**Partitioned Histories and Revisionist Narratives:**

**Indian and Pakistani Textbooks on the Partition of 1947**

Chaitanya Venkateswaran

Prof. Patrick Kelly Joyner

WRT – 101 – 007

15th February 2021

"In our history we won the war, and in their history textbooks, they won the war," says Ashish Dhakaan, a history teacher in Gujarat, a western state of India, as he reflects on the state of history education in schools across the two neighbouring nations of India and Pakistan (PERROT et al.).

These words succinctly put forth the controversy and revisionism surrounding the narratives of history taught in the education systems of India and Pakistan. As two nations borne out of colonial rule, India and Pakistan have strived to establish their individuality, legitimacy and integrity among the masses through history education. This becomes particularly concerning when one realizes that the minds of generations develop twisted and often hostile ideas about the other nation even while the histories of the two nations remain closely intertwined over thousands of years of civilizational history.

Over the years, history taught to the youth of the country in schools has become a means for the government to revise history according to the political climate between the nations. Governments have grown to play an instrumental role in developing hostile narratives among the people and influencing the perceptions of the youth. Key examples of this include the educational reforms and revisionist narratives propagated by the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan and Hindu nationalist governments in India in the late 1990s. General Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan was focused on the Islamization of Pakistani curriculums by entrenching it in Sunni Muslim ideology that is pervasive even today. On the other hand, Hindu nationalist governments in India worked to educate the youth on Hindu nationalist ideology which propagates that non-Hindu communities in India, especially the Muslim community, are separate, second-class citizens with loyalties outside India, standing in total contradiction to Hinduism’s historically very inclusive identity formation process (Lall).

A key event that has been subject to revision and distortion over the years is the Partition of 1947 that marked the end of British rule in the Indian subcontinent with the establishment of the two separate states of India and Pakistan. While many people celebrated the awakening of their nation to freedom and independence after over two centuries of brutal colonial rule, the occasion was marred by immense bloodshed. The violence pervasive at the time killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions as they migrated from India to Pakistan or vice versa for primarily communal reasons. As nascent nations, the violence and displacement was not addressed or controlled properly by either country’s leaders. Each side ultimately blamed the other for the tragedy that occurred, with the event remaining contentious and bitter for the two countries in discussions till the present day. This is evident in a Pakistani textbook for intermediate classes which states:

While the Muslims provided all sorts of help to those non-Muslims desiring to leave Pakistan [during partition], the people of India committed atrocities against Muslims trying to migrate to Pakistan. They would attack the buses, trucks and trains carrying the Muslim refugees and murder and loot them. (Mazhar ul-Haq)

On the other hand, the Indian textbook critically questions the killings on both sides, bringing to light the atrocities committed by both in the name of religion and country:

Was this simply a partition, a more or less orderly constitutional arrangement, an agreed upon division of territories and assets? Or should it be called a sixteen month civil war, recognizing that there were well-organized forces on both sides and concerted efforts to wipe out entire populations? (Themes in Indian history: Textbook in history for class XII)

These accounts show that shared history can vary when presented from different views, and each nation generally aims to present its history to its people in a certain way. In 'newly-formed' nation-states, especially those with a post-colonial identity, the main purpose of education is arguably not to invest in the intellectual development of its children but is above all a mass campaign to disseminate “a view of the nation's past deemed conducive to the strengthening of national unity or the furthering of integration” (Mohammad-Arif). In this process, the teaching of history along with its rewriting and retelling, assumes a prominent position. As two nations with low literacy rates at the time of independence, and lack of awareness and minimal access to information among the masses, both India and Pakistan had the opportunity to fundamentally shape the minds of the people through nationalized systems of education. Since the education systems in both these nations are federally controlled, the national and state governments have major influence in what is included in the curriculum and how it is taught to students.

 Upon attaining freedom from colonial rule, and establishing individual nationhood, India and Pakistan invested heavily in building the image and identity of their nations through education. For Pakistan, there was a crucial need to align the nation and its ideals with the Muslim world, and set itself apart from India both historically and culturally. This distinct image also increased its legitimacy as a separate state in the subcontinent and established an identity that was not subsumed by the diverse Indian identity. The opportunity was used to make the case for an inevitable and undeniable need for a separate Muslim state, and emphasize the idea that minority communities would have never received equal rights if they remained under the Hindu-majority Indian state. Countering that, India attempted to craft an image of a secular, democratic republic which was accepting of diverse identities and communities – setting itself apart from the decidedly religious identity that Pakistan built its foundations on. As nations with significant ethnic, regional and linguistic diversity, India and Pakistan were compelled to use history as the primary tool for national integration and for the production of unified citizens beyond these multiple, diverse and often clashing identities (Mohammad-Arif).

The book, *Partitioned Histories: The Other Side of Your Story* compiled and published by the History Project, has students from India and Pakistan placing the versions of history taught to them in school side by side in a single book. It reveals inherent biases in the writing of history that one would easily miss without direct comparison with the other side. It also does not seek to pass judgement about which version of history is correct, leaving it up to the reader to develop a nuanced view on the issue, while exposing the reader to a wide array of differences among the views of each side.

A prime example of these differences is visible in the presentation of the Mountbatten Plan which was crafted by the British colonial administration to transfer the power of government to the two separate states - India and Pakistan. School textbooks on each side present this historical event differently.

On the Indian side, the focus remains on the idea of a united India with continued reluctance towards a communal partition, and highlights the representative process that led the two countries there, determined collectively by the political leaders of the freedom struggle against colonial rule. This further reinforces the secular and democratic image that India wanted to craft for itself beyond the Partition. It also reflects the remaining contempt towards the Muslim League who are held primarily responsible for successfully demanding an independent state for the Muslims of the subcontinent:

Mountbatten put his plan for the partition of India before the ‘big seven’ leaders: Nehru, Patel, Kripalani, Jinnah, Liaqat, Nishthar, and Baldev Singh. Due to Jinnah’s persistence, Congress leaders unwillingly accepted the plan, which was formally announced on 3rd June 1947… The historic announcement was received with mixed feelings by the public. Many Indian nationalists deplored the partition of India while the Muslim League was not fully satisfied with the way Pakistan was to be divided (Sachdeva et al.).

This very event is chronicled in the Pakistani textbooks from a very different perspective that focuses on the role of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, and the preferential treatment given to India, the sacrifices made by Pakistan in the process and presents a view where Pakistan was not given its due in the distribution of both land and assets:

It was Pakistan’s bad luck that Mountbatten was appointed as the last Viceroy. He forced Jinnah to accept boundaries that divided Punjab and Bengal. These boundaries were disastrous but Mountbatten threatened that there would be no Pakistan at all unless they were accepted. He then blamed Quaid-i-Azam for the violence and bloodshed that followed Partition…It is therefore generally agreed that the Mountbatten Plan led to Pakistan having to make severe concessions. In the distribution of assets, Mountbatten again showed great partiality to India and Pakistan was deprived of her legitimate share in the finances, defense equipment, railway engines and bogies, etc. (Sachdeva et al.)

Another example of a combative issue between the nations is over the land of Kashmir. Kashmir is strategically advantageous for both nations and enemy control over the region can seriously threaten national security as it provides a gateway into the subcontinent through the Himalayas for countries like China and Afghanistan. The representation of Kashmir in history textbooks is another key point for revision and continued influence for governments of the two countries as the issue of Kashmir’s independence is a living political cause with ongoing real-world implications. The Pakistani textbooks present it as follows:

Kashmir had a Hindu maharaja in power but its population was mainly Muslim. The maharaja, Hari Singh, wanted to declare complete independence as he did not want to be a part of either of the two countries.... In September 1947, he began forcible expulsion of Muslim Kashmiris... [They] decided to retaliate and overthrow him in October 1947. The maharaja was forced to accede to India in return for Indian assistance to restore him to power. Pakistan refused to accept this military intervention and mobilized their army to support the Kashmiri forces... Indian troops had taken over Srinagar and after months of fighting, India took the issue to the United Nations. A ceasefire was agreed upon and in January 1948, Kashmir was divided between India and Pakistan. India, however, received a larger share, including the capital, Srinagar (Sachdeva et al.).

The Indian version of the story differs from this, focusing on the request for help from the king of Kashmir against Pakistani pressure and its provision by India upon Kashmir’s accession to the Union of India:

Hari Singh, the ruler of the princely state of Kashmir, had decided to keep Kashmir independent. However, he was instigated and pressured by Pakistan to accede with them. Matters reached a boiling point when Pakistan-backed armed intruders attacked Kashmir in October 1947 and prompted Hari Singh to sign the Instrument of Accession with India. Due to the terms of accession, the Indian Army came to Kashmir’s defence and won back a major portion of the state. However, even today a part of it remains under Pakistan’s control (Sachdeva et al.).

These two different narratives have underlying tones of hostility and are aimed at ‘otherizing’ certain communities and the continued fortification of a specific, government crafted national identity. This can have a major influence on the youth, who study and absorb these biases, and can go on to hold positions of influence and make decisions that stem from a base education that has instilled bias in their minds. While it may be hard to draw direct connections between education imbibed by the youth of the country and specific policy changes or diplomatic positions they choose later in life, one does find that even 70 years after the Partition, the hostilities remain alive and well among generations that have not directly experienced or lived through periods of major conflict between the two nations. The consistent friction at the borders also keeps these belligerent narratives alive and well far beyond the borders.

It is important for people to realize that history is not always black and white, and that each side has made grey and difficult decisions when in positions of conflict. However, presenting a critical, nuanced view of history to a diverse population can also lead to the development of a fragile republic – one whose integrity is constantly threatened and does not have one fundamental idea to tie it together.

The question of using history education as a tool for distorting and rewriting history is a powerful and relevant one, but also one that does not have a black-and-white answer. After all, can a country make a choice between its national and intellectual integrity?

Works Cited

Lall, Marie. “Educate to Hate: The Use of Education in the Creation of Antagonistic National Identities in India and Pakistan.” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education*, vol. 38, no. 1, Routledge, Jan. 2008, pp. 103–19. *EBSCOhost*, doi:[10.1080/03057920701467834](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057920701467834).

Mazhar-ul-Haq. *Civics of Pakistan for Intermediate Classes: According to the Intermediate Syllabuses of All the Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education in Pakistan*. Bookland and Enver-Ul-Haque Khan, 1987.

Mohammad-Arif, Aminah. *Textbooks, Nationalism and History Writing in India and Pakistan*. *www.academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/11681878/Textbooks\_Nationalism\_and\_History\_Writing\_in\_India\_and\_Pakistan. Accessed 26 Jan. 2021.

PERROT, Caroline Nelly, et al. “Partition Key Battleground in India, Pakistan Textbook Wars.” *AFP International Text Wire in English*, Agence France-Presse, 4 Aug. 2017. *ProQuest*, http://search.proquest.com/central/docview/1925769620/citation/59F0698C39FB4143PQ/13.

Sachdeva, Arjun, et al. *Partitioned Histories: The Other Side of Your Story*. The History Project, 2016.

*Themes in Indian History: Textbook in History for Class XII*. National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2017.