

RECONCILING THE PAST: ANALYSING HISTORICAL WRITING AND NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

Dr. Binish Maryam*

**Corresponding Author:*

Abstract

The communal historical narratives have served to justify the distinctions between Hindus and Muslims, predominantly portraying them as adversarial factions. The violence from the partition has inflicted profound scars that remain largely unacknowledged by both India and Pakistan; hence, there has been little initiative to alleviate the suffering caused by the partition riots, which represent one of the most significant genocides in history. This paper aims to examine the function of historical literature in the formation of communal ideology that has resulted in societal division based on religion in India. The paper will demonstrate how historical works within the Indian context have contributed to societal divide based on religion and governance, hence advocating for reconciliation to ensure long-term peace.

Keywords: History writing, memorialisation, partition, re-storying, historical commissions, reconciliation

Introduction

Ethnic violence and religious rioting are occasionally rationalized by historical grievances. The significance of historical narratives in addressing social conflict is undeniable, as they create enduring psychological scars within a community. Narratives, as a profound and formative expression of one's story, are crucial in shaping the collective psyche of a community (Lederach, 2005). Indian history has witnessed a surge of communal literature, including novels, songs, and dramas, predominantly fictional, with a significant communal bias in their publication. Padmini, or Padmavati, is presumably a fictional heroine conceived by the Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi in the 16th century. Alauddin Khilji's siege of Chittor in 1303 is a documented historical occurrence; nevertheless, the legend of Padmini lacks substantial historical proof, leading most contemporary historians to dismiss its veracity. (Gopalakrishnan, 2018) These historical romances gained significant popularity and captivated the imagination of the younger generation. They remain in circulation now and perpetuate the exaltation of the Hindu past. (Yagnik & Sheth, 2005)

The myths and history of the Somnath temple continue to symbolically shape the consciousness of the Hindu majority. (Yagnik & Sheth, 2005) The narratives of looting and treachery perpetrated by the leader of one group against another get ingrained in the collective awareness of society. The painful history may perpetuate societal divisions on past injustices; while the past cannot be altered, efforts can be made to achieve reconciliation. History should be narrated with an understanding that previous injustices occurred within certain temporal and contextual frameworks. Past injustices should neither influence nor determine the current societal situations.

This paper aims to examine the function of historical literature in the formation of communal ideology that has resulted in societal division based on religion in India. As these works evolve into the prevailing narrative that shapes societal awareness, individuals rationalize the killings and massacres of ethnic or religious 'others' based on historical grievances; hence, reconciling the past becomes essential for the building of permanent peace. The paper will demonstrate how historical works in the Indian context have contributed to societal divide based on religion and governance, hence advocating for reconciliation to ensure long-term peace.

Rewriting History: Analysing Role of Historical Narratives

Utilitarian like James Mill, in his work "History of British India," established the communal view of Indian history by categorizing it into three distinct periods: Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization, and British civilization. Historical works directly impact societal beliefs. The instruction of history continues to influence the perspectives of individuals and contributes to the building of collective memory. Romila Thapar emphasizes the need of accurately interpreting historical events, asserting that erroneous histories can facilitate the spread of mythology. Thapar critiques the portrayal of ancient Indian history, asserting that while tensions and conflicts are inherent in all societies, historical narratives have sought to obscure references to the tensions of that era.

The historical narrative is a crucial element in the formation of community ideas, particularly when we go into the medieval era, also referred to as the Muslim period. A number of historians are particularly eager to highlight the conflicts between Hindus and Muslims during the medieval era. The diverse communalist theorists emphasize the adverse aspects of the Mughal sovereigns and kings. Harbans Mukhia asserts that a genuinely secular and logical approach to history necessitates a fundamental shift in our methodology, focusing on the history of society rather than that of individual rulers or ruling classes. We must examine the entirety of society, its structure and nature, which engender the conflicting phenomena of communal peace and discord at proximate moments, if not concurrently, including the domains of both harmony and conflict. (Mukhia, 2010)

A prevalent critique of the Muslim rulers is to the jizya, or the religious tax imposed on Hindus. Many individuals discussing jaziya neglect to mention zakat, a tax specifically imposed on Muslims. Some individuals contend that jaziya was imposed against Hindus, compelling them to convert to dodge this tax. Even if we temporarily accept this logic, one may still doubt the propriety of paying zakat as Muslims. Some details regarding the jaziya tax are not well disseminated in popular literature, such as Ibn Battuta's observation that in South India, the Hindu monarchs (Zamorin) levied jaziya on their Jewish people. How can one reconcile this with the jaziya imposed by Muslim rulers? The story is predominantly sectarian and biased, omitting crucial aspects that could render the age more secular and failing to accord them appropriate consideration.

It is widely remembered that Muslims systematically destroyed temples after assuming power. This singular occurrence evidently portrays Islam and Muslim leadership as intolerant, unaccommodating, and anti-Hindu. The complete destruction of a holy site is indefensible in any context. However, it is essential to comprehend the underlying goal. The majority of the demolitions occurred within enemy territory as an act of retribution. With the exception of Aurangzeb, who acted because the temples had become into hubs of plot against the state. The demolition of the shrine in enemy territory symbolized the sultan's invasion. Likewise, numerous Hindu monarchs engaged in the same practice of demolishing temples within their adversaries' territories much before the advent of Muslim rulers. Subhatavarman, the Parmara monarch (1193-1210 A.D.), invaded Gujarat and looted numerous Jain temples in Dabhoi and Cambay. In fact Harbans Mukhia concludes that the medieval Indian state was *negatively secular* as it subordinated religion to politics and not vice versa.

The most intriguing conclusion regarding the medieval period is that, despite extensive warfare between the Mughal state and the Jats, Marathas, and Sikhs, there were no instances of communal rioting at the societal level. The conflict was fought for political and economic reasons rather than for religious purposes. The works of Romilla Thapar and

Harbans Mukhia clearly indicate that communal identification was absent in ancient and medieval Indian history. At that time, communalism and nationalism, as currently defined, were non-existent. Bipan Chandra asserts that "communalism has been and continues to be the erroneous perception of the historical process over the past century." Subsequently, as will be seen, influenced by modern communal politics, it transformed into a distorted portrayal of history in the hands of historians. (Chandra, 2010)

An impartial examination of social and economic history could have united Muslims and Hindus on a common platform. However, the widely used history textbooks in schools do not present an affirmative depiction of Hindu-Muslim relations prior to independence. Modern Indian history is typically presented as commencing with the First War of Independence (1857), wherein figures such as Rani Jhansi, Nana Saheb, Mangal Pandey, and Kunwar Singh are seen as the true heroes and martyrs, while Bahadur Shah Zafar is characterized as a feeble Mughal sovereign. The collaboration between Hindus and Muslims in their joint struggle against British colonialism is hardly emphasized. This occurrence can be cited as a prime example of Hindu-Muslim solidarity; nevertheless, this aspect is not adequately addressed.

The writing of history is crucial since communalist forces choose historical narratives to legitimize their actions. When one group is positioned against another, it attributes historical injustices to the latter. Consequently, the composition of history significantly influences the collective mindset of individuals. Shortly after the 1857 reforms, the storyteller recounts the diverse socio-religious reform movements, highlighting the religious innovations presented by Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Dayanand, Swami Vivekanand, among others.

The narration reveals a total absence on Hindu-Muslim relations. The writers neglect to address the daily lives while documenting the main movements. The significance of movements, reforms, wars, political heroes, and parties sometimes overshadows the experiences of ordinary individuals in the narrative. The emphasis shifts towards the center, while the perimeter is overlooked. The experiences of the average individual, together with their relationships and means of sustenance, are either overlooked or deemed insufficiently significant for documentation. Numerous methods exist for analyzing historical events, although much relies on the manner in which they are presented to us. The sorrow is in our historical inheritance conveying diverse messages and narratives of both hope and despair, yet we frequently opt not to engage with them. Indian society has consistently been a multilingual, multicultural entity characterized by diverse identities. The history of India transcends the two-nation idea and the communalism of Muslims and Hindus, if we examine our past with greater compassion and awareness.

History Writing and the Making of Memory

History has significantly influenced the formation of communal identity. The historical story shaping the concept of both groups requires re-evaluation. History education permeates society, beginning with school curricula that familiarize pupils with the past, thereby necessitating further efforts in this area. It might be contended that the communal violence occurring in India is primarily influenced by economic and political issues, with historical context playing a subordinate role. Even within this story, one must reconsider the issue of communalism from a broader viewpoint. These narratives undoubtedly influence the imagination of communities, perhaps affecting their daily lives. The subjects may be affected by historical narratives whose veracity cannot be verified. In certain instances, historians may exhibit prejudice, and their writings can reflect their personal subjectivity.

Lederach emphasizes the necessity of re-storying, wherein history must be conveyed to facilitate reconciliation with past injustices. Unless a system for peace education and the reconciliation of historical injustices through historical commissions is established, communalism will persist as an issue in the collective memory of the populace. To reconcile violent conflicts rooted in historical differences, it is imperative to renegotiate and rectify historical injustices, occasionally using innovative approaches, as Lederach suggests by re-storying. The pursuit of enduring peace cannot be realized without addressing the issues stemming from historical burdens. The truth commissions or historical commissions have a significant duty to fulfil in this context. The inter-community relations have deteriorated due to violence. Given that conflicts are human-made phenomena that significantly alter or deteriorate interpersonal relationships within society, the role of a peacebuilder must encompass efforts to foster relationships. (Appelby, 2000)

A significant component shaping collective memory is the division of the country, which fostered the notion that Hindus and Muslims constitute two different groups incapable of coexisting. This notion is detrimental, particularly for the Muslims who choose to remain in India. In each instance of communal unrest, the patriotism and nationalism of Indian Muslims have been scrutinized by specific factions. Prior to delving into further specifics, let us first examine how partition has significantly contributed to the establishment of both territorial and psychological borders. The massacre of hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan, along with Muslims in India, resulted in a traumatic split of the nation. The Hindus and Muslims, who united against the British armies during the Revolt of 1857, were separated with the country's independence. The failure to address the injustices of the Partition has led to a postponement of collective memory. The historical commissions established globally aim to recognize injustices and unite fragmented communities, preventing traumatic memories from causing additional suffering.

The scars of partition violence persist in collective memory and literature; regrettably, India and Pakistan have not endeavored to address these issues. The establishment of Pakistan elevated religious identity over other identities. The partition process characterized Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus as butchers, deceitful others, untrustworthy, and anti-national, but most fundamentally, as just Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus. (Pandey, 2012) The Constituent Assembly,

Muslim League, and Congress leaders regarded Partition as a long-term resolution to the Hindu-Muslim issue. The event progressed in the most detrimental manner. The nation was fragmented; the populace experienced feelings of betrayal, accompanied by simultaneous sentiments of regret and vengeance. The partition persists as an unresolved trauma; even a minor disturbance might evoke significant anguish.(Hasan, 1993) The geographical demarcation the establishment of a distinct Islamic state has led to a division not only of territorial boundaries but also of populations. This harrowing chronicle of partition and violence advocates for reconciliation. The subsequent section will elucidate how the brutality of partition and the memory associated with the establishment of Pakistan persist as a profound scar in the collective consciousness of both nations.

Reconciling the Past: The Way Ahead

Memorialization and historical narratives can serve to either incite violence or foster peacebuilding. Many post-conflict cultures have observed that adept ethnic entrepreneurs can leverage historical grievances, humiliation, and exploitation to galvanize individuals for political objectives. The influence of historical narratives in social conflict is significant, as they serve as enduring scars on the collective psyche of a community. Violence inflicts profound anguish and emotional distress on victims, necessitating the need to confront this issue. Emotional pain and fragmentation become integral to memory. A paradigm shift in approach is necessary to address such memory. (Lederach,2005)

John Paul Lederach elucidates the concepts of lived history, remembered history, chosen trauma, and re-story in his discourse on peacebuilding. Experiential history refers to what an individual encounters personally during their lives. Remarkably, a local or national community encompasses various dimensions of experienced history. (Lederach, 2005) The first-hand experience of violence profoundly affects an individual's mind, necessitating specialized attention. For individuals who have not experienced direct violence, history remains vibrant and relevant as recollected history. They are designed to commemorate a certain historical event in a distinct manner. This moment defined their identity at that time and continues to influence it presently. The dates recalled may originate from distant history, yet they feel as though they occurred yesterday. In numerous situations, the selected trauma serves as a rationale for intergroup defence, anticipatory aggression, or even retribution. The narrative of partition has been sustained as a selected trauma and a recollected history, drawing on concepts articulated by Lederach. This form of memorialization poses a significant challenge to enduring peace, making the reconciliation of these memories essential for the attainment of harmony.

The endeavour to achieve enduring peace remains unattainable unless we actively engage in addressing the issues stemming from our historical complexities. The historical commissions or truth commissions hold a significant and earnest function in this context. Historian Gyanendra Pandey highlighted the oversight of the Partition within the realm of social sciences. He expressed dissatisfaction with the historical narratives in India, arguing that they do not adequately reflect the traumas of the partition and the profound divisions it created among Hindus, Muslims, and the Sikh community. There exists a notable absence of endeavour to delineate partition within the framework of national museums and monuments. No legal proceedings or public inquiries were conducted regarding mass rape, nor was there any provision of justice for the victims.(Felman, 2002)

Meena Menon articulates that “no objective history of Partition has been penned in either India or Pakistan, as emotions remain potent on both sides.”(Menon, 2014) The Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP) Oral History Project was initiated in 2008 by a collective of young individuals with the aim of documenting the narratives surrounding Partition. (Menon, 2014) The protracted recollection of partition and the prevailing sentiments of animosity towards Pakistan or India that resonate within many individuals indicate that both nations have inadequately confronted this issue. The chasm persists, and the recollection endures; without a means to mend this memory, the prospect of peace in the subcontinent remains unimaginable.

Historical experiences predominantly indicate that accounts of violence foster the emergence of adversarial communities. The discerning methodology employed in the composition of history is further exemplified by Gyanendra Pandey's assertion, “The history of violence is chronicled in the historiography of modern India as an aberration and absence.” The notion that violence is perceived as an anomaly within the broader narrative of Indian history suggests a misrepresentation; it is regarded as a distorted manifestation, an exceptional instance, rather than a true reflection of India's historical continuum. The notion of absence is particularly salient here, extending beyond the confines of Indian history, as historical discourse has encountered significant challenges in accurately capturing and re-presenting the moments of violence.”(Pandey,1991)

The emergence and development of truth commissions and war crime tribunals, for instance, represent endeavors to establish a comprehensive and public accountability for the crimes and atrocities perpetrated during recent episodes of violence. These initiatives encompass social, political, and legal dimensions aimed at fostering a collective recognition within the public domain regarding the events that transpired, the individuals who endured suffering, those who bore responsibility, and the mechanisms of accountability that follow. There is a necessity for "renegotiating history and identity," as it addresses how historical trauma linked to particular violent incidents influences the identities of individuals and entire communities, and how these events can be directed towards constructive engagement that meets individual needs while aiming to shape the broader public and national ethos. (Lederach,2005)

Unfortunately in the absence of any such mechanism the wounds refuse to heal, the trauma lingers in the memory therefore the need to reconcile becomes central to the study. The approach towards achieving peace will remain short lived and half-hearted unless fissures are addressed in a more genuine manner, either by creating historical commissions or truth centres. The ongoing silence and disregard towards monumental barriers that fragment memory render any

pursuit of peace inadequate. The historical narratives of India and Pakistan are rooted in painful memories; without an initiative for correction, the prospect of peace remains elusive. Another significant aspect arising from communal discourse is community stereotyping, which involves the creation of us/them dichotomies. The peace process must examine all factors that hinder harmonious cooperation in society; categorizing communities as either virtuous or bad exacerbates the challenges to attaining peace.

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