

Working Paper #29

**We Left our Keys with our Neighbours:
Memory and the Search for Meaning
in post-Partitioned India**

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We Left our Keys with our Neighbours: Memory and the Search for Meaning in Post-Partitioned India¹

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If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later? In other words, can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot³

I. Introduction

In mainstream Indian and Pakistani nationalist master-narratives, Partition is a contested terrain. For India, it signifies independence and the end-note of a non-violent anti-colonial movement; for Pakistan, it embodies freedom from both British and Hindu domination and the creation of a homeland for Muslims.⁴ Recently, the debate in Partition historiography has moved from nationalist posturing to detailed analyses of the trauma and pain that accompanied Partition.⁵ This is usually conceived of through a distinction between ‘high politics’ and ‘subaltern’ voices. The ‘fragment’, it is contended, provides us with a perspective of the marginal, of a ‘history from below.’⁶ My own journey to reckon with the embattled identities produced out of Partition began when my grandfather remarked that despite the fact of Partition, he would have gladly continued to work in Lahore. I was stunned. Why not, he said, don’t people work in Dubai? And wasn’t Lahore far closer than Dubai? In post-partitioned India, Lahore felt a million miles further from Dubai. His vivid memory of the desire to stay on in Lahore despite the high politicking that had resulted in Partition, despite the long years since Partition, form an

¹ I am deeply grateful to Ayesha Jalal and Neeladri Bhattacharya for their thoughtful criticisms of an earlier draft; to Jeanne Penvenne for a readings course on oral history before I went into the field and to Sharon Russell and the Mellon-MIT Inter-University Program on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Forced Migration, with generous support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, for funding this project. I take full responsibility for errors of fact and interpretation.

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³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press, 1995, p. 73.

⁴ For recent perspectives from India, see Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition: Anita Inder Singh, The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-1947*, Oxford University Press, 1987; for a succinct description of official histories of Pakistan, see Ayesha Jalal, “Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1995; for a good overview of both narratives see Asim Roy, ‘The High Politics of India’s Partition: The Revisionist Perspective’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 24, 2, 1990

⁵ See for instance Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the partition of India* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998 and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998; for a perspective from Pakistan, see Nighat Said Khan, ‘Identity, Violence and Women: A Reflection on the Partition of India 1947’ in Nighat Said Khan, Rubina Saigol and Afiya Shehrbano Zia eds., *Locating the Self: perspectives on women and multiple identities*, Lahore: ASR Publications, 1994

⁶ See Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 6, Menon and Bhasin, p. 8

unanalysed silence. This chapter uses oral history to grapple with memories and identities that evoke many such silences, gaps in Partition writing and thinking.

II. Methodology

I conducted fifty semi-structured interviews in Delhi between July 2002 and August 2003.⁷ On tape, former refugees described life in pre-Partition Punjab, childhood and schooling, friendships and migrations, their experience of anti-colonial movements and colonial rule. I used materials from the archives and my own socialisation in Partition stories to field questions about Hindu-Muslim relations, withdrawing when they seemed to prefer silence. I was occasionally asked to switch off my tape recorder: the dominant attitude, however, was that their histories be recorded before they are forgotten or lost. I did not search for foundational myths or stories that describe culture or conflict as a ‘hydra-headed phenomenon’.⁸ I listened carefully for what is not said is sometimes as important as what is said.⁹ I used the snowball technique to meet interviewees – one led me to another – while trying to include perspectives from rural and urban west Punjab and from different socio-economic strata. This is still only half a story: I could not travel to Pakistan for archival research or interview those who migrated from what became India in 1947.

Predictably perhaps, people’s recollections of the Partition of the Punjab were tailored to fit their lives ever since and yet, there was so much that seemed to overflow, huge gaps that could not be sewn shut, loose ends that had nowhere to go. I will focus on some of these gaps, silences if you will, for the light they reflect on the morass that was Partition, is crucial to understanding the contradictions in Indian attitudes towards Pakistan today.

III. Individual Interviews

“Never Did we Think we Would Come”: A Contingent Decision

Not one of my interviewees believed they would have to leave when troubles broke out, or leave *forever* – whether they came from Nathiagali near Abbottabad or Lahore, Jhelum or Rawalpindi districts. This moment of “reckoning”, the decision to leave their home/*vatan*, for a new political configuration or country/*desh*, lasted a few hours for some, several months for others. But the memory of the contingent quality of that decision to leave has stayed. When I arrived in Delhi with my tape recorder in 2002, this fact had to be recorded, marked, and reiterated.

⁷ See Annexure I for my questionnaire. See Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, Newbury, Calif: Sage Publications, 1988; Howard E Sypher, Mary Lee Hummert and Sheryl L Williams, ‘Social Psychological Aspects of the Oral History Interview’ in Eva M McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers es., *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, New Jersey and UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994.

⁸ Ashis Nandy, Telling the story of communal conflicts in South Asia: interim report on a personal search for defining myths, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol 25, No 1, January 2002, p. 4.

⁹ Sondra Hale, Some Thoughts on Women and Gender in Africa: Listening to the Whispers of African Women, *Journal of African Studies*, Winter 1998, Volume 16, Number 1

Mr Inder Kumar Gujral, former Prime Minister of India and an active member of the Indo-Pakistan People to People Movement for Friendship and Democracy, was present along with his communist friend and poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz at Minto Park in March 1940. They listened together to Jinnah's Lahore Resolution: a turning point in both Indian and Pakistani master narratives of Partition. For most Indians and would-be Pakistanis, the Muslim League's Lahore Resolution was held to be a declaration for a sovereign Pakistan. Few contemporaries such as the eminent politician Dr B R Ambedkar accepted that a demand for Pakistan did not necessarily imply a demand for Partition.¹⁰ I reproduce excerpts from the interview with Mr Gujral for his response to this resolution.

Gujral – At that time the Communist Party had taken a stand and we had become supportive of ... not Pakistan, not in that word because they coined another word, that is, the right of self-determination of Muslim minorities ... very stupid but very... therefore... for all the time... this I didn't agree with but you know the Communist Party has one habit. It conditions your thinking and that is that. Then, like all dogmatic parties, therefore if you are in it in a dogmatic party, then you are ... for instance my distancing came in the 1942 movement ... My mother, my father, all of us went to jail ... [I was released in] 1943. [In] 1945 I was settled at Karachi. There was a great deal of debate going on. I wasn't a participant in that debate but one thing was becoming very clear – there was a sharp thinking in Lahore but I wouldn't say I formed an opinion on it. I was not so much involved in this opinion making ... opportunity.

N – At what point did you realize personally that it would mean uprooting of you typically from one place to another, from west to east?

G – Never. *Never did we think we would come.* That was the reason why my father was in the Constituent Assembly.¹¹

Like all good historians, Mr Gujral cannot draw a neat line between the Lahore resolution of 1940 and the migration of 1947. He remembers too well the Cabinet Mission negotiations and his father's decision to join the Pakistan Constituent Assembly. As President of his College Union and later President of the Lahore Students Union, he probably had a better understanding of the Lahore resolution of March 1940 than his ambivalence today reflects. He suggests the resolution was not a call for a separate Pakistan but related to the right of self-determination for Muslim minorities: Mr Jinnah was willing to negotiate on the basis of the Cabinet Mission Plan. I showed him this press note that referred to his father's activities in October that year.

Mr Inder Sain Lamba, Secretary, Punjab Hindu Student Federation in a statement says –

“Recently a statement has been issued by L Avtar Narain Gujral, Advocate of Jhelum that about 20,000 Hindus and Sikhs of Jhelum, Chakwal, Pind dadan Khan and adjacent villages have decided to stay in Pakistan. How this statement is baseless may be judged from the deeds of the local Muslims of Jhelum. Nearly 700 Hindus and Sikhs were killed on 25.9.47 with the active help of Military and Police. L Avtar Narain praises the authorities in the same evening when the helpless refugees were attacked. We wonder how a man like L Avtar Narain who has removed his all relative and capital to the Indian Union, can give such a baseless statement. We press upon the Government of India not to neglect the refugees of Jhelum district who require immediate evacuation otherwise there may be greater loss of life and property as

¹⁰ For a clear step-by-step analysis of the Lahore Resolution, see Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the demand for Pakistan*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1999, also see B R Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, Bombay: Thacker and company limited, 1946

¹¹ Interview with Mr IK Gujral, 25 July 2003. I have retained silences and mannerisms in the extracts to retain the flavour of the original interviews.

particularly when there is no refugee camp at Jhelum proper. It is the first duty of Indian Government to remove the refugees from Jhelum district and other Pakistani areas and not to rely on the baseless statements of some renegades.”¹²

After a long silence, Mr Gujral declared he had never heard of Mr Inder Sain Lamba before. He then pointed out to me that it was patently untrue that his family had moved out of Pakistan. He was then in Karachi and his brother was in Jhelum helping with the evacuation process.¹³

N – What made it difficult for people like your father or Mr Sachar to stay on in Pakistan? Was it these hordes of tribesmen *kabailis* who were coming?¹⁴

G – The tribesmen’s camp was outside our house and they were crossing the river from there to go to Mirpur and that was the time he had decided to come away at about the same time. That was the last time when my father ... he had already reached there ...

N – Now for the future of India and Pakistan it would have made sense for minorities to remain on both sides but the violence made it impossible ...?

G – Yes, also the beginning perception was that the country is divided and people stay where they are, but the horrendous part of the violence and the Nehru-Liaquat Pact was signed because it was not possible.

N – Now in your opinion at that time who was responsible for the violence? Did you think that the police was hand in glove with the Muslim National Guard or did you think that these were people who were your own neighbours who were falling upon each other ... upon Hindu houses?

G – Both ... on this side and that side... you see ... army was being divided, administration had not been set up, governments were not formed, therefore to expect that law and order should have been enforced ...

N – Did Mr Jinnah personally want Pakistan did you think? Or did he want more share in power in an undivided India?

G – Much has been said, that I don’t know personally... but he had agreed to the Cabinet Mission which means he didn’t want ... but at the same time when I look at the papers now I think he must be ... but his speech at the Lahore session made it very clear what he wanted.

We are told that Lala Avtar Narain Gujral was willing to stay on and work with the Pakistan Constituent Assembly until the movement of tribals that had to cross Jhelum *en route* to Kashmir forced him to abandon his plans.¹⁵ His brother Satish Gujral’s eye-witness account of a meeting at the DAV College refugee camp in Lahore on the 17th of August when Prime Minister Nehru was shouted down by thousands of enraged refugees resonated with other accounts of the haphazard meetings in Ambala, Lahore and Jullundur that led to the Nehru-Liaquat evacuation pact.¹⁶ The evacuation of minorities was not an inevitable fact that flowed seamlessly out of the drawing of the Radcliffe Line. Leaders in Delhi were allegedly unaware of the heavy toll of refugees and violence that would stem from their high politicking. Yet, it is of some significance that when Congress functionaries in Punjab and Bengal were being forced to obey the dictates of

¹² All India Hindu Mahasabha Press note – for favour of publication, date 16.10.47 in Hindu Mahasabha Papers, C-152, Nehru Memorial Library

¹³ See Satish Gujral, *A Brush with Life*, New Delhi: Viking, 1997, for a vivid account of the evacuation of refugees in Jhelum district.

¹⁴ I was referring to his brother’s account of the tribals invading Jhelum.

¹⁵ Did the arrival of the tribesmen only precipitate Mr Avtar Narain Gujral’s decision to leave Pakistan or did it markedly change the course of his plans? We will never know but for a hint of the unformed nature of his plans, see Satish Gujral’s chapter on Partition in his book.

¹⁶ Satish Gujral, *A Brush with Life*. Interview with Satish Gujral, 29th July 2003. I am grateful to Mrs Manju Singh for organizing this interview. Other accounts of Cabinet level meetings discussing evacuation are located in the private papers of Sir Thomas Wynford Rees, British Library.

the High Command in Delhi, Mr Avtar Narain Gujral paused. He seriously considered the possibility of a safe and secure environment that Raja Ghazanfar Ali, a League politician from Jhelum, promised.¹⁷ This is all the more meaningful when we hear from Mr IK Gujral that refugees from the Rawalpindi riots of March 1947 believed these were planned by interests that desired Partition and did not want “small minorities... therefore the slogans were *Pakistan leke rahenge* [we will take Pakistan] that time.” Whether in history or memory, the desire to stay on, even after these orchestrated riots, suggests a deep attachment to one’s home/*vatan*.¹⁸ Although Mr Gujral will not linger on this moment of reckoning, he cannot erase it from his narrative. Perhaps it is too strong; perhaps its corroboration in formal archives lends it meaning or perhaps it justifies his own politics today.

The contingent quality of Partition is a significant silence in both Indian and Pakistani master narratives of Independence. Pakistani history text books infamously push back the moment of their founding variously to the coming of Islam in India in the 8th century or, at the very least, to the two-nation theory propelled by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in the late 19th century that gained exceptional clarity with the Muslim League Lahore Resolution of 1940. Indian history text books, still uncomfortable with a story of Indian secularism gone awry, quickly gloss over their nation’s division.¹⁹ Partition is ‘unfortunate’, or more blandly, a small price that apparently needed to be paid ... for the freedom of India meant so much more: it set an example to the rest of the colonized world.²⁰ However, this account of Mr Gujral’s and several others I heard suggests that the violence of Partition did not make it inconceivable for minorities to stay on. That people continued to believe they would return after this sudden spate of violence ended suggests that as late as October 1947, the two-nation theory had its opponents. The story of Mr Chamanlal Mehra, a shop owner from Lahore, hinges on this belief.

***“I am a Pukka Muslim, you are a Pukka Hindu”*: an Ordinary Friendship in Extraordinary Times**

I was taken to meet Mr Chamanlal Mehra by Deepak and Rakesh Mahandru, co-proprietors of *Lahorian di hatti*, a shawl shop in Nai Sarak, district Chandni Chowk. I was drawn to their shawl shop by its name – I imagined deep associations with Lahore but discovered that the young proprietors were born long after Partition. Mr Mehra had known their father Sohanlal Sherbetwala and drunk his famous *sherbet* in Lahore’s renowned Anarkali Bazar. Mr Mehra’s father had owned two shops in Shahalmi Gate of Lahore, a predominantly Hindu area, and a big building that was rented out to fifty two people. Twenty eight years old in 1947, he was now regarded a knowledgeable elder in the locality by others who listened respectfully to his Partition stories. When I asked him

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ For more archival evidence of the desire to stay and the haphazard nature of the decision to evacuate minorities, see chapter five of the dissertation.

¹⁹ See Krishna Kumar, *Prejudice and Pride: School histories of the freedom struggle in India and Pakistan*, Viking, 2001.

²⁰ This is a point of view espoused by some of Delhi’s elites. Conversation with Ramachandra Gandhi, India International Centre, New Delhi, June 2003

about Partition, Mr Mehra told me the story of a friendship that saved his life. He spoke feelingly in Hindi and more than once, his voice grew heavy with emotion.

Partition happened on 15 August, no? Before that, the commotion began on 3rd August. He came to me ... said I am a *pukka* Muslim, you are a *pukka* Hindu, that exchange of turbans [*pagdi*] has created a difficulty for me, because that makes us brothers ... because of the exchange of turbans, so tomorrow, you take *my* mothers, sisters and remove them from Lahore. There will soon be calamities about which I cannot say more. ²¹

In his narration, Mr Mehra speaks in the voice of his Muslim friend and emphasises “you take *my* mothers, sisters and remove them from Lahore”... therefore the exchange of turbans signifying brotherhood becomes more than symbolic in these calamitous times. The use of ‘*my*’ with reference to Mr Mehra’s family makes it seem as if his Muslim friend is asking him to protect *his* mothers and sisters from what is to come. Mr Mehra replies that he is talking like that only, nothing will happen, he will not leave. ‘*Raj palat jayega, hum yahin rahenge*’ [there will be a change of government, [but] we will stay here] - this sentence is repeated several times during the course of the interview. This conversation is framed in a larger context of people in Lahore who asked them (the Hindus) not to leave: the story of this friend provides the detail.

Eight days after his friend’s warning, on the 11th of August, Shahalmi Gate is set on fire.²² The young men of the neighbourhood, including Mr Mehra, who were keeping patrol, try to put out the fire but the engine of the fire brigade had been filled with petrol instead of water: three hundred houses are burnt. Mr Mehra said *this* was the warning his Muslim friend had wished to give him, but he hadn’t told him the whole scheme. The morning after the fire, his Muslim friend returned and begged Mr Mehra to leave, even now there was time. On the 13th of August, Mr Mehra’s father suggested they leave Lahore for about ten days until the troubles end. They stay with relatives in Dalhousie. Two weeks later, on their way back, ‘*vaapas jaana to hai hi*’ [we had to return], a friend in Amritsar tells them that nothing remains of Shahalmi Gate. Seven thousand buildings more were burnt after they left.

As a shop owner, Mr Mehra’s focus is not on details of the violence he heard or saw but on the shops that were burnt. He then traced out the journey to Delhi, the shop allotted to them by the Government in lieu of property lost in Lahore and the steady recovery in economic fortunes since. His wholesale trade in cloth has moved from Connaught Place to Janpath to Karol Bagh to its present location in Chandni Chowk. He supplies embroidered suit material to shops all around the country. As we fill out my questionnaire, he flounders when I ask him for his mother’s name – he cannot remember! It is a funny moment: then he recalls ‘Lal Deyi’. When I ask him if he is bitter, he says he returned to Lahore in 1962. I am surprised – why? How? He went, *ghoomne ke liye, koi khatra nahin tha* [to wander/visit, there was no danger]! Shahalmi gate was no more and

²¹ Interview with Mr Chamanlal Mehra, 23 April 2003. The interview was in Hindi/Urdu; the translations are mine. *pukka* refers to strong, one who adheres to the rules of the faith, a practicing Hindu/ Muslim. The word he uses is *aafat*, which I have translated as calamities; *bipta* is *musibat* which I have translated as difficulty.

²² This date from Mr Mehra’s memory matches completely with archival records of disturbances in Lahore.

the shops had been replaced by a big crockery market. He recalls how the rickshaw and *tonga* drivers refused to take money from him, neither did the owner of a drugstore.

I mean, there was nothing sad between us when I went in 1962, I felt I had returned to my own city. Why did we leave this city? I was saying again – why did we ever leave? They gave us so much love – again in 65 there was confusion. In 62, there was nothing ...²³

There is, indeed, no bitterness in Mr Mehra's voice. In questioning the moment of departure, on his visit to Lahore and forty years later to me, Mr Mehra recaptures the agony of leaving. He re-inhabits the Lahore of his dreams and his voice is deeply sad. He recounts his visit to the street from where he picked up his bride – *apne sasural ke gali gaya*. As he stood in contemplation, a young man asked him what he was doing. When he told him '*yaar kabhi hum sahare bandh ke aaye the, is gali mein ... aaj poochne wala koi nahin. Usne kaha hamari bibi hai, poochne wali, chalo aap hamare ghar.*' [friend, I once came to this street as a groom, today there is no one to ask after me. He said 'my wife is here to ask after you, come to my home'.] Mr Mehra refuses because he is shy – the women in that home are in *purdah* [veil]. But they talk outside and the Lahoria tells him to go and ask those people for something – a reference to what is naturally given when you go to the home of your in-laws as a gift or blessing.

Even as I broach the subject of anti-colonial movements and the responsibility for Partition, Mr Mehra returns to the migration as a mistaken act, '*galti ki Lahore chod diya*' [we made a mistake leaving Lahore]. He remembers that when he left Shahalmi Gate with his extended family, his Muslim friend had watched him leave, as if in relief. The structure of the interview and his repeated references to that original act of kindness show that he attributes his new life in Delhi to the '*daya*' and '*drishti*', the mercy and foresight of his Muslim friend. In times such as those, what were friends to say and what were they to hide? This *pukka* Muslim friend tried to protect the interests of his *pukka* Hindu friend in the only way he could: in the half-whisper of half a scheme. His story of resettlement in Delhi is a story of rebirth and renewal that this friendly act made possible.²⁴ There was a great deal of mobilization along lines of formal religious affiliation for which we have evidence in both formal archives and in literature: this story reveals the dilemmas posed by friendships between religions in this moment of reckoning and massive upheaval.

***“Not a Friend, he was a Classmate”*: Punjabi Hindu as Hindu supremacist**

If Mr Mehra's story affirms friendships with Muslims in pre and post Partitioned Punjab, Mr Sharma's narrative ridicules that very idea. A former BJP Parliamentarian and recent convert to Sikhism, Mr Baikuntha Lal Sharma aka Prem Singh “Sher” was recommended to me by several interviewees including Baba Vivek Shah, the head of a temple frequented by refugees from Lahore, who believed I could learn about the struggles of Punjabi Hindus from him.²⁵

²³ The confusion in '65 is a reference to the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965.

²⁴ I am grateful to Neeladri Bhattacharya for suggesting this to me.

²⁵ This faith was head-quartered in Lahore, its main temple located on the banks of the Ravi. After Partition, the guardians of the faith were allotted a space on the banks of the River Jamuna in Delhi. The temple in Jamuna Bazar is huge, and full of names of people from Lahore and Rawalpindi who donated

Mr BL Sharma lives in a refugee colony in the heart of New Delhi. Most of the interview was in the form of a pre-set speech delivered loudly as if during an election campaign. Initially I tried to steer the conversation to his past rather than his immediate preoccupation: ‘there can be no peace on earth until Pakistan is wiped out from the world’s surface.’ Mr Sharma began his career in the Sangh parivar as a *pracharak* of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Shakargarh tehsil, district Gurdaspur.²⁶ His memory of the Hindu Mahasabha training camp in Bilaspur in 1945 matched with those I found in the Mahasabha papers: he was then sixteen years old. His narration of the collective death through immersion in a river, *jal-samadhi*, of some Hindu women in a *kafila* that he accompanied from Peshawar enabled him to return to stating his goals: that 218 places of pilgrimage remain in Pakistan and he has vowed to reclaim them all. He declares that Pakistan used to have ten percent Hindus, now it has not even one percent. He claims that the RSS ordered *pracharaks* not to migrate from areas that came within Pakistan. This order, received after the 14th August, may have wrought further confusion in the minds of minorities. Were they to stay and defend themselves against the violence or leave in large numbers? However, the contingent nature of his migration is lost in a narrative drawn around ancient antagonisms between Hindus and Muslims.

Of his childhood, Mr Sharma reveals little. His father was head clerk in the Divisional Superintendent Office of Railways in Ferozepur. He himself studied at the Sanatan Dharm School in Ferozepur and later at the KC Arya High School Sialkot. Mr Sharma breezily refers to a Muslim friend who later sent him copies of the pamphlet ‘Rape of Rawalpindi’ that he then distributed for his own propaganda purposes.²⁷ So he did have ‘Muslim friends’ then? Mr Sharma replies ‘*class mein baithte to hello hello hota hi hai... jab tak musalman gaay ka maas khata rahega... hamara sochne ka drishtikon hi nahin hai, poora ult-baith, ek purab hai, doosra paschim.*’ [we sat in class so we used to exchange Hello’s, as long as the Muslim eats the flesh of cows ... our ways of thinking are not the same, its completely different, one is east, the other is west]. Effortlessly, the present rhetoric of Hindutva dominates every association and memory in the past.

sums of money for its construction and renovation. I am grateful to the Mahandru brothers and to Mr KL Sharma for taking me there.

²⁶ The RSS is the ideological heart of the family or organisations associated with Hindutva and Hindu nationalism. For a quick overview of these organisations see Tapan Basu et al., *Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right* New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993. This book also relies on material from an interview with Mr Sharma conducted in 1990. I thank Mr KL Sharma of BK Dutt Colony for helping arrange this interview with Mr BL Sharma on 3rd May 2003.

²⁷ It is hard to situate Mr Sharma’s practiced polemic. A study by Kim Lacy Rogers suggests that activists of the civil rights movement in 1960s and 1970s America countered their experiences of victimization during the movement by succouring strength from within the community. The trauma they experienced then begins to have some meaning. In the case of Mr Sharma, his large following of Hindu nationalist workers probably lends importance to his mission and himself, his meagre pension notwithstanding. There were several hangers-on toward the end of my interview seeking his presence at a wedding. See Kim Lacy Rogers, ‘Trauma Redeemed: The Narrative Construction of Social Violence’ in Eva M McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers eds., *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, New Jersey and UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1994.

Mr Sharma attributes his desire to protect Hindu society to his parents' upbringing. His sister, Shakuntala Sharma, was apparently a member of 'Bhagat Singh's party'. Quite contrary to our academic understandings of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, Mr Sharma seems to have learnt the art of protecting *Hindu* interests from a revolutionary terrorist who aimed his activities against the *British*. He read his sister's copy of the banned book '*Shahidane Vatan*', along with the autobiographies of Swami Vivekananda and Lokmanya Tilak, attended college cursorily then threw his energies into the protection of Bharat Mata [Mother India]. This rather prosaic introduction to his politics is followed by a projection of himself as a man of simple means, he has never kept more than five hundred rupees in his wallet and he gets a pension of seven thousand rupees.

Describing the Congress as a Hindu party and similar in aims to the Hindu Mahasabha in 1947, Mr Sharma feels that at the present rate of growth of Muslim population, the rest of India will soon become Pakistan. These 'snakes' are intent on converting *dar-ul-harb* into *dar-ul-islam*.²⁸ This standard Hindutva rhetoric is couched in an interpretation of Partition as a sell-out to Muslims and Islam as a fundamentalist religion because they believe their religion to be the only true one. Mr Sharma magnanimously ascribes to Hinduism a tolerance that the Sangh Parivar wishes to erase – '*they* are very clear in their thoughts, *we* are not clear'. After being described as tolerant, Hinduism must in fact become 'clear': this Hindu society/nation must be saved. The word for 'nation' is curiously the Urdu word 'mulk'.

Mr Sharma dwells on his career since Partition only to show that it was geared towards the protection of Hindu society. In post Partitioned India, he relied on his relative to become a warrant officer in the army ordinance corp at Ranchi. He was then fired from his job because he was present at Ayodhya when Ram Lalla emerged in 1949.²⁹ The next marker seems to have been a job at the National Defence Academy Khadakvasala, then at the Ministry of Agriculture. He was then 'recruited' to form 'patriotic unions' in the Government services. He rose to become Secretary General of Government Employees National Confederation. In the meantime there were troubles in the Hindu world, not least the Meenakshipuram conversion incident of 1981. These induced him to quit government service and join the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. He was elected to Parliament in 1991 and 1996 from New Delhi on a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ticket. Unhappy with the compromises made by the BJP, he felt that the problems of Hindu society were being neglected. His resignation letter to the then Home Minister Mr L K Advani stated that as a *karmkandi* Brahman, he felt it his duty to take on the job of the martial caste, Kshatriyas and save Hindu society. His slogan is *shastrameva jayate* [arms will prevail] but in his very next breath, he uses Urdu poetry to explain his actions.

*Mohabbat ke liye kuchh khaas dil makhsoos hote hain,
Yeh woh nagama hai jo har saaz par gaya nahin jaata.*

²⁸ In traditional Islamic theology, dar-ul-harb refers to a land of war where the adherents of Islam are at war and unable to practice their religion in peace. Dar-ul-Islam refers to a land of peace.

²⁹ See S Gopal ed., *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir*, Viking, 1991 for a discussion of this sighting.

This means only certain hearts are meant for love, this is that song which cannot be sung by each instrument.³⁰ This implies Mr Sharma was not cut out for Parliamentary work. Mr BL Sharma also spoke appreciatively of the songs from the well known film *Umrao Jaan*. His brand of Hindutva, it seems, includes a flavour for Nawabi culture. Using Urdu, a language stigmatised as ‘foreign’ and ‘Muslim’ by the Hindutva lobby, to buttress his reasons for abandoning the Parliamentary path is characteristic of the Sangh Parivar’s shifty thinking and political double-speak.³¹ He has since converted to the Khalsa faith because the Sikhs were founded, he believes, to be the militant and protective arm of Hindu society.

Urdu/Hindi, Hindu/Sikh, Congress/Hindu Mahasabha, Muslims/Pakistan – the clarity in Mr Sharma’s thinking comes from a peculiar reading of history suited to his own purposes of constructing an exclusivist and supremacist Hindu India. Although Mr Sharma’s first contacts with the RSS appear to have been made in the mid 1940s he has erased any prior instance of ‘shared living’ with Muslims from his memory to forge a homogenizing narrative that fits with his present politics. In this monological discourse, Partition provides no rupture in Mr Sharma’s relations with Muslims. Today he is determined to kill Pakistanis even if this means the murder of millions. He is currently fund-raising for a Smriti Mandir outside Delhi, dedicated to the ‘martyrs’ of the Hindu community, victims of Partition violence and all those who died at the hands of Muslim conquerors in the last twelve hundred years.³² The temple is on the lines of a memorial in Israel that one of his close friends visited. He also produces a monthly newsletter *Abhay Bharat* which propagates the idea of an Akhand/ undivided India. This publication is targeted to reach 14,000 police stations and members of the armed forces. He concluded the interview with the contented declaration: ‘I am the happiest man in the world. *Sab anand mein hoon, bas yeh desh bach jaye*’ [I am very happy; just this country must be saved].

***“I think the Muslim is a very warm person”*: Punjabi Hindu as Secular Indian**

If the Muslim has no place in Mr Sharma’s conception of India, the Muslim occupies uneasy ground in the secular Indian imagination as well. My conversations with Mr Krishen Khanna, an archetypal “secular” Indian in the Nehruvian mode, traced a journey in memory that was fraught with unresolved questions.³³ We spoke over two Sundays, the conversation included his wife Renuka Khanna, and I was given access to private

³⁰ This couplet is by Maqmoor Dehlvi. I am grateful to my mother for supplying this reference and translation.

³¹ See Amrita Basu, ‘Mass Movement or Elite Conspiracy: The Puzzle of Hindu Nationalism’ in David Ludden ed., *Contesting the Nation: religion, community and the politics of democracy in India*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996

³² Smriti Mandir literally means a temple of commemoration. I am grateful to Mr BL Sharma for sharing with me some issues of *Abhay Bharat* and literature pertaining to the Smriti Mandir. The idea that violence was inflicted only upon Hindus and Sikhs during Partition is disseminated in RSS tracts and books. See the series available in Suruchi Prakashan, Karol Bagh, New Delhi.

³³ I am grateful to Mr GP Talwar for arranging this interview. I was asked to interview him by other Lahorias and intrigued by his book, *The Time of My Life: Memories, Anecdotes, Tall Talk*, Viking, 2002. The two interviews were conducted on 22nd June and 29th June 2003.

letters of his father Mr Kahan Chand Khanna. The Khanna's fathers taught Philosophy and History at the prestigious Government College Lahore. Their remembrances evoke the cosmopolitanism of Lahore, probably at its best.

One of India's most renowned painters, Mr Khanna's first job was in a printing press on Abbott Road Lahore. On the 11th of August 1947, he left Lahore for Simla on a week long assignment, never imagining it would be forever. The interview began with his reflections on the relationship between what happened then, how he used to think about it and how he now thinks about it. Mr Khanna first reflected on the relationship of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis and Christians on two hundred yards of Maclagan Road, his first home in Lahore. He used to think of it as 'great amity between various groups, religious groups or whatever'; but when he recently subjected his memory to 'some sort of critical review' he realized there were 'very few Muslims' on this stretch of road. He recalls the easy accessibility of various homes on that road, then remembers some uneasiness during Muharram – a memory that seems to have been buried over time and was only recently uncovered:

... we had during Muharram of course processions being taken down the road we watched it like everything else but I seem to think there was always a little kind of a not a fear ... at the time of Muharram for instance ... we didn't quite know what to make of it but there it was. There wasn't any animus towards the Muslims as such not in our ... not amongst the children but that's because maybe we were children...

This cagey quality of his remembrance dissolves when he proceeds to talk of the family tailor, a Muslim, 'a very respectable man' who came regularly to ask his mother if she needed anything even when his father was pursuing a PhD in London: 'there was a wonderful community feeling there'. That size of community allowed for such civilities. He then moved to Multan where there were 'far more Muslim boys, my give and take with these chaps was as it was before.' This is all very well but there's more – he feels 'one got *assimilated* into a very Muslim culture. One didn't realize that this was a *Muslim* culture.' A cook in his family house on his mother's side pointed out that the young Khanna boy's dress, the salwar kameez, was *Muslim*. Mr Khanna refers to his study of Persian and his language being Urdu 'my wife and I, we were from a very different, mixed kind of bringing up ... with lot of interchanges with the Muslim world and accepting this as a part of my own heritage.' His daughter on the other hand, is a classical Bharatanatyam dancer and her classical language is Sanskrit. A child of post-Partitioned Delhi, she does not speak Punjabi. However, there is no unrestrained dip into nostalgia when I enquire into the possible losses and gains for the next generation.

... you know a loss of poetry is a loss of poetry. I don't give a damn whether it's Muslim poetry or English poetry. If you decide not to read it, it's your loss. I'm quite sure since I can't read Hindi and I don't read Hindi, a lot of literature in Hindi is my loss, but then I content myself with the fact that I can't have every literature, every bit of poetry into my system.

This matter of fact quality may be a result of so much movement: he studied in schools in Lahore, at the Imperial Service College in Windsor, UK, at Emerson College Multan, then in Government College Lahore. His professional career in a bank took him to Madras, Bombay, Kanpur; he has lived in Simla and Delhi, but above all, he exudes the wisdom that comes with success. His reasoning is not bound in regret; the loss is there but not overwhelming.

Neither of the Khannas is quite sure whether to place social relations between members of different religious communities as intimate or in decline in 1945-46. They say different things at different points in the interview. It is clear they were not involved in 'high politics'. The atmosphere in Government College Lahore was 'intellectually lazy' and the young boys spent much of their 'surplus energies' in sports and other college activities. Consider this extract, the lack of empathy with the movement for Pakistan and the gushing admiration for Muslims that follows -

Krishen Khanna – I remember a great friend of mine Teji used to say, well you know the big brother has to be generous

N – And what did you think?

K – And I said well I suppose so and but you know why are *we* bothered with all this? We are living alright. I mean there was no ... *thought* that we'd ever get separated. Of course the majority community had to be generous ... why shouldn't they act in a magnanimous fashion?

N – By majority community you meant?

K – The Hindus

N – in the country

K – in the country, but in Lahore of course it was a 50-50 affair. In Lahore it was such an evenly mixed ... I mean it was 1 %, even the 1 % was fluctuating and it quite honestly never bothered me.

N – Do you remember an atmosphere of sloganeering, mobilization?

K – I saw a procession, probably the first one, a Pakistani procession in Anarkali and these women there ... they were Pakistani women dressed in their green thing whatever ... these *leke rahenge Pakistan; leke rahenge* [we will take Pakistan; we will take ...] you know shouting the odds. I said, what's wrong with these *chudel's* [witches] you know (laughs) then we could go on about divisions ... I was working in a press. There were lots of Muslims in the press working. I was heading it, I was running their lives for them in terms of work and so on. *Very affectionate, very nice, very open, very friendly* and even now let me tell you I mean I went back may be what thirty years later, more than that, the warmth with which I was received ... I think the Muslim is a *very warm* person. The Punjabi Muslims are *very warm*, we were *very warmly* received, *very warmly* received³⁴ and it happened right now, Kuldeep Nayar went there and he's a part of the Indo-Pak friendship. They call it Pak-Indo; we call it Indo-Pak, same thing. We work independently. They were feted, they were dined ... *unhone hamari khatirdari ki* [they took such good care of us] ... but we are ... their delegation that came here was unattended! *Sukha!* [dry! Stiff!] Nothing happened!

N – *aisa kyon?* [why so?]

K – Because we are like that. We are stupidly political, involved in politics, accounts, *ye karenge, ye theek rahega, das cheezen*, [we'll do this, this will be enough, ten things] I mean can you imagine now they are talking about sending our troops to Iraq but I mean we shouldn't even be contemplating this, fortunately they made a public issue of this...

Although the movement for Pakistan is even today remembered in anecdotal terms, Mr Khanna rushes to reaffirm his faith in the humanism of the ordinary Muslim. I asked him about the atmosphere in the printing press – after all the press was responsible for much of the venom in circulation in 1946 but he was sure that there was no tension in his press. The Muslim workers under his supervision were very affectionate, nice, open, friendly. The Muslim is a very warm person. Is this the memory of social interactions in pre Partition Lahore or a memory distilled through secular India's own traumas ever since. I ask about the violence, their memory of the RSS, the Akalis and the League. The conversation meanders into the present throwing sharp light on the grey ground that the Sangh Parivar and Indian Muslims inhabit in popular minds.

³⁴ Emphasis in the original interview.

K - ... the strange thing is much as one would disagree with the RSS, given their kind of cast-iron stance on Muslims, they did a lot during Partition. The recovery of women, for instance, the RSS *did* that and they are not ... that element of the RSS ... the RSS is not very imaginative, but actually they are led by very clean, clean-living people. My taya who was very dear to us was a member of the RSS. He used to say well, whats wrong with being a Hindu? *Well this is true, see what was happening in the Punjab was that Hindus were being assimilated in a Muslim culture, also very little of the Muslim absorbing Hindu culture.* Am I right Renu or wrong?

Renu – you know, the atmosphere of Hindi Muslims was not the atmosphere of the Punjabi Muslims.

K – Yes, absolutely ...

R – Punjabi Muslims were really agricultural. Very simple, very warm hearted. Their hearts were very clear of whom they were extremely respectful. Now in Government College Lahore my psychology teacher was an Ahmadiyya and he occupied the chair of Psychology and Philosophy after my father and I was his student. Qazi Akbar was his name. Now the Ahmadiyyas were declared by the Pakistan Government to be non-Muslim! So there was a lot of absorption ... as a whole culture I mean we are sure ... just like in Ajmer, Hindus and Muslims go regularly.

K – When I came back from England, you know, to Multan, my father was still there as Inspector of Schools – one of his great friends was a Qureishi and his father was a Pir, a very well known, one of the big boys in the region ... and a very good friend of my father's and the day I arrived he came to see me, the Pir Sahib himself. And all our servants, all these chaps, the driver, were staggered that the Pir should be coming to see this young chap! A huge, tall thug of a man, beautiful beard, stately presence and immaculately dressed came and for a good ten minutes he blessed me in the choicest language. And I was down, my head was down, utterly ... his son Sajjad became a good friend of mine in College! ... He came to give his benediction. That's a great honour you know but now one would say some bloody Muslim came to give you an honour. I mean people don't regard ... the way the VHP talks its as if the Muslims didn't exist as a community or they are a horrible lot...

R – But don't forget the president of the country is a Muslim... there are so many Muslims in the country who has assimilated.

K – of course. Hussain, Raza all these chaps. Raza says *naam ke liye muslim hoon, sayyid hoon* [I am a Muslim in name, a Sayyid], but I mean his knowledge of Hindi... this whole business of Hindu-Muslim...

R – He knows Hindi, he knows Sanskrit...

K – ya... and what culture you were brought up in ... no culture tells you to slit anybody's throat!

N – so how would you analyze the change in the RSS from 1947 to now?

K – My taya was a leader of the shakha in Ferozepur which is a contiguous area to Pakistan and he was a very well regarded, very honoured...

N – this is in the early 40s...

K – No, this is after Partition ... and my father disagreed with him. Well he said, why don't they call themselves Hindus? Well my father said because Hindu has become a very specific nomenclature. My taya said Hindu only means this side of the Indus, anybody who is a resident in this part of the world you know, so whats wrong in calling yourself that? Nothing ... you know its synonymous with a certain religious community, a certain religion and the Muslims certainly are a different religion ... its like the Hindus keep saying the Sikhs are a part of us. Well they are *not* a part of us ... they are very separate and they should be regarded as such. You should honour their differences rather than saying *ye to hamare hi jaise hain* [they are like us only] ...

The RSS is led by 'clean- living people' but there were important disagreements between his father and uncle on what they meant by a Hindu. The Punjabi Muslim is *very* warm, syncretic to the point of being considered heretic by some, and the Indian Muslim has *assimilated* so much in post Partitioned India. An accommodating [secular?] stance on religious difference runs into difficulty confronting an exclusivist RSS re-defining Hindu or Pakistanis who define Ahmediyya in a certain way. The secular Indian, while speaking of the difference between Hindus and Sikhs or Hindus and Muslims is caught in the syncretic eddy or mired in the politics of tokenism. Would the Indian Muslim President be equally acceptable if he was not well versed in Sanskrit? The Muslim Pir can be stately and the VHP can be ridiculously ignorant, but can the secular Indian empathize

with religion as faith, one's own or another? Was the blessing of the Pir merely a 'great honour'? I turn to their response in my questionnaire – under religion/caste, Renu Khanna has written 'caste-nil; mixed religions- accept all'. Mr Khanna has written 'I was born a Hindu but am a lot else besides'. The 'lot else' does find utterance in responses to occupation, civil society organisations and places of living in post Partitioned India, but the question on religion still elicits this uneasy response: the secular Indian is uncomfortable with a question that asks just about one's religion.

Our second meeting focused on the relationship between the individual and the state. Mr Khanna detailed instances in post Partitioned India when the Government of the day hindered with people to people contacts between India and Pakistan, even in the realm of art and culture. I will close this section with this secular Indian's own reading of why Government College Lahore never managed to have an old boys' network.

K - you know there was this Old boys dinner and I was there as well. And various remarks and... Swaran Singh was there ... it would be around sometime in 52, 51 ... What happened there was somebody made a remark in their speech that Partition happened and its bad for the college it broke up, this that and the other sort to which Qutb responded, Nazim Qutb responded who is a friend of ours and he said well it needn't have happened if it weren't for blah blah blah it became a political argument and I don't think it had been intended at the outset. I think Qutb was over-sensitive when he came out. He was actually Pakistan's Information Minister I suppose he had to make some sort of a remark and he did...

N – and what is your hunch about why the Government College Old Boys association hasn't been functioning for years...

K – I find it hard to answer this question but I think people are busy and you suggested just now that all these guys have done well, you know, bureaucracy and so on which is true. They either have no time for this kind of thing or they feel that possibly this *mel-jhol* [meeting together] might not be so good.

N- So then don't you think that this is a case in point when people to people contact

K - is important...

N - is coming into direct conflict with occupational...

K- Yes I think this is definitely so. This is definitely so. I am rather naïve in my formulations but I do think that there are various hierarchies sort of positioned, the artistic hierarchy is one, the political hierarchy is another, and the economic hierarchy is another – these three are the main - and controlling all this is supposedly the political hierarchy... also covers trade, the economics of this country and I think these boys to stay in power, that side or this side or whatever, it's a usual back-scratching society. If this was left to the people they wouldn't bother. People are interested in living, they are not interested in who owns what and where the various flags are flying...I mean I know this is very very naïve. I will be brushed aside as this idiot but I really think people are interested in preserving their own territory.

That private or civil society's remembering can come into conflict with the designs of Governments is a carry-over from his earlier references to the 'dry' attitude of the Indians involved in the Indo-Pak Friendship Society.³⁵ As I prepared to leave their beautiful home, Mrs Khanna said '*everybody* is haunted by their childhood memories'. That and their liberal attitude towards 'a loss of poetry' left me with a sense that their past is something they carry with them. To spend an afternoon with the Khannas is to revisit a slice of warm Lahore in the 1940s. There is no anger here, only a host of memories. The figure of the Muslim occupies several niches in their memory, as does that of the

³⁵ For the tension between individual and statist forms of remembering, see Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Uses and Abuses of Memory', Translated by Lucy Golsan in Howard Marchitello ed., *What Happens to History: The Renewal of Ethics in Contemporary Thought*, Routledge, 2001, p. 12. The second interview was conducted with Mr Khanna, 29th June 2003

‘secular’ or ‘communal’ Hindu. They shared stories of a Muslim retainer who stayed in touch after Partition, an old classmate who became Governor of Punjab and publicly embraced Mr Khanna at an awards function in 1989 but they haven’t worked out why Hindus and Muslims could not share power in a united India. The secular Indian canvas has the Muslim in every colour, but s/he is ultimately soulless, a caricature, a symbol, an extra piece that will not fit into an unfinished jig saw puzzle, a witness to ‘shared living’ in another time. The silence stays while the secular Indian has tried to move on.

“*Kehte hain nasur hai*”: a Life in Contradiction³⁶

And yet moving on can mean such different things. I was persuaded to meet Mrs Gill by her granddaughter, an old friend of my cousin’s whom I met at a wedding. She insisted I interview her grandmother because she had a very interesting Partition story to share. In an interview spanning several hours and informed, at different moments, by the opinions of her husband, daughter and grand daughter, I heard several interesting stories. Partition, in the words of Mrs Gill, was a *nasur*, a wound that refused to heal.³⁷

Her family belonged to Mailsi, a village in Multan. Her father served the British, her grandfather had served the community as a doctor for decades. They owned a large house, a small hospital, the only car in the village - a Chevrolet. Mrs Gill opened the interview with a story about her grandfather’s departure from the village – people did not want him to leave, they gave him so much love. This is a theme she returns to - part of family lore, her daughter and granddaughter made sure when they joined the conversation that I knew of this trauma.

Several strands of life in pre-Partition Punjab unravelled. The daughter of a Police officer who worked for the British, Mrs Gill grew up in Rawalpindi, Gujrat, Sialkot, Lahore, Multan and Mianwali – all districts in Muslim majority Punjab. She referred to her Muslim friends with affection, said they ate together, ‘when I was a young girl I was most brought up as a Muslim girl in my own house’. She remembers being treated differently from her brothers because of a protective environment that she attributes to Islam – there is even a moment when the *darogha* sahib, her father, tries to make her and her mother wear *burqas* because he fears his enemies will harm his family. These stories are narrated warmly: religious difference does not seem to have been an issue – she remembers the words of a prayer she sang with her Muslim classmates in Lady Anderson’s High School in Sialkot.

Originally from Jullundur, Mrs Gill was married into a *khatri* family in east Punjab in December 1945. Although she regards Mailsi her home and was married from there, she had spent only her summer vacations there. Her father was building his retirement home in Lahore when Partition happened. In the winter of 1946-47, Mrs Gill visited Mailsi. She recalls the tension and the fears in the family –

³⁶ They say this is a *nasur*.

³⁷ Interview in Hindi/Urdu with Mrs Gill and other members of her family, 19th December 2002. Names have been changed in this account to preserve the anonymity of the interviewee. Translations are mine.

Before Partition, when I was six months pregnant with my daughter I visited Mailsi. Then we used to hear slogans “*Pakistan banke rahega, Pakistan banke rahega*” [Pakistan will come into being; Pakistan will come into being]... we’d talk amongst ourselves about our future because we were minorities ... my grandfather used to say nothing will happen, no one will touch us, but we were a minority in that city, the majority were Muslims. And we were considered more well-to-do than them ... so he used to say that no one will tell us anything, and then we used to respond, my uncle, that fine, lets stay here for a month, a month and a half longer. When they saw that circumstances were worsening, then he said lets leave, my grandfather said I will not leave, no one will say anything to us, they are all friends. He was a doctor, I have treated them, why will anyone kill me? They used to say, they are Muslims, we are getting ready to leave. They say, my uncle and my grandfather, that *those Muslims swore by the Korans on their heads again and again saying please don’t leave and my grandfather would respond saying I don’t want to go. I really don’t want to*, but tell me, my children, and then my uncle said, you know ... young thinking maturity, see we know you will not say anything to us, we have complete faith in you, but if a mob comes, 500 or 600, from somewhere else, not from your village, but from behind, first they will kill you, then they will kill us. You will not be saved, and we will not be saved, is this intelligence? This is why it is best if ... my grandfather would cry that this is helplessness. It was neither in their hands nor in our hands ...³⁸

The above quote is based partly on a direct experience of family discussions in the winter of 1946. The details of the trauma that were enacted in September-October 1947 when her family finally moved out of Mailsi have reached her through other members of the family. I asked her if she ever discussed Partition with her grandfather. No, she answered. This is not to doubt the veracity of her story – there are numerous such stories in the archives.³⁹ It is interesting however that it is this story that dominates her own memory of Partition and has passed down the generations as emblematic of the family’s experience.

Mrs Gill was herself celebrating Independence outside Parliament in New Delhi with her husband, an officer in the elite Indian Foreign Service. Her only direct knowledge of Partition violence revolves around the stabbing she witnessed of an old Muslim in Delhi and the fear she felt listening to the slogans ‘*har har mahadev*’ and ‘*allaho akbar*’. She recalls the fires near Paharganj and the announcements on the radio broadcasting refugees’ whereabouts: she did not know whether her own family had escaped from Multan. In her neighbourhood in Delhi, young men from the RSS promised them protection and planned for families to move to Birla Mandir if trouble came ... this is September 1947 and Delhi is ablaze with anti-Muslim violence. She describes the RSS volunteers as full of *josh* – enthusiasm, ‘young young’, about twenty years of age, they used to attend *shakhas* in the morning, they were ‘very patriotic’. Residents of Delhi, they were excited by stories they heard from refugees especially Sikhs. There were train loads of massacred people, once it began, the violence went on for a whole month. Her

³⁸ ‘you know ... young thinking maturity’ are English words Mrs Puri broke into in the course of an interview that was largely in Hindi. Emphasis in the original interview.

³⁹ This account of migration resonates with a newspaper item I came across in the papers of the Punjab Boundary Force housed in London. In the village of Setalmari in Multan district, Muslim villagers escorted their Hindu neighbours to protection in the city. Complaints that Muslim refugees from Amritsar had occupied some vacant houses belonging to Hindus in Mohallah Laheti Sarai led to the local Muslim Leaguers taking action against these refugees. ‘Exemplary sense of brotherhood: Muslim villagers give Hindus helping hand in Multan village’, *Civil and Military Gazette*, 4 September, Mss Eur., F274/67, BL

narrative suggests the violence was spontaneous – an attribute that does not stand when examined against the historical record.⁴⁰

Mrs Gill also recalls instances where Hindus helped disguise their Muslim friends as Hindus so that they could finally find their way to an army convoy and across the border to Pakistan. She tells of a friend who came in a *kafila* that stretched for 25 miles: by the time they reached India, the *kafila* was half the size it had been. Her own family managed to reach India safely but she remembers that one of her brothers, a police officer, was forced to leave behind his gun when he came to India.⁴¹ She returns, several times, to the property they left behind, the jewellery in particular. Their ‘safe deposit’ in those days, it was hidden in cup boards or buried under the earth. In fact, when her brother was recruited to retrieve abducted women, he made a trip to Mailsi in the hope of retrieving the family jewels. However, their home was now occupied by a refugee family who firmly but politely told him that they too had left behind their wealth in India.

There is something I cannot put a finger to... a careful coiffure, the stray strands threaten to upset the balance. I learn from her husband who has now joined the conversation that he was attracted to the RSS in 1947. In fact it is his daughter who goads him into revealing that indeed, he was impressed by their discipline but his older brother, a Congressman, prevented him from joining them. More stories flow out, there is so much anger here. Mrs Gill tells me about her younger brother –

we remember all those things, we do, very bitter, when my brother was, because the partition was created, that’s why we lost our brother. As I told you now, he got very beaten up in school and got very scared. He would get very agitated. He used to say ‘Oh Pakistan!’

Her youngest brother was traumatized by this beating at school and then came Partition. He joined the Indian Air Force and disappeared during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. She uses the word *nasur* – this is a wound that can never heal – and holds Pakistan responsible. But when I ask her if the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s strategy of mobilizing Hindus using Partition rhetoric against Indian Muslims is fair, she is emphatic - *Unka badla inse kyon liya jaye?* [why should these people pay for that wrong?]

Mrs Gill distinguishes between Indian and Pakistani Muslims. She decides to tell me a story about her grand daughter. When she was studying at University in London, she became very close to some boys from Pakistan. Her grand daughter breaks in with ‘Nani, I am glad *you* are telling this, I was wondering if you would’. They were doing a play together, meeting often, she was invited to their parent’s house for Eid. When Mrs Gill learnt that Deepa had received Eidi, she became suspicious. Were these just friends?

Deepa – In all fairness, I was also egging her on. She used to say that you know, are they just friends or are they boyfriends and I used to tell her maybe they are ...

Mrs Gill - I was really scared – very worrying – Neeti, there were two things – one was religion, the other was partition. With Pakistan, that was the last – I couldn’t have taken that.

There are other stories of Mrs Gill’s opposition to her daughter’s friendship with a Pakistani friend in New York in the late 1960s. I am struck by the vehemence of her

⁴⁰ See chapter five of the dissertation.

⁴¹ There is evidence of the same suspicion among the Punjab police in Amritsar, *ibid*.

stance. This is not about marrying into a family from Pakistan, but a case of forging any kind of personal relationship. Why does Mrs Gill's insistence on her grandfather's reluctance to leave Multan in October 1947 not influence her attitude toward her children's personal friendships with Pakistanis? Why should this generation pay for the errors of a previous one? She changes the subject.

The Politics of Memory

Memory prompts our inquiries as historians, just as the search for that which has been forgotten focuses them. The past as it was experienced, not just the past as it has subsequently been used, is a moment of memory we should strive to recover.

- Patrick Hutton⁴²

Remembering well requires reopening wounds in a particular way, one which people cannot do by themselves; remembering well requires a social structure in which people can address others across the boundaries of difference. This is the liberal hope of collective memory.

- Richard Sennett⁴³

Oral history, as I have employed it in this chapter, offers us a window into the silences that engulf narratives of Partition among former refugees. The subjectivity of oral history and its insights into the meaning of history as opposed to facts about events, allow us to study the attitudes, hopes and identities of peoples.⁴⁴ Yet the silences I have attempted to uncover suggest that memory, in and of itself, poses questions that it cannot answer. The fragment needs support from the whole, the interface between 'high politics' and the 'fragment' is breached in the realm of the mind.

Research on memory, myth and national identity, following the doyen of "collective memory" Maurice Halbwachs, has focussed on recovering the contexts and means by which social groups remember and manipulate the past to reflect presentist concerns.⁴⁵

⁴² Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*, University of Vermont, 1993, p. xxiv.

⁴³ Richard Sennett, "Disturbing Memories" in *Memory* ed., Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 22.

⁴⁴ Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson eds., *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge 1998, p. 67-68. See Raul Hilberg, Sources and Their Uses in *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*, eds., Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J Peck, Published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC and Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998 for his distinction between the recollection of contemporaries and written contemporaneous records.

⁴⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, translated and introduced by Mary Douglas, Harper and Row, 1980; Jacob J Climo and Maria Cattell eds., *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives*, Altamira Press 2002; Charles S Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust and German National Identity*, Harvard University Press, 1997; Richard Samuel and Paul Thomson, *The Myths We Live By*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990; Richard Sennett 'Disturbing Memories' in Patricia Fara and Karalyn Patterson eds., *Memory*, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994; Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the making of Israeli national tradition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1995. In the Indian context, see Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995; Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Myth, History and the Politics of Ramjanmabhoomi' in S Gopal ed., *Anatomy of a Confrontation, The Babri Masjid- Ramjanmabhoomi issue*, Penguin 1991.

The alternative to collective memory has been Foucauldian counter-memory: ‘the discursive practices through which memories are perpetually revised’.⁴⁶ Lost in these formulations is the resilience with which memories of a different order are grounded, in internal and unaided contexts.⁴⁷

It is not an undifferentiated memory that contributes towards the making of a national identity.⁴⁸ The politics of memory necessitate an interaction between *disappearance* (forgetting), and *preservation* and a balance with other guiding principles: will, consent, reasoning, creation, liberty.⁴⁹ Their essential subjectivity, however, means that memories that are selected, out of a potentially infinite set of possible memories, are deeply relevant to individuals who remember them, for their meaning in constructing personal identities and relationships.⁵⁰ Writing of modes of thinking that seem strange and antiquarian today, David Gross suggests that these ‘elements of enduring noncontemporaneity must often retreat from the mainstream, either to the periphery of social life – to rural enclaves, ethnic subcultures, or religious sects ... or, if there is serious risk of suppression or persecution, underground.’⁵¹ A popular travelogue on Delhi suggests the city is culturally divided between older residents and Partition refugees. Recent political analyses of Punjabi Hindu refugees voting strategies examined their affinity toward a Congress or BJP based Hindu nationalism. Neither of these strategies does justice to the enormous range of ambivalences in Punjabi Hindu attitudes toward their past.⁵² My research suggests that their memories of Partition are complex and the complexities have not retreated from the mainstream or eroded with time. But the will to disentangle these memories that do not fit into a coherent master-narrative is, indeed, absent.

To grapple with the multiplicity of Punjabi Hindu narratives of leaving west Punjab is to pose the question of the meaning of that moment of reckoning today. How does Mr Gujral’s memory of his father’s desire to stay impinge on his politics and his involvement with the Indo-Pak People to People Movement today? Why does Mrs Gill’s memory of her grandfather’s reluctance to leave Multan and her own friendships with Muslims in pre-Partition Punjab not influence her thoughts on her children’s interactions with Pakistanis? Why is Mr Mehra, who seems to remember the events of August 1947 in

⁴⁶ Patrick Hutton, ‘Foucault: History as Counter-Memory’ in *History as an Art of Memory*, p. 112-113. Zerubavel holds that a countermemory is essentially oppositional and stands in hostile and subversive relation to collective memory, Yael Zerubavel, p. 10.

⁴⁷ For a recent corrective to this trend, see Jan-Werner Muller ed., *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe, Studies in the Presence of the Past*, Cambridge University Press, 2002

⁴⁸ Omer Bartov, ‘Intellectuals on Auschwitz: Memory, History and Truth’ in *History and Memory*, 4, 1992

⁴⁹ Todorov, p. 14.

⁵⁰ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory, New Perspectives on the Past*, Blackwell, 1992, p. 88. Also see Maurice Bloch, ‘Internal and External Memory: Different ways of being in History’ in *How we Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory and Literacy*, Westview Press 1998.

⁵¹ David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2000, p. 143.

⁵² See for instance William Dalrymple, *The City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi*, Harper-Collins, 1993 and Christopher Jaffrelot, ‘The Hindu Nationalist Movement in Delhi: From ‘Locals’ to Refugees – and towards Peripheral Groups?’ in Veronique Dupont, Emma Tarlo and Denis Vidal eds., *Delhi: Urban space and human destinies*, New Delhi: Manohar: 2000

Shahalmi Gate in such detail, reluctant to engage in a discussion of high politics? How does Mr BL Sharma's involvement in the formal politics of Hindu Nationalism affect his reading of his past in pre-Partition Punjab? Why has Mr Khanna returned to the memory of Maclagan Road and found in it traces of tension between Hindus and Muslims? These questions suggest that the present informs the past and that identities exist not as fragments unaffected by events at the centre, but are forged combating and accommodating them.

Recording his visit to his ancestral homes in Bangladesh, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that the purpose of history is to 'create an ethical moment in our narratives and offer, not a guarantee against the prejudice that kills, but an antidote with which to fight it.'⁵³ The multiplicity of local contexts and narratives proffered by my interviewees suggests that unbidden memories do contest the official histories sponsored by the votaries of Hindu nationalism and Indian secularism.⁵⁴ Memories, in some small measure, afford us the ground on which to combat the teleology of history.⁵⁵ A judicious equipoise between archival sources and memories shows us the complexity of an event like Partition and its consequences on the formation of national identities.⁵⁶

The Nation and its Ambivalences

"Cities are like trees, they may add new branches, shed old limbs and burst into new forms, but they remain attached to their roots." So wrote Mohammad Qadeer on Lahore although he recognized the extent of its transformation after Partition.⁵⁷ What about people? Do they have roots like trees, firmly embedded on one ground or can they belong to many grounds, many earths and many traditions? How do they remember, what do they remember and how does that memory shape their future political orientation? In the heart of New Delhi today lies a sprawling multi-storey office structure with state of the art conference facilities and auditoria for cultural and literary events to suit Delhi's elite – much of which is Punjabi and Hindu. *Dilli O'Dilli*, one of the more popular restaurants there, overlooks the *Purana Qila* (Old Fort) built by an Afghan ruler in the mid sixteenth century. The walls of *Dilli O'Dilli*, meant to capture the spirit of 1947, are adorned with huge black and white photographs of Nehru and the smiling Mountbattens. The walls are silent on the tragedy of Partition, an event of massive proportions that strained all the material resources and secular credentials of the young government. People, unlike

⁵³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, The University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 148.

⁵⁴ See Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: postmodernism, Hindu fundamentalism, history*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002 and Sugata Bose, 'Post-colonial histories of South Asia: Some reflections', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38 (1), January 2003 for a debate on the kinds of histories in circulation in post-colonial India

⁵⁵ Muller, p. 22.

⁵⁶ For a similar conclusion on another complex historical event, see Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 18; also Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee eds., *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998

⁵⁷ Mohammad A Qadeer, *Lahore: Urban Development in the Third World*, Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1983

government institutions, are like trees. They remember keenly and their memories continue to lend meaning to their lives.

In the official historiography of partition, there is no way to mark the distance between the announcement of 3rd June and the moment of evacuation – this moment remains hidden in narratives that veer between deeply felt betrayal and questions of state responsibility. Fifty-six years hence, these memories continue to occupy the space between the states ‘cartographic anxieties’ and the so-called ‘ironic unconcern’ of life as it is lived on the border.⁵⁸ My own interactions with Punjabi Hindus over the course of the year showed me that their past does not hang loosely nor is it easily brushed aside. Partition invades its memories or those of pre-Partition conflict or support present political stances. As memories of the past spilt into concerns about the present, I witnessed quarrels between and within generations of Punjabi Hindu families on the violence in Kashmir and Gujarat and the proper attitude to adopt with Muslims and Pakistanis, in India and abroad. At the heart of these debates lies India’s own future as a vibrant political community.⁵⁹

Despite the Partition of 1947, Punjabi Hindus continue to imagine vicariously what life could have been like in an undivided India. If, as Benedict Anderson suggests, the nation is an ‘imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’, the imagined political communities that inhabits the political heart of the country, Delhi, continue to reach out and within.⁶⁰ The ambivalences that constituted the decision to Partition and evacuate minorities continue to inhabit their continually reconfiguring memories. Voiced in the privacy of their homes or with friends as listeners, these memories remain unanchored in the nation’s commemorative rituals and public histories but vivid in their particularity, they remind us that at the moment of its founding the nation was severally imagined. This suggests that these memories are deeply felt but the triumph of Hindu Nationalism in India does drape them in a sheet of unreflective prejudice – sometimes muslin-thin, sometimes as thick as window-blinds.

⁵⁸ Sanjay Chaturvedi, ‘The Mental Borders of South Asia’ in Ranabir Samaddar and Helmut Reifeld eds., *Peace as Process: Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution in South Asia*, Manohar, 2001, p. 69-70.

⁵⁹ For the debatability of the past and the [cultural] norms that support it, see Arjun Appadurai, *The Past as a Scarce Resource*, *Man* 6 (2), 1981; for the significance of multiple discourses and the practice of democracy, see William J Connolly, *Identity\Difference: democratic negotiations of political paradox*, Cornell University Press, 1991; and E Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence*, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 193.

⁶⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1993, p. 6.

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Name (including maiden name) _____

Father's name _____

His village, district of residence _____

His education, if any _____

His occupation _____

Mother's name _____

Her village, district of residence _____

Her education, if any, and occupation _____

Your date of birth _____

Place of birth _____

School _____

College _____

Date and place of marriage _____

Pre-partition places of residence _____

Occupation, place of work _____

Date of migration _____

Post partition places of residence _____

Occupation, place of work in post Partition India _____

Membership in civil society [non-state] organizations _____

Religion, caste _____

I permit Ms Neeti Nair to use this interview to complement her archival research. I understand that this research is for her doctoral dissertation 'Remembering "Lahore": history, society and politics, 1900 to the present'.

Date of interview

Signature

Appendix 2: Individual Interviews

Interviews:

Mrs Gill, Deepa and others, 19 December 2002

Mr Chamanlal Mehra, 23 April 2003

Mr BL Sharma, 3 May 2003

Mr Ramachandra Gandhi, India International Centre, New Delhi, June 2003

Mr Krishen and Mrs Renu Khanna, 22 and 29 June 2003.

Mr IK Gujral, 25 July 2003

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