

Speaking for Themselves

Partition History, Women's Histories

I

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

There is no dearth of written material on the Partition of India: official records, documents, private papers, agreements and treaties, political histories, analyses, a few reminiscences. A vast amount of newspaper reportage and reams of government information exist on the resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees from Punjab and Bengal; on negotiations between India and Pakistan, on the transfer of power and the division of assets; and there are hundreds of pages of Parliamentary debates on the myriad issues confronting both countries and both governments. Nationalist historiography has generally seen Partition as the unfortunate outcome of sectarian and separatist politics, and as a tragic accompaniment to the exhilaration and promise of a freedom fought for with courage and valour. Historical analyses over the last three or four decades, however, have uncovered the processes and strategies that led to the successful manipulation of Muslim perception in favour of a

separate homeland, based on ineluctable differences between Hindus and Muslims. Although, as Mushirul Hasan has argued, the two-nation theory ". . . hardly reflected the consciousness of a community"¹ it is one of the abiding conundrums of Indian independence that a partition that seemed impossible and remote as late as 1946 was, one year later, presented as the "logical" resolution of the incompatibility of Muslim political destiny with Hindu majority power. A partition that was striking for its failure "to satisfy the interests of the very Muslims who are supposed to have demanded it"² a division that was remarkable for having been decided almost in the blink of an eye.

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

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

series of political negotiations via the Cripps Mission and the declaration of separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims, made of Jinnah's 1940 Lahore Resolution an even more dramatic declaration than it was:

It is a dream that Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has gone far beyond the limits... it will lead India to destruction if we fail to revise our notions in time. . . .

Muslims are a nation, according to any definition of a nation, and they must have their homeland, their territory and their state. We wish to live in peace and harmony with our neighbours as a free and independent people. We wish our people to develop to the fullest our spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political life in a way that we think best and in consonance with our own ideals... Ladies and Gentlemen, come forward as servants of Islam, organise the people economically socially, educationally and politically and I am sure that you will be a power that will be accepted by everybody.⁵

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

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

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

The abundance of political histories on Partition is almost equalled by the paucity of social histories of it. This is a curious and somewhat inexplicable circumstance: how is it that an event of such tremendous societal impact and importance has been passed over virtually in silence by the other social sciences? Why has there been such an absence of enquiry into its cultural, psychological and social ramifications? There can be no one answer to this question, but what seems to have stepped in, at least partly, to record the full horror of Partition

is literature, the greater part of which was written in the period immediately following the division of the country. In one sense, it can be considered a kind of social history not only because it so approximates reality (what Alok Rai calls "a hypnotic, fascinated but also slavish imitation of reality"¹¹) but because it is the only significant non-official *contemporary* record we have of the time, apart from reportage.

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

The importance of literary, autobiographical, oral historical and fragmentary material for an understanding of Partition has now been acknowledged by historians and others, concerned especially with the study of ethnic conflict and violence¹⁶ and, by extension, for the writing of history itself. Official memory, after all, is only one of many memories. Different sorts of telling reveal different truths, and the "fragment" is significant precisely because it is marginal rather than mainstream, particular (even individual) rather than general, and because it presents history from below. The perspective such materials offer us can make for insights into how histories are made and what gets inscribed, as well as direct us to an alternative reading of the master narrative. At their most subversive, they may counter the rhetoric of nationalism itself; may even enable us to rewrite this narrative as what Gyan Pandey calls "histories of confused struggle and violence, sacrifice and loss, the tentative forging of new identities and loyalties".¹⁷ Their recuperation is important for yet another reason: without them, the myriad individual and collective histories that simultaneously run parallel to official accounts of historic events and are their sequel, almost inevitably get submerged; with them may also be submerged the countering of accepted—and acceptable—versions, to be buried eventually in the rubble of history

II

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

— Gulab Pandit, social worker

To the best of our knowledge there has been no feminist historiography of the partition of India, not even of the compensatory variety.¹⁸ Women historians have written on this cataclysmic event but from within the parameters of the discipline, and still well within the political frame. Even accounts of women's contribution to the freedom movement

have tended to be male-centred—women do figure, but as members of prominent political families (Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Ammu Swaminadhan, Kasturba Gandhi, the Nehru women, and so on), or as the thousands who came out in response to Gandhi's call for *satyagraha*. They have been seen as supplementary to male action, rather than as actors in their own right, contributing to something that existed independent of them. Consequently, the importance of such a historic time has been evaluated not with specific reference to them, but with reference to the movement in question.¹⁹ Yet the story of 1947, while being one of the successful attainment of independence, is also a gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of the realignment of family, community and national identities as a people were forced to accommodate the dramatically altered reality that now prevailed.

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

Because the traditional time-frame of history has been derived from political history, the absence of women in historical accounts is most unsurprising. Women have been excluded from making war, wealth, laws, governments, arts

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

and science; and men, "functioning in their capacity as historians, considered exactly those activities constitutive of civilization: hence, diplomatic history, economic history, constitutional history, political history," and so on.²⁴ Feminist historiography has focused attention on the necessity of restoring women to history not only to challenge conventional history-writing, but to emphasize that a representative history can only be written if the experience and status of one half of humankind is an integral part of the story. Rejecting the women-as-a-separate-chapter syndrome, Helene Cixous insists that "we insinuate ourselves into the text, as it were".

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

Joan Scott's words, throws light "not only on women's experience but on social and political practice . . . and permits historians to raise critical questions regarding the re-writing of history".³⁰

In the light of the above, how do we embark on a feminist reading of Partition? What sorts of questions do we raise and where do we find our sources? How do we disentangle women's experiences from those of other political non-actors to enable us to problematise the general experience of violence, dislocation and displacement from a gender perspective? How do we approach the question of identity, country and religion, of the intersection of community, state and gender? How do we evaluate the state's responsibility to refugees in general and women refugees in particular, as articulated in the policies and programmes of the government? How do we, as feminists concerned with issues of identity politics, unravel the complex relationship of a post-colonial state with religious communities in the aftermath of convulsive communal conflict?

Where, in short, do we begin?

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

Partition fiction has been a far richer source both because it provides popular and astringent commentary on the poli-

tics of Partition and because, here and there, we find women's voices, speaking for themselves.³² But the most useful material for our purpose has been the very few first-hand accounts and memoirs by women social workers who were involved in the rehabilitation of women, and the oral testimonies we set out to obtain from them and other women in ashrams and refuges in Punjab and Haryana, the field of this research.

We began, though, with the women in our own families and, gradually, the blurred outlines of their earlier geography began to get filled in. From them, and later from all the people we spoke to, we learnt of their life in undivided India, of social and personal relationships between Hindus and Muslims, and the composite culture of the Punjab. The loss of homes was almost less painful, more bearable, than the loss of friendships and of what they had assumed were shared destinies. Listening to them, in retrospect, it was easy to forget that along with deep affection and amity had been equally deep-seated prejudices and taboos; as one of the Hindu women we interviewed said to us, "*roti-beti ka rishta nahin rakhte the, baki sab theek tha*". (We neither broke bread with them, nor inter-married, but the rest was fine.) From men in the family we heard something of the growing politics of separation and the Pakistan Movement, the almost imperceptible shift towards accepting the notion of two nations.

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

and given shelter and employment: Jalandhar, Amritsar, Karnal, Rajpura, Hoshiarpur ... right up to Rohtak.

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

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

We went back to the records to find what we could of the women's stories there, as disaggregated data, memoranda, reports, official statements, government documents. We did this not because we wanted to corroborate what they said, but because it was important to locate their stories in a po-

litical and social context, to juxtapose the official version with the unofficial ones.

III

Hardly ever, and hardly anywhere, have women "written history". They have left few accounts, personal or otherwise, and have committed much less to writing than men. Women historians have noted this absence³⁴ and emphasized the importance of retrieving women's history through oral sources. Because women have used speech much more widely than the written word, oral history practitioners have found in interviews and testimonies a rich vein to mine and to surface what, so far, has been hidden from history.

"The real value of these oral testimonies," say the women of Stree Shakti Sanghatana who presented a remarkable account of women in the Telengana movement, "lies in their ability to capture the *quality* of women's lives. . . . We are able to document experiences that traditional history would have ignored or even dismissed, to appreciate the issues as they appeared to the actors at the time, and set their responses. . . . against the backdrop of that understanding."³⁵

For feminists, oral history holds the very real promise of exploring the social experience of women and retrieving it as both "compensatory" and "supplementary" women's history. While welcoming its extraordinary potential, however, we must be equally attentive to its complexities. Early on, feminist oral historians realized that traditional oral history methodology was still grappling with the separation of subject and object, interviewer and interviewee, thought and feeling, the political and the personal.³⁶ Most feminists advocate empathy and mutuality, rejecting all the hierarchies inherent in the formal, impersonal, falsely neutral "interview". At the same time they raise important questions regarding the ethical problems of personal narrative. They are concerned about the uncomfortable fact of class privilege in almost all interviewing situations; the matter of ma-

terial inequality between the researcher and her subject; and the ethical and moral implications of collecting personal narratives in the first place and utilizing them for research.³⁷ Our own research posed similar problems at almost every stage; particularly troubling was our complete inability to deal with the reversal of roles, when questions were posed *by* the women *to* us: "What is the use of asking all this now? It's too late—you can't change anything." Our response rang hollow even to our own ears: we want to communicate an experience of Partition hitherto ignored and, in fact, unsought; to set the record a little straighter, to make women visible, to better understand historical process. The women, unfailingly gracious and generous in their sharing, accepted our explanation, unsatisfactory as it must have been to them—for no matter how "honest" or candid we might be about our project, it was they who were laying bare their lives, not we, ours.

Then, there are related problems of accuracy and fidelity to the letter and spirit of the narrative; of interpretation, evaluation, selection and representation; the troubling issue of "authorship" and the fact that, in the end, it is the researcher who controls the material, however participatory the research may have been. The responsibility for the distortions or limitations of our studies rests squarely with feminist oral historians as does the dilemma of how much to tell. When confidentiality is enjoined, are we justified in presenting a life story in the interests of advancing historical understanding, especially when that story is deeply personal or traumatic?³⁸

The assumption of most feminist research is that it is committed to social transformation, and to women. By highlighting the contradiction between feminist principles and fieldwork practice, feminist oral historians insist that we be mindful of the exploitation that ethnographic method exposes subjects to, and remind us exactly how ambivalent the relationship between feminism and ethnography can be. In Daphne Patai's view, all those who claim that by allowing their subjects to speak they have "empowered" them,

need to ask themselves: "Is this empowerment or appropriation? And what does it mean. . . for researchers to claim the right to validate the experience of others"?³⁹ Since we are almost always in a situation where "other" people are the subject of "our" research, the old hierarchies and inequalities tend to get reproduced all over again. Feminists and other practitioners of participatory research have tried to redress this imbalance somewhat by "returning" the research to their subjects or initiating some form of action that maintains continuity with them. At best, such attempts only demonstrate a sincerity of purpose and sensitivity to the larger question of power and control; they do little, in the end, to resolve the ethical issue bedeviling us because of the very nature of oral history and of what lies at its heart: individual testimony.

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

IV

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

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

tivity of witness" brings us is not purely historical;⁴⁰ rather it is imbued with an experience of historical events and with the profound understanding that their meaning can never be settled.

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

For most of the women remembering was important, but as important was *remembering to others*, having someone listen to their stories and feel that their experience was of value. We realized, once the floodgates were opened, that we could not always determine the flow. Sometimes murky, sometimes clear, often we simply just sat by the stream grateful that it was flowing. It is true that not every woman spoke without

demur or hesitation. More than once we heard the cry, "Why rake up the past again?" but almost the next breath would bring forth an incident, an encounter, a tragedy recalled, a past resurrected. Once begun, the "interviews" became like conversations, our questions more like interjections that sometimes received a direct response, but more often, an extended reminiscence that might refer to the question only tangentially. Much further into the telling we might suddenly find it being addressed in another context, opening up yet another vista. Where we encountered genuine reluctance or an unwillingness to disclose, we simply did not press the issue.

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

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

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

Country. Community. Religion. Freedom itself: a closer examination of what meaning they have for women has led feminists to ask searching questions about women's asymmetrical relationship to nationality and citizenship; and to appreciate the role assigned to them in any renegotiation of identities, whether ethnic, communal or national. Such an analysis of the experience of abducted women, for instance,

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

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

Notes

- ¹ Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993). p. 1. Hasan's elegant and concise Introduction presents us with an excellent summary of current concerns and debates in Partition historiography as well as a clear-sighted analysis of the forces that led to the crystallizing of the demand for Pakistan.
- ² Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 2.
- ³ For a range of recent historical accounts see, among others, Mushirul Hasan, *India's Partition*, op. cit.; Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); *South Asia*, Journal of South Asian Studies, Special Issue, "North India: Partition and Independence", Vol. XVIII, 1995 (Melbourne: SouthAsian Studies Association); Amit Kumar Gupta (ed.), *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India 1945-47* (Delhi: Manohar, 1987); David Page: *Prelude to Partition: The Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control 1920-1932* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- ⁴ Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition*, op.cit, p. 6.
- ⁵ M.A. Jinnah: "An Extract from the Presidential Address—Lahore, March 1940", in Hasan (ed.), op. cit., p. 56.
- ⁶ Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom* (Delhi: Roli Books, 1995), Introduction.
- ⁷ Farzana Sheikh, "Muslims and Political Representation in India: The Making of Pakistan" in Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition*, op. cit., p. 82.
- ⁸ Quoted in Hasan, *India's Partition*, op.cit., p. 36.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-26.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ¹¹ Alok Rai, "The Trauma of Independence: Some Aspects of Progressive Hindi Literature 1945-47" in Amit Kumar Gupta (ed.), *Myth and Reality*, op. cit., p. 322
- ¹² Partition fiction (and some non-fiction) is almost the only social history we have of this time. We do not intend to engage in a debate on how "fictional" Partition fiction is, but the point does need to be made that it is in fiction, rather than any other genre, that we find an attempt to assimilate the full import of what Partition meant. For more on this see Jason Francisco, "In

the Heat of Fratricide: the Literature of India's Partition Burning Freshly (A Review Article)" in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 2, 1996 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for South Asia); Alok Bhalla (ed.), *Stories About the Partition of India*, 3 vols. (Delhi: Indus/HarperCollins, 1994); S.S. Hans, "The Partition Novels of Nanak Singh," and N.K. Jain, "The Partition Theme in Indo-Anglian Novels," in Amit Kumar Gupta (ed.), *Myth and Reality*, op. cit.; Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India Partitioned* op. cit.; Samina Rehman, "Birjees: The 'Dastaan Go' in Nighat Said Khan, Rubina Saigol, Afiya Shehrbano Zia (eds.), *Locating the Self: Perspectives on Women and Multiple Identities* (Lahore: ASR Publications, 1994); Veena Das and Ashis Nandy, "Violence, Victimhood and the Language of Silence" in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), vol. 19, no. 1 (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1985); Alok Bhalla, "Memory, History and Fictional Representations of the Partition", paper presented at a conference, "Movement and Memory", Iowa, 1997.

¹³ In an appeal to the Indian electorate on the eve of the first general election in 1952, the Congress put out a pamphlet which declared, "The price of freedom was Partition. The Congress and its leaders resisted the idea . . . till the last moment and they yielded only when they realized that the alternative was indefinite perpetuation of foreign rule or civil war, or both. . . . A strong and stable Central Government could be established by peaceful means only through Partition..." Quoted in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition*, op. cit., p. 32.

¹⁴ Jason Francisco, "In the Heat of Fratricide", op.cit., pp. 227-50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 239-40.

¹⁶ Accounts of ethnic violence in the South Asian region, in particular, have used more of such material over the last two decades or so, to further an understanding of how such violence occurs, is experienced and dispersed in public consciousness. The testimony of the survivor is especially important in such considerations, "permitting the historian", in Amrit Srinivasan's words, "to smuggle the social structure into his studies". See Amrit Srinivasan, "The Survivor in the Study of Violence" in Veena Das, *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 305-20. In the same volume, see also essays by Veena Das, "Our Work to Cry: Your Work to Listen", and Valli Kanapathipillai, "July 1983: The Survivor's Experience". Other essays and texts include Uma Chakravarti and Nandita Haksar,

The Delhi Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation (Delhi: Lancer International, 1987); Mushirul Hasan (ed.) *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom*, op. cit.; Gyanendra Pandey, "In Defence of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, March 1991, pp. 559-72; E. Valentine Daniel, "Mood, Moment and Mind: Writing Violence", paper presented at the conference "Violence Against Women: Ideologies and Victimization", Sri Lanka, 1996; Pradeep Jeganathan, "All the Lord's Men? Perpetrator Constructions of Collective Violence in an Urban Sri Lankan Community", unpublished paper, n.d.

¹⁷ Gyan Pandey, "In Defence of the Fragment," op. cit. p. 560.

¹⁸ Recent attempts at rewriting Partition history from a subaltern and gender perspective include essays by Urvashi Butalia, "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency During Partition", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVIII No. 17, April 24, 1993; and "Muslims and Hindus, Men and Women: Communal Stereotypes and the Partition of India" in Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (eds.), *Women and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995); Dipesh Chakrabarty, "East Bengal and the Sense of Place in Bhadrakok Memory", unpublished paper, 1995; Veena Das, "National Honour and Practical Kinship: Of Unwanted Women and Children" in Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Karuna Chanana, "Partition and Family Strategies: Gender-Education and Linkages among Punjabi Women in Delhi" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXVIII No.17, April 24, 1993; Ritu Menon, "Reproducing the Legitimate Community: Secularly, Sexuality and the State in Post-Partition India" in Amrita Basu and Patricia Jeffery (eds.), *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, "Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian State and the Abduction of Women During Partition", *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XXVIII No.17, April 24, 1993; Gyanendra Pandey, "Partition and Independence: Delhi 1947-48" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXII No. 36, September 1997.

¹⁹ Examples of recuperating women in the history of the freedom movement and, thereafter, in social movements are Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990* (Delhi: Kali

for Women, 1993); Bharati Ray, *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Stree Shakti Sanghatana, *"We Were Making History. . .": Life-stories of Women in the Telengana People's Struggle* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989); Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge University Press/Foundation Books, 1996).

²⁸ Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.1. Kelly's is still one of the most lucid texts on this subject.

²¹ Joan Wallach Scott, "Women's History and the Rewriting of History" in Christie Farnham (ed.), *The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 36.

²² Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory*, op. cit., p. 3.

²³ Ibid., p.1.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁵ For deft summaries of how feminist historiography has progressed see Susan Geiger, "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content," in *Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 11, no. 2, 1986, pp. 334-51; Sherna B. Gluck, "What's So Special About Women's Oral History?" in *Frontiers A Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. II Number 2, 1977; Joanna Bornat, "Women's History and Oral History: An Outline Bibliography" reproduced in *Oral History in Women's Studies: Concept, Method and Use* (Bombay: SNDT, Research Centre for Women's Studies, 1990).

²⁶ See Joan Kelly, op.cit., Joan W. Scott, op. cit., and Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University-Press, 1979), pp.145-80.

²⁷ Gerda Lerner, "The Feminists: A Second Look", *Columbia Forum* 13 (Fall 1970), pp. 24-30.

²⁸ Joan Kelly, op. cit., p. 6.

²⁹ Gerda Lerner elaborates these as being: sexuality; reproduction; the link between child-bearing and child-rearing; role indoctrination; sexual values and myths; female consciousness. Socialist feminists like Sheila Rowbotham have added class; black feminists rightly insist on race; and in South Asia the importance of caste, religion and ethnicity cannot be over-emphasized.

³⁰ Joan W. Scott, op.cit., p. 41.

³¹ To paraphrase Virginia Woolf, it is the small *details* of a woman's life—did she marry? how many children did she have?

did she do the cooking? did she work outside the home?—that make up her personal history *and* a social history, and it is from this mass of information that we will be able to add what she called then, "a supplement to history. Calling it of course by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety." Quoted in Joan W. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

- ³² Women writers like Ismat Chughtai, Qurratulain Hyder, Amrita Pritam, Jeelani Bano, Krishna Sobti, Ajeet Cour and Jyotirmoyee Devi in India have written with great power on Partition. A careful analysis of their writing (not attempted here) will compare with men's fiction in interesting and unexpected ways, not least in their tangential comments on nation, country and religion.
- ³³ The original scope of this study was Punjab (East and West, i.e. W. Pakistan) and Bengal (West and East, i.e. E. Pakistan); after initial interviewing in West Bengal, however, and extended discussions with collaborators in Bangladesh we recognized that the Bengal experience was so different that it merited a separate study. The migrations here took place over eight to ten years, were not accompanied by the kind of violence that Punjab experienced, and consequently, the rehabilitation and resettlement of refugees were qualitatively different. The Pakistan part of the study, however, is being carried out by Nighat Said Khan and Anis Haroon in W Punjab and Sind. See an initial essay by Khan, "Identity, Violence and Women: a Reflection on the Partition of India 1947" in Khan et al (eds.), *Locating the Self*, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-71.
- ³⁴ The literature on the use of oral history for feminist research is fairly extensive and varied. We do not propose to review it here, merely to direct the reader to the following which we have found most useful. Sherna B. Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); Ruth Linden, *Making Stories, Making Selves: Feminist Reflections on the Holocaust* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993); Michelle Perrot (ed.), *Writing Women's History*, trs. Felicia Pheasant (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Personal Narrative Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- ³⁵ Stree Shakti Sanghatana, *op. cit.*, p. 26; SSS was one of the first feminist research groups in India to use oral history in order to establish and assess the contribution made by peasant women

to armed resistance in the Telengana district of Andhra Pradesh. See *"We Were Making History ..."* for some of the most powerful testimonies on the place of women in history. Other women's groups that have used oral history are Stree Vani in Pune, interviews with Dalit women; Jagori, which has done several life histories of single women and Unmad, a group of health activists who have compiled stories of women with mental health problems.

- ³⁶ Gluck and Patai (eds.), *Women's Words*, *op. cit.*, Introduction.
- ³⁷ Feminist historians and ethnographers have long been involved in a debate on the ethics of using personal narratives for research. Each exchange has led to refining our understanding of the implications of this methodology, but the debate itself has not been laid to rest. Judith Stacey in her essay, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" (Gluck and Patai, *op. cit.*, pp. 11—20) details the complexity of the question, and the inherent "inequality and potential treacherousness" of the relationship between the researcher and the researched (p. 113). After a remarkably candid and soul-searching presentation of the issues, she concludes that "the relationship between feminism and ethnography is unavoidably ambivalent", perhaps even exploitative. Nevertheless, she does believe that "while there cannot be a fully feminist ethnography there can be ethnographies that are partially feminist", and research that is "vigorously self-aware and humble" (p. 117). Lila Abu-Lughod, on the other hand, in *her* essay titled "Can There Be Feminist Ethnography?" concludes that there can, and "that its time has come". (Lecture presented to the New York Academy of Sciences, February 1988, p. 28.) She argues that this is so because feminist ethnographers take the commonalities and differences between researchers and subjects into account, and contribute to the cause of feminism in special ways. A third view is put forward by Daphne Patai who says "... too much ignorance exists in the world to allow us to await perfect research methods before proceeding". ("Is Ethical Research Possible?" in Gluck and Patai, *op. cit.*, p. 150.) However, she makes the important point that "ethical dilemmas subtly transform into political dilemmas" and need to be addressed as such. ("Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives" in *International Journal of Oral History*, Vol. 8 No. 1 February 1987, p. 24). For further discussion on the politics of representation see also, Personal Narratives Group, "Whose Voice?" in *Interpreting Women's Lives*, *op. cit.*; Anne Hardgrove, "South

Asian Women's Communal Identities" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 30, 1995, pp. 2427-30; Gillian Elinor, "On the Use of the Stolen and Given: An Essay in Oral History" in *Issues in Architecture, Art and Design*, Vol. 1 No. 2 Winter 1990-91, pp. 73-80.

³⁸ This last has come up especially with regard to Holocaust, incest and rape testimonies, and particularly with reference to Claud Lanzmann's video recording of Holocaust survivors, *Shoah*. See Judith Stacey, *op. cit.*, and James F. Young, *Writing & Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 157-71.

³⁹ Daphne Patai, "Is Ethical Research Possible?", *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁴⁰ James F. Young, *Writing & Rewriting the Holocaust*, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁴¹ For a most illuminating discussion of this, see Daniel Bertaux and Martin Kohli, "The Life Story Approach: A Continental View", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1984, No. 10, pp. 215-37.

⁴² James F. Young, *op. cit.*, p. 161. The "reliability" of personal narratives as a historical document has been questioned by those who worry about its ephemeral nature, its distance from facts, its flexible and volatile character and its propensity to misrepresentation—by interviewer and interviewee, alike. See Ron Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York: Praeger, 1991); William Moss, "Oral History: An Appreciation", *American Archivist*, Vol. 40, October 1977, pp. 429-39; Samuel Schrager, "What is Social in Oral History?" *International Journal of Oral History*, Vol. 4, No.2, June 1983, pp. 76-98; Eva M. McMahan, *Elite Oral History Discourse* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989.) Others see little validity in individual stories representing either group or collective interest and experience. The evidentiary value of oral history has been challenged most consistently by those who look at it as raw, unprocessed data, highly selective and untested. William Moss cautions that "recollection itself is a complex piece of evidence", involving three factors: the initial event or reality; the memory of it which is at least one step removed from reality; and the testimony which is yet another interpretive act. A fourth level of selection is that of the interviewer asking specific questions which elicit a specific response, and then reinterpreting them in his or her representation. Memory itself, he says, is

"tricky" with respect to reality. The historian or interviewer has no way of knowing from the testimony whether it is "distorted or accurate, deliberately falsified or spontaneously candid". Yet, he notes, "even as we move further from reality, recollections provide. . . a corresponding abstractive value of fascinating richness. . . Even when erroneous or misguided, recollections may, in their very errors provoke understanding and insight. Furthermore, the aggregate recollections of many people can provide a rough means for approximating historical truth where no transitional or selective records exist." (Moss, *op. cit.*, p. 91.)

James Young, whose work on Holocaust testimonies discusses these issues at length, counters by saying, "The aim of testimony can never be to document experiences or to present facts as such. Rather, it is to document both the witness as he makes testimony and the understanding and meaning of events generated in the activity of testimony itself." Oral history, he believes, "is a matter of memory, reconstruction and imagination. Unlike written history that tends to hide its lines of construction, oral testimonies retain the process of construction, the activity of witness". He further notes the "constructed nature of all evidence" including that which is rhetorically objective like photographs, train schedules or eyewitness accounts from the era. Historical theorists now acknowledge that "the legitimacy of historical sources cannot rest solely on their factual element, in which case readers would be endlessly troubled by conflicting versions". Critical readers, thus, instead of "disqualifying" competing accounts learn to read "difference" and to incorporate that dimension in their analysis. James F. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-71.