Seventy-five years ago, the world witnessed one of the largest migrations in recorded human history: the Partition of India and Pakistan. An estimated 14 million people were uprooted from their homes, driven by violence or the fear of it as the newly independent nations of India and Pakistan were born from the subcontinent’s long struggle for freedom. After 300 years of British economic intervention and, later, political domination, the new nations were formed in August of 1947. India had a majority Hindu population (though it was envisioned to be a secular country), and Pakistan had a Muslim-majority population. The new nation of Pakistan was divided into East and West Pakistan; East Pakistan later to be a secular country), and Pakistan had a Muslim-majority population. The new nation of Pakistan was divided into East and West Pakistan; East Pakistan later fought for its independence and became the nation of Bangladesh in 1971.

In the lead-up to Independence from British colonial rule, which had politicized South Asian religious identities in new ways, vigorous debates were held about whether to divide – or “partition” – into two countries. Splits within the independence movement, represented by the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, prevented a consensus on power-sharing formulas and guarantees for the rights of Muslims in a Hindu-majority India. Ultimately, then-British Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten, enlisted a British judge Cyril Radcliffe to draw the borders of the new countries, though he had never been to the region. The new borders were only announced by the departing British days after Independence and the Indian and Pakistani independence. As tensions were already on the rise, many began migrating prior to the official announcement.

From 1946 to 1948, an estimated 14 million Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs headed in both directions, many forcibly driven out by violent extremist groups on both sides. Unspeaking violence engulfed this large human displacement. An estimated one to two million people were killed, and hundreds of thousands of women were victimized by sexual violence.1

The 1947 Partition was part of an established practice by the British empire of “drawing lines on maps of other countries”2 in order to more effectively “divide and rule”3 or to attempt to solve ethnic and religious tensions that the British had previously fostered, as evidenced in the earlier partitions of Afghanistan (1893), Bengal (1905), and the Ottoman Empire after World War I (1918-1922). Newberry notes that from 1870-1991, “Everywhere in British Africa, partition changed the cultural landscape.”4 The legacies of these partitions are long-lasting, and even today, they certainly continue to impact world politics and possibilities for peace.

The 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan – given the magnitude of displacement and death – certainly deserves greater attention in our education systems and public consciousness globally. The 1947 Partition is rarely included in discussions of world history, and where it is, such as briefly in textbooks in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the United Kingdom, there is a focus on “us and them” and singular narratives. They tend to be silent about the violent outcomes of Partition, as educational scholar Meenakshi Chhabra offers a brief history of the Partition that could be shared with students as well.

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The Slate is devoted to pedagogy and educational praxis, both in and beyond the classroom. This section is meant to be a space for educators and researchers to explore the debates, practices, challenges, and opportunities of 21st-century education. The Slate can take many forms, encompassing everything from personal reflections to practical resources for educators (e.g., syllabi, field exercises, etc.), from critical essays on traditional education to experimental teaching strategies. With this section, we seek perspectives that decolonize conventional curricula and pedagogies. Through socially and civically engaged approaches, the section aims to foster alternative models for education that are grounded in contemporary experience and which strive towards greater accessibility, innovation, and critical engagement.

For the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan, we grapple with understanding contested historical events like the 1947 Partition; it offers important analytical frameworks as we grapple with understanding contested historical events like the 1947 Partition; it also provides a way to develop a “people’s history” of Partition, one that can foster a more expansive collective historical memory, one which transcends the political agendas and projects of nation-states.

Humanizing Partition through children’s literature and curriculum

Whether in schools, libraries, or even the books read at home, the increasing number of Partition-related stories in recent years offer multiple perspectives on this event through the hopes, realities, and experiences of the characters in the texts. The following texts at the primary and secondary levels could introduce readers to stories about the Partition.

At the level of upper primary school, three titles deserve special mention. First is Chabahil’s Cuju’ by Uma Krishnaswami, illustrated by Soumya Sitaraman. This picture book, for which there is also a teacher’s guide; tells the story of an Indian-American boy and his grand-uncle, whose special teacup is the only item that the elder still has from his childhood home. There is also a page at the end of the book that offers a brief history of the Partition that could be shared with students as well.

As an educational scholar, I offer three areas through which we can engage the pedagogies of Partition in our classrooms, communities, and beyond to learn from this painful history: (1) humanizing Partition through children’s literature and curriculum; (2) public pedagogies and counternarratives of Partition; and (3) efforts towards peacebuilding and solidarity. Education – both inside and outside of the classroom – offers important analytical frameworks as we grapple with understanding contested historical events like the 1947 Partition; it offers a way to develop a “people’s history” of Partition, one that can foster a more expansive collective historical memory, one which transcends the political agendas and projects of nation-states.

Monisha Bajaj

Pedagogies of Partition

Collective Memory and Counternarrative 75 Years On

The Night Diary

Fig. 1 (above): A still from the short film “Rest in Paper,” directed by Haseeb Rehman. The Night Diary by Veera Hiranandani (Penguin Random House, 2018).
India to Pakistan during Partition than, later, to the UK.

The 2022 six-part fictional series Ms. Marvel explores the superhero Kamala Khan’s origin story, which centers around her family’s migration from India to Pakistan during Partition. Several episodes include archive and fictional footage that address the fear of being singled out and facing violence, offering a window into this historical period through popular culture. Archives, museums, films, and shows visualize the complex and layered experiences of Partition. Exposure to multiple narratives can be an opening to discuss these events, but caution is required not to fall into the singular narratives of “enemy/victim” and “us versus them” that have been propagated by political leaders in different nation-states.

Efforts towards peace-building and solidarity

Attention to agency and solidarity, as well as counternarratives to dominant sources, can help unpack the tropes of simplistic tropes around Partition that have fueled enduring hate and division across nations. It is essential to highlight stories of solidarity as well as to critically analyze how political leaders have leveraged singular narratives for their own agendas over these past 75-plus years. Shedding light on lesser-known stories of Partition can also further highlight the human and emotional realities of this period. One such effort is a joint, publicly available text produced by the History Project entitled Partitioned Histories: The Other Side of Your Story.

The project, collectively developed by Indian and Pakistani educators and scholars, presents 16 chapters in a nearly 300-page book, each chapter has the Indian and Pakistani narratives of historical events side-by-side, as culled from history textbooks in both nations. The authors of the book note in the introduction when referring to the book’s last chapter, “The Partition of India, with which we conclude, is arguably the most important of these events and it is still the reason for the rift between people on either side of the border, a rift that we hope to interrupt, and engage both by doing history differently.” The placement of conflicting narratives side-by-side offers a chance for the reader to zoom out and question why such narratives have been produced, by whom, and in the service of what agendas.

The organization Project Dastaan is a “peace-building initiative which examines the human impact of global migration through the lens of the largest forced migration in recorded history, the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan.” The organization uses virtual reality (VR), with footage compiled from volunteers, to allow survivors of Partition to visit their childhood homes through VR headsets, as opposed to navigating the turbulent political terrain of securing visas or traveling long distances across hostile borders. With teams from across the South Asian region, the organization also produces videos like “Child of Empire,” a virtual reality “docu-drama experience” of the 1947 Partition.

The organization also recently produced three short animated videos entitled Lost Migrations to shed light on “hidden stories” of Partition, such as the experiences of women, South Asians in Burma, and those who became stateless after 1947.

Brazilian educational scholar Paulo Freire has described “looking at the past must be a means of understanding more clearly what and who [we] are so that [we] can more wisely build the future.” The role of critical inquiry and education as the pursuit of greater freedom requires a nuanced understanding of the many ways in which Partition has been interwoven with colonialism, imperialism, and lingering structures of violence. By exploring pedagogies of Partition in classrooms, communities, and classrooms, we can better understand the dimensions of global conflict and possibilities for peace and justice in our world today.

The previous article by the author on Teaching Partition, that this article shows from, can be found here: https://medium.com/gtm/jyabi/teaching-about-south-asian-partition-0728beda08

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Notes
1. These tests offer further information and historical insights into the Partition.

2. “South Asian diaspora brings 1947 partition to Western pop culture”

3. “Young Indians and Pakistanis Rewrite their Shared History” in NPR.

4. “The Creation of Pakistan and Partition have emerged as hot topics of discussion both in India and Pakistan.”

5. “No Partition till 1971 visible on Pakistani currency notes.”

6. “The previous article by the author on Teaching Partition, that this article shows from, can be found here: https://medium.com/gtm/jyabi/teaching-about-south-asian-partition-0728beda08”


8. https://www.simonandschuster.com/”

9. https://www.youtube.com/“

10. https://www.partitionmuseum.org


15. https://www.nytimes.com/video/music/2022/03/08

16. “Fascinating stories of Partition, such as the experiences of women, South Asians in Burma, and those who became stateless after 1947.”


19. “Young Indians and Pakistanis Rewrite their Shared History” in NPR.


22. “No Partition till 1971 visible on Pakistani currency notes.”

23. “No Partition till 1971 visible on Pakistani currency notes.”


27. “No Partition till 1971 visible on Pakistani currency notes.”


29. “No Partition till 1971 visible on Pakistani currency notes.”

30. “No Partition till 1971 visible on Pakistani currency notes.”