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Remembering partition: women, oral histories and the Partition of 1947

by Pippa Virdee

Abstract: This article explores key developments in the way Partition has been represented in the history of India and Pakistan. It more specifically examines how alternative silent voices have become more visible in the past fifteen years in the historiography of Partition. This shift has been made possible with the use of oral testimonies to document accounts of ordinary people's experiences of this event in the history of India and Pakistan. The article then goes on to reflect on the author's experiences of working in South Asia and the use of oral history as a radical and empowering tool in understanding women's history in Pakistan.

Keywords: Women's history, Partition, migration, Pakistan, India

The use of oral history has been a growing trend in Partition Studies since the 1990s. Popularised by the need to explore 'history from below' it has changed our understanding of Partition by shifting the focus from the 'great men' of history to one which encompasses a people's history. Oral history as a new methodological tool has been pivotal in enabling this shift. It has enhanced our understanding of the human trauma and turmoil ordinary citizens endured during those chaotic and frenzied days of the collapsing British Empire in India. Moreover, it has provided an opportunity to document the history of those people who, until recently, were silenced, marginalised and outside the official histories. To date much of this new research has been largely confined to India, and more specifically concerned with developments in the Punjab, but there have been some studies on other regions including Bengal, Delhi and Pakistan Punjab. Comparative work has also started to emerge, whereby locality based studies have used first-hand accounts to provide some much needed coverage to local voices.

The purpose of this article is to examine some of the developments that have taken place in partition historiography, especially since official records were opened up to the public; to focus on the impact of oral history, which has increasingly been used in the past fifteen years, transforming our understanding of the gendered dimension in Partition Studies and the transformative impact of this period on the lives of women. Finally, the article reflects on the experiences of working with oral history in South Asia and more specifically on my experiences of interviewing women in Pakistan.

Historiography and Partition's representation

The starting point for Partition literature is the official histories produced in India and Pakistan. Such writings tended to celebrate the achievement of independence, to play down the dislocation surrounding Partition and/or to displace blame for the violence. The Indian nationalist approach was to understand Partition as the net result of years of divisive policies adopted by the

colonial power. These undermined pre-existing cultural unities and social interaction, which cut across religious identity. For Pakistani writers, on the other hand, the creation of a separate homeland arose from the desire to safeguard community values away from the tyrannical Hindu majority rule. The ideologically incompatible discourses arising from the 'divide and rule' and 'two-nation theory' understandings of Partition that followed from independence have helped frame the post-independence relationship between India and Pakistan.

Much of the early historiography was concerned with the 'high politics' that accompanied the process of transferring power. This has partly been directed by the sources that were available; early accounts were dependent on key insiders providing autobiographical accounts of their experiences. There was however, a glaring omission of ordinary voices and how high politics affected those at the bottom of society. Literature and film to a limited extent filled that void. Fiction was perhaps the only way in which emotive, traumatic and religiously sensitive material could be depicted in countries that were divided on the basis of religion. Writers such as Intizar Hussain, Bhisham Sahni, Saadat Hasan Manto and Amrita Pritam were writing from their own personal experiences of dislocation and captured the human drama of Partition.

In the 'official' histories both India and Pakistan have produced documentation to displace blame for the violence of August 1947, which despite its biases is useful to the historian. One of the best-known attempts to document the violence is Khosla's account, which was first published in 1949.¹ Khosla, interestingly, uses eyewitness accounts to illustrate the violent and horrific nature of the disturbances. In Pakistan, there have been a number of government publications that understand the violence against Muslims in East Punjab in terms of a so-called 'Sikh Plan'.² Khan, meanwhile, provides an insightful piece, again illustrating this with first-hand accounts of Pakistani refugees and their experiences of being uprooted.³ Though this publication, like that of Khosla, has many biases, the combined effect of the two publications at least provides some insight of localised and personal experiences of the frenzied months following Partition. It also provides a useful alternative to the other personal accounts of the time from the officials themselves.

For both India and Pakistan it was important to establish an independent national identity; re-imagining the past and creating a new national history allows this new identity to emerge and to reinforce and justify the nascent nation-state. Thus the dominance and glorification of the 'great men' such as, Jinnah, Gandhi, Nehru is palpable in the post-independent histories of India and Pakistan. Despite some important

advances in Regional Studies⁴ the emphasis has predominately been on why Partition happened, rather than on how it impacted and transformed the lives of ordinary citizens. The pervasive hold of the national leadership in shaping perceptions of Partition, the relationship between the British, the Congress and the Muslim League, have all contributed to an obsession with what happened at the top echelons. Moreover, this imbalance is reflected in the history books,⁵ which have for a long time neglected the heavy price paid by the citizens of the two new nations. This curriculum of hatred continues to feed religious bigotry on both sides of the border, placing Hindus and Muslims against each other.

By the early 1980s, a new historiographical school emerged and challenged existing assumptions; writers such as Ranajit Guha pioneered the study of Indian history 'from below'.⁶ The Subaltern Studies School,⁷ as they came to be known, sought to provide an alternative history from the populist nationalist struggle that was being depicted. By the early 1990s the impact of this approach started to permeate Partition Studies and resulted in a shift away from the 'great men of history' approach towards a 'history from below.' Regional Studies had already shifted the focus from national to regional politics, but social activists and feminist writers pushed the agenda into probing a hidden and traumatic past. A key catalyst for this was the chilling similarities between Partition violence and the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. Second, and more importantly, the Golden Jubilee of Independence encouraged a reassessment of partition. Marked with special publications, it presented an opportunity for introspection and reflective writing which was able to deal with the horrors and violence that accompanied independence. Fifty years on a new generation of writers was more willing to tackle and challenge taboo subjects such as violence, rape and the abduction of women. Interestingly, in Europe, this coincided with the ongoing debate about ethnic cleansing, genocide, and war crimes against women in Bosnia. In this case, 'feminist activists made a concerted effort to affect the statute establishing the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the rules of evidence under which rape and other crimes of sexual violence would be prosecuted...'.⁸ Thus there was now a wider discussion about the use of mass rape against women in conflicts; indeed Menon and Bhasin note the similarities with accounts of violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina with Partition violence.⁹ In both these cases women are the upholders of community honour and are then tainted by the 'other' and forced to take on the burden of dishonouring the community. Scholars such as Menon, Bhasin,¹⁰ Butalia¹¹ and



'Ghanta Ghar' or Clock Tower in Faisalabad forms the centre of the famous eight bazaars which are designed like the Union Jack and date back to 1903. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2004.

Das¹² have led the way in opening up the discussion in India about communal violence and its relationship with women and in doing so have made significant contributions to this new history of Partition. Significantly, they have sought to give the victims of Partition a voice by utilising oral narrative as a means of communicating their histories.

Women, oral history and Partition

The 'new history' of Partition that emerged initially from feminist writing encapsulates the shift from explaining the reasons for Partition towards a more nuanced understanding, which attempts to incorporate the impact Partition has had on the lives of ordinary people. What is distinctly noticeable in the new history of Partition is that it is largely, though not exclusively, female writers and scholars who have embraced oral history. It is perhaps the sensitive nature of the subject and the attempt to capture life stories and the human dimension that lends itself more easily to the female gaze. More importantly it has been an active assertion by a new generation of writers to re-orientate our focus and understanding of Partition. The feminist embrace of oral history emerged from the

neglect of women's voices in traditional sources; oral history has therefore provided an opportunity to integrate 'women into historical scholarship, even contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic and political importance that obscured women's lives.'¹³ The centrality of gendered accounts in historical discourse is an important development in recognising and challenging dominant tendencies in the discipline. In this way the new developments have brought a welcome shift. Sheila Rowbotham's contention is that women's experiences in historical discourse were often 'hidden' and new methodologies, such as personal testimonies, allows us to challenge 'historical interpretations based upon the lives and documentation of men'.¹⁴ Feminist interpretations that have focused on the plight of women and other marginalised groups, often on the periphery of Indian society, has enabled this reappraisal in Partition discourse. It has brought the experiences of women during this traumatic time to the fore and has begun to expose the harsh realities of sensitive and taboo subjects such as, abduction, rape and violence against women in a predominately patriarchal society. Until recently these subjects remained hidden from public discourse. Although feminist discourse had been well developed in pre-partition India and then also in independent India and Pakistan, partition-related violence against women has remained in the shadows of nationalist and political discourse in Partition Studies.

As highlighted earlier, this shift in Partition historiography started in the 1980s with subaltern influences and began to emerge a decade later, first with Menon and Bhasin's article in *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1993 and then later *Borders and Boundaries* and Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, both of which were published in 1998. These significant pieces of work by feminist writers have done much to re-configure the debate surrounding the plight of women during partition. They have uncovered these 'hidden histories' and brought them into the public realm of discussion and debate while challenging the nation to deal with the murky and controversial past. In both of the monographs first-hand accounts by women were the key to revealing the human tragedy of partition-related violence and mass migration. More broadly these accounts have challenged the conventional histories, which marginalised women and other subaltern groups. Bacchetta goes further and suggests that these accounts 'reflect a different kind of subaltern writing that inadvertently challenges almost-established subaltern writing, which...continues to marginalise women'.¹⁵

There are two distinct features about this 'new history' of Partition. Firstly that it has a predominately Indian-centric approach and



Fatima's residence was located on the top floor of this building. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2007.

comparatively little has been written about women in Pakistan. Nighat Said Khan, a Lahore based activist, has conducted some interviews with women, largely in Sindh, but the interviews remain largely unpublished.¹⁶ More recently I have attempted to bridge this significant gap in documenting the experiences of Partition and resettlement of women in Pakistan Punjab, especially in terms of how this is recorded in public and private spaces.¹⁷ Second, the majority of the work so far has attempted to document the plight of Punjabis. Although, the region, it can be argued, suffered the worst of the atrocities, within wider Partition historiography the research is geographically limited. Zamindar's

work however, does bring together through personal narratives, the story of families divided by Partition in Delhi and Karachi.¹⁸ Recently there is work emerging on Bengal and also Yasmin Saikia has been exploring the impact of the 1972 war in Bangladesh on women.¹⁹ But in addition to these accounts there remain many unexplored histories of lesser-known experiences of the upheaval caused by Partition and independence.

The use of oral history in the study of Partition has been embraced in recent scholarly work because it has allowed the researcher to delve deep into the human dimension, an attempt to understand through emotions the impact on

everyday life.²⁰ This is often absent in the official records. As a methodological tool, oral history has complemented official documentary sources rather than competed with them. For example during my own research, I found that although the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and the Liaison Agency were looking into the abduction of women and children during 1947, the documents could not reveal anything about the women themselves. Further there is not much information about their personal circumstances, how the women responded once they had been 'recovered' and what happened to them afterwards. Oral testimonies in this case have been significant in filling that missing dimension and allow the historian to document not just the political history which examines the government's role in recovering abducted women but to explore the cultural, social and human repercussions of this history. They can complement the official source material, providing an altogether more comprehensive analysis. Moving away from the statistics of how women's lives were uprooted and how they rebuilt their lives; they enable us to document the aftermath and not just the event itself. Furthermore, the level of detail required in grass roots case studies is difficult to obtain if local records are not available, especially if they were destroyed, at times deliberately, as in 1947. The use of oral testimonies thus becomes an important source of information as well as allowing us to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of ordinary lives. Moreover, with women's voices that are often marginalised, oral history has become even more important as it has the ability to empower those unexpressed utterances, which would otherwise remain undocumented. At the same time this process has at least democratised the discourse which has until recently remained concerned with high politics.

However documenting, recording and recounting these stories also presents the researcher with ethical dilemmas. The subject matter in many cases concerns stories of trauma, forced migration, violence, rape and loss of one's homeland. These are emotive subjects that can evoke strong responses in some cases, while others find it hard to re-live that painful experience again. Although the people were speaking willingly there is still a sense of burden and responsibility on the interviewer to be aware of the impact the interview may have on the interviewee. This interaction and the interview process itself create a new historical document 'by the agency of *both* the interviewer and the interviewee' (emphasis in the original).²¹ The interview process is therefore much more complex, one in which the interviewer has an agenda to document an untold story and the interviewee shares their particular experience or

story. Bornat et al argue that, 'for the oral historians the interview is always more than the recorded and transcribed words, it is a process in which the narrator, the interviewee, is actively constructing and creating an account'.²² There is also in many ways a power imbalance between the two agents; it is ultimately the interviewer who has the ability to interpret, recount and analyse the interview before narrating it and the interviewee has no power or control during this process. Some oral historians may share a transcript with the interviewee but this approach is not standard. However, the process of collecting these personal histories has enabled historians to broaden what history is about,²³ it has democratised history and enabled hidden voices to be incorporated into our wider understanding of society. There is then a dilemma about the use of these accounts and the radical potential of oral history to reclaim the history of ordinary people. Sangster however forces us to question the impact of feminist discourse which 'hoped to use oral history to empower women by creating a revised history *for* women [emphasis in original]' and to what extent this is overstated. She questions whether we are 'exaggerating the radical potential of oral history, especially the likelihood of academic work changing popular attitudes?' And she asks 'are we ignoring the uncomfortable ethical issues involved in using living people as a source for our research?'²⁴ As an oral historian this is one of the challenges of working with living history. The radical nature of course comes from providing space for alternative histories to exist and challenge the status quo.

Remembering Partition: a female gaze

In this section I reflect on some of the main themes that became important in collecting first-hand accounts in India and Pakistan; and themes which were particularly useful for understanding a gendered perspective of the Partition period and the impact on women's lives in Pakistan. Over the past ten years or so I have collected testimonies from around 100 or so men and women, and in more recent times I have chosen to focus on women, especially Muslim women, in an attempt to balance some of the recent research which has focused on the Indian Punjabi experience.

I first used oral testimonies for my doctoral research. It was an integral part of the methodology and complemented the 'history from below' approach that I wanted to adopt. It also followed logically from the historiography outlined earlier, as it was moving away from established modes of thought. The locality based approach I adopted also allowed local voices to emerge, so it presented an opportunity to narrate not just localised case studies but to tell this story through the people who inhabited these places. So cities such as Ludhiana and



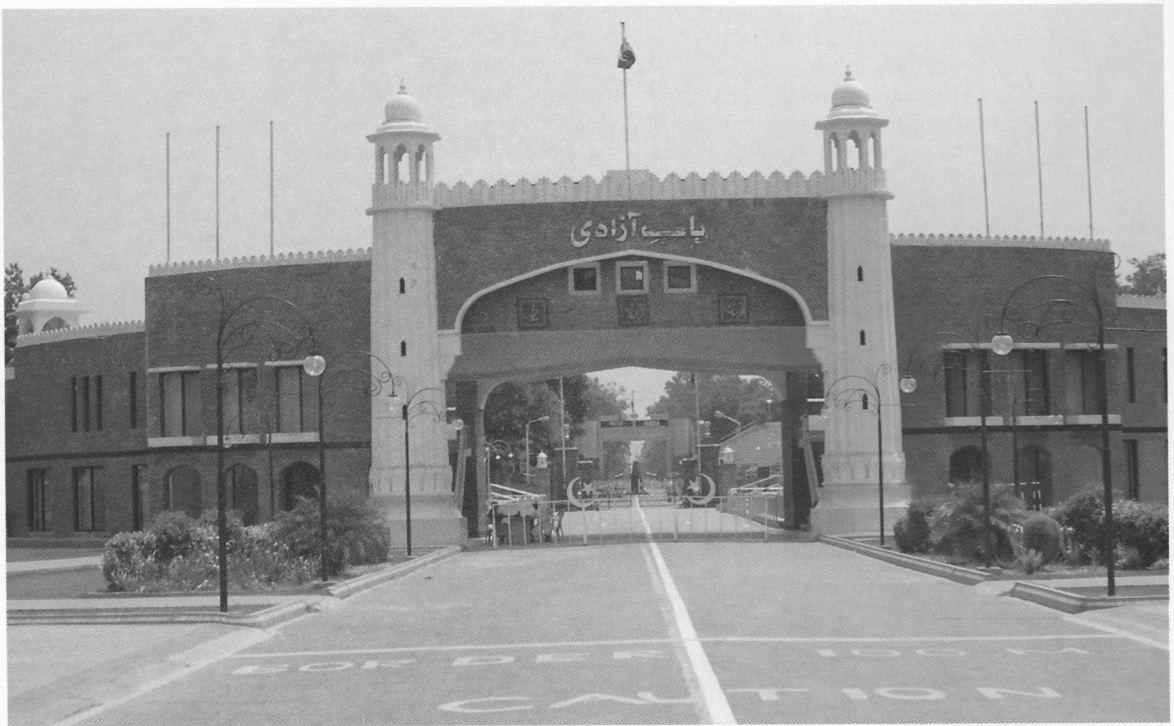
Lyallpur became important because of these migrants and the transformative impact the movement of people has had on these localities. Documents provided the factual details such as the level of population displacement, government responses to the refugee crisis, and housing reconstruction, but oral accounts provided a glimpse into the lived experiences, the impact of displacement, how they adapted and ultimately how these cities were transformed after August 1947.²⁵

I have collected oral testimonies from a diverse range of people in India and Pakistan, rural and urban, men and women. For my doctoral work I focused on localities (Ludhiana and Lyallpur) but within these places I concentrated on areas which had experienced high levels of refugee resettlement. Once in those areas, it was not difficult to find people who had migrated, either in India or Pakistan. This also created a snowballing process that led to multiple interviews in a geographically tight space. Other interviews were conducted with a more targeted approach; this was particularly useful for conducting interviews with women involved in the rehabilitation of refugees in Pakistan. On the whole the interviewees have been given pseudonyms but in some cases, where the person's views are already in the public domain or their identity forms part of the narrative then the identity has been revealed.

Most of my interviews have been conducted in Punjabi and then translated and transcribed; translating directly from oral Punjabi to written

English. This was a time-consuming process but an important one for me as a researcher because it allowed me to engage and interact with material intimately while reflecting on the interview itself. The ability to speak the local dialect is an absolute advantage, especially in a region where language is such an emotive and political subject. It also allows the interviewer to establish trust and rapport with the interviewee. Interviews conducted with a local translator while useful in providing access to people, does mean that some of the sub-text of the interview can be lost in translation. The ability to conduct the interview yourself, to respond to the visual and verbal expressions are crucial. Interestingly, Hamilton seeks to analyse the emotions in oral history interviews.²⁶ Conducting interviews in Pakistan was initially quite challenging for me. My East African/Indian/British background allowed me to adopt a neutral position but even then certain words or phrases would locate me as 'Indian'. This was problematic because I was then no longer viewed as a neutral and objective researcher and instead belonged to the 'other'. Conversely it is worth highlighting that belonging to a particular region also at times allowed me to bond with some of the interviewees more easily, especially when we spoke the same dialect, which would immediately establish rapport and congeniality. There was then a sense of kinship in the interview. Interestingly, the concerns over my background were mainly expressed by men I interviewed rather than women. This perhaps reinforces how generally

Kamoke is a small city in Gujranwala district and is associated with violence and the abduction of women during Partition. I did a number of interviews here. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2008.



Wagah-Attari border crossing. Picture taken from the Pakistan side. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2005.

men are more politicised (and in this case adopting a nationalist stance) than women. But my gender, however, was crucial in allowing me access to women, especially in Pakistan where society is more conservative and gendered segregation more common.

The majority of the interviewees were recounting events and memories from the 1940s and so their ability to accurately reconstruct these events may be questionable. There are obvious concerns over memory and the ability to recall these events but this is further complicated by nationalist fervour in a politically charged environment. In addition there are the inevitable allegations that people may change or exaggerate their experiences for the benefit of the interviewer. I was more concerned about the ethical questions of whether we should subject people to recollect something as traumatic as the communal carnage, abduction of women, and the forced migration that took place following independence in August 1947. For many this period is still too traumatic to talk about. Indeed some of the people interviewed were emotionally upset by the whole experience and in some of the interviews the truth was concealed from me because it was too sensitive to talk about. I only discovered this through informal conversations with other members of the family who later informed me that certain things had been hidden from me. For example on one occasion I was informed that the interviewee was involved in violence and looting and in another case the interviewee kept silent about the abduction and

rape of a niece. This subject is still very sensitive and people, regardless of their religious background, do not open up about it easily. Sometimes stories are recounted by using the example of a friend or distant relative, thus creating some distance between the experience and associated dishonouring. In an interview with Tahira Mazhar Ali we discussed how the recovery of women was marred with difficulties, in large part due to the stigma and shame associated with being forcibly abducted and raped. She was actively working at the time to improve the condition of women and was familiar with the plight of women who were abandoned or then forcibly recovered by the government.²⁷ The following extract from this interview also shows the disjuncture between government initiatives of recovering abducted women and the realities in then locating these women back to their 'rightful' homes:

I was working with Mridula [Sarabhai],²⁸ particularly after Jawaharlal [Nehru] asked for the return of the abducted Hindu women. I got myself immersed in the task of recovering those women. Mridula asked me to ask those women to come back to their homes. But many of those women did not want to face the family because of shame and sheer embarrassment they felt. Quite a few were accorded acceptability and some were happy and well settled in the households they were living. Such women, therefore, did not want to go back.²⁹

When I started my research on women's experience of partition and resettlement in Pakistan Punjab I was very conscious of the class dimension and I was keen to incorporate women from less educated, working-class and rural areas rather than focusing on more accessible, educated and urban voices. Indeed it has been harder to access women in rural areas and in Pakistan particularly the process has often involved an intermediary to arrange interviews. Local knowledge is necessary in order to enable the cluster process; thus multiple interviews have been done in a few villages such as Kamoke especially where I knew of disturbances during 1947. It was evident that working class women responded differently to the interviews and how they saw themselves which affected their responses during the interview. As Gluck notes, the middle class are 'more accustomed to reflecting about life, and also to articulating ideas. As a result the interview is more "orderly"; thoughts are more often completed...' while less educated women tend not to be reflective about themselves or to view their lives as important.³⁰ My experience was that it was much harder to get working class or illiterate women to value their own voice. It was difficult for some to articulate their opinions, often they devalued their views. For those who were writers or activists, the process of sharing their opinions was normal and easy. In an interview with Abida, she reflected on her own life growing up, 'I was an astute child and aware of things around me. I had a dream that when I would visit Lahore, first of all I would get rid of this *pardah* [veil]'. She also notes how 'Partition benefited my kind of women who did not want *pardah*,' she stopped wearing hers when she went to America on a scholarship.³¹

However, it was apparent that some women, especially in rural areas, were simply restricted to the confines of the '*char diwari*' or the four walls of their house and unable to articulate any opinions of their own.³² It was not so much that they had nothing to say but rather the belief that they have little of worth to share. Interestingly, Portelli discusses how as researchers we can also 'flatten the emotional content of speech down to the presumed equanimity and objectivity of the written document'. This, it is suggested, is especially the case with working class voices that 'may be poor in vocabulary but are generally richer in the range of tone, volume, and intonation, as compared to middleclass speakers...'³³ This then presents further complexities when transcribing and selecting material to be used. Farkhanda Lodi, a writer, expressed her sadness at the suffering that women are subjected to, suggesting that women are forced to remain weak due their social and cultural conditioning. In her interview she reflected on the plight of women in Pakistan:



As you see our respectable culture does not allow us to speak about such things. That is why she never discusses this issue [referring to abduction]... She is weak, helpless and vulnerable. She has been forced to remain weak. It is the training; she gets this from her parents, culture and the social environment that develop in her a pitiable pathetic soul. Our system and society do not allow her to progress. So she is in pain, for me her life is a constant misery... Our women were illiterate and uneducated. Muslims did not

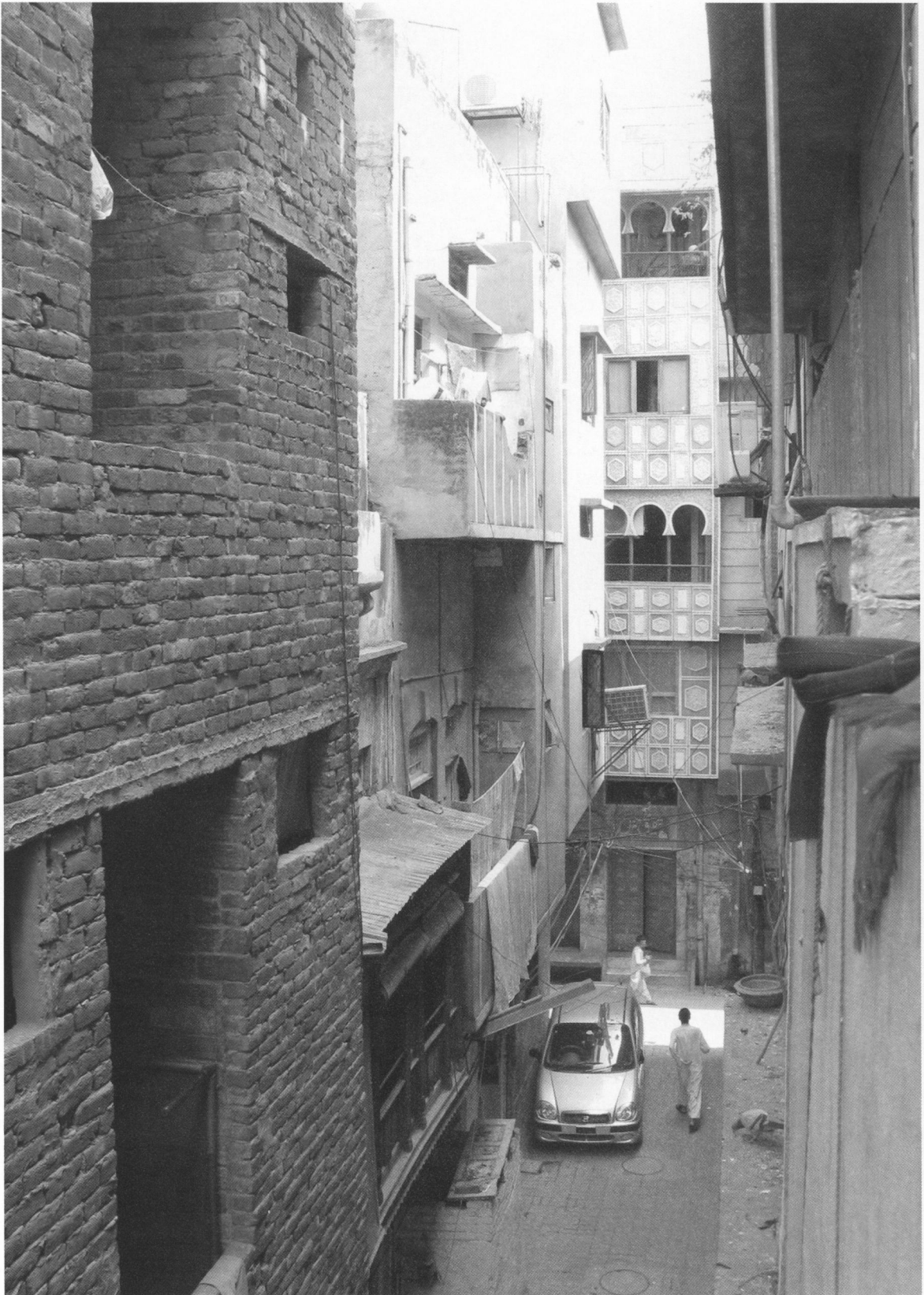
Overlooking Kamoke train station. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2008.



use to allow them to go out. So they used to live indoor. In UP [United Provinces] the women from well-off families used to go out in palanquins; they were not allowed to go out without taking a *mehram* [a close male family member].³⁴

The issue of social conditioning was vividly highlighted during one of the interviews that I did in Lahore. Fatima³⁵ was from a relatively deprived background living in a densely populated building. She had migrated from nearby

Wagah border and I was introduced to her by a mutual acquaintance. The interview took place at her home in an informal but confined space. Our mutual friend had informed Fatima that I wished to interview her about her experiences of Partition but once the interview started she was reluctant to open up to me. The reasons were two-fold: her brother was present at the interview and she felt her brother's views were more important than hers. When I asked Fatima about how she found out about the disturbances, her brother mumbled in the back-



View from a house in Lahore where I conducted an interview. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2008.

ground, 'well now I don't have permission to talk otherwise I could have explained everything.' I respond by saying that I just wanted to record women's experience and wanted them to explain things in their own way. Fatima responds, 'what can I say, I don't recall anything.' By doing so, she validated her own brother's agency and marginalised her own voice. Similarly in another interview I asked Reshma Bibi how she came from India, her response was, 'I cannot remember at all. You should ask any man who could tell it to you properly'.³⁶ Sangster has also highlighted that women often remember the past in different ways to men, often 'they downplay their own activities, emphasising the role of other family members in their recollections.'³⁷ In Butalia's experience, 'women almost never spoke about themselves, indeed they denied they had anything 'worthwhile' to say, a stance that was often corroborated by their men...or they simply weren't there to speak.'³⁸ While, Menon and Bhasin suggest that there is 'gendered telling' of the narrative, so that men recount the story in a 'heroic mode'³⁹ which in many ways resembles the dominant nationalist discourse. Consequently, Fatima's brother goes on to explain what happened and what prompted them to leave. His explanation includes political analysis for the disturbances, which were most likely informed retrospectively and through informal discussions. Throughout the interview Fatima's brother remained present, sometimes remaining silent and sometimes contributing to the interview. He tried to take over, not it seems because he did not want his sister to talk to me but because he thought he had more knowledge and therefore a discussion with him would be more beneficial to my research. Looking at it from his point of view he was trying to assist me with my research by providing an informed opinion, much more than his sister could, but by default he was silencing his sister's views. The interview highlighted the complexities of speaking with women, especially with those who are illiterate or from rural areas. Paradoxically it is often the women themselves who have been conditioned to feel they have little of value to contribute and are therefore reluctant to share their views.

But given the opportunity, they are also willing to open up and let the interviewer come into the '*char diwari*' and into their personal space, narrating their stories as experienced and visualised by them. In their own way the period leading up to Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan was also creating opportunities for Muslim women's emancipation. Education for girls during the 1940s was still largely exclusive, middle class families were beginning to encourage education for girls but amongst the lower classes it was still not considered appropriate and girls remained outside

formal education.⁴⁰ Although education provided many women with more political awareness, it is important to note that formal education was not the only route. In the case of Salma Begum, who was from an affluent background, her lack of formal education did not detract from her overall awareness of the politics surrounding the Muslim League and the demands for a separate state. Her family was well connected and politically active and while she was not discouraged from studying, she herself made a decision not to study because of her own lack of interest. Yet in my conversation with her it was clear that she took an interest in politics via her family's network:

My father then joined the Khilafat Movement and he was advocating *sooti* [homespun cotton] against imported cloth. The government offered him a good job through my paternal uncle but he was too involved with the movement's activities...During the German war, they asked the British that they will fight only on one condition that they will have to give them independence. One of my nephews went to the war as a Major. So many people from Punjab were killed in that war.⁴¹

In an interview with Nusrat, the absence of women's contributions in politics is highlighted, something that she believes remains largely silenced. She also touches on how her own desires were thwarted by the reluctance of her father:

There was another political activist called Fatima Begum. Her father started publishing the first Urdu newspaper *Paisa Akhbar*⁴² from Lahore. She did a lot of work for the movement of Pakistan. But no one knows her name, even no one mentioned her although there are many speeches and I always used to listen with the hope that someone will mention Baji Fatima's name that she served the nation very well. But to my disappointment, no one speaks about her. The reason was that she never cared to promote herself in public. She was a silent worker and always liked to be behind the scene. A renowned lawyer and writer Abdul Qadir arranged political meetings at his place and Baji Fatima took us to attend a couple of those meetings. I was a student then.

[Her daughter encourages her to share her own story] Tell her how *nana jaan* [grandfather] disliked women's participation in the politics. He was of the view that it was not appropriate for girls to step into the thorny bush of politics, it is not respectable field for women:

[Nusrat] Yes, my father never liked me to get involved in politics. He strictly forbade us to take part in political activities and used to say that I do not want my girls shouting on the roads and then being arrested by police. He never liked me to participate, therefore I refrained from politics, and I left it because I felt it useless if I was not free to say anything.⁴³

On the other hand Fatima Sughra, despite experiencing similar concerns within her own family, managed to trespass that space and venture into the newly created public arena. In 1947 she was a young girl from a conservative background but was inspired by the changing political landscape around her. She highlighted the fact that people in her locality, in the walled city of Lahore, had reservations and objections in sending girls to protests organised by the Muslim League. They even prompted her father to stop her involvement but she disregarded this and continued. She recalls her experiences of participating in the protests organised by the women's wing of the Muslim League, which was fighting for a separate homeland at the time and how much her initial response was spontaneous but inspired and encouraged by the events taking place around her:

I think it was in February or March 1947, daily processions were arranged and we took processions to the Radio station, Mall Road, Jail Road, High Court and the Civil Secretariat. I remember the day I took off the Union Jack and replaced it by hoisting a Muslim League flag [made out of her green scarf]. Many Muslim women, [who had never left their house before] came out from their houses and took over the streets of the city. This was all happening because the Begums [elite female Muslim League leadership] went door to door and convinced the Muslim women to come out from their homes for the protests. I don't know what sort of passion was inside me at time; I just jumped over the Secretariat Gate [to replace the Union Jack]. I had no interest in politics. I just went to join the processions for enjoyment. I thought that the Muslim League represented the Muslims and *Quaid-i-Azam* was their leader and struggling for the creation of a Muslim country.⁴⁴

Sughra's account gives an insight into how even non-elite women were not completely passive and hidden. And although Sughra's single act of hoisting a makeshift Muslim Flag is replayed heroically each year the narrative rarely makes it into the general history books of Pakistan, sadly, if anything, it remains a footnote in history.

Conclusion

The value of oral history for a historian is that it provides an opportunity to link the official with the personal. It provides the human dimension, which is often missing in the dominant political histories. Through living people, oral history allows us to connect the present with the past: a preoccupation for the historian. Yet there is also something quite democratic and encouraging about using this form of methodology because there are no restrictions on access in the same way as we are restricted in our access to the archives, especially those records which are deemed to be highly 'sensitive' and held back. The problem with the archives is multi-fold, the lack of proper awareness regarding documents is one and secondly the State and Provincial archives are poorly equipped and lack the necessary resources. However, there is also the issue that post-1947 nationalistic history has politicised public records and thus there is an overly sensitive response regarding these records. Both nation-states have been keen to project themselves in the best possible light and so there is a certain amount of protectionism concerning this period especially one which might question the state's response. Personal narratives therefore allow us to venture into private female spaces and document histories which would otherwise remain hidden.

Although there is much elitism in orthodox history, which gives primacy to empirical sources over oral accounts, ultimately both have a value and contribute to our understanding of the past and how we represent it. Both methodological approaches are important in how we construct and interpret the past, albeit they do this in different ways. The orthodox historical approach, which relies on empirical evidence, helps us to contextualise the past and presents the reader with the bigger picture. Relying on documentary and recorded sources from the period does however place importance on the 'great men' and the decisions they made at the time. In the case of Pakistan this was especially important at the time of independence; the need to build and bring together a new nation required history to take a linear approach, converging ideas, myths, and histories, in order to create a new nation-state. The 'great men' embodied this, however, sixty years on and the state is still fragile and any diversion from the orthodox approach is potentially threatening. Moreover, within this history, the role and place of women has been completely marginalised. Piecing together the impact of partition on women from documentary sources is possible but only to a limited extent, thus the role of oral history can play an important role in constructing an alternative history. It allows us to challenge ideological readings of the past, which have been shaped by the neglect and/or destruction of a non-linear past. By empowering

women to speak, it presents us with an opportunity to piece together a social cultural history of hidden lives, often confined to private spaces but nonetheless, lives which are important in shaping the newly created nation of Pakistan. In a recent article in *Oral History*, Gluck asked whether feminist oral history had lost its 'radical/subversive' edge?⁴⁵ As these personal narratives from Pakistan demonstrate, there is still some progress to be made but they do provide the historian an insight into other alternative narratives, which is essential if old histories are to be challenged and reappraised. These accounts also allow us to explore the subtleties and the complex histories of women's lives during this difficult period. It further challenges the preoccupation with victimised accounts of women during Partition and instead suggests

that in reality women played multiple roles. Fatima Sughra's account shows us how a young middle class girl, encouraged by the elite female leadership, becomes a symbol of the Muslim separatist movement. The separatist movement and subsequently Partition also provided an opportunity for many women to become more mobilised politically and thereby visible in public spaces. The accounts presented here do highlight the marginality of women's histories, which to some extent has been internalised by many women themselves, but more importantly they also highlight women's own agency in circumventing and creating space for themselves regardless of these obstacles. It is these alternative spaces created by women which are important in moving forward any discussion on displacement and upheaval caused by Partition.

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NOTES

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4. At the forefront of this shift towards regional politics in the case of the Punjab were such historians as Ian Talbot and David Gilmartin. Talbot has highlighted the transformation in the Punjab Muslim League's fortunes in the period from the 1937 to the 1946 provincial elections. This breakthrough was essential for the creation of Pakistan. Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1988 and David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
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- The following is a small selection of subaltern literature: Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies* (5 vols), New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995; and David Arnold, 'Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India', *Journal of Peasant Studies* vol 11, no 4, 1984, pp 155-77.
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33. Alessandro Portelli, 'The peculiarities of oral history', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 12, no 1, 1981, p 98, pp 96-107.

34. Interview with Farkhanda Lodi, age 70; recorded by Pippa Virdee in Lahore, 22 April 2007.

35. Interview with Fatima; recorded by Pippa Virdee in Lahore, 24 April 2007.

36. Interview with Reshma Bibi, age approximately 72; recorded by Pippa Virdee in Gujranwala, 26 April 2007.

37. Sangster, 1998, p 89.

38. Butalia, p 126.

39. Menon and Bhasin p 55.

40. For a more in depth discussion see Dushka Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab: From Seclusion to Politics*, chapter 4, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1998.

41. Interview with Salma Begum; recorded by Pippa Virdee in Lahore, 19 April 2007.

42. Moulvi Munshi Mahboob Alam came up with the idea of *Paisa Akhbar* in 1888, based on the Penny newspaper.

43. Interview with Nusrat; recorded by Pippa Virdee in Lahore, 24 April 2007.

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