

SPECIAL SECTION

by Guneeta Singh Bhalla

I felt as though I was there on that warm summer night. The soft patter of hooves streamed past us. A long caravan of ox-carts was hauling mounds of produce to the market, each with its own sleeping sabzi-walla (vegetable-seller) sprawled on top of the vegetable pile. Oil lanterns under each carriage sent patterns of lively yellow shapes darting across the narrow brick road and climbing up the walls of homes. It was dazzling. I was completely immersed in this hypnotic memory from pre-Partition Lahore while interviewing Ajit Cour at her daughter's art gallery in Delhi, when a visitor entered and the trance was broken.

Cour was only 12 in 1947, when the Partition of Punjab forced her family to relocate to Delhi. They left behind their material goods, their heritage, their associations and every aspect of life that they knew. Cour shared memories of the convent she studied in and of chanting slogans in favor of an independent India. They lived on a lane that was exclusive to doctors as her father was a doctor, just as my grandfather was. He too, like Cour's family, fled Lahore in 1947. Perhaps our families knew each other. But it is too late to find out. He passed on before his story was recorded and Cour was too young then.

That August, Muslim refugees poured into Lahore just as quickly as the surviving Sikh and Hindu inhabitants of the city fled for the newly defined India. One

HARNESSING THE POWER OF STORIES

Uncovering the people's history of Partition

such refugee was an eight year old boy named Ali. He had witnessed the massacre of his entire village in Ludhiana District (East Punjab), including his family, by a furious mob that had rounded them up in a courtyard. One gunman shot at him 5, 6, perhaps 7 times, missing each time. Ali suddenly got the nerve to run. He ran fast and right into the knees of another gunman. Quite unexpectedly, the man grabbed him and gently led him away. They walked for two days before Ali was turned over to a Sikh family in a village. Not long after, he was recovered by the Pakistani military who transported him to Lahore. The refugee camp was a miserable place, he remembers. The air was thick with painful recollections, uncertainty and suspicion. He remained there for a month before being discovered by his extended family.

BEGINNINGS

I first learned about Partition from my paternal grandmother. She spoke of those times rarely, but each time, it was clear that the memory was still fresh and painful. There had been no healing. Lahore was still the home she yearned for. We moved to the US when I was in middle school and in high school I spent nearly a semester learning about the Jewish Holocaust in Europe. When I brought up the topic of Partition, I was often met with the same sentiment: surely it was not a significant event if there was no mention of it in our textbooks. I knew then that the world needed to hear about Partition not from myself but directly from my grandmother and all the others like her that lived through it.

The thought nagged in the back of my mind for years until a 2008 visit to the oral testimony archives at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. It was very powerful to watch survivors recall their ordeal, more so than reading a book or watching

a movie. That is when it clicked. The same needed to be done for Partition. I began interviewing survivors and recruiting a team in 2010. Experts at Berkeley's Regional Oral History Office proved to be a great resource in helping us develop our interview format. This office provided the initial camera equipment, while Berkeley's ASUC Art Studios provided for post production space.

The story collection effort took me on my first solo-trip through East Punjab that winter. Away from the safe bubble my family had constructed, Punjab was suddenly a whole different country. Caste disparities were openly on display, and solo traveling women were most certainly an oddity.

From city to city I was joined by distant cousins, friends or new hosts I was meeting for the first time. We traveled along the border regions, stopping at villages and driving past the last untouched ancient burial mounds (thanks to a heavily militarized zone).

On one such afternoon I interviewed 93 year old Bhim Sharma in a dusty machine parts shop in Batala, Punjab. He recalled the day his village in District Narowal (West Punjab) was surrounded by mobs. The entire village was holed up in one house. When hope was nearly lost, three women rode in from behind a hill on horseback. Masked as men with turbans on their heads and straps of ammunition wrapped around their bodies, they caught the mob unexpected and lobbed grenades at the leader. He was killed instantly and the mob dispersed. The women then escorted the villagers to safety. Months later, and thousands of miles away in Morgan Hill, CA, Kuldip Kaur corroborates Sharma's story and recalls the three women on horseback who defended the caravan she was in when it was being attacked by mobs.

From East to West Punjab

an interview by Yasser Zaman Khan

Mohammad Yunus Chowdhry was born in April 1932 in Amritsar where his family lived in the Katra Karam Singh neighborhood near the Golden Temple. His father

was a well known land owner with 400 acres of land near the Beas River. Fruit from his orchards was shipped all over South Asia. At the time of Partition, young Chowdhry studied in 9th grade in Mohamaden Anglo High school. He remembers watching Noor Jehan's

movies such as Khandan, in one of several cinemas in Amritsar, namely Nishat, Rialto and Chitra cinemas.

Communal violence escalated in the month of March 1947, in Amritsar. Chowdhry's family fled Lahore which in August 1947 become a part of Pakistani Punjab. They migrated in a kafla (caravan) on foot.

Once in Lahore, his father descended into a state of deep depression along with one of his brothers who also suffered from asthma. His brother's declining state of mind and poor health, combined with inferior living conditions as refugees led to his death in 1948. Today Chowdhry is the only one surviving out of his six siblings, still here to tell us about his family's tale.



Yasser Zaman Khan with Mr. Chowdhry in his California home in August 2011

The 1947 Partition Archive is dedicated to documenting, preserving and sharing eye witness accounts of the Partition of British India in 1947. The archive was founded by UC Berkeley post-doctoral researcher, Guneeta Singh Bhalla. These are some of their stories.

Stateless in Dhaka

an interview by Farhana Afroz

Begum Khairunnisa left Bihar in 1947 after the riots broke out. She carried her new born daughter, Julekha who was 13 days old and walked for days to cross the border into East Pakistan. Her husband Sher Khan was a railway worker. They came to Parbatipur in a freight train and lived in Syedpur till after the war of 1971, and the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. In 1972 they came to Dhaka and were allotted a room in the Geneva refugee camp where, as Urdu speakers, they awaited their turn to relocate to Pakistan. Their turn never came and today she continues to live in the Geneva camp in Dhaka with her daughters, Sultana and Julekha, along with several grandchildren. They remain stateless people as neither country, Pakistan or Bangladesh, will recognize them as citizens.

When asked why she remains in this camp, she said in Urdu, "Kahan jayenge?" (Where will I go?) She added, "Acheha ya bura, mujhe yahin rehna hoga. Partition, ye theek nahi hua." (Good or bad, I have to stay here. Partition was not right.) Like many other stranded Biharis of Bangladesh, Khairun Nisa feels that they are the worst victims of the 1947 Partition. Despite the passage of 66 years, the Biharis of Bangladesh, have yet a place to call home.



Begum Khairunnisa (r) with her daughters in their Geneva Camp home in Dhaka.

Since those early days, over 30 citizen journalists have joined the effort and preserved nearly 500 stories. The stories come from diverse geographies, from Assam in the East to Hazara in the West, as well as Great Britain, Israel and North America. While language limits my exposure to stories from Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi speakers, other interviewers such as Farhana Afroz, a software engineer from Silicon Valley, have ventured deep into the villages and Partition refugee camps of Bangladesh, amplifying narratives that may never otherwise be heard.

A CENTURY OF DISPLACEMENT

From the 150 or so narratives that I have personally been involved in collecting, some patterns have certainly begun to emerge. The stories reveal that while city dwellers had access to the emerging political thoughts of the time and became increasingly polarized, villagers were largely unaware and caught mostly off guard when unknown mobs appeared on their doorstep. I have also been intrigued by narratives describing the diverse roles of women in pre-Partition society. I have heard of families, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh, where mothers worked closely with fathers in running business and farming affairs. They patrolled the family farm on horseback while their husbands were off selling the crop. I have interviewed women who were pursuing graduate education in the 1940's.

Especially difficult to fathom are the tales of double and triple displacements. There are those who fled the Japanese invasion of Burma in the early 1940's and escaped to Bengal on foot, only to be displaced again in 1947. Some were once again displaced during the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. In East Punjab, yet another communal clash and mass-displacement took place in 1984.

LOSS OF LIFE, CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE

"I looked left and right, East, West and North. Everything was on fire," recalls Razia Sultana. She was studying to be a doctor in Delhi on a full scholarship from the Nizam of Hyderabad, a strong believer in women's education. When news of the riots reached the Nizam, he sent armed escorts to rescue Hyderabad students studying in Delhi. They were flown back to Hyderabad in a private jet. She pauses for a deep breath. "Delhi was burning on all sides. I saw libraries go up in flames. Some had one-of-a-kind books. So much life was lost. So much culture and knowledge as well."

The great loss of knowledge and disruption of cultural continuities are seldom a focus of discussion. One example that comes to mind is that of the mysterious "junglis" of Lyallpur district. We know today from researchers such as D. Gilmartin, that this derogatory term was used to describe the pastoral people that once roamed West Punjab. Memories about them sometimes surface during our interviews. "I had to walk by their village to get to school. I was afraid of them. They sometimes raided our village at night... Our ancestors had taken their land and they were bitter." Or as another interviewee recalls: "They wore long black robes, had fair skin and hair, and

small features. They spoke a different language and had unusual ceremonies." Many urban centers in West Punjab were developed in the late 1800's by the British. East Punjabis were lured West and encouraged to convert the jungles to farmland, imposing on pastoral lifestyles. How did the pastoral communities assimilate with mainstream culture? Did their lifestyle embody the way Punjabis lived once upon a time?

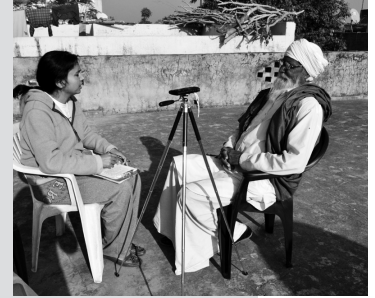
"In our area of Punjab, Hindus were largely traders, Sikhs held knowledge of the land while Muslims were bearers of ancient musical traditions and fine craftsmanship," an interviewee recalls. This begs the question: What happens when profession is coupled to religious associations, like it has been in South Asia? How does society cope with the sudden loss of experts in a certain profession, (i.e. entire links that form its economic chain) in the aftermath of a situation like Partition? How has this impacted modern economies in South Asia? Much remains to be explored and much, unfortunately, has already been lost and may never be known.

TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC HISTORY OF PARTITION

The popular debate surrounding Partition often focuses on political leaders and nation states. The leaders we are taught to remember most today are those who held close associations with the British leadership, both through personal relationships and their British educational backgrounds. I feel that focus on their limited experiences has obscured the larger narrative, and neglected contributions from those other community leaders who were less plugged into the British system of governance and upper society. It is these gaps we wish to fill by recording, preserving and freely disseminating the people's history of Partition. We aim to empower all citizens, ordinary and extraordinary, to record stories from survivors on video and submit them to the archive for preservation. Our organization is set up to provide the training, tools and mentor-ship. It is also our core belief that citizens from all ethnic, religious, economic and gender backgrounds must come together to build the Partition Archive. The story of Partition entails vastly diverse experiences. I feel it is critical for the next generation to come to terms with all aspects of Partition, es-

From West to East Punjab an interview by Ranjanpreet Nagra

Bahadar Singh Nagra was 16 years old at the time of Partition. He was born in village Matteke Nagra, now in Punjab, Pakistan. The village had a diverse population consisting of Muslims, Sikhs, Brahmins, potters, Rai weavers, and Christians. His father had 12 acres of land on which they grew wheat, corn, sugarcane and cotton. Following harvest, excess crop was sold in Sialkot. They also had four oxen, a horse and about eight buffaloes. At weddings, he remembers, they would get 'loofah'— a bowl made of thick leaves with wedding foods in it. He also recalls popular local fabrics from that period, including, 'chabbi da latha,' 'chabbi di malmal,' and 'khaddar.'



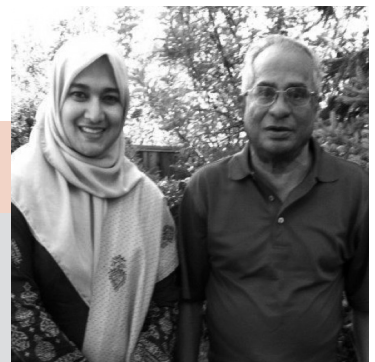
Ranjanpreet Nagra (l) with Bahadar Singh Nagra (r) at his home in village Khanpur, Punjab, India.

During Partition, Bahadar Singh Nagra and his family walked east to Batala. At one point, they were hungry for about 2-3 days before they found food and shelter. Along the way they saw bodies in Alipur Saidan where migrating groups had been slaughtered. They stayed at Narowal Theyh for some time and in Dera Baba Nanak for about 10 days.

Bahadar Singh Nagra lost both his parents during the migration east — his father, Kherha Singh died of dysentery at Daska camp and mother, Budho Kaur Kaler passed away a month later. In India, Bahadar Singh worked as a coolie at the Batala railway station for 1 year. He lived in village Mannana for 3 years and came to his current residence in village Khanpur in 1955.

pecially if we are to dismantle the cold war the subcontinent is currently embroiled in.

It's often said that things happen when there is a need. Since we began this work, the sheer number of individuals who have come forward to volunteer their skills or to share their stories demonstrate a clear need to connect with and understand Partition on a human level.



Hiralal Bhattacharjee with Farhana Afroz at his daughter's home in CA.

Staying back in Mymensingh an interview by Farhana Afroz

Hiralal Bhattacharjee was born in Netrakona, Mymensingh (currently in Bangladesh) in British India. His father, Suresh Chandra Bhattacharjee worked as a sub registrar. His mother Surodhoni Bhattacharjee was a housewife and a mother of 6 children. "Life was quiet and peaceful in our small town...Hindus and Muslims lived as friends and neighbors...children were not restricted by religious boundaries and everyone played with everyone," said Mr. Bhattacharjee wistfully, as he spoke about the way things were in the East Bengal of his childhood.

In 1947, Mr. Bhattacharjee was a high school student. He remembers those days very well. He remembers that many of his Hindu neighbors migrated to India. They felt that they would not have the freedom to practice their religion or live with dignity. The Bhattacharjees, however, felt differently. His father did not want to leave the land of his ancestors and therefore chose to stay back in East Pakistan. As a college student in Dhaka, he wore a dhoti, the typical outfit for Hindu men of that time but never faced any discrimination. Following the riots in 1964 in Dhaka, and at the urging of his father, Mr. Bhattacharjee moved to Calcutta. Later, he moved to Mumbai and found a job in the city and settled there. Today, he is a proud father of 3 and a grandfather of 5 children. He is retired and lives in Singapore with his son.