

Understanding Emergency and Partition as Ruptural Moments

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Abstract. This paper attempts to understand the new forms of knowledge made available through an enquiry into ruptural moments constituted by events of national importance. The focus is primarily on two critical events, Partition and Emergency, for they have been considered as symptomatic of the nation's engagement with secularism, democracy and citizenship in the contemporary. The authors argue that South Asian nations and communities, especially India, can engage with and understand their present effectively only by coming into terms with the past events that has been silenced, erased and subjugated. Functioning as a metanarrative, the paper illustrates how a study of ruptural moments helps in identifying the shifts in discursive patterns, initiating critical enquiries into the past and uncovering forgotten narratives. The alternative histories generated by the re-visiting of ruptural moments are useful in sustaining more inclusive and liberating perspectives for understanding the contemporary.

Keywords: “rupture”, “discourse”, “past events”, “uncovering the past”, “access the contemporary”

1. Introduction

The 1990s, in India, witnessed a sudden interest in revisiting past events of national importance and exploring their trajectory from different disciplinary and ideological perspectives. Accordingly, a number of studies on events such as Chauri Chauraⁱ, Partition and Emergency were initiated, thus earmarking a quest for alternate histories. These events were significantly entwined with the story of the nation, and had caused a ‘rupture’ in the otherwise secular, non-violent character of the nation projected in dominant histories. That this renewed interest followed the socio-political conjuncture of 1989-1991 was particularly interesting, as the period was identified as a “truly ruptural moment” in contemporary Indian history, characterized by the ‘complete collapse of Nehruvian consensus’ in India (Menon and Nigam). Having seen how this “truly ruptural moment” interrogated and radically re-presented the identities constituted on the basis of religion, caste and gender the authors found it important to engage with the significance of ruptural moments in understanding the history of modern India. For this paper, we choose to focus on two critical events – Partition and Emergency – that could be designated as ruptural moments in the history of post-Independent India. The objective of the paper is to understand the new forms of knowledge made available through an enquiry into these ruptural moments. The rationale for choosing to focus on Partition and Emergency is that these two events have shaped and re-shaped the secular democratic ideals of the nation, and have remained as two axes from where historians, sociologists and politicians have attempted to re-frame and re-invent the nation.

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ⁱ See *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922 - 1992* by Shahid Amin (1996) which is considered as a seminal work in the area of historiographic studies in India. Chauri Chaura is recorded in Indian nationalist historiography as an instance of popular violent uprising that provoked the calling off of the Non-cooperation movement led by Gandhi, the leader of anti-colonial nationalist movement. Amin tries to ‘rescue’ and ‘reclaim’ the event from official narratives, through a process of re-narrativisation based on the ‘historical field work’ conducted during 1988-1991.

2. Identifying and locating ruptural moments in history

Not all events in history could be designated with the momentousness of a 'rupture'; therefore, it is important to understand the nature and character of ruptural moments in order to engage with them insightfully. 'Rupture' is not a monosemic term and affords multiple interpretations; it could be loosely defined in literal terms as 'a breaking apart', 'the state of being broken apart' (Websters' dictionary) or a 'breach' (Oxford Dictionary); in political writings the term has been used to mean divisions and disagreements leading to a political impasse (Vijay Prashad); from a postmodern perspective rupture stresses extreme breaks, discontinuities, and an apocalyptic sense of ending and completely new beginnings (Steven Best and Douglas Kellner). Veena Das' definition of critical events could be a useful starting point to understand ruptural moments. According to Das, a critical event is "an event par excellence because it instituted a new modality of historical action which was not inscribed in the inventory of that situation" (Das 5). In this paper, we refer to this 'institution of a new modality' as 'rupture'. The ruptural moment, is not a single random event but could be a series of ideas, debates and incidents which culminated in a major irreversible catastrophe. In the context of this paper, the term rupture is used to signify an instance of 'breaking apart' which happens rather too suddenly leaving unforeseen implications behind. Accordingly, events such as Partition and Emergency are identified as ruptural moments, splintering socio-political and historical consensus.

The authors argue that the ruptural moments constituted by these critical events have resulted in three significant changes in the historiography of post-Independent India. One, they have initiated a shift in discourses, resulting in an incision upon the democratic institutions of the state. Two, they act as points of enquiry into the past, unsettling memories and re-configuring the past. Three, they help uncover forgotten, silenced, subjugated narratives which have been taken away from public discourse. It needs to be stated that this paper functions as a metanarrative, drawing from the studies of Urvashi Butalia (2000); Shahid Amin (1996); Emma Tarlo (2003); Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998); Kavita Daiya (2008) and Gyanendra Pandey (2002), seminal works which have highlighted the momentousness of events such as Partition, Emergency and Chauri Chaura and their roles in defining the dominant constructs of democracy, secularism, nationalism and citizenship. In these works, the methods of enquiry into the past parallel the 'narrative turn in history' and the studies in historiography that dominated the western academia from the 1970s onwards.

2.1. Shift in discourses

Studies on ruptural moments show that they have not merely caused a temporary disruption but have changed the dynamics of the society and the State inside out. What makes certain events 'ruptural moments' is the fact that the changes were not temporary in nature but permanent with a lasting effect on the constitution of various institutions of the State and civil society. For the same reason moments of rupture becomes significant in re-telling the procedures of nationhood, history and particular forms of sociality. The shift in discursive patterns that followed ruptural moments is one of the major provocations for engaging with Partition and Emergency. Veena Das who engaged in an in depth study on Partition as a critical event, argues that the event brought about new modes of action which redefined traditional categories and saw the emergence of new political actors. As Roma Chatterji puts it, "the event of Partition is not constituted as a violent moment, rather it is a rupture, the effects of which are felt long after the event has occurred. it destabilizes the life-world creating alternate biographies that are hidden behind the cultural roles that society expects its members to play" (Chatterji and Mehta 430). Accordingly, though the unprecedented violence is a defining feature of the event of Partition, what makes it a ruptural event is the ways in which it destabilized and re-configured the story of the nation. Much of the crises that are embedded in the fragmented identities within the nation could be traced back to Partition, the violent birthmark of independent India. It was the moment of the congealing of new identities, relations, and histories that led to the fixing of the minority citizen with questionable intentionsⁱⁱ. The effects of Partition cannot be limited to the geographical boundaries of India; it challenged the discursive patterns of the whole of South Asia and is being increasingly identified as 'the singular moment in the history of South Asia and Britian that had a profound

ⁱⁱ See Gyanendra Pandey's "Can a Muslim be an Indian?" (1999); "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today" (1992) and *Remembering Partition* (2001).

and lasting effect on the politics and societies of many of the nations that make up contemporary South Asia” (Daiya 5).

Emergency that happened during 1975-77, three decades after the Independence and Partition of India, is projected as an event that provoked a series of debates on the crisis of secularism in India thereby reiterating the transformative potential of the event. More importantly, the term secularism first entered the constitution of India in the post-Emergency years with the 42nd amendment (Needham and Rajan viii). For the generation that grew up on the Nehruvian secular ideals of democracy and nationalism, Emergency was a crucial moment that questioned the very foundations on which the nation was built. Accordingly, the interest of historians, sociologists and anthropologists was in comprehending how the event changed the people’s thoughts and lives. For instance, Neelam Srivastava identifies Emergency as a turning point in which the secular modern citizen’s faith in Indian democracy and pluralism was being decisively eroded among the Indian public (Srivastava 10). Similarly, tracking the popular narratives and experiences of survivors and victims of the event, Emma Tarlo’s *Unsettling Memories* sought to understand how Emergency refashioned the relationship between citizen, state and market in contemporary urban India. Thus, what gets foregrounded in the study of ruptural moments is the shift in discursive patterns, ideologies and identities.

2.2. Enquiry into the past

The desire to access the past dominates most of the studies on ruptural moments. It helps establish continuity in the otherwise seemingly isolated moments strewn together with collective tragedy, horror and victimization. For instance, what enables us to discuss two events of varying socio-political imports – Partition that followed the independence from colonial power and Emergency declared as part of coercive State measures – is the rupture that they caused in the dominant narratives, thereby creating an aporia to engage with the past. It would be useful to begin this section with a poignant personal recollection from Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence*:

We were middle-class Indians who had grown up in a period of relative calm and prosperity, when tolerance and ‘secularism’ seemed to be winning the argument. These stories [of partition] – of loot, arson, rape, murder – came out of a different time. . . . Then, in October 1984 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her security guards, both Sikhs. For days afterwards Sikhs all over India were attacked in an orgy of violence and revenge. . . . The stories of Partition no longer seemed quite so remote It took the events of 1984 to make me understand how ever-present Partition was in our lives, too (Butalia 3-5).

We may note that the context of anti-Sikh riots, which, being a critical event has the potential to cause a rupture in the community’s relationship with the nation and society, evokes memories of a violent but forgotten past and works as a provocative reason to probe into the past (here Partition) that had ceased to be real for the present generation. As Butalia admits, it was the experience of living in Delhi in 1984 and watching the brutal and senseless massacre of thousands of Sikhs after the death of Mrs. Gandhi, that brought home to her the violence of Partition; it was then that she began to understand that Partition was not a closed chapter of history. It could be argued that, in similar ways, the context of a rupture provides entry points to a past which seemed unreal or inaccessible. Another seminal work on partition narratives, *Borders and Boundaries* by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin was also published after the Sikh riots of 1984. Menon and Bhasin recount how the long-forgotten traumatic past of the Partition resurfaced at the wake of the 1984 riots:

. . . everything that happened pre-1947 was safely between the covers of our history books. Comfortably distant, undeniably laid to rest . . . 1984 changed all that. The ferocity with which Sikhs were killed in city after city in north India in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s assassination, the confusion and shock that stunned us into disbelief and then into a terrible realization of what had happened, dispelled forever that false sense of security. . . . here was Partition once more in our midst. . . (x-xi).

As we note here, an event of rupture becomes more significant only when it opens the doors to access an otherwise unreal past, shrouded with myths and mysteries. An account of the differing experiences of Partition displacement are pointers to the way collective memories of cataclysmic events are formed and popularly remembered (Kaur). Partition, therefore, comes across as an event continually brought into being by the play of subject memories. Accordingly, each new eruption of hostility or episode of brutality (for instance, the Ayodhya issue, Mumbai riots, Gujarat riots etc) leads to a swift recalling of ‘the massacre and

migration on a scale unparalleled in world history in peace time' (Pandey 7). In much similar ways, Emergency was identified as the lynchpin of critical enquiry only at the wake of events such as communal riots and popular uprisings against the State that threatened the secular democratic fabric of the nation.

2.3. Uncovering silenced, forgotten narratives

In the recent past, there has been a growing body of literature seeking to work against the areas of collective silence which often cling to violent and disturbing events. Whether it is Partition on which 'there is no dearth of material' (Butalia 5) or Emergency which 'has been much mythologised but little studied' (Tarlo 2), or Chauri Chaura which 'was quarantined within a consequentialist past' (Amin 5), the official history elided the social history embedded within these events. The sheer absence of visible reminders of institutional memorials such as a statue or a memorial plaque instituted by the State, transformed the sites for remembering into sites for forgettingⁱⁱⁱ. Accordingly, events such as Partition and Emergency have been forced to go down in history merely as political strategies which had little to do with the lives of the people before or after the event. This erasure of the 'before' and 'after' consequently led to the silencing and negation of the tragedy, horror and trauma that marked the lives that lived through the moments. Emma Tarlo theorises this 'amnesia induced by the State agencies' and shows how they do not fit comfortably into the national picture of how things are meant to be" because they "do not fit the 'history of progress' as we want to see it" (Tarlo 21). She argues that despite the specificity of the Emergency as an event, it provides some sort of privileged access to the semi-obscure social and political structures of everyday life in the capital city. Thus, a ruptural event which creates a gap in the existing narrative, allows entry into the otherwise forgotten and forbidden corridors of history. Here we see the frozen events in history getting transformed into points of critical enquiry, foregrounding the silenced and forgotten narratives, often featuring the lives ordinary citizens.

3. Conclusion

The intelligentsia and academia in India have begun to critically engage with Partition and Emergency only in the last two decades. This engagement, however traumatic and fragmented it is, has been rewarding in understanding the instances of insurgency that continue to threaten the secular democratic founding of the nation. The contemporary, however, is fraught with questions of understanding and coming to terms with the past, the failure of which has led to violence and instability. Engaging with the ruptural moments in history would help us reclaim the past which often is embedded within textualised, official histories. Much of the fragmentation that nations and communities in South Asia encounter could be identified with the failure of the agents of the State and civil society to reclaim the past and rescue the events from the hegemonic discourses of dominance. While the production of an alternate historical understanding may not always render a perfect resolution, it would certainly lead to the emergence of perspectives that are more inclusive, multiple and hence, liberating.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Urvashi Butalia points out, "In India there is no institutional memory of Partition: the State has not seen fit to construct any memorials, to mark any particular places – as has been done say, in the case of holocaust memorials or memorials for the Vietnam war" (Butalia 286). Similarly, Emma Tarlo also records her disappointment in not having found any "visible reminders of the Emergency; a statue to the sterilized perhaps [or] . . . A simple memorial plaque" (Tarlo 55). Kavita Daiya adds in her study of Partition, "Seen largely as an aberration in modern Indian history, this Partition is little memorialized by the state or by those affected by it" (Daiya 7).

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