

In December 2012, I attended the wedding of a cousin in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She was marrying a young man from the same city, whom she had known for quite a few years and whose family, not very coincidentally, was also known to mine. As all weddings in my extended family, divided across Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, and spread out now across Europe, North America and Australasia, the wedding was an occasion to reconnect and remember the threads that bind us: a pair of great-grandparents, Khan Bahadur Kabiruddin Ahmed and his wife Sajeda Begum, and their home, Kabir Bhaban, in Faridpur of East Bengal, then East Pakistan, and finally Bangladesh. But it was also an occasion to remember less obvious connections.



ANANYA JAHANARA KABIR

FROM POSTMEMORY TO POST-AMNESIA

REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING EAST PAKISTAN

The day before the wedding, gifts, mostly of saris and jewellery, were sent over to the bride. The jewellery included some elegant and striking pieces which belonged to the bridegroom's grandmother. His grandfather had been a well-known diplomat and, evidently, a connoisseur of fine things. The collection his wife was passing on to her new granddaughter-in-law included pieces from all across Asia—as confirmed by their styles and also the leather boxes in which they were lovingly encased, which had branded on to them or stamped on their silk linings the names and addresses of specific jewellers. Many of these boxes revealed themselves as bearing addresses from Pakistan. Closer scrutiny revealed further that some of these Pakistani boxes had been recycled to accommodate jewellery that was of non-Pakistani provenance.

Today, I want to tease out the story of why these jewel boxes had been preserved, sometimes independent of their contents, for several decades; why they had travelled from Pakistan to Bangladesh; and what it meant for an older woman to bring them out at a moment of extreme personal and familial significance—the first wedding of a grandchild. I want us to think about disappeared spaces, about memories gone

underground, about links that have been broken, and about the persistence and intergenerational transmission of affect. I want, in short, to think about Partition and collective memory. And I want to do so through a perspective that, despite the proliferation of scholarship on both Partition and the War of Bangladesh's Liberation, is not often deployed: a perspective that deploys 1947 and 1971 as linked events.

My approach to Partition as a memorial event rests on a simple axiom, which is at the heart of what I want to communicate to you today: To know better, if not fully, how we feel (about) Partition, we cannot ignore 1971. And to pay attention to 1971 is to remember anew a singular phenomenon: East Pakistan. This cartographic entity came into existence in 1947—or, more accurately, 1955. That year, the new state of Pakistan renamed as East Pakistan its eastern Wing, encompassing the known from British times as East Bengal. It ceased to exist in 1971, when the third successor state to British India, Bangladesh, was created after a violent civil war between the Pakistani nation-state and its eastern wing. The transformation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh also meant the transformation of West Pakistan into Pakistan, plain and simple. For



PHOTO: COURTESY

Kabir Bhaban, Faridpur, Bangladesh—the source of post amnesia.

India, it meant a new geopolitical valence for its eastern front.

I remind you of facts that you may already know well in order to emphasise that which often goes unnoticed in discussion on these two events of nation-formation through collective, physical and epistemic violence: the conundrum that was East Pakistan, and the hauntology that attends its erasure from the map. East Pakistan is a spectral presence from which we may extrapolate patterns of forgetting and remembering that are particular to modern South Asia. These patterns have been shaped by the interlinked nature of the foundational moments for postcolonial nation-states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; they have also been shaped by processes of modernisation and movement that were set into motion before 1947 and which continued until 1971. By attending to these specificities, we bring to memory studies and partition studies a clearer understanding of post-Partition memory work in South Asia.

One way in which I have attempted to do so is to extend Marianne Hirsch's influential concept of 'postmemory'. Hirsch developed this concept through her work on the intergenerational transmission of collective trauma across several generations of Holocaust survivors, focusing on *Maus* and her family photo albums. Hirsch's postmemory encapsulates our uncanny ability to 'remember' traumatic events which we did not personally experience, but stories of which have



With my grandfather Jehangir Kabir, mother, and aunts, Deccan, India, c 1979.