

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Orality and the Archive: Teaching the Partition of India through Oral Histories

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Last December, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took diplomatic relations between India and Pakistan one step closer to peace talks by choosing to visit his Pakistani counterpart in Lahore for the latter's birthday. The move, the first of its kind in a decade by an Indian Prime Minister, received much attention from media worldwide and was both praised and criticised (BBC, December 25). This was closely followed, only a few weeks later, into the new year of 2016 by a deadly attack on the Pathankot Air Base near the Punjab border in India by terrorists allegedly associated with links to Pakistan. At around the same time, my Indian Writing in English seminar in Bengaluru was discussing the partition of India and Pakistan as a part of the module on narrating the nation. In the context of negotiating one specific aspect of narrating the nation—that of communalism and religious fundamentalism—we were drawn to the historiography of the event – the partition of India – that is often construed responsible for the allegedly growing hatred between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Discussing the partition amidst such political developments was significant for my graduate seminar.

In understanding the various known and familiar aspects of partition, both my students and I recognized certain responses as characteristic<sup>1</sup> when it came to dealing with it: most observations about the partition, we learnt, were framed within the contemporaneity of increasing tensions between the two States ever since they were partitioned. Debates about religious intolerance in the country were always mounted on defining ideal ways of exhibiting nationalism<sup>2</sup>. Our discussions very often veered towards problems of ascribing the 'Hindu-Muslim problem' (as it is very often termed here in India), invariably to the partition itself<sup>3</sup>. Quite contrarily, the schisms that are often pointed at between the Hindu and Muslim community have other trajectories that are not quite discussed in mainstream historical accounts of the partition either<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, it is in an attempt to locate the human dimensions of the political and territorial event of partition by reading the archive that this paper wishes to explore the strength of oral narratives. The ideas become all the more significant in the context of teaching about partition through a set of oral narratives.

## Reading Archives, Teaching Partition

This article explores how teaching partition in an English Studies graduate seminar in Bengaluru, through archives of oral accounts narrating the partition, opened newer trajectories of using oral histories as teaching materials. The course closely read the discursive construction of the knowledge of partition in archival processes of the state vis-à-vis oral accounts collected primarily by Urvashi Butalia (1998, 2000) and Veena Das (2000). The article examines how the teaching of partition through these archives proved to be illuminating in understanding the narrativization of partition as it is prevalent today.

The paper argues that oral histories see immense strength in being read as archives of a different nature as

opposed to the State's archivization of partition: the subjecthood of the victim in oral histories, it was observed through our discussions, is an embodied subjectivity as opposed to the effacement of subjectivity in the State's representation. To the State, partition becomes an event of numbers and territorial disputes (an idea carried forward even today in its contemporary negotiations of India-Pakistan relations). Oral histories, on the other hand, are narrativized as witness accounts. These enabled students to recognize the human side of partition thereby creating an *affective* literacy of partition. The introduction of oral narratives in the classroom led to an *affective turn* in engaging with an event of great trauma like the partition of India. It enabled us as a class to rethink the modes of knowing and narrating suffering associated with the partition of India. It clearly led us to recognize the location of a voiced subjectivity in such narratives. The flexibility of oral archives enables more voices to be added to the archive unlike the State's record of the "facts" of the event. Urvashi Butalia in her introduction to *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 (p 13).*

Let us now turn to a discussion of some classroom experiences that substantiate the same.

## The Partition of India: An Overview

The Partition of India is an important event in the socio-cultural historiography of India. This political event is associated with a territorial division between the two countries. The plan to partition India was announced in June 1947. Consequently, in August 1947, a predominantly Muslim state was created in Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and a predominantly Hindu State in India. The event was accompanied by a movement of several millions of people across the borders of the two states. It was also marked by large scale violence including murder, dacoity, communal hatred, sexual violation, and loss of property among others.

This plan did not foresee the large scale movement of people that ensued. By the time of the political freedom of India and Pakistan, several people had begun to move to and from both the countries. The period was characterized by a growing hatred towards the "other" on either side. Urvashi Butalia recounts one such instance where a Sikh shared his tale of "hatred" that he relived now, full of guilt, regret, and remorse. He says "our entire village took off to

a nearby Muslim village on a killing spree. We simply went mad. And it has cost me fifty years of remorse, of sleepless nights—I cannot forget the faces of those we killed” (73). Gyanendra Pandey (2001) makes an interesting observation in this regard. He says that the partition is not to be viewed merely as a “happening” but rather as a “category of understanding the happening” (66). This is a significant insight into understanding the very narratives of the Partition of India.

## Engaging with the Partition in Classrooms

The partition of India is introduced to students at school in India at different points in time. The first set of materials that they encounter as resources to understand partition are their textbooks. Popular cultural media, too, have representations of partition. Literary works around partition have been produced within English as well as regional Indian languages, especially Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi. Popular feature films have also built storylines around the event of partition<sup>5</sup>.

The students who were enrolled in this graduate seminar were in their first year of the graduate program. The program includes students from different parts of India. The group, therefore, was a mixed one comprising varied cultural backgrounds. Some students hailed from places closely associated with the partition like Punjab, for instance.

The module on partition is a part of their course titled “Indian Writings in English.” The objective of this course is to introduce students to specific debates in and around notions of “India” and its contestations, through various literary and cultural texts within the context of emerging work originally written in English. While the texts and contexts of this course have changed every year I have taught it, one framework that has guided this course is narrating the nation: what are the various means by which a nation is narrated and, in effect, comes to be imagined? Novels written by Indians in English inform one aspect of narrating the nation in this course. The Partition is introduced as another aspect among several contesting narratives that show a layered reading of the nation and its imaginations. The module on Partition emerged as a part of a larger unit that negotiates and interrogates various ideas about the nation and nation-state. A key idea that is discussed in this module is violence and the nation-state. It was in the context of discussing issues around communalism, religious fundamentalism, and violence in India that our discussion prompted us to view partition differently.

## Initial Classroom Discussions about the Partition

My introduction of the partition to this group of graduate students began with a discussion of commonly held knowledge about the event itself. Partition is a rather familiar referent within the contexts of India’s struggle for independence. More often than not, students invoked the major political names of Nehru, Jinnah, Lord Mountbatten associated with India’s partition. Some also mentioned that Gandhi was against the very idea of the partition, which led us to deliberate: What had the State provided us by way of archives about partition? What does it mean to archive the partition?

Our discussion began with a negotiation of the term “archive” itself. The archive, it was clear from the students’ responses, mean a set of documents containing data and information about events, people, and places. “But who puts them together?” I prompted them to think. It was necessary to now clarify how an archive comes into being.

## Understanding “Archives”

I initiated the discussion by introducing the concept “archive” as one in which a healthy interest has been invested of late. Derrida’s and Foucault’s contributions to theorizing the archive became integral to understand the idea of oral histories as archives themselves. A brief elaboration of Derrida’s ideas of archiving as a reflection of the pleasure principle in its desire to

preserve the past for the present and future, enabled students to understand an important implication of building an archive: the mode of archivization (system of structuring archives together) determines the kind of knowledge preserved. Who wants what kind of knowledge system to be preserved for the future? If there is a careful choice in preserving knowledge, what is being excluded, erased, or effaced? This led us to an important realization regarding archives and the State: what the State preserved as archives of Partition, then, was also politically motivated. In effect, the students were able to see an archive as a reconstruction of said events that takes on the form of a narrative. It became important to ask the pertinent question about the authorship of these narratives and their construction. Who constructs these narratives? What are the purposes and functions of a given construction? How does one negotiate an archive’s construction so that certain events get recorded?

At this point I brought into the discussion the Foucauldian idea of archives not just as a set of texts and documents, but as the *system of discursivity*—a system that provides a premise for something to be stated as a fact. The students were introduced to Foucault’s notions of



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the archive. For Foucault, the archive is not just a set of texts or narratives. It is one that enables certain things to be stated in certain ways, or in other words, it functions as a discourse. Inevitably, such a grouping of texts or narratives links the information recorded to the networks of power that created it.

The class then became increasingly concerned with modes of representation that the State uses to negotiate partition and border disputes. While documents that read and understand the modalities of partition form an important part of the archive, the various discursive spaces that the State utilizes in its processes of narrating and memorialization of the partition also become significant to understand narratives of the partition. For instance, in an interesting article, Richard Murphy (2001, pp 185-191) explores the ceremonial exchange between the Indian and Pakistani troops at the Wagah Border as a performative space of the partition that marks a “political paranoia” of difference and negation. He closely reads this everyday affair of aggressive foot-stamping vis-à-vis the Basant

discussion of the essay “Understanding Partition: Politics, Memories, Experiences” on partition in the Grade 12 CBSE (Central Board for Secondary Education) textbook<sup>6</sup> (CBSE is the central board that governs secondary education in India. Students under this curriculum share the same syllabus to study Indian History across the country.) This essay provides students with an overview of partition not merely by looking at the political dimensions of the event, but also by locating the emergence of communal hatred in the division of the two States. The essay also provides a counter-narrative mode of understanding partition: unlike the standard practice of merely stating a set of facts, it begins by making a crucial reference to “stories” being central to understanding partition and points to the strength of locating partition not merely in documents and state policies but in individual stories that altered the everyday lives of its victims.

The CBSE essay includes three such instances of partition stories told by individuals involved directly in the movement to and from both the countries. These stories

**The Times of India**  
 LARGEST NET SALES of any Daily Newspaper Printed in Northern, Southern, Central or Western India.  
 REGD. No. B111  
 NO. 155. VOL. CIX. BOMBAY: FRIDAY, AUGUST 15, 1947 PRICE TWO ANNAS  
**BIRTH OF INDIA'S FREEDOM**

**NATION WAKES TO NEW LIFE**  
**Mr. Nehru Calls For Big Effort From People**  
**"INCESSANT STRIVING TASK OF FUTURE"**  
**Assembly Members Take Solemn Pledge**  
**WILD SCENES OF JUBILATION IN BOMBAY**

**STATE VISIT TO KARACHI**  
 Their Excellencies Lord and Lady Mountbatten speaking to Karachi representatives at the Starline Alms on their arrival

**FRENZIED ENTHUSIASM IN BOMBAY**  
**Crowds In Festive Mood**  
 THE national flag was hoisted over the 74-year-old Bombay Civil Secretariat at midnight when the citizens of Bombay greeted the dawn of independence with solemn invocation and frenzied rejoicing.  
 "Citizens of free India—you are now free"—said the Prime Minister, Mr. B. G. Kher, in raising the flag at the midnight ceremony, which was attended by all Ministers and departmental heads and employees of the Bombay Government.  
 His declaration was greeted with cheer from the thousands who gathered at the approaches to the Secretariat.  
 A strong police guard kept order with the greatest difficulty till the conclusion of the ceremony when they lost control and hundreds

**"MAY BOMBAY PROSPER"**  
**Governor's Message**  
**GOOD WISHES TO FREE INDIA**  
 Sir John Cochrane, Governor of

parties among modern Lahoris as events that mark a distinct difference between India and Pakistan. The States' political paranoia is read here alongside the citizens' cultural paranoia. What serves as a cultural memory that permeates the cultural ethos of the historiography is marked by accentuated difference and aggression. Thus the seminar moved closer towards discussing the discursive construction of partition in and through archives of oral histories.

### Introducing Oral Histories as Teaching Materials

The classroom discussions made it imperative for us to re-negotiate our 'facts' about the Partition as givens. As mentioned earlier, several literary works and popular films centered around partition are available to engage with the modes of representing partition. While most often literary and cultural expressions about the partition are used to begin classroom discussion, our starting point was a

capture the tensions of religious difference, communal hatred, and nationalistic fervor quite well in the context of the partition, which made it a useful place to begin discussing the partition, especially as at least some students had a general sense of the event and its repercussions. Introducing into the syllabus literary works concerning the partition also proved helpful; some students, I assumed, would be familiar with the mode of narrating partition through stories and not merely as facts and figures. This would help them accept these stories as archival material of a different kind, when compared to the documents that are normally understood as archives in general.

Interestingly, no student who had studied the essay was able to recall the individual stories included in it, though students were able to identify larger issues like rape, burglary and, most important of all, "Hindu-Muslim hatred" as some of them phrased it. Their inability to recall the individual accounts made it easier to impress upon them the one-sided reading of partition.

## Student Stories: Creating Archives in Classrooms

During the discussion, one of the students intervened “on a different note” by sharing a story of partition she had heard from her maternal grandmother who was forced to migrate from Lahore to Delhi in India<sup>7</sup>. She recalled how her grandmother, then a young girl of fifteen, was forced to move from her ancestral property with her family and siblings to India. The family had hoped that this would be a temporary arrangement and left most of their valuables buried in their backyard because crossing the border with valuables, they heard, was not an easy affair. The student recalled how her grandmother crafted an ingenious way to carry some gold coins across the borders: she kneaded several of them into the dough used to make *rotis* and convinced officials at the border that the dough was for her little siblings who might feel hungry along the arduous journey undertaken to reach the other side.

This little anecdote functioned as more than an interesting story in the class. What began as an exercise in understanding what school textbooks have said about oral histories and partition led us to a fascinating dimension of the event — understanding partition as it affected the everyday life of its victims. That there was a student in class to whom this story had been passed on added strength and great value for the first time I taught the partition and oral histories as archives. We no longer needed to access a story outside the purview of our experiences to validate the emotional aspects of the partition; here was a student among us who had firsthand account of the experience from her grandparent. This account, I observed, made students more conscious and curious about earlier witness accounts and other stories we were to read in the course.

Following this, a set of State records about Partition were closely read in class. One such document was a report filed by the Ministry of Information, Government of India on population movements on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, 1947 (National Archive, Movement of Refugees). This report provides an overview of the number of Muslim and non-Muslim refugees who were moved to and from India and Pakistan.

What became interesting in this report, quite apart from the evident religious binary it illustrated, was its conflation of particulars as general. While the Hindu-Muslim markers became a way of understanding the physical movement into both the nations, what also emerged for us was the conflation of the subjectivity and personhood of an individual into a larger, consolidated religious binary. The colonial tropes of temporal linearization and spatialization as well as the tendency to divide partition into phases and locate it spatially in and around Bengal and Punjab was easily visible while the oral narratives we discussed dismantled several such notions. Human dimensions of history, which had to do with the “difficult” part—of grief, despair, and loss—were merely captured as:

*On October 29, six thousand non-Muslims arrived in India by refugee trains from Lahore and*

*3,000 from Lyallpur. Three thousand Muslim refugees each from Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana were moved by train to Pakistan.*

This account does not capture the pain, loss, and grief of partition. Another report by the British High Commissioner to India on 15 September 1947 described the communal disturbances that were developing in parts of Punjab following the movement of people across both the newly-formed countries. After a list of number of casualties, the report states:

*Nehru at Press Conference on 12th (September) said that the official and non-official sources estimated number of deaths in Delhi disturbances roughly at 1,000. Official verified figures of casualties in disturbances in West and East Punjab were 15,000 killed but he felt these figures were very low and might be doubled or trebled (“Communal Disturbances”).*

Reading reports such as these, we began to see how the State’s archives of partition that provided facts about the event did not account for narratives that embody the subjectivity of the individuals who were in transit. This prompted us to revisit the story that was narrated by one of the students. “What is interesting about Kudrat’s story about her grandmother’s movement from Pakistan” one of them remarked, “is how this story has no mention of a Nehru or a Jinnah or a Gandhi! Those are the only names we know of with regard to Partition.” Surely we were made aware, through this remark, of the “other side” of Partition that does not directly involve the politicians of the time. This radical line of inquiry led us to recognize how the event of partition must be re-viewed through a different set of lenses. Here were stories that told not just about the losses in terms of numbers but also stories about survival and hope, betrayal and despair.

## Introducing Urvashi Butalia and Veena Das

This gave us an occasion to engage with one of the most brilliantly recorded oral histories about partition called *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) by Urvashi Butalia. Butalia observes how the Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984 made her doubly aware of the communal dimensions of the relations between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in India at the time. Stemming from Butalia’s own engagement with stories she had heard from her family as a child, the work begins with Butalia’s visit to her maternal uncle, Rana, who chose to remain in Pakistan. Following this, she decides to visit her uncle several years after the partition. The work, which is a collection of witness accounts of partition, does more than give us an idea of how partition affected the everyday lives of people from different walks of life. Questions of caste, class, and gender become central to Butalia’s negotiation of partition. In her “An Archive with a Difference,” she uses letters written by common people who were affected by the decision to partition the two countries, addressed to the very civil and administrative

authorities who made those political decisions. The loss of a community and the fears of rebuilding communities are seen as important concerns in these letters. On reading and discussing some of these letters in class, it became apparent that the letters are an embodiment of hopeful citizens of a new nation who are otherwise erased from the mainstream narrativization of the Partition.

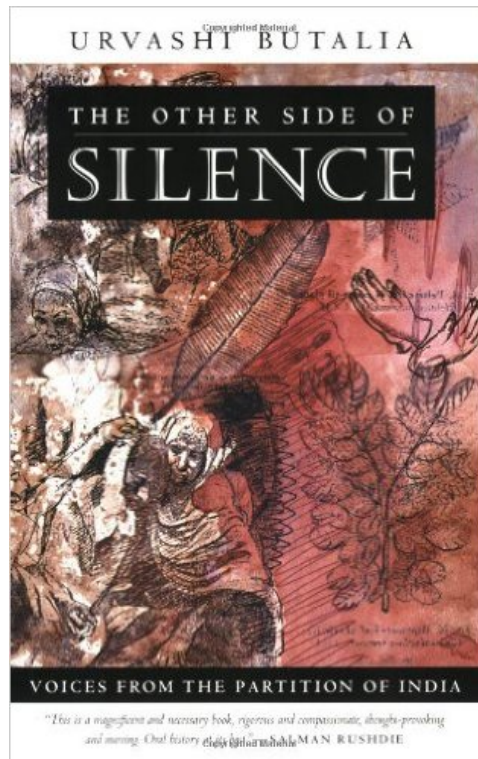
### Victim-as-Witness: Partition and Subjectivity

We began to read Butalia's oral histories from her work *The Other Side of Silence* as witness accounts not just by individuals who witnessed the partition but also by those who came to bear witness to it in their very act of revisiting the traumatic event. Functioning as witness accounts, it was observed that these victims were bearing witness to the event itself, creating a new register to understand their narratives of trauma and suffering. The victim-as-witness is a category that is constructed differently in these personal narratives of suffering as opposed to State archives which merely collate victims as numbers.

Butalia provides an extremely moving account of her maternal uncle as well as her mother's views on the partition in her chapter "Blood." Both Rana, her uncle, and Subhadra, her mother, locate partition in the ways in which their everyday lives changed. Butalia places Rana's predicament of having chosen to stay back in Pakistan within a tenuous relationship he shared with his family. His choice of having to convert to Islam to remain in Pakistan along with his mother was a painful one that led to the separation of the two from his siblings who moved to India. Rana, we learn, was unwelcome in his own home. His loyalty towards Pakistan and his own family came to be doubted. Butalia observes:

*Ever since television made appearance, Ranamama made sure he listened to the Indian news everyday. When cricket was played between the two countries, he watched and secretly rooted for India. Often, when it was India playing another country, he sided with India. . . . His children and family found this bizarre. They could not understand these secret yearnings, these things that went on inside his head (p 39).*

Similarly, in "Subhadra", Urvashi Butalia's mother's account, Subhadra remarks how Rana was never accepted as a Muslim in Pakistan (p 65). Reiterating Pandey's argument that Rana's double bind was inherent in her subjectivity makes for an interesting shift from thinking



accounts.

### Asha and the Widow as Survivor *vis-a-vis* the Partition

Yet another interesting ethnographic work that we recalled was Veena Das' work on partition and subjectivity (2000). In "Violence, Poisonous Knowledge and Subjectivity" Das' research focuses, much like Butalia's, on the accounts of several women whose negotiation with partition concerned everyday spaces of domesticity, not borders, property, and possessions. What is fascinating about Das' work is how the stories collected bring partition into the domain of kinship and domesticity. Through a re-reading of one of the accounts given by a Partition survivor named Asha, Das negotiates the experience of partition that lies in the edges of unspoken words, unvoiced fears and grief.

She recounts one such narrative of Asha who was widowed prior to the partition and had no home to go to post-partition. In Asha's life, we are told, "the originary moment of the violence of the Partition got woven into the events of her life because she was already vulnerable as a widow in a kinship universe of Hindu upper-caste ethos" (209).

Widowed at the age of twenty in 1941, much before the event of partition was to take place, Asha recounts how her bereavement after her husband's death, coupled with being childless, "weighed heavily upon her" (210). Asha's husband's sister gave her own son in adoption to help her gain some interest in life. However, during the partition, Asha's family lost its property and belongings and had to leave Lahore. Her own natal home was in Amritsar, the nearest town to the border on the Indian side. This family

about the partition as a "happening" to understanding the category of that very happening.

### From Numbers to Subjecthood: Oral Histories as Archives

Oral history documentation works against the generalizing principle to highlight the subjectivity of the person. These narratives do not function as metanarratives of a community or as the general history of the nation. Students began to recognize that in the state's archival methods such narratives merely function as a set of generalized numbers. These victims are characterized by an effacement of their victimhood. In the oral narratives archives, however, we recognized the embodied subjectivity of the sufferer: otherwise absent, clouded, and shrouded in State

provided refuge to many from Asha's conjugal family until other relatives came forward to help them. Asha continued to live in her parents' home but was seen as a burden by her own brother and his wife. Das quotes Asha: "a daughter's food is never heavy on her parents, but how long will one's parents live? When even two pieces of bread are experienced as heavy by one's own brother, then it is better to keep one's honor—make one's peace—and to live where one was destined to live." (211)

Her parental home where she is entitled to receive honor became a place where she could no longer make the same kind of claims after her marriage. She was forced to accept the last resort of having to live where she was "destined," which was in her conjugal home. Das observes how Asha's reading of her own plight is "shaped by the cultural, patriarchal norms of widowhood" especially in the absence of the feeling of belonging that was earlier extended by her sisters-in-law, even after her husband's death. With the reliance on the sacred texts, a life of asceticism was the prescribed measure, and all the more stringent for the upper caste widows like Asha (Gupta 2001, 302). Her stay in her conjugal house was always encumbered by daily chores. She had to perform this role to ensure that the family did not see her as an added responsibility and yet her very presence, Das observes, functioned as a constant reminder to the family of the loss of her husband. She could neither express grief as it would disturb the happy picture of the family, nor express her happiness as she was a widow. Her brother-in-law, a widower himself, began to make passes at her that she found difficult to deal with, while her own siblings saw her as the poor widow with whom the ancestral property would have to be divided. Her becoming an unwanted entity within these domestic spaces illuminated the subjecthood of a widow in the context of the partition. Here was a fascinating oral narrative that helped us locate the effects of partition in everyday life.



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## Telling Partition: Kinship and Domesticity

Das marks Asha's account as one that narrates partition as an event of loss, betrayal, and hopelessness. She observes:

*for many women such as Asha, the violence of the Partition lay not in what happened in the riots or in the brutal violation of their bodies but also in what they also had to witness—viz. the possibility of betrayal coded in their everyday relations. . . . Who could have predicted that a major political event would reveal the possibility of betrayal in much-loved relationships? (p 218).*

Her account is told here in elaborate detail to impress upon readers the strength in the telling of her experience. It is this orality that constitutes a re-reading of the archives. In Asha's recounting of the partition experience, it is the home that becomes more relevant than the nation. Her remarriage is, in turn, seen as betrayal by the members in her conjugal family. Her account highlights the politics played out between relatives of her community and not between communities as is often associated with Partition. Das reflects:

*In the case of Asha we saw that she defines relationships of kinship much more through ideas of care, and in her story the brutality of the Partition lay in what violence could do to alter the ways in which kin recognize or withhold recognition from each other. Thus the traumatic memory of Partition cannot be understood in Asha's life as a direct possession of the past (p 221).*

This kind of historiography frees it from a convenient positioning of the "other" seen in other records by the British administrators of the time too. It turns partition from two-nation, two-communities, two-religions' story to larger questions of dispossession, dislocation, and betrayal. Partition, therefore, is not just geopolitical but also emotional. Butalia makes an interesting remark in the context of remembering the partition. She says: "I have come to believe that there is no way we can begin to understand what partition was about, unless we look at how people remember it" (p 13). Partition, therefore, is about how people remember it. Oral archives of partition stories do not arrive at facts, but rather, on how memories shape "facts."

## Gendering Oral Histories about Partition

In reading Asha's account, an interesting set of responses emerged from some of the male students in a class where the majority was young. One of them remarked: "While what these writers are saying is indeed of great significance, I do not understand how the partition is always problematized from the point of view of the women and children. Did men not suffer at all? While the domestic space is definitely significant, why should the other side of partition only entail dimensions of the woman's experiences?" This was an interesting observation, calling attention to the danger of gendering the archive. To look at partition as an event that only affected women and children, not men, can be a dangerous reading of the archives themselves.

This observation led some of us to explore the questions of masculinity in and around partition. An illuminating addition to our own archive of material on partition was made possible through a reading of Deepak Mehta's essay (2000) "Circumcision, Body, and Masculinity: The Ritual Wound and Collective Violence," through which we were able to locate the ritualized constitution of the body. The essay clearly articulates the anxieties of both masculinity and nationalism through the Muslim identity. The strength of such a critical observation has been pointed out by Pandey, too. Pandey claims that while there have been several accounts of ritualization and sexualized violence against the body of the woman, the male body is never discussed in detail in any such accounts. Mehta's interesting account of reading masculinity within the discourse of partition further broadened for us the scope of oral history narratives about the Partition.

## Pedagogical Implications: Partition and the Affective Turn

As the class read such witness accounts, we began to see how the oral archive recorded in the work significantly differs from the facts collated by the State. The facts reported in the State accounts are not obvious givens. Butalia (1998) observes how the Indian Independence Bill provided for ten committees that were set up to look into the matters of the partition, but none of them considered the problems of rupturing and dislocating people's lives (p. 75). Partition has largely been known in the way it has been handed down to us. These committees have indeed shaped the cultural apparatuses of partition.

The oral narratives, however, provided for an affective turn in constituting the historiography of partition. This affective turn is achieved by reading stories about loss, betrayal, and hope rather than assimilating a set of figures and political facts around the partition. The discursive construction of the victim in State archives has no space for the particulars. The voice in these State archives is not the victims' but the State's—the voice of those who were only distantly involved in the event. That these individual stories have been archived in and through several projects before they fade away is the greatest strength of an oral histories archive. That we had one more oral narrative shared in our class apart from the ones by Butalia and Das added to our own archive of partition stories we were familiar with.

A significant pedagogical implication of reading oral histories as archives of suffering was that students brought back several other stories to class about Partition that covered a range of other issues like caste, class, gender, and sexuality. The movement from gaining theoretical knowledge about reading oral histories of partition to feeling and relating with it through other similar narratives was indeed notable in students' readings and engagements with other narratives of suffering.

Oral histories may restrict or even appear to constrict the temporal and spatial canvas, but it definitely expands the boundaries of critical engagement and cultural analysis.

The State records events of death, rape, loss, and despair but oral narratives do the same differently. In them, patriarchy, sexuality, national politics and everyday life all intersect, but are seen through the prism of lived experience. What is therefore refracted is more than just a story. An oral archive, then, enables us to imagine a dynamic historiography of the nation. What Das does with the fragments of Asha's experience is to perform a cultural exegesis: her reading is not an application of an existing framework of history to a personal account. She sees another dimension of the historiography of the nation through it. What is foregrounded in these accounts is the materiality of the pain and suffering of the subjects of the Partition.

## Oral Histories as Archives: Challenges and Problem Questions

The introduction of oral accounts of partition saw its share of problems when brought into the classroom as teaching materials, too. Students raised concerns about veracity and authenticity of these narratives that were often recalled from memory several years after the partition. This, they said, countered the "objectivity" that is central to the discipline of history itself. "Would these not be mediated accounts? How much would they remember? How well would one remember forty years after the happening?" they asked.

However, once students understood that such narratives challenge not just the "givens" about partition but also the received beliefs about the processes of historiography itself, it became clear to them that authenticity is not always a strong critical point when discussing narratives of trauma and suffering. The historian's understanding of partition may be different from the popular imagination of the same. Private memories and witness accounts often counter mainstream versions of history. Having introduced the problems of disciplinary narratives of history, oral narratives prove to be a stronger archive that negotiated the interstices of caste, class, and gender within the partition as opposed to the otherwise singular and unitary preoccupation of partition as a narrative of geopolitical division and large-scale violence.

That the students were indeed able to see partition well beyond the lens of dates, events, and political figures was a welcome change. The move from dealing with partition as distant subjects not directly affected by it, to recognizing the embodied suffering of subjects as violence and suffering. Such oral histories function as important archival sites that also alert us to a fuller picture of the partition without shying away from its horror or being forced into apathy due to lack of knowledge about them. Their recognition of a secure, safe, well-constituted sense of Self vis-à-vis the lives of those who experienced trauma and suffering enabled a better, empathetic recognition of the Other. "We no longer see subjects of suffering and trauma with a sense of detachment and security but rather with a sense of relating with them as individuals cohabiting similar life-worlds as ours" remarked one of the students. What made the use of oral histories as archives to discuss



the Partition radical was locating an affective literacy in the reading and understanding of events marked by violence. Students in general began to be a lot sharper in critiquing the modes of violence in other contexts too. The introduction of a story from one of their own classmates made the understanding of oral narratives and its strength a lot more useful.

Oral narratives need to be collected to enable students to understand suffering from the perspective of the subjecthood of the victim. In introducing these archives into the classroom space, the partition was re-viewed through an affective lens of pain, suffering, and feeling of empathy. This affective turn was possible in the recognition of the "other side of silence," otherwise effaced in historical accounts. These archives of oral histories have shown us how where no government remembers stories of those who crossed and those who remained, memories disseminate them.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Most of the relations between India and Pakistan are constructed around the Hindu-Muslim paradigm. What is meant by “characteristic” here is the nature of responses that have anything to do with both these countries. It is marked by an increased sense of hostility politically, and consequentially also emotionally in the minds of several nationalist Indians.
- <sup>2</sup> When several Muslim celebrities from Bollywood raised issues about the tolerance in the country, the characteristic response was “Go back to Pakistan.” The sentiments around categorically asserting a nationalist identity has become increasingly tense today in India. The recent developments around the debate of nationalism in the premier public universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University emphasize the tolerance-intolerance debate in this context. The current government has been criticized for an increasingly rightist Hindutva discourse defining nationhood (See Sashi Kumar’s “The New Nationalism” in the March issue of *The Frontline* for more). It is within several of these debates that the question of Partition was raised in our classes.
- <sup>3</sup> The Hindu-Muslim relations in India have always been configured within and around increasing communal tensions. A vast amount of archival material points towards the problems and perspectives of understanding the Hindu-Muslim relations. Several instances of communal tensions in the country, including the Ramjanmabhoomi incident that led to the destruction of the Babri masjid in Ayodhya by right wing Hindu fundamentalists in December of 1992 and to the riots in Mumbai and consequent bomb blasts in 1993 are attributed to a breakdown in the harmony between the two communities. A variety of literature exists that critiques and problematizes many of these positions. See Jha et al (2012); Mehta et al (2007); Pandey (2001); Das (2000) for more on understanding the nature of the rather problematic constructions of Hindu and Muslim subjectivities.
- <sup>4</sup> A wide literature is available that ascribes the communal differences between Hindus and Muslims to events prior to the Partition itself. Literature on the peaceful coexistence of the two communities is also available. See Gyanendra Pandey’s *Remembering Partition* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001) and *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: OUP 1990); Asghar Ali Engineer’s *Communal Riots in Post Independent India* (Hyderabad: Sangam Books, 1984) for more on the subject.
- <sup>5</sup> Works by Sadat Hasan Manto, Alok Bhalla, Khushwant Singh, and films like *Qissa* are a select few references of literary and cultural expressions of partition.
- <sup>6</sup> See “Understanding Partition: Politics, Memories, Experiences”(pp. 376- 404) in *Themes in Indian History III*, Delhi: NCERT for the chapter on Partition
- <sup>7</sup> I would like to thank my student Kudrat Handa for bringing this story to the discussion in class. This one story opened several dimensions of reading partition for both students as well as me. Thanks are also due to Amala Poli, a former student who added important ideas to an earlier draft of this paper.



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