



INHERITED MEMORIES

Third Generation Perspectives on Partition in the East

INTRODUCTION BY FIRDOUS AZIM



Excerpt from Inherited Memories

Introduction

By Firdous Azim

This story of divided lands and homes, of movements across newly-drawn boundaries, harrowing as it is, can be set in a linear fashion when it pertains to the border on the western side of India. The story of Partition becomes slightly more complex when we turn to the eastern border, and look at the drawing of lines between the two Bengals and the movement of peoples across this dividing line. The two divisions are beautifully portrayed in another novel on Partition, Intizar Hossain's *Basti* (1980), which portrays the protagonist Zakir's, world splintering into three parts, as Partition results not only in the loss of the original homeland, but also in divided family migrations, as friends and relations move to the two parts of Pakistan. And as Pakistan is dismembered, this added fragmentation

intensifies the sense of loss. Basti begins with the original migration, from India to the two wings of Pakistan and, tracing national events and family experiences to the 1971 War, it shows a family divided and separated across three countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. ...

Stories, memory and recall are not easily compartmentalized. The first- person narratives that follow are framed like stories themselves: how a whiff of a certain aroma recalls the grandmother's journey from the original homeland, or how a traveller's tales of contemporary Dhaka draws a person back to the stories heard about East Bengal. Ways of memorialization are also commented on, as the following interviews will reveal.

The plethora of Partition narratives based on first-person interviews that appeared in the 1990s were mainly based on the western side of the border. This is because the eastern side had gone through another nation- making process, and another exodus of people in 1971, and the national narrative was more concerned about the 25 years of independence than the 50 years of partition. Gathering first-person narratives from Bangladesh and West Bengal has not been as preponderant. The following interviews, carried out by the Inherited Memories project, are extremely valuable in this regard. The story they weave is complex, with many strands, where differences pertain not only to religion, but also to ethnicity and language. The story of migration is long-drawn: if there is no dramatic exodus as the iconic pictures of the train journeys illustrate, there is a slow leeching, as borders remain porous and people continue to grapple with issues of formal citizenship and emotional belonging. The Inherited Memories project has indeed provided us with a valuable document.

Book Blurb

In 2015 the Goethe-Instituts in Kolkata (India) and Dhaka (Bangladesh) began a collaborative project entitled 'Inherited Memories'. The project began with a key question that grew out of discussions on memory and history: was there such a thing as a 'culture of remembrance' in India, something akin to the Erinnerungskultur in Germany? The question was asked specifically in relation to the Partition of India in 1947: why was it that such a major historical event found little reflection in public memory? Soon, other questions came up: why was it, for example, that whatever memorialising existed was largely in the West, in Punjab, and the Bengal region, which had lived through two partitions and a war that could be likened to a third partition, was given such little attention? At the time these discussions began, many, perhaps most, of the survivors of the 1947 Partition were no longer alive and their memories therefore lost to us. It is often said that memory jumps a generation, so a decision was taken to talk across borders with the children and grandchildren of Partition refugees in the Bengal region, to look at how memory is passed down, what is retained or lost, and how it is owned and shared by subsequent generations.

This book, which comprises interviews from both Bangladesh and West Bengal, is the result of these discussions. Guided by a committed and engaged group of writers from both countries, the book explores, through the stories of ancestors, the memories people carried with them, the things they never forgot, the yearning that did not go away, the journeys that remained unfinished and those that were completed. Through these, it examines how history simultaneously looks similar and different from either side.