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Artworks as Testimony: Reflections from the Indian sub-continent

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Introduction

Experiences of intense and emotionally charged events - encompassing emotions of loss, grief, turmoil and anguish - are often imprinted in local artworks (see Figure 1). Selected by curators and historians, these tangible artistic expressions gradually end up in museums and galleries where they are subject to aesthetic appraisals from visitors and passers-by. In this blog post, the authors unsettle this aesthetic stance with the help of *lesser* discussed artworks from the Indian sub-continent - artworks that were produced in the midst of the Indian political partition, as people were compelled to traverse across borders.



*Figure 1: A painting collection from the **Asylum and Migration Project** on display during the **MSF South Asia Health and Humanity Summit** at New Delhi. (Source: First Author's personal picture. New Delhi, India).*

Partition and Independence - Twin Tales of Loss and Triumph

The newly formed Indian nation-state, after a long struggle for self-governance from the British Crown, posed a unique challenge for the Indian political elites. The challenge was to create a new national 'Indian' identity despite disparate ethnic and religious groups. In other words, a common denominator that could bind all Indians together in the service of enhancing the legitimacy of the newly formed nation-state. As a result, socio-political narratives and discourses - with a heightened focus on the brave and sacrificial nature of the anti-colonial struggle - gradually gained momentum. Several memorials, symbolising the ultimate

triumph, also came into being to honour the heroic bravery of all freedom fighters.

While the elites rejoiced in freedom and triumph publicly, the ordinary people - for whom independence was sought - struggled to survive. Approximately, **14 million people uprooted themselves** during the lead-up to independence in 1947. **Their stories of loss, despair, fear and pain** slipped through the crevices of grand nation-building endeavours - as they moved across the newly-etched India-Pakistan border.

Forgotten Memories of the Indian Partition

The 1990s registered a gradual emergence of memories of Partition (or *Batwara*) in India - a surge of repressed or forgotten memories from the increasing popularity of survivors' oral histories, **recorded by feminist scholars**. In the wake of this revival, artworks created by migrants and refugees - who observed and experienced the horrors of partition within the refugee camps and beyond, came to light as well. Since their discovery, they have helped to break the silence of official Indian histories and re-script tales of trauma, solitude, desperation and loss.

Line drawings and sketches created by **Sardari Lal Parasher** - who at the time of the Partition served as a camp commandant of a refugee transit camp in Ambala (North India) - are a set of one such discoveries. Parasher's artistic productions on paper scraps bear witness, in the absence of official documents, to the incomprehensible horror experienced by people - the horror that Parasher experienced and documented. **His drawings depict** women huddled together, intense painful emotions through bodily postures and facial expressions, people in transit and their salvaged belongings on bullock carts, screams and cries.

Other artistic expressions also provide testimony to the horrors of partition and the ensuing communal violence and massacres. The famous Indian sculptor, poet and painter, **Amar Nath Sehgal** - who witnessed human suffering and violent conflicts very closely, as he attempted to cross the border - created several paintings and sculptures with screaming heads and shrieking mouths. An example includes the '**Anguished Cries**' that portrays the pain of victims of violence and their plea for help.



Artworks as Testimony

Sweeping through the artworks described, thus far, the authors ask if people can expect to discover new facts about the past - facts that do not appear as parts of officially-written histories? **Artists** would argue that discovered artworks could help us acquire a deeper understanding of events that we have not seen or experienced directly. In that sense, artworks could help us build inroads to a different kind of memory that exists below the weight of officially-dominant

narratives. As such, we - in the present - can engage with new forms of testimony by considering artworks as a source of information.

What kind of testimony do the artworks provide, then? The few examples, illustrated here, entail that (visual) **artworks help provide testimony** of the experiences of the creator, the sculptor, and the painter. Critics could be uncomfortable with this position because they would underscore that artworks are often infused with emotions of the creator and could be - for the most part - imagined. However, **feminist scholars** and **philosophers** actually place emphasis on both the emotions and **experiences of creators** - materialised with artworks - as a means of documenting people's histories. Philosophers would further add that artworks actually have a **reference to something 'real'**, that may have been a part of artists' experiential repertoire.

A second generation survivor of a Partition migrant (pictured, here in Figure 2) shares her thoughts on the relation between artworks and acts of violence associated with 'the border'.



*Figure 2: Mrs. Aneeta Khetrapal, mother of the first author, shares her **khes** (textile artwork) story. This khes was woven by her mother and was brought to India as a part of limited belongings that her parents could carry during the Partition. (Source: First Author's personal picture. Prayagraj, India).*

“To me, what my parents and grandparents faced was the result of shaping hegemonic border control that unleashed the violent instinct in people. They harmed each other but women and children suffered the most intense forms of brutality. However, they were also silenced by their own families to preserve the dignity of the clan. We have borne this

brunt silently for ages. I hope that the silenced pain and struggles that our artworks embody provide testimony to what has never received fair judicial attention. While they [politicians] worked to impart a hegemonic face to their borders and revelled in their new-found political freedom from the Crown, our artworks served to provide a more humane demeanour to our experiences, as we lost our words to describe our pain and loss.”

Translated from Hindi with permission.

Conclusion

Artworks have a different way of presenting transpired events and these can help us draw new interpretations of the facts that we know - already. In the case of the Indian Partition, we can expect to deepen our understanding about the pain and the worldviews of both the refugees and bystanders - knowledge (and facts) that the grand narratives of triumph fail to provide. These artworks may merit a new label, e.g. ‘border arts’. In the future, researchers and artists - alike - may become interested in exploring how border arts could be used for attesting to acts of violence that unfold at the border or further away from it.

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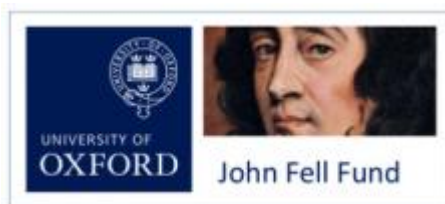


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