THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

May 31, 2023

The Many-Faced Afterlife of 1947

By: Pranav Kohli

Partition remains a living memory and an unfinished history; an irreparable rupture whose afterlife warrants scrutiny. If we are to continue remembering Partition we must do so as a portent or warning of the future that awaits us.

The memory of Partition is fundamentally a memory of displacement.

Confronting Partition's visceral afterlife involves a rendezvous with memories of abandoned homes and severed relationships, of loss and suffering. These memories are the product of physical and cultural displacement, having taken shape in India years and decades after the fact.

But at a deeper level, the memory of Partition is also the product of displacement in time.

The last 25 years have witnessed a wave of oral historical and ethnographic work on Partition. This veritable memory boom has been driven by a sense of urgency to interview Partition survivors and document their memories before the inevitable passage of time silences them forever. As we witness the inevitable death of the last of Partition survivors, it has become important to engage with their memories and trauma, to perhaps find some meaning - some lessons or solace perhaps - so we may finally begin to lay them to rest.

A personal connection

My grandparents on both sides of the family were born on the other side of the border. Although I had grown up with these memories, it was my migration to Ireland in August 2014 - a displacement of sorts - that made these familial memories of Partition relevant to my identity. In those initial months as I struggled with culture shock as a postgraduate student in Ireland, it was my Pakistani neighbours Adeen and Mahvish who despite *not being of home* reminded me most of home.

> Just like that, my connection to the Partition, my Pakistani heritage, my familial connection to Dera Ghazi Khan became relevant.

On the surface, we shared a language, recipes, pop culture references, and cultural sensibilities. Like me, they would never return a food container empty. Underlying these quaint moments was the silent acknowledgement that we shared a common cultural heritage (a difficult and unaddressed history). And just like that, my connection to the Partition, my Pakistani heritage, my familial connection to Dera Ghazi Khan became relevant.

Studying race and nationalism in the classroom as part of my MPhil programme, made questions of belonging more relevant closer to home. These experiences led to my first engagement with Partition oral history, a project that was driven by my nostalgia for the pre-Partition period even as it deconstructed nostalgia as an idealisation of the past. The 'egg' of memory had hatched in a foreign nest.

The afterlife of Partition

`I remember the whole map [layout] of the place, so much so that even their [Pakistan] staff which sits there, works there, would not know. Still I can draw the drawing of my house, my important places, my schools and my canal also. There we used to go for swimming every Sunday.`

It was with these words that my granduncle said to me in Delhi in May 2015 that my journey as an ethnographer of Partition began. My granduncle was born in 1931 and had been 16 years old at the time of Partition. When I interviewed him for an MPhil thesis, he was delighted at the chance to share his memories. I still remember the wistful look in his eyes as he remembered his hometown Dera Ghazi Khan, now in Pakistan. He told me about his childhood, his journey to India on a train that was very nearly attacked, his close brushes with violent mobs in Delhi in the weeks and months just after Partition, and of the many years of hardship that followed in its wake.

> A chance encounter on a full moon night had uncovered a strata of history on which this city rests uneasily.

Once I began to pay close attention to Partition's lingering presence in the everydayness of things, it became impossible to stop. In a metropolis as old as Delhi, the land is a book that can be read by those who speak the languages of memory and history.

On the night of the Sikh Guru Guru Nanak's birth anniversary - 4 November 2017 - while my grandaunt and I were walking home from the Rajouri Garden market, we met someone who was performing the Multani/Derawali (or more generally, Saraiki) *karva chauth* ritual on the street. The Saraiki *karva chauth* ritual differs from the north Indian one in two significant ways: the moon is seen through a hole cut out in the middle of a roti (not a sieve), and this ritual is performed on the first full moon of the Indian lunar month Kartik which also marks Guru Nanak Gurpurab. Talking to the woman after she had finished the ritual, we learnt that her family had migrated to Delhi from Multan during Partition. This was her way of keeping her connection with her ancestors alive. And just like that, a chance encounter on a full moon night had uncovered a strata of history on which this city rests uneasily.

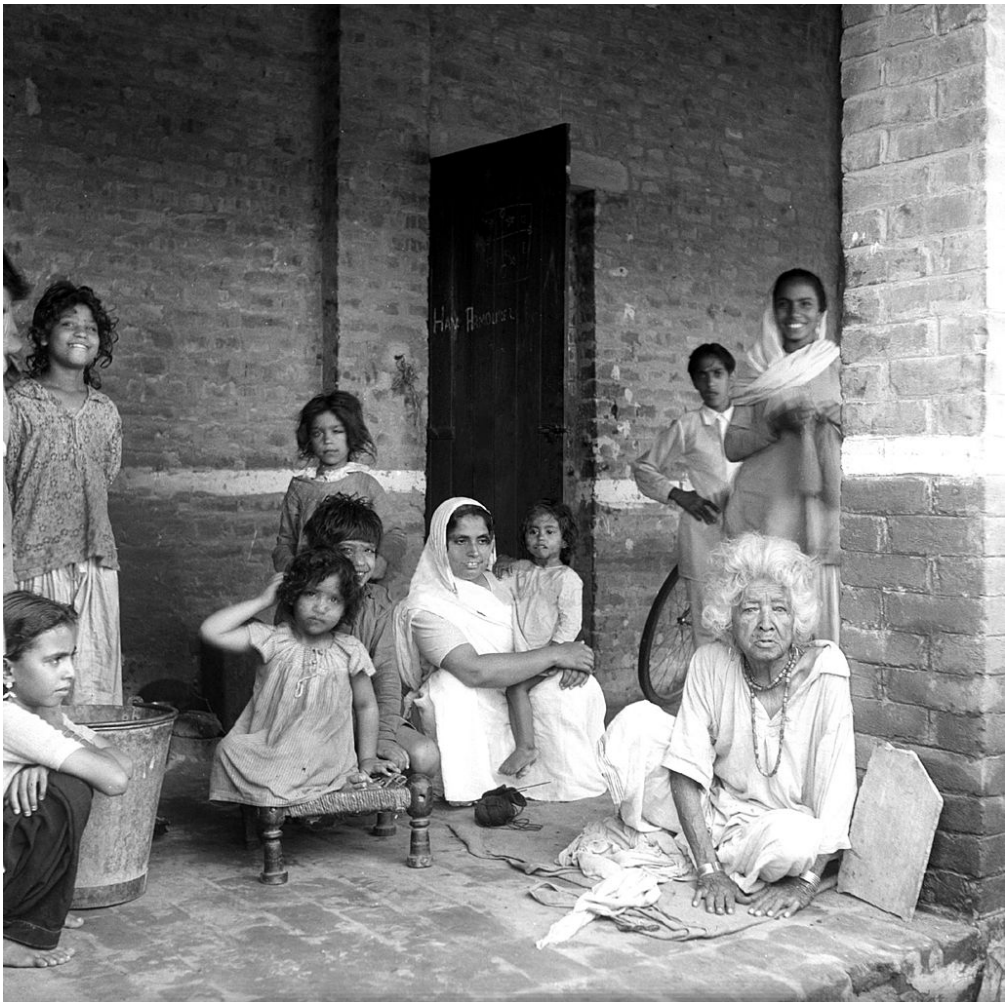
A map of displacements

Delhi was also the obvious choice given my familial connections and its centrality to Partition's history. Delhi had received the lion's share of refugees during Partition. The 1951 census calculated the city's population at 1,744,072, of which refugees comprised 28.4% of the population (Datta 1986: 443).

The history of Partition is writ large over the neighbourhoods of Delhi. Even today, certain neighbourhoods of Delhi are associated with Partition refugees: Kirti Nagar, Derawal Nagar, Kingsway Camp, Malviya Nagar and Lajpat Nagar, to name a few. Plots and houses in these neighbourhoods were specifically allotted to refugees from Punjab in compensation for the property they had abandoned in Pakistan. Satellite towns around Delhi and other cities in Punjab, Haryana and UP were also chosen for the resettlement of refugees. Meanwhile, despite not having been specifically built to resettle Partition refugees, west Delhi neighbourhoods such as Rajouri Garden emerged as a popular destination for Punjabi refugees.

> Refugee organisations had withered drastically and were now largely social and cultural spaces for the first and second generations of Partition survivors

Volunteer-run organisations were founded by refugees in the 1950s with the explicit purpose of resettling their respective communities and help them rebuild lives following Partition. The All India Mianwali District Association, for example, had been instrumental in the establishment of Mianwali Nagar, an enclave within Delhi's Paschim Vihar. By 2018 these refugee organisations had withered drastically and were now largely social and cultural spaces for the first and second generations of Partition survivors. Almost all of their active members were aged 60 and above, and the committees of these organisations were largely male-dominated.



During the resettlement process, the Indian government made a concerted effort to preserve the 'regional affinity' of refugees. In Faridabad's New Industrial Township (NIT) - a township created specifically to resettle refugees from the North West Frontier Province - regional affinity was preserved right down to the village level. Families were first listed according to their regions and then allotted contiguous sites based on the villages they were from (Jain 1998: 104).

> I became aware of Faridabad's enduring connections to the Partition and the Frontier.

I became friends with a community of Partition survivors from the North West Frontier Province who would meet in NIT's Rose Garden every evening. Through them, I became aware of Faridabad's enduring connections to Partition and the Frontier. For example, the BK Chowk and BK Hospital (Faridabad's Civil District Hospital) were named after Badshah Khan or Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. BK Hospital was inaugurated by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Prime Minister Nehru on 5 June 1951. Khan was in India at the time for medical reasons, having been released on bail by Pakistan. Pooran Chand (name changed), a Partition survivor who shared a grandparent-like relationship with me during my fieldwork, remembered being part of the crowd that bore witness to this emotionally charged moment. (In 2020, residents protested a proposal by the Haryana government to rename the hospital after former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. An 87-year-old Partition survivor was quoted in the *Hindustan Times* as saying that "the state government is wiping out our history")

Faridabad's Partition survivors also introduced me to the nearby Gurdwara Shahidane Gujrat Train. 'The Gurudwara of the Gujrat Train Martyrs' was built in the 1950s, to memorialise the 'martyrdom' of those who died in the Gujrat Train massacre. In January 1948, a train full of Frontier refugees bound for India was massacred at this station in Pakistan (not to be confused with the state of Gujarat). The killing was accompanied by the abduction of Hindu and Sikh women. This *gurdwara* was built in their memory and functions as something of a non-denominational shrine - drawing both Hindus and Sikhs - to the memory of the Partition's 'martyrs'.

Difficult questions

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau (1984) compares memory to a bird that lays its eggs in another's nest. "Like those birds that lay their eggs only in other species' nests, memory produces in a place that does not belong to it" (87).

De Certeau's quote has stayed with me for the way in which it identifies displacement as intrinsic to the process of remembrance. Sociological and anthropological work on memory has revealed that memory is neither an absolute truth nor a completely faithful reconstruction of lived experience. Instead, memory is a social construction and the process of remembering - of narrating events from the past - is also fundamentally a process of making sense of the past (Boym 2001; Connerton 1989).

It is partly this quality of memory to draw its meaning from the present in which it is recalled that de Certeau referred to when he compared memory to an egg hatched in a foreign nest: "It [memory] receives its form and its implantation from external circumstances, even if it furnishes the con-tent (the missing detail)" (1984: 87).

> The nostalgia and bittersweetness of their memories was overshadowed by the increasing normalisation of mob lynchings.

Researching Partition in 2017-18 made for a strangely dislocating experience. While my fieldwork brought me in touch with some fascinating people - a couple of whom had even revisited Pakistan since the Partition - the nostalgia and bittersweetness of their memories was overshadowed by the increasing normalisation of mob lynchings.

The start of my fieldwork in July 2017 coincided with the lynching of Junaid Khan. On 22 June 2017, Junaid was stabbed multiple times aboard a moving train and later thrown onto the Asaoti Railay Station where he bled to death in his brother's arms. Junaid and his family lived in a village in Ballabgarh, a mere 10 kilometres from the Rose Garden where I frequently conducted my fieldwork. Junaid's lynching was part of a larger worrying pattern of the normalisation of Hindu nationalist violence; one characterised by glacial investigations, unending judicial proceedings, threats to the victims' families often with the counter-charge of cow slaughter, and unflinching support for the perpetrators from politicians and Hindu Right organisations (including publicly garlanding them).

Observing and living through this period of *de facto* state-sanctioned lynching, made me question the relevance of my own work. I was increasingly aware of a visceral tension I was experiencing between the past I was recording and the present I was living.

> They remembered the suffering endured by them during the Partition as a 'sacrifice' and a debt owed to the independent nation.

Stories of frenzied mobs, targeted killings and genocidal violence no longer felt like stories of a distant place and time. These acts of violence, of majoritarian mobilisation under the guise of a so-called national revival were unfolding in the present. This in turn raised difficult questions about the relevance of my own work. Why was I, living in this India, recording the victimhood of a people who were no longer oppressed? What relevance did these memories have at a time when violent Hindu mobs were openly lynching Muslims? Was there any hope for healing and reconciliation in this climate?

These questions were compounded by the terrifying realisation that the vast majority of Partition survivors I interviewed supported the current regime. They remembered the suffering endured by them during the Partition as a 'sacrifice' and a debt owed to the independent nation. They remembered deceased family, friends and co-religionists as 'martyrs' and many of them explicitly demanded the status of 'freedom fighters' for themselves and their fellow survivors. 'Sacrifice' and 'martyrdom' were bestowed retrospectively in these discourses to glorify ambiguous suffering, the honour killings of women and 'bad death'. For example, a Partition survivor I interviewed said,

'Only Punjabis know what we have undergone and what all *sacrifices* we have made. Murders took place, women jumped into wells to commit suicide, we cut off the heads of our daughters ourselves. But, on the other hand we also feel we came at a good time. There we would have stayed among Muslims as a minority. Although we were a minority, we would *dominate* them. All the financial power was ours. And what did we get here? What *compensation* did we get here?'

In such deeply resentful moods, many Partition survivors called for the complete ethnic cleansing of Muslims from India as 'justice' and 'revenge' for the suffering they had endured. They saw the rise of militant Hindu nationalism as necessary. In such conversations it became clear that revenge was the only 'healing' they desired.

> If we are to continue remembering the Partition in this climate we must do so as a portent or warning of the future that awaits us.

The religious nationalism of the present and trauma of the past has combined in telling ways to weaponise Partition's memory. We live in a time where the bonhomie of the Kartarpur Corridor and warm nostalgia recollections of the pre-Partition period coexist with frequent acts of mob lynching, religious polarisation and routine warmongering against the so-called 'eternal enemies' of the Hindu nation.

These myriad specific juxtapositions demand that we cast a critical eye on our past and ask ourselves some tough questions. If we are to continue remembering Partition in this climate we must do so as a portent or warning of the future that awaits us. Rather than ignore the fascism that thrives on the victimhood of Partition, we must study the complex ways in which Partition survivors continue to grapple with Partition's senselessness.

Krishna Sobti once famously said that, 'Partition was difficult to forget but dangerous to remember' (quoted in Butalia 2000: 283). If we choose to continue remembering Partition we must ask ourselves what it means to remember Partition in the time of fascism.

Pranav Kohli is the author of Memories in the Service of the Hindu Nation: The Afterlife of the Partition of India *(to be published by Cambridge University Press in July 2023). He holds a PhD in anthropology from the National University of Ireland Maynooth.*

References:

Boym, S. (2001). *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Butalia, U. (2000). *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. London: Duke University Press.

Connerton, P. (1989). *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Datta, V. N. (1986). *Panjabi Refugees and the Urban Development of Greater Delhi*. In: *Delhi Through the Ages*, edited by R.E. Frykenberg. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

De Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jain, L.C. (1998). *The City of Hope: The Faridabad Story*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing.

Menon, R. and Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Pandey, G. (2001). *Remembering Partition: Violence Nationalism and History in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.