

Partitioned Histories: Promoting critical engagement and tolerance by comparing narratives

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*A new initiative established by volunteers in India, Pakistan, the UK and US, aims to promote critical thinking and tolerance through history education. Their publication uses school textbooks from conflict areas as source material and places them side by side to showcase the contrasting national narratives of the same events. The first case study is on India and Pakistan. **Ayyaz Ahmad** offers an insight into how the project that he co-founded is encouraging participants to question what we learn and to understand that there might be other sides to each story.*



“I don’t think this question is correct,” said a 9th grade student filling out the impact survey. We were working with a few students who had taken the History Project course earlier to evaluate long-term impacts of the course. One of the questions was about how Pakistani society views certain groups of people in particular lights. I was a bit surprised, and so I asked her why she thought this question was problematic. Her reply? “Because the entire Pakistani population cannot have just one perspective.” I just smiled. She had not only internalised the idea of multiple perspectives, but was also applying the concept to ask important questions. In that instance, we found The History Project fulfill its two goals – critical thinking and tolerance.



Volunteer delivering History Project course. Photo provided by author.

Why does this matter? Let’s step back for a second. We live in a world where the flow of information is not constrained, at least not yet. In an age when one can engage with various voices on a daily basis, it is daunting how we self-limit our engagement with others through confirmation bias. Basically, we only like to read or hear what is already in line with our worldview (though is not always our choice—we are fed information that reifies our worldview through school curricula, through online forums, etc). In instances when we do come across something that does not line up with our expectations, we ignore it or worse, attack it. The belief that the narrative we are learning is the only one that exists is problematic not because it might be false. No, the issue of factual inaccuracies comes much later. It is problematic because lack of critical engagement with what we learn leads to the lack of conversation, a much deeper problem, especially when we come across information or points of view that do not merge with our own. We simply refuse to talk to others who disagree with us, because why should we? They must be delusional or just

downright evil because how could anyone disagree with what ‘everyone’ knows? There is clearly no point in talking to them. Emphasising singular narratives creates a world in which we don’t ask questions, and where the ‘other’ is our enemy. This becomes a self-fulfilling cycle when we refuse to acknowledge the validity of another perspective.

It is with these realisations in mind that a team of 50 volunteers from India, Pakistan, the US and the UK has been working on what we call *The History Project*. The belief that something must be done about this problem, not only for ourselves but for future generations, drives this team to give their time, efforts and energies to this cause. We believe it is important to acknowledge the other side, and give our own children a more holistic worldview: different people have different perspectives, and that is okay. If we take every differing opinion as an attack upon our world, then things would become really ugly — as is sadly the case today.

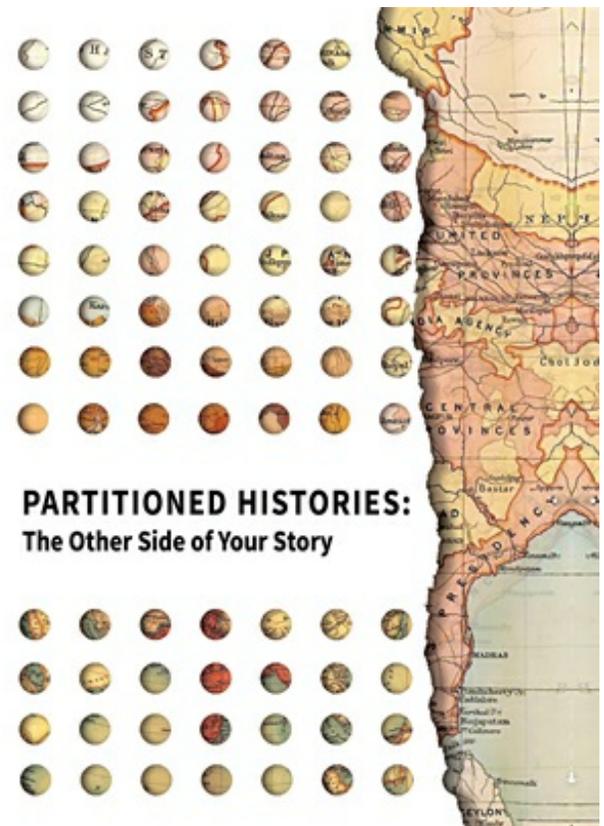
In March 2016, with the help of this dedicated team, The History Project launched its publication, *Partitioned Histories: The Other Side of Your Story*, which looks at the case study of India and Pakistan. Using school textbooks as source material, we placed the historical narratives taught to students in the two countries side by side to showcase the contrasting national narratives of the same events from the shared histories of the two countries.

Our goal was three-fold. First, by using textbooks, we wanted to highlight one of the most important sources in the formation of national narratives. Second, students get access to the ‘other’ side of their shared history, an opportunity that most of us don’t usually get. Third, one can look at the two narratives side by side to understand how the same events, viewed from different perspectives, can give birth to very different national narratives.

At this point, it is also important to highlight what we are not trying to achieve. The History Project is not trying to label any one side right or wrong. The History Project is not trying to take ownership of the truth. The History Project is not claiming to tell readers “what really happened”. Absolutely not! In fact, this would go against the very core of our goals. As I highlighted earlier, our most important goal is to encourage readers to question what we learn and to understand that there might be other sides to each story. That is it. Beyond that, we can continue to choose what we already believe, but now hopefully we can begin to at least talk to the other side. We might even take the leap and seek to understand it. With singular narratives, we tend to get into the habit of questioning others not to understand them but to prove them wrong.

Partitioned Histories: The Other Side of Your Story is only the first step in the journey. By using the book, we have also devised a course that focuses on the aforementioned principles of critical thinking and tolerance as derived from accepting the existence of multiple narratives. The student mentioned at the beginning of this essay recently went through this course, and that’s why it was really encouraging to hear her response.

I want to conclude with another story. We were almost at the end of one of our courses when one child raised her hand and said, “Sir, we hear what you’re saying. We understand that the other side has a perspective and not everyone on the other side is bad. But sir, every time I think about the other side, I can’t help but feel angry towards them and I don’t know why.” How would you answer this? This is what we’re doing to our children. We are filling their minds with hatred against children just like them who’re on the ‘other’ side. They’ll grow up, continuing to hate each other, and possibly some day even fight, without ever understanding where all that anger came from.



You can purchase a copy of the History Project's book "Partitioned Histories" [here](#). Support the initiative by choosing the "Buy one – Give one" option. For every book you purchase, the organisation shall give a copy to deserving students from low and middle income schools.

Find out more about the idea and the History Project's course [here](#).

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Ayyaz Ahmad is Co-Founder of The History Project Society, an initiative that innovates the way history is taught by highlighting the biases inculcated through textbook narratives that breed a specific brand of patriotism and often perpetuate conflict. He completed his BA in Political Economy from Williams College, studied Social Policy at the London School of Economics, and recently completed an MBA from the University of Cambridge.



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