



## **Reframing Partition: Memory, Testimony, History**

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An interplay of memory, testimony and history helps craft alternative narratives. These ideas are seldom conjoined in the writing of a historical narrative. Testimony lies at the interstices of memory and history. These three concepts initiate an open-ended dialogue and offer the possibility of writing parallel histories of "events" and "non-events". In this article, my concerns are two-fold: first to introduce the idea of a fragment through the personal memory of Partition.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, to engage with the incomplete narrative of Partition embedded in testimonies. I shall try to work out a dialogic relationship between memory, testimony and history and grapple with the project of crafting memory as history. In so doing, I bring the personal testimony into the narrative of framing Partition at the intersection of memory and history.<sup>2</sup>

Memory forms an afterlife of Partition. The stories of uprooting and violence are never the same. They are narrated in different forms. The language of narration is laden with contradiction and ambivalence. It is, at times, incoherent, silent and inchoate. There is not a single Partition narrative but many, not always complete or resolved. The official archive and the nationalist commemoration, however, make the British partitioning of India into a political certitude. As a commanding event that forever changed South Asia's boundaries and constructed a



definitive political identity, Partition becomes a moment of finality in the mainstream political and historical narratives. In major historical accounts, the multiple truths of popular memory are somewhat silenced.

Partition's memory remains as elusive as ever. It eludes historical narration, as it is indeed difficult to fathom the depths and layers of subjective 'experience' (Guru & Sarukkai 2012: 1-8).<sup>3</sup> The complexity of memory and diversity of experience and their palpable dimensions complicate the project of writing a history of Partition and violence, probably because we do not always have the language to narrate the multiplicity of memory and its variegated structure. Language has its own limits. Translation is never complete and is a complex task (Benjamin 2003). Experience cannot be captured and translated fully in words. Gestures, tone, silences also make the story of Partition. There are memories that resist translation and representation. Forgetting makes it difficult to fully narrate the experience. The process of memory is bound up with a process of forgetting (Davis 1999: 129). And it is through an interplay of memory and history that we can meaningfully engage with the emotional history of Partition.

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### **Personal memory: Nirmal and Vash**

I grew up in a family deeply affected by Partition violence. But somehow while growing up, I seldom heard of the unprecedented violence unleashed at the time of Partition. The family was silent about the trauma that had devastated their lives. There were some exceptions though. For instance, a distant relative or an acquaintance occasionally and inadvertently entering the family narrative. I have often thought of my mother's history, then her mother's and then her mother's. I knew my mother's grandmother had jumped into the well when she learned of her husband's murder in the village of Viram Dattan, now in Sialkot, Pakistan.

Silence and erasure shroud such personal histories. There are many unrecorded and unfinished histories of violence that are quite often not narrated and expressed. My first enduring memory is that of Nirmal. Her story is unique. She was my mother's first cousin. My mother was in her teens at the time of the Partition. I remember my mother recalling that Nirmal was a beautiful blue-eyed young girl. Nirmal continues to live on the cusp of my mother's memory and history. My mother told me that Nirmal was killed in Sheikhpura in 1947. She was only twenty-two years old, newly married into a prosperous Sikh family of



Sheikhupura (now in Pakistan). The attackers shouted the slogan of 'Har Har Mahadev' (an invocation to the Hindu god, Shiva) and the family came out hoping that the Indian army had arrived. But they turned out to be Muslims from the Baloch regiment who quickly segregated the men from the women.<sup>4</sup>

My mother recollected that when the assailants set out to shoot the separated male members, Nirmal's husband, while begging for life, offered the family savings of Rupees 5,000 to one of the attackers. In the meantime, another assailant came forward to shoot Nirmal's husband. Nirmal ran and came in front of her husband. The bullet went through Nirmal and hit her husband, killing them both instantly. The rest of the segregated lot were then shot dead and the women taken away. A ten-year-old boy, who survived the massacre, later narrated the horrific scene of murder to the rest of the survivors.

Was Nirmal's death a simple case of a woman dying for her husband, of supreme sacrifice? Perhaps or perhaps not? Nirmal's story reveals the complexity and ambiguity of a narration that cannot be easily written. Nirmal is dead. Her voice is absent. But she is part of living memory and history. Her small photograph still remains somewhere in our old family album.

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Is Nirmal just a victim? Does she have an agency in the family's memory of violence? My mother told me that Nirmal's mother, her *bua* (paternal aunt), kept looking for her lost daughter. She cried her eyes out. She arrived at midnight at my mother's parents' home in Karnal, beating her chest and thighs, in the form of *wain*<sup>5</sup>, 'Nirmal kithe hai?' (where is Nirmal?). 'Nirmal kithe hai?' became a family metaphor to both remember and forget Nirmal.

The other relative that my mother talked about was Nirmal's sister-in-law, Vash, who, unlike Nirmal, survived the violence of destruction. My mother's memory of that night returns, but with a difference. In this recall, my mother says that on 27 August 1947 her *bua* along with a pregnant daughter-in-law came into their house wailing, 'ham to lut gaye' (we have been robbed). My mother was, of course, talking about the same *bua* who had lost her daughter Nirmal a few days ago. Vash was her daughter-in-law.

Some years ago, listening to my mother's fragments of memory, I decided to meet Vash. I set out to look for her. I knew that Vash had "settled" in Panipat. I then heard that she was visiting her sister in one of the refugee colonies in Delhi. I went to see her in Janakpuri. Vash



welcomed me warmly and I was deeply touched. My notes of December 2005<sup>6</sup> disclose the nature of my interaction with her:

I just went to see *mami* (aunt) Vash in Janakpuri this morning. Old and frail, and over eighty, she gave me a sense of a woman who had been through many vicissitudes. Her memory, of trudging along in the *kafila* (caravan), is too distant and yet too close to be forgotten or shared. What I felt when I met her was that she was not too willing to talk about herself, her husband or her sister-in-law. Vash said that she felt distressed speaking about Partition. This memory made it difficult for her to eat and sleep. It tormented her. She wanted to forget.

But let me piece together some fragments. Vash was born into a Hussaini Brahmin family in Rawalpindi, she was married into Guliana (Gujjarkhan), in present-day Pakistan. Her husband, initially in the army, joined the Bata Shoe Company in Bata Nagar, near Lahore. Vash's trauma began when she heard that her home, Rawalpindi, was burning (Chandra n.d). She had to abruptly leave Lahore with her husband and mother-in-law. But her husband was arrested at the border for possessing a licensed rifle and was put in jail in Lahore. Vash and her mother-in-law had no option but to carry on with the *kafila*. She walked for six days in her blood-stained and torn *salwar-kameez* (a Punjabi dress) during the painful journey from Lahore to Amritsar. She was eight months pregnant. There was no Wagah border, 'this is a recent creation', she added. On this tortuous journey she ate what was offered to her by the Sikhs on the way.

Vash came to Amritsar and from there by train went to Ludhiana where the train was stopped and she witnessed the men calling out names: 'Hindu or Muslim; Ram or Rahim?' She saw Sikhs washing the blood-stained swords every five minutes, but after some time there was no water left to clean their swords, she recalls. This scene continued to haunt her. She was plagued by the question throughout her life as to why were the Sikhs washing their swords? Wailing and crying she, along with her mother-in-law, reached her uncle's house in Karnal on 27 August 1947. After two days, her uncle's son died, and Vash from then onwards may well have been considered a messenger of ill omen. Her life was in shreds.

Vash and her family moved to Panipat, where they stayed in Ward 11. After some time, with government help, her mother-in-law got a house worth Rupees 6,000 as compensation for property lost in Lahore. The first two years were particularly difficult. For the next five months, Vash frantically waited for her husband's return who finally



arrived after being tortured in jail. He started working in a government grinding flourmill. Later, he was employed in a ration shop and then got himself a minor position as a supervisor in the railways. She recalls 'Life has been hard ever since. The Khattris, Jhangis and Multanis could flourish because they were in business. People in government service were more badly affected. They were the worst sufferers'.

Vash did not wish to talk about her trauma. Her testimony, as recorded in my notes, reveals her suffering and endurance. She would sometimes break her silence. And in a moment of lucidity and candour she would start recalling her pre-partition life and her memorable trips to Kaithal (now in Haryana), just an hour away from Panipat.

Before Partition when I came to Kaithal to see my *mama* (uncle), everything was so beautiful. I used to wear a long-tailored coat on a sari. My uncle remarked that the people in town were asking after me, and found me fashionable. I was a Pindi [Rawalpindi] girl. But when I came to Panipat [after Partition], no one asked after me. No one [...]. Nobody bothered to even look at me. I felt poor and rejected. And I took to wearing *salwar kameez*.

Could she ever afford a coat, I wondered but never asked? 'Independence? Whose Independence? Azadi kya hui barbadi hui?' (you call this independence? It spelt our ruin), Vash would often break down while repeating these words:

My mother-in-law wanted to distribute sweets when Gandhi died. She felt that Gandhi got her daughter Nirmal and son-in-law killed in Sheikhpura in 1947. 15 August and 26 January were her days of mourning. She would lie on the bed and cover herself with a thick blanket even on a hot day and would not talk to anyone. She would not like to face that day. Once my husband got a pass to watch the Independence Day parade, oh she created such a scene! [...] Perhaps, because of her own personal experience, my mother-in-law became rigid and bitter. So much so she did not like my going out. She never allowed me to mix with the Jhangis and Multanis. Once Bhag Bhen, a social reformer, a disciple of Gandhi, came looking for me to persuade me to work for the abducted women [during the recovery operation]<sup>7</sup>. She wanted me to accompany her to Pakistan with her and bring the women back from there. She had taught me at the Rawalpindi Arya Samaj School. She was close to Gandhi and was a Congress activist. She was educated at the Kanya Mahavidyala, Jalandhar.

Vash did not go with Bhag Bhen to assist her in the "recovery programme", because, in her own words, 'I had decided never to step out of the house'. Vash concluded, 'No no, we never had any tensions with



the Muslims'. She found her own survival strategies to cope with the pain of her uprooting. Her days and months passed dealing with her many painful pregnancies, cooking long hours in the *chulha* (hearth) in her *angan* (courtyard), looking after her traumatised and disturbed husband, and taking care of her children. She lived in a one-room house in Model Town in Panipat, which had become a colourless refugee city. And Kaithal stood as a ruined city—scarred, desolate and backward. 'Where has all the colour gone? Why have the Muslims left Kaithal? We did not have any tension with them', says Vash. For her, Partition was a final rupture: it split her inner being irrevocably. She never recovered. Vash does not want to remember. Coming to Panipat meant shutting out memories. Her memory is personal and hardly engages with larger politics. It is best to forget trauma and not to recall, she feels.

I shared Vash's testimony with my mother, who listened to my narration. My mother also confirmed that Vash was in an advanced pregnancy state when she, along with her husband, mother-in-law and a five-year-old son, trudged from Lahore (Bata Nagar) to Amritsar in the *kafila* in August 1947. Her husband was detained at Wagah. My mother added that Vash had some gold which she had tied around her waist to walk the entire distance. My mother recalled that in pre-partitioned Punjab, Vash visited them in Kaithal from Lahore. She had brought a few clothes and my mother tried to give her own clothes. Vash refused and said, 'she never wore anybody's clothes'. 'But after Partition [...]', mother could not complete the sentence. All this changed. The pride of wearing her own clothes vanished. My mother said Vash lost her dignity. My mother's memory intersected with Vash's, but also diverged from it. The difficulty of writing the lived experience of the silenced pasts is palpable. It is primarily through such small and scattered stories that I could put the fragments of my mother's narrative together. There were many "truths" in my mother's dynamic and altering memory. I realised that memory is not a passive repository of images from the past, but an active force constituted of gaps and silences (Claus & Marriott 2012: 244).

Vash's testimony may be read as that of a faceless victim, who came from Lahore to Karnal, and then tried to "settle" in Panipat. As a *sharanarathi* (refugee), Vash constantly experienced a sense of exile. She felt rootless and homeless. She did not step out of her house after her rehabilitation and felt marginalised. She only craved for her long-tailored coat that, as a twenty-year-old, she wore on a silk sari in pre-partitioned Lahore and Kaithal. Partition ruined everything.



Partition for Vash was a moment of destruction. So was *azadi* (independence). She lost her balance. Vash did not wish to connect with any tangible community or space after the Partition. She tried hard to erase the memory of violence and Partition. But the memory returned. She wanted to forget her horrific dislocation. She could not recover from her loss. She lived quietly in her locality until her death some years ago. Faceless, silent, invisible.

Fragments from such personal testimonies help me craft a popular history of Partition. Such small voices offer multiple possibilities of writing parallel histories. They suggest the limits of political history and challenges of narrating different and 'discontinuous' histories of the oppressed and the excluded. 'The history of the oppressed', writes Walter Benjamin, 'is a discontinuous history' (Moses 2009: 110).<sup>8</sup> To express the history of pain, fear and desecration is not easy. And it is difficult to archive and narrate human experience, voice and testimony. My mother's testimony lives inside her and it is hard to reach the inner recesses and layers of her memory and language. Crafting testimony as history is not easy as the event may be partially or fully lost to both history and memory. The messy, uncontrolled memory is flattened in the process of recall and translation. 27 August 1947 is crucial to her. My mother has other memories too which occasionally overshadow the memory associated with Nirmal and Vash. She also wants to erase some memories and keeps adding to the rest. Ancestral memory remains unresolved and triggers pain, trauma and forgetting.

### **Amrita's testimony**

There are other narratives that find expressions in poetry, story and speech. My exploration of Partition memory initiated me into a dialogue with the well-known Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam (1919-2005). Her testimony helps shape a complex and human history of Partition, distinct from her own texts, writings and life story. The link between Amrita's oral and written world is crucial to map, especially in light of her experience of Partition. In this section, I shall trace and engage with her testimony, its structure, layers of meaning and language.<sup>9</sup>

Many years ago, I met Amrita Pritam, who had a long conversation with me. The conversation and discussion continued for years until her death.<sup>10</sup> While she shared some fragments of her memory with me, I realised that her testimony of Partition was imbricated with other stories. We never set out to specifically talk about her experience of Partition. I was intrigued by her eloquence and poetics of language.



Amrita's memory cannot be shaped as a coherent whole. Trauma means the impossibility of translating personal memory into narrative (Rosenthal 2003: 43). Her memory of Lahore, a city where she grew up, returns frequently and differently in each moment of recall:

Lahore was a compact city. A small city. A city where everybody could meet easily. Everything was available at walking distance. But all this did not matter. The city which did not provide shelter, why would I remember it [...].?

Amrita identifies a storm of hatred in Lahore:

Lahore was on fire. From all four sides one could hear cries of bloodshed. The newspapers were full of it. This started in Pothohar and news would reach Delhi every day. Oh, I meant, Lahore. But we were certain that even if India was partitioned, and Pakistan was created, so what? We would stay on in Pakistan. This was not in any dream and imagination that Hindus would not be able to live there [...].

For Amrita, the moment of Partition was the most traumatic in the face of 'seventy-two hours' curfew'. She expresses her agony: 'I was expecting a child in May '47. At that time, milk, medicine, doctor, nurse, nothing was available. So, this was a very painful situation. And at this point if anything was needed, what would happen?' Amrita's partition experience made her aware of the restrictions that were imposed on her. She never attended any political meetings. She was all by herself at home. Socially, too, she was cut off. She lived through the trauma of Partition while being confined to home. Her memory was primarily shaped by hearsay, newspapers and rumour. Yet, despite her social and spatial isolation, she was a witness to some horrific scenes of violence, which left an indelible impression on her psyche:

One day while walking on the road, I saw a man running with a knife shoved into his back. I immediately returned home. There were no phones at that time. One could not meet anybody. There were curfews in the city. Nothing was available. Where would we go in these circumstances? [...] We were scared. If one went to the rooftop at night, one saw houses were set on fire. All around they were burning. Houses in the city were first burnt, later the fire spread outside the city. We heard all kinds of strange news that women were being abducted, they were stripped of clothes, they were being burnt in thousands, so we were very scared. Could hardly breathe [...].

One of the recurring memories in her narrative is how her Muslim friends could not visit her during the curfew. However, there were





exceptions. Whenever the curfew opened for a little while, she said her friend, Sajjad Haidar (Urdu playwright) would come to visit her. He even had the courage to celebrate her son's birthday. He brought a cake. She wonders, 'I don't know how he managed it. There was no vehicle available at that time. Those days people were at each other's throats. Knives were out in the open'.

Under such circumstances, Amrita says, she had to leave the city. She did not carry clothes or any other belongings. 'The main idea at that time was to get out at the earliest. And this didn't occur to anybody that we would not be able to return'. But there was a sense that all this was temporary as 'we thought once this storm was over after a month, we would return to our home'. Amrita remembers that those were summer days, that is why she did not carry any winter clothes. The uncertainty did not diminish the hope and promise of return. A friend helped with transport to drop her to the railway station. She had a distant relative in Dehradun and thought it would be somewhat quiet. She decided to go there for some time. 'There was little cash. There was no time to even go to the bank. Not for a single moment did we think that we would not be able to come back'.

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### *The train journeys*

'Then the train started from Lahore', she continues.

The only thought that occurred at that time was that it's a matter of a few days. We will return. The thought didn't cross my mind that one would have to leave one's house. This was a temporary madness, I thought [...]. I had collected nine gems with extreme fondness. I can still remember that they were so tiny and tied up in a knot, yet I left them behind.

There is no centre in Amrita's testimony; it keeps shifting. Her "train journey" is a recurring theme in her language. Some names that she had forgotten would come back to her while sharing her train journey amid violence and mayhem: 'Then began the train journey to Dehradun. I saw people squatting on platforms. No place to go. No *thikana* (destination) [...].'

Amrita reached Dehradun: 'And then there was no way one could go back. I realised we were *beghar* (homeless). I was in search of a job. It was very difficult. There was no work. No money. No clothes'. 'Those were very difficult times' is the leitmotif of her pain and trauma. She sold her two bangles and decided to leave Dehradun for Delhi to look for a job. It was at this time she heard of a radio station in Faridabad,



as an advertisement had appeared in the newspaper. Faridabad happened to be in Punjab, so she thought that she could easily do this work in her own language. She appeared for the interview and opted for the literary section. Unfortunately, this could not materialise. Amrita then decided to stay on in Delhi and met Randhawa (M.S. Randhawa), who was the Deputy Commissioner of Delhi. She recalls that Randhawa was impressed with her *shayari* (poetry) and got her a job at the radio station (All India Radio) as an announcer of programmes in Punjabi. Then she brought her children from Dehradun and moved to Delhi. By chance, she had carried a shawl which she cut into two pieces and one piece she took for herself and with the other two small pieces she wrapped her children. Her friend had two rooms and gave her one. 'Then I could not go anywhere after that. Neither Dehradun, nor Lahore. All the struggle was here [Delhi]'

After Partition, Amrita speaks about her immense economic struggle. In her post-partition life, the radio became her medium. Amrita's main commitment, shaped by her experience of Partition, was to her compositions. She received a letter from Jalandhar radio to write a musical piece. She wrote, 'Ham bhi kabhi watana wale the' (once we too had land). She also composed other *nazms* (poems), which she posted to Sajjad Haider. He translated them into English and published them in the *Pakistan Times*. She admitted that she did not keep copies of those nazms. She recalls that she had earlier recited some of these nazms on the radio: 'I had only one media with me—that was the radio'.

Amrita's compositions were crystallised by her experience of Partition. Her memory constantly reverts to her horrific experience of the train journeys. For instance, the train journey from Delhi to Dehradun was the most painful. The inspiration for a nazm came when on the train she witnessed dislocated people. She translates the image into meaning as expressed in her own words:

When I saw those mud dunes in the dark, I thought they were graves on all four sides. The wind was blowing, hissing, sh, sh, sh [...] I could hear its cry. [...] That time I saw everything at the station. There were people lying in heaps on the platform. I saw such people. I could not sleep. When I looked outside, it was pitch-dark. Then on that train I didn't have paper with me [...] but somehow managed to find a scrap and wrote the nazm on the back of it, *Aj Ankhan Waris Shah Noon*, while on the train [...].



Amrita's composition on *Waris Shah*, once published, triggered reactions from different religious quarters, but that did not deter and diminish her creative spirit:

When I wrote Waris Shah, there was an uproar. Some people wanted to know why I gave voice to Waris Shah—Waris Shah was a Mussalman. The communists asked who is Waris Shah? They said why didn't I give voice to Lenin [laughs]. Now how is Lenin connected (*taluk*)? And the Sikhs started complaining that, as one born into a Sikh family, I should have given voice to Guru Nanak. All through my life the press kept abusing me and I continued to suffer.

And yet, Amrita highlights the diversity of response that the nazm elicited. The tremendous applause and appreciation can be gauged via people's *zabani* (language), away from the snares of ideological onslaughts. 'I learnt that people would cry while singing the nazm. Even when they sang it on the stage, they would weep'. Amrita recalls that 'the nazm is still being sung at the *mazar* (tomb) of Waris Shah in Pakistan at the time of the Urs (Muslim festival). Even today the Urs begins with the nazm and Waris Shah's *kalam* (poetry) is sung all night'. The overwhelming response to the nazm touched Amrita deeply. The most redeeming aspect for her was when somebody told her that in camps during Partition, people would cry and tie the nazm into a knot and wear it as a *taveez* (amulet).<sup>11</sup>

### *Friendships and loss*

Amrita's separation from friends shapes her experience of loss and defines her subjectivity. While describing the times of distress and privation, her memory of friendship returns. She recalls that only Sahir and Sajjad were close to her in Lahore. But, as she emphasises, Sajjad Haidar remained a friend throughout her life. With Sahir (Sahir Ludhianvi, a well-known Urdu poet and film lyricist), she had a relationship based largely on silent communion. Amrita had met Sajjad Haidar at the Lahore radio station. She says that he did not do *shayari* (poetry), and only wrote *nasar* (prose). This was in 1945-46, she remembers, when she would give a talk on All India Radio, Lahore, and at other times play the *sitar* there. Sahir, who used to work for a literary Urdu journal, *Adabe Latif* in Lahore, had come 'this side' by then, she recalls. Only once did he come to Lahore to fetch his mother. But, according to Amrita, he did not stay and returned the same day. He stayed for a few days in Delhi and then left for Bombay. After that she



lost touch with him. 'Sahir bhi bichud gaye' (Sahir too went away) is her memory. There is a silencing of this memory in her testimony.

Amrita speaks in despair, 'I only remember and miss my friend Sajjd Haidar in Lahore. He was my dearest friend. I never found such a friend in my life. I cannot recall having met such a man, who was so beautiful of mind and speech'. After Partition, Amrita says, Sajjad would regularly write letters. He named his son quite similar to her son. When Amrita arrived in Dehradun, he got to know through letters that her child was unwell. He prayed for her child to be blessed: 'There is a saying in the Arab country that when an enemy asks for *dua* (blessing), then it is accepted. Allah, God forbid I am not this child's enemy'.

Once, after 1947, Sajjad managed to visit Amrita in Delhi, and stayed for eighteen days in Marina Hotel. He would meet her every day, morning and evening. Amrita did write about her friendship with him. But later he wrote saying that she should not mention his name in the press as he was a government servant. Though her voice is conspicuously intelligible and resonant, Amrita's "subalternity" is at once subtly demonstrated in the way her expression is silenced. There were many letters exchanged between the two, she confesses. He had, in fact, kept those letters along with the envelopes. When nearing his end, Sajjad handed over those letters to his friend, with an appeal that the latter would not keep them in his house. The friend swore to Amrita that he had not even opened the letters.

Significantly, Amrita's engagement with language shapes her experience of Partition. Her mode of *khato-khitavat* (letter-writing), which is situated in her Partition experience, opens up a conversation with her friend, a window of possibility which was lost to many women of her generation.<sup>12</sup> Partition becomes a moment of catharsis for her. But there is a silencing of her voice in her mode and process of expression. It is crucial to recognize the muting that follows her letter-writing. We never get to read her letters. Her voice is lost in the crucible of her circumstances and location as a woman at the intersection of memory and history of Partition and violence.

At one point in her conversation, Amrita confessed 'I have no memory'. For she missed Sajjad and nobody else.

The house which did not give me shelter, the land which did not give me refuge, why should I remember it? The rest are for comfort. All that I had. When I lost that [the house and land], so



be it [...]. What's the point in remembering? Then a new struggle started.

In the same conversation, Amrita said that her other friends were Rajinder Singh Bedi and Krishan Chander, who also came "here". Manto later wrote her a letter; he did not know her before, she recalls. He had read one of her nazms, and said that 'today, after reading your nazms, I cried a lot [...].' It was a short nazm: 'Children call the moon *mama* (uncle). But an enslaved country's moon fades.' While "settled" in Delhi, Amrita constantly reached out to her friends on the other side of the border of Punjab. After Partition, Afzal Tauseef, a well-known Pakistani writer, became one of the close friends from Lahore. She was visiting Amrita in Delhi, and their sharing of pain becomes a key point in one of our conversations. 'The pain of Partition can be understood by Punjabis alone. They were the ones who were uprooted. They became homeless', said Amrita. Born in Simbli (Nawan Shahar, Jalandhar) in 1936, Tauseef lost her entire paternal family in Jalandhar in 1947. Amrita called Tauseef, 'suchi dhe Punjab di' (the true daughter of Punjab), and wrote a book about her, *Doosre Aadam ki Beti: Afzal Tauseef*.

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The memory of pain and dislocation haunted Amrita, even though her friendships gave her solace and provided her the creative impulse to compose her poems. There was the pain of leaving the city of Lahore as well as rage over Partition. The memory flashes up, as she discloses, 'Whenever one gets somewhat settled, it comes'.

#### *Memory of an abducted woman*

Amrita's conversations constantly evoked the pain of what happened to thousands of people; the way women were abducted, coerced and silenced. Her identification with the "abducted woman" is telling. The abducted girls were being brought back or sent off, she recalls, and camps were organised. Deeply traumatised by moments of despair and anger, she wrote her novel, *Pinjar* (Skeleton). Here is how she narrates the experience of writing *Pinjar*:

In that condition, I met, you know, that person who was with Subhas Bose. I am forgetting his name [...]. He was made in-charge of the camps, especially to rescue abducted girls, to look for them [...]. Mridula Sarabhai was with him. After having shared the pain of these girls, their traumatic experiences, the novel, *Pinjar* was composed. This happened in Delhi. The plan was to bring Hindu girls here and to send back Muslim girls. This man was a General. I will ask Imroz [Imroz is Amrita's partner] his



name. He might remember [...]. Yes, now I remember. His name was General Shah Nawaz<sup>13</sup> [...].

Drawing on the memory of loss and violation, Amrita says:

The biggest sense of loss I had was in faith [...]. Faith in every religion. That's why I wrote many nazms in that anger. The girls who remained on the other side, in 1947 I wrote a poem [*Tavarikh: History*] on their behalf: "Mein tatti dheh Punjab di mere phutthey vekh naseeb" (I am the cursed daughter of Punjab. Look at my destroyed fate). I wrote on those ill-fated women of Punjab who were coerced and delivered children. "Majboor" (helplessness) was another poem I composed in 1947: "Meri ma di kokh majboor si" [...] (my mother's womb was helpless [...]). I was the fruit of that time. When the trees of independence were in bud. Independence was very close and far [...].

Amrita says that her experience of Partition shaped her sensitivity and the will to never tolerate coercion and force from anybody. She speaks poetically, 'Without her consent her lips will reveal. There are so many accusations against a woman's name, as if when she is walking dust would rise [...]. Like this [...]'. Throughout her narration, Amrita was deeply aware of her own wounded self. She repeats, 'Those were very difficult days. Actually, a woman has to pay a huge price for her public life. Especially those women who have self-respect. People gossip'. Partition gave her a public life, but also a sense of her marginalisation and exclusion from male public culture. She said, 'Women are constantly haunted by their public life. I came to be recognised as someone who smokes and had cut her hair. Nobody seemed to be interested in what I wrote'. Partition helped in shaping her new fragile self which was inflected with a sense of exile. As she puts it evocatively, 'Amrita Pritam is the name of a *yatra* (journey). From a small *yatra* to a big *yatra*. From an alphabet striving towards meaning. From limits to limitlessness of [a] journey'.

Paradoxically, Amrita at one point said, 'I never felt a sense of loss' as her 'timeless contemporaries' were always with her.

There was no standard culture that I missed. I was only fond of my Sufi poets, their *kalam*. They used to make me *dewaana* (ecstatic). When somebody asked me who were my contemporaries? I answered, Shah Hussain, Sultan Bahu, Waris Shah. These are my *kal mukt* (timeless) contemporaries. Those who were not imprisoned and enslaved by time.



### *Resisting partition*

Amrita invokes an idea of shared heritage that resists the finality of Partition in Punjab:

Our poetry starts with Farid,<sup>14</sup> from the twelfth century onwards. Everything is shared. There is one language. Now there is some difference in language: Persian has dominated on that side, while Sanskrit prevails this side. There is separation to some extent. But fundamentally, as far as the foundation is concerned, they are the same. Our poets (*shayar*) are the same as theirs. There was no reason for Partition.

For Amrita, 'this *takseem* (division) happened on very *maslui* (weak) foundation'. As she says repeatedly that when she heard of Partition, she thought it was a temporary madness. She did not think that it would continue. It was a storm of hatred, which was not properly managed, she said. 'It too shall pass. It cannot last for long. We will return. Later, all hell broke loose'. The questioning of freedom in 1947 continues: 'What kind of *azadi* and at what cost are we gaining?' The dilemma remains, 'If Partition had happened on religious grounds, then why did so many people remain in Hindustan [...]? More than half the Muslims are here. On what basis was it done?' She also points out that 'ironically, Hindus could not stay there [present-day Pakistan], and here [India] Muslims could remain. There is democracy here. It was very difficult'.

And yet, Amrita offers a critique of politics of hate and power:

A man cannot build his life on the basis of religion. Nor can he live on the foundation of hatred. Life is a flower, it has many shades and colours [...]. This [Partition] was a power game. People had to suffer from both sides. In Pakistan, Afzal Tauseef has expressed this aspect in her writings, which are full of pathos. Manto too has written [...].

In our ongoing conversation, Amrita described the Partition of 1947 as shaking the roots of her existence:

Voh to hai na jade hil jaati hain. Kimate hil jaati hain. Jitne vishvas bane hote hain voh hil jate hain, zameen hil jaati hain (Do you know those roots? They are shaken. Values are shaken. Trust is shaken. The ground is shaken).

Influenced by Sufi poets like Shah Hussain (1538-99), Sultan Bahu (1629-91), Bulleh Shah (1680-1757), whom she had studied in school as part of the curriculum, she tried to cope with the violence in 1947.



She had read *Heer Waris Shah*<sup>15</sup> from her heart. Another oral narrative that deeply influenced her from childhood was the *Qissa Puran Bhagat*.<sup>16</sup> Amrita broke down while narrating the *qissa* (narrative account) to me. Such poems and *qisse* sustained and nurtured her soul to survive the trauma of Partition.

Amrita celebrated azadi, but she did so with regrets and disappointments, 'If we all had fought and died together for azadi against the British, it would have been different [...] even if it meant a longer time [...]. There were internal conflicts and fights too, but this [Partition] was no solution to such conflicts'. Freedom, azadi, was achieved at an artificial level, she feels. The power-holders wanted to grab the opportunity. At one level, Amrita says she was happy with azadi in 1947, but it was difficult to come out of the vortex of accompanying violence and murder. And, 'Hindustan's independence didn't give birth to independence, but to opportunism'.

In these conversations, carried over many months and years, Amrita told me that if Subhas Chandra Bose had been around in 1947, the situation would have been different. The constant shift from the personal to the political is significant in Amrita's testimony. The politics of Partition unnerves her sensibility. She refers to the political scenario and manipulations and critiques the politics of the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha. Her admiration for Subhas Chandra Bose is telling, as Bose was no longer on the scene by this time. Her cynicism with Congress leadership is connected with her disavowal of ideological outfits that polarised the society:

Gandhi told Jawaharlal to let Jinnah be Prime Minister and not to worry as elections would take place after that. Patel and Jawaharlal remained quiet. They didn't agree. They simply refused. Didn't say yes. Haar gaye Gandhi (Gandhi lost) [...]. In fact, all the problems were created by the Muslim League, Hindu Mahasabha.

Steering clear of ideologies, her language is complex, not confined to any one political perspective or frame. Her fluid narrative traverses multiple registers: personal, political and, above all, transcendental. In fact, she seeks to go beyond the political to reach the transcendental and poetic. Amrita's disenchantment with Marxism was matched by her commitment to Sufi ideas of healing, love and poetry.

Amrita's story of Partition is mainly located in Punjab. Her identification with a sacred geography becomes a source of creativity. The inner quest never left her and the probing continued till the end of her





life. This was because 'that faith in our leaders was lost. And one begins to probe inside oneself'.

*Partition never ends*

Amrita points out that the edifice of hate, built around the moment of independence and Partition, shapes a continuing cycle of violence. This foundation of hate is difficult to dismantle and violence cannot be controlled, she laments. That is why for her the people of Hindustan have really suffered. It is more so in the case of the people of Punjab. South India never underwent the trauma of Partition, she stresses. But in Punjab, she says, most people were not able to settle after the destruction of Partition, even the second and third generations. Partition scarred both the sides forever, she feels. It destroyed so many generations. 'Sadiyon bhugtana padega uss Partition ko' (for centuries we have to suffer that Partition).

For Amrita, the recurring cycle of violence continues. The 1984 riots were a prime example, even though the question there was not about Hindus and Muslims, but related to Sikhs and Hindus. This was a moment, when once again anger and violence came out in the open and manifested in ugly forms. The framework of continuing violence accounts for the Bombay riots and the Kargil episode. It also explains the moment when Babri Masjid was razed to the ground:

I said that if Ram's name comes from the heart to the lips, then can anybody lift a knife in one's hands? Can anybody pick up arms? This can't happen. Really people take refuge in names. Sometimes, they take refuge in Ram's name, sometimes in Allah's name, then somebody else's name. Their *rozgar* (livelihood) is dependent on this. They have no interest in human beings.

Amrita adds a class angle to the perpetuation of violence. She does not distinguish between Hindus and Muslims on the basis of religion. Tracing a prehistory of Partition violence in undivided Punjab, she says that 'I was only concerned with human bloodshed, not that of Hindus-Muslims [...]. The difference between Hindu and Mussalman mattered to a particular class of people'. She further explains that there was a class of people, from the lower class, who hated each other. In this context, Amrita also brings a caste dimension to the conflict. The Pandits (Brahmans) believed in *chhua chhaat* (purity and pollution) vis-à-vis the lower classes, she points out.



To some extent, the interplay of class and gender shapes Amrita's reflections on Partition. She says,

Women and Sikhs would not normally cross Mussalmans' *mohalla* (neighbourhood) [...]. Their children would make fun, throw bricks. This kind of atmosphere prevailed [...]. I noticed it from the very beginning [...]. Women, in particular, would fear crossing a Mussalman *mohalla* [...].

However, Amrita points out that this kind of segregation did not apply to her. The class she came from would openly mingle and interact with Muslims. All her friends at the Lahore radio, she says, were 'Mussalmans'. She confesses that 'my case was completely different. But I am telling you what I had noticed from a distance. Like during Holi if a single drop fell on a Mussalman's clothes, there would be a riot. Even during festivals nobody was spared [...]'.

Amrita's complicated reading of the Hindu-Muslim question has a bearing on her experience of Partition. She does address the differences between the worlds of Hindus and Muslims in pre-partitioned Punjab. She admits that this was despite the fact that Hindu women would visit the *dargahs* (shrines) of *murshids* (Sufi preceptors), *pirs* (saintly men) and *faqirs* (mendicants). But, she points out that 'Muslims never went to *mandirs* (temples). This was the difference'. She further adds that 'they [Hindus] would, like Mussalman women, go to the *dargah* for *mannat* (wish-fulfilment). But Mussalman women would never visit a temple'.

Amrita says that 'nobody is born enslaved. A person is made enslaved'. It is difficult to write Amrita's experience of Partition after many years. My notes speak of so many other incomplete stories. I could not possibly translate them into a singular narrative. The psychological truths in her long conversation with me are hard to capture and narrate. It is difficult to single out the Partition experience from Amrita's writings. Her narration of continuing violence demonstrates how Partition impinged on her creative expression and everyday experience. Amrita creates an inner life, embraces her pain. For her, the pain is *zarkhez* (fertile), it inspires her to write.

Amrita's testimony unfolds her multiple subjectivities. Having lost her house in Lahore, and dislocated from her habitat, she becomes a permanent "refugee", as distinct from a Punjabi refugee in urban Delhi (Datta 1993). She claims that her friend Sajjad did try to save her house in Lahore, but the madness of Partition did not help anyone. Once she came to Delhi, she ultimately was able to buy a house in



instalments in Patel Nagar, then one of the refugee colonies in Delhi. She becomes a legal subject. Yet, she perceives herself as a woman in exile—rootless, displaced, split.

In a way, Amrita's oral world is not easy to capture in words. As in her writings, numerous aspects remain unsaid in the testimony. The silences in between shape her story too. What comes out clearly in her narrative, after experiencing Partition, is the rejection of caste and religious identities and the quest for forging a Sufi community of ecstasy. Yet, her narrative seems to, at times, perpetuate caste and class identities by apportioning blame to lower classes and castes in general. Indeed, there is a silence on the ways in which lower class and Dalit women would cope with violence and dislocation in her testimony. Her narrative does not address the mediation of gender and caste in shaping the female partition experience. Amrita seems to be oblivious to and insulated from the experience of Dalits<sup>17</sup> and lower caste/ class women. She does distance herself from the narratives of subalterns.

Yet, this is not to deny that Amrita's own 'subalternity' (Spivak 1999: 308)<sup>18</sup> is expressed in several different ways. Her conflicted narrative of victimisation and resistance reveals dissenting possibilities. Is her testimony trying to alter the terms of the social script of sexual violence and exploring alternative possibilities for female agency?<sup>19</sup> (Brueck 2012: 233f.). The psychological liberation achieved by Amrita demonstrates how female subjectivity is reclaimed and works against a victimised and submissive status. In the process, she, as a victim and subject, rewrites a typical normative narrative of the Partition woman, her rape and violation. Amrita's cathartic release of anger, pain and suffering constitutes a unique subject of the Partition and its afterlife. Amrita is not writing a rape script of a violated partitioned woman, but is working out a creative alternative as a liberated woman.

### **Subhashini's testimony**

Questions of memory, history and testimony bring me to the last subject, Subhashini (1914-2003). Paul Ricoeur reminds us that 'everything starts not from the archives, but from testimony'. He adds that 'we have nothing better than testimony, in the final analysis, to assure ourselves that something happened in the past' (Ricoeur 2004: 147). However, there is no 'eternal image' of the past (Benjamin 2003: 396). The past appears as a fragment or a flash in remembrance. It resists



linearity of 'secular time'; and is structured by discontinuity and gaps. Witnessing is central to testimony. Are not memory and history, asks Ricoeur, condemned to a forced cohabitation (397)?

In this section, I share some fragments from the testimony of a woman named Subhashini (Datta 2012). Her story, within a sea of stories, disturbs the mainstream historical narrative of Partition. It is a local memory of violence that is lost in the smoky narration of major events and histories. The testimony demonstrates an interplay of memory and history in crafting an intricate narrative of "events" and "non-events". It is not important to ascertain if what she is saying is true or based on "evidence" or not. Hers is not a legal testimony. It is a human testimony, which blurs the distinction between "fact" and "fiction", real and imaginary. The testimony moves freely in a spiral that unfolds a non-linear, fluid, circuitous, repetitive narrative. It does not follow a strict chronological and rational order.

I found Subhashini in the course of my historical fieldwork in 1997 when she was heading the Kanya Gurukul in village Khanpur in Haryana, an Arya Samaj institution devoted primarily to disadvantaged rural women's education. While conversing with her over many years, I also entered into a conversation with Amrita, Vash and my mother. None of them had any knowledge of the existence of the other. They would not think that they had something in common. But their conversations cross, connect and intersect in unfamiliar and unpredictable ways. They open up possibilities of crafting parallel histories of Partition through the multiplicity of memory and recall. My conversation with Subhashini was carried out over a long period. It was not shaped by a typical interview-like situation. Over the years a relationship and bond developed, and I began to call her *amma* (reverential address). I saw her in many moods and it is not easy to express her emotions, thoughts and feelings in words.

Subhashini was a dutiful daughter of a well-known Arya Samaji martyr, Bhagat Phool Singh (1885-1942), popularly known as Bhagatji. Her testimony reveals that throughout her life she endorsed her father's abiding concerns of *shuddhi* (purification), *sangathan* (organisation), *ved prachar* (propagation of the Vedas), *gauraksha* (cow-protection) and *Akhand Bharat* (unfragmented India). Her entrenchment in agrarian, caste and patriarchal structures located her firmly in the Jat community and an Arya Samajist ethos enmeshed with popular culture in the peasant society (Datta 1999).



Subhashini's father arranged her marriage to a *brahmachari* (celibate gurukul student) from the Gurukul Bhainswal (an institution for boys' education founded by her father). As a married woman, she regarded herself, in her telling phrase, a 'rand lugai' (a wife who lived like a widow). Her only devotion was to *Pitaji* (father). Even when the father was dead, he was always with her. He would often appear in her dreams and offer advice and moral support in times of crises. The psychological—almost Electra-like—dimension of her obsession with her father shapes her testimony and memory of Partition. That is why I call it a "daughter's testimony"; a testimony that is avowedly a testament to a daughter's blind devotion to her father and is unexpectedly entwined with varied narratives of fear, trauma, pain and the violence of 1947.

### *Three stories*

Subhashini recalls Partition and its "prehistory" in the shadow of other different stories. *Kanhi-Puthi-wala-kissa* (the scandal of Kanhi-Puthi village), *Bhagatji ka balidan* (Bhagatji's martyrdom), and *Bhagatji ka badla* (Bhagatji's revenge) are the three connecting and recurring events and metaphors that shape her cyclical narrative of Partition. Though each retelling is a different one, there is a constant return to these three "events" along with other stories. Some stories and episodes get connected, some remain unconnected.

There are several layers in Subhashini's story. The testimony constantly refers to the murder of Bhagatji allegedly by Muslim pastoralists on 14 August 1942 at the Kanya Gurukul in the village of Khanpur. Yet, it is not clear who killed him, as the murder remains shrouded in mystery, doubt and ambiguity. 'We don't know. It was all-dark. We could not recognise the killers. But we knew who they were' (Datta 2012: 167). In its constant retellings, the testimony alludes to this uncertainty.

In popular imagination, Bhagatji's murder came to be commemorated as *balidan* (martyrdom) for the wider Jat community. Subhashini narrates that after Bhagatji's martyrdom, there was *tehelka* (uproar) in Gurukul Bhainswal. While standing next to her father's corpse, the brahmacharis and *snataks* (gurukul graduates) took the pledge to take revenge: 'Jab tak unka badla nahin lenge ham chain se nahin baithenge. Ham gaon hi ujaad denge' (we will not sit in peace until we avenge ourselves on the Mussalmans. We will destroy their villages) (Datta 2012: 69).



The trope of Bhagatji's martyrdom was invoked in 1947, when the Jats killed Muslims in large numbers in rural Rohtak, particularly in villages adjoining the gurukuls of Bhainswal and Khanpur. For Subhashini and her community of local Jat peasants, Partition and its accompanying violence became an occasion and site of localised violence to exact retribution for Bhagatji's murder. 1947 signalled the final resolution of a personal history of vendetta, fear, hurt and violence.

Subhashini feels that 1947 was divinely willed to avenge her father's murder in 1942: 'Yeh Parmeshwar ki wajah se hua' (this was God's will). The armed Hindu Jat peasants, army deserters (known as *bhagodas*), gurukul brahmacharis, with her support and prompting, attacked, drove and wiped out the Muslim Rangar (Rajput) pastoralists from her side of the locality. Though there is no dominant narrative in the testimony, 1942, or simply remembered in her testimony as *bayalis* ('42, forty-two), is central to her memory. It is not the 1942 of Gandhi's Quit India movement, '42 signals, for her, a local recall of a popular tradition around Bhagatji's martyrdom. In her memory, '47 occurred because of '42.

[...] Riots broke out in '47 and with them erupted the fury over Bhagatji's murder. God has given us the chance to get rid of the Mussalmans [...]. All the snataks thought '47 occurred because of '42. [...] Not a single village was spared [...]. With guns, knives, and scythes, Jats killed them all [...]. (Datta 2012: 70-3)

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Partition is invested with a new sense of meaning, with the massacres, as a moment of divine retribution for Bhagatji's murder. She valorises Providence for its own design of justice and judgment.

*Bas, badla unka liya gaya; khud Parmeshwar ne hi liya* (Bhagatji's revenge was taken by the Almighty). We were so happy with *Parmeshwar's kripa* (God's grace). Finally, we were at peace [...]. Our inflamed passions were quenched. It was a new world, a new age. Luckily now we don't fear Mussalmans any more [...]. (ibid.: 73)

Subhashini's testimony moves in a spiral. She attributes her father's murder, commemorated as his *balidan*, to the *Kanhi-Puthi-wala-kissa* in the 1930s. The widow of a Jat *nambardar* (village headman), Shiriya Devi, and her daughter, Chalti, from village Kanhi chose to live with a Muslim Rangar, Karamat, from village Puthi. The *kissa* (scandal) ended with the women's murder by a relative of theirs who was appreciated by Bhagatji for his warrior-like act to maintain the 'honour of the community'. Karamat too was killed at the behest of Bhagatji, though



there are several contradictory versions of his murder. The Muslim Rangars thereafter, she tells us, took an oath to kill Bhagatji. The *Kanhi-Puthi-wala-kissa* had profound implications for the local history of individual and collective remembrance. In local Jat narratives and Subhashini's memory, the *kissa* forged an essential link between 1942 and 1947. She says, 'Bhagatji's *bhagats* (devotees) wreaked havoc on Puthi [in '47] [...]. We were convinced that Mussalman Rangars of Puthi killed Pitaji [...]. Karamat was chopped like green fodder [...]' (ibid.: 72).<sup>20</sup>

### *Meanings of partition*

Subhashini did not set out to share her memory of Partition with me. Her testimony testifies to Partition violence as framed within an individual subjectivity. On several occasions, while writing her story, I felt that Partition was devalorised and decentred in her testimony, and other stories, somewhat incomplete and, at times, incompatible with the Partition, structured the narrative. Simply recalled as '*saintalis*' ('47, forty-seven) in her testimony, it was almost a non-event. Her 'incremental memory' which consists in filling the same story each time with additional detail shows how memory is not an 'instantaneous act of recall', but functions 'as a process, a generator of meaning', rather than as an event (Portelli 1991: 254). So, it is not just the meaning of an event like the Partition that alone is at the heart of Subhashini's story; nor is it just enmeshing of Partition in everyday life that marks her story. Her story of Partition, entangled with other narratives, is one among many different stories.

Subhashini's testimony is an individual remembrance expressing both individual and collective fears. It does intersect with contemporary Hindu communitarian narratives and shapes the grammar of collective trauma. Indeed, the cultural construction of collective trauma is inflamed by individual experiences of pain and suffering, but it is the threat to the collective rather than individual identity that defines 'suffering collectivities' (Alexander 2013: 2). This might explain the complexity of Subhashini's experience, whereby she perceives herself and her community as victims even in the moment of perpetrating aggression against the 'Mussalmans'. The 'Mussalman', while being violated and destroyed remains the ominous "other" and not a victim. Her testimony highlights the atrocities Muslim pastoralists committed on the Hindu Jat peasants.



Partition historiography has been enriched via the writings of feminists and radical historians. However, there is a tendency to essentialise female Partition experience in some of these works. Subhashini's testimony, shaped by inconsistencies, repetitions, shifts, is intrinsically different, especially when it is juxtaposed with the collective testimonies of the Jat peasants. 'Bhagatji ka badla le liya gaya' (Bhagatji's murder has been avenged) is the collective memory. These are not always stories of difference; they shape local and popular remembrance and history. An individual memory both converges with and differs from collective memory.

A daughter's testimony offers a triumphal account of Partition. Subhashini gleefully provides a graphic account of how the Hindu Jats cleansed her Gurukul and the adjoining villages of Muslim presence. In many instances, Partition is celebrated as a moment of carnivalesque violence, a spectacle of carnage. Yet, her narrative expresses horror and remorse at what was done to Muslim women by Hindu Jats. Though she does not completely identify with Muslim women, she does show sympathy, sensitivity, solidarity and even admiration for them. She appreciates the *pativrata* (devoted) Muslim women for jumping into wells during 1947 (Datta 2012: 103). Her narrative expresses different forms of violation these women were subjected to: rape, disfiguring, mutilation of their bodies, abduction, murder. In a way, Subhashini's voice tries to break the collective Indian silence on the rape of Muslim women. By empathising with them in her narrative, Subhashini almost becomes a victim, blurring the distinction between victim and victimiser. Her feelings of horror, shame and humiliation enjoin her to cyclical and reversible positions as victim and perpetrator. Her silences are telling. The dialectics of remembering and forgetting influence her inability to carry on with the conversation.

They [Jats] raped Muslims' *bahu-betis* (daughters and daughters-in-law). They brought some women to their homes or kept them elsewhere. Some were burnt alive with acid. What more could happen after this? *Iss najare ko dekhne se dukh hota hai* (I would feel deeply saddened seeing such a sight). (ibid.: 103)

In an evocative imagery, she reveals 'giddhon ka raj tha' (vultures ruled the roost). She speaks of how 'our Jat *bhai* (brethren) killed small children with such *berahami* (mercilessness) [...]. They cut off their legs right from the middle [...]. How women were molested? Their breasts were cut and thrown away' (ibid.: 182). The grisly details are interspersed with remorse, regret, guilt in the narrative. The con-





fessional integrity of her testimony brings out her trauma, vulnerability and helplessness as a witness: 'How can I describe those ghastly scenes? *Na suno, na sunao* (neither hear, nor tell). We prayed to Parmeshwar not to show us such najare (scenes)' (ibid.: 182). The inexplicability and uncertainty of the Partition experience is evoked in her telling phrases, 'bas band karo' (just stop this) and 'kuchh na poochho' (don't ask). These notations both silence and open the narrative to uncertainties and ambiguities. Subhashini is haunted by the 'crying and wailing of women'. While talking about rape, her invocation of '*na suno, na sunao*' reveals the difficulty of finding a language to express the memory of violence. What she is unable to communicate cannot be disassociated from the narrative.

Subhashini's testimony acknowledges the impossibility of closure in making sense of Partition and the horror of violence. That her father ceases to appear in her dreams after the massacres were over is perhaps one of the few closures in her narration. There are other stories too. The big story is not lost. Gandhi and Jinnah are, on occasions, blamed for their role in bringing about Partition. So are the British. She also regrets that Patel, who could have prevented the division, was not in a position to have his way. However, her narrative is conflicted—it recognises Gandhi's greatness, but it is also irrepressibly bitter towards him. It recognises *ajadi* (azadi), but suggests it did not mean much to her. 'Independence did not have much effect on our lives, but the fear of Mussalmans was gone'.

Partition is recalled in many ways. She celebrates Partition and mourns it too. The testimony also calls Partition a blunder. She admits that 'Partition gave us self-confidence'. Partition, in this testimony, is not just violence. In this it differs from virtually the whole of academic and much of collective remembrance of Partition on the Indian side of the divide.

A daughter's testimony demonstrates a constant interplay of remembering and forgetting. In the last sections of the testimony, Subhashini poignantly expresses that 'the change of place did not change the course of history'. Further, 'We have heard of men being divided [...]. Desh ka batwara nahi suna kabhi (never heard of a country's division). Zameen ka batwara kabhi nahi suna (never heard of the partition of land) [...]. Sthan ka parivartan kabhi itihās nahi hota' (the change of place is never history). Subhashini confesses, 'I can't quite recall everything relating to *san '47*. Kuchh yaad nahin ab to (can't remember anything now) [...]' (Datta 2012: 195). What are we



to make of this forgetting in her confession? On the eve of independence, she went to Delhi's Red Fort, and broke down. She adds,

just leave that history [...]. Admiyon ko marte dekha, admiyon ko siskate dekha, admiyon ko tadapte dekha [...] (I saw men dying, I saw men sobbing, I saw men torn apart by suffering). Chhod do uss itihās ko (just leave that history) [...]. I also remembered my Pitaji on that day. (ibid.: 198)

As a witness to the violence and freedom of 1947, she wants to forget: 'Bhool jao uss itihās ko' (forget that history) (ibid.: 199).

Subhashini's testimony, while focusing on the life of a socially marginal figure, opens up an altogether different narrative of violence in a locality. It does so by looking at the subject positions of victim, perpetrator, collaborator, witness, bystander and survivor and the difficulty of weaving these mutually exclusive categories together in individual lives. The daughter's testimony was shaped decisively by the social structure, norms and values of a rural north Indian patriarchal society. It demonstrates a complex mediation of caste, gender and patriarchy. The unique structure of the narrative is shaped by psychological, metaphoric and mythic elements. This is the stuff of which human memory—recall—and human consciousness as a whole are made. The plurality of voices testifies to her multiple truths. The silences and contradictions in the daughter's testimony open up different possibilities of writing the history of violence, Partition and beyond. Subhashini's testimony helps understand the impossibility of transmitting a coherent truth about the Partition of India. Moreover, this impossibility is 'embodied in the form of the narration itself' (Moses 2009: 163).

There are many Subhashinis. Her multiple identities and multi-layered experience question the modern concept of the subject. The "daughter's testimony", an individual recall, is one among many parallel histories of Partition.

### **Testimonies and geographies of partition**

This article has engaged with three women's testimonies and geographies of violence. The varied narrations of Partition and violence need to be juxtaposed with different geographies and spaces. Partition was to both separate and connect these women and fashion their lives in totally different ways. However, all three of them are unable to provide a closure to their memory of Partition.



For Subhashini, Partition and independence offered a secure identification with her family, community, and territory, and indeed with the nation. Though she did not celebrate independence, Partition provided a new context for the shaping of her own identity and the Kanya Gurukul, Khanpur, that was built around her father's martyrdom. Yet, ambiguities mark her complex narrative. In addition, this form of local individual remembrance is invisible in the rich Partition historiography. The violence that rocked Haryana (which was then part of east Punjab), especially a locality like Rohtak, is rarely acknowledged, and is overshadowed by the discourse of violence in west Punjab. Subhashini's testimony therefore seems to redress a certain lack of balance in the larger history of Partition violence. In contrast to Punjabi refugees, Hindu Jats of Haryana were not displaced and uprooted during Partition. They stayed on their land and extended their territorial controls after the Muslim exodus.

In contrast to Subhashini, Amrita's experience is located in Punjab, especially Lahore and Gujranwala. But her journeys and forays into different spaces open up the possibilities of imagined homelands and cultural, sacred spaces that invoke Sufi and popular motifs and metaphors. Though her life is devastated by horrific violence that burnt and destroyed Lahore, in her conversations she seeks to create a new geography of hope, love and transcendence. The searing experience of Partition and loss and the long tradition of transgressive love stories, expressed in the Punjabi qissa, fire her language and her "self" as sensitive, vulnerable, and tormented. She interrogates the logic of Partition in several different ways. Her relationship with her own religious community remains ambivalent, distant and conflictual. The trauma does not leave her.

Vash's testimony was shaped by another kind of geography. As a victim of Partition violence, her journey in the *kafila* from Lahore shows how geographic violence could generate an exodus of victims to liminal and marginalised spaces. These spaces, like Karnal and Panipat, came to represent the ghettoised experience of women like Vash. She remains a survivor in the new, post-partitioned sanitised spaces. She lives amid ruins and is a subject of the process of ruination (Stoler 2013: 11).

Both Amrita and Vash, in their own ways, critique the somewhat imposed and artificial independence that was secured in 1947. And for both of them, Partition marks a rupture. But for Subhashini, the Parti-



tion is not a rupture. It is a continuum impregnated with several meanings; and appears to offer a final resolution to an ongoing script of personal and local conflict and acrimony. Amrita comes into her own, even though she feels rootless and separated from her friends and homeland. Vash does not step out of her newly acquired house in Panipat. Clearly, Amrita and Vash, in their own ways, do not identify with national borders, the political constructs and imagined projections of territorial power (Baud & van Schendel 1997: 211). Both perceive themselves as *panahgeer* (refugees), rootless and displaced. Subhashini, without being displaced, likes to see herself as a legitimate subject after experiencing a new feeling of attachment to a homogeneous territory free from Muslim presence. She seeks to acquire a strong sense of community and territorial identity in a locality like Rohtak and firmly aligns herself to the Hindu Jat community.

Love and longing are what Amrita pines for after Partition. Subhashini, however, demonises love and celebrates the moment of violence and Partition. She welcomes the eventuality and opportunity of Partition in not letting the two Jat women rest in peace even after they are murdered. 'Time has transfigured them into Untruth [...]. What will survive of us is love'<sup>21</sup> is what these women might have thought as their eternal truth. But Subhashini could not care less as she wants to erase their memory.

What about Vash? Does she diminish through loss and despair?

## Conclusion

The testimonies discussed in this article take us to the realm of multiplicity of memory and different notions of geography. They are characterised by silences, breaks, gaps, ruptures, evasions. They point to the troubled and intense relation between memory and history, and depict how memory is constantly reworked in different contexts, locations and spaces. Each recall is different. These individual and collective memories are 'alternative pasts'; they refuse to be disciplined. They can be 'alternative histories of emotions' (Nandy 2015: 599) and also serve as an alternative to history (Nandy 1995: 60).

Such testimonies and memories of violence differ from personal accounts written by officials, who saw violence with their own eyes. G.D. Khosla, Penderel Moon and Malcolm Darling are prime examples of this (Khosla 1989; Moon 1998; Darling 1949). However, the three testimonies that I have engaged with are personal memories, which deserve to be retrieved even if it is possible to do so only partially.



They can be crafted as 'experimental histories',<sup>22</sup> which unfold multiple perspectives on the past and non-linear and shifting narrative structures. The juxtaposition of different versions of the past, of different voices, to question well-established historical "truths" constitutes a critique of official accounts, nationalist narratives and conventional historiography. Such popular memories also question what is generally considered to be the "archive" and archival histories. Paradoxically, these testimonies expand the notion of the archive. These are small voices that can unsettle the master narratives of history. As Ranajit Guha writes, 'If the small voice of history gets a hearing at all [...], it will do so only by interrupting the telling in the dominant version, breaking up its storyline and making a mess of its plot' (Guha 2009: 316).

The multiplicity of divergent narratives shows that there is no single truth of Partition. Different narratives do not constitute a 'homogeneous corpus' (Moses 2009: 163). Partition is sometimes hidden as rupture, sometimes as continuum and sometimes as silence in living histories. Categories of victims, victimisers, survivors and witnesses are fluid, shifting, and overlapping. Emotions of fear, pain, rage, grief, anger, guilt and shock inflect these testimonies. In those troubled times, fear, blurring the boundary between the imaginary and real, was used as a survival strategy to carry on with ordinary, daily lives. Trauma underwrote individual and collective memories. Testimonies of violence shape post-colonial subjectivities—decentred, fragmented, plural, ambivalent, shifting and, at times, elusive. How does one explain the 'troubled and ambivalent state' of 'belonging'? Is there a 'sense of guilt' (Verma 1988: 77) to belong and not belong at the same time? An interplay of memory, testimony and history reframes Partition within different notions of time and space. This crafts parallel histories of Partition, which remain provisional, incomplete, unresolved and fragmentary.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 was the most decisive moment in the history of South Asia. Hence, the choice of the upper case.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Hindi and Punjabi into English are mine.

<sup>3</sup> For a complex understanding of the idea of "experience" in India, see Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2012) "Introduction".



<sup>4</sup> According to a report prepared by some scholars and activists (the Committee for Co-ordination on Disappearance in Punjab), 'The British government deployed the largely Muslim Baloch Regiment of the Indian Army to interfere in situations of mayhem and murder. But the Baloch Regiment helped the Muslims and was very hostile to the Sikhs' (Kumar et al. 2003: 20).

<sup>5</sup> A form of sequential wailing in rural Punjab.

<sup>6</sup> I spent time with Vash in the month of December 2005. These conversations were carried out over a month. My methodology was such that I did not plan the interviews. Our discussions were free-flowing. The interview was not fixed for a particular date. Hence, I am not giving specific dates for each conversation with Vash.

<sup>7</sup> The Indian and Pakistani governments arrived at an agreement, the Inter-Dominion Treaty of December 6, 1947, to recover abducted women. As a result, the Central Recovery Operation sought to recover any woman seen in the company of a man of the other religion after 1 March 1947. It continued for about nine years (roughly from 1948 to 1956) and set out to recover and restore "abducted women" to their natal families and respective countries. The Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance was first transformed into a Bill and in 1949 into an Act (Butalia 1998; Datta 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin argues for a discontinuous history of the oppressed, while 'continuity is that of the oppressors' (cit. in Moses 2009: 110).

<sup>9</sup> For Amrita's life story and Partition experience crafted through her writings, see (Datta 2008).

<sup>10</sup> The conversation with Amrita began in January 2000 and continued until her death in October 2005. Interviews, Hauz Khas, New Delhi (January 2000-October 2005). Like Vash, Amrita's conversations were not formal interviews and cannot be reduced to mere dates.

<sup>11</sup> Amrita continues that later when she went to London she met a woman from Pakistan who recognised her as the author of the nazm on *Waris Shah*. Ustad Nazakat Ali and Ustad Salamat Ali, two reputed Pakistani vocalists, were present at a party and were asked to sing, but they refused saying that they could not sing without accompaniments. Later, on their own, they volunteered to sing, without any accompaniment, as a tribute to the one who had written this nazm, *Aj Ankhan Waris Shah Noon*. That night, Amrita recalls, they sang their hearts out.

<sup>12</sup> Amrita pointed to the predicament of women in Punjab. As they would write in Hindi and men would write in English, it was difficult to communicate. In fact, there was no communication between the genders. Amrita recalls, 'I never learnt Urdu. But there was an atmosphere of Urdu language and culture at home. That's why I could understand and speak. With immense difficulty I could read [...]. So, Urdu was only used as a spoken language. Not for writing [...] letter-writing was different [...]. Actually, in Punjab men used to know Urdu, and women Hindi. Men would be taught Urdu in schools. In those days, schools were not co-educational. They were separate. Hindu women would be taught Hindi [...]. The fact is that wife and husband were unable to write letters to each other'.

<sup>13</sup> Major General Shah Nawaz Khan of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army.

<sup>14</sup> Faridu'ddin Masud Ganj-i-Shakar (c. 1175-1266), known reverentially as Baba Farid.

<sup>15</sup> A Punjabi love poem written by Waris Shah (c. 1722-98), the Punjabi Sufi poet of the Chishti order.

<sup>16</sup> A popular Punjabi *qissa* (narrative account) written by eighteenth-century Punjabi poet, Qadar Yar. The story has been narrated and retold by several poets and writers and is known for its mystical and romantic dimensions.

<sup>17</sup> For a radical and critical reflection on 'Dalit experience', see Gopal Guru (2012).



<sup>18</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that 'a woman's interception of the claim to subalternity can be staked across strict lines of definition by virtue of their muting by heterogeneous circumstances' (Spivak 1999: 308).

<sup>19</sup> I owe this point to Laura Brueck (2012).

<sup>20</sup> On contradictions and inconsistencies in Subhashini's testimony, see Datta (2012).

<sup>21</sup> The lines are from Philip Larkin's poem, "An Arundel Tomb" (1964).

<sup>22</sup> On the idea of 'experimental histories', see (Neumann: 2008).

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