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## **Collective memories: A way to understand the process of identity formation of migrants**

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### **Abstract**

Collective memory is the integral part of the journey of migrants/refugees both at the time of 'rootedness' and 'uprootedness'. In this research paper, the researcher had tried to explore the process of construction and reconstruction of identity formation of migrant and refugee groups through the formation of collective memories. The trauma of leaving the homeland is crucial in the making of collective memories. Furthermore, the language used 'by the migrants' and 'for the migrants' is also significant in defining the courses of their memories. These collective memories are also formed as the result of interaction between the host community and migrants, which show the traces of assimilation as well as resilience. As a result of these fragmented collective memories, the migrant community usually have a ruptured identity which transcends between the feeling of selves and others.

**Keywords:** Collective memories, trauma migrants/refugee, host community identity

### **Introduction**

The making of nations and communities depends on a critical understanding of belongingness. This notion of belongingness is not only a claim, rather an accomplishment of relationships which are historically developed locally as well as transnationally. The process of Partition makes this understanding more complex in the context of migrants and refugees. In the process of (im) migration resulting from partition, the people are constituted through relations of power and inequality, which further complicate the processes of state formation as well as developing the meaning of nation. For instance, in undivided Bengal, the Bengali nation which was based on linguistic identity, which tried to unite the people belonging to diverse social groupings of class, religion, and ethnicity. But after partition, this belongingness was ruptured and the religious identity and belongingness became the focal point of reference instead of linguistic identity which was the prominent factor in pre-independence times and which can be seen as outrage in the 1905 partition of Bengal (Samaddar, 1999) <sup>[20]</sup>. This rupturing of belongingness due to partition, leading to 'construction of the Other', results in exclusion and anxiety, challenging the desires of long-term residents as migrants do not feel related to their new place of dwelling. This 'making of difference' develops the context for the political and institutional practices to engage with the process of accommodation, rehabilitation, and further resettlement of migrants into new communities and enclaves. (Samaddar, 1999) <sup>[20]</sup>.

Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) <sup>[12]</sup> try to identify the frames which are commonly used in popular discourse as well as media reports throughout the world about refugees. They share that the refugees are primarily visualized through the lenses of 'security threat' as well as 'economic burden'. But another frame is also evident, which identifies them through the 'humanitarian and victimization' frames. The first frame of reference sees refugees as victims of the situation over which they do not have any control, whereas the second frame highlights the role of the host society who tries to provide a conducive environment for the refugees. They further articulated, refugees are often framed as 'innocent' victims in popular culture, media reports, movies and films. These portrayals focus on the experiences and self-narrations of the refugees by excessively focusing on humanitarian helpers. For instance, in Indian context the movies like *Garam Hawa*, *Pinjer*, *Train to Pakistan* etc. depicts the dilemmas and atrocities faced by the refugees in their journey of migration and rehabilitation.

But Ticktin (2016) <sup>[26]</sup> argues that the problem with humanitarian perspective is that humanism sets up a distinction between 'innocence and guilt', leaving no space for the experiences of life. Further, by calling attention to the 'precarious' existence of the refugees who could be deported any moment, the literature highlights the limitation of the very

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framework of Humanitarianism, because the 'protection of law' offered to them by the state can be withdrawn any time. Malkki (1996) <sup>[16]</sup> further elaborates this through the Foucauldian framework and asserts that it is more useful to seek to connect people through 'history' and 'historicity' than through a human essence.

In this sense, it is important to explore the idea of collective memory, which is closely related to the history and historicity of any particular community. This collective memory is the integral part of the journey of people both at the time of 'rootedness' and 'uprootedness'. In this research paper, the researcher had tried to explore the process of construction and reconstruction of identity formation of migrant and refugee groups through the formation of collective memories.

### **Collective Memories: Theoretical Understanding**

Collective memory is a powerful symbol of the political and social transitions, which are closely associated with the pervasive interest in memory. It plays an important role in politics and society. Scholars have also tried to explore how individual's memories are influenced by the groups' memory to which they belong, i.e., how an individual's memory transforms into and as collective memory? Further, they questioned the very idea of memory, whether it is an individual affair or a collective action or amalgamation of both (Olick, 1999) <sup>[18]</sup>.

The idea of collective memory in social life was initially reflected in the writings of the eminent sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1915/1965), in his famous book '*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*'. He explains it in terms of 'commemorative rituals'. His disciple, Maurice Halbwachs, further elaborates this concept in his book '*The Social Frameworks of Memory*' published in 1925. Durkheim has generally been criticized for an 'organicism' that neglects difference and conflict. But Halbwachs (1925) <sup>[13]</sup> moves further from Durkheim's critique of philosophy and argues memory is reflected in the process of how minds work together in the society. Only individuals are capable of creating memories and they do so with the help of their group members. That means, memory is not driven by individuality, rather it is operated by structural and social arrangements. Society is important for the construction, acquisition and disbursement of memories. He believes in the idea that it is not possible for a person to remember anything in the coherent manner beyond a group or society. He uses the example of childhood memories and states that one can't create his or her childhood memories without the assistance of their 'significant others', including family members and friends.

It is the group members who provide the content for memories for an individual. Groups are even capable of creating such memories, which they have never 'experienced' before. They not only help in remembering the memories but also help in forgetting or vanishing them. He does not believe completely in the idea of subjectivity of memories as well as common-sense understanding of memory as a process of remembering. He states that memories are preserved by an individual's efforts which are the result of social frameworks and identities. It is always not possible to remember each and every movement, incidents which occurred in pasts. In this context, 'memories are always partial, fractured, fragmented and doubtlessly revised' all the time. But it is interesting to

explore how one person uses one schema to remember a certain past and another person uses the other? This variation in schema is the result of earlier experiences of the individual.

Freud (1921) <sup>[11]</sup> further explains that all the earlier experiences are related to the history of the group and the individual's unconscious is the space for collecting past experiences. He further argues, it is the socially undesirable and unacceptable behaviour which gets repressed by the individual and those practices and behaviour get stored in the individual's unconscious mind. The Freudian theory of collective memories interestingly can be seen in a novel based Hollywood movie- *The Lord of the Flies*. In this movie, the Freudian theory on the unconscious mind can be explored in different characters. According to him, it is 'forgetting' rather than 'remembering', which plays a vital role in identity formation of an individual resulting in creation of collective memories. But, Halbwachs (1925) <sup>[13]</sup> argues that memory does not collect all the past experiences, rather at the passage of time, certain kinds of memories become generalized '*imagos*' and these *imagos* are preserved in a social context. In this sense, memories are the products of the 'symbols' and 'narratives' which are publicly available- and of the social means for; storing and transmitting' them. They are possessed by an individual but are resultant of a social interaction. An individual (re)constructs those memories according to the situations. Further, the modern technologies like, archive, museum, or library, facilitates in storing these collective memories and passing it to the next generation. He believes that collective memories are social facts which are not the repository of the past, rather they are appropriated as per the present situation.

### **Language: A Tool of Construction and Reconstruction of Collective Memories of Migrants**

Language is a system which has its own logical reality which is independent, this is true because human beings construct it in this manner. A similar view about the same can be also traced in the writings of Berger and Luckmann (1967) <sup>[5]</sup>. It is not only that a human being understands, comprehends, code and remembers language, rather Language itself is a memory system. This view is similar to the Bakhtin's (1963; 1986) <sup>[3-4]</sup> idea when he states that that inherently language is dialogical in its nature. When he uses this notion, he actually tries to explain that language originates and lives in the interaction among people, it can't sustain in the minds of secluded individuals. The words have their meaning only when they can be used in contemporary times. He states-

"Each individual utterance is a link in a chain of speech communion. Any utterance, in addition to its own theme, always responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to others' utterances that precede it" (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 93-94) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Bakhtin (1963) <sup>[4]</sup> states that 'utterances' comprises the 'memory traces' of earlier usages. The meaning of every word and their usage can be traced back in history. The development of language is a long historical process and each genre, like prose, poems, drama etc. is a 'representative' of 'creative memory' (Bakhtin, 1963, pp. 121) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Furthermore, Collective nature of remembering takes place in the group through language, narrative, and dialogue.

Language is one of the very important tools through which individuals of any group transcend the memories of that particular group. The first form of collective memory is based on the principle of individuality i.e., the combined memories of all the members of a group. This idea of collective memory is based on the idea of objective symbols and deep structures which transcend the personalized risk slipping into the metaphysics of the minds of the group members. It is obvious from this viewpoint, that social frameworks decide what an individual remembers and it is the individual only that ultimately who is responsible for 'remembering' the collective memories of the group. The shared symbols and deep structures have meaning only when that are acknowledged by the individuals and groups and used in everyday practices. These structures do not have 'life' of their own, rather they are dependent on individuals for creation and promotion of their meaning.

For instance, tussle of dependency and power is also evident in the usage of everyday terms used for the migrants/refugees. There are two terms which are used in Bengali language- *Sharanarathi* and *Udbastu* for the refugees. While the literal meaning of the term *Sharanarathi* is one who seeks refuge and protection from a higher power (even god), whereas, *udbastu* a more generally used term means who is homeless. Origin of the term *Bastu* can be traced from the Sanskrit *vastu* meaning the foundation of a house and associated with the idea of lineage. The opposite of *Bastu* is *Basha* meaning a temporary dwelling. Chakravarty (1996) [7] says the term *Bastu* not only represents the home but also one's foundation. He further says only an individual loses his/her foundation through a serious misfortune. The prefix *ud* clearly shows the importance of the word *udbastu* in the lives of the individuals. She further says that it is the Bengali-Sanskrit terms, which clearly connotes the true essence of homelessness and refugeehood and uprooted as opposed to their English words. The word *sharanarathi* was not preferred by the East Bengal refugees as it carries the notion of dependency, charity and humiliation. They prefer to use another word *purusharathi*, for themselves to depict their power and masculinity. In this way, the usage of word for a group also plays a crucial role in construction of collective memories of migrants.

### **Construction and Reconstruction of collective memories through trauma**

In its earliest conventions, trauma was being referred to physical injury, this is true to certain extent in contemporary times too. But there is another aspect to it too, which is psychological in nature. The emotional shock resulting from certain incidences may have a long-lasting impact over the memory of people. Many psychologists believe that these psychological traumas may lead to neurological alterations. Further, if they stay in the memory for a long time then they may also cause neurological ailments also.

James (1983) [14] has explained this as 'thorns in the spirit', as they constantly affect the working of the human minds and stop their development to a large extent. This can easily be understood in terms of migrant people. Those who have faced the traumas of dictatorship, torture, dislocation, war and many more atrocities are particularly very fragile, so they need safe and secure environment to protect them from even the smallest of the fear and also need the support to heal them. The gestures like, symbolic and material

restitution, apology, compensation, empathetic listening, providing them space to voice their experiences and opinions may help in reducing the 'trauma' of their harsh memories of their past. This may also help in preventing the 'backlash' from those people who have faced atrocities, in terms of civil wars, riots, terror attacks etc. There is presently debate over the measures which may reduce the 'psychic' wounds of 'history' in the most apt manner. Some people have the view that forgiveness and forgetting are the best way to reduce it, whereas some others believe that acknowledgment of wrongdoing along with forgiveness is also required to heal the pain of sufferers of traumatic past (Shriver, 1995) [24].

The burdens of trauma are not faced by an individual only, rather it is shared by the whole group of community. Further, an individual sufferer may also take revenge in terms of terror or violence, then in that case the individual trauma can lead to group trauma also. Adorno (1959) [1], raises the issues related to the collective nature of memory, which is not 'worked out' or in other words is based on biased experiences of one person or a group only. This may have a strong impact over the socio-political structures of any nation. For instance, the group of people who have biased notions and violent outlook towards the social system may pose a threat to the existence of civil society.

For instance, the result for Vietnam War is very distinct for both the communities, i.e., America and Vietnam. On the one hand, the memory of the Vietnam War is an ongoing problem for the American society, whereas, for people of Vietnam, it is a situation of powerful collected trauma.

Further, Linde (1993) [15] describes that generally scholars argued that there are two plausible ways of explaining the partial coherences between past events and present outlooks. Firstly, the past experiences which were emotional in its nature shaped the schemas which dominated their adult narratives and secondly the present experiences had shaped the schemas by which they remember their past. This process overlooks a third perspective that is partial coherences. These partial coherences made through the interaction between the members of host and migrant communities. She talks about the social responsibility of the speakers and recipients/listeners to create together the journey of life stories which has to be connected coherently. Further, the partial coherence involves not only self-portrayal and willfully claimed identity, but also recurrence of key words, metaphorical imagery, emotional tone, and other aspects of their voices that were unlikely to have been produced for cautious effect. For instance, the claim of a person that Feeling of responsibility for other persons partially integrates with explicit identity as a responsible parent. That means the psychological fragmentation misses to some extent which coexists with some integration.

Strauss (1997) [25] describes another model namely 'Rupturing of narrativity' which explains the notion of 'collective memories' and emphasizes on the idea that some cognitive fragmentation is to be expected because there is no central classifier in anyone's head that documents information rationally. Instead, new life-experiences and notions are adopted in relation with information which is very much equal in the context of learning. Still, 'partial coherence' is expected. However, as we are emotional human beings and are concerned about our safety, status, and affection towards others. Recurrent events that stimulate these 'strong' emotional feelings create the schemas which

are expected to be used in interpreting the new experiences which are ambiguous, which is not so in the context of the schemas which carry lesser emotional forces. This, for sure, is not a new discovery, even though it has been given some importance in psychological research in recent times. The significance of individualistic as well as collectivistic culture notions for understanding the process of social memory, both in terms of collective and collected, may become more clarified if the recent discourse of 'trauma' is being utilized to understand the same. The exploration of trauma is important in contemporary times so as to break the shackles of 'valorised' and 'moralistic' notions of memory.

### **Collective Memories: A Tool for Identity Formation**

The selection and constraints behind migration makes every migration different from other migrations. Similarly, there pattern of settlement is unique in nature. It has also been observed worldwide that refugees face intense resistance from local residents and also encounter daily struggles for the survival of their loved ones, who have been housed there and await the 'amalgamation in the host community'. Not just this, the migrant community may also face certain 'psychological issues' when they try to negotiate various situations in the host community. With the growing helplessness and dependency, the refugee may feel exhaustion and frustration, in the process of engaging with the host community. All these negotiation and psychological pressures creates such collective memories wherein the migrant groups consider themselves as outsider and construct a 'ruptured identity'.

Besides, many scholars have also mentioned that the host community also fears regarding the high number of refugees in their areas compared to their own population. Sometimes, it has also been found that the refugee may become a disturbing element for the host society, for example the migration of Bangladeshi people in North-Eastern regions of India (Singh, 2010; Dasgupta, 2010; Sen, 2003) [23, 8, 22].

The entrance of a 'non-autochthonous' migrant population usually serves to strengthen the 'sense of identity' in the host community, which develops a critical awareness of their 'own identity' vis-a-vis the presence of migrant communities in the same geographical location. Weiner (1993) [27] suggested that host communities try to define for themselves- who 'does' and 'does not' belong to a particular nation/land/soil and creates such collective memories wherein they specify 'others' and 'selves', for this, they try to regulate the entry of people within their own territory, which they regard as their 'homeland'. For instance, the interventions made by south Asia states to check the entry of people within their boundaries may be a result of growing ethnic group solidarity. This can be seen in the present government's important Act for the immigration of religious minority communities from neighbouring countries. The restrictive policies used by governments to check the influx of (im) migrants is not always economical, rather there are deep-seated social, cultural and territorial reasons behind such restrictions. Interestingly, the influx of migrants/refugees belonging to the same religious or ethnic community may also be treated as threatening when it becomes evident that the said community is being maltreated in their home country. In such situations, the host country feels that these (im) migrants may become a burden on them in the long run. Further it is also found that despite the same religion and ethnicity, the host and migrant

community confront each other due to the fear of marginalization as Bengali Hindus in Assam and Bihari Muslims in Sindh, Pakistan.

The intergroup prejudices are responsible for creation of these feelings of separation and stretch to a large extent. Due to this, some prejudices about the migrant community develop in the minds of the local community and the same kind of prejudice also prevails in the mind of the migrant community for the local residents, which may hinder the process of their integration in this new community. These biases, when nurtured gradually, take the form of stereotypes. Many types of social, political, economic and educational institutions play a very important role in converting these prejudices into conservatism. For example, if we look at the partition itself, we find that in popular discourses, the diasporas/refugees or migrants are always shown in pathetic conditions. Such popular narratives disrupt the process of integration of migrant people and also nurture many other kinds of orthodox ideas (Dovidio, *et al.*, 2010) [9]. Due to this type of prejudice and stereotypes, there is always a separation or conflict between the local community and the migrant community, and both the communities use different types of social tactics to reconcile with these conditions with the use of their respective collective memories.

This 'hybridity' which results from the interaction of migrants and hosts is also the reflection of the process of assimilation in their 'new homes'. For our migrants, constructing and recognising their own cultural hybridity is a process replete with pain and confusion, and is part and parcel of the ending of their dreams of returning "home". Their stance towards the nation-state- whether of origin or of the settlement- is also rather less critical than some authors suggested. Most migrants usually get caught up in a deeply asymmetrical relationship with the "host" society, and their tentative steps towards assimilation can only succeed if they are supported by civil society groups in the host country. They have no choice but to couch their claims for rights in terms that the host country (or sections of the political classes) deems "legitimate". The "third space" about which Bhabha has written proves in their case at least, to be extremely constrained (Bhabha, 2006) [6]. All these interactions with the host nation state and civil society are guided by their collective memories. While the notion of 'hybridity' calls to be polished to capture all the nuances pertaining to the cultural and political process which are used by migrants to assimilate into the host community. For the migrants, creating and identifying their own 'cultural hybridity' is the process which includes both pain as well as confusion.

From this, it may be inferred that there are various ways used by the migrant communities to develop connections with the host community, it might be in the form of assimilation or cultralism, or it may be done in terms of fractured assimilation as well. All these efforts lead to development of peculiar relationships between the hosts and migrants. Sometimes, they may have to follow the norms ascertained by the host community and lose their cultural and social dominance, but in some other situations, they may also try to develop alliances with other groups to secure better socio-cultural and political positions within the host country. All these processes of rehabilitation and assimilation have a deep-seated impact over the process of identity (re)formation among the migrants and this whole

process is highly guided by the collective memories of the migrant as well as host community.

### **Collective memories: Challenges and Possibilities**

There are certain issues with the usage of collective memory approach in the context of understanding the experiences of migrants/refugees. Some of the issues are as follows:

- First, collections of the 'collective memory' of any group or society are usually the assemblage of the memories of a section of a group, especially those who have access to the means of cultural (re)production or whose views are comparatively valued highly over others. In this way, the collective memory of one group may come in contestation with the collective memories of the other group. Scholars have distinguished them in terms of 'official' and 'vernacular' memory. They further differentiate them as 'public versus private memory' and 'historical versus folk memory' (Schudson, 1992) <sup>[21]</sup>. However, this distinction doesn't clarify the reality of both forms of collective memories, official or vernacular. But this is more complex in terms of 'checking' the authenticity of vernacular memories.
- Second, collected memory approaches don't represent the whole community. It usually represents the memory of the dominant groups in the public domain. This sometimes creates, (re)create the existing realities in favour of the powerful groups. It may also erase certain memories from the 'collective memories' of the group at large.

Despite that, the collected memory approach, provides the possibility of dialogue among different disciplines, including-physical, behavioural as well as social sciences. However, the collective memory approach provides a number of influential arguments which show the shortage of a purely psychological approach. In this context there are three core different types of arguments which are important. First, certain kinds of association- an interaction among the individuals that form human society- not reducible to individual psychological processes are relevant for those processes, as the 'natural setting' approach of Neisser (1982) <sup>[17]</sup> implicitly allows. This looks like a 'social frameworks' approach, of Halbwachs (1925) <sup>[13]</sup>, which shows that it is the groups which provide the definitions, as well as the divisions, by which specific events are subjectively defined as consequential. These are the definitions which trigger different cognitive and neurological processes of storage. Besides, there are a number of political historians who study about memory and they have shown that it is the contemporary circumstances which provide the cues for certain images of the past. It looks like a neuro-psychological image of remembering which is an active and constructive process rather than reproduction process and there are a number of sociological studies which shows that the ways the past is remade in the present for present purposes (Olick and Robbins, 1998) <sup>[19]</sup>. These studies are thus pretty assimilable to the individualist approach, though their emphasis is somewhat different. However, another kind of opinion relies on a more radical ontological break between individualist and collectivist approaches. So, there is a need of amalgamation between the neurological and psychological studies of memory along with the sociological and cultural perspective about memory

is important to understand the process of creation and erasure of 'collective memories' of any group.

So, one may infer that the process of 'remembering' does not include the 'reappearance' or 'reproduction' of any experience in the original form rather it involves the mending together of a 'new' memory. People do not remember each and every detail of every experience, rather they remember it selectively as well as purposefully to some extent.

Further, after taking clues from physiological brain studies and its sociological understanding, the cognitive psychologists tried to explore the concept of mind. As the ability to 'recall' and 'remembering' is highly contextual and has tried to investigate the social variables to understand the same. So, they critiqued the methods of laboratory-based studies of memory as they neglect the impact of natural settings and social variables like race, caste, class and many more on the process of remembering. When people relate to one memory, they try to remember it for long and they also add memories related to that particular context in their register.

In this way, Collective memory is being referred to as an aggregate recollection of individual's memories for the collective representations and creation of shared identities. These collective memories are developed through personal testimonies, dreamy reminiscences, oral histories, traditions, myths, life-styles, languages, arts, popular cultures, and so on and so forth. This theoretical framework may help in understanding the process of memory construction of migrants/refugees in post-partition India.

### **Conclusion**

Migration not only takes place between places, but also has its effects 'on place'. In this the place is neither reified nor transcended, but 'thickened' as it becomes the setting of the variegated memories, dreams, imaginations, nightmares, anticipations, fantasies, and idealisations that experiences of migration, of both migrants and native inhabitants, bring into contact with each other. Migration makes place over determined, turning it into the 'missense of different histories. Movement or migration doesn't lead to 'placelessness', rather it intensifies and over determines the idea of place. They perceive that not only people migrate physically, but their memories, experiences, fantasies, anticipations, idealizations, and nightmares also move with them. This idea promotes that the relationship between citizenship and nation-state is not so straightforward, rather it is more complex and pluralistic in nature (Aydemir and Rotas, 2008) <sup>[2]</sup>. These experiences, dreams, imaginations, anticipations and nightmares are part of the collective memories of the migrants and hosts, which are an aggregate recollection of individual's memories for the collective representations and creation of shared identities. These collective memories are developed through personal testimonies, dreamy reminiscences, oral histories, traditions, myths, life-styles, languages, arts, popular cultures, and so on and so forth.

These collective memories are very complex as the migrants feel caught between the 'memories of past' and their 'position in present'. Their 'memories of past' have the experiences of their homeland. These memories not only show their pain but also resilience. These are 'selective' and 'collective' memories and are shared with the people of the

next generation. This is also evident in the manner in which the migrants talk about their 'homeland'. These partial and exaggerated and fractured memories may develop certain historical discourses which may need strong mediation between community's consciousness and national consciousness.

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