

Takht posh - تخت پوش

INDS502: Historical Memory and Social Reconstruction

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In December 2017, I was visiting my family in Calgary and had brought home some school work. As long as I was working on my project, half of the living room floor was covered in sheets of paper and my books were spread all over the house – the living room, the dining table, my parent’s bed – literally, everywhere. A couple of days after I had completed my project, my books were still lying around all over the place. Noticing this, my *daadi* (paternal grandmother), who had until then successfully resisted her urge to comment on my ‘eccentric’ working habits, finally asked why I had not put my books away even though I was done working. That is the beginning of the story portrayed in *Takht-posh* (an Urdu word for a type of bed). *Daadi* told me how even as a kid she would keep all her dolls neatly arranged on a their special *takht-posh*. What started off as a standard “when I was your age...” mini-lecture, turned into an hour long conversation about *daadi*’s childhood in India.¹ This, of course, is not unusual for me; I’ve grown up listening to *daadi*’s stories. What struck me, though, is how the conversation ended:

daadi: It was a good time. We’d play a lot. We’d put on little *burkhas* and play
... had to leave the *burkhas* there... the dolls were also sitting on their *takht-posh*

me: when you *left* your home?

daadi: ... nobody knew how long it would take to get to Pakistan

...we didn’t bring much

A conversation that was prompted by an everyday happening ended with a sudden, though perhaps not entirely unexpected, allusion to the 1947 Partition of India. With the end of the British Raj, the subcontinent was divided into two nation-states, India and Pakistan. On the ground, this meant that millions of Muslims in India and Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan had suddenly found themselves in the ‘wrong’ country. In the ‘retributive genocide’ that ensued,²

¹ The version of the conversation incorporated into the art piece is also included in Appendix 1 at the end of this reflection. I have recreated the conversation based on some notes I took right after my conversation with *daadi*. Also, the original conversation took place in Punjabi and Urdu. I have translated it to English with some words retained in the original Punjabi or Urdu.

² Paul R. Brass, “The partition of India and retributive genocide in the Punjab, 1946-47: Means, methods, and purposes,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 5, no. 1 (2003): 72. DOI: 10.1080/14623520305657

approximately 200,000 – 360,000 people were killed and approximately 12 million people were displaced from their homes.³ Among the latter were all of my grandparents and their families. *Takht-posh*, a mixed media art piece, attempts to capture the ways in which the histories and memories of the 1947 Partition of India intersect with, overlap, and constitute each other. In particular, by superimposing sketches inspired by my conversation with *daadi* on top of a textbook version of the independence/partition of India and Pakistan, I hope to demonstrate how the events of 1947 have lived on in the lives of individuals who experienced them firsthand and in the everyday lives of their families, as well as the tense relationship of these memories with more public remembrances of the Partition.

Before expanding on the above mentioned themes, it is useful to briefly explain the process for creating this piece and the choice of media used. A mixed media piece, *Takht-posh* was created using tea stains, watercolours, graphite pencils, pen and printed-text on a nine inch by twenty-eight inch sheet of watercolour paper. I started off by adding a wash of tea stains to the paper, which was meant to create the look of a vintage textbook page. On top of the tea-stained paper, I printed the background text using a simple tracing technique that can be used to transfer printed images onto paper.⁴ The text in the background is a slightly edited excerpt from *A History of India* by Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund.⁵ This text is placed in the art piece as a representation of relatively fixed accounts of the moment of independence that tend to dominate national imaginaries of how the Partition took place.

³ Brass notes that the estimates of death tolls vary from 200,000 to a million. The numbers are of course highly contested. However, the magnitude of the event, Brass notes, is clear from the fact that these deaths and killings took place in the context of what was officially recognized as “peacetime” between India and Pakistan. Ibid, 73.

⁴ The idea for this technique was borrowed from the following video: UM Stamps, “DIY Inkjet Transfers,” YouTube, accessed on April 16, 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3AhszEmqOE>

⁵ I took out some sentences to fit the text within the available space. H. Kulke and D. Rothermund, *A History of India*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 257 – 262, accessed on: <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/books/9781317242130>

Thereafter, I superimposed on to the text sketches inspired by my conversation with my grandmother in December. The sketches and anecdotes were completed using watercolours, graphite pencils, and pen.⁶ Watercolours – which spill into one another, can be added in layers, and are generally hard to control – are in a way a representation of how memory works. The generation of memory is not always a linear recall of events. Paul Connerton, for example, notes how historians working with oral narratives often find that people narrate their experiences in a cyclical way, rather than linearly.⁷ On the other hand, Carol Kidron’s work indicates how the children of Holocaust survivors receive knowledge about their parent’s past in fragments as opposed to elaborate narratives.⁸ That memory is not generated or transmitted with clear temporal continuities in narrative is also evident from the way my *daadi*’s anecdotes jump from one time and place to another. Together, these two elements, the textbook history and my grandmother’s anecdotes, are meant to show how different forms of knowing about historical events or coexist (sometimes, in tension with each other) and overlap to create social memory of the past. Lastly, the use of pencil to add detailing in the sketches, is meant to signify the dual fact that the generation and transmission of memory within and across generations necessarily involves some imaginative filling in of details,⁹ and that memory is susceptible to erasure due repressive political forces.



With these observations about the process of my work in mind, the rest of this reflection expands on two themes: 1) my own position in relation to the histories and memories I seek to portray in *Takht-posh*, and how this project can be seen as an example of the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, and 2) the relevance of this type of

⁶ Ideas for watercolour techniques were borrowed from the following website: WATERCOLOURPAINTING.com, www.watercolourpainting.com

⁷ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 20

⁸ Carol A. Kidron, “Toward an Ethnography of Silence: the Lived Presence of the Past in the Everyday lives of Holocaust Trauma Survivors and Their Descendants in Israel,” *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 1 (2009): 14

⁹ Hirsch writes about how even the most intimate familial knowledge of the past is mediated by broadly available public images and narratives. Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 112

remembrance of the Partition. Firstly, I approach this work – that is, the work of historical memory – as a person who has grown up in urban Pakistan. The Pakistan I have grown up in is profoundly shaped by the period of General Zia-ul-Haq’s ‘Islamization’ project in the 1980s, which reified Pakistan’s identity as an Islamic state for Muslims, and to the exclusion of its minorities through discriminatory laws that have proven hard to reform.¹⁰ Thus, my motivation to understand and represent how the history and memory of the Partition is created in South Asia is informed by and inextricably connected with broader questions such as: What does it mean to be a Pakistani today? Can Pakistanis envision a future that retains aspects of their Islamic identity without the exclusion of its religious minorities? And with India heading on a similarly dangerous path of religious extremism in the guise of nationalism, I am compelled to wonder if the impact of the divisions, based on religious difference, entrenched by the Partition can be mitigated in the future? Can uncovering previously untold memories of the Partition initiate a process of collective reckoning with the past?  Thus, to the extent that *Takht-posh*, as a representation of a memory of the 1947 Partition, is a “selective re-creation that is dependent for its meaning” on the current socio-political context of Pakistan as well as aspirations for the future of this polity,¹¹ it is more than an effort to simply record multiple versions of the past. It is an effort to generate a knowledge of the Partition that is constituted by the affective force of memory, which is necessarily a part of the process through which I have received knowledge of the Partition from my elders. 

¹⁰ For a discussion of how General Zia tied the ‘Islamization’ project to the very idea of Pakistan by drawing on tropes from the Independence movement, and therefore, why reforming some of the laws implemented in his time has become the equivalent of questioning Pakistan’s *raison d’être*, see: I. A. Rehman, “40 YEARS OF ZIA: HOW ZIA REDEFINED PAKISTAN,” *Dawn* July 2, 2017, accessed on April 22, 2018: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1342697>

¹¹ Argenti, Nicolas and K. Schramm, *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 1-3

¹² Hirsch talks about how postmemorial work can reactivate more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures through the reinvestment of individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. This expression of memory, unlike history, signals an affective link to the past, a sense of an embodied ‘living connection’. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 111

While it is important to clarify my own positionality in relation to the history Partition and its influence on my representation of its memory in *Takht-posh*; there is, I believe, another motivation for remembering the Partition in this way, a motivation connected to conveying difficult knowledge about the past that even some historians think is impossible to capture in purely historical accounts.¹³ This difficult knowledge is important, of course, to create more nuanced understandings of the Partition. The case of remembering the Partition is, as Gyanendra Panday notes, especially complicated because it was accompanied by India's liberation from British colonial rule.¹⁴ Pandey demonstrates the complexity of remembering this dual event of the Partition-Independence by pointing out how Independence was an abstract thing for many, while the Partition, as one person noted, in a negative sense was a very tangible reality – “Whenever we met as a family – for us, it was Partition, not Independence [that counted]”.¹⁵ This quote is important because it captures a common theme in the remembrance of 1947; the events of 1947 are overwhelmingly remembered as Independence on the collective level, while family stories – like my grandmother's – continue to evoke the remembrance of a displacement and of loss. Moreover, this sense of loss and displacement is particularly difficult to pay attention to in the case of Pakistan because, as Pandey correctly notes, there was no distinction between Independence and Partition for Pakistan, Partition *was* Independence.¹⁶ Yet, the stories I have

¹³ Rockwell argues points out how it is common for South Asian historians emphasize the ability of literary accounts of the partition to capture something about the experience that seems impossible to capture in historical writing alone. Rockwell disagrees with this position and argues that this can be an excuse for historiography that refuses to be attentive to the experiences of people. Daisy Rockwell, “Particularities of Partition Literature I,” *The Chapati Mystery*, February 19, 2010, accessed on April 22: http://www.chapatimystery.com/archives/university/particularities_of_partition_literature_i.html/comment-page-1

¹⁴ Gyanendra Pandey, “Partition and Independence in Delhi: 1947-48,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 36 (1997): 2261

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

received from my grandparents reveal memories marked by a permanent sense of loss. It is these memories that I have sought to capture in *Takht-posh*.

Appendix 1

Calgary, Canada (December 2017)

daadi: You should put your books away if you're not studying anymore?

me: Hmm.. I'll do it later ...

District of Jalandhar, India (1940s)

....

daadi: I used to be very organized.. would keep all my things in their place. I had these dolls when I was a kid, and I had a special *takht-posh* made for them. I would dress them up and arrange them neatly on the *takht-posh*

me: (chuckles) How old were you?

daadi: we were young

me: so in India?

daadi: Yes.. we would play, *maasi Nazeeran* and I. We would play in the *vehra* (veranda).. I got my *bibi* (mother) to make *burkhas* for us too.

(laughs)

We'd wear those little *burkhas* and play in the *vehra*. It was not even outside the house.. there were these four houses...ours, *Fazl Bibi's*, and some other relatives... all connected.. veranda in the centre to connect them

so we didn't even have to go out on the street, but we'd play in the *vehra* with little *burkhas* on (laughs)

...

We'd also play with *Taqi** and *Sheema*.. but there was this one girl, she kept making silly faces at me.. so I hit her and told *maman jee* (uncle) that she couldn't come on the *tanga* (carriage) with us...I didn't like her.

me: wait so, *nana abu** was visiting your family?

daadi: no, no.. we went to *Ambarsar* (colloquial name for Amritsar). To visit them.

me: so *nana abu's* family lived in Amritsar?

daadi: Yes.. at the time... *maman jee* was a surgeon in the army, so he would get posted in different cities.

when he was in *Ambarsar*, he sent a telegram to my *bibi* (mother)..

*Taqi is the name of my nana abu (maternal grandfather).

Amritsar, India (1940s)

...

So we went to visit them in *Ambarsar*... it was so much fun... all day, us kids, we would run around the house

then in the evening *maman jee* would call a *tanga* and take us for a walk on *thandi sarak* (cool road)

Me: *thandi sarak*?

daadi: hmm.. it was next to the *nehr* (canal)... lined with trees, so it was cool in the summers.. a lot of people would go there for a walk in the evening

we would also get *falsay* (type of berry) too... they had very good *falsay* there.. *maman jee*'s servant, he would buy each of the kids *falsay* for 2 *annas* (old unit of currency).

(laughs)

Taqi would eat all of his *falsay* quickly... and then tell *maman jee* that the girls got more than him ...

District of Jalandhar, India (summer, 1947)

...

It was a good time. We'd play a lot. We'd put on little *burkhas* and play.

... had to leave the *burkhas* there... the dolls were also sitting on their *takht-posh*

me: ... when you *left* your home?

daadi: yes, we couldn't take much with us... nobody knew how long it would take to get to Pakistan

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