the ideal type of nation state can fruitfully be examined through partition. Whether through forced migration, the creation of exclusionary narratives or mapping of territories, we need to explore processes by which a “founding violence, and the continuous creation by violent means, are the hallmarks of the state” [Neocleous 2003: 412]. Indeed, the massive population transfers in Europe and the Indian subcontinent after the second world war, went well with the idea of the nation state. A similar logic underlay the example of Turkey with the population transfers that took place during the last days of the Ottoman Empire: millions of Greeks left for Greece and the Turks returned “home” to Anatolia. These developments were part of the creation of the Turkish nation state.
with its assumptions about territorial separation and homogenisation as part of modernity. As Borneman suggests in another context, the modern nation state seems to inevitably politicise the cultural nation by assuming that a nation needs a unified state for representation. The peculiar uniqueness of partition-states, however, is the centrality of a threatening minority in constituting national identity. While such entities as the Ottoman and Austrian-Hungarian empires present alternatives to the nation state in terms of workable ethnic relations, the separation between discrete nation states implied by partition is often understood as “good”, “natural”, and “ideal” (in the sense of being sought after) way of solving conflicts or potential conflicts between groups. In this sense, partition should be seen as something very modern, a product of the modernity project.

Raising such issues takes forward the enquiries into notions of space published over the past two decades. Recent studies underline the contested – essentially libel and political – nature of spatial identities [Bendix 1993]. According to this set of approaches, such identities are no longer conceptualised as a given, but rather as an assortment of typifications and images that are constantly negotiated. The thrust of such studies has been to question the distinctiveness of societies, nations, and cultures as based on some kind of unproblematic division of space; to interrogate the “fact” that they occupy naturally discontinuous spaces. Indeed, it is, so taken for granted that each country embodies its own distinctive culture and society that the terms “society” and “culture” are routinely simply appended to the names of nation states, as when a tourist visits India to understand “Indian culture” and “Indian society” [Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 7].

Indeed, partition as a product of modernity makes problematic the very “naturalness” of the nation state. Two kinds of naturalisms are challenged in this respect [Malkki 1992; Bilu and Ben-Ari 1997]: the first is the anthropological convention of taking the association of a culturally unitary group (the “tribe” or “people”) and its territory as natural. The second is the practice of taking the association of citizens and states and their territories as natural [Handler 1988].

X Necessary Solution

Given the wide acceptance of the nation state as “natural”, it may be seen that partition is often suggested as a necessary, natural and desired solution to actual or potential inter-group conflict. In the case of Palestine and Israel where many groups perceive the conflict as a demographic one, partition is seen by a vast majority of the population as the solution. By emphasising that Bengal has experienced three partitions [Chatterji 1999], Chatterji suggests that we look at partitions as constant attempts by authorities to order or manage conflicts between social groupings through strict territorial divisions.

Linking these ideas to the image of partition as an ongoing process is useful. For many Jews, the idea of “return” to Israel has long been part of prayer and longing over the centuries. Indeed, the idea of return for many Jews is related to their diasporic existence and very survival as a people. For the Palestinians the “right of return” is implicated in being refugees and as basic to their sense of peoplehood and nationhood [Klein 1998; Lindholm Schulz 2003: 1]. Indeed, for Palestinians it is assumed that “return” is the only ultimate solution to contemporary predicaments. Just like “loss” and “struggle”, “return has become part of Palestinian identity” [Lindholm Schulz 2003: 7]. But as time has passed and new generations were born and grew up outside Palestine, return has become increasingly abstract, and placed in a distant tomorrow. For newer generations, return does not necessarily signify a longing for a homeland as a feeling of nothingness, liminality, and the vacuum of not having a home in the countries where they reside [Lindholm Schulz 2003: 9]. Thus “return” is not a monolithic discourse but differentiated by generation, gender and place of residence.

In this sense, India’s partition fiction depicts attempts to go beyond partition, to create alternative worlds, other solutions to inter-group conflict. Here paradoxically, memory may provide hope for the future. The partition stories collected by Alok Bhalla (1999) for instance, are about loss of religious sensibility, yet in order to overcome ruptures there is a need to find redemptive ways: not to think about the violence but about non-revenge histories that seek commonalities.

In general, there has been little discussion on issues of reconciliation in Israel because from the perspective of the Jewish majority, such a concept would imply the open recognition of misdeeds towards the Palestinian Israeli minority, a rather difficult acknowledgment given present ideological stances among Israeli Jews. Yet in analysing special ceremonial events in schools, one might explore the potential of such ceremonies to challenge hegemonic canons and alleviate inter-ethnic tensions. Hence, cultural and religious ceremonies or bases of faith may offer the cultural and religious ceremonies or bases of faith may offer the potential for renewal that national ones do not.

In Israel, a rare example of going beyond partition is the initiative of Zochrot. Founded by Israeli-Jews who believe that by overlooking the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948 the Arab Israeli conflict is prolonged, the initiative seeks Jewish acknowledgment of this historical tragedy. In addition, it actively attempts to develop a sense of responsibility for Zionist property confiscation as essential for bringing about an end to the conflict, and promoting true reconciliation. Zochrot organises visits of refugees and their descendants and invites Israeli Jews interested in learning about their histories and expressing solidarity with them.

As the Zionist discourse conjures up images of a violent memory, invariably exclusive and masculine, leaving little space for the (Palestinian) “other”, Zochrot strives towards reconciliation in inclusive and compassionate ways and attempts to create a space for the memory of women in the Palestinian Naqba. For the Palestinians involved, the tour is a journey in memory, to places they lived in, or from where members of their families came. For the Jews who sympathise, the experience uncovers a kind of memory that was deliberately and systematically hidden from them. An alternative culture to the predominant, hegemonic collective memory which oppresses the Palestinians and suppresses their Naqba, is thus created [Bronstein 2004 unpub; www.zochrot.org].

Conclusion

As Butalia has pointed out, “in any such exploration of the past, the aspects we choose to illuminate are determined not only by the present we live in, but the future we wish to work towards” [Butalia 1998: 351]. The theme with its rich potential for cross-cultural explorations will hopefully generate further fruitful dialogue, collaboration and comparison among social scientists at a global level.
The lens of partition serves to focus our gaze on how societies that have experienced breaks and traumas are organised and constituted, and the ways in which they deploy their understandings of the past and reformulate, reconstruct and reconstitute themselves, thereby also evolving new traditions. This could allow for enquiries into ways in which local communities as well as wider national entities use their knowledge of the past and ways in which multiple voices are narrativised.

The limited vision that arises form studying one’s own society and seeing it as unique, is broadened and enhanced by adopting approaches that illuminate both commonalities and differences with other societies. Cross-national analysis may illuminate elements that a focus on one nation obscures. By deploying the comparative imagination and comparative perspectives, the understanding of partition as a phenomenon of modernity as well as a set of organising principles could be strengthened. Placing these distinct experiences “side by side” with each other to generate dialogues between partition societies, opens up the possibility of intervening in contemporary and ongoing debates ranging from citizenship; states and nation-building; borders and boundaries; social identities; the nature of contemporary conflicts; social and collective memory and issues of remembrance and forgetting.

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