2017 marked the 70th anniversary of India’s Independence and Partition. In August 2017 in Kolkata, a conference to commemorate the event was held, which focused on the experience in Bengal where the aftermath continues to affect life to this day.

Wide range of topics

Other ways the Partition was remembered were through literature and films, oral testimonies of women, and Dalit literature. One of the latest developments in Partition Studies, focussing on the experiences of Dalits, brings in a whole new angle to an already complex arena. As a pioneer in this field, Prof. Bandopadhayay presented some of his latest findings in a Panel on ‘Partition and Dalits’, held together with Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury (Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata) and Dr Sarbani Banerjee (Techno India University, Kolkata). While the two senior scholars focussed on the administrative policies faced by lower caste refugees stationed in various camps in West Bengal (1950 -1951) and the way they contested evictions and refugee rehabilitation policies, Sarbani spoke about Dalit literature. Through two key texts, a memoir and an autobiography, she examined the role of place (such as trains, railway stations, hospitals and prisons) in shaping the Dalit refugees’ consciousness and how their experience differed significantly from that of upper caste refugees. A second elderly scholar, a survivor of Partition, gathered over several decades, were the subject of papers by Dr Aparajita Dasgupta (Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata) and Prof. Subhankaran Dasgupta ( Jadavpur University, Kolkata). Incidentally, Prof. Dasgupta, who was also chair of the panel, Prof. Chandrakanta Bagchi, was one of the first to unearth, way back in the 1980s, the stories of Bengal women’s trauma and triumph during and after the Partition – which significantly contributed to the feminist turn in Partition Studies.

Quite predictably, there was a lot of attention for history, but, as a literary scholar, I especially cherished the papers on literature and films. One of the most engaging presentations in the conference was by Prof. Krishna Sen (Calcutta University), who spoke about Bangla fictional narratives of the Partition from West Bengal (a series of short stories, a trilogy, and two award-winning novels). Drawing on Morin’s terminology of a special kind of remembering and forgetting in Beloved (‘re-membering’ and ‘re-memory’), Sen argued that these Partition narratives either try to re-member a traumatic past in an attempt to adjust to modernity and globalisation in Kolkata or re-create an other/myth: ‘East Bengal’ that is co-erval neither with East Pakistan nor Bangladesh, even though those locations still exist.

Other very interesting papers on film. Prof. Sreemati Mukherjee (Presidency University, Kolkata) spoke on the enduring appeal of Megha Dhaka Tara [The Cloud-capped Star], a Bangla novel of the 60s, and its many adaptations over half a century on celluloid and in theatre. Dr Bhaksar Sanka (Univ. of California, Santa Barbara) engaged with the documentary Chai: The Non-Man’s Island (2012) to speculate on the fissured futures on the Bengal border, where life is lived out in a perpetual liminality.

While most papers were directly related to the Partition and its aftermath, there was a few that, very interestingly, engaged with the subject indirectly. Prof. Nandini Bhattacharjya (Bardhaman University, West Bengal) revisited Rabindranath Tagore’s identity debates, enunciated in several of his writings (both fiction and non-fiction) as illuminating ideologies of sub-continental partisanship. Prof. Ananya Johanan Kabir (University College, London) invited us to rethink the Partition by exploring an intangible dimension, namely the memories of the sights, sounds and smells of home, carried by migrants and from the city of Kolkata. Dr Barnta Bagchi (Utrecht University, the Netherlands) brought together feminist utopian studies and memory studies in her delineation of the solidarities between two key feminist figures that emerged in pre- and post-Partition Bengal: Sufia Kamal and her beloved older friend Bokuya Shakhwat Hassan, who banded together in a desire for the utopian.

All the Panels were followed by vibrant ‘Q&A’ sessions. We were fortunate to have three eminent Chairs: Professor Emavitaa, Supriya Chaudhuri (Jadavpur University, Kolkata), Prof. Molin Biswas (Jadavpur University, Kolkata); and an award-winning filmmaker), and Prof. Bhaskar Chakrabarty (Calcutta University).

Kolkata Partition Museum, media coverage

The conference ended with a roundtable, during which I formally brokered the ideas of a Kolkata Partition Museum. Pointing out the resonance of a similar idea in India, where a partition museum in Amritsar opened in 2016, I argued that museums are the next logical step in Partition Studies, following the digital archiving of oral histories in the last decade. I shared with the audience my vision of such a museum as well as the work I had done so far in its conceptual stage. My museum idea was hotly debated in the open discussion that followed the roundtable. While lauded, its enormous challenges were emphasised. Most present seemed to prefer a digital archive or an archive with a space for exhibitions and public events. This way, the huge budgetary, administrative and logistical requirements of a museum could be bypassed. Not to speak of the political risks, given the sensitive subject-matter. Two of my co-panelists provided some very constructive suggestions for an archive, which I very much found worth pursuing. The museum idea was covered in two local vernacular newspapers (‘Anabandha Pattrika’ (ABP) and ‘Aajkaal’) and on ‘All India Radio’ (AIR), which broadcasted interviews with Prof. Bandopadhay and myself. Reporting about the conference, ABP highlighted the museum proposal, while ‘Aajkaal’ carried a more analytical piece, touching on the other topics covered in the conference.

Conferences are an inevitable part of an academic’s life. But seldom are they as inspiring as this one proved to be to me. I learnt a lot over two days of deliberations and it was rewarding to see an academic event being acknowledged in the media, but the best part for me was the new friendships formed as well as a sense of fresh solidarity with a community of scholars united by their common passion for Partition Studies. It was so much more than I could have hoped for!