Partition and Post-Partition Acts of Fiction: Narrating Painful Histories

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In his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Walter Benjamin offers the following often cited comment on history and its writing: 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (1955: 256). The statement draws its power from Benjamin's rethinking of history, and the work of history, in the context of a fascist Germany and its texts. At the same time, it is not inapplicable to other histories that force a radical questioning of the very notion that we occupy and further a culture of civility. The partition of India in 1947 has to be one such historical event and experience.[1] The very first attempt to engage this nightmarish moment, outside of journalism of course, was made by literary culture. In the last few decades, much of this literature has been brought to our attention and has been the subject of critical debate. In this piece I hope to contribute to discussions on the intersection between history and literature that Partition texts inhabit by focusing on three writers of Urdu literature, writers who have wrestled with the cultural blow that Partition dealt.[2] Problems of cultural dispossession and traces of its history in the present of which they write inform their re-describing of post-1947 history as an emergent history. Partition's erasure in Indian historiography has in no small way contributed to the sense many survivors have of a history that does not include or represent them.[3]

Published in October 1948, Sa'adat Hasan Manto's *Siyah Hashye* offers an early sense of the violation that the genocide of 1947 posed for him. Whatever else it is or was, Partition here is measured in painful detail

after painful detail that describe a totally shaken voice, shaken in its faith in the vision of progressive history that had been, till the 1940s, practically synonymous with the Indian struggle to end colonial rule. It appears additionally informed by a crisis of belief in the practice of literature itself. The impossibility of the realpolitik, the shock and disbelief in the face of its happening, inform the entirely descriptive and deliberately intransitive writing. Consider the following representative piece: 'Rioters brought the running train to a halt. People belonging to the other community were pulled out and slaughtered with swords and bullets' (Hasan 1995: 97). The will to meaning, that irreducible interest of narrative itself, is refused in this piece as much as it is invited by the very fact of the skeletal plot: surely 'rioters' inadequately contains the brutality described in the second sentence and this non-communally inflected term is meant to stand in a disjunctive relationship with a violence that is genocidal ('other community') as surely as the sense of a collective and active subject of the first sentence is replaced in the second by an indefinite and generalized scene of victimage. Historically available rationales are absent: the term 'rioters' refuses communalism as surely as it renders nationalism irrelevant, the two most politically prominent discourses by which this difficult historical moment was managed. It equally refuses the temptation to seek the consolation offered by metaphysical explanations and the relief offered, at the time, by that most favoured of commonplace explanations—the discourse of insanity.[4]

A journalistic spareness redeployed in literary text describes one writer's attempt to negotiate his occupation of the ground of an impossible condition. Clearly, language is itself recognized here as a casualty of this encounter with the unthinkable. And it is not in the words themselves but in the deliberately catachrestic turning of the headline into literary text that Manto 'speaks' the impossible condition facing him as a writer:[5] on the one hand, there is the perceived urgency of memorializing what Said has so memorably described as 'the messier precincts of "life" and historical experience' (2000: xviii). Here, it is about as messy as it can get—India's own encounter with the unthinkable in human behaviour. On the other hand, there is the sense that existing frameworks are incommensurate

with historical experience itself. To borrow language from Elaine Scarry, what is at issue here is the 'knowability of the world', a knowability that is arguably dependent, as she suggests it is, on 'its susceptibility to representation' (Scarry 1985: 3).

Bringing that which is beyond language—partly because this experience makes language seem 'too quick and cavalier' (ibid.) and partly because 'it is no longer possible to feel at home inside it [language]' (Leaman 2003: 251)—within the purview of language was no doubt that much more difficult and keen for Manto, for whom a lasting effect of Partition appears to have been a dispossession of culture and language. 'When I sat down to write,' he states, 'I found my mind in a confused state. However much I tried, I could not separate India from Pakistan or Pakistan from India. My mind was invaded by the same puzzling questions again and again, will the literature of Pakistan be different? If so, how? Who has the claim to what was written in undivided India? Will that be divided as well?' (Manto quoted in Memon 1980: 29).[6] Culture itself appears to have been turned by this historical event from a given to an ungraspable concept.

Other writers, too, appear to have been profoundly impacted by the sudden knowledge that a cultural vivisection was *required* by the political one and not a consequence of it. Intizar Husain, for instance, states:

> For me this entire event was a complex and convoluted human tragedy which raised many other kinds of questions and doubts. Here we have two great traditions, that of the Hindus and that of the Muslims. In the Hindu religious tradition the values of constancy, peace, patience and forbearance were deeply ingrained. I pondered with amazement what kind of new man had emerged from this culture and appeared on the scene in 1947. And where was our own Muslim religious tradition carrying us? (1983: 161)

A virtual erasure of Partition's social consequences, psychological upheaval, emotional devastation, and physical violence and degradation has meant that such questions have been informed by a sense of urgency for some writers.

As always already implicated in a politics associated with a struggle

between dominant and counter-history, memory and counter-memory, narrative and counter-narrative of nation, one might expect Partition texts to draw on the potential offered by intertextuality to locate terms and conceptual apparatus in their own attempt to grapple with a difficult history. A text that has emerged as a foundational partition text is Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*. Published in 1953 in *Savera*, it is a text that much recent writing on Partition literature acknowledges, debates, describes, and interrogates.[7] It has also given rise to other textual productions,[8] including a title (*Kitne Toba Tek Singh* by Bhisham Sahni) and a poem by Gulzar, entitled 'Toba Tek Singh'. Manto's story, Gulzar's 1970s' poem of the same name, and a text by Joginder Paul, *Sleepwalkers* (that I will argue relates intertextually with Manto's text) undertake to write a counter-history, one that answers the question: what would the present look like if we chose to remember Partition in the same way that we have chosen to remember the end of colonial India?

To begin, one could ask: what is it that Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* does as a Partition text? In a classic gesture of disavowal of dominant commonplaces in a hyper-territorial time, this short story stretches the semantic limits of a site traditionally associated with the principle of deterritorializing, the mental institution, so that it includes within its spatial and linguistic economies a refusal of the state-mandated principle of territorialism. Inmates express a refusal of nation and its logic as for instance is made manifest in the narratorial comment:

> ... they did not know a thing about its actual location [Pakistan] and its boundaries. That is why all the inmates of the asylum who weren't completely insane were thoroughly confused about whether they were in Hindustan or Pakistan. If they were in Hindustan, then where was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how was it possible that only a short while ago they had been in Hindustan, when they had not moved from the place at all? (Manto 2001: 65)

Clearly, the notion of nation is experienced by them as illogical.[9]

This, along with the text's announcing of its political project in the opening sentence—'Two or three years after the Partition, it occurred to

the governments of Hindustan and Pakistan that, just as they had exchanged civilian prisoners, they should exchange the lunatics confined in the asylums as well. In other words, Muslim lunatics interned in the asylums of Hindustan should be sent to Pakistan, and the Hindu and Sikh lunatics confined in the asylums in Pakistan should be handed over to Hindustan' (ibid.: 64)—has led to agreement that *Toba Tek Singh* is primarily an allegory that plays on a received understanding of rational and irrational. Thus, the insane exchange places with the sane, the asylum with the state and its apparatuses in this text.

However, if we direct attention to that which occupies the majority of the text—describing bodily and linguistic behaviours of inmates—we find other equally compelling interests, not necessarily at odds with an overtly political one. There is the much commented on rupturing of language in the separating out of word from meaning in a classic instance of nonsense verse, for instance. Thus it is not just the figure of Bishan Singh that has extraordinary symbolic value but the refrain with which he responds when asked his opinion about the partitioning of India. 'Opar di gurgur di annexe di bay dhiana di mung di daal of the government of Pakistan' (ibid.: 66), changes, the narrator informs us, to 'of the Toba Tek Singh government' (ibid.), while the pre-political version reads 'Opar di gurgur di annexe di bay dhiana di mung di daal of the laltain' (ibid.). This is not the only place in which the issue of language is raised. It is raised more pointedly as an issue of trust in language's capacity to engage in any meaningful way with the historical world, as for instance in the narrator's representation of the inmates' perplexity over the meaning of nation. It appears also in the opening reference to juridical language, here a language of force that betrays the very public whose rights it is meant to house. The somatic is of course everywhere in this text, a fact that is somewhat predicted by the text's choice of the mental institution. After all, the place most closely associated with somatic behaviours disassociated from the rational self, behaviours that the text spends much time describing, has to be the asylum. Interestingly, the asylum is not offered as an already radically-irrationalized and distressed space. On the contrary, the institution is presented as an institution—

manifesting signs of an accretion of functions and state-sponsored racial policies, for instance.[10] This is to say, it is invested with a particular social economy that derives from a history of bureaucratic rule as much as from its subversions (the narrator informs us that it is utilized by the powerful to provide shelter from the law). Describing Partition's effects through describing forms of affect takes up much narratorial space. One inmate, we are told, suddenly insists on living in a tree. As the narrator reports it, he says: 'I want to live in neither Hindustan nor Pakistan ... I'd rather live on this tree' (Manto 2001: 65 [ellipses original]). 'A sudden change' in another inmate, we are informed, 'was manifested by the fact that he took off all his clothes, handed them over to the guards, began to race around stark naked' (ibid.), while a third who 'bathed some fifteen sixteen times a day, abruptly gave up this habit' (ibid.). Probably the most memorable image of somatic distress, that acts simultaneously to allegorically express resistance of the newly-required territorial mentality, is of Bishan Singh's performance of refusal of the logic of nation at the very moment of its realization as an exchange of inmates:

> Just before sunrise, a sky rending cry emerged from the gullet of Bishan Singh, who till then had stood still and unmoving. Several officials came running to the spot and found the man who had stood on his legs, day and night for fifteen years, was lying on his face. Over here, behind identical wires lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh (ibid.: 70).

Because of its symbolic intensity, this scene encourages an overlooking of the critical scene preceding it, in which there is a far less restrained description of affect. 'On a severely cold day', we are told, 'police lorries packed with Hindu and Sikh lunatics proceededed toward the border under police escort' (ibid.: 69), where the exchange of lunatics proceeds to take place. What follows, as described by narrator, places Bishan Singh's act within a context, making it much less anomalous:

> It was indeed a hard job getting the men out of the lorries and handing them over to the officials on the other side. Some just refused to budge from their place. Those who agreed to come out were difficult to manage,

Speaking for Themselves: Partition History, Women's History

Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin

I

As an event of shattering consequence, Partition retains its pre-eminence even today, despite two wars on our borders and wave after wave of communal violence. It marks a watershed as much in people's consciousness as in the lives of those who were uprooted and had to find themselves again, elsewhere; indeed it sometimes seems as if two quite distinct, rather than concurrent, events took place at independence, and that Partition and its effects are what have lingered in collective memory. Each new eruption of hostility or expression of difference swiftly recalls that bitter and divisive erosion of social relations, between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and each episode of brutality is measured against what was experienced then. The rending of the social and emotional fabric that took place in 1947 is still far from mended.

There is no dearth of written material on the Partition of India: official records, documents, private papers, agreements and treaties, political histories, analyses, a few reminiscences. A vast amount of newspaper reportage and reams of government information exist on the resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees from Punjab and Bengal; on negotiations between India and Pakistan, on the transfer of power and the division of assets; and there are hundreds of pages of Parliamentary debates on the myriad issues confronting both countries and both governments. Nationalist historiography has generally seen Partition as the unfortunate outcome of sectarian and separatist politics, and as a

tragic accompaniment to the exhilaration and promise of a freedom fought for with courage and valour. Historical analyses over the last three or four decades, however, have uncovered the processes and strategies that led to the successful manipulation of Muslim perception in favour of a separate homeland, based on ineluctable differences between Hindus and Muslims. Although, as Mushirul Hasan has argued, the two-nation theory "... hardly reflected the consciousness of a community"[1] it is one of the abiding conundrums of Indian independence that a partition that seemed impossible and remote as late as 1946 was, one year later, presented as the "logical" resolution of the incompatibility of Muslim political destiny with Hindu majority power. A partition that was striking for its failure "to satisfy the interests of the very Muslims who are supposed to have demanded it"[2] a division that was remarkable for having been decided almost in the blink of an eye.

As Partition historians have unravelled the complexity of the movement which culminated in the violent, fratricidal sundering of a country, earlier nationalist and separatist justifications of it have given way to more considered and careful analyses of how exactly religion became the determinant of nationality. When India was partitioned, some sixty million of her ninety-five million Muslims (one in four Indians) became Pakistanis; some thirty-five million stayed back in India, the largest number of Muslims in a non-Muslim state.

It is not our purpose here to review the wealth of historical writing on Partition,[3] but it may be worth recapitulating some key concerns raised by political historians, recently. It is evident that a combination of social, historical and political factors were responsible for the simultaneous division of India and creation of Pakistan. The two-nation theory, it is generally agreed, was put forward as an ideological counterweight to secular nationalism, and derived a large part of its emotional appeal from a fear of political oblivion for Muslims once the British quit India. In the 1930s, however, and till the Second World War in fact, Chaudhry Rehmat Ali's scheme for a separate country was given short shrift, certainly by the All India Muslim League, and even by those like Mohammad Iqbal who made a case for provincial autonomy "within the body politic of India".[4]

The slow process of mobilisation through the 1930s, characterised by a series of political negotiations via the Cripps Mission and the declaration of separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims, made of Jinnah's 1940 Lahore Resolution an even more dramatic declaration than it was:

> It is a dream that Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has gone far beyond the limits. . . it will lead India to destruction if we fail to revise our notions in time. . . .
>
> Musalmans are a nation, according to any definition of a nation, and they must have their homeland, their territory and their state. We wish to live in peace and harmony with our neighbours as a free and independent people. We wish our people to develop to the fullest our spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political life in a way that we think best and in consonance with our own ideals. . . Ladies and Gentlemen, come forward as servants of Islam, organise the people economically, socially, educationally and politically and I am sure that you will be a power that will be accepted by everybody.[5]

Various accounts have highlighted the importance of Muslim mobilisation in the provinces to draw attention away from the high politics of League vs. Congress, with the British as dividers and rulers.[6] Others, notably Ayesha Jalal, have emphasized the crucial and decisive role of Jinnah, sole spokesman for a Muslim Homeland, in refusing to clarify the terms of, or elaborate upon, the Lahore Resolution, thus retaining a political advantage over the Congress. In her reading, it was this masterly understanding of *real politik* that pulled the carpet from under the feet of all other political players in favour of the AIML, despite its modest electoral performance. Others are more inclined to note the gradual crystallization of "Muslimness" among Indian Muslims, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. Farzana Sheikh, for example, has argued that the evolution of "Muslim politics" was the culmination of a history of ideas that believed Muslims and Muslimness were fundamentally different from other political sensibilities, leading to the conviction that "Muslims ought to live under Muslim governments". "It is neither insignificant nor coincidental," she says, "that the manner in which Indian Muslims

expressed their opposition to Western representation conformed closely to the political norms of Islam."[7] Francis Robinson carries this further by saying that there is indeed a "fundamental connection" between Islamic traditions and political separation;[8] the logical outcome of this is two nations, based on religious difference, requiring physical separation (as opposed to federal autonomy) in order to realize their political and cultural aspirations.

This view runs counter to those who reject the notion of any objective differences between Hindus and Muslims *as Hindus and Muslims;* they look instead at the complex interplay of historical and political forces, class compulsions, the politics of power (both in the provinces and at the centre), and the pressure on the British to arrive at a negotiated settlement, that led to the rapid consolidation of strength by the Muslim League.[9] Though they are wary of the essential difference thesis, they do not wholly endorse the nationalist view either. The latter gives primacy to the composite nationality concept (its cruder articulation being "unity in diversity"), arguing for the cultural assimilation and social intermingling of Hindus and Muslims, but failing to recognize or pay enough attention to the genuine fears and cleavages among both. Mushirul Hasan, in his considerable and impressive oeuvre on the Partition, has meticulously delineated the progression of these prevailing and countervailing forces up until the elections of 1946 and Direct Action Day, after which, as he says, "the creation of Pakistan could not be denied".[10]

The abundance of political histories on Partition is almost equalled by the paucity of social histories of it. This is a curious and somewhat inexplicable circumstance: how is it that an event of such tremendous societal impact and importance has been passed over virtually in silence by the other social sciences? Why has there been such an absence of enquiry into its cultural, psychological and social ramifications? There can be no one answer to this question, but what seems to have stepped in, at least partly, to record the full horror of Partition is literature, the greater part of which was written in the period immediately following the division of the country. In one sense, it can be considered a kind of social history not only because it so approximates reality (what Alok Rai calls

"a hypnotic, fascinated but also slavish imitation of reality"[11]) but because it is the only significant non-official *contemporary* record we have of the time, apart from reportage.

Popular sentiment and perception, at least as reflected in Partition literature particularly in Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi,[12] almost without exception registered the fact of Partition with despair or anger and profound unhappiness. "How many Pakistans?" asks one writer, while another says she felt as if a limb had been cut off. "Who killed India?" cries a third; "the Ganges in mourning", echoes a fourth. The futility and tragedy of demarcating boundaries, and the impossibility of dividing homes and hearts are the theme of story after story, as is the terrible violence that accompanied forced migration. Nowhere in the thousands of pages of fiction and poetry do we find even a glimmer of endorsement for the price paid for freedom, or admission that this "qurbani" (sacrifice) was necessary for the birth of two nations.[13] Rather, a requiem for lost humanity, for the love between communities, for shared joys and sorrows, a shared past. In the annals of Indian history, Partition is unique for the literary outpouring that it occasioned; Jason Francisco, reviewing recent anthologies of Partition writing—fiction, memoirs, poetry, testimonies, diaries, fragments—identifies three thematic concerns in these texts: rupture, protest and repair. These three motifs, he says, "form a natural response to Partition, a continuum from pain to healing"[14] and, via stories of repair, to the "healing power of memory". He is right in underlining the difficulty experienced in assimilating the barbarity and viciousness of Partition into normal life, and the essential problem of writing Partition as the human experience it was—namely that the overwhelming majority of its events went unrecorded, unverbalised; historical fiction, thus, "validates historical truth precisely in its power to represent".[15]

The importance of literary, autobiographical, oral historical and fragmentary material for an understanding of Partition has now been acknowledged by historians and others, concerned especially with the study of ethnic conflict and violence[16] and, by extension, for the writing of history itself. Official memory, after all, is only one of many memories.

Different sorts of telling reveal different truths, and the "fragment" is significant precisely because it is marginal rather than mainstream, particular (even individual) rather than general, and because it presents history from below. The perspective such materials offer us can make for insights into how histories are made and what gets inscribed, as well as direct us to an alternative reading of the master narrative. At their most subversive, they may counter the rhetoric of nationalism itself; may even enable us to rewrite this narrative as what Gyan Pandey calls "histories of confused struggle and violence, sacrifice and loss, the tentative forging of new identities and loyalties".[17] Their recuperation is important for yet another reason: without them, the myriad individual and collective histories that simultaneously run parallel to official accounts of historic events and are their sequel, almost inevitably get submerged; with them may also be submerged the countering of accepted—and acceptable—versions, to be buried eventually in the rubble of history.

II

"Itihas mein sirf naam our tarikh sahi hoti hai, baaqi nahin."*

— Gulab Pandit, social worker

To the best of our knowledge there has been no feminist historiography of the partition of India, not even of the compensatory variety.[18] Women historians have written on this cataclysmic event but from within the parameters of the discipline, and still well within the political frame. Even accounts of women's contribution to the freedom movement have tended to be male-centred—women do figure, but as members of prominent political families (Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, Ammu Swaminadhan, Kasturba Gandhi, the Nehru women, and so on), or as the thousands who came out in response to Gandhi's call for *satyagraha*. They have been seen as supplementary to male action, rather than as actors in their own right, contributing to something that existed independent of them. Consequently,

* "In history books, only the names and dates are correct, not the rest."

the importance of such a historic time has been evaluated not with specific reference to them, but with reference to the movement in question.[19] Yet the story of 1947, while being one of the successful attainment of independence, is also a gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of the realignment of family, community and national identities as a people were forced to accommodate the dramatically altered reality that now prevailed.

Women's history, in Joan Kelly's famous formulation, has a dual goal: to restore women to history and to restore our history to women.[20] The aim of the enterprise is to "make women a focus of enquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative";[21] in other words, to construct women as a historical subject and through this construction, "disabuse us of the notion that the history of women is the same as the history of men, that significant turning points in history have the same impact for one sex as for the other".[22] This is not to say that the history of women cannot, in any circumstance, ever be the same as that of men, simply that it cannot be subsumed in the history of mankind. Women's experience of it has implications for historical study in general, and women's history has revitalised theory by problematising at least three of the basic concerns of historical thought: periodisation; the categories of social analysis; and theories of social change.[23]

Because the traditional time-frame of history has been derived from political history, the absence of women in historical accounts is most unsurprising. Women have been excluded from making war, wealth, laws, governments, arts and science; and men, "functioning in their capacity as historians, considered exactly those activities constitutive of civilization: hence, diplomatic history, economic history, constitutional history, political history," and so on.[24] Feminist historiography has focused attention on the necessity of restoring women to history not only to challenge conventional history-writing, but to emphasize that a representative history can only be written if the experience and status of one half of humankind is an integral part of the story. Rejecting the women-as-a-separate-chapter syndrome, Helene Cixous insists that "we insinuate

ourselves into the text, as it were".

The task of restoration has only just begun, and it has not been easy, primarily because the historical archive has little to offer for such a reconstruction. For example, feminist historians have had to tease information out of census data and interpret demographic changes, to arrive at an understanding of how and when critical shifts in women's status with regard to fertility and mortality took place.[25] They have also had to examine other sources—women's letters, diaries, autobiographies and testimonies—in order to first, *locate* them in history, and then reinterpret and challenge the historical record. The progression from "compensatory" to "contributory" history, and finally to a reconceptualisation of it is a long and arduous one, methodologically as well as otherwise.[26] At each stage of the endeavour, searching questions have to be asked not only of historical enquiry as we have known it, but of the inadequacy of our own conceptual tools and methodological techniques. The task is further complicated by the fact that women can neither be considered a minority or subgroup, nor a race or class apart;[27] for as both Gerda Lerner and Joan Kelly have shown, they are the "social opposite not of a class, a caste or of a majority (since we are a majority) but of a sex: men".[28] Sensitive feminist historiography therefore requires not only the addition of other categories to inform our understanding of historical processes,[29] but a history of the dialectical relations between men and women *in history*. The attempt, in Joan Scott's words, throws light "not only on women's experience but on social and political practice . . . and permits historians to raise critical questions regarding the rewriting of history".[30]

In the light of the above, how do we embark on a feminist reading of Partition? What sorts of questions do we raise and where do we find our sources? How do we disentangle women's experiences from those of other political non-actors to enable us to problematise the general experience of violence, dislocation and displacement from a gender perspective? How do we approach the question of identity, country and religion, of the intersection of community, state and gender? How do we evaluate the state's responsibility to refugees in general and women

refugees in particular, as articulated in the policies and programmes of the government? How do we, as feminists concerned with issues of identity politics, unravel the complex relationship of a post-colonial state with religious communities in the aftermath of convulsive communal conflict?

Where, in short, do we begin?

The historical archive, for reasons outlined above, is unlikely to yield the kind of information we are looking for.[31] It is not that women are *altogether* absent from Partition histories or even from official records; it is just that they figure in the same way as they have always figured in history: as objects of study, rather than as subjects. They are present in some reports and policy documents, and no account of Partition violence for instance, is complete without the numbing details of violence against women. Yet they are invisible. Furthermore, their experience of this historic event has neither been properly examined nor assigned historical value. This is not to valorise experience over other equally important considerations, rather to recognize that it adds a critical dimension to any analysis of the impact of such an event on men and women, on relations between them, and between gender and social and historical processes.

Partition fiction has been a far richer source both because it provides popular and astringent commentary on the politics of Partition and because, here and there, we find women's voices, speaking for themselves.[32] But the most useful material for our purpose has been the very few first-hand accounts and memoirs by women social workers who were involved in the rehabilitation of women, and the oral testimonies we set out to obtain from them and other women in ashrams and refuges in Punjab and Haryana, the field of this research.

We began, though, with the women in our own families and, gradually, the blurred outlines of their earlier geography began to get filled in. From them, and later from all the people we spoke to, we learnt of their life in undivided India, of social and personal relationships between Hindus and Muslims, and the composite culture of the Punjab. The loss of homes was almost less painful, more bearable, than the loss of friendships and of what they had assumed were shared destinies. Listening to them, in retrospect, it was easy to forget that along with deep affection

and amity had been equally deep-seated prejudices and taboos; as one of the Hindu women we interviewed said to us, *"roti-beti ka rishta nahin rakhte the, baki sab theek tha"*. (We neither broke bread with them, nor inter-married, but the rest was fine.) From men in the family we heard something of the growing politics of separation and the Pakistan Movement, the almost imperceptible shift towards accepting the notion of two nations.

But this was only a very casual, most cursory introduction to what we were seeking because neither of our families experienced the kind of violence and destitution that millions of others did, even though they had been forced to leave. We realized we would have to simultaneously widen our horizon and narrow our focus. The choice of Punjab was obvious for personal and historical reasons both, and because it had been the site of maximum relocation and rehabilitation.[33] The most comprehensive resettlement scheme in the country, rural as well as urban, had been implemented in Punjab and, of course, it had also witnessed the greatest violence and killings in the course of the migrations. Here, too, were the numerous ashrams and homes to which destituted women were brought and given shelter and employment: Jalandhar, Amritsar, Karnal, Rajpura, Hoshiarpur ... right up to Rohtak.

Forty years after Partition, there were no "communities" of women we could identify whom we might find, waiting to be found. Families had dispersed, resettled, moved many times over and, initially at least, we were not looking for women in families. We were looking for those who had been left quite alone. People we spoke to said, "Partition? What do you want to talk about that for? Anyway, it's too late—they're all dead." This was true; many were undoubtedly dead, but we persisted. "Speak to so-and-so," people said, "she'll know." Sometimes she did, sometimes she didn't, and sometimes she'd say, "I'm not the person you want, but ask —." Eventually we found that there *did* exist communities of sorts of women, in ashrams or homes, set up where the first of the refugee camps had been established in erstwhile East Punjab.

But this wasn't enough. We needed to know what the women couldn't tell us, the how and why of the ashrams and of rehabilitation,

of what happened to the widowed women, to those whose husbands were missing, whose families couldn't be traced. "Speak to —" the women told us, "she was the warden here for twenty years." We travelled to different cities to meet them; we lived with them, we went back to them, sometimes once or twice, sometimes more often. They became friends, occasionally they would write and ask what we were doing with all this material, that they had remembered something else, and had we been able to contact— yet? We moved from person to person, place to place, but without a fixed plan or design. Our journeys took us to Jammu, Amritsar, Bombay, Jodhpur, Lucknow, Kota. We spoke mainly to women, but also to men, to Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. We talked to senior government and police officers, politicians, doctors, social workers.

We went back to the records to find what we could of the women's stories there, as disaggregated data, memoranda, reports, official statements, government documents. We did this not because we wanted to corroborate what they said, but because it was important to locate their stories in a political and social context, to juxtapose the official version with the unofficial ones.

III

Hardly ever, and hardly anywhere, have women "written history". They have left few accounts, personal or otherwise, and have committed much less to writing than men. Women historians have noted this absence[34] and emphasized the importance of retrieving women's history though oral sources. Because women have used speech much more widely than the written word, oral history practitioners have found in interviews and testimonies a rich vein to mine and to surface what, so far, has been hidden from history.

"The real value of these oral testimonies," say the women of Stree Shakti Sanghatana who presented a remarkable account of women in the Telengana movement, "lies in their ability to capture the *quality* of women's lives. . . . We are able to document experiences that traditional history would have ignored or even dismissed, to appreciate the issues as

they appeared to the actors at the time, and set their responses. . . against the backdrop of that understanding."[35]

For feminists, oral history holds the very real promise of exploring the social experience of women and retrieving it as both "compensatory" and "supplementary" women's history. While welcoming its extraordinary potential, however, we must be equally attentive to its complexities. Early on, feminist oral historians realized that traditional oral history methodology was still grappling with the separation of subject and object, interviewer and interviewee, thought and feeling, the political and the personal.[36] Most feminists advocate empathy and mutuality, rejecting all the hierarchies inherent in the formal, impersonal, falsely neutral "interview". At the same time they raise important questions regarding the ethical problems of personal narrative. They are concerned about the uncomfortable fact of class privilege in almost all interviewing situations; the matter of material inequality between the researcher and her subject; and the ethical and the moral imlpications of collecting personal narratives in first place and utilizing them for research.[37] Our own research posed similar problems at almost every stage; particularly troubling was our complete inability to deal with the reversal of roles, when questions were posed *by* the women *to* us: "What is the use of asking all this now? It's too late—you can't change anything." Our response rang hollow even to our own ears: we want to communicate an experience of Partition hitherto ignored and, in fact, unsought; to set the record a little straighter, to make women visible, to better understand historical process. The women, unfailingly gracious and generous in their sharing, accepted our explanation, unsatisfactory as it must have been to them—for no matter how "honest" or candid we might be about our project, it was they who were laying bare their lives, not we, ours.

Then, there are related problems of accuracy and fidelity to the letter and spirit of the narrative; of interpretation, evaluation, selection and representation; the troubling issue of "authorship" and the fact that, in the end, it is the researcher who controls the material, however participatory the research may have been. The responsibility for the

distortions or limitations of our studies rests squarely with feminist oral historians as does the dilemma of how much to tell. When confidentiality is enjoined, are we justified in presenting a life story in the interests of advancing historical understanding, especially when that story is deeply personal or traumatic?[38]

The assumption of most feminist research is that it is committed to social transformation, and to women. By highlighting the contradiction between feminist principles and fieldwork practice, feminist oral historians insist that we be mindful of the exploitation that ethnographic method exposes subjects to, and remind us exactly how ambivalent the relationship between feminism and ethnography can be. In Daphne Patai's view, all those who claim that by allowing their subjects to speak they have "empowered" them, need to ask themselves: "Is this empowerment or appropriation? And what does it mean. . . for researchers to claim the right to validate the experience of others"?[39] Since we are almost always in a situation where "other" people are the subject of "our" research, the old hierarchies and inequalities tend to get reproduced all over again. Feminists and other practitioners of participatory research have tried to redress this imbalance somewhat by "returning" the research to their subjects or initiating some form of action that maintains continuity with them. At best, such attempts only demonstrate a sincerity of purpose and sensitivity to the larger question of power and control; they do little, in the end, to resolve the ethical issue bedevilling us because of the very nature of oral history and of what lies at its heart: individual testimony.

Our own attempt has been to present the women's stories in their own words and at some length, in dialogue with ourselves, and severally, with other voices but in a privileged position; the women are always at the centre. Our narrative is determined by their stories, and our analysis made possible by juxtaposing their versions of particular experiences with other versions, official or otherwise, and with available historical records.

IV

All life lines are broken at some point or another. Personal tragedy, an

irreparable loss, a natural disaster or cataclysmic historical moment shape lives in ways that are forever marked by that event. Our concern in speaking to women about how they experienced the Partition of India was two-fold: first, to see how the lives of those who are non-actors in the political realm are shaped by an epochal event, and how their experience of it enables a critique of political history and the means of writing it differently. Second, to study a time marked by massive disruption and crisis through life-stories that would, both, bear witness and allow us to attempt a gendered social history.

Yet, how were we to link the stories of women's lives with the story of the nation, the history that we had been told? Of what significance were these fragments in the grand mosaic of freedom? How were we to present the history of that time from the perspective of those who knew anything could happen but had no way of forestalling it? Should we simply reproduce what they said in their own words, with the full power and evocation of the original? Somehow we felt that without context or commentary, such a presentation might leave their testimonies as defenceless as the women themselves, open to scepticism, dismissal, disbelief; to charges of exaggeration and nostalgia, not to be trusted. Or we could write a narrative account, weaving their stories in and out of it in the third person, referring to them to substantiate an argument, corroborate a hypothesis. We could attempt a sociological reconstruction with data on households, occupations, social and economic status, how and where relocated, and so on; or we could concentrate on a particular village or town that had been affected and follow the path of its refugees and its women, in all the rich and unhappy detail that this kind of treatment allows. But that might shift the focus away from the women. In the end we decided to use a combination of commentary and analysis, narrative and testimony, to enable us to counterpoint documented history with personal testimony; to present different versions constructed from a variety of source material: indepth interviews, government reports and records; private papers, memoirs, autobiographies; letters, diaries, audio-tapes; parliamentary debates; and legal documents. This would allow the women, speaking for themselves, to be heard—sometimes

challenging, sometimes agreeing with, sometimes probing historical "facts", insinuating themselves into the text and thereby compelling a different reading of it. The juxtaposition of documented history and personal history forces a re-examination of what James Young calls the "activity of telling history itself," and of recognizing that the "legitimacy of historical sources cannot rest solely on their factual element". The kind of knowledge that the "activity of witness" brings us is not purely historical;[40] rather it is imbued with an experience of historical events and with the profound understanding that their meaning can never be settled.

None of the life-stories presented here is complete. Impossible and undesirable, both, to compress lives between the covers of a book; besides, in what way could we mark the "beginning" or "end" of the women's stories? Fragments of memory, shards of a past, remembrances bitter and sweet are strung together in a sequence that often has no chronology. Indeed a lack of sequence marked all the interviews, and the ordering of events was generally erratic. We learnt to recognize this as a feature of recalling traumatic experience: recollection makes for a reliving of time past even as time present interrupts memory. Everyday time and life-time overlap, and each woman's story reveals how she has arranged her present within the specific horizons of her past and her future.[41] So the telling breaks off, we leave and return and sometimes the story resumes where it left off, at others not. Sometimes it contradicts itself because, each day, we remake ourselves, each telling presents us in another dimension, and each time we remember, we remember differently. Occasionally, we will reach a point in the story where memory refuses to enter speech. Some memories are elaborated, some elided, some never summoned up at all; thus it is that from the totality of a life only a fragment is offered here, some part of the broken line. Yet, in representing the women's stories, albeit in their own words, the "essential provisionally" of their accounts is made fixed and immutable; it begins and ends, it appears to be a seamless whole.

For most of the women remembering was important, but as important was *remembering to others*, having someone listen to their stories and feel that their experience was of value. We realized, once the

floodgates were opened, that we could not always determine the flow. Sometimes murky, sometimes clear, often we simply just sat by the stream grateful that it was flowing. It is true that not every woman spoke without demur or hesitation. More than once we heard the cry, "Why rake up the past again?" but almost the next breath would bring forth an incident, an encounter, a tragedy recalled, past resurrected. Once begun, the "interviews" became like conversations, our questions more like interjections that sometimes received a direct response, but more often, an extended reminiscence that might refer to the question only tangentially. Much further into the telling we might suddenly find it being addressed in another context, opening up yet another vista. Where we encountered genuine reluctance or an unwillingness to disclose, we simply did not press the issue.

Not all the stories we heard were intrinsically different: what is different is how events have been grasped, how remembered; how they have been understood or misunderstood; how each woman assimilated her experience. All are part of the narration, and part of an unfolding history. Some women never recovered from Partition, others saw in this rupture a moment of unexpected liberation for themselves *as women*. Any number were resettled or rehabilitated in some manner and echoes of their stories are to be found even in the handful presented here. Others form the bedrock from which our narrative proceeds, a narrative that contextualises them and highlights the gendered nature of historical experience and its recording. The stories that we have selected are a mix of women destituted as a result of Partition; women unalterably affected but not devastated by it; social workers whose own lives changed dramatically in the course of their work; and one woman who, as she said, "spread her wings" after she left Karachi. The stories might supplement each other, or sometimes serve as counterpoints, but each is distinct and dwells on those experiences that relate most directly to the themes which emerged with sharp clarity from the accounts: violence; abduction and recovery; widowhood; women's rehabilitation; rebuilding; and belonging.

These form the six thematic clusters. Each cluster, in turn, tries to unravel the tangled skein of relationships between women, religious

communities and the state, both within and across the two new nations; between women and their families, "real" and "acquired"; between women and their men, women and their country. It does so by bringing the normative to crisis: mass widowhood on an unprecedented scale, compelled the state to step in as rehabilitator and, in the process, made for a temporary suspension of the traditional inauspiciousness and taboos surrounding widows. At the same time as it released a very large number of women into the workforce, it also put the welfarist assumptions of the state to test. Forced migration was often accompanied by mass abduction and the conversion of women and children; families, communities, governments and political parties converged to "recover" these women with extraordinary zeal and restore them to where they "rightfully belonged". Women's sexuality, as it had been violated by abduction, transgressed by enforced conversion and marriage and exploited by impermissible cohabitation and reproduction was at the centre of debates around national duty, honour, identity and citizenship in a secular and democratic India. The figure of the abducted woman became symbolic of crossing borders, of violating social, cultural and political boundaries. The extent and nature of violence that women were subjected to when communities conflagrated, highlights not only their particular vulnerability at such times, but an overarching patriarchal consensus that emerges on how to dispose of the troublesome question of women's sexuality. Together, the clusters lay bare the multiple patriarchies of community, family and state as experienced by women in their transition to freedom, and explore the deep complicities between them.

Country. Community. Religion. Freedom itself: a closer examination of what meaning they have for women has led feminists to ask searching questions about women's asymmetrical relationship to nationality and citizenship; and to appreciate the role assigned to them in any renegotiation of identities, whether ethnic, communal or national. Such an analysis of the experience of abducted women, for instance, sheds light not only on the Indian state and its articulation of its role and responsibilities vis-a-vis its female citizens, but also on its perception of its role vis-a-vis Pakistan, Hindu and Muslim communities, and displaced Hindu families.

The issue of gendered identities is central to any discussion on the interplay of community, class and caste with wider political, economic and social forces. The adoption of a perspective that locates women at the intersection of these forces rather than at the periphery, casts an entirely new light on the apparent fixity of defining features of identity; indeed, the presence, absence and precise location of women turns out to be one of the crucial elements that throws these "fixed" identities into disarray and confusion. Thus, are we made to look anew at those age-old borders and boundaries: nation, religion, community, gender; those ancient myths about shame and honour, blood and belonging. And thus, do the women's "histories" interrogate not only the history we know, but how we know it.

The Partition of India in 1947 was an undeclared civil war, and since then we have had disputed borders in every country of South Asia. The religion-based division of the country anticipated many of the questions that trouble us now across the subcontinent: ethnicity, communalism, the rise of religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism. Sharply, but poignantly, Partition posed the question of "belonging" in a way that polarized choice and allegiance, aggravating old, and new, antagonisms. Subsequent contestations have revived and rephrased the question in ever more complex ways, and how it is answered has far-reaching implications for women.

NOTES

1. Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993). p. 1. Hasan's elegant and concise Introduction presents us with an excellent summary of current concerns and debates in Partition historiography as well as a clear-sighted analysis of the forces that led to the crystallizing of the demand for Pakistan.
2. Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 2.
3. For a range of recent historical accounts see, among others, Mushirul Hasan, *India's Partition*, op. cit.; Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); *South Asia*, Journal of South Asian Studies, Special Issue,