

## **Indian Partition Digitalized: Archiving Oral Narratives**

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### **Abstract**

The orality of the drastic partition of Indian Subcontinent had been submerged into oblivion if the efforts to retrieve the memories would not have been done. In the past decade Urvashi Butalia, Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon, and Anam Zakaria have endeavored to accumulate the oral accounts of the survivors and compiled them in their well-known books. The paper tries to explore and investigate a noteworthy change that has been initiated by new generation in the sphere of partition studies in recent times. The academics in this field are digitalizing the oral narratives that can be accessed online, in the borderless arena of the internet. The emergence of the new sphere in the internet and social media enabled the memories to create their own space. In this era where people are conserving their past, present, and future in media, it can be said that memory and media are mutually shaping each other. These memory projects have opened new space of alternative narratives that are helping new critical studies on partition contributing to the possibility of reaching out and opening ways of arriving at reconciliation.

**Key words:** Indian partition, interviews, memoires, digital library, digital oral narratives, internet.

The independence of Indian Subcontinent brought with it the abruptly decided and executed partition followed by one of the biggest migrations of the world. Amidst partition, communal riots unveiled the worst face of partition. Massive population exchanges occurred between the two newly-formed states in the months immediately following partition. In the process, women were kidnapped, raped, molested, bought, and forced into marriage. Gyanendra Pandey has noted that amidst the partition chaos “the kind of search for ‘enemy’ nationals and the urge to drive out every sign of the ‘other’ from places far and wide in India and Pakistan” was at rampant. (38). When the exodus was finally ended, it is said that more than 75,000 women were abducted and raped during partition. 7,226,000 Muslims went to Pakistan from India while 7,249,000 Hindus and Sikhs moved to India from Pakistan immediately after partition. Estimates of the number of

deaths ranged around roughly 500,000, with low estimates at 200,000 and high estimates at 1,000,000.

Historiography always presents the facts as mentioned above, socio-political issues of partition, the aftermath, and the loss due to the partition but in a very narrow and limited context, especially only showing the figures of losses. The concurrent personal accounts of the victims are always excluded by historiography. The reason behind the exclusion can also not be debated as historiography always deals with the facts and incidences with evidences. At the same time, the personal memoirs cannot be obliterated by the history because they also have the same significance as history to gather knowledge about partition. The question of the reliability of the memory on which the oral accounts are based has always been debated on the grounds that memory is never static or fixed and it is always hinges on the present phenomena and sometime on the future too. Moreover, history is always suspicious about memory based on its vulnerability towards evolution and instability whereas history is rigid in his periphery and it is based on facts. Nonetheless, memory is the string that connects a person from his past to present; it exists in the present too. On top of that it affects and at some point creates all branches of identity of a person while history exists in past only. Memories are personal yet collective and history relates itself to every individual yet impersonalized. Memories are the window to look through the individual's personal judgment of the incident. However, verbalized memories always depends on the narrators desirability of omissions and inclusions in his/her oral account. The oral narratives are mostly the remembrance of the bitter incidences such as killing of the loved once, of abduction, forced marriage, rape etc.

The orality of the drastic partition had been submerged into oblivion if the efforts to retrieve those memories would not have been done. In addition, the endeavor to retrieve these oral accounts was necessary because the generation, which is the bearer of these memories, has already extinct and who still live are at the edge of extinction. In the past decade Urvashi Butalia, Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon, and Anam Zakaria have endeavored to accumulate the oral accounts of the survivors and compiled them in their well-known books. In her book *The Other side of Silence* Butalia has put together the oral narratives and testimonies to bring out the other face of partition before the world. Menon and Bhasin also have done a tremendous fieldwork in this area. Their book *Borders and Boundaries* also deals with the breath-taking narratives of women who had found themselves as a mere puppet in the hands of the partition politics. Not only from India such efforts to retrieve the oral narratives are made but also Pakistan makes its contribution to it. Anam Zakaria the Pakistani scholar has recently published a book *The Footprints of Partition* that is a very good trajectory to find the oral narratives from both sides. Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence* remarks:

The oral narrative offers a different way of looking at history, a different perspective. For, because such narratives often flow into each other in terms of temporal time, they blur the somewhat rigid timeframes within which history situates itself. Because people locate their memories by different dates, or different timeframes, than the events that mark the beginning and end of histories, their narratives flow above, below, through the disciplinary narratives of history. They offer us a way of turning the historical lens at a somewhat different angle, and to look at what this perspective offers. (13)

However, oral narratives need written words to authenticate them and to make them accessible to every individual. Here illiteracy may pose a complication. As an answer to such problems, a welcoming change has occurred in the critical sphere of partition studies in recent times. The intelligentsia in this field is making the oral narratives digitalize and online, in the borderless area of internet that is easy to access in one click. The industrious efforts started by Butalia, Bhasin, Menon, and Zakaria has now taken up by Guneeta Singh Bhalla, who is the founder of *1947 Partition Archive*, and by Andrew Whitehead who has interviewed the generation and post generations of partition and created a project *Partition Voices*. By these efforts, orality has freed itself from the boundaries of alphabets and has come to the public domain in its original form. The era of new orality has begun. In 2010, Guneeta Singh Bhalla started her mission to collect as many interviews as she can with her team and succeeded to collect nearly 9,500 oral narratives from 12 countries in over 36 languages and dialects by 2020. The interviews are available in digital copies including photographs, documents and images of personal objects of historical value. The website states that, "The collections have been compiled by over 600 Citizen Historian volunteers, over 150 Story Scholars, 200 community based digital archivists and other volunteers." (*1947 partitionarchives.org*).

It is pleasing to know that she has involved the youth to participate in this mission, training them to accumulate interviews of the partition survivors. The crew of the online archive *1947 Partition Archive* comprises of researchers, digital archivists, curators, video editors are all from different religious and cultural backgrounds having different profession and nationality and it is thoroughly volunteer based. Recently, *1947 Partition Archive* in association with Tata Trusts-Partition Archive Research Grant has launched a month long research program that allow academic researchers in India to have full access to their complete collection. They are proving funds in faculty level, graduate and under graduate level. The website notes:

The Tata Trusts and The 1947 Partition Archive (hereafter "The Archive") are pleased to announce a one month immersive research residency grant program for academic researchers who seek to explore and study The Archive's complete oral history collections including over 9,400 oral history accounts on video, at one of

three partner universities, including Ashoka University, University of Delhi and Guru Nanak Dev University. (*1947partitionarchive.org*)

Another initiation by this campaign is "Sunday Stories Live". It is an interactive web series that airs live in *Facebook*. The participants discuss about South Asian histories, South Asian current events that are especially connected to the after effects colonialism and 1947 partition.

The interviews and memoirs of the partition survivors has relevancy even after 74 years of the partition of Indian subcontinent as the team of *1947 Partition Archives* are continuously bringing into light the new interviews and memoirs. On top of that the campaign is constantly gaining momentum by making its way in newspapers and magazines over 200 times. The recent publication about this campaign titled "The Coronavirus pandemic gave 1947 Partition Archive an unlikely shot in the arm: a series with speakers from both sides of the border" dated July 18, 2020 is by First post. Another article titled "Partition oral history project goes online due to Covid-19" dated April 8, 2020 is by The Hindu.

Above-mentioned endeavours by Guneeta Singh Bhalla reveals that internet has proved itself a good asset to serve as an alternative space for the documentation as well as direct representation of the orality in the form of virtual memorials, oral history projects, and visual archives. This appraisable new practice is pioneered by one more esteemed persona Mr. Andrew Whitehead. He has worked as correspondent, presenter, and editor of BBC World Service News for 35 years and is a historian, professor, and freelance journalist. He has contributed largely to make partition digitalize. In 1997, he started with a radio series of interviews *India: a people partitioned* for the BBC World Service to mark the fiftieth anniversary of India and Pakistan's independence. He says, as the website noted, "India: a people partitioned sought to be a social history of partition: not about the high politics of independence, nor about the British Raj and those who upheld it, but about the lived experience of the millions who were caught up in the partition whirlwind" (Whitehead). This radio series of interviews won him prestigious award in New York Festival that inspired him to conduct his most ambitious work on Kashmir *A Mission in Kashmir*. Published by Vikings Penguin in Delhi, is a vivid account of the emergence of the Kashmir conflict started right after the closing weeks of 1947. Forty interviews are there to understand the plight of the people who survived the tumultuous times in Kashmir. Another initiative is taken by him in the form of an interview series *Partition Voices*, which is available in his website. These interviews consist of some eminent personalities too such as Lal Krishna Adwani, Benazir Bhutto, Pran Chopra, Inder Kumar Gujral, K.S. Duggal and his wife Ayesha Duggal, Amrita Pritam, Bhisham Sahni, Bapsi Sidhwa, Urvashi Butalia, Khushwant Singh etc. Yasmin Khan has made excellent use of some of these interviews while writing her *The Great Partition*.

One more cross border initiative was taken up by *The Citizens Archive of Pakistan* and *Routes2Roots*, which lasted for a limited period. This programme was called "Exchange for

Change" in which the schools of India and Pakistan encouraged their children to communicate with each other through letters, postcards, and social media. More than 2,000 children from 10 schools on either side participated in this programme. *The Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP)* is a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of culture, heritage, and history. Recently it has started "Oral History Project" under which they interview people about significant events in their lives during the early days of Pakistan to provide an alternative perspective to historical literature. The website notes:

CAP has focused its attention on the tradition of oral storytelling in Pakistan, emphasizing the importance of such narratives in a dialogue on national identity. Our organization has three main goals: to preserve and provide access to the archive, to build and support educational programs, and to develop educational products based on the testimonies collected. ("The Citizen Archive of Pakistan")

CAP also has a remarkable collection of photographs of cultural and historical significance as well as partition by F.E.Chaudhry in its website. The website is under modification for sometime and has a partnership with Google Arts & Culture.

The reason behind collecting the oral accounts of the victims of the partition is the belief that this history belongs to everyone. In the memoirs of victims, they remind the country as whole rather than different entities of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Large number of interviewees has admitted that the partition was wholly a political propaganda resultant communal violence. They also state that the still present communal schisms are often aggravated by a lack of communication and understanding. These fractures can only be mended by the shared attempts to build harmonious bridges between countries and between the individuals because in their past they have the shared pain, shared loss and even shared regrets. To initiate the cross border conversation Sundeep Dutt from India and his friend Faisal Hayat from Pakistan have launched a *Facebook* page "Bolti Khidki" or "The Speaking Window" in which people across the border post stories of partition survivors. "Most Partition survivors are old and it will be difficult to trace them after four-five years. Our generation should know where they come from. We thought the best way to do this was by documenting these tales for the future generation through a photo series," says Sandeep Dutt in the *Facebook* page. He met Faisal Hayat in another *Facebook* page "Aman Ki Asha" that was created to bring two countries closer through art and literature. Inspired by this effort they created their own page "Bolti Khidki" and started sharing the stories they collected. At present, "Bolti Khidki" has more than 7,500 followers and with them, it has started a new volunteer programme involving youth of India and Pakistan to give their helping hand in collecting more stories of partition.

Subodh Mathur, after spending 13 years in US returned to Jaipur when his father died. To preserve his family and specially his grandmother's legacy Mathur and his elder brother Subhash

started editing a book *Dadi-Nani: Memories Of Our Grandmothers*, which is written by family and friends. While editing the book Mathur came across an idea of launching his own website [www.dadinani.com](http://www.dadinani.com). He started inviting people to share their own legacies and this initiative expanded from a limited area to the wider one. In 2010, he has converted the website's address from [dadinani.com](http://dadinani.com) to [Indiaofthepast.org](http://Indiaofthepast.org) which accumulates personal memories from the 1950s and earlier. Apart from many stories, this website owns the reservoir of 400 partition stories too. These kinds of individual efforts to conserve the oral accounts and the stories of partition online have become a part of postmodernist critical sphere. The main objectives of these above mentioned organizations and persons are to centralize the marginalized and obliterated memories and create a place for them in mainstream ideology.

In popular culture, Twitter and Tumblr are also promoting partition memories in their vicinity. Twitter's trending topic hashtag #IfThereWasNoPartition was a remarkable step towards collecting virtual memories, oral histories, and visual archives. In 2012 on Twitter on August 14 and 15, Indian Twitter users actively congratulated their Pakistani counterparts and soon, a hashtag #IfThereWasNoPartition was trending, which was coined pretty much to show how the two nations continue to be bonded, culturally as well as socially. Inspired by the above mentioned program Mehreen Kasana, an avid blogger based in Pakistan who also runs an incredibly popular Tumblr account, decided to launch a new Tumblr, titled "Pakistanis Against Stereotyping" on August 8, which now has over 1000 pictures related to the topic. #DHPoco is another collaborative run by Adeline Koh and Roopika Risam in Tumblr on postcolonial digital humanities. They can be found in Twitter using hashtag #dhpoco. They also own a website <http://dhpoco.org>. Interestingly they present postcolonial issues in animated form through pictures with dialogues.

The emergence of the new sphere in internet and social media made the memories create their own space next to historiography in the critical intelligentsia. In this era where people are conserving their past, present and future in media it can be said that memory and media are mutually shaping each other. These memory projects have opened new space of alternative narratives that are helping new critical studies on partition. The digital archives are the reservoir of multifaceted narratives that has become of equal importance as the official history.

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