



**MEMORY, EMOTIONAL BELONGING AND IDENTITY
NEGOTIATION AMONG PARTITION-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN
MALDA DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL**

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Abstract

Partition of Bengal in 1947 had profound impacts on the politics, society and culture of eastern India. The impact of Partition of Bengal went beyond migration and territorial partition into issues of remembering one's ancestral home and emotional attachment to place, social identity and belonging of displaced communities and generations thereafter. This research paper investigated the issues of memory, emotional belonging and negotiation of identity amongst Partition-affected communities in Malda district of West Bengal. This paper focused on the role of family narratives, culture, oral memories, photographs and intergenerational discourse in the remembrance and reinterpretation of the Partition experience. The paper also focused on the impact of caste, gender, religion, social position and geographical location on displacement and belonging. A qualitative and interpretive historical approach was followed, based on current literature and future oral history and archival investigations. As was discussed, memory and identity were processes that had been influenced by the experiences of history, family ties, culture, and social adaptation. The article under consideration highlighted the importance of using oral testimonies and archival material at the district level to learn about the experience of communities affected by Partition in Malda. This contribution to the study of Partition focused on the link between memory, attachment, and identity formation through the generations.

Keywords: *Bengal Partition, Memory, Emotional Belonging, Identity Negotiation, Malda, Refugee History, Oral History, Borderland Identity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the important political and social upheavals in the history of South Asia. Partition of British India into two countries, India and Pakistan, led to reorganization of territories, displacement of populations, change in citizenship, and disruption of existing social and cultural links. In Bengal, the impact of Partition has been enduring through migration, resettlement, political instability, and socio-economic transformations. Historiography increasingly turned its attention to the perspective of common people, including refugees, women, marginalized groups, and displaced individuals.

The district of Malda was geographically significant in analyzing the links between Partition, migration, memory, and belongingness. The history of the region of Malda being a part of Bengal makes it significant in analyzing issues related to territory, migration, cross-border relations, and life post Partition. However, the history of the Partition-affected people cannot be captured in one story since families had varied social background, varied experience of migration and varied experience of settlement. The element of memory is essential in preserving the stories related to one's ancestral land, migration journey, separation, settlement, and cultural transition through oral storytelling, pictures, family documentation, rituals, language and food habits. These memories also changed across generations as personal experiences were supplemented by inherited family stories.

In the present study, memory, emotional belongingness, and identity formation were studied through a historical and interpretative approach. Emotional belongingness referred to the connection that an individual maintained with his place, community, culture, and history, whereas identity formation pertained to how an individual perceived himself with respect to his origin, place of current settlement, citizenship status, caste, religion, and locality. The paper took into account the dynamics of memory and identity as influenced by the historical context, family stories, and social connections. However, certain claims regarding Partition-affected communities in Malda had to be verified.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine the role of memory and family narratives in preserving the experiences of Partition, migration, and displacement among affected communities in Malda.
- To analyse the relationship between emotional belonging, ancestral homeland, and present social identity among Partition-affected communities.

- To explore the influence of caste, gender, religion, and social position on experiences of displacement, rehabilitation, and identity negotiation.
- To understand the intergenerational transmission of Partition-related memories through cultural practices, oral narratives, family documents, and historical awareness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Abbas (2016) studied the link between migration and citizenship in India. The study emphasized the role of migration in affecting the sense of belongingness and political recognition of individuals, and their relationship with the State. The study offered an effective framework for studying the process of citizenship negotiations and construction of identities among the displaced populations at their places of destination. The study was pertinent to the current study as Partition-affected populations in Malda faced the same.

Bhattacharya and Mukhopadhyay (2026) based on the relationship that exists over time between forced migration and social capital in the case of the Indian Partition. The research pointed out the significance of social networks, relations within communities, trust, and collective solidarity in building up the displaced community. This research was important in the current study as social capital had an impact on how displaced families formed new relationships. However, the results obtained needed verification from the original source.

Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury (2022) studied the experiences of Dalit refugees during the Partition of Bengal from 1946 to 1961. This study demonstrated the significance of caste, refugee resettlement, political mobilisation, and social stratification in the study of Partition history. This research demonstrated that experiences of refugees are not homogeneous and can be affected by caste and social standing. This research was relevant to the current study as it offered a way of studying the differences caused by caste in displacement, belongingness, and identity construction among the Partition victims in Malda.

Bharadwaj and Mirza (2019) examined the longer-term effects of population transfers in India post-Partition. The paper analyzed the inter-connection between displacement, agricultural development, adoption of technology and economic change. It established that population transfers had a bearing on regional development in the longer term. This study is pertinent to the current study since it offered an entry point to understand how population transfers during Partition had shaped the socio-economic environment within which communities had rebuilt themselves.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND STUDY AREA

The importance of the Bengal Partition in history needs to be understood in light of the broader political trends in late colonial India. Communal politics, competing claims over political representation, debates over borders, and calls for separate political organization were some of the factors that led to the partitioning of Bengal in 1947. Political borders were created in such a way that the connections between land, citizenry, property, and mobility changed.

The analysis of Bengal carried out by Joya Chatterji explains how the process of communal politics and finally the Partition took place in the province (Chatterji, 1994). This research shows how the partition of Bengal was a result of a complicated historical process.

Partition altered the association of communities with their original areas as well. Communities that were previously in contact with each other socially, culturally, economically, and even through kinship networks faced different political situations. The emergence of the India-Pakistan border line impacted the trends of migration, property ownership, settlement, citizenship, and social networking. These trends continued to impact those people who were dislocated from their homes in Bengal.

Malda needs to be studied from this larger historical perspective but also needs to be looked at as a separate district with unique social and geographic characteristics. The historical background of the district must be established through sources like official administrative sources, censuses, district gazetteers, local histories, archives, and oral sources. It is necessary to reconstruct such information in order to understand the exact nature of territorial transformation, migration, settlement, and experiences of people.

It is also essential for the historical study of Malda to keep in mind that the displacement and migration took place not during a particular period alone. Different individuals and families could have moved at different times owing to reasons of political instability, communal strife, economic problems, personal family issues, or other reasons such as border conditions.

Consequently, the post-partition history of the district demands considerations of both historical continuity and social transformation. The establishment of new settlements, land transfers, adjustment of professions, upward social mobility through education, and interplay between uprooted communities and indigenous people may have played a role in identity formation. These trends need to be studied on the basis of facts, not simply presumed to impact all communities in the same way.

It is especially important from the perspective of the historical context to understand the meaning of the term homeland. What was formerly connected with the everyday experiences of the community

and its familiarity could become something different in the wake of the establishment of the international border. It could become synonymous with suffering, division, nostalgia, memory, or even the past itself. The new place of settlement could take on similar qualities.

4. MEMORY, EMOTIONAL BELONGING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF HOMELAND

Memory offers one of the crucial ways of analyzing the impact of Partition on the long run. Historians may study those experiences which were not recorded in any form of official documents. On the other hand, memory cannot be seen as an exact representation of the past. Memory has been influenced by later experiences, family narratives, cultural images, and social conditions.

The connection between memory and homeland is especially relevant for displaced people. The concept of homeland can be associated with a particular village, town, house, area, linguistic community or family relations. Some people can identify homeland through their own experience, while for others homeland may be connected with their cultural memories.

4.1. Memory as a Historical Source

Oral memory has the potential to yield important insights into family history, migratory experience, social interaction, and emotions resulting from displacement. Oral memory could contain information not found in any official documents such as individual interpretation of migration, feelings of uncertainty, and meaning attributed to certain places. It is critical for one to analyze oral testimonies objectively.

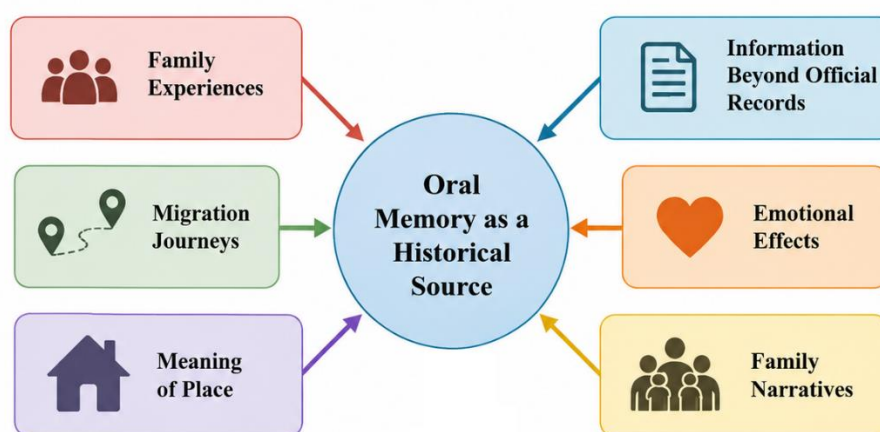


Figure 1: Memory as a Historical Source

However, memories are dynamic, and people tend to reinterpret their past in light of subsequent experience. Oral histories may even consist of personal memory blended with information gained from one's parents, grandparents, relations, and other community members.

Consequently, in addition to determining what people remember, it is necessary for the researcher to investigate the way, time and reasons for which a certain event was recalled. It is important to distinguish individual memories from family narratives and official historical discourse. In Malda, oral history studies could be oriented to such issues as memories of ancestral villages, migration paths, settlement, occupational shifts, and interaction with neighboring communities. Such topics should be investigated via interviews rather than offered as experiences common to all Partition-related families.

4.2. Emotional Belonging and the Ancestral Homeland

Emotional belonging can be defined as the feelings of attachment that one develops towards a certain place, community, relation, and experience. In the case of Partition, emotional belonging would have something to do with one's ancestral village, family home, language, religion, eating habits, festivals, or just regular life experiences. The concept of homeland does not cease to remain emotionally significant despite the fact that one no longer lives in that particular place. In the case of first-generation migrants, the homeland remains emotionally significant due to individual memories and experience while the latter generations get to know about the homeland from stories told by their family members.

Emotional belonging to the homeland of the ancestors does not mean rejecting one's present place of residence. A person can feel attached to one's ancestral village while at the same time being strongly attached to Malda. This proves that emotional belonging is complex and historically determined. Hence, the study of Malda needs to focus on how people relate themselves to their past ancestry and current community. It is also necessary to study how the concept of homeland changes from one generation to another.

4.3. Memory and Everyday Cultural Practices

Memories can be preserved through cultural practices in day-to-day life such as language, food, rituals, songs, family meetings, religious practices, photography, and storytelling. Through such cultural practices, individual experiences can be associated with cultural identities. Family meetings and storytelling could offer chances for the older generation to pass information on migration, origins, and settlement stories. Cultural practices can also act as mechanisms of continuity in the wake of displacement. It must not be assumed that specific cultural practices would continue. While some families retain some specific cultural practices, others modify or abandon them depending on changes

in society, marriage relations, economic factors, mobility, and generation differences. The research to be conducted in Malda would explore the cultural practices that are being remembered or modified and the reasons for such modifications. The study would also find out whether cultural memory acts as a mechanism of historical continuity or adaptation to new social environment.

4.4. Memory, Loss and Historical Continuity

The experiences of loss, separation, uncertainty, and adaptation can be part of the memories related to partition. The experiences of losing one's house or broken family ties can affect one's perception of the past. Nevertheless, memories can also involve survival stories, rebuilding, gaining education, changing careers, and making new social connections.

Thus, an even-handed historical methodology should take into account both aspects of the past experience of Partition affected communities. It should refrain from defining the experiences of partition affected communities only in terms of suffering. People and families might have established new kinds of social and cultural identities through their migration and settlement experiences. Consequently, the analysis of memories of Malda should explore how families relate their stories of displacement with their survival and adaptation stories.

5. IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AMONG PARTITION-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

Identification results from the interplay of history, relationships, culture, politics, and geography. The Partition affected the way in which people related to geography through altering the political boundaries and the notion of citizenship. Identification negotiation means the manner in which people define themselves socially. With regard to Partition, identification negotiation might be seen in the connection between heritage and place of dwelling, between traditional culture and current relationships, and between family history and individual identification.

➤ *Between Ancestral Origins and Present Belonging*

The family affected by partition could maintain links to their ancestral places while at the same time forming new ties to their current setting. Both types of identity could exist side-by-side without necessarily being contradictory.

The family could retain information on their ancestral village as well as engage in the education, work, culture, and social activities of Malda. In the process, the new place of residence could emerge as an essential element of family identity even though the ancestral land retained much significance. The researcher must permit the individual to define his or her own identity rather than impose a pre-

determined one. Questions on origins, family history, culture, citizenship, and current social ties would distinguish individual experiences.

➤ ***Borderland Identity and Citizenship***

A Borderland approach allows to explore the impact of political borders on social interactions, mobility and identity formation. The border between India and Bangladesh is historically meaningful in the sense that it is the dividing line between areas with cultural, linguistic, economic and familial ties.

However, having a border does not mean having identical feelings of insecurity and alienation. People who live in border areas might perceive citizenship, feeling of belonging, and social identity differently according to the legality of their citizenship, family background, economic status, and local contacts.

Thus, historical research on Malda area should consider the distinction between formal citizenship and personal experiences of belonging. The researcher should pay attention to known problems, including migration, administrative control, property relations, regulation of the border, and familial links. The idea of borderland identity should be tested using empirical data about the local population.

➤ ***Social Memory and Identity Formation***

Social memory combines personal recollection with the community interpretation of the past. Communal narrative may be formed based on family histories, cultural events, public ceremonies, literature, religion, and local organizations.

In regard to Bengal Partition, cultural representations have played an important role in preserving memories of displacement, homelessness, migration, and new identity. These representations might shape future generations' understanding of historical experience of their families.

In case of Malda, studying the problem of social memory would imply the study of the way communities keep the memories about Partition and affect the current perception of identity. Also, the researcher should study the differences between community members since communal memory is not always homogeneous.

➤ ***Identity and Social Adaptation***

Identity negotiation might entail adapting to new social and economic environments. Migration can result in changes in terms of occupation, language, education, neighbourhoods and social contacts. Such changes may have a bearing on how people construct their identities in terms of their culture and society.

Adaptation need not entail completely discarding one's earlier identities. On the contrary, it may be a case of combining inherited cultural traits with local associations. Such a combination might result in a hybrid form of identity that is a mixture of both continuity and change. Research among those affected by the Partition in Malda should focus on such processes using individual and familial histories. It should reveal how people see the link between inherited and current social identity.

6. CASTE, GENDER, RELIGION AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF MEMORY

Historical experience during the time of Partition was informed by factors such as caste, gender, religion, class, occupation, and social status. Hence, the Partition communities were not socially homogenous in their experience of Partition. Access to land, education, employment, networks, and rehabilitation was different for individuals and influenced their experience of displacement. In addition, the survival of memory depended on whose experience got recorded.

1) Caste and Unequal Historical Experiences

Caste was an important variable within the analysis of displacement and rehabilitation. Social status affected access to opportunities for settlement, work, education, politics, and other resources. History of Partition would have to incorporate the stories of various castes and their problems related to social marginality, rebuilding livelihoods, and rehabilitation.

Studies of refugee groups offered an understanding of the connections between refugee populations, governmental bodies, and nation-building processes. Nonetheless, the experiences of various caste groups in Malda needed to be studied using locally gathered materials. Oral testimony, archival documents, and historical materials might help to explore the differences without assuming similar experiences of all marginalized communities.

2) Gender and the Experience of Displacement

Gender affected the social and emotional experience of Partition. Migration, separation of families, economic uncertainties, and social changes affected the women and men in different ways. The role of women in survival of the household, decision of migration, means of livelihood, and preserving culture demanded special considerations.

An analysis sensitive to the issue of gender was concerned with whether the experiences of women had been documented in the official history or only in the family histories. The experiences varied based on caste, religion, social class, age, marital status, education, and family background. In Malda, oral

history interviews with women and men could be useful for analyzing variations in migration, settlement, and culture.

3) Religion and Community Identity

Religion was a key aspect of the political environment of Partition and affected issues of community identity and belonging. Religion, however, was not the only determining factor for individual experience. Regional affiliation, caste, class, occupation, gender, family links, and access to resources were also factors in shaping the experiences of displaced communities.

A study of Malda had to take into account the interplay of religion and other aspects of social identity. Oral accounts and local archives would be useful in separating out political constructions of religious communities from individual experience following Partition.

4) Intergenerational Transmission of Memory

Intergenerational transmission was defined by the transmission of historical memories across generations. First-generation migrants retained their memories through personal recollections, and younger generations got their knowledge about Partition from family recollections, pictures, cultural practices, education, and community discourses.

Memory transmission was not always perfect. There were some memories that were constantly being spoken of and others that were not being talked about due to trauma, societal influence, or changes in life circumstances. The study of intergenerational memory in Malda may include the following aspects:

Table 1: Historical Questions Related to Memory, Belonging and Identity

Dimension	Historical Questions
Family narratives	What accounts of migration and displacement are preserved within families?
Ancestral homeland	How do descendants understand the places from which their families migrated?
Language and culture	Which cultural practices are maintained across generations?
Historical awareness	How do younger generations learn about Partition?
Present identity	How are ancestral origins connected with present social belonging?
Family documents	What information is preserved through photographs, letters, property papers, and memoirs?

These categories represent proposed areas of inquiry and should not be interpreted as findings from a completed survey of Malda.

5) Memory, Silence and Historical Representation

All historical experiences were not equally represented in public discourse. There were experiences that had been left out by families due to reasons such as trauma, shame, politics, social pressures, or the lack of written record. Thus, the lack of written record was not necessarily an indication of a lack of historical experience.

Oral history helped in uncovering experiences that had not been sufficiently documented. Oral history however had to be analyzed together with other historical records. This study thus involved the analysis of both historical experiences and silences, especially those involving the narration of experiences and those involving the exclusion of certain experiences from historical narratives.

7. CONCLUSION

The paper investigated the relevance of the 1947 Bengal Partition to history through the lenses of the concepts of memory, belonging, and identity among Partition communities in Malda district. It has been argued that the impacts of Partition were not limited to territorial division and movement but affected relationships with homeland, culture, family history, and current social identity as well. In turn, the concept of memory turned out to be the dynamic phenomenon captured in oral accounts, photos, culture, and intergenerational exchange of knowledge. In addition, it has been demonstrated that experiences of different communities were affected by factors such as castes, gender, religion, social status, and resources available. It is important to emphasize that the study took into account the relevance of investigating both remembered experiences and silences in history, at the same time avoiding generalization about all affected families. While existing studies contributed greatly to the theoretical and historical framework, further research of Malda was needed through oral testimonies, archives, family records, and district history sources. Such research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Partition-related memories continued to influence emotional belonging, cultural continuity, and identity formation across generations.

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