

Connecting Memories and Healing the Wounds: Exploring the Role of Social Media in Reducing Partition-Related Trauma among the Elderly Communities in India

Doyel Dutta^{1*}, Prof. (Dr.) Akash Deep Muni

^{1*}PhD Scholar, School of Media & Communication, Adamas University, Kolkata

²Professor & Associate Dean, School of Media & Communication, Adamas University, Kolkata.

***Corresponding author:** Doyel Dutta

*PhD Scholar, School of Media & Communication, Adamas University, Kolkata

Abstract

Partition of India is an extremely unfortunate event in the history. It did not just divided the country but also put a question mark before humanity, communal harmony, peaceful coexistence and spirit of brotherhood. The word home got tragically redefined in a completely unexpected way. The victims still find it difficult to forget the pain. They still feel homeless as the place they called their home once is far away currently. Social media is beyond geographical boundaries. These days, senior citizens are gradually learning to use technology. They can now use social media on their own. It is very much possible to get connected to the people of the other side of the boundaries through networking platforms. This paper is an endeavour to find out whether social media can heal their partition related wounds and give them some solace.

Key Words – Partition, Trauma, Elderly Community, Social Media

Introduction

“The Partition of the country and the changes that followed gave me a jolt....when I pondered over the matter I felt of revolt in me....when I sat down I found my thoughts scattered. Though I tried hard, I could not separate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India. I found it impossible to decide which of the two countries was my homeland now.”

- Saadat Hasan Manto (1)

The partition of India is perhaps the most unfortunate incident in the history of the Asian subcontinents. Without anaesthesia, one major part was removed from the body of Mother India. It is not just a tumultuous and traumatic tale of bloodshed, brutal violence, immense human suffering and displacement but also a saga of psychosocial identity crisis. Many people left their “I” behind while crossing the Redcliff line. The known motherland suddenly became strange. The familiar faces were painted with the colours of religious barbarity and blind social hatred. The idea of “home” started changing its form in an entirely unexpected way. All of a sudden, the body, mind and soul started travelling in completely different directions.

“Partition was deeply scarring and traumatic, changing the lives of people dramatically, uprooting them from places and communities where they had lived for generations. They lost languages, ways of life, property, heirlooms, and people. It shaped their attitudes toward government, minorities and above all the concept of home.” historian Priya Satia who also happens to be a scholar of Stanford University, said in an interview with Stanford News. (2)

People from both sides were traumatised equally. If somebody left their sweet memories back in India, somebody was separated from their own people in Pakistan. As Bapsi Sidhva said in *Cracking India*, “The fire died but the heat stayed in our bones”, though the fire lost the dreadfulness of its flames over time, the embers remained in the hearts. No one could forget the distress that changed their life completely. (3)

Yasim Khan, an internationally acclaimed author, wrote in his book “The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan”, “The Partition displaced fifteen million people and killed more than a million. More than anything else in our history, it changed us as people. It was the largest mass migration in human history, and it was accompanied by unspeakable violence, which forced people to rethink the nature of politics, the meaning of nationalism and the pursuit of power.” (4)

Nisid Hajari said in “Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition”, The Partition of India was not only the partition of territory; it was also the partition of the human soul, a suture that wounded deeply, a tear that bled. (5)

As per Gyanendra Pandey, Partition not only drew lines on maps but also on the psyche of the people it affected. It created a sense of 'otherness' and ruptured the social fabric irreparably. (6) Urvashi Butalia believes that the trauma of partition lingers in the collective memory of South Asia, serving as a reminder of the dangers of religious and communal violence, and the importance of reconciliation and understanding. (7)

Like the legendary fictional character of Indian partition narratives, Toba Tek Singh, thousands of people from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh still lie on the no man's land. Behind the barbed wires, on one side, stands the country India and on the other side, Pakistan. (11)

On the other hand, with the advent of digital media, the world has really become a global village. Connectivity is no longer a challenge. Globalisation is no longer a bookish word for the common people. Geographical distance, these days, is just a number with a unit. In such a rapidly progressing world, whether it is possible to find a home for soul in a now-foreign land is a big question.

This study is an attempt to find out whether social media can provide some kind of solace to the victims of partition. Whether it can help them to regain their long-lost self-image and develop a connection with their almost forgotten home where their soul once resided. The study is conducted amongst the migrants from Bangladesh, the then East Pakistan.

Literature Review

Maheswary and Lourdasamy delve into the intricate psyche of partition survivors in their compelling study "An Evaluation of the Partition Narratives: A Special Focus on Psychological Trauma." Through meticulous analysis, they navigate the tumultuous terrain of trauma, illuminating its profound impact on individuals ensnared in the throes of historical upheaval. Skillfully blending empirical evidence with insightful interpretation, the authors unravel the multifaceted dimensions of trauma narratives, offering invaluable insights into the enduring scars of partition. Their study not only enriches our understanding of psychological trauma but also underscores the imperative of acknowledging and addressing the lingering effects of collective historical trauma.

Jain and Sarin's exploration of "The psychological impact of the partition of India" offers a poignant journey into the depths of human suffering wrought by one of history's most harrowing events. Through a meticulous examination of survivor narratives, psychological theories, and historical context, the authors deftly unveil the profound and enduring trauma inflicted upon millions during the partition. By weaving together personal accounts with scholarly analysis, they paint a vivid portrait of the psychological scars etched upon generations, transcending borders and time. Their work not only illuminates the individual experiences of anguish, loss, and displacement but also underscores the collective trauma embedded within the social fabric of the subcontinent. With sensitivity and rigour, Jain and Sarin underscore the imperative of confronting the psychological legacies of partition, offering invaluable insights into the human condition amidst the tumult of history.

Kharbe's study, "Trauma Narratives: A Psychological Study on the Select Partition Writing," offers a profound exploration into the psychological dimensions of partition literature. Through meticulous analysis of select writings, Kharbe delves deep into the intricate interplay between trauma and narrative, unravelling the complexities of individual and collective experiences of anguish, displacement, and loss. By employing a qualitative inquiry approach, the study sheds light on the nuanced ways in which trauma is articulated and processed through literary expression. Kharbe's work not only enriches our understanding of the psychological impact of partition but also underscores the therapeutic potential of storytelling in navigating and healing from historical trauma. It stands as a compelling contribution to the growing body of literature on trauma studies and partition narratives.

Qureshi, Misra, and Poshni's study, "The Partition of India through the Lens of Historical Trauma: Intergenerational Effects on Immigrant Health in the South Asian diaspora," offers a ground-breaking examination of the enduring impacts of partition on immigrant health. Through a comprehensive analysis, the authors illuminate how historical trauma reverberates across generations within the South Asian diaspora, shaping mental and physical well-being. By interrogating the intersections of history, trauma, and health, the study reveals the complex interplay of socio-political forces in immigrant communities. It underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing intergenerational trauma in healthcare practices and policy frameworks. This research not only deepens our understanding of the long-term consequences of historical events but also advocates for culturally sensitive approaches to promoting holistic health within diasporic communities.

Thakore's study, "In the Grip of Trauma: A Study of the Victims of Partition," offers a compelling examination of the enduring psychological impact of partition on its victims. Through meticulous research and empathetic inquiry, Thakore delves into the depths of trauma experienced by those directly affected by the partition of India. By centring the voices and experiences of survivors, the study sheds light on the profound and often overlooked psychological scars left by this tumultuous historical event. Thakore's work not only contributes to our understanding of the human toll of partition but also underscores the imperative of acknowledging and addressing the ongoing trauma faced by survivors and their descendants. It stands as a poignant reminder of the need for compassion, healing, and reconciliation in the aftermath of collective trauma.

Roy's book, "Memories and Postmemories of the Partition of India," offers a profound exploration of the enduring impact of partition through the lens of memory. With meticulous research and insightful analysis, Roy navigates the intricate terrain of individual and collective recollections, unravelling the complexities of post-memory and its transmission across generations. Through a multidisciplinary approach, the book illuminates how memories of partition continue to shape identities, politics, and cultural narratives in contemporary South Asia. By examining diverse perspectives and narratives, Roy underscores the multifaceted nature of memory and its role in shaping historical consciousness. Engaging and thought-provoking, this book not only deepens our understanding of the partition but also invites reflection on the enduring legacies of trauma and resilience in the region. It stands as a significant contribution to the scholarship on memory studies and South Asian history.

Dhir and Azevedo's study, "Exploring Post-Traumatic Growth from Citizen Narratives of Refugees from the 1947 Partition of British India," offers a compelling examination of resilience and growth in the aftermath of profound trauma. Through citizen narratives, the authors delve into the overlooked aspect of post-traumatic growth among refugees of the partition. By employing a qualitative approach, they highlight the stories of individuals who have not only survived but thrived despite enduring unimaginable suffering and displacement. This study not only sheds light on the human capacity for resilience but also challenges conventional narratives of victimhood. It underscores the importance of amplifying the voices of survivors and recognizing their agency in reshaping their lives in the aftermath of historical trauma.

Urvashi Butalia's "The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India" is a poignant and powerful testament to the human experience amidst the chaos and violence of partition. Through a mosaic of personal narratives, Butalia provides a deeply moving portrayal of the untold stories of those affected by the division of India in 1947. With sensitivity and empathy, she gives voice to the silenced and marginalized, capturing the pain, loss, and resilience of individuals caught in the tumult of history. Butalia's meticulous research and skilful storytelling illuminate the complexity of partition's impact on families, communities, and identities, challenging prevailing narratives and offering a more nuanced understanding of this pivotal moment in history. This seminal work not only honours the memory of those who lived through partition but also serves as a vital contribution to the ongoing conversation about trauma, memory, and reconciliation.

Objectives

- To understand the reaction of partition migrants towards the social media posts from their country of origin.
- To examine the effect of those posts on their emotions.
- To attempt to find out whether social media can give them some solace and relief from the anguish they are carrying.

Methodology

A qualitative design was followed for the study. 11 people who migrated from Bangladesh to India in the aftermath of partition were asked to go through some Bangladeshi pages on Facebook. One common page was Beautiful Bangladesh, a page dedicated to the tourism of the country. The other pages were concerned with their respective divisions, namely, Dhaka, Mymensingh and Barishal and their reactions were observed keenly. Post that, in-depth interviews were conducted through conversation. No pre-structured questionnaire was used. The respondents were selected through convenience sampling in the city of Jamshedpur. No other social media platform than Facebook was used. Data was coded based on the cohesion of the reactions. Content analysis was done for the final conclusion.

Findings and Discussion

Respondents had a mixed reaction looking at the posts on the pages concerning their motherlands. While some had a sparkle in their eyes being able to have a glimpse of the places probably they will never be able to visit again, some sighed remembering the old days.

One of the respondents, who had left his country at the age of nine along with his parents, said that things have changed a lot. The culture that is being projected is somehow different from what they had. He cannot remember very sharply anything about his neighbourhood but he still retains some good memories about his family and childhood friends. The economic condition of the family was affected very badly after migration. Being the eldest son of the family, he had to sell fritters with his father around the marketplaces near Jhargram before joining Tata Motors (then Telco) in Jamshedpur as a member of the ground-level production team. All he can recall is the sweet days when he could go to school in the village and enjoy the evenings playing in the green fields near his house. He said he is not able to relate to the photographs or the posts as his memories are very different from what is being projected there. But his facial expression somehow revealed something different. He was happy seeing the developments of Mymensingh. "Anek unnati hoeche" (Has developed a lot), he said spontaneously looking at the photographs of Mymensingh Bridge, Railway Station, Bangladesh Agricultural University and also the high-rise buildings. Though he said, his known motherland doesn't exist anymore, while asked whether he would like to follow the page, "Amader Mymensingh, Amader Oitijjhyo", he said, yes. The reason given by him was, he would love to see the land he left long back. Still, it would mean some kind of connection.

Another respondent, a retired Indian Railway Officer, who migrated to Calcutta at the age of ten for studies leaving his mother and one younger brother behind, who later united with them after partition in Ranchi where his father was posted that time, one year before Independence, says, he doesn't feel any deep connection. Nor does he feel any great loss. For him, Jharkhand is now his home where he has spent most of his service life. His father worked with the Indian Railway, hence, his childhood was spent in many cities and small towns of Jharkhand and Odisha. For him, Netrakona is just like the other places where he lived during his teenage and childhood. All he misses about his homeland is his friends and extended family who are still there but not in touch. He was already a regular user of Facebook. He said he could find one of the lost friends in Facebook who is currently settled in Chittaranjan. He believes this is an advantage of using social media, especially networking sites. While looking at the pages of Bangladesh, he said, he already follows two pages regularly, Bangladeshi Culture and Beautiful Bangladesh. He likes to get updated about the country. There is no specific

reason but since he stayed in that country once upon a time, he enjoys the scenic beauty and there is a subconscious feeling that at the end of the day that is the place where his root is.

One ninety-two year old grandma got emotional seeing a post about the natural beauty of Dhaka in the page Dhaka City. "That country has a different beauty" she said addressing no one particularly. She lives in a 3 BHK apartment with her family in Jamshedpur, not much exposed to technology. But, she loves to see photographs and videos with the help of her grandchildren. Looking at the photos of "Hilsa fish", she said, "Paddar Ilisher cheharai alada" (Hilsa from Padma River looks very different from that of Ganga). Her thread of memories opened seeing a photograph of a lake surrounded by green bushes. She recalled her siblings, friends and other relatives. While asked whether she is in touch, she said not with everyone. How would it be if she finds them through Facebook? She said, it would be great but she doesn't know the good names of everyone only the nick names she can recall nor is she sure about whether they would recognise her. Was she happy seeing the posts from her motherland? She said very much. After so many decades, at least she could get a glimpse of the land she once considered her home. More than her words, her gestures spoke. She pulled the chicks of the researcher and said, "Lokkhi Meye" (Good Girl)!!

Another octogenarian patriarch from a reputed family based in a suburban area of Jamshedpur smiled looking at the floating Swarupkhali Guava market of Barishal on the page "Barishal" and said in a humorous tone, "Aite Sal, Jaite Sal, Tare Koy Barishal" (Sal woods are required for travelling to Barishal). This is the reason behind this proverb. My homeland is full of water, he added. His smile widened with a glimpse of a pond full of violet water lilies. This is the natural wealth of our country, he further added. During partition, he had to flee to Calcutta and after a few years, his destiny brought him to Jamshedpur where he worked with Tata Steel as a foreman. All his memories revolve around betel nut trees, Kobi Gaan (a traditional folk song from Bengal) and his father. He is separated from his family, lost his father during the massacre. Three of his elder siblings went missing. He wonders whether they are still alive as they are much older than him. Knowing the features of Facebook, he said that it would have been really great had he got this a few days ago. He would have searched for his brothers. Though the memories are not very sweet for him, he loved to see the images and videos on the pages related to his homeland. He said he would love to know about the updates.

A retired school teacher from a Bengali medium school seemed emotionless as she was just three when her family migrated. She showed neither excitement nor dispassion, complete indifference. She has heard all the things from the elders, there is no personal memory. Hence, quite obviously she doesn't have much interest in the Facebook contents related to Bangladesh.

The degree of interest somehow seems dependent on the level of intensity of the childhood trauma and the feeling of up-rootedness. As it varies from person to person, the level of the feeling of relief and delight also varies. An exposure to the once considered motherland certainly triggers emotions but not everyone wants to repeat it again. There are some who don't wish to open that chapter again as they have settled themselves in India in a completely different way. For them, such social media pages are not of much value. But, those who are still nurturing the memories deep inside the heart, love to see the natural beauty as well as the new developments of their homeland. And, for that reason, they love to come back to Facebook again and again.

Conclusion

Separation from one's believed motherland, a place entwined with love and identity, inflicts a profound wound that never truly heals. For those who have experienced such a severance, the sense of despair and up-rootedness persists as a constant shadow over their lives. Social media, though a modern marvel, offers only fleeting solace. It cannot restore what has been irrevocably lost; the physical and emotional connections to a homeland that, with the passage of time, transforms beyond recognition. The updates and images shared on social media may inform the exiles about recent developments in their homeland, but these virtual glimpses pale in comparison to the vibrant reality they once knew before crossing the Radcliffe Line.

The feelings of displacement and the enduring sense of loss cannot be wholly mitigated by digital interactions. The homeland of their memories, rich with personal history and cultural significance, becomes an elusive ideal, gradually distorted by time and distance. This enduring pain underscores the limitations of technology in addressing deep-seated emotional and cultural wounds. The homeland, as it was remembered, is no longer attainable, leaving a void that social media cannot fill.

Yet, within this digital realm, there lies a small comfort. Social media can provide momentary relief, a brief escape from the relentless ache of separation. Seeing familiar faces, hearing familiar voices, and engaging in shared cultural practices online can spark moments of joy and nostalgia. These fleeting moments may not heal the wound, but they can offer temporary relaxation and a sense of contentment. For those living in the diaspora, these brief interactions can be a lifeline, offering snippets of happiness and a semblance of connection to their roots.

In a nutshell, while social media cannot bridge the gap left by separation from one's homeland, it serves as a modern balm, however temporary, to the deep wounds of displacement. It offers moments of solace and connection, reminding the displaced of their enduring ties to their heritage. Though the feeling of up-rootedness may never be fully overcome, these digital interactions can still bring a measure of comfort and a fleeting smile, providing some relief in the suppressed and long unrevealed dream to reconcile with their lost homeland. The word home carries a very different meaning for them which highly resonates with the popular verse given by famous partition writer, Amrita Pritam -

"If you really want to find me,
then knock on the door of every country,
every city,
every street.
This is a curse, this is a boon,
and wherever
you catch a glimpse of a free spirit,
know that, that's my home."

That free spirit finds a little joy wandering through the pages of Facebook amidst the sorrows of displacement and separation which has become a part of the existence of the exiles. As the virtual world is not yet broken into fragments by the narrow domestic walls, words automatically come from the depth of truth when elderly people get a chance to have a glimpse of their homeland. They love to see it again and again as that is the place where their souls still wander. Though momentary, they have a mild feeling of connectedness with their root.

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