I

Chowdhry in his California home in

Yasser Zaman Khan with Mr.

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On one such afternoon I interviewed 93 year old Blim Sharma in a dusty machine

parts shop in Batala, Punjab. He

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Narowal (West Punjab) was surrounded by mobs. The entire village was holed up in one house. When hope was nearly lost, three women rode in from behind a hill on horseback. Masked as men with turbans on their heads and straps of am

munition wrapped around their bodies, they caught the mob unexpected and lobbed grenades at the leader. He was killed instantly and the mob dispersed. The women then escorted the villagers to safety. Months later, hundreds of miles away in Morgan Hill, CA, Kulip Kaur corroborates Sharma’s story and re-

calls the three women on horseback who defended the caravan she was in when it

was being attacked by mobs.

From city to city I was joined by distant

Stateless in Dhaka

an interview by Farhana Afruz

begum Khairunnisa left Bihar in 1947 after the riots

broke out. She carried her new born daughter. Julekha

who was 13 days old and walked for days to cross the

border into East Pakistan. Her husband Sher Khan was

a railway worker. They came to Parbatipur in a freight

train and lived in Sylhet till after the war of 1971, and

the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. In 1972 they came to Dhaka and were allotted

together in the Geneva camp where, as Urdu speakers, they awaited their turn to relocate to Pakistan. Their turn never came and today she continues to live in the Geneva camp in Dhaka with her daughter’s, Sultana and Julekha, along with several grandchildren.

They remain stateless people as neither country, Pakistan or Bangladesh, will recognize them as citizens.

When asked why she remains in this camp, she said in Urdu, “Kahan jaayenge? (Where will I go?)” She added, “Achcha ya bura, mujhe yahin rehna hoga. Partition, ye theek nahi hua.” (Good or bad, I have to stay here. Partition was not right.) Like many other stranded Bharis of Bangladesh, Khairunnisa feels that they are the worst victims of the 1947 Partition. Despite the passage of 66 years, the Bharis of Bangladesh, have yet a place to call home.

The 1947 Partition Archive is
dedicated to documenting,

preserving and sharing eye wit-

ness accounts of the Partition

of British India in 1947. The archive

was founded by UC Berkeley

post-doctoral researcher, Guneeta

Singh Bhalla. These are some of

their stories.

such refugee was an eight year old boy

named Ali. He had witnessed the mas-
sacre of his entire village in Ludhiania

District (East Punjab). Including his fam-

ily, by a furious mob that had rounded

them up in a courtyard. One gunman

shot at him 5, 6, perhaps 7 times, missing
each time. Ali suddenly got the nerve to

run. He ran fast and right into the knees

of another gunman. Quite unexpect-

edly, the man grabbed him and gently led

him away. They walked for two
days before Ali

was turned over to a Sikh family

in a village. Not long after, he was

recaptured by the Pakistani military

who transported him to Lahore.

The refugee camp was a miserable
place, he remembers. The air was thick with painful

recollections, uncertainty and suspicion. He

remained there for a month before being
discovered by his extended family.

BEGINNINGS

I first learned about Partition from my

paternal grandmother. She spoke

times rarely, but each time, it was

clear that the memory was still fresh and

painful. There had been no healing.

Lahore was still the home she yearned

for. We moved to the US when I was

in middle school and in high school I

spent nearly a semester learning about

the Jewish Holocaust in Europe. When I

brought up the topic of Partition, I was

often met with the same sentiment: sure-

ly it was not a significant event if there

was no mention of it in our textbooks.

I knew then that the world needed to

hear about Partition not from myself but
directly from my grandmother and all the

others like her that lived through it.

The thought nagged in the back of my

mind for years until a 2008 visit to the

oral testimony archives at the Hiroshima

Peace Memorial. It was very powerful to

watch survivors recall their ordeal,

more so than reading a book or watch-

ing a movie. That is when it clicked. The

same needed to be done for Partition. I

began interviewing survivors and recruit-

ing a team in 2010. Experts at Berkeley’s

Regional Oral History Office proved to

be a great resource in helping us develop

our interview format. This office pro-

vided the initial camera equipment, while

Berkeley’s ASUC Art Studios provided for

post production space.

The story collection effort took me on

my first solo-trip through East Pun-

jab that winter. Away from the safe bubble my family had constructed, Punjab was sudden-

ly a whole different country. Caste disparities were openly on display, and solo traveling women were most certainly an oddity.

From East to West Punjab

an interview by Yasser Zaman Khan

Mohammad Yunus Chowdhury was born

in April 1932 in Amritsar where his

family lived in the Katra Karam Singh neigh-

borhood near the Golden Temple. His

father was a well known land owner with 400

acres of land near the Beas River. Fruit

from his orchards was shipped all over South

Asia. At the time of Partition, young

Chowdhury studied in 9th grade in Moham-

madan Anglo High school. He remembers

watching Noor Jehan’s

movies such as Khandan, in one of several

cinemas in Amritsar, namely Nishat, Rialto

and Chitra cinemas.

Communal violence escalated in the month

of March 1947, in Amritsar. Chowdhury’s

family fled Lahore which in August 1947

decided to part of Pakistani Punjab. They

migrated in a kunja (caravan) on foot.

Once in Lahore, his father descended into a

state of deep depression along with one of

his brothers who also suffered from asthma.

His brother’s declining state of mind and

poor health, combined with inferior living

conditions forced them to leave Lahore. They

remained there for a month before being

discovered by his extended family.

Yasser Zaman Khan with Mr.

Choudhry in his California home in

August 2011

Guneeta Singh Bhalla

by Guneeta Singh Bhalla

I felt as though I was there on that

warm summer night. The soft patter of

hooves streamed past us. A long

caravan of ox-carts was hauling mounds

of produce to the market, each with its

own sleeping sabzi-walla (vegetable-sell-

er) sprawled on top of the vegetable pile.

Oil lanterns under each carriage sent

patterns of lively yellow shapes darting

across the narrow brick road and climbing

up the walls of homes. It was dazzling. I

was completely immersed in this hypnotic

memory from pre-Partition Lahore while

interviewing Ajit Cour at her daughter’s

art gallery in Delhi, when a visitor en-

tered and the trance was broken.

Cour was only 12 in 1947, when the

Partition of Punjab forced her family to

relocate to Delhi. They left behind their

material goods, their heritage, their as-

sociations and every aspect of life that

they knew. Cour shared memories of the

convent she studied in and of chanting

slogans in favor of an independent India.

They lived on a lane that was exclusive
to doctors as her father was a doctor,

just as my grandfather was. He too, like

Cour’s family, fled Lahore in 1947. Per-

haps our families knew each other. But it

is too late to find out. He passed on be-

fore his story was recorded and Cour was

too young then.

That August, Muslim refugees poured

into Lahore just as quickly as the surviv-

ors. Months later, and thousands of

people were most certainly an oddity.

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my first solo-trip through East Pun-

jab that winter. Away from the safe

bubble my family had constructed, Punjab was suddenly a whole different country. Caste disparities were openly on display, and solo traveling women were most certainly an oddity.

From city to city I was joined by distant

cousins, friends or new hosts I was meet-

...
Since those early days, over 30 citizen journalists have joined the effort and preserved nearly 500 stories. The stories come from diverse geographies, from Assam in the East to Hazara in the West, as well as Great Britain, Israel and North America. While language limits my exposure to stories from Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi speakers, other interviewers such as Farhana Afroz, a software engineer from Silicon Valley, have ventured deep into the villages and Partition refugee camps of Bangladesh, amplifying narratives that may never otherwise be heard.

A CENTURY OF DISPLACEMENT

From the 150 or so narratives that I have personally been involved in collecting, some patterns have certainly begun to emerge. The stories reveal that while city dwellers had access to the emerging political thoughts of the time and became increasingly polarized, villagers were largely unaware and caught mostly off guard when unknown mobs appeared on their doorstep. I have also been intrigued by narratives describing the diverse roles of women in pre-Partition society. I have heard of families, Muslim and Sikh, where mothers worked closely with fathers in running business and farming affairs. They patrolled the family farm on horseback while their husbands were off selling the crop. I have interviewed women who were pursuing graduate education in the 1940’s. Especially difficult to fathom are the tales of double and triple displacements. There are those who fled the Japanese invasion of Burma in the early 1940’s and escaped to Bengal on foot, only to be displaced again in 1947. Some were once again displaced during the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. In East Punjab, yet another communal clash and mass-displacement took place in 1984.

LOSS OF LIFE, CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE

“I looked left and right, East, West and North. Everything was on fire,” recalls Razia Sultana. She was studying to be a doctor in Delhi on a full scholarship from the Nizam of Hyderabad, a strong believer in women’s education. When news of the riots reached the Nizam, he sent armed escorts to rescue Hyderabad students studying in Delhi. They were flown back to Hyderabad in a private jet. She pauses for a deep breath. “Delhi was burning on all sides. I saw libraries go up in flames. Some had one-of-a-kind books. So much life was lost. So much culture and knowledge as well.”

The great loss of knowledge and disruption of cultural continuities are seldom a focus of discussion. One example that comes to mind is that of the mysterious “jungles” of Lyallpur district. We know today from researchers such as D. Gilmartin, that this derogatory term was used to describe the pastoral people that once roamed West Punjab. Memories about them sometimes surface during our interviews. “I had to walk by their village to get to school. I was afraid of them. They sometimes raided our village at night…. Our ancestors had taken their land and they were bitter.” Or as another interviewee recalls: “They wore long black robes, had fair skin and hair, and small features. They spoke a different language and had unusual ceremonies.” Many urban centers in West Punjab were developed in the late 1800’s by the British. East Punjabis were lured West and encouraged to convert the jungles to farmland, imposing on pastoral lifestyles. How did the pastoral communities assimilate with mainstream culture? Did their lifestyle embody the way Punjabis lived once upon a time?

“In our area of Punjab, Hindus were largely traders, Sikhs held knowledge of the land while Muslims were bearers of ancient musical traditions and fine craftsmanship,” an interviewee recalls. This begs the question: What happens when profession is coupled to religious associations, like it has been in South Asia? How does society cope with the sudden loss of experts in a certain profession, (i.e. entire links that form it’s economic chain) in the aftermath of a situation like Partition? How has this impacted modern economies in South Asia? Much remains to be explored and much, unfortunately, has already been lost and may never be known.

TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC HISTORY OF PARTITION

The popular debate surrounding Partition often focuses on political leaders and nation states. The leaders we are taught to remember most today are those who held close associations with the British leadership, both through personal relationships and their British educational backgrounds. I feel that focus on their limited experiences has obscured the larger narrative, and neglected contributions from those other community leaders who were less plugged into the British system of governance and upper society. It is these gaps we wish to fill by recording, preserving and freely disseminating the people’s history of Partition. We aim to empower all citizens, ordinary and extraordinary, to record stories from survivors on video and submit them to the archive for preservation. Our organization is set up to provide the training, tools and mentorship. It is also our core belief that citizens from all ethnic, religious, economic and gender backgrounds must come together to build the Partition Archive. The story of Partition entails vastly diverse experiences. I feel it is critical for the next generation to come to terms with all aspects of Partition, especially if we are to dismantle the cold war subcontinent is currently embroiled in.

It’s often said that things happen when there is a need. Since we began this work, the sheer number of individuals who have come forward to volunteer their skills or to share their stories demonstrate a clear need to connect with and understand Partition on a human level.

From West to East Punjab

Bhadar Singh Nagra was 16 years old at the time of Partition. He was born in village Matteke Nagra, now in Punjab, Pakistan. The village had a diverse population consisting of Muslims, Sikhs, Brahmins, potters, Rai weavers, and Christians. His father had 12 acres of land on which they grew wheat, corn, sugarcane and cotton. Following harvest, excess crop was sold in Sialkot. They also had four oxen, a horse and about eight buffaloes. At weddings, he remembers, they would get ‘loofah’— a bowl made of thick leather with wedding foods in it. He also recalls popular local fabrics from that period, including, ‘chabbi da latha,’ ‘chabbi di malmal,’ and ‘khadar.’

During Partition, Bhadar Singh Nagra and his family walked east to Batala. At one point, they were hungry for about 2-3 days before they found food and shelter. Along the way they saw bodies in Alipur Sialakain where migrating groups had been slaughtered. They stayed at Narowal Theyd for some time and in Dera Baba Nanak for about 10 days. Bhadar Singh Nagra lost both his parents during the migration east — his father, Khera Singh died of dysentery at Daaska camp and mother, Budha Kaur Kaler passed away a month later. In India, Bahadar Singh worked as a coolie at the Batala railway station for 1 year. He lived in village Mannana for 3 years and came to his current residence in village Kharapur in 1955.

Hiralal Bhattachatjee was born in Netrakona, Mymensing, East Pakistan. His father, Suresh Chandra Bhattachatjee worked as a sub registrar. His mother Sarudhoni Bhattachatjee was a housewife and a mother of 6 children. “Life was quiet and peaceful in our small town. Hindus and Muslims lived as friends and neighbors...children were not restricted by religious boundaries and everyone played with everyone,” said Mr. Bhattachatjee wistfully, as he spoke about the way things were in the East Bengal of his childhood.

In 1947, Mr. Bhattachatjee was a high school student. He remembers those days very well. He remembers that many of his Hindu neighbors migrated to India. They felt that they would get the freedom to practice their religion or live with dignity. The Bhattachatjjees, however, felt differently. His father did not want to leave the land of his ancestors and therefore chose to stay back in East Pakistan. As a college student in Dhaka, he wore a dhoti, the typical outfit for Hindu men of that time but never faced any discrimination. Following the riots in 1947 in Dhaka, and at the urging of his father, Mr. Bhattachatjee moved to Calcutta. Later, he moved to Mumbai and found a job in the city and settled there. Today, he is a proud father of 3 and a grandfather of 5 children. He is retired and lives in Singapore with his son.

Staying back in Mymensing

Hiralal Bhattachatjee with Farhana Afroz at his daughter’s home in CA.