

Partition in South Asian Films

An Overview

ANWESHA SENGUPTA

British India's partition and its consequences for the community life in India and Pakistan have been a recurrent theme in the films of the subcontinent since the 1940s. Many scholars of film studies in South Asia have paid close attention to "Partition films," analysing their forms, contents, politics, and consumption patterns. Hood's monograph is a recent addition to the scholarship of "Partition films." Divided into eight chapters, it is, according to the author,

an endeavour to appreciate certain salient features of the 1947 Partition of India, the bitter pill that accompanied the joyous cup of Independence, as represented in films, most of them worthy to at least some degree. (p xvi)

'Salient Features' of Partition

What are the "salient features" of partition? A quick survey of the partition historiography would reveal the following. It was hurried—the division of British India happened little more than two months after Lord Mountbatten declared the partition plan on 3 June 1947; the Mountbatten Plan was preceded

Tear-drenched Earth: Cinema and the Partition of India by John W Hood, *Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2024; pp 207+xvii, ₹910.*

by complex political bargains between the Muslim League, the Congress and the British. In material terms, it meant the division of the territory, government assets, records and personnel; communal violence preceded, accompanied and followed partition; and women were particularly vulnerable to the communal violence. Partition resulted in one of the largest mass migrations in recorded history. The migration pattern and the nature of partition violence had regional variations. Many of those who had to leave their homes and cross borders faced severe difficulties as refugees. The rehabilitation of the refugees was a long-drawn process and affected women, Dalits, and children in different ways. The refugees had to live with the trauma of being uprooted, losing families and friends to communal violence, and yearning for their lost homes. Those who stayed back as religious minorities had to

face legal, bureaucratic and routine majoritarian violence.

Partition did not solve the communal problem in South Asia; rather it was routinely invoked whenever there were conflicts around religion. Hood provides us with a descriptive account of selected "Partition films" that touch upon one or more of these "salient features of partition." Before critically reflecting on the monograph itself, a summary of the chapters will be useful.

The 'Partition Films'

The book begins with the big men of South Asia's history and their roles in partition. Hood focuses on three films—Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), Ketan Mehta's *Sardar* (1993), and Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017)—to reflect upon the high politics of partition as depicted on screen. Chapter 2 discusses a range of issues—the minute, almost comical, calculations that were part of the administrative consequences of partition; the arbitrary nature of the Radcliffe Line and its consequences for those who must negotiate with it as borderlanders, refugees, or as security personnel; and the tension between ascribed nationality, imagined nationality and sense of belonging. Chapters 3 and 4 closely look at the films that focus on forced separations of individuals from their families, ancestral villages, and

religions due to partition. The gendered experiences of separation become crucial in Chapter 4, reminding us that women often are the worst sufferers in a conflict situation. Moreover, the chapter also discusses two films that revolve around accidental separations of children from their families (and their countries) and the complexities of repatriation amid bilateral hostilities between India and Pakistan.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the communal violence that accompanied partition. It was often a “crude vendetta” against someone from another religion—incomprehensible, irrational, and unrestrained. In certain cinematic portrayals, it is “the violence of ghoulish titillation, rather than violence of actuality” (in the case of *Hey Ram* [2000], p 110). In some other depictions, violence is not sensationalised or exploited as “morbid entertainment” (*Viceroy’s House*, p 115). All the killings, abductions, rape, and molestations often happened in the name of god—a point that Hood elaborates in Chapter 6. He routinely reminds the reader, “truly horrible things were done to innocent and not so innocent people while loudly proclaiming the glory of *Ishwar* or *Allah* or *Waheguru*. In the name of their religion, men and women effectually turned their backs on god; in perpetrating evil deeds in his or Her name, they committed the most terrible blasphemies” (p 122). What is the meaning of home for those who had been displaced by partition? Is it ever possible to return? Is the displacement spatial or is it also temporal?

In Chapter 7, Hood studies a few films that tackle these issues. The films portray the yearning of the protagonists for their homes and the diverse ways through which some of them try to return. The final chapter reads the “reverberations” of partition in events like the 1971 Liberation War, the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom and the Gujarat pogrom of 2002. The author focuses on several films that deal with one of the above-mentioned “cataclysmic” events and discusses how integration and social cohesion remain unachievable goals in the subcontinent even after more than 75 years of partition.

Decontextualised Reading of Films

Hood’s writing is accessible and the narrative is well-structured. And the author provides a competent description of the films that he chooses to discuss. The book can be seen as a useful, catalogue-like introduction to a number of South Asian films that have addressed partition and communalism. Beyond that, however, the book has very little to offer. Almost all the films discussed in this book have been closely studied by various film scholars. Hence, it is surprising that the author does not engage with this scholarship at all. Neither do we understand his rationale behind selecting certain films, while not mentioning several others that can also be classified as “Partition films.” For example, films made in Pakistan (like *Kartar Singh*, 1959; *Tauba*, 1964; *Lakhon Mein Eik*, 1967; *Behen Bhai*, 1968, among others) in the first few decades after partition and addressing the great divide find no mention in the book. Relatively recent, star-studded *Jannat ke Talash* (1999) also remains unmentioned in the book. For that matter, apart from the critically acclaimed *Khamosh Pani* (2003) and *Ramchand Pakistani* (2008), no Pakistani film receives the author’s attention. Hood mentioned in the introduction that the filmography “is by no means exhaustive... [and he has] selected those films that illustrate major points of interest arising out of the Partition experience” (p xii). But such a statement does not justify this glaring omission. Partition has been remembered in the official discourse of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan in strikingly different ways. These modes of remembrance have shaped South Asian politics and diplomatic relations. Focusing only on Indian and Bangladeshi cinemas, while discussing “Partition films,” makes this book an incomplete account.

Another major drawback of the book is the author’s inability to contextualise the films. Film scholars like Ira Bhaskar have divided partition in Indian cinema in three temporal phases: the first phase consists of the immediate decades after partition, the films of the 1970s form the second phase, and the third phase

begins with the 1990s (Viswanath and Malik 2009: 63). Each phase is politically distinct and that has shaped the partition films made during that period. The film producers, directors and the audience were affected by the politics of the time that they lived in. It shaped not only the making of the films but also their reception. Hood does not pay any attention to the temporalities of the films that he discusses. While reading his description of *Chinnamul* (1950), made and released during the February riots of 1950,¹ when East Pakistan and West Bengal were reeling under severe refugee pressure, one wonders how the audience might have reacted to it. On the other hand, for the audience of *Hey Ram*, *Gadar* (2001), or *Pinjar* (2003), the partition was a distant event, a part of history textbooks and perhaps of family memories. How did that distance shape the viewing experiences? For Hood, these are not important questions to ask.

Time, for Hood, is unimportant in another sense. While discussing the films, he does not bother to locate the narrative in the historical scholarship. The Evacuee Property Act, which is crucial for understanding *Garm Hawa* (Zamindar 2007: 13–14) or the Rehabilitation and Recovery of Abducted Persons Ordinance, 1949 (Menon and Bhasin 1993) which is central to films like *Pinjar* (2003), remain unmentioned in the discussion of the films by Hood. Consequently, the descriptions read further apolitical and ahistorical.

Hood does not shy away from making his politics obvious, though. Partition for him was a tragic event for which Muhammad Ali Jinnah was to be blamed. He has little respect for Jinnah and he has little tolerance for the “Two

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Nation Theory.” The problem with such political understanding is that it is too straightforward. Beginning with Ayesha Jalal, the partition historiography has very convincingly reimagined Jinnah’s politics and position regarding the making of Pakistan (Roy 1990). Hood’s understanding is passionate, but uninformed of the historical scholarship. This becomes evident from statements like,

generally experiences such as communal hatred, rape, slaughter, social displacement, fractures of families and livelihood were much the same in the west [ie, Punjab] as in the east [ie, Bengal, Assam]. (p xi)

Dismissing the regional variations of partition experiences as insignificant is plain wrong. Such faulty understanding

has stopped him from locating the film spatially. Hood writes:

It is worth noting that the Sikhs and their culture are infinitely more prominent in the region of the western Partition, and that the Bengali-speaking people of the eastern region formed a significant socio-cultural majority remarkable in itself. Beyond these actualities, what is represented on screen is of interest for *what* it is, rather than for *where* it happened. (pp xi–xii, italics in original)

As he removes “where” and “when” from his analytical frame, his book becomes merely a descriptive catalogue, that too a rather incomplete one.

Anwasha Sengupta (senguptaanwasha@gmail.com) teaches history at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata.

NOTE

- 1 A communal riot started in early December 1949 in Khulna district of East Pakistan. It eventually spread across the entire province and eventually engulfed West Bengal. It is often referred to as the February Riots of 1950. A peace agreement between Jawaharlal Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan (8 April 1950) brought the situation under control.

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