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Moving Stories Make Up India's '1947 Partition Archive'

By [Lisa Tsering, Staff Reporter](#)
Mar 05, 2014

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Volunteer citizen historian Ranjanpreet Nagra conducts an interview in Punjab for the 1947 Partition Archive. (Metha Skylab Daoheung/The 1947 Partition Archive photos)

United States

A small army of volunteers is painstakingly collecting hundreds of stories from India's great migration in the years following the country's independence and Partition in 1947.

The ongoing project, which can be seen online at [1947PartitionArchive.org](#), features an online Story Map showing where each person's story originated.

The Partition of British India into modern day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh marks the largest forced human migration in history, notes the Web site. Nearly 15 million people lost their homes in 1947 and that number stands at over 20 million today.

One of the site's most active contributors, Guneeta Singh Bhalla, felt so strongly about the archive that she left a research position at UC Berkeley in December 2012 to volunteer full time for the project. Working with other volunteers who put in thousands of man-hours at no charge, the team led an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign that raised over \$35,000.

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Together with community donations and a grant from the American India Foundation, the 1947 Partition Archive — a 501(c)3 nonprofit — has more than 650 stories posted to the Story Map in English, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Sindhi and other languages.

Now, Bhalla and her colleagues are urging Indian Americans to share their stories, too.

“We are seeking input from witnesses of Partition all over the world, not just NRIs,” she told India-West in a recent e-mail. “There are individuals from the borders of Afghanistan to Burma that have been affected, and of course many British personnel. It is essentially a global story at this point.”

Since the Indian government has not created any monument or archive of this type, the group feels it's up to volunteers to make it happen. “We provide a platform for anyone anywhere in the world to collect, archive and display oral histories that document not only Partition, but pre-Partition life and culture as well as post-Partition migrations and life changes,” reads the Web site. The full works will soon be made available for educational purposes to academic researchers, students and the public.

Bhalla explains why she left Lawrence Berkeley Lab in her e-mail. “While I am still very passionate about physics and the basic inquiry into Nature, I felt an immense urgency to record memories or Partition,” she told India-West.

“Also, being in the United States, and having so many tools to my disposal to make the documentation of Partition possible, I felt a sort of moral responsibility to make this happen. It is essentially our last chance to give this important history a serious chapter in our global history books ...


“With the nearly gone memories of Partition, there won't be another chance to ‘plug back in.’ It's now or never.”

Bhalla told the New York Times that she first became fascinated with the stories of Partition when she heard her grandmother describe her own traumatic train ride, clutching her three children to her as she observed carnage and saw dead bodies around the railroad tracks. “My paternal grandparents and my father were all from Lahore. My father was an infant at the time of Partition, when he and his brothers fled with my grandmother to Amritsar. Hence, it is a part of my existence,” said Bhalla.

Visit 1947PartitionArchive.org to learn more and contribute your own story.



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