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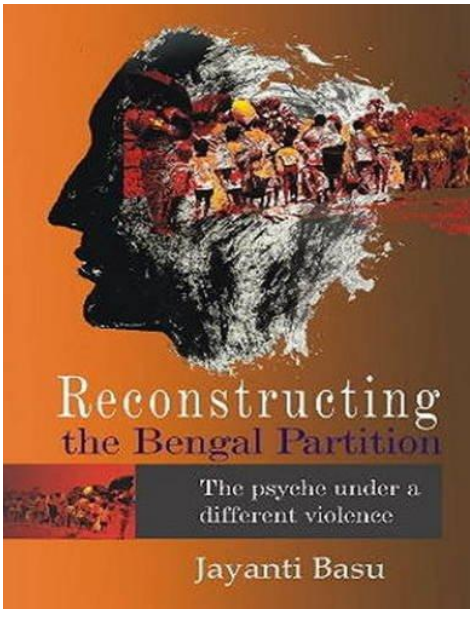
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Book Review

Jayanti Basu's *Reconstructing the Bengal Partition: The Psyche under a Different Violence*. Kolkata: Samya, 2013; pp xlii + 249, Rs 550 (hardback)

Subhasri Ghosh
Assistant Professor, Department of History, Asutosh College, Kolkata, West Bengal.
E-mail - subhasri.ghosh@asutoshcollege.in,

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Reconstructing the Bengal Partition: The Psyche Under a Different Violence Author's Name – Jayanti Basu Publication - Samya Year of Publication- 2013 ISBN- 9788190676090 Page Count- 249 INR 550 (Hardback)	

The twentieth century has often been labelled as the century of Partitions, marked by three major corporeal dissections — Ireland, India, Palestine — all under the aegis of British imperialism. In the South Asian context, the word 'Partition' evokes a plethora of emotions: trauma, nostalgia, relief, and even hatred. Partition historiography, which essentially follows two trajectories — the 'high politics' pivoting on the whys and the wherefores; the 'human dimension' hinging on 'memory-history' where the sufferers bare their hearts to narrate the

catastrophe that changed their lives and perhaps that of the subsequent generations, forever. While Percival Spear's *India, Pakistan and the West* (1952) flagged off the debate on the causalities, Ayesha Jalal's *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (1994) marked a major shift in analysis since it deviated from the one-sided argument of vilifying Jinnah and the Muslim League. While Jalal bailed out Jinnah, Joya Chatterji in *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (1994) trained her focus on the micro-level to argue how the demand for a separate homeland for the Hindus, fuelled by a large and powerful section of Hindu society within Bengal, was seen as the only way to regain lost glory and to wrest power from the Muslim majority. Chatterji's attempt at linking the local with the national, unleashed a series of studies where scholars taking cognizance of local-level events, connected the dots to paint the larger picture.

A paradigm shift of sorts occurred during the 1990s. For most historians, even though the question of causes was never resolved, it did recede, making way for a new line of study that involved training light on the sufferers or the unintended victims of Partition. The lived experiences of the common people opened up a new genre of Partition study, collectively identified as explicating the human dimension of the Partition. Feminist scholars Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin transformed the field and forced historians to confront the contradictions between nationalist accounts and Partition narratives. Bringing in sexuality and violence into Partition studies, they tried to bring to the fore the stifled voices, and in the process imbued Partition studies with a new vitality. Taking a leaf out of their works other scholarly pursuits have enriched this oeuvre —Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta ed. *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*; Gargi Chakravartty *Coming out Of Partition: Refugee Women in Bengal*— through recontouring the very foundation of historical analysis by relying essentially on two methods— oral history and literary analysis.

Jayanti Basu's authored volume, falls within this second category. A psycho-analyst by training, she delves deep into the inner recesses of minds of the East Bengali migrants, settled in and around Kolkata, to cull out their mind-set and how Partition impacted and shaped their identity. Divided into five chapters along with a Preface and an Introduction, the book delineates how violence took an altogether different meaning in the context of Bengal, unlike that of Punjab. While the latter was scarred by large-scale looting, rape and mass murder, the scenario in Bengal, on the other hand, in the immediate aftermath of Partition, or more precisely till 1950, was marked by a relative calm after the dance of death witnessed in 1946. However, it would be a travesty of truth to deny the existence of violence in Bengal. What occurred in Bengal, as Basu points out, can be treated as "a different kind of violence…called 'soft violence'" (p. xxxi), which left an indelible impression on her respondents, as she found out in the course of her data collection. Mainly focussing on the *bhadrolok* community, the different chapters touch upon various aspects of memory, often considered as an afterlife of Partition, through recollections of the interviewees. She assesses the rich complexity of the human psyche in response to the trauma of migration that involved uprooting from the natal set-up, concluding that the memory of past events is to a great extent psychologically determined.

The process of recollection, which her respondents resorted to, in order to piece together their past, is in a way, the author summarises, a creative process, and thus she chooses to label them

as respondent-creator. Each individual experience, encapsulating the myriad hues of emotions— pain, trauma of separation, struggle for finding a foothold, guilt— is unique and herein Basu introduces the notion of perception, which not only varies between individual to individual but also at the level of the self, "the experiences and perceptions of a person at a certain point in his life may be altered in the perception of the same person at the time of reporting" (p. 217). Thus, while trying to recover the *memory of Partition* (italicised by Basu), she also tries to understand the self through psycho-analysis, what she refers to as the 'actual self'— "the active agent that enjoys and suffers the flow of events over the entire course of life" (p. 218). While trying to figure out this actual self, Basu essentialises three traits— the self that suffered the event, the self that the narrators think that they possess, the self that emerged in the process of narration. It is the enmeshing of these various selves, sometimes corroborating, sometimes negating, that shapes the identity of an individual at various stages of life, especially the 'self of the partition victims.'

In unravelling the individual self against the backdrop of Partition, Basu also tries to define the collective self— "one beyond individual variation and beyond the additive conglomeration of the individual selves" (p. 219). At the same time, Basu avers that the collective self will not apply to everybody at every moment but is actually a self in process. Thus, just as the self is constantly in a state of flux, so is the collective self. As members of the minority community in East Bengal/East Pakistan, the individual 'self' felt marginalised and excluded, leading to insecurity and loss of identity, resulting in migration. One major reaction to this marginalisation and consequent insecurity, as pointed out by Basu, is the intertwining of the self with the collective, where the feeling of the individual merged with the collective— I became WE, which helped them to cope with the pain and loss. This merger, Basu shows, serves two psychological purposes— one is the silencing of personal pain and the other the strength one derives from confronting the harsh reality together (p. 223).

The emotions remained repressed for long, buried in the inner chambers of their memory, but never forgotten, only to gush forth when prodded by the interviewer. Once they were out of the danger zone having crossed the border, fear gave way to anger— anger at being pawns in the political power-play, anger at being thrust into the throes of uncertainty, anger at being at the receiving end in general. And it is this anger that was channelised in their political choice when they mostly gravitated towards the Communist ideology, shunning the ruling Congress party.

Pivoting on the Partition, Basu, thus explores and brings to the fore the shifting strands of emotions— an essential ingredient of memory-history— that would add new dimensions to Partition historiography in Bengal. A valuable contribution, notwithstanding, the volume does suffer from certain lacunae. Her data set being limited to the *bhadralok* community, who more or less found a decent rhythm of life in West Bengal, after the initial struggle, follows a similar arc. She herself acknowledges this limitation. Had she branched out to include more diverse groups, namely, those still cooped up in the numerous Permanent Liability (P.L.) Camps in sub-human conditions, whose struggle for existence still continues, or for that matter, the Namasudra community who migrated in droves following the carnage of 1950, the volume would have been more enriched. A peep into their mindset, especially those who experienced brutality first-hand, would have added new dimensions. The migrants are not a homogenous category— they are striated along class, caste, gender. This diversity has

somewhat been glossed over in the study. A somewhat dilution of the sample has robbed the study of its uniqueness. The reviewer, in the course of her research, collected numerous oral accounts which portray the diversity of experiences, where the migrants fought amongst themselves for access to resources. There were haves and have-nots amongst them also. These various nuances, have somewhat been glossed over in the current study.

Also, the psyche of one generation often filters down to the next. An inter-generational psycho-analysis would have imbued the research with more distinctness. The author herself is a second-generation migrant, having seen her elderly family members recount their lives in Kumilla and Chandpur— their 'true home' and 'ancestral home' respectively. This book is about "their memories." Although she admits that she is an outsider to their memories, a chapter, or at least an epilogue on how she herself processes the memories of her forefathers, whether these have consciously or sub-consciously impacted her own psyche, would have brought a fitting end to the volume. That she plunged into the memories of the Partition survivors, beginning her study by interviewing her father, bears testimony to the fact that she could not remain an outsider all along. Thus, as Fine opines, those researching/studying an event outside of direct experience "continue to 'remember' an event not lived through… feel obliged to accept the burden of collective memory that has been passed to them and to assume the task of sustaining it" (Ellen Fine, 1988, 187). By trying to 'reconstruct' the Bengal Partition through the lens of psycho-analysis, Jayanti Basu's contribution, not only sustains but becomes a seminal addition in Partition research.