

Remembering Partition

Violence, Nationalism and History in India

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiii
1 By way of introduction	1
2 The three partitions of 1947	21
3 Historians' history	45
4 The evidence of the historian	67
5 Folding the local into the national: Garhmukhteshwar, November 1946	92
6 Folding the national into the local: Delhi 1947–1948	121
7 Disciplining difference	152
8 Constructing community	175
<i>Select bibliography</i>	206
<i>Index</i>	212

1 By way of introduction

Questions of violence, nationhood and history

This book focuses on a moment of rupture and genocidal violence, marking the termination of one regime and the inauguration of two new ones. It seeks to investigate what that moment of rupture, and the violent founding of new states claiming the legitimacy of nation-statehood, tells us about the procedures of nationhood, history and particular forms of sociality. More specifically, it attempts to analyse the moves that are made to nationalise populations, culture and history in the context of this claim to nation-statehood and the establishment of the nation-state. In the process, it reflects also on how the local comes to be folded into the national in new kinds of ways – and the national into the local – at critical junctures of this kind.

The moment of rupture that I am concerned with has been described as a partition, although it is more adequately designated the Partition and Independence of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.¹ As a partition, it shares something with the political outcomes that accompanied decolonisation in a number of other countries in the twentieth century: Ireland, Cyprus, Palestine, Korea, Vietnam and so on. Orientalist constructions, and ruling-class interests and calculations, through the era of formal colonialism and that of the Cold War, contributed fundamentally to all of these. In addition, it may be that the liberal state has never been comfortable with plural societies where communities of various kinds continue to have a robust presence in public life alongside the post-Smithian economic individual: perhaps that is why the combination of such mixed societies with the demands of colonialism – and of decolonisation – has often been lethal.² Yet the specifics of different partitions, and of the

¹ I discuss this question of nomenclature more fully in the next section.

² Note, however, that the process of migration and ‘mixing’ was greatly increased – in the New World as well as the Old – with the growth of world capitalism and colonialism. Also, most African territories suffered a process of Balkanisation with the end of colonial rule: here, the retention of the unity of a colonial territory – as in the case of Nigeria or Kenya – was the exception rather than the rule. (I am grateful to Mahmood Mamdani for stressing this last point to me.)

discourses surrounding each of these, require careful attention if we are to make more than a very superficial statement regarding the procedures of nationhood, history and local forms of sociality.

The next chapter outlines the particularities of the Indian partition of 1947. A few of its striking features may, however, be noted immediately. The singularly violent character of the event stands out. Several hundred thousand people were estimated to have been killed; unaccountable numbers raped and converted; and many millions uprooted and transformed into official ‘refugees’ as a result of what have been called the partition riots.³ Notably, it was not a once-subject, now about-to-be-liberated population that was pitted against departing colonial rulers in these riots, but Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs ranged against one another – even if, as Indian nationalists were quick to point out, a century and more of colonial politics had something to do with this denouement.

The partition of the subcontinent, and the establishment of the two independent states of India and Pakistan, occurred with remarkable suddenness and in a manner that belied most anticipations of the immediate future. There was a very short time – a mere seven years – between the first formal articulation of the demand for a separate state for the Muslims of the subcontinent and the establishment of Pakistan. The boundaries between the two new states were not officially known until two days *after* they had formally become independent. And, astonishingly, few had foreseen that this division of territories and power would be accompanied by anything like the bloodbath that actually eventuated.

The character of the violence – the killing, rape and arson – that followed was also unprecedented, both in scale and method, as we shall see below. Surprisingly, again, what all this has left behind is an extraordinary love–hate relationship: on the one hand, deep resentment and animosity, and the most militant of nationalisms – Pakistani against Indian, and Indian against Pakistani, now backed up by nuclear weapons; on the other, a considerable sense of nostalgia, frequently articulated in the view that this was a partition of siblings that should never have occurred – or, again, in the call to imagine what a united Indian–Pakistani cricket team might have achieved!

³ ‘... Two events, the Calcutta killing [of August 1946], and the setting up of Mr. Nehru’s first Government... [in September]... signalised the start of a sixteen-months’ civil war; a conflict in which the estimated total death-roll, about 500,000 people, was roughly comparable to that of the entire British Commonwealth during the six years of World War II’, wrote Ian Stephens, in his *Pakistan* (New York, 1963), p. 107. I discuss this and other estimates more fully in ch. 4.

From the 1940s to today, a great deal has been written about ‘the partition of India’ and the violence that – as we are told – ‘accompanied’ it.⁴ Given the specificities of subcontinental history, however, the ideological function of ‘partition’ historiography has been very different, say, from that of Holocaust literature. The investigation has not, in this instance, been primarily concerned with apportioning guilt on the opposing sides. In my view, its chief object has not even been to consolidate different ethnic/national identities in South Asia, though there is certainly an element of this, especially in right-wing writings. It has been aimed rather at justifying, or eliding, what is seen in the main as being an illegitimate outbreak of violence, and at making a case about how this goes against the fundamentals of Indian (or Pakistani) tradition and history: how it is, to that extent, not *our* history at all. The context has made for a somewhat unusual account of violence and of the relation between violence and community – one that is not readily available in literature on other events of this sort. This provides the opportunity for an unusual exploration of the representation and language of violence.

It is one of the central arguments of this book that – in India and Pakistan, as elsewhere – violence and community constitute one another,

⁴ See, for example, B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan, or the Partition of India* (Bombay, 1946); I. H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, 610–1947: a Brief Historical Analysis* (The Hague, 1962); Satya M. Rai, *Partition of the Punjab* (London, 1965); Chowdhury Muhammad Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan* (New York, 1967); Khalid bin Sayeed, *Pakistan: the Formative Phase, 1857–1948* (2nd edn, London, 1968); H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain, India and Pakistan* (London, 1969); K. K. Aziz, *The Historical Background of Pakistan, 1857–1947: an Annotated Digest of Source Material* (Karachi, 1970); C. H. Philips and M. D. Wainright, eds., *The Partition of India. Policies and Perspectives, 1935–1947* (London, 1970). More recent works include David Page, *Prelude to Partition. Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control, 1920–1932* (Delhi, 1982); Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge, 1985); Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India* (Delhi, 1987); David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (London, 1988); Ian Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement: the Growth of the Muslim League in North-West and North-East India, 1937–47* (Karachi, 1988); Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India, 1860–1947* (Cambridge, 1989); Asim Roy, ‘The High Politics of India’s Partition’, review article, *Modern Asian Studies*, 24, 2 (1990); Sarah F. D. Ansari, *Sufi Saints and State Power: the Pirs of Sind, 1843–1947* (Cambridge, 1992); Mushirul Hasan, ed., *India’s Partition. Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (Delhi, 1993); Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided. Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947* (Cambridge, 1995); and Tazeen M. Murshid, *The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim Discourses, 1871–1977* (Calcutta, 1995). Some of the more recent of these studies are rich in their accounts of the social and economic context of political mobilisation on the ground: yet they remain concerned primarily with the question of political/constitutional outcomes at the national level. An exception is Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905–1947* (Delhi, 1991), which investigates the details of the crowds and the context of violent outbreaks in Bengal from 1905 to 1947.

but also that they do so in many different ways. It is my argument that in the history of any society, narratives of particular experiences of violence go towards making the ‘community’ – and the subject of history. The discipline of history still proceeds on the assumption of a fixed subject – society, nation, state, community, locality, whatever it might be – and a largely pre-determined course of human development or transformation. However, the agent and locus of history is hardly pre-designated. Rather, accounts of history, of shared experiences in the past, serve to constitute these, their extent and their boundaries.

In the instance at hand, I shall suggest, violence too becomes a language that constitutes – and reconstitutes – the subject. It is a language shared by Pakistanis and Indians (as by other nations and communities): one that cuts right across those two legal entities, and that, in so doing, cuts across not only the ‘historical’ but also the ‘non-historical’ subject.

‘Official’ history and its other

Official claims and denials – often supported by wider nationalist claims and denials – lie at the heart of what one scholar has described as the ‘aestheticising impulse’ of the nation-state.⁵ These claims and denials provide the setting for a large part of the investigation in the following pages. In this respect, the present study is animated by two apparently contradictory questions. First: how does ‘history’ work to produce the ‘truth’ – say, the truth of the violence of 1947 – and to deny its force at the same time; to name an event – say, the ‘partition’ – and yet deny its eventfulness?

Secondly: how can we write the moment of struggle back into history? I have in mind here Gramsci’s critique of Croce’s histories of Europe and of Italy.⁶ What I wish to derive from this, however, is not merely the historian’s exclusion of the *time*, but of the very *moment* (or aspect) of struggle. I am arguing that even when history is written as a history of struggle, it tends to exclude the dimensions of force, uncertainty, domination and disdain, loss and confusion, by normalising the struggle, evacuating

⁵ E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies. Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), p. 154. Shahid Amin describes the same process when he speaks of the drive to produce the ‘uncluttered national past’; ‘Writing Alternative Histories: a View from South Asia’ (unpublished paper).

⁶ ‘Is it possible to write (conceive of) a history of Europe in the nineteenth century without an organic treatment of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars? And is it possible to write a history of Italy in modern times without a treatment of the struggles of the Risorgimento? . . . Is it fortuitous, or is it for a tendentious motive, that Croce begins his narratives from 1815 and 1871? That is, that he excludes the moment of struggle . . . ?’ Antonio Gramsci, ‘Notes on Italian History’, in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, 1971), pp. 118–19.

it of its messiness and making it part of a narrative of assured advance towards specified (or specifiable) resolutions. I wish to ask how one might write a history of an event involving genocidal violence, following all the rules and procedures of disciplinary, ‘objective’ history, and yet convey something of the impossibility of the enterprise.

It is this latter concern that has led me, throughout this book, to provide a closely detailed account of what the contemporary and later records tell us about what transpired in and around 1947. Part of my purpose is to underscore the point about how different the history of Partition appears from different perspectives. More crucially, however, I hope that what sometimes looks like a blitz of quotations, and the simply overwhelming character of many of the reports, will help to convey something of the enormity of the event.

The gravity, uncertainty and jagged edges of the violence that was Partition has, over the last few years, received the attention of a growing number of scholars and become the subject of some debate.⁷ This marks an important advance in the process of rethinking the history of Partition, of nationhood and of national politics in the subcontinent. It has been enabled in part by the passage of time, for it is now more than fifty years since the end of British colonial rule and the establishment of the new nation-states of India and Pakistan (the latter splitting up into Pakistan

⁷ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, ‘Recovery, Rupture, Resistance. Indian State and Abduction of Women During Partition’, and Urvashi Butalia, ‘Community, State and Gender: on Women’s Agency During Partition’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, ‘Review of Women’s Studies’ (24 April 1993); Gyanendra Pandey, ‘The Prose of Otherness’, in *Subaltern Studies*, VIII (Delhi, 1994); Nighat Said Khan, et al., eds., *Locating the Self. Perspectives on Women and Multiple Identities* (Lahore, 1994); Mushirul Hasan, ed., *India Partitioned. The Other Face of Freedom*, 2 vols. (Delhi, 1995); Veena Das, *Critical Events: an Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi, 1995); Gyanendra Pandey, ‘Community and Violence’, *Economic and Political Weekly* (9 August 1997) and ‘Partition and Independence in Delhi, 1947–48’, *ibid.* (6 September 1997); Shail Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes. Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity* (Delhi, 1997); Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices From the Partition of India* (Delhi, 1998); Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (Delhi, 1998); Ayesha Jalal, ‘Nation, Reason and Religion. Punjab’s Role in the Partition of India’, *Economic and Political Weekly* (8 August 1998); Seminar, ‘Partition’ number (August 1994); and *South Asia*, 18, Special Issue on ‘North India: Partition and Independence’ (1995). For literature, Alok Bhalla, *Stories on the Partition of India*, 3 vols. (New Delhi, 1994); and Muhammad Umar Memon, ed., *An Epic Unwritten. The Penguin Book of Partition Stories* (Delhi, 1998). For some reflection of the animated debate, see Jason Francisco, ‘In the Heat of the Fratricide: the Literature of India’s Partition Burning Freshly’, review article, *Annual of Urdu Studies* (1997), pp. 227–57; Ayesha Jalal, ‘Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of “Communalism”: Partition Historiography Revisited’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 33, 1 (January–March 1996), pp. 93–104; ‘Remembering Partition’, a dialogue between Javeed Alam and Suresh Sharma, *Seminar*, 461 (January 1998); David Gilmartin, ‘Partition, Pakistan, and South Asian History: in Search of a Narrative’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, 4 (November 1998).

and Bangladesh in 1971). But the passage of time does not, of its own accord, unconsciously produce a set of new perspectives and questions. On the contrary, a set of far-reaching political and historiographical considerations lies behind the renewed thinking in this area.

In India the 1970s already saw the beginning of the end of the Nehruvian vision of a modern, secular, welfare state – leading a developing society to socialism and secularism through the gentle arts of persuasion, education and democracy. It was clear that the privileged and propertied classes were not going to be readily persuaded of the need to share the fruits of development; that the oppressed and downtrodden, but now enfranchised, were threatening more and more to take matters into their own hands and to meet upper-class violence with violence; in a word, that secularism, democracy, welfare and the right to continued rule (and re-election) were not so easily secured. One result of this was a new consolidation of a right-wing, religious-community based politics – which was in the eyes of many of India's secular intellectuals not unlike the politics of the Pakistan movement of the 1940s. This was one reason to return to a study of the history of those earlier times.

The 1980s saw the emergence of exceptionally strong Hindu (and Sikh) right-wing movements – very much in line with the rise of fundamentalist and absolutist forces all over the world. Above all, that decade saw the naked parade – and astounding acceptance – of horrifying forms of violence in our own ‘civilised’ suburbs. The massacre of Sikhs on the streets of Delhi and other cities and towns of northern India in 1984 was only the most widely reported example of this:⁸ and a shocked radical intelligentsia greeted this, as it greeted other instances of the kind, with the cry that it was ‘like Partition all over again’. The spate of new studies of Partition and Partition-like violence is one consequence of this entry of barbarity – or should one say ‘history?’ – into our secure middle-class lives.

There is a historiographical imperative at work here too. For too long the violence of 1947 (and, likewise, I wish to suggest, of 1984, 1992–3 and so on) has been treated as someone else’s history – or even, *not* history at all. I shall have more to say about this in the chapters that follow. But it is necessary, at this stage, to state the broad outlines of a problem that, especially after the 1980s and 1990s, Indian historiography simply has to face. Stated baldly, there is a wide chasm between the historians’ apprehension of 1947 and what we might call a more popular, survivors’ account of it – between history and memory, as it were. Nationalism

⁸ There was, in addition, the massacre of Muslims in a spate of so-called ‘riots’ (better described as pogroms) throughout the 1980s, which peaked in 1992–3. More recently there has been a series of attacks against Christians scattered in isolated communities. All this, apart from the continuing attacks against Dalits (earlier, and sometimes still, called ‘Untouchables’) and women of all castes and classes.

and nationalist historiography, I shall argue, have made an all too facile separation between ‘Partition’ and ‘violence’. This is one that survivors seldom make: for in their view, Partition *was* violence, a cataclysm, a world (or worlds) torn apart. Whereas historians’ history seems to suggest that what Partition amounted to was, in the main, a new constitutional/political arrangement, which did not deeply affect the central structures of Indian society or the broad contours of its history, the survivors’ account would appear to say that it amounted to a sundering, a whole new beginning and, thus, a radical reconstitution of community and history.

How shall we write this other history? To attempt an answer to this question, it will help to step back and consider the history of ‘history’.

The history of ‘history’

Once upon a time, as we all know, China, India and the Arab lands had civilisation and Europe did not. But that was long ago. Then came a time when Europe claimed ‘civilisation’ from the rest of the world: and things have never been the same since. Ever after that, Europe is supposed to have possessed many attributes that the rest of the world never had.

Europe had ‘civilisation’ – which meant capitalism, the industrial revolution and a new military and political power; the rest of the world did not.

Europe had ‘feudalism’ – now seen as a prerequisite for development to ‘civilisation’; the rest of the world (with the possible exception of Japan) did not.

Europe had ‘history’ – the sign of self-consciousness; the rest of the world (with the possible exception of China) had only memories, myths and legends. Today, by a curious turn of events, and in the shadow of the Holocaust, that ‘extremest of extreme’ events as it has been characterised,⁹ Europe (now, of course, including – even being led by – the United States) has memories; the rest of the world apparently has only history.

What does all this indicate about the larger question of civilisation and the place in it of nationhood and history? First, that the plot has never been simple; and, secondly, that it has rarely seemed to work quite as it was planned. The current debate on the vexed question of memory and history, in fact, tells us more than a little about the relationship between nation and history, and history and state power. Let us stay with it for a moment.

⁹ See Dan Diner, ‘Historical Understanding and Counterrevolutionary: the Judenrat as Epistemological Vantage’, in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 128.

The debate has, of course, served to put both concepts, memory and history, under the sign of a question mark. To understand something historically, a historian of Holocaust memories and histories tells us, ‘is to be aware of its complexity, . . . to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, of protagonists, motives and behavior’.¹⁰ Even with qualifications, this is in line with the old, established view of the objectivity and scientificity of history. By contrast, Novick goes on to say ‘collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes’: typically, it would be understood as expressing some eternal or essential truth about the group whose memory it is. For collective memory is, as the same author puts it in a paraphrase of Halbwachs, ‘in crucial senses ahistorical, and even anti-historical’.¹¹

Yet it is necessary to stress that the relationship between memory and history has always been an unstable one – more so perhaps than historians have acknowledged. Today, according to Pierre Nora, the leading French scholar of the subject, history has ‘conquered’ memory. ‘Modern memory is, above all, archival’; and ‘We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left.’ Nora speaks, indeed, of a new ‘historical memory’, based upon increasingly institutionalised sites of memory.¹²

There is some force in the argument. There is no such thing as ‘spontaneous memory’ now – if there ever was. However, the historian perhaps proclaims the triumph of ‘history’ – and with it of historical societies, the modern nation-state, democratisation and mass culture – too quickly. The ascendancy of capital and its concomitant forms of modern statehood and culture has not been quite so absolute. The face-to-face communities of peasant society may be in decline, although they have hardly disappeared everywhere. But other communities of shared, inherited cultures – bonded by common memories and ‘irrational’ rituals, themselves contested and variously interpreted – continue to have a real existence even in the most advanced capitalist societies, living in an often tense relationship with the omnipresent state, yet autonomous and even resistant to its rules in many ways.

¹⁰ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston and New York, 1999), pp. 3–4. Cf. Gabrielle Spiegel’s characterisation of history as ‘a discourse drafted from other discourses’; ‘Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time’ (unpublished paper).

¹¹ Novick, *Holocaust*, pp. 3–4. See also Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York, 1980), pp. 78–87 and *passim*.

¹² Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire’, *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7, 8, 13, 21; cf. his *Rethinking the French Past. Realms of Memory. Volume I: Conflicts and Divisions*, English edn (New York, 1996), ‘General Introduction’, *passim*.

If, as Halbwachs suggests, there are as many memories as there are groups (or communities),¹³ then it is not to be wondered at that collective memories continue to have a vigorous existence – even if they do so in altered, and more historicised forms. Where the ruling classes and their instruments have failed to establish their hegemony through persuasion, or where historiography has failed (or refused) to address serious moments of dislocation in the history of particular societies in all their complexity and painfulness – which I believe has often been the case – it has perhaps given an additional lease of life to ‘memory’. Furthermore, the triumph of the nation-state, the long arm of the major publishing houses and modern media and the homogenisation of culture, have not only produced more history: they have also produced more archetypal myths.

Indeed, with the new reach of nationalism and of the modern state, and the new sites of memory that they have established, it is not fantastic to suggest that history itself appears in the form of memory – a national memory as it were. In other words, the world today is populated not only by the ‘historical memory’ of various groups, dependent upon museums, flags and publicly funded celebrations. It is also flooded with the mythical histories of nations and states, histories that are themselves an institutional ‘site of memory’, locked in a circular, and somewhat parasitical, relationship with other, more obvious *lieux de mémoire*. This hybrid ‘memory-history’, whose presence Nora again notes, is surely one of the distinguishing marks of our age. Pronouncements about the worldwide progress – or decline – of ‘history’ do not, however, sit very well with this complexity, one that challenges the stark separation that is sometimes made between ‘memory’ and ‘history’.

On the question of disciplinary history, one might note, parenthetically, that a slippage frequently occurs between the conception of history as an objective statement of all that is significant in the human past, and as a statement of purposive movement. For Hegel, the leading philosopher of the practice, the state is the condition of history: for the state symbolises self-consciousness and overall purpose, and thus makes for the possibility of progress – and regress. ‘We must hold that the narration of history *and* historical deeds and events appear at the same time . . . It is the State which first presents subject matter that is not only appropriate for the prose of history but creates it together with itself.’

Only in the State with the consciousness of laws are there clear actions, and is the consciousness of them clear enough to make the keeping of records possible and desired. It is striking to everyone who becomes acquainted with the treasures of Indian literature that that country, so rich in spiritual products of greatest

¹³ Cf. Nora, *Rethinking the French Past*, p. 3.

profundity, has no history. In this it contrasts strikingly with China, which possesses such an excellent history going back to the oldest times.¹⁴

Within the academy, however, history is sometimes presented as a scientific description of anything in the human past; at other times, as an account of anticipated advance, of known directionality and accumulating progress. In order to avoid any confusion in this regard, I want to underscore Hegel's proposition about the latter aspect of the discipline, and to say that even when history becomes rather more reflexive – and adds historiography, the history of history, to its concerns – it continues to work within a context defined by modern (or shall we say, nineteenth-century) science and state. It continues to be based on the belief in the past as past, in the privilege of large and centralised socio-political formations, in objective facts and predictable futures: and it relies heavily on the power of those beliefs.

It is my argument that the writing of history – in each and every case – is implicated in a political project, whether consciously or unselfconsciously. There is a crucial need to explicate the politics of available histories. 'At one time', writes Nora, 'the Third Republic [in France] seemed to draw together and crystallize, through history and around the concept of "the nation".' 'History was holy because the nation was holy.' 'The memory-nation was... the incarnation of memory-history.' The crisis of the 1930s changed all that. The 'old couple', state and nation, was replaced by a new one, state and society. History was 'transformed into social self-understanding'. 'We no longer celebrate the nation, ... we study the nation's celebrations.'¹⁵ French history, he tells us, was once 'the very model of national history in general'. Now, it seems we are being told, it is the very model of a non-national, open-ended, many-centred history. But model nonetheless.

'We live in a fragmented universe... We used to know whose children we were; now we are the children of no one and everyone.' 'Since the past can now be constructed out of virtually anything, and no one knows what tomorrow's past will hold, our anxious uncertainty turns everything into a trace...' 'With the disintegration of memory-history, ... a new kind of historian has emerged, a historian prepared, unlike his predecessors, to avow his close, intimate, and personal ties to his subject ... [and] entirely dependent on his subjectivity, creativity, and capacity to re-create.' 'The demise of memory-history has multiplied the number of private memories demanding their own individual histories'; everything we touch or use is

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History. A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, tr. by Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis, 1953), pp. 75–7.

¹⁵ Nora, *Rethinking the French Past*, pp. 5–7.

preserved as an archival document, and of course (historical) memory is everywhere. There has been ‘a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the concrete message to its subjective representation . . .’¹⁶ ‘Memory has become the discourse that replaces history’, as another commentator on memory has it.¹⁷

I have to say, in response to this, that this is not the only world I recognise. Who is it, in fact, who lives in a ‘fragmented’ universe, and turns every ‘trace’ into a historical document? This is not my history and – probably – not the history of the majority of people across the globe. Where I come from, and I daresay in many other parts of what was once called the Third World, an incredible range of old and abandoned objects gets recycled, including discarded official documents and forms – the staple of historians for a long time now – which are often found being used as wrapping for snack foods. At this point, our historian, with his feet planted firmly in Europe and little awareness of how the rest of the world thinks or feels, moves too quickly – and unreflexively.

When Nora and others dismiss the history–nation connection, as belonging to the past, they appear to me to be mistaken on two counts. To speak of history entering ‘the epistemological age’ is to confine history to the narrow space of academic production – precisely when the sites of historical production have expanded dramatically – and within that too, perhaps, to that of detailed research publications for a small circle of readers. What happens here to Hegel’s self-conscious state and overall purpose? What happens, besides, to the ‘histories’ published in the *New Yorker*, the *London Times*, and *The Times of India*, not to mention the popular historical publications put out by a host of right-wing political parties, and nationalist and nativist movements, that flood streets and stalls the world over? Or are all these now to be classified as ‘memory’?

Which leads to a second objection: don’t ‘private memories’ and ‘individual histories’ continue to feed upon the ‘memory-histories’ of states, parties and pressure groups representing communities and nations? Is it not premature, just at present, to pronounce the death of memory-history – and with it the death of the ‘nation’ idea – especially when the self-assured nationalisms and nation-states of the West have been so naturalised as to be rendered invisible, at precisely the same time that the less disguised nationalisms of the rest are declared suspect? Are we really supposed to accept the argument, implicit in the periodic outpourings of Western governments and media alike, that *our* nationalisms – like *our*

¹⁶ The above quotations are all from Nora’s ‘General Introduction’ in *Rethinking the French Past*.

¹⁷ Charles Maier, ‘A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial’, *History and Memory*, 5 (1993), p. 140.

religions – are fine: *theirs* are unfortunately troublesome, and need we tell you, dated?

It is notable that national identity has been one of the obsessions of French politics and history in these post-national times. Braudel was not the only distinguished historian of France to succumb to the temptation of returning to national history, with the publication of the first volume of his *L'Identite de la France* in 1986. As one commentator has noted, ‘the 1980s saw a huge outpouring of multi-volume collective histories of France, mostly in traditional narrative mode, which would not have looked out of place at the end of the nineteenth century’.¹⁸ In the ambitious project that he guided on *Les Lieux de Memoire*, a project self-consciously designed to break down narrative history, Nora’s own contributions appear to be suffused with nostalgia for an earlier history. Interestingly, while repeatedly announcing the demise of the nation and of its attendant national history, he speaks at the same time of ‘the permanence of a . . . [French] identity even now in the throes of fundamental change’.¹⁹

Perhaps what lies behind this ambivalence is the still refractory question of what constitutes the domain of ‘history’. The long enduring colonial distinction between the historical continent called Europe and the continents (and peoples) without history has, one imagines, been finally laid to rest. Quite apart from the story of world capitalism, that is, the history of the dominant world order within which diverse societies have been compelled to live for some time now, as Tállal Asad notes in a review of Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People without History*, ‘there are also histories (some written, some yet to be written) of the diverse traditions and practices that once shaped people’s lives and that cannot be reduced to ways of generating surplus or of conquering and ruling others’.²⁰

While Asad’s statement may seem to apply only to a time past, before the advance of capitalism and its attendant political and ideological structures, it is possible to suggest that these other histories, other traditions and practices, continue to have a significant life – sometimes robust, sometimes fitful and fugitive – even under the sway of capitalism and the new globalisation, and even in the heartlands of capitalism. Indeed one

¹⁸ Julian Jackson, ‘Historians and the Nation in Contemporary France’, in Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore, eds., *Writing National Histories. Western Europe since 1800* (London, 1999), p. 242. On Braudel he writes: ‘That the leading representative of the Annales school should in his twilight years renounce the Annaliste contempt for purely national history and produce a massive exploration of France’s past is itself significant; so is the enthusiasm with which the book was greeted; so, even more, is the self-consciously elegiac tone which pervades it; so, most of all, is the mystically nationalist tone, reminiscent of Michelet’, p. 241.

¹⁹ Nora, *Rethinking the French Past*, p. 23.

²⁰ Talal Asad, ‘Are there Histories of Peoples without Europe? A Review Article’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29, 3 (1987), p. 604.

might argue, with Partha Chatterjee, that ‘community’ remains the insufficiently acknowledged shadow, the alter ego, the underside of capital, very much a part of the here-and-now of the modern world order. The contradiction between the two narratives of capital and of community, writes Chatterjee, lies at the very heart of the history and progress of modernity.²¹

The point relates to our practice of history writing. Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Guha have demonstrated how ‘Europe’ – which may also be called capitalism or modernity – tends to become the subject of all history.²² Could one say, more specifically, that it is in the unrecorded history of the contradiction between ‘community’ and ‘capital’, between the ‘particular’ and the ‘universal’ – in the unrecorded or, at least, uninTEGRATED histories of other traditions and other practices – that we shall find much of the specificity, and diversity, of our lives and times, of our nation-states, of our capitalist economies and our modern institutions? Perhaps it is precisely in the ambivalences that we shall find the particular valence of our histories. Consider this question in terms of the naming of the object of investigation in this book.

A note on the term ‘Partition’

The ‘partition of India’, which is how the division of the subcontinent in 1947 is universally referred to in Indian historiography, is also (for Pakistanis) the ‘independence of Pakistan’. Within India, the ‘partition’ of the historians, and of the official pronouncements of the nation-state, lives side by side with the ‘partition’/‘uproar’/‘migration’ that survivors of 1947 speak of. What lies behind these alternative names, I suggest, are diverse claims regarding nationalism and the nation-state: the claims of the Indian state against the Pakistani, on the one hand; and, on the other, the claims of the Indian and Pakistani states against non-statist reconstructions of the past, which sometimes deny the claims of nationalism and the nation-state altogether.

In spite of occasional objections, however, historians belonging to both India and Pakistan continue to write of the partition of India, or of British India, in 1947. Indeed, the proper noun, ‘Partition’, has passed untranslated into several South Asian languages (including languages spoken in Pakistan and Bangladesh) as the name of a significant break that occurred

²¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), p. 237.

²² See Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Past?’ *Representations*, 37 (Winter 1992); and Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony. History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), esp. ch. 1.

in, or about, 1947. Along with vernacular equivalents like *batwara*, *vibhajan* and *taqseem*, and other local terms for the violence of the time that I shall have occasion to discuss below, the English word ‘Partition’ has come to be used in the region of Punjab and Delhi, UP (Uttar Pradesh) and Bihar, Bengal and beyond, for the events (or some of the events) that marked the establishment of India and Pakistan, the Hindu–Muslim discord of that moment and the fratricide (or ‘civil war’) that occurred in 1947. In Bangladesh, many ordinary peasants and labourers, speaking in the common Musalmani Bengali of the rural poor, refer to 1947 as ‘*partitioner bacchar*’ (the year of Partition), as they refer to 1971 as ‘*svadhintar* [or *mukti-juddher*] *bacchar*’ (the year of Independence, or ‘of the liberation war’ – referring to the massacres and widespread resistance and fighting that came with the Pakistani army’s actions of that year).²³

I shall therefore refer to the object of the present inquiry as Partition. As chapter 2 will indicate, however, there are several different conceptions of ‘partition’ that went into the making of the Partition of 1947. There was the partition signalled in the Lahore Resolution of March 1940, the demand of an important section of the Muslim political leadership for a state of their own – which was articulated more and more widely by Muslims across the subcontinent over the next seven years. There was, secondly, the demand put forward in early 1947 by sections of the Sikh, Hindu and Congress leadership, for the partition of Punjab and Bengal – linguistic regions which had a great deal of cultural uniformity. There was, yet again, the feared, and then dreadfully realised, partition of families and local communities, whereby millions of people were torn from ancestral homes, fields and fortunes, life-long friends and childhood memories, relatives and loved ones, the knowledge of the familiar and the comfort of the known – a third partition, shall we say, that so many survivors speak of, in words that we hear but do not always listen to, as ‘migration’, ‘*maashal-la*’ (martial law), ‘*mara-mari*’ (killings),

²³ I derive this information from conversations with a number of Bangladeshi colleagues and students, among them Ahmed Kamal, Aminul Faraizi, Dina Siddiqi and Tehmina Anam. Within the wider rubric of Partition, it is possible to refer to several different ‘partitions’. The provinces of Punjab and Bengal, for example, were divided as part of the breakup of British India, and establishment of India and Pakistan, in 1947. In the case of Bengal again, observers have spoken of earlier and later ‘partitions’. The province was partitioned in 1905, when the British made an abortive attempt to carry through an administrative division of east from west Bengal, to spike the growing militancy of the nationalist movement in that region and to win for the British the support of the Muslim aristocratic and professional elite of East Bengal; in 1947 when the partition we are here discussing took place; and in 1971, when Pakistan was ‘partitioned’ and the erstwhile East Bengal or East Pakistan became the independent nation-state of Bangladesh. However, it is ‘1947’ that is usually described as the year of Partition, with a capital ‘P’ – not only in the written, but also in oral accounts of the subcontinent’s recent past.

‘raula’, ‘hullar’ (disturbance, tumult, uproar), or negatively in the rhetorical question, ‘Beta, is neem ke ped ko chhorkar kahan jaate?’ (“Where could we have gone leaving this [old] neem tree behind?”).

I raise the question of nomenclature at the outset in order to stress the fact that our very choice of terms determines not only the images we construct but also the questions we ask about historical (and contemporary) events.²⁴ Shall we continue to think of 1947 as a constitutional division, an agreed-upon partition of territories and assets? Or shall we face up to the enormity of the violence and the incredible acts of rape, torture and humiliation? Shall we call it ‘civil war’, recognising the fact that there were well organised local forces on both sides and a concerted attempt to wipe out entire populations as enemies? Some have used the expression holocaust as well.²⁵ In the lower case, for which the *Random House Dictionary* (1987) gives as the primary meaning of the term, ‘a great or complete devastation or destruction, esp. by fire’, this is entirely appropriate. Surely, 1947 was all of that. It may, indeed, be seen as having elements of a sacrificial offering rendered up at the birth of two new nations – which is perhaps more in line with the original meaning of holocaust than many other events for which the name has been applied. More to the point, the term captures something of the gravity of what happened in the subcontinent at this time that is not usually conveyed in the somewhat mild and, in the Indian context, hackneyed term, ‘partition’. Posing the question of the adequacy of the latter description may, therefore, lead us to rethink the meaning of that history.

New nations, new histories

What the violence of 1947 did was to create new subjects and subject positions: a fact that in itself necessitates a reconsideration of the standard view of history as a process with an always already given subject. After

²⁴ James Young makes the point about the importance of naming very well in his discussion of narratives of the German Holocaust. ‘That events of this time [could] be contained under the rubric of [different] names like “Patriotic War” (in Russia), “Hitler-time” (in Germany), or “World War II” (in America) tells us as much about the particular understanding of this period by the namers as it does about the events themselves.’ Precisely so, ‘the terms sho’ah and churban figure these events in uniquely Jewish ways, which simultaneously preserve and create specifically Jewish understanding and memory of this period’; James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington, 1988), p. 87.

²⁵ For an early example, see Sardar Bhupinder Singh Man’s speech in the Constituent Assembly of India, 19 December 1948, *Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative). Official Report*, vol. vii, no. 1 (1949), pp. 798–9; for a very recent one, Tapan Raychaudhuri, ‘Re-reading Divide and Quit’ in the new edition of Penderel Moon’s *Divide and Quit. An Eyewitness Account of the Partition of India* (Delhi, 1998), pp. 297 and 306.

Partition, individuals, families and communities in the subcontinent remade themselves in radically altered settings. They had to struggle to overcome new fears, to gradually rebuild faith and trust and hope and to conceive new histories – and new ‘memories’ that are, in some reckonings, ‘best forgotten’. ‘What is the point of telling today’s children about these things?’ Partition survivors sometimes say. ‘All that has nothing to do with their lives and their problems.’

And yet, while individuals and families recreate themselves in changed times and changed conditions, sometimes by forgetting, they – and the communities and nations in which they live – are not able to set aside the memory of the violence quite so easily. For there are numerous ways in which the life and conditions of India and Pakistan, and perhaps Bangladesh too, have been obviously re-made by that violence and the curious memory-history we have of it. In saying this, I refer not only to the immediate problems of rehabilitation and resettlement, and the reordering of industries, armed forces, administrative apparatuses and supply lines that were divided and disrupted, but also to the fashioning of longer term policies, mentalities and prejudices.

Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were all redefined by the process of Partition: as butchers, or as devious others; as untrustworthy and anti-national; but perhaps most fundamentally, as Sikhs and Muslims and Hindus alone. All over the subcontinent, for extended periods, at many times since 1947, men, women and children belonging to these communities – yet belonging to different castes, classes, occupations, linguistic and cultural backgrounds – have been seen in terms of little but their Sikh-ness, their Muslim-ness or their Hindu-ness.²⁶ And periodically, Christians have been treated in a similar way. Journalists and other commentators in India invoke Partition whenever there is a major instance of inter-community strife; and local administrators have been known to describe predominantly Muslim localities as ‘little Pakistans’, even at other, ‘normal’, times.

The ‘Sikh problem’ arose in 1947 and has remained a major factor in Indian politics ever since. Their homeland, Punjab, split down the middle, with a large part of their property and pilgrim-sites left in West Pakistan, the Sikhs as a political community have never been allowed to forget what they suffered at Partition. This is summed up in the commonly encountered statement that while the Hindus got their Hindustan and the Muslims got their Pakistan, the Sikhs were like orphans, left with

²⁶ Today a Muslim shopkeeper in the southern Indian state of Kerala easily exclaims, on learning that his middle-class customer from northern India is also a Muslim, ‘Oh! You should have told me you were one of us.’ (I am indebted to Javeed Alam for this information.)

nothing. The Punjabi Suba movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the Khalistani movement of the 1970s and 1980s both derived a considerable part of their strength from such sentiments.²⁷ On the state's side, the question of 'minorities' in India – Sikh, Muslim and at times even Christian – has continued to be handled in the light of the 'lessons' of Partition. Military coups in Pakistan are still justified on the grounds of the unfinished work of Partition.

What this book is (not) about

'Nations' – modern political communities, products of history that are forged in struggle – are made, to a large extent, through the actions of emergent nation-states, or their ruling classes, which seek to nationalise different elements of the social and intellectual body of the putative national community. This procedure may be seen in its most concentrated form, perhaps, at the moment of the establishment of the new national state: Partition and Independence in the case of India and Pakistan. A primary object of this book is to trace this process of nationalising the nation through a close study of the experiences and struggles of several different sections of the population, and the disputes over other elements (history, collective memory) that were crucial to the making of a particular kind of – modern, democratic, progressive – nation.

A small clarification is in order. It is obviously not my argument that modern states (or ruling classes) make nations at will. Instead, I seek to recover the moment of Partition and Independence in India as a moment of nationalisation, and a moment of contest regarding the different conditions of such nationalisation. On what terms would Muslims, Dalits ('Untouchables') and women be granted the rights of citizenship? Could they become citizens at all?

I wish to try and recover the history of Partition, therefore, as a renegotiation and a re-ordering, as the resolution of some old oppositions and the construction of new ones. I wish to see it as a history not of large, historical processes alone; nor yet of victimhood, plain and simple (which may amount to something very similar); nor yet of madness or natural calamities that swept all before them (though madness is surely one way

²⁷ For one example of the connections made, see 'Stupid Sikhs', a speech on Sikhs and Sikhism by Sirdar Kapur Singh on 7 October 1974 (published by the All Canada Sikh Federation, Vancouver, 1975); and for more critical academic assessments, Mohinder Singh, 'Reconstruction of Recent Sikh Past and the Diaspora' (unpublished MS); Rajiv A. Kapur, *Sikh Separatism: the Politics of Faith* (London, 1986); and Robin Jeffrey, 'Grappling with History: Sikh Politicians and the Past', *Pacific Affairs*, 60, 1 (Spring 1987), and his *What's Happening to India? Punjab, Ethnic Conflict, Mrs. Gandhi's Death, and the Test of Federalism* (Basingstoke, 1986).

of making sense of the violence of the time, and natural calamities do come to mind); but also as a history of struggle – of people fighting to cope, to survive and to build anew; as a history of the everyday in the extraordinary. I wish to see it, in a word, as a history of contending politics and contending subject positions.

Is it necessary to add that this book, and perhaps the entire corpus of powerful new writing on Indian nationalism and on Partition, does no more than to signal new questions? Much of the detailed research, analysis and reflection required for a more effective response to the political and intellectual challenges of our times still remains to be done.

To that obvious qualification, let me add two more about the present study. Ideally this book would have dealt with the nationalisation of society, politics, culture and history in two nation-states, India and Pakistan. Owing to the exigencies of international relations, and the consequent difficulty of obtaining visas for travel (not to mention research) between India and Pakistan, however, it has to be restricted to one of those countries, present-day India. I can only hope that in spite of this limitation, the questions raised and the propositions advanced here have a wider application.

In the matter of coverage, this book is wanting in several other respects too, including one that will be immediately noticed. The Partition of 1947, and the establishment of the new states of India and Pakistan, directly and drastically altered the constitutional, political and social condition of both north-western and north-eastern India: Punjab in the north-west and Bengal in the north-east were both split up and divided between India and Pakistan. However, owing to the limited extent of my linguistic abilities, and because the subject is large and calls for far more detailed research on the different provinces and regions of the subcontinent, the material for this book comes in the main from Punjab, Delhi and UP, or northern and north-western India more broadly. This bears noting, but does not in my view call for extended apology. The area I have studied would cover a large part of western Europe, in geographical spread as well as in the strength of its population; it is rich in history, and accommodates a great variety of social and cultural practices; and in its evidence, from and about 1947, it raises many of the most important questions that must arise when it comes to the question of nationalising richly layered and culturally varied societies and peoples.

A final disclaimer: this critique of nationalism in India does not imply that national movements have not played an outstanding part in liberating people far and wide, in ex-colonial Africa and Asia as elsewhere, from the clutches of imperialism – political, economic and intellectual. On the contrary, what it does seek to show is that nationalism is the expression

of a particular historical conjuncture, albeit one that was fairly extended in time and played out very differently in different parts of the world between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. Nationalism everywhere has been the product of particular, distinctive histories. It has been as strong as its leading class or classes: visionaries as well as practical men and women, devoted to commerce and industry, education and culture, aspiring to rule, to unify peoples, mobilise resources and transform economic, social and political conditions in a new, progressive spirit. And – like every other major development in history – it has been shot through with its own contradictory impulses. Given the particularity (and partiality) of its claims and achievements, and the necessarily contradictory quality of its conditions of existence, we can scarcely accept at face value the self-representation of a particular nationalism or of nationalist ideology in general (however short-lived or long term its triumph) any more than we would accept the claims of a self-contented imperialism or of a grander ‘modern civilisation’.²⁸

The point is obvious, but perhaps in need of reiteration. Liberation is not a cut-and-dried object, obtained once and for all in some seamless form. Progress and justice are not notions of crystal-clear content and unmistakable indices, which may be easily measured. Every liberation in history has come at the cost of the establishment of new hierarchies and new kinds of bondage, not to mention the reinvention of old ones. To what extent have the concerns and struggles of the lower castes, of millions of ordinary workers, peasants and artisans, of peripheral nationalities struggling for democratic rights (for example, in the north-eastern states of India and in Kashmir), of women now working in new locations, under new pressures, related to the nationalist elite’s (and the nationalist historian’s) lasting concern with the representation (and hence maintenance?) of homogenised and uniform nations, and homogenised and uniform national cultures and histories?

Recognition of the severity, the broken edges, and the uncertain boundaries of Partition allows us a standpoint that was perhaps unavailable to an earlier generation of writers of a nationalist Indian history. How much violence and intolerance has it taken to produce the ‘successful’ nation-states of the twentieth century? How many partitions did it take to make the Partition of 1947? How different is the history of those citizens, on the one hand, whose position is so ‘natural’ that they are not even aware of their privilege as citizens; and that, on the other, of people whose

²⁸ On this last, Gandhi’s response to the question what he thought of ‘western civilisation’ remains apposite in many ways: ‘It would be a good thing.’ Cf. the important reflections of Aimé Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955; English edn, New York, 1972), p. 14 and *passim*.

livelihood and security in their assigned nation-states is so uncertain that the phrase ‘privileges of citizenship’ might sound somewhat ironical? Among the latter are many faceless ‘victims’ of Partition: Muslim artisans, peasants and labourers in India; Dalit sweepers; ‘recovered’ women, Chakmas and Anglo-Indians; people who stayed or fled at Partition, to face new circumstances and build new lives and communities, in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

This book is about the making of the Partitioned subject in the subcontinent, the nationalising of nations and the selection of particular pasts. As part of the context, the next chapter seeks to provide a dense, summary account of the major lines of argument and confrontation that developed between the self-appointed or acclaimed representatives of ‘Hindus’, ‘Muslims’ and ‘Sikhs’ in the mid-1940s – insofar as any such dense but ‘summary’ account is possible.²⁹

²⁹ This ‘summary’ is intended for the reader who feels handicapped because of unfamiliarity with the subcontinent and subcontinental politics in the last years of British rule. Those familiar with the main lines of that history may wish to move directly to ch. 3.