

Population Exchange and Identity Formation: The Case of Post-Partition India

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SOMDEEP SEN, AUG 2 2010

An analysis of human history would demonstrate the pivotal role that migration and population movement has played in determining the very character of human society today. While this may seem a natural process, its ability to impact the social, political and economic dynamics of both, the sender and host-country and critical concepts like 'citizenship', 'identity' and 'belonging' has compelled many, especially in the West to adopt legislation restricting the process. This pull-push between the forces 'for' and 'against' migration is what has defined academic discourse on the subject. But, while this niche of academia remains critical to the discourse, it is a subset of the 'migration' discourse and its impact that is often overlooked, namely 'population exchange'. While discussion on the subject often focuses on the conditions that lead to 'population exchange' and the migrants as 'victims' it is its immense ability to be 'operationalized' for the establishment and embedment of identities, that is critical.

The close association of 'population exchange' and identity formation has been particularly evident in the case of India. Its independence and partition[1] created two states and peoples, thus redefining the concepts of 'us' and 'them' in the region. While this pivotal event, having ensued more than six decades ago, continues to determine the dynamics of inter-state relations in the subcontinent, it is their ability to impact national identities within the country in the 21st century that remains particularly compelling. Focusing the case of India, this study questions the role 'population exchange' (partition) continues play in the process of identity formation (assuming it to be perennial in nature) in the country in the 21st century. Before exploring this key question, this study will clearly articulate the key concepts that are central to this study. Following this the central question will be critiqued through the prism of two key events in India's history following its independence, namely, partition (1947) and the Gujarat 'riots'[2] (2002).

Key Concepts:

Population Exchange can be literally seen as a 'transfer' of population between two regions, states or territorial entities based on international agreement or mutually agreed (on by two states) international law. While this understanding of 'population movement' provides for a broad framework for operationalizing this concept in academic research, it critical to realize that this *brand* of 'population movement' is often representative of a particular political project. Such a 'project' usually represents the reification of a state or region's identity and a process of cleansing, not only of a people, but the culture that they personify.

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The concept of *national identity* cannot be disconnected from the notion of 'nation'. Anderson defines the 'nation' as an "...imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." [3] According to him, as a construct a 'nation' is classified as "*imagined*" because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." [4] Similar to 'population exchange', the 'nation' is also representative of a political project that creates and sustains the horizontal social networks that lie at the core of the 'nation'. With this understanding the 'nation', 'national identity' can be conceptualized as the identity drawn from the political project that creates a 'nation'.

National Identity Formation can be defined as the process of creating national identities. In this study it is classified as a continuous progress that changes in trajectory and character based on the transforming political, economic and social norms of a society.

Partition of India:

The TIME Magazine cover story for October 27, 1947, titled "India-Pakistan: The Trial of Kali" describing the brutal partition of India noted,

On a bed of stretched thongs in an open courtyard in Lahore, half naked, her head wrung steeply back, her legs rigid in a convulsion of birth, a woman lay dead. Under the law of the English, whose writ ran for a third of mankind, it was fixed that whenever a person, however humble, died of violence or even unexpectedly, public inquiry was made into the causes of his death. If guilt seemed to fall upon another, a trial was held and punishment sought lest murder, undetected or held lightly, spread. In India and Pakistan since mid-August at least 100,000 have died, not of germs or hunger or what the law calls "acts of God," but of brutal slaughter. Scarcely one died in fair combat or with the consolations of military morale. [5]

While some may categorize such an account as providing a Euro-centric and barbaric portrayal of the *oriental*, the sheer magnitude and inhuman character of the partition and the subsequent population exchange cannot be denied. The Indian Independence Act of 1947, which was adopted by the Parliament of the United Kingdom, asserted its sole objective being "...the setting up in India of two independent Dominions..." [6] It further states "...[a]s from the fifteenth day of August, nineteen hundred and forty-seven, two independent Dominions shall be set up in India, to be known respectively as India and Pakistan." [7] The Act went on to allocate territories and systematically divide territories such as Punjab and Bengal. The All-India Congress Committee (the primary political vehicle behind the independence movement) approved the partition with a resolution but included the following declaration,

Geography and the mountains and the sea fashioned India as she is, and no human agency can change that shape or come in the way of her final destiny...The picture of India we have learned to cherish will remain in our minds and hearts. The AICC earnestly trusts that when the present passions have subsided, India's problems will be viewed in their proper perspective and the false doctrine of two nations in India will be discredited and discarded by all. [8]

On 14, August 1947 (the eve of India's independence), Acharya Kripalani, President of Congress, issued a statement "...saying it was a day of sorrow and destruction for India." [9] Mansergh in "Partition of India in Retrospect" noted

Kripalani was a man of Sind. But he was also the President of the Congress. His emotional reaction to partition was widely shared. It precluded neither acquiescence in the existence of Pakistan nor peaceful co-existence with her. But it rested upon considerations and derived from assumptions about partition and its meaning which neither were, nor in the nature of things could be, shared on the other side of the border. [10]

The perpetual disagreement over the partition, further manifested in its religiously divisive character [11] when Hindus

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and Muslims from each new dominion migrated across the newly drawn borders of India and Pakistan. With an estimated exchange of 14.5 million people, it was termed as the “...largest mass migration in history.”[12] The death toll, owing to riots and massacres, especially of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, was estimated to be up to one million.

While the sheer magnitude of the population exchange that followed partition is indicative of its immediate societal impact, some of its influence could also be seen as having transgressed generations.[13] Vanita Sharma, exploring the “...transmission of partition memories within the family”[14] noted that some in the first generation of partition refugees found the events too traumatic to pass on to their children. Therefore for these people “...forgetting the Partition was much more important than remembering.”[15] Among families in which partition was spoken about “...the extent to which the first generation spoke about their memories with their children varied considerably, which meant that the second generation...had different levels of knowledge about their family’s experiences.”[16] Tallying her conversation with the second generation, Sharma noted “[a]s children, they recalled how these stories of bravery, courage, horror and danger held great fascination for them. As adults the second generation interviewees had often reassessed their feelings about these stories and were more divided over the contemporary relevance of the stories, both for themselves personally and for society in general.”[17] It is this assumed relevance of such an event long after its occurrence that makes exploration of critical importance. The author claims that “[r]esearch on post-memory is important because it demonstrates how historical events, such as Partition, can continue to influence the identity and perceptions of subsequent generations, and it shows how historical memory, whilst being preserved through intergenerational transmission, can also change through this process.”[18] Kaur in “Distinctive Citizenship”, asserting the cross-generation impact of the Partition, claims that “[t]he process of Partition becomes particularly palpable when narrated through the lives of ordinary people who experienced violence and homelessness in the course of the boundary making between the two states.”[19] While the author’s focus remains the ‘refugee experience’, she alludes the critical impact the memory of suffering could impact individual identity and post-event national historical narrative.

While academic discourse on the impact of partition and the population exchange it ensued often focuses on the ‘human cost’ of the events in 1947, Mansergh claims that the long-lasting impact of partition is rooted in its very conceptualization. He claims “[i]n the view of Britain and Pakistan there were two successor states to the British Raj: in the predominant Indian view there was rather a successor state and a seceding state.”[20] The distinction between these two concepts remains critical to eventual understanding of the historic event. According to the author,

[i]f there were two successor states then each was equally entitled to division of resources and authority within the prescribed terms of reference. If, however, there was one successor state from which territories were carved to form a seceding state, then the presumption was that resources and authority descended to the successor state, except insofar as they were specifically allocated to the seceding state.[21]

Psychologically this meant that at the very creation of India, it was seen as being robbed of its territorial sanctity by a somewhat illegitimate national construct. The indivisibility of India and ‘illegal’ and ‘temporary’ carving of it (through partition) was clear evident in the resolution of the AICC that accepted partition. Such a conceptualization was therefore critical to the foreign policy of the country, especially in relation to its Pakistani neighbor. But since it was a viewpoint that is rooted in the very creation of state (post-1947), the national identity of the population (especially the Hindus) can be seen as being drawn from it as well. With the Muslim League, the representative body for Muslims in pre-Partition India, as the primary proponent of the partition, their successors in India, namely the 138 million Muslims (2001 Census) could face a level of suspicion as betrayers of the sanctity of India.

The potential of the partition of having a long-lasting impact on identity formation in India, could then be seen as apparent in India. The experience, memory, suffering and conceptualization of the event itself were critical to the process. Moreover, these elements were rooted in the very meaning and understanding of India following partition. Therefore, national identities that draw from such a territorial construct are bound to hold similar understandings of ‘us’ and the ‘other’. But, this correlation, while may be apparent among the first and second generation after partition, cannot be automatically assumed as being relevant in the 21st century. The six decades of political, social, economic and cultural transformations that the country has seen following independence therefore warrants a separate analysis

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of the possible role of partition and population exchange in identity formation today, with the Gujarat riots being ideal for the purpose.

Gujarat Riots 2002:

More than five decades after independence, India's secular trajectory seemed to be at its end. *Time Asia's* Anthony Spaeth wrote,

When Afsana, an 18-year-old Muslim living on the outskirts of the Gujarati capital of Ahmadabad, heard last Wednesday that a Muslim mob had torched a train, the Sabarmati Express, at Godhra, she was appalled – and very, very frightened. She knew that revenge would be nigh. Her neighborhood, Naroda, is largely Hindu. On the day after the Godhra killings, local Hindu leaders gathered a crowd of 2,000 residents and gave them simple instructions: Muslims had to be destroyed.[22]

The massacres began on February 27 and within a period of 6 weeks it took the lives of approximately 2,000 people, a majority of whom were Muslims. The killings were compounded by claims of gang rape. Along with the human cost, some observers noted that there was an attempt to desecrate the very essence of Islamic culture in the region. *The Guardian* reported, “two hundred and thirty unique Islamic monuments, including an exquisite 400-year-old mosque, were destroyed or vandalized...”[23] Teesta Setalvad of Sapara claimed, “This has been a systematic attempt to wipe out an entire culture.”[24] The desecrated and destroyed Islamic monuments included “...the tomb of Vali Gujarati, the grandfather of Urdu poetry and inspiration of many later poets and singers, who died in Ahmadabad...in 1707.”[25] The extent of the damage, while difficult to quantify is said to rival “...the better publicized destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan or wrecking of Tibet monasteries by the Red Guards.”[26]

Human Rights Watch's 2002 report “We Have No Orders to Save You” demonstrated that massacres were not an occurrence out of vacuum. It noted, “The violence in Gujarat began after a Muslim mob in the town of Godhra attacked and set to two carriages of a train carrying Hindu activists.”[27] The activists were said to be returning from Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, “...where they supported a campaign led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council, VHP) to construct a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of a sixteenth century mosque destroyed by Hindu militants in 1992.”[28]

The reaction of government institutions was particularly criticized. *Human Rights Watch* (HRW) claimed that while the “...Gujarat government chose to characterize the violence as a ‘spontaneous reaction’ to the incidents in Godhra, ... Human Rights Watch’s findings, and those of numerous Indian human rights and civil liberties organizations and most of the Indian press indicate that the attacks on Muslims throughout the state were planned, well in advance of the Godhra incident, and organized with extensive police participation and in close cooperation with officials of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party, BJP) state government.”[29] The HRW report further claims,

The groups most directly responsible for violence against Muslims in Gujarat include the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, the ruling BJP, and the umbrella organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps, RSS), all of whom collectively form the *sang parivar* (or “family” of Hindu nationalist groups). These organizations, although different in many respects, have all promoted the argument that because Hindus constitute the majority of Indians, India should be a Hindu state.[30]

With a reportedly implicit role of political entities in the Gujarat massacres, this ‘killing campaign’ was the manifestation of the Hindu-Muslim divisions that remain within the country. With the events being less than a decade ago, it would be impossible to analyze them through the same elements of memory and identity (as in the case of Partition). But the massacres, many would claim, was part of a broader Hindu nationalist campaign based on a

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particular vision and aspiration of India being a Hindu state.

The rhetoric of the far-right claims the Muslims of India to be “...a challenge and menace to the overwhelming majority of ‘Hindus’ constituting more than 80 per cent of the population.”[31] Led by the *Sangh Parivar* the Hindu-nationalist agenda is rooted in concept of *Hindutva*, which is “...based on a combination of received tradition and active refashioning of this tradition.” Moreover while addressing the issue of “...Indian tradition, these Hindu communal ideologues [incorporate] it in a truncation manner, stressing the inimical traits of Hindu religious myth and imagery while completely ignoring both the Lokayat beliefs in Indian philosophical heritage and other religious streams like Buddhism, Islam and Christianity in the Indian tradition.”[32] *Hindutva* ideologues “...invoked providence and rummage through history and mythology, to be able to pose as the heirs and continuers of all that was exalted and heroic in the past.”[33] This therefore is seen as entitling “Hindus...to exercise authority, precedence and domination over others.”[34] The Indian nationality, moreover, is seen as accessible to anyone “...even a Muslim – provided he or she accepts *Rama*[35] as omnipotent and denounces *Babur*[36] and his descendants as foreigners.”[37] In addition, “[m]ythological characters like Rama and Krishna are being counterposed as indigenous Indian heroes against historical figures like Christ and Muhammad whose followers in India are made to suffer from being identified with ‘foreign’ religious sources. Hindus are therefore inherently more patriotic as Indians than Christians and Muslims.”[38]

What we have thus seen here is that Gujarat massacres were rooted in a radical nationalist ideology that pursued a particular vision and understanding of the state of India. Muslims were seen as deserving a relegated position in society, justified historical and cultural arguments that saw the Hindus rightful in occupying a superior status in the country. But, can the massacres, having occurred in the 21st century, have a correlation, 56 years later with the Partition of India of 1947?

The Trajectory: From 1947 till 2002

Establishing a trajectory between the partition and the massacres of 2002 is an attempt to ascertain a constant societal feature that has somewhat remained unvarying for almost six decades. It assumes that while Indian society has continued to transform itself since independence, some central orientating factor have remained somewhat perennial to the process. But, discerning the trajectory between India’s partition and the Gujarat massacres is not entirely implausible. Spaeth asserted “[t]he quilt of the 20th century was a patchwork of bloodstains, one of the largest spreading from the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, when the departing British ordered Hindus to live in certain areas and Muslims in others.”[39] As the massacres followed the author reminisced, “[t]he most indelible memory of that tragedy is of railway carriages, filled and mutilated corpses, coming across the border from India or from the newly created Pakistan – Hindus on some trains, Muslims on others.”[40] But as the brutality of the partition seemed to be of the past, Spaeth, analyzing the Gujarat massacres, claimed “...almost 56 years later, it happened again.”[41] Moreover, the Hindu mob’s “...blood lust was fanned by exactly the kind of rumors that fueled the slaughters in 1947: Muslims had abducted teenage girls, or slaughtered cows, which are worshipped by Hindus.”[42] While police claimed to have been rendered powerless, Spaeth asserted, “...if history is a guide, many probably stood back approvingly.”[43]

The direct correlation established by Spaeth between the partition and the Gujarat massacres of 2002 can be therefore seen as based on reminiscent symbols that allow for an often-poetic trajectory that aligns the bloody ethnic tensions that have been a key feature of India’s independence. This is not entirely inaccurate, religious riots have been prevalent all through the country history, including the 1969 and 1985 riots in Gujarat. The points of contention between the two communities are generally framed around “Hindus...[being] encouraged to believe that Muslims are taking them for a ride in their own land.”[44] In this view then, the very sense of ownership that radical Hindus hold over the country, could be seen as reminiscent of the trauma of partition; where India was the home for Hindus, while Pakistan was seen as hosting the Muslims of the subcontinent. But, such viewpoints could quite easily be relegated to being merely the rhetoric and principals of the ‘fundamentalist’. Doing so would therefore undermine their ability to have any significant impact on the character of mainstream politics in India, even though one of the key members of the *Sangh Parivar*, the Hindu nationalist BJP, ruled the country between 1998 and 2004.

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Analyzing the riots merely through political trends and rhetoric could limit our ability to explore the presence of a constant trajectory between 1947 and 2002. Instead, it would be important to re-evaluate the very creation of the country through the process of population exchange. The Hindu-Muslim divide was seen to be at the core of partition. But, more importantly, the population exchange that occurred cannot be seen as having been conjured in a political vacuum. Revisiting the concept of 'population exchange' it is important to realize that it is often rooted in a political project or ideology that aims at reifying the very identity of a region but displacing those that are seen to be discordant with the underlying principles of the same project. The population exchange between Turkey and Greece (of 2,000,000 Christians and Muslims), while encompassing a plethora of reasons, for the former was an attempt to "[reconstitute] Ottoman unit by getting rid of the Christians." [45] The centrality of nationality to the process was clearly articulated by Article 30-36 of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). Asserting the role of a 'political project' Schechla claims "Population transfer policies [or population exchange] within state borders are often grounded in ideologies of ethnic-group domination. These have the effect and/or purpose of manipulating demographic units to ensure territorial and social control." [46] Ideology in itself "serves as an effective tool providing social cohesion and legitimacy." [47] Lying at the core of modern states then they serve as "...the most prolific purveyors of ideas and values intended to bind citizens together." [48] Often though such ideological frameworks "...formalize a self-definition that coincides with notions of ethnic purity to the exclusion of indigenous and minority peoples," [49] which is often manifested in population exchanges geared at achieving the ideological aspirations.

The Partition therefore could be seen as rooted in an ideology or political project that divided the Hindu and Muslim population in South Asia. The creation of an Islamic state in Pakistan warranted the expulsion of Hindus and the incorporation of the Muslims in British India. Even though India was categorized as a secular state, the creation of an Islamic state automatically deemed it as the home of the Hindus. This differentiation is what then lies at the core of the Indian independence experience. But, the divisions that carved region could be seen as having manifested within the country. While the trauma and suffering of partition and the associated population exchange is what created the country, it also defined 'self' as distinct from the 'other'. While this differentiation proved beneficial for the Pakistanis (as population exchange ensured a homogeneous Muslim population), within India, the 'other' remained in significant numbers. Therefore, as Partition is seen as an illegitimate for the creation of an illegitimate identity (according to the Indian partition rhetoric), the agents of the same creations are citizens of the country. While it would be naïve to assume then that partition identities continued through the next 56 years, the reality remains that the population exchange was a central feature of India's creation, one that is inescapable. Therefore, national identities in India, drawn from the territorial construct and being of the country after 1947, would automatically, inspire themselves from the trauma of the time. Today then, as the divisions between Muslims and Hindus are seen as rooted in a mere socio-economic crisis, it is important to realize that the divisions reminiscent of the population exchange of 1947 are deeply entrenched in the core of the territorial being of India. While not as traumatic and violent as the partition, and not directly drawing on the Partition experience, riots and massacres of Muslims in Gujarat in the 21st century (drawing on a particular 'brand' of identity formation) could still be seen as inspired, at a sublime level, by the population exchange of 1947.

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[1] Which involved territorial partition and the exchange of millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims between India and Pakistan

[2] The events in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002 have often termed as 'massacres' or 'genocide'.

[3] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991): 6

[4] Anderson, 5

[5] "India-Pakistan: The Trial of Kali" *Time Magazine*. October, 27, 1947

[6] *Indian Independence Act* (1947)

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[8] Mansergh, Nicholas, "The Partition of India in Retrospect" *International Journal*. 21.1 (Winter, 1965/1966): 2

[9] Mansergh, 2

[10] Mansergh, 2-3

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[11] With a Muslim majority Pakistan and a Hindu majority but secular India

[12] After partition: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh” *BBC Online*. 8 August 2007. www.bbc.co.uk

[13] It is important to note at this juncture that the Partition did not have a uniform impact on every person; especially in the way it played a role in their lives after the traumatic events.

[14] Sharma, Vanita. “Inherited Memories. Second-Generation Partition Narrative From Punjabi Families in Delhi and Lahore”. *Colonial and Social History*. 6.4 (2009): 412

[15] Sharma, 415

[16] Sharma, 415

[17] Sharma, 424

[18] Sharma, 424-425

[19] Kaur, Ravinder. “Distinctive Citizenship. Refugees, Subjects and Post-Colonial State in India’s Partition” *Cultural and Social History* 6.4 (2009): 429

[20] Mansergh, 1

[21] *Ibid*, 1

[22] Spaeth, Anthony. “Killing Thy Neighbor” *Time Asia* (2006)

[23] Harding, Luke. “Gujarat’s Muslim heritage smashed in riots” *The Guardian*. 29 June, 2002

[24] Harding, “Gujarat’s Muslim heritage smashed in riots”

[25] *Ibid*

[26] *Ibid*

[27] “We Have No Orders to Save You” *Human Rights Watch* 14.3 (April, 2002): 4

[28] “We Have No Orders to Save You”, 4

[29] “We Have No Orders to Save You”, 4

[30] *Ibid*, 4

[31] Aloysius, G. “Trajectory of Hindutva” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29.24 (June, 11, 1994):

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1450

[32] Banerjee, Sumanta. "Hindutva': Ideology and Social Psychology" *Economic and Political Weekly* 26.3 (Jan 19, 1991): 97

[33] Banerjee, 97

[34] Banerjee, 97

[35] A Hindu Deity

[36] Founder of the Mughal Empire in India (a Muslim empire)

[37] Banerjee, 97

[38] Banerjee, 97-98

[39] Spaeth, Anthony. "Killing Thy Neighbor"

[40] *Ibid*

[41] *Ibid*

[42] *Ibid*

[43] *Ibid*

[44] Chisti, Seema. "Analysis: Gujarat siege mentality" *BBC Online*. 25 September, 2002.

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[47] Schechla, 240

[48] *Ibid*, 240

[49] *Ibid*, 240