

As the issues of migration and refugees due to escalation of conflict in Syria rage on in world politics, particularly in Europe, it was just the right time to carry out a research on memories of some of the biggest refugee crises and migration in recent history. The current debates center mostly around the broader theme of what impact the refugees would have if they are allowed to settle in a particular society. So it will be pertinent to look at what legacies, previous massive conflicts and the mass movements arising out of it leave in the societies these refugees moved into.

One of such events is the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent and the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947. A great amount of research has been done on the Partition of India and history has been written since then. Some amount of oral history has also been and is still being carried out to record testimonies of witnesses of Partition and they have either been published or been made available on the internet. But there has been hardly any research done on the post-partition third generation. It needs little guessing that the third generation would have grown up with partly idealised, partly imagined and partly extreme negative memories inherited from their previous two generations. This process of passing on and inheritance of memories is likely to distort the contours of an individual's understanding of history unless divergent views are put together and presented.

Keeping these in mind, the 'Inherited Memories: My Parent's World' project was conceived to explore how these 'un-objectifiable memories' and subjectively transmitted stories influence the image of the third generation of post-partition history.

Research and fieldwork

At the outset, it seemed that it might be difficult to find the right kind of respondents who could give us substantive interviews with relevant information that we sought through a set of standard questionnaire. The refugees who migrated from both sides during and soon after the Partition had not settled in one particular area or region. They were all scattered in West Bengal and other parts of India and in erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

There was one exception – the Bihari or Urdu speaking Muslims who had migrated from Kolkata or the eastern Indian state of Bihar or the eastern parts of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. This group, presently consisting of nearly eight hundred thousand people, had been associated with the Pakistan army during Bangladesh's independence war of 1971 and had thus been ostracised soon after that. Most members of this group still live in scores of camps set up by the International Committee of Red Cross and Red Crescent or the ICRC after the war ended in December 1971. So this was one group that was concentrated in some areas. It had been decided that we would record the interviews on video. Given the time frame and the resources, we had to restrict the total number of interviews to 20 – 10 from each side. Our teams of 15 volunteer researchers in Kolkata in West Bengal and Bangladesh (from Dhaka and Chittagong) searched for respondents through their own contacts. While deciding on the final list of respondents the gender and social strata distribution were maintained.

A set of open ended questions, specific to the event of 1947 Partition had been finalised during a week-long training workshop with the researchers. The fieldwork begun in Kolkata in September 2015 and it ended in Dhaka in October 2015. The transcripts and their English translation had been prepared to go with the full interviews for readers who might want to use the research material for further studies.

Memories – Continuous and Fragmented

The field recordings have thrown open some surprises. In some cases, we were surprised to hear vivid narratives from young respondents who had inherited them from their grandparents or parents. Their narration sounded as if they had lived through such experiences. In those interviews it seemed that there had been a continuum of family stories and they had been preserved well.

It was surprising to hear how they inherited and processed traumatic experiences of their previous generations. All of them could narrate the stories of traumata with an element of objectivity as if they were analysing the causes of those of events. In a few interviews, it seemed that the memories were fragmented and somewhat faded. Even though they are fragmented and faded, they do create an interesting mosaic of narratives that had not been known or recorded ever.

By listening to the interviews and reading the transcripts one can clearly identify some patterns emerging and that is true for respondents in both West Bengal and Bangladesh.

It is clear that the women respondents have more stories to tell and their narratives are more graphic with details. One can guess why it is so. In South Asian societies, as girls and young women spend more time at home with their grandmothers, mothers or other female members of the family, they tend to exchange more stories and become repositories of family history.

It also became apparent that the inherited memories of respondents in Bangladesh were stronger. One reason for this could be that most of the Muslims who left India for East Pakistan in 1947 did not leave with their entire families. Some members of the family were left behind or some family members chose not to migrate and remained in India. In such families there have been continuous meetings and visits of family members from India. These families also tend to visit the other sides of families. As a result, it is likely that they have been able to construct their own narratives along with the memories they have inherited from their previous generations.

On one issue, the third generation respondents from both sides agree, which is that Partition is a historical event and they do not feel nostalgic about the other side as their parents and grandparents did or still do. They are ready to visit the other side and meet families in case they have not yet done so but they accept that their homes are where they live currently and express their loyalty to either India or Bangladesh. They all agree on another issue too, that there should be easier border movements procedures from both sides. This, they think, will bring ordinary people and particularly the divided families the chance to visit each other more.

The interviews with the non-Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh, generally known as the Bihari Muslims are most fascinating. This community had been uprooted twice – in 1947 and again after the independence war of Bangladesh in 1971. While narrating their memories of 1947, all of them invariably talked about their memories of 1971 that they inherited from their parents. These testimonies are most striking as their personal testimonies talk about a community living with a refugee status since 1947 to date. The limited research, which we undertook, can be the beginning of a process and it has the potential to trigger future extensive research on inherited memories of Partition with a larger sample size and including the western partition of Punjab. The third generation progeny of more than 14 million refugees who were forced to

migrate to either in India or Pakistan in 1947 presently influence the dynamics of the societies. Through the multi-perspective of several of these inherited experiences and stories, one can achieve a convergence of general understanding of this segment of historical developments.