

Partition in South Asia

written by Amna Latif | August 16, 2026



75 Years After Partition: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh offers a timely, interdisciplinary intervention into the cultural memory, historiography, and ideological reproduction of the 1947 Partition of British India and the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. Spanning cinema, literature, textbooks, and language politics, the volume situates Partition not as a finite historical event, but as an ongoing process—a living memory-project shaped by state narratives, popular culture, and personal trauma. While the volume is ambitious and often incisive, it is uneven in theoretical depth, methodological rigor, and critical reflexivity.

Building on this foundational premise, the volume's most significant achievement lies in its interdisciplinary breadth. By bringing together scholars from history, media studies, literature, and education, it demonstrates how Partition continues to shape national identities and ideological frameworks across South Asia. The inclusion of analyses of cinema (both Bollywood and Lollywood), textbooks, novels, and language politics allows for a multi-scalar understanding of how Partition is narrated, remembered, and weaponized in different contexts. This interdisciplinary approach is not just expansive—it is essential, as it reveals how memory is constructed not only in archives and classrooms but also in cinemas and living rooms.

Central to this endeavor is the editors' framing of Partition as a "politicized memory-project." This concept is theoretically grounded and sets a critical tone for the volume. It challenges statist historiographies that either glorify or erase Partition violence, and instead positions memory as a contested terrain where nationalist, gendered, and religious identities are continuously negotiated. This framing is particularly effective in destabilizing monolithic narratives and opening space for subaltern, feminist, and counter-hegemonic readings.

Among the most analytically rich contributions are the chapters on cinematic representations. Ritika Verma and Anjali Gera Roy's analysis of Hindi films like *Pinjar*, *Veer-Zaara*, and *Uri* offers a nuanced reading of how mainstream cinema oscillates between humanist cross-border romance and hyper-nationalist militarism. Their conclusion—that even seemingly progressive films like *Veer-Zaara* ultimately reinforce Hindu majoritarian nationalism through symbolic "Hindu-ization" of the female protagonist—is a powerful critique of how cinema can subtly entrench majoritarian ideologies under the guise of universalism.

Complementing this, Farooq Sulehria's chapter on Lollywood (the Pakistani film industry) is a standout. His theorization of Partition as a three-stage process—Context, Event, and Memorialization—is a significant theoretical contribution. Through discourse analysis of films like *Kartar Singh* and *Khamosh Pani*, he demonstrates that Pakistani cinema has both resisted and reproduced statist narratives. His observation that *Khamosh Pani* was banned for its radical gendered critique of Islamization is particularly striking, and his use of a Marxist framework to view cinema as an ideological state apparatus is both bold and well-earned.

In contrast, Fahmidul Haq's chapter on Bangladeshi cinema, while empirically rich, is theoretically thinner. He convincingly demonstrates the "absence of 1947" and the "abundance of 1971" in Bangladeshi cinema, but his explanation—that 1971 is more recent and emotionally resonant—risks reifying the very amnesia he critiques. This chapter misses an opportunity to engage more deeply with trauma theory or postcolonial melancholia, which other contributors, such as Afroja Shoma, employ more effectively to explore the psychological afterlives of Partition.

Shifting from screen to classroom, the two chapters on textbooks—Devika Mittal (India) and Mazhar Abbas (Pakistan)—offer scathing indictments of how state curricula produce and perpetuate stigmatized Muslim identities. Mittal's analysis of two Indian history textbooks reveals how Muslims are either "invisibilized" as freedom fighters or "demonized" as communal actors. Her conclusion that textbooks reproduce the "enemy within" narrative is chilling and empirically well-supported. Similarly, Abbas's comparative analysis of Pakistani textbooks under the Zia dictatorship and Gen. Musharraf's military shows that both military regimes, despite ideological differences, used Hegelian philosophical history to selectively narrate 1947 as "liberation" and 1971 as "conspiracy." His documentation of how Bengalis are "silenced" or "othered" as Hindu agents is a sobering reminder of the way Partition continues to shape intra-Muslim hierarchies in Pakistan.

Both chapters, however, suffer from a lack of engagement with pedagogy. They analyze content but not classroom reception or teacher mediation. Without ethnographic or student-centered data, their claims about the "effects" of these textbooks remain speculative. This methodological gap points to a broader limitation in the volume: while it excels at textual critique, it often assumes ideological transmission without empirically evidencing how audiences interpret or resist these narratives.

Turning to literature, Afroja Shoma's chapter on Bangladeshi novels and Qaisar Abbas's chapter on *Zameen* by Khadija Mastoor offer powerful gendered readings of Partition. Shoma's use of "post-amnesia" and "long partition" to frame 1971 as an extension of 1947 is theoretically sophisticated. Her reading of female bodies becoming sites of national honor and trauma is compelling, though her sample lacks Dalit or indigenous voices. Similarly, Abbas's analysis of *Zameen* is a searing feminist critique of how migrancy and patriarchy intersect in post-Partition Pakistan. His conceptual model—Partition → Ideological State → Patriarchy → Mendacity—is ambitious and largely convincing, though at times overly schematic, reducing complex literary characters to ideological archetypes.

Extending the lens to language, Amit Ranjan's chapter on the communalization of Hindi and Urdu is a valuable contribution to the linguistic afterlives of Partition. His fieldwork in Mumbai adds ethnographic texture, showing the way ordinary speakers blur the Hindi-Urdu divide even as elites police linguistic purity. However, his conclusion that "common people speak khichdi" risks romanticizing syncretism and underplaying the fact that language is increasingly policed in contemporary India. The chapter also under-theorizes the role of script—Devanagari vs. Nastaliq—as a visual marker of religious identity, which could have deepened the analysis.

Despite these strengths, the volume has notable silences. Dalit and Adivasi perspectives are almost entirely absent, leaving Partition's impact on caste hierarchies and tribal displacement largely unaddressed. Queer readings of Partition cinema or literature are missing, despite the volume's strong gendered focus. Moreover, reader reception or audience studies are lacking—most chapters assume ideological transmission without exploring how audiences interpret, resist, or reconfigure these narratives. Finally, while the volume spans India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, comparative transnationalism is underdeveloped; there is little dialogue between the chapters that could have enriched the analysis.

In conclusion, *75 Years After Partition* is a vital intervention in Partition Studies. The volume successfully demonstrates how Partition is not a past event but an ongoing ideological project that

shapes citizenship, gender, and identity across South Asia. Its strengths lie in its interdisciplinarity, gendered readings, and critique of majoritarian nationalism. However, its methodological limitations—especially the lack of ethnographic or reception studies—and theoretical unevenness prevent it from being a truly transformative volume.