

Framing the (Im) Possible: The Museumisation of Partition Memories in India

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The new Partition Museum in Amritsar remembers the violent past within the frame of the Indian nation. Although the remembrance of partition has been part of popular and public memory cultures for a long time, the violent pasts been split off from the history of independence struggles and the dead and injured have been categorised as sacrifices for nation building. The Partition Museum tells the stories of different layers of violence from different perspectives, mostly from the perspectives of ordinary people. However, the narratives are limited where the continuities of gendered violence, the (de)construction of national identities and the transgression of nostalgic attitudes are concerned. Nonetheless, the mission of the museum is based on ideas of coming to terms with the past, accepting the existing postcolonial nations of the British Raj, and emphasising peaceful cohabitations within and between the nations.

Keywords: remembering partition, (trans) national memory cultures, coming to terms with the violent past, peaceful cohabitation.

On 17 August 2017, 70 years after the partition of British India and the creation of the two independent nations, India and Pakistan, “the world’s first museum and memorial on the Partition” opened its permanent exhibition in Amritsar, a city in the Indian border state of Punjab. Back in 1947, the borderline between the new nation states India and Pakistan was inaugurated on the same day of August. The museum was actually opened in October 2016 after extensive discussions with experts from different fields, survivors and public consultations.¹

The partition of formerly multi-religious and multi-ethnic geopolitical and cultural regions, the forced migration of millions of people, “one of the greatest migrations in the twentieth century”, accompanied by large scales of violence “remains a watershed in the subcontinent’s history.”² Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Debali Mookerjee-Leonard state: “No other single word, inherited from the English and used almost unchanged except with regional accents or intonations, is laden with as much historical import in the Punjabi, Hindi/Urdu and Bengali languages as ‘partition’.” The terms, used in non-English languages on the subcontinent for the unprecedented event and process, “suddenly vested with new meanings in 1947, are important markers for the strange dispersal of the partition trauma; they are comparable to unnoticeable humble tombstones scattered all over the land, impossible to collect, gather, and organize for an official display in a museum. Dispersal is in fact what also happened to the survivors; the diaspora of the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike is spread all over South Asia and beyond, impossible to count, categorize, and

comprehend.”³ According to estimations based on population census data, 14.5 million people migrated from 1947 to 1951, whereas the fate of 3.4 million people remains unknown.⁴

Nowadays, the 1,500-mile Indian-Pakistani border, “one of the most heavily guarded international boundaries in the world” can clearly be seen on images taken from space.⁵ Before the division, the Indian state of Punjab was part of the British colonial province Punjab, whose larger part belongs today to Pakistan. These new two national regions make particularly visible how the multifaceted common pre-partition history, culture and use of languages have been reframed and changed according to the respective national concepts and (sub) national and religious identities.⁶ However, the undivided Punjab remains a central reference point of memory for people in and from the region who are living in different nations and world regions. Similar can be said about Bengal, the other province that was physically divided into the Pakistani East Bengal and the Indian West Bengal.

Research and Memory of Partition in (Trans) National Contexts

Remembering the partition of British colonial India has never been a taboo in public memory. There is an abundance of (trans) national (non-)fictional literature, art works, films and academic analyses dealing with mass migration and displacement, violence and old and new forms of belonging.⁷ The (trans) national historiography as well as cultural artefacts referring to partition can be framed as trans-cultural memory to emphasise the communication and sharing of memories across borders produced by constructions of communities or identities based on concepts of nation, ethnicity, religion etc. Nevertheless, the concept of the nation as well as further collective identity constructions remains influential in memory processes.⁸

The controversies about the partition as a crucial event in South Asian history have been manifold. Critics have in particular challenged the interpretation of partition and its violent events within the frame of British colonialism or the process of nation building. Moreover, the ongoing debate includes the categorisation of partition violence with its extreme forms on a large scale as hitherto unprecedented “communal”, “sectarian” and/or “criminal” violence.⁹ At the same time, the official discourses on partition have produced silences or the marginalisation of narratives of (gendered) violence.

Although the representation of the events in literature, art and film in the first decades after partition have been considerable, such representations as well as the amount of scientific work seem to have been enormously amplified. Partition has become an important field in national, inter- and transnational academic contexts that delivers multifaceted insights not only in the causes of partition, its gendered violence and the gendered processes of national identity, but also about the aftermath in (trans)national settings. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Debali Mookerjee-Leonard have even observed a particular increase of American and British scholars’ interest in partition since the end of the cold war and a change in the Indian official discourse in the course of economic liberalisation in the 1990s. The political changes in India have had the effect that representations of “both Independence and Partition” were published in media and press “in an unprecedented manner”.¹⁰ Yet, it should not be overlooked that the perspectives on the historical events have also

be changed by critical discourses within the nations and the transnational perception of artistic works as e.g. Salman Rushdie's novel 'Midnight's Children', published in 1981, the film directed by Deepa Mehta and screenplay by Salman Rushdie was published in Canada/UK in 2012.

After 1965, as Kavita Daiya states, partition and especially its violence have been marginalised in Indian public discourse due to official memory politics that preferred forgetting as a remedy "to maintain ethnic harmonious relations with the nation." Moreover, the violence caused by the partition "popularly perceived as irreconcilable with India's history of peaceful, non-violent anti-colonial struggle that Gandhi led, [...] suggested its very failure".¹¹ Thus, the celebrations of independence as e.g. Suvir Kaul argues have "not particularly engage[d] with the political and social cataclysm that followed upon the creation of the nation-states of India and Pakistan." In consequence, "our memories of Partition are fragmented and painful. [...] Partition remains the unspoken horror of our time." Moreover, the "known and unknown legacies" have continuously shaped the "collective identity and thinking of India".¹² Such critical perspectives question the categorisation of partition as a historical "aberration, a moment of 'insanity' in an otherwise remarkable story of non-violently achieved freedom from British oppression". The reasons for such interpretations of history are due to the fact as Kavita Daiya argues that "all the constituencies involved—British, Hindis, Muslims, Sikhs", are responsible for the violence.¹³

To capture the presence of past violence, scholars have developed analytical perspectives to grasp continuities, reproductions of violence in long periods of time. For example: Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar¹⁴ looks in particular at the bureaucratic violence, the institutional sites of nation building and constructions of loyal citizenship in India and Pakistan "to make visible the power of modern states to limit and produce bounded nations and the margins within them".¹⁵ Her notion "the long partition" has been expanded in order to analyse "the continuing cultural, political, economic, and psychological effects of 1947."¹⁶ Recurrent topics of the aftermath of partition have been the wars between India and Pakistan, the separation of East Pakistan/Bangladesh along with genocide, conflicts over Kashmir as well as the exclusions of religious minorities in the respective new nations including violent attacks and mass killings. Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer and Rahul K. Gairola underline that the cohabitation of people with different backgrounds in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh remains problematic as "the angers and resentments of the past" have been kept alive by "forces [...] that seem determined to instigate much more menacing tribalization of the population based on class, cast and religious identity."¹⁷

It is also noteworthy, as Sucharita Sengupta and Paula Banerjee argue in the case of West Bengal, that with new shifts in historiography and social sciences "the refugee experience was reduced to the memory of partition that seemed to have traumatized refugees to such an extent that all other experiences paled in comparison. Historians and social scientists belonging to the genre of cultural studies, largely depending on oral narratives settled on the notion that the violence and trauma associated with losing one's home was the definitive aspect of refugee psyche. Everything else was shaped by that experience."¹⁸ They point out, "that memory is trope often used by refugees when talking about the partition".¹⁹ However, it is also important to analyse the way in which these dislocated people, who often did not ascribe themselves as refugees, claimed

their citizenship and formed new or merged with existing social movements.

It took quite some decades before the first books were published about gender aspects in partition violence and the creation of new citizenships. As late as 1998, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin stated the missing of feminist historiography of Indian partition.²⁰ Since then a plethora of studies has been published, often focussing on the suffering of women including gendered violence like abduction, rape, mutilation, forced marriage and conversion as well as (forced) suicide to save the family's and/or community's honour. Nevertheless, a wide variety of studies has not simply equated women with passive victimhood. Studies raised questions of agency and the creation of new nation states without questioning patriarchy. For example, Veena Das analyses the debate in the Indian Constituent Assembly and argues that the "rhetoric strategy of focusing on abducted and raped women to the exclusion of the sexual violation of men allowed the nation to construct itself as a masculine nation."²¹ As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin already argued before, the violence during partition requires to "look a new at those old-aged borders and boundaries: nation, religion, community gender; those ancient myths about shame and honour, blood and belonging."²²

To sum up, the (trans)cultural memory of partition indicates a crucial point of current societal and individual conditions. Alice Correia and Natasha Eaton state with reference to Bhaskar Sarkar: "As 'the underside of independence' the trauma partition (in the singular of the plural) 'remains a festering wound in the collective psyche of South Asia'"²³

Partition and (Trans)Cultural Memory Institutions

For quite some time people from different backgrounds have demanded the acknowledgement of partition violence in official national and transcultural memory, the establishment of (national) memorials and museums. In 2012, the curator and historian Murtaza Vali argued that commemorating partition remains a difficult task and that "a single memorial will always be inadequate" due to the fact that "there was no clear distinction between perpetrator and victim as both 'sides' raped and killed and were raped and killed; guilt and victimhood were hopelessly intertwined across newly formed borders." Moreover, "the violence was not delimited, temporally or geographically, but unfolded over more than a year and at various sites across a large swath of the Subcontinent."²⁴

Anindya Raychaudhuri discusses the ideas of a partition museum in the 2000s in theoretical frames of remembering and forgetting in national contexts. He draws on several ideas to create a national museum in India.²⁵ The peace museum, he described and discussed, was finally implemented as an open-air museum on the premises of a restaurant close to the Attari-Wagah border in August 2018. The dedication of the museum to Atal Bihari Vajpayee indicates its mission towards friendship with Pakistan. The museum was initiated and created by a retired Punjab civil servant and his son and emphasises the common cultural history of pre-partition Punjab.²⁶

According to Anindya Raychaudhuri, officially initiated and performed remembrance of partition remains problematic as "nostalgia (for an unpartitioned, prelapsarian idyll) [can] be effectively mobilised to suit the needs of the contemporary nation-state" instead of addressing nostalgia's inherent ambiguities. The nostalgic memory of an "unified idyllic past" of a region,

now divided into different nations, could also back oppositional attitudes against aggressive national policies, against supposed enemies. Additionally, the addressing of past and present violence based on the construction of different religious communities would question the image of a secular Indian nation state.²⁷ With reference to Andreas Huyssen's and Jean-François Lyotard's reflections on the relation between remembering and forgetting Raychaudhuri underlines the possibility of an increasing invisibility of the past in particular in official memory cultures. In this vein, representations of traumatic events, and the naming of victims have often been intertwined with ideas of redemption through forgetting. Thus, it remains a question if, e.g., the inclusion of victims' grief and stories in readings of the past initiate processes of forgetting. To avoid such erasures of memory Raychaudhuri highlights Lyotard's arguments that memory processes should "try to preserve the remainder, the 'unforgettable forgotten'". In other words, in processes of remembering partition, "the memories not only of loss" should be in focus "but in particular the memories that traverse and thus question the apparent rigidity of the borders that define today's nation-state."²⁸ Thus, one can conclude, that memory processes should aim at peaceful cohabitations within and beyond nations. This requires a framing of remembering sufferings in contrast to the claim "that all nations are founded in blood and that porous boundaries are sealed only through violence; sacrificial blood-letting, that is, necessary for the making of strong nation-states." Such interpretations of partition have been interwoven with notions of martyrdom "for a good reason: senseless deaths are recuperated, those who were killed, however randomly, are seen to have died for a cause, the guilt of those who survived (or who participated in violence) is assuaged."²⁹

However, as already emphasised, the memory of the partition of colonial India has not only been part of postcolonial national but also of transcultural memory. Apart from the contributions of members from the Indian and Pakistani diaspora to the respective national discourses in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, global memory capes – complex, nevertheless contesting and mutating, transnational, not bounded by regional social groups, de-territorialized, and digitalised memory cultures- have become prominent.³⁰ For example: since 2011 the non-profit non-governmental organization "The 1947 Partition Archive" can be seen "as a global digital museum accessible to everyone, everywhere, and built by everyone, everywhere." The operators, supporters and contributors of the platform are from diverse cultural, ethnic and national backgrounds. They state that they "democratize historical documentation" and that their funding by "crowdsourcing and other non-traditional methods" give an opportunity "to reach all segments of society, including those that are often 'left out' and don't fall under the radar of conventional studies." Apart from oral history stories (over 9,000), the platform informs about literature, films, media coverage and events on the topics.³¹ However, oral histories, which could cause problems for the narrators, are not available online. They are stored by institutions and universities.³²

The Local and Regional Memory Landscapes of the Museum in Amritsar

The location of the Partition Museum at Amritsar's town hall is embedded in the Indian national, regional and urban memory landscape, which refers to different layers of South Asia's past and present. In the city itself the museum is part of the heritage walk including the Golden Temple, an

important pilgrim destination for Sikhs from India and abroad. The various memorials, cultural and religious sites refer to different layers of the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial past and generate “a kind of cacophony of memory inscribed in the built environment” as Churnjeet Mahn and Anne Murphy emphasise.³³

The city and the region are attractive to (inter)national tourists. The renovation of sites and city areas, the erection of new memorials and museums are part of the local and regional heritage tourism assessed as having potentials to increase the number of visitors.³⁴ Area of interest is here not so much the discussion about the renovation of parts of the city centre, particularly the axis from the Golden Temple to the town hall, which has been criticized as inadequate for the historical architecture in the region.³⁵ Of more importance is the fact, that the museum is located within a narrative of the Indian nation that includes not only memorials in the city dedicated to the resistance against British colonial rule. War memorials of the Indian-Pakistani wars in the border region remind of the “sacrifices” made for the defence of the Indian nation. The “Punjab State War Heroes Memorial and Museum” on the outskirts of Amritsar, inaugurated at the end of October 2016, calls for and represents militaristic values and attitudes as its name indicates.³⁶ It seeks “to inspire and infuse the spirit of patriotism in the youth” as Sarbjit Bahga puts it.³⁷ The museum covers a long history of wars and violent conflicts in the region and includes also the Indian Pakistani War in Kashmir in 1999. The governmental website states: “Punjab is the sword arm of the country and has been on the invasion route to the heart land of India since the beginning of the recorded history. It is an amazing reality that the heroic people of this land across gender have never reneged on their duty towards the Idea of India in terms of living and dying by the military ethos of ‘Naam, Namak, Nishan’ (Honour, Integrity, Flag) always and every time there has been a call for duty.” This mission is symbolized by a high stainless sword on one of the museum’s buildings.³⁸

Before the partition, the “Shah Suri Marg”, renamed by the British colonisers “Grand Trunk Road” as well as a railway provided short routes between today’s border towns Amritsar and Lahore, 36 miles in total. Moreover, the Grand Trunk Road “was the main artery that connected the breadth of the territory and ran from Sonargaon in Bengal to Peshawar in the northwest of Pakistan”.³⁹ Since the partition, the travel routes by road or train have been interrupted by the border checkpoint Wagah, approximately half way on the tour from Amritsar to Lahore. During the partition, Wagah was one of the major transit points for the exchanges of population between the new nations. Nowadays the border point is renowned for its daily joint retreat ceremony of the Indian and Pakistani border guards, introduced in 1959.⁴⁰ On a smaller scale, a joint retreat ceremony can also be attended at the border point Hussainiwala in the Indian Punjabi district Ferozepur. There the joint ceremony was introduced in 1970.⁴¹ In other words, as Richard McGill Murphy puts it, “[p]artition lives each day at sunset”.⁴²

For these invented traditions of nationalism at both sides of the highly secured border, buildings were erected to accommodate spectators; gateways and signboards show slogans dedicated to the respective Indian or Pakistani nation. The spatial organisation of the ceremonies and their composition make evident that these practices can be grasped not only in an extended theoretical sense but also literally as a “performance of nationalism”, a “nationalist theatre” as

Jisha Menon emphasises.⁴³ During the performance, animators incite the audience to shout national(istic) slogans, and cheer acts, a loud mixture of music from loudspeakers on both sides of the border accompany the rituals. Presentations of civilians contribute to the performance of nationalism before the retreat ceremony starts, afterwards spectators can interact with the border guards, take pictures or try to sneak a peek behind the border. Commercial business ranging from transport services, food, beverages, gift items to national memorabilia frames the ceremonies addresses the spectators as consumer of nationalism. In other words, paradoxically, the spectacular nationalistic show has been normalised.⁴⁴

The Pakistani and Indian border guards represent in their ceremonies aggressive military masculinities (and also femininities) hardly distinguishable from each other. The uniform colour differs, but the design is similar. Identical corporal exercises and shouting demonstrate their ability to protect their respective nations. Paradoxically, these rituals are a mimicry, as Menon points out, of old British war military rituals practised during colonial rule in India. Thus, the Indian and Pakistani nationalist theatres at the border, “unwittingly stage the drama of the twins separated at birth, thus reinforcing the mimetic relationality rather than the oppositionality between the two nations”.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, they represent both nations as nations at war and thus contribute to the hostility between them.⁴⁶ At the same time, the artificiality and exaggeration of the soldiers’ performances can be read as an “absurdity of the extreme antagonism between the two nations” and “anxious performances of nationalism”.⁴⁷ Finally, they refer to the violence during the partition: “The chaos, panic, and bewilderment that characterized the massive forced migrations is reshaped into a crisp, structured ceremony that keeps alive a particular account of the Partition in order to legitimize state monopoly of violence.”⁴⁸

Mission and Narratives of Partition Museum in Amritsar

The Partition Museum has not only been seen as an information and education centre. It has particularly been understood as a memorial for the sufferings of people during the processes of partition. The museum initiators demanded the 17 August as an annual “Remembrance Day”. Kishwar Desai declared in an article of the newspaper “Hindustan Times” shortly before the museum opened its permanent exhibition: “On this day, every year, we should think of the martyrs and survivors of 1947, and learn from their spirit and resilience. One way we could all acknowledge the debt we owe them is to visit the Partition Museum on August 17, and together we could remember them”.⁴⁹ Desai is an Indian author, columnist and chair of the “Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust” (TAACHT). TAACHT was founded to collect money for the building and operation of the museum. Thus, the museum is an independent, not a national institution, but has nevertheless been acknowledged by state representatives as the Chief Minister of Punjab, Captain Amrinder Singh and is, as he underlines, “dedicated [it] to the nation”. The operators have termed the museum a “People’s Museum” to emphasise their aim “to depict the Partition as it was experienced by the People.” In this vein, artefacts from survivors and their families as well as sequences from oral history are key elements of the exhibition.⁵⁰ It should be noted briefly, that the current appreciation of oral history and efforts to interview witnesses or children and grandchildren of

forced migrants in memory institutions is also based on changes in historiography. For some decades now, oral history as well as the perspectives of ordinary people has come into the focus of historians.⁵¹ It might be worth bearing in mind that from 1947 to 1950, oral testimonies of victims and perpetrators on violence during the partition “were seen to be acts of narration that ‘inflamed passions’, engendered ethnic violence, and so were best suppressed.”⁵²

The key elements of the current exhibition in Amritsar, artefacts of survivors’ families and their stories, have been supplemented by further archival written, audio and visual material including official documents and a variety of cultural objects as well as artwork (poetry, novels, paintings, drawings, sculptures, and films) in 15 rooms, an area of 17,000 square feet. Additionally, special installations contribute to narrations and interpretations of history and try to catch the attention of visitors for particular topics.⁵³ The exhibition’s multimedia design is in line with current international standards, visitors have the opportunity to learn about the past through different lenses and perspectives. However, questions concerning perpetrators, individuals and group of individuals, who committed the violence, have been largely avoided.

The galleries follow a chronological order and start with the pre-partition history of Amritsar and Punjab. In the first section of the exhibition, a board explains in different languages the reasons for choosing Amritsar as the museum’s location: “Amritsar’s experience of the Partition, and its location near the border gives it a unique experience”.⁵⁴

The first two galleries (“Why Amritsar” and “Punjab”) introduce the visitors to the social, cultural and economic history of the former British colonial province Punjab with a particular focus on Amritsar and its close relations to Lahore as well as the destruction and violence in the city, the decline of its economic power, the loss of skilled workers and its role as transit point for the forced migration. Whereas people from the new nation Pakistan were housed in camps, others left the city and region for Pakistan. By starting the exhibition with these topics, the history of the local and regional context of the museum is well explained, but it also leads to the neglect of other border sites and regions. Nevertheless, the prior partition of Bengal at the beginning of the 20th century, the resistance against this colonial action and the reunification is also addressed in one of following galleries. Additionally, the famine in Bengal in 1943 and outbreaks of violence in Calcutta and its neighbouring regions in 1946 have also been mentioned.⁵⁵

The history of the independence movement, the “Prelude to Partition” with different ideas and the political debate for or against a separate Muslim state describes the situation before the Boundary Commission drew the lines between Pakistan and India. The gallery which addresses the days when Pakistan (14 August 1947) and India (15 August 1947) declared their independence from the British Raj is followed by the symbolic representation of the Partition, an installation of broken mirrors on the walls and the floor. Interview sequences represent individual perspectives on this historical moment. Thereafter, the consequences and the violence during the process of separation, the building of two nations is visualised and narrated in manifold ways: installations like the one that shows destroyed buildings or a big saw splitting a wall, a big screen with documentary film sequences about the forced migration on trains, newspaper clippings, testimonies, and artwork (poetry, paintings etc.).⁵⁶

The situation of women during the partition is a central theme in these galleries, in one of them an installation showing a well reminds of the rapes and abductions. The banner displayed above the well reads: “India estimates 33,000 abducted women need to be recovered from Pakistan. Pakistan estimates 21,000 abducted women need to be recovered from India.” To emphasise the violence linked to these estimations, the image of a bloody hand separates the two statements. The text added to the contemporary newspaper clipping “Women jump into well to avoid capture” reads: “As abduction and rape spread, many families resorted to ‘honour killing’ of their women. Drowning in a well was one common method. This installation commemorates all those missing women and children.”⁵⁷ Unfortunately, information about the concept of honour is not displayed. Thus, a further layer to initiate critical reflections about gendered orders and their effects in violent incidents has been missed. Future revisions of the exhibition should also address the sexual violence against men and persons with a non-gender binary identity. Indeed a difficult task against the background that remembering and talking about sexual violence against men and boys has been a taboo for a long time and as mentioned above would question the construct of a masculine Indian nation.

The following galleries address the establishing of the new borders and nations with its consequences in administrative and daily life. Here, a central topic is the situation of refugees, their arrival in India, the support of the Indian government for refugees and their integration into the new nation. Unfortunately, the explanations resort to descriptions and facts as well as personal experiences leaving questions of the impact of the linkages between gender, nation building, belonging and e.g. the (forced) repatriation of abducted women aside.

The last gallery “Hope” broaches the issue of loss at the beginning on a board with the title “Reconciliation”. The text draws on the works of creative writers who have expressed traumatic experiences and contributed to reconciliation with the past: “Through their writing they exorcized their own nightmarish past; and helped a generation with theirs.”⁵⁸ This is followed by the presentation of success stories of former refugees in India. In other words, the violent past, the bloody birth of the nation in history, is a fact. By doing so, questions of continuities of violence, the ongoing hostility between the nations of the former Indian subcontinent becomes a less important issue and turns the history of the nation into a success story. Yet, even within the telling of the story of integration, the struggles of forced migrants for citizenship, the scope of difficulties of arrival and establishing a new home along class, caste and gender should be paid more attention.⁵⁹

The exhibition ends with the installation of a barbed wire tree in the last gallery of the museum, the “Tree of Hope”. Visitors can write their ideas and impressions on pieces of paper to be hanged on the artificial tree. The museum underlines that in this way the artificial tree becomes “a metaphor for greening the landscape through empathy and human connection.”⁶⁰ A similar installation has been set up at the beginning of 2020, the “Memory Tree”. Here the visitors “can dedicate a leaf on the Memory Tree etched with the name of the person you’d like to remember or any other personalised details and let them be remembered forever.”⁶¹ In other words, the narrative of the museum moves from the painful and violent past to a symbol of new life. Thus, the installations become interactive tools to integrate the voices of visitors within the frame of the

postcolonial nation(s). At the same time, this can also be understood as a performance of national identity that respects the post-colonial nations of the British Raj. This kind of telling and staging the history and aftermath of partition resembles the recent trend in immigration museums. Joachim Baur points out that such museums “construct a master narrative of migration and [...] contribute to re-vision of a national imagined community.”⁶²

The scope of exhibitions is always limited. The curators have to decide on the focal points, which lead to the marginalisation and exclusion of layers of past events and experiences. However, additional information in form of e.g. changing exhibitions on particular topics, lectures, readings and film screenings related to the scope of the museum’s topics has been provided on a large scale.⁶³ Nevertheless, it is crucial to learn about the continuities of violence, the aftermath of the colonial “divide and rule”, a policy, which contributed to strong religious and ethnic identities. Such (repeatedly performed) identity constructions have led to so called communal violence within and between the three nation states (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). Moreover, “the lack of representation of Bengal’s experience”, which differs from the event and aftermath of partition in Punjab, “is a lacuna” for a museum that purports to tell the history of the Indian Partition.⁶⁴

Concluding Remarks

The museum has been well received in national contexts and beyond. At the beginning of January 2020 the museum announced that more than half a million visitors have come to the museum since August 2017.⁶⁵ Articles in different media formats have informed about the museum and, in particular, of high-ranking visitors from the government. Its approval has also become public due to the awards the museum received. In 2017 the National Excellence Award from Condé Nast Traveller (magazine of a travel agency), in 2018 the ASEAN (India Youth Achiever’s Award in the Tourism Sector) and the UK-India Award in Media, Arts and Culture.⁶⁶ The museum has also been lauded by the New York Times, as one that “put a human face to tragedy” of partition.⁶⁷ Urvashi Butalia’s comment on an interactive project on Partition is also true for the gaps, which are filled by the museum: the “... stories encapsulate experiences that often escape official histories we seldom learn about in history – how cities and cultures were remade by the influx of Partition refugees.”⁶⁸

The narratives of the museum encourage visitors to develop critical attitudes towards politics of nationalism and look for peaceful cohabitations within and between nations and ways of transnational communication. Although the explanations and information in the museum do not explicitly express this view, the museum can be seen as a counter narrative to aggressive forms of nationalism in India as well as its manifestations in the region. However, the narrations of the museum are based on the concept of the nation. Visitors are not encouraged to think beyond national identities. The history of suffering during the period of partition with a focus on Punjab is told at length as the centrepiece of the exhibition. The history of (pre)colonial belongings and living conditions on the Indian subcontinent is mostly presented as the history of peoples’ commonality evoking nostalgic feelings without initiating reflections on reasons of violence. Important questions why neighbours, who had peacefully lived together, turned against each other

are not addressed. The repercussions of partition, the aftermath of partition is reduced to questions of reconciliation with the violent past. In this vein, it is crucial to initiate reflections on the continuities of violence and its causes in order to prevent violent clashes in the present and future. It is laudable that the sufferings of women have been addressed. However, the basic problem of equating women with victims should be overcome in order to present a complex gendered history of the Indian Partition and the post-colonial nation building. In other words, the impact and different layers of gender aspects in suffering, committing violence, remembering and the constructions of national identities need to be addressed. Yet, exhibitions on the Indian Partition should look beyond the respective national frame, integrate transnational views and abandon “methodological nationalism”.⁶⁹ A difficult task in times of increased nationalism. Currently, it seems to be difficult, if not impossible, to get a wide public support for creating a museum on the complex history of partition beyond the nation states.

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