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HISTORIOGRAPHY OF PARTITION: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES FROM INDIAN AND PAKISTANI SOURCES

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Abstract

The Partition of 1947 stands as one of the most contested events in South Asian history, producing divergent interpretations that continue to shape national identities in India and Pakistan. Indian historiography has often emphasized the tragedy of Partition, highlighting themes of colonial divide-and-rule, communal violence, displacement, and the human cost of division. In contrast, Pakistani historiography has traditionally framed Partition as the logical culmination of the Two-Nation Theory, portraying it as a moment of liberation and fulfillment of Muslim political aspirations. Revisionist scholars in both countries have challenged these state-centric narratives by questioning the roles of political elites and exposing the complexities of colonial negotiations, while subaltern and feminist historians have foregrounded the silenced voices of migrants, women, and marginalized communities. These competing perspectives reveal how history-writing functions not merely as scholarship but as a tool for nation-building and collective memory. This paper asks: **How do Indian and Pakistani historiographical traditions construct differing narratives of Partition, and what do these differences reveal about identity, politics, and memory in South Asia?**

Keywords: Partition of 1947; Historiography; India; Pakistan; Nationalism; Subaltern Studies; Collective Memory; Nation-building; Communal Violence; Comparative History.

Introduction

The Partition of British India in 1947 remains one of the most defining and contested events in South Asian history. It marked the end of nearly two centuries of colonial rule and the simultaneous birth of two sovereign nations, India and Pakistan. However, this independence was accompanied by one of the largest forced migrations in modern

history, displacing approximately 14–16 million people across hastily drawn borders (Talbot & Singh, 2009). The Partition unleashed unprecedented communal violence, resulting in the deaths of an estimated one to two million people, along with widespread abductions, rapes, and dispossession. Families were uprooted, communities dismembered, and long-standing cultural and economic ties were fractured. Beyond its immediate human toll, the Partition entrenched political hostilities, altered demographic landscapes, and inaugurated a legacy of suspicion and rivalry that continues to shape relations between India and Pakistan today.

While the historical fact of Partition is undeniable, the **interpretations and meanings attributed to it remain deeply contested.** Historiography—the study of how history is written and remembered—is especially significant in this context. The Partition is not merely an event of the past but also a foundational moment around which both India and Pakistan have constructed their national identities. For India, Partition has often been remembered as a tragedy: the violent rupture of a secular nationalist project that sought to unite diverse communities under one democratic framework. For Pakistan, conversely, Partition has largely been interpreted as triumph: the successful culmination of the Muslim struggle for self-determination and the vindication of the Two-Nation Theory. These competing narratives illustrate how historiography is not simply a neutral recording of facts but a powerful tool in shaping collective memory and political legitimacy.

In India, nationalist historians from Nehru onward highlighted colonial divide-and-rule policies as the prime cause of Partition, portraying it as an externally imposed tragedy. Later Marxist and subaltern historians broadened this picture, analyzing structural inequalities, elite politics, and the silenced experiences of refugees, women, and peasants (Sarkar, 1983; Butalia, 1998). Pakistani historiography, on the other hand, initially emphasized the inevitability of Partition by tracing Muslim political consciousness back to the medieval era, framing it as the fulfillment of Islamic aspirations (Qureshi, 1965). Over time, revisionist scholars such as Ayesha Jalal (1985) have challenged this triumphalist view, arguing that Jinnah's demands were as much about bargaining for political space as about territorial sovereignty. Thus, the historiographies of India and Pakistan have evolved along divergent trajectories, shaped by political needs, ideological agendas, and changing academic currents.

The significance of these historiographical debates lies in their continuing relevance for both societies. In India, Partition is remembered as a warning against communal politics, frequently invoked in discussions of secularism, nationalism, and minority rights. In Pakistan, it is enshrined as the foundational myth of statehood, validating its existence as a homeland for South Asia's Muslims. School curricula in both countries selectively narrate Partition to reinforce these national projects, often silencing uncomfortable truths such as the scale of violence or the complexities of regional variations (Zamindar, 2007). At the same time, cross-border and diaspora scholarship has sought to move beyond binary interpretations, foregrounding human experiences and shared trauma as common ground for a more inclusive history (Khan, 2007).

This paper situates itself within this comparative historiographical tradition. Rather than recounting the events of Partition, it examines how the event has been written about, interpreted, and remembered in Indian and Pakistani scholarship. By analyzing nationalist, Marxist, revisionist, subaltern, and feminist perspectives, the study aims to reveal the ways in which history-writing has been mobilized for nation-building, identity formation, and political legitimation on both sides of the border.

Research Question: *How have Indian and Pakistani historians constructed differing narratives of the Partition, and what do these differences reveal about national identity, memory, and politics in South Asia?*

Literature Review

Indian Historiography

Nationalist Perspectives

Early Indian historiography largely framed Partition as a tragic outcome of colonial machinations. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru (1946/1961) and Gandhi (1948) positioned British

"divide and rule" policies as the central cause of communal fissures, emphasizing how the imperial administration institutionalized religious difference through separate electorates and communal representation. Later scholars, such as Bipan Chandra (1984), echoed this view, arguing that the British consciously deepened communal divisions to weaken the independence movement. Nationalist historiography thus cast Partition as an externally imposed rupture rather than an organic demand from within Indian society. This interpretive framework aligned with the Nehruvian vision of secularism and national unity, situating Partition as an aberration in India's civilizational continuity.

Marxist Interpretations

Marxist historians introduced class, economy, and colonial exploitation into Partition studies. Historians like Sumit Sarkar (1983) and A.R. Desai (1959) argued that the event could not be explained solely through communal politics; rather, socio-economic contradictions, agrarian crises, and the colonial state's restructuring of land relations deepened divisions. The Muslim League's mobilization was analyzed as partly rooted in landed elites' fears of Congress-driven reforms, while the Congress itself was criticized for failing to adequately address peasant demands. Marxist historiography thus repositioned Partition within a broader critique of colonial capitalism, highlighting how material inequalities intersected with communal identities.

Subaltern and Feminist Approaches

From the 1980s onward, the Subaltern Studies collective challenged elite-driven histories of Partition by recovering the experiences of marginalized groups. Gyanendra Pandey (1990) emphasized how communal violence was experienced differently across localities, resisting homogenized nationalist narratives. Feminist scholars such as Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin (1998) foregrounded gendered violence, examining abductions, rapes, and forced conversions that marked women's Partition experiences. These works highlighted silenced narratives, particularly of lower-class migrants, women, and peasants, revealing how Partition was not only a high-political event but also a deeply personal and traumatic rupture for millions. Subaltern historiography thus problematized both nationalist and Marxist frameworks, demanding attention to lived realities.

Pakistani Historiography

Foundational Narratives

In Pakistan, early historiography constructed Partition as the inevitable realization of the Two-Nation Theory. Official accounts, such as those propagated by Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi (1965), positioned Partition as the culmination of a centuries-long struggle by Muslims to preserve their religious and cultural identity. These works depicted Muslims as a distinct community incompatible with Hindu-majority India, thereby legitimizing the creation of Pakistan. Foundational historiography celebrated leaders like Muhammad Ali Jinnah as visionaries and downplayed the violence and dislocation accompanying independence, focusing instead on national destiny.

Islamic Nationalist Historiography

Building on the foundational narrative, Islamic nationalist historians emphasized the role of Islam in mobilizing the Muslim masses. Partition was framed not simply as political separation but as the rebirth of an Islamic homeland. Works by historians aligned with the Pakistani state depicted the Congress as majoritarian and oppressive, casting Jinnah as the sole spokesman of Muslim interests (Jalal, 1985). This approach reinforced Pakistan's ideological legitimacy, embedding Partition within a sacred teleology. In doing so, it mirrored Indian nationalist narratives by privileging elite politics while marginalizing ordinary experiences.

Revisionist Trends

From the 1980s onward, Pakistani scholars began reassessing state-centric narratives. Ayesha Jalal's *The Sole Spokesman* (1985) challenged the myth of an uncompromising Jinnah, arguing that he sought power-sharing rather than outright separation until late in negotiations. More recent scholars like Tahir Kamran (2008) have highlighted regional variations, showing how Punjab and Bengal experienced Partition differently from elite political discourses. Oral histories collected by diaspora scholars further complicate the triumphalist narrative, foregrounding the suffering of refugees

and the loss of composite culture. Revisionist Pakistani historiography thus increasingly acknowledges the violence, displacement, and contested nature of Partition, creating space for more nuanced debates.

Comparative Approaches

Contrasting Narratives

The divergence between Indian and Pakistani historiographies reflects their respective nation-building agendas. Indian works often frame Partition as a tragedy marked by betrayal, loss, and the failure of secular nationalism (Talbot & Singh, 2009). Pakistani works, conversely, emphasize liberation, destiny, and fulfillment of collective Muslim aspirations (Qureshi, 1965). These contrasting emphases reveal how Partition has been mobilized to sustain political legitimacy: as a warning against communalism in India, and as justification of Pakistan's existence.

Towards Shared Histories

In recent decades, comparative and cross-border approaches have sought to transcend nationalist frameworks. Works like Vazira Zamindar's *The Long Partition* (2007) and Yasmin Khan's *The Great Partition* (2007) employ both Indian and Pakistani sources to emphasize the everyday realities of migration, violence, and bureaucratic negotiations. Oral histories collected across borders (Butalia, 1998; Khan, 2017) reveal common experiences of trauma and loss, undermining state-sponsored narratives of inevitability or triumph. Diaspora scholarship, often written in English rather than Urdu or Hindi, further bridges divides by interrogating memory, nostalgia, and identity. These shared approaches demonstrate the potential for historiography to move beyond binaries of victimhood and destiny, towards a more interconnected understanding of Partition.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative historiographical approach to analyze how Partition has been narrated differently in Indian and Pakistani contexts. The methodology involves three main strategies.

First, **close reading of primary and secondary texts** will be conducted. These include official history textbooks from the NCERT in India and the Pakistan Studies Board, alongside works by major historians such as Bipan Chandra, Ayesha Jalal, Urvashi Butalia, and Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi. Academic monographs, memoirs, and oral history collections will also be examined.

Second, **content analysis** will be used to identify recurring themes. Particular attention will be given to depictions of colonial responsibility, political leadership, communal violence, migration, and gendered experiences. Comparing how these themes appear across national historiographies will highlight the extent of divergence and convergence.

Third, the study will contrast **state-sponsored narratives** (e.g., textbooks, nationalist histories) with **independent scholarship** (revisionist, subaltern, and diaspora perspectives). This contrast will help expose the political uses of history and reveal how historiography serves to construct collective memory and identity.

By systematically comparing Indian and Pakistani historiographies, the paper aims to move beyond parochial frameworks and illustrate the value of **comparative historiography in transcending nationalist boundaries**. Such an approach does not merely juxtapose two perspectives but interrogates the politics of history-writing itself, demonstrating how narratives of Partition continue to shape South Asia's contested past and present.

Analysis / Discussion

Colonial Responsibility vs. Indigenous Responsibility

A central historiographical divergence lies in how responsibility for Partition is apportioned between colonial rulers and indigenous actors. **Indian nationalist accounts** have consistently emphasized the role of British colonial policies in fostering communal divisions. Leaders such as Nehru (1946/1961) and later historians like Bipan Chandra (1984) argued that the British "divide-and-rule" strategy institutionalized religious categories through separate electorates, census practices, and the Communal Award of 1932. These measures, they contend, hardened fluid identities into rigid

communal blocs, making Partition almost inevitable. This interpretation portrays Partition less as an outcome of indigenous failings and more as a consequence of deliberate colonial manipulation.

In contrast, **Pakistani historiography** often minimizes British responsibility, instead stressing the irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims. Foundational narratives argue that the cultural, political, and religious incompatibility between the two communities necessitated Partition (Qureshi, 1965). The Two-Nation Theory is thus framed as a historical truth, not merely a political construct. This interpretation aligns with Pakistan's nation-building project, as it legitimizes statehood by portraying Partition as the natural culmination of centuries of Muslim struggle.

Revisionist scholarship complicates this binary. Ayesha Jalal (1985) challenged deterministic explanations by arguing that Jinnah initially sought federal arrangements and only hardened his demand for Partition when negotiations with Congress and the British failed. Scholars like Yasmin Khan (2007) emphasize the chaotic contingency of 1947, pointing out that the rushed British withdrawal exacerbated violence and disorder. These revisionist perspectives reveal Partition as neither fully imposed by the British nor entirely driven by communal incompatibility, but rather as the outcome of complex interactions among colonial haste, elite negotiations, and local tensions.

Role of Leaders

Leadership figures have been central to Partition narratives, yet their portrayals diverge sharply across Indian and Pakistani historiographies.

In **Indian accounts**, leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, and Patel occupy ambivalent positions. Gandhi is often remembered as a moral voice for unity and peace, yet critics point out his inability to prevent communal violence (Parekh, 1997). Nehru's commitment to secularism and modernity is celebrated, but his refusal to accommodate Muslim League demands is sometimes cited as a contributing factor to the impasse (Sarkar, 1983). Patel, meanwhile, is remembered as a pragmatic realist who prioritized consolidation of India over compromise. Indian nationalist historiography often portrays these leaders as tragic figures caught in impossible circumstances, with Partition framed as an unavoidable concession rather than a choice.

In **Pakistani historiography**, Jinnah is exalted as a visionary and uncompromising leader. Foundational narratives celebrate him as the *Quaid-e-Azam*, the sole spokesman of Muslim aspirations, who rescued his community from Hindu domination (Qureshi, 1965). His insistence on Partition is depicted not as obstinacy but as foresight. This heroic portrayal aligns with Pakistan's ideological foundation, elevating Jinnah as the father of the nation.

Revisionist perspectives, however, complicate these images. Jalal (1985) argued that Jinnah was more of a "sole spokesman" than a mass leader, using the demand for Pakistan as a bargaining tool rather than an ultimate goal. Similarly, Pakistani revisionists like Kamran (2008) highlight the regional diversity of Muslim politics, suggesting that Jinnah's appeal was uneven. On the Indian side, subaltern scholars question elite-centric narratives altogether, arguing that overemphasis on leaders obscures the agency of ordinary people (Pandey, 1990). Thus, while nationalist accounts heroize leaders, revisionist works expose their limitations and strategic maneuvering.

Communal Violence and Memory

Few aspects of Partition are as contested as the memory of violence. **Indian historiography** has extensively documented the trauma of displacement, massacres, and humanitarian crises. Historians like Gyanendra Pandey (2001) emphasize the intensity of communal riots, portraying Partition as a rupture in India's secular fabric. Oral histories, particularly feminist ones, foreground survivor testimonies of abduction, sexual violence, and forced conversions (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). These accounts stress the *human cost* of Partition, framing it as a tragedy that continues to haunt India's collective memory.

In contrast, **Pakistani narratives** have often downplayed Muslim-initiated violence, focusing instead on Muslim suffering during migration. Foundational historiography emphasized the plight of refugees (*muhajirs*) who fled India, portraying them as victims of Hindu and Sikh aggression. Official Pakistani accounts often presented Partition violence as evidence of Hindu-Muslim

incompatibility, reinforcing the justification for statehood. This selective memory marginalized instances of Muslim-perpetrated atrocities and overlooked shared experiences of trauma across communities.

Revisionist and cross-border scholarship has challenged these selective silences. Works like Zamindar's *The Long Partition* (2007) highlight how the violence was not one-sided but reciprocal, often breaking down along local rather than purely communal lines. Oral history projects conducted jointly by Indian and Pakistani researchers reveal that survivors, regardless of religion, narrated similar stories of loss, fear, and uprooting (Khan, 2017). Such accounts destabilize nationalist narratives by emphasizing shared suffering, offering the possibility of a more integrated memory of Partition.

Gender and Subaltern Perspectives

One of the most transformative shifts in Partition historiography has been the inclusion of **gendered and subaltern voices**.

In India, feminist historians like Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin (1998) have exposed the gendered dimensions of Partition violence. Women experienced abductions, rapes, forced conversions, and "recovery operations" by both states, which often treated them as symbols of communal honor rather than individuals. These works argue that nationalist and state-centric narratives erased women's voices, reducing them to passive victims. By reclaiming these stories, feminist historiography reveals how Partition reshaped gender relations and reinforced patriarchal controls.

In Pakistan, the integration of women's experiences into Partition history has been slower. However, recent scholarship has begun to address these silences, particularly through oral history projects. Pakistani researchers like Nighat Said Khan (2005) have highlighted how women's testimonies complicate triumphalist state narratives, exposing the pervasive trauma endured by women across religious lines.

Subaltern studies extend this recovery of marginalized voices beyond gender. Scholars such as Gyanendra Pandey (1990) and Shahid Amin (1995) emphasize how peasants, laborers, and migrants shaped Partition through everyday decisions and local actions. Rather than focusing on elite negotiations, subaltern perspectives demonstrate how violence and migration were experienced differently across regions and classes. These approaches challenge both Indian and Pakistani nationalist historiographies by decentralizing elite actors and foregrounding ordinary people's agency.

Textbook Narratives

Perhaps the most direct reflection of nationalist historiography lies in **school textbooks**, where Partition is narrated for future generations.

In **India**, NCERT textbooks often present Partition as a tragic event that disrupted the vision of secular unity. The emphasis falls on colonial responsibility, with limited attention to Congress's failings or Hindu communalism (Chopra, 2011). Violence is acknowledged but often generalized, with little exploration of Muslim victimhood. This selective narration aligns with India's secular democratic identity, framing Partition as a lesson against communal politics.

In **Pakistan**, by contrast, Partition is portrayed as the culmination of a centuries-long Muslim struggle. Textbooks glorify Jinnah and depict the Congress as Hindu-dominated and hostile to Muslim interests (Naseem, 2010). The violence of Partition is attributed to Hindu and Sikh aggression, while Muslim-perpetrated violence is omitted. This narrative reinforces the Two-Nation Theory and legitimizes Pakistan's existence as a homeland for Muslims.

Comparative studies reveal how these **state-sponsored memories** are instrumental in shaping national identities. By silencing certain aspects of history and emphasizing others, textbooks transform Partition from a complex historical event into a moral-political lesson. Independent scholarship, however, has begun to challenge these didactic narratives, calling for more nuanced, inclusive accounts that incorporate multiple perspectives.

Conclusion

The historiography of the 1947 Partition reveals deep divergences between Indian and Pakistani interpretations, shaped by the imperatives of nation-building, identity formation, and political legitimacy. **Indian narratives** tend to emphasize colonial responsibility, the tragedy of communal violence, and the failure of secular nationalism, while **Pakistani narratives** frame Partition as the triumphant fulfillment of Muslim aspirations, downplaying violence and privileging the vision of Jinnah. Revisionist and subaltern scholarship in both countries has complicated these binaries, highlighting contingency, regional diversity, and marginalized voices.

What emerges is a picture of Partition not as a fixed historical truth but as a contested memory, continually reinterpreted to serve present needs. Historiography in both India and Pakistan demonstrates how history-writing is as much about the present as the past, shaping collective memory and political identity.

The challenge lies in moving beyond nationalist silos towards a **shared history** approach. Cross-border oral histories, diaspora scholarship, and feminist interventions already point to the possibility of writing Partition as a human tragedy that transcends communal boundaries. Future research should deepen this trajectory by expanding access to cross-border archives, facilitating collaborative projects, and foregrounding survivor narratives that resist state-sponsored silences.

Ultimately, the comparative study of Partition historiography demonstrates that while India and Pakistan have written their pasts differently, they share a common investment in using history as a tool of nation-building. Recognizing these parallels may provide a pathway toward more inclusive, empathetic, and reconciliatory histories of one of the twentieth century's most consequential events.

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