

Aparna Kumar, Review of Anindya Raychaudhuri, *Narrating South Asian Partition: Oral History, Literature, Cinema*, in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 80.4 (Nov. 2021), p. 1114-1115.

***Narrating South Asian Partition: Oral History, Literature, Cinema.* By ANINDYA RAYCHAUDHURI. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. ix, 223 pp. ISBN: 9780190249748 (hardcover).**

Anindya Raychaudhuri's book, *Narrating South Asian Partition: Oral History, Literature, Cinema* begins on a personal note, with the testimony of a Bengali woman named Sipra, who the author later reveals to be his mother. This testimony unfolds the moment when Sipra introduces her son to the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent, a subject that arises from a curiosity about their family's origins. Sipra recounts how she condensed the partition's convolutions and pain for her young son, harnessing a myriad of imagery to ease his initial confrontation with "the uncertainty of the migrant" (p. 2). Partition, unsurprisingly, takes a number of dissonant, yet familiar forms throughout her testimony: the loss of home, the division of a country, the creation of two new countries, the separation of religious communities, the fear of non-belonging.

The anecdote marks a poignant beginning for a book situated at the juncture of oral history and cultural representation, seeking "not to uncover any kind of objective truth" about 1947 (p. 5), but rather to understand how narratives of the partition persist across time, how they are "remembered, reinterpreted, and reconstructed" (p. 8), how they "inhabit the present" and "are put to work" (p. 5). It unfolds the very spine of Raychaudhuri's study: the

“complexity of the ways in which partition is remembered, talked about, narrated, or, indeed, not talked about or forgotten” (p. 2). It also in a way marks the dislocated beginnings of the author’s own partition story, what becomes a recurring point of entry into the larger stakes of the project. That is, the book’s broader meditations on the modalities of history writing that become visible, or are made possible at the intersections of memory, biography, culture, narration, and intermediality.

Raychaudhuri’s book, in one sense then, cannot be divorced from the larger oral history turn in partition historiography, that which in the last three decades has destabilized the exultant statist narratives of the period, by exposing the deep-seeded elisions between public representation and private memory of the division process. Foregrounding marginalized voices, this shift in historical narration has revealed the everyday hardships, the personal and communal displacements, the horrific forms of violence that punctuated this transformation of territory and community.

In equal measure, Raychaudhuri’s book represents a significant departure from this critical body of work. For one, his approach to oral history can be distinguished for its commitment to cross-border frameworks and with it his adamant rejection of partition “as being single sited” (p. 4). Embracing a broader geographic scope, his study consciously entwines voices from the partitions of both Punjab and Bengal,

in a manner that powerfully recasts any segregation of these archives elsewhere as “artificial and anachronistic” (p. 4). Raychaudhuri’s book also challenges the disciplinary isolation of “oral history” within partition historiography. He opens his archive of 165 interviews, sourced from India, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, to other kinds of cultural texts, namely literature and film. This interdisciplinary nexus has immediate implications for the very language Raychaudhuri activates when describing the partition. “The memorial legacy of partition,” he asserts, “is one of trauma, pain, and shared suffering, but it is also always *productive*” (p. 2). This emphasis on productivity, which here refers to the partition’s internal compulsion to “produce narratives” (p. 2), resonates with curatorial projects like Iftikhar Dadi and Hammad Nasar’s *Lines of Control* (2012),¹ and literary scholar Aamir Mufti’s call to inhabit “partition as method.”² Raychaudhuri’s book, in this vein, is galvanizing partition as “problem-space,” as much as it is recognizing it as an unfinished historical process, a distinction that is both timely and generative.

Importantly, Raychaudhuri’s integration of oral history and cultural representation is not just an exercise in comparison, though an interest in how these kinds of texts

¹ Iftikhar Dadi and Hammad Nasar, eds. *Lines of Control* (London: Green Cardamom, 2012).

² Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2016), 200-201.

differ certainly animates his method. He brings the two together, rather, to raise questions around agency in history writing. His concern, in this regard, surrounds the way that marginalized voices have typically entered into partition history, as victims of pain, trauma, and loss. Without denying the enormous tragedy of the partition, Raychaudhuri problematizes this prevailing narrative of victimhood, to recover the forms of control his participants exert over their memories, identities, and communities. For Raychaudhuri, agency is “always also narrative” (p. 10), an assertion that facilitates his entanglement of oral testimonies and cultural texts.

Raychaudhuri’s analysis is organized into seven chapters, with each focusing on a narrative trope central to partition discourse, many of which feature in Sipra’s opening testimony: the lost home, the separated family, the child’s perspective, the death train, the riverscape, to name a few. While each chapter elucidates nuanced insights on the individual lives of these tropes, together they emphasize their multivalence across historical and cultural texts and elaborate how they are employed by authors, artists, everyday people to exercise agency over partition history. I found Raychaudhuri’s analysis of the death train, in particular, to be quite revealing. In addition to re-evaluating the train’s status as icon of the nation-state in South Asia, Raychaudhuri demonstrates how the

“trainspace” came to stand for a number of “contradictory emotional significances” (p. 126). In his analysis, the train moves between symbolizing salvation and destruction, danger and liberation, terror and relief, the promise and impossibility of cross-border movement, the nation and the nation at its limits.

Overall, Raychaudhuri’s book is an important read for scholars of modern South Asia and partition history—for the archive of partition stories it builds, for the methodological shifts it makes imperative, and for its call to think deeply about our craft as historians and the narrative agency embedded in our choice of words.

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