

# The Last Journey

## Exploring Social Class in the 1947 Partition Migration

*The very first theme inaugurating any personal narrative of Partition is that of “last journey” that migrants undertook to escape fatal violence. The theme is situated in those critical moments of turbulences and upheavals within families, neighbourhoods and the political leadership that made individuals leave their homes. This article focuses on the “differing” means and modes of transport used by the Hindu and Sikh migrants from West Punjab (now Pakistan) to East Punjab during the Partition displacement. A variety of transport modes were used like foot columns, bullock carts, trucks, private cars, trains and aircraft – of which the fastest and the safest means were seldom available to underprivileged sections. These differing modes are a pointer to the divergent class experiences of Partition displacement, and the way collective memories of cataclysmic events are formed and popularly remembered.*

**RAVINDER KAUR**

In the depth of night the last hope is shattered. The Hindus and Sikhs have no roots [any longer] here at all. They must wrench themselves together, assemble their pitiful possessions, and before sun-up are on the long unending trek to India. Here a cart dragged wearily by a lean hungry bullock, there a wheelbarrow or a push-cart, many carrying bundles on their heads. Multiply this a hundredfold. The streams mingle and flow ever eastwards. They cling together out of sheer terror, for on long way out danger lurks – bands of marauders prey on their very helplessness. The attack is launched unawares. Men, women and children perish or are badly mauled. Those who escape lick their wounds and resume their wearisome journey [Rao 1967:8-9].

The above narrative is extracted from the official account of Partition migration compiled by the government of India two decades after the events. The image that it conjures up is that of refugee caravans with men, women and children on bullock carts and miles long refugee columns on their way to India. The other powerful images, gained through government photo archives and personal accounts is that of choked railway compartments with people clambering dangerously on the train tops.<sup>1</sup> The terrified faces in texts and images help evoke a powerful symbol of pain and trauma that ordinary people went through. Clearly, the narrative behind these images is the national narrative, the chaotic birth of the Indian nation and the excruciating pain attached to it.

However, what often remains overlooked is that such popular narration is built around the experiences of urban poor and rural folk who, with their farming essentials and meagre belongings, set out to find a new home. The “truth” of Partition migration, thus, masks the complexity and the multiple levels within the population movement. For instance, the experiences of upper class and upper caste migrants – who flew down to safety; or that their household belongings and bank accounts were transferred through official means – seldom frame the popular imagination of “what happened during the Partition”. The Partition migrants, thus, in the popular accounts appear united in their misfortune irrespective of their social class, caste and gendered experiences. The tension between the “differing” experiences and

the master narrative of the last journey, that seeks to condense, simplify and standardise the account of Partition migration, has been seldom explored.<sup>2</sup>

This article takes means of transport used during Partition migration as a point of entry into differing modes of how individuals or communities experienced, and now, remember Partition. While the foot journeys took weeks of travel and were fraught with dangers of violent attacks, looting and abduction on the way, the air transport took no more than a couple of hours and posed no risk of attack to the travellers. In between these two options lay train and motor truck transport that was not always easy to obtain and, once it became freely available, became targets of specialised attacks. The means of transport provided the vantage point from which to “witness” and later on “narrate” Partition.

To open such an analysis, one can borrow Paul Virilio’s concept of “speed” as the determinant of one’s world view and subject it to a class analysis [Virilio 1977]. The interwoven complexities of such class based measured movement inform us how movement was experienced in the first place. The differing experiences then help explain how different narratives emerged and how some of them became more popular than others. Virilio begins by emphasising the significance of speed or mobility in modern societies. The different modes of transport that command greater speed point to how the world is experienced when organised on the fast changing time-space-speed vectors. Space is conquered with the acceleration and technology and the distances are measured on the basis of speed and not in spatial terms. In other words the distance between two given points is measured by how fast one can reach a point rather than by the actual spatial distance. The speed at which we cover the distance – on foot, motor vehicle, train and airplane – determines how we experience and remember the landscape en route, witness ordinary minute happenings and interact with the people inhabiting those landscapes. While Virilio uses “speed” to explain the steps and gaps in the conflict-ridden technologically advanced world, it has significant

relevance to the forced movement that inevitably accompanies inter-intranational conflicts.

## Movement and Displacement

In the Partition migration history, June 3, 1947, is as important a day as the Partition itself. On this day then British governor-general Mountbatten announced the Partition Plan according to which the British would hand over power as early as August 1947 instead of June 1948 as planned earlier. The advanced date meant that the entire procedure of transfer of power had to be hurried up. This included handing over authority, division of assets and the territorial division of Punjab and Bengal provinces. Communal riots had already erupted in Rawalpindi district earlier in the month of March where 2,090 people died and 1,142 were seriously injured [Hansen 2002:117]. The fall of Khizar Tiwana government in Punjab following the Muslim League agitation led to widespread riots in Rawalpindi that soon engulfed Lahore, Amritsar, Jhelum, Attock and Multan. A particular feature of the March violence, besides the unprecedented number of deaths, was the number of people who sought refuge in the camps. An official estimate from the districts of Attock, Jhelum and Rawalpindi alone put the number of refugees at 60,000 who were in the camps either because they feared for their safety or their houses had deliberately been burnt (ibid:113). The growing uncertainty about the future course of events such as the drawing of boundary lines and the possible extent of communal violence, further proved cataclysmic in making people move away to perceived safer areas where their community was in the majority.

The upper middle class migration occurred quite early as a precursor to the impending mass migration in the months to follow.<sup>3</sup> As a precautionary measure, many people with substantial properties and businesses left the trouble-prone areas long before the Partition took place. They would either take up temporary residences in Hindu-dominated cities or proceed to the hill stations of Simla or Mussorie for early summer vacation while waiting to see if the situation would normalise. They even took to sell their properties or exchange them with those Muslims on the other side of the border who were contemplating migration to Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> This trend of early migration is also echoed in official account.

The Hindu or Sikh landlord, merchant or moneylender blessed with wealth is the first to take flight. Naturally, [because] he is the object of envy and avarice. There is nothing now to protect him from the attentions of the Muslim goonda (ruffian). Overnight he has packed up, rushed to the nearest railhead, thence to flee eastward to safety in India. Soon after Partition there is just a fleeting moment of sanity, and the Hindu villager, peasant, artisan or petty trader fondly imagines the worst is over and lulls himself into the belief that if he accepts the fact of Pakistan he will be spared molestation and allowed to say on as a useful element of the society. But passions once aroused are hard to quench. The madness has far from subsided, it has gained in intensity [Rao 1967:8].

The class differences between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims are pointed to in this account as the possible ground for conflict, fearing which the Hindu and Sikh landlords made arrangements to flee long before. The class conflict inherent in the Partition violence needs to be unmasked of its religious veil. Evidently, it was not only the class differences between Hindus and Sikhs and the Muslims that defined the Partition exodus, but the internal class hierarchy among Hindus and Sikhs that also shaped how and when migration took place.

Violence took place throughout the summer of 1947, especially in cities like Lahore and Gurdaspur that were located in the disputed border areas. In this part of Punjab, people did not know where the lines would be drawn. Each community was making pleas to include certain areas on their side. The Boundary Commission headed by Cyril Radcliffe, a British bureaucrat who had never visited India either before or after the Partition, was flooded by petitions in favour of various areas on the border. But Lahore went to Pakistan and Gurdaspur remained with India, leading to widespread riots. To make matters worse, the Boundary Commission award was not made public until after Independence Day on August 15. Most people in the border areas did not know which nationality they belonged to and whether to stay or move. While political leaders quibbled about the boundary award, a large population had become “minorities” and found their own backyards turned into “hostile territory”.

The largest ever mass migration in human history then began. Everybody was looking for a safe refuge for his or her person, family and belongings. Migration became the only alternative to certain death at the hands of organised mobs. Hindus and Sikhs “had” to leave for “their” nation India and Muslims were driven out to their “own” Pakistan. A perverse logic that guided this forced migration was that room had to be made for the incoming refugees from the other side. So, more refugees were created on both sides to make way for more refugees.

If one imagines this migration to be an unfounded panic reaction, then the statistics of people killed and injured during the months between August and October proves otherwise. Various estimates place the number of people killed and injured during Partition riots at half a million and there were around 10-12 million refugees who moved across the borders.<sup>5</sup> The plains of Punjab witnessed unending inter-community conflicts that created fear and uncertainty in the region. While some were forced to move because of fear of death, others tried to escape shame and humiliation brought about by the abduction and rape of women, or forcible conversions. To stay meant living in a new social structure where one’s religion now formed the mainstream on whose margins now existed the “new” minority. In a diversely populated region like Punjab, each community risked becoming such a minority in specific places. Migration to one’s majority area became an obvious route to escape death and humiliation.

The migration continued despite the appeals of political leaders to stay put. It seems that the political leadership had not imagined that division of territory would result in a massive population exodus. This naiveté is all the more astonishing since migration was already being reported from Punjab during the Rawalpindi violence in the month of March. There were emotive appeals to rescue the minorities in West Punjab from where “a steady stream of refugees was arriving (with) appalling stories of the experiences through which they had to pass before they could escape that doomed city (Lahore), and of the worse plight of those who are still left behind” (*Hindustan Times* (editorial), ‘Rescue Them’, August 18, 1947).

But Nehru made his displeasure of migration clear when he announced that he was not “in favour of wholesale migration of population. It was not in the interest of the majority of people to be uprooted from the soil. The lives and interests had to be protected by both the governments who were responsible for the minority well-being” (*The Times of India*, Nehru’s Speech, August 25, 1947). Notwithstanding Nehru’s views about migration, Francis

Mudie, the governor of West Punjab saw the refugee problem more as a nuisance, and therefore, only the removal of refugees could restore peace. He wrote to Jinnah:

I expect trouble in all the western districts. The refugee problem is assuming gigantic proportions. The only limit that I can see to it is that set by the [population] census reports. According to reports, the movement across the border runs into a lakh (hundred thousand) or so a day. At Chuharkhana in the Sheikhpura district I saw between 1-1½ lakhs of Sikhs collected in the town and round it, in the houses, on the roofs and everywhere. It was exactly like the Magh Mela in Allahabad. It will take 45 trains to move them, even at 4,000 people per train; or if they are to stay here, they will have to be given 50 tonnes of atta (flour) a day. At Govindgarh in the same district there was a collection of 30,000 to 40,000 Mazhabi Sikhs with arms. I am telling everyone that I don't care how the Sikhs get across the border; the great thing is to get rid of them as soon as possible.<sup>6</sup>

It was clear that organised violence had triggered off mass migration that could not now be stopped. People had left their homes to take shelter in camps, for their strength lay in numbers and safety in togetherness. By now the newspapers had started taking note of the refugee crisis in the making. The pictures of newly installed Indian cabinet members were now accompanied by pictures of refugees also. The daily newspaper *Hindustan Times* carried a full length eyewitness account written by a Karachi-based lawyer, Hardayal Hardy. The headline appropriately read 'The Helpless Thousands in West Punjab':

I left Karachi by 7 Up (Karachi-Lahore Mail) on August 20. I was to detrain at Montgomery where I had to appear in a murder case the next day. I received my first shock when near the railway signal at Montgomery station I saw the body of a Sikh lying alongside the track. When the train steamed into the station, I saw two more corpses of Sikhs. When the train stopped, I got an idea of the misery that had befallen the Hindus and Sikhs in Montgomery. There were thousands of men, women and children squatting on the platform with their scanty belongings around them. Every inch of available space had been occupied. Inquiries revealed that there had been arson, loot, fire-raising and stabbing on a large scale in the town and the surrounding villages and the people had escaped to the railway station for safety. Outside the railway station, I saw hundreds of Muslims armed with hatchets, axes, lathis and other weapons trying to break in and attack the helpless people. But the police appeared to keep them away (*The Hindustan Times*, 'The Helpless Thousands in West Punjab' by Hardayal Hardy, September 2, 1947).

It was not until mid-October that a Joint Evacuation Movement (JEM) plan was formulated by the Military Evacuee Organisation (MEO) India and Pakistan. The target date for accomplishing evacuation of approximately 10 million refugees in Punjab was set as December 1947. The sheer enormity of the population to be exchanged posed its own problems. In British East Punjab, 4.4 million Muslims, that is 32 per cent of the population, needed to be evacuated. The princely states and the Punjab Hill states were home to another 2.3 million Muslims who were now huddled in a number of transit camps. Hence, the total number of Muslims in East Punjab expected to be evacuated was 6.7 million.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, West Punjab had a non-Muslim population of 3.9 million that was awaiting evacuation. The non-Muslim population of Sind and North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) would take the total number to 5.4 million. The non-Muslims included three million Hindus, 1.5 million Sikhs and half a million dalit Hindus among others.

The JEM plan was finalised between H M Mohite of MEO (India) and F H Stevens representing MEO (Pakistan) on October 20, 1947. It was estimated that since August 1, "2.1 million Muslim refugees had already moved into West Punjab and two million non-Muslims into East Punjab".<sup>8</sup> Therefore, "the object [was] to move the balance of the evacuees from East Punjab states into Pakistan and those from NWFP and West Punjab into India, as soon as possible" [Singh 1991:549]. The plan outlined the methods of evacuation, means of transport and even identified the routes to be used for the "foot convoys".

In a section entitled 'Method', the modus operandi is explained:

The rural population will be moved by foot convoys, especially those who were in possession of bullock carts and cattle. Motor transport convoys will be used by Pakistan MEO to deliver food to the foot convoys and other famished camps. Both MEO's intend to use motor transport to clear small pockets and to help the progress of the foot convoys by lifting the women, children, sick and the aged. The extra lift obtained by this method is therefore small, but it is none the less important and will save many lives. Railway trains will be used to move urban populations, rural people who have no bullock carts or cattle or who are unfit to walk. Each train will carry at least 2,500 people and the total lift is considerable. Aircraft may be used, if available, but only a small lift is to be expected by this method [ibid: 549].

The targets made for phased movement were as shown in Table 1.

The authorities were seemingly busy planning the final exodus down to the last detail.

Halting points for the night, food, water, medical aid and protection had to be provided for in advance. Schedules had to be drawn up to avoid clashes between caravans moving in opposite directions. All along the route of the convoys, jeeps and armoured cars kept constant patrol. Night curfew had to be clamped down on areas through which the convoys marched. Mobile dispensaries were always in attendance to care for the sick. Besides all this, when rains towards the end of September washed roads away in many regions and brought movement to a halt, the MEO had to undertake repair and construction of lines of communications [Rao 1967:16].

The whole evacuation operation was organised on roughly three levels. First, to establish transit camps for the isolated pockets of refugees. Second, transporting the refugees on foot, rail or motor transport and last, to settle them in refugee camps or shelters in their respective country of destination. The two governments had exchanged chief liaison officers (CLO) to coordinate the evacuation work with the local authorities. In turn, each district had a liaison officer who was responsible to the CLO in Lahore and Amritsar. The district liaison officers informed the MEO about stranded refugees, abduction of women and children and forcible conversions taking place in their areas. The

**Table 1: Joint Evacuation Movement**

	Muslims	Non-Muslims
At present	3.2 million	1.8 million
On completion of non-Muslim foot convoy (approximately November 1)	2.4 million	1.2 million
On completion of Muslim foot convoy (estimate on November 30)	0.5 million	0.6 million
On December 15	0.25 million	0.3 million
On December 31	Nil	Nil

Source: Singh 1991:551.

MEO would, thereafter, organise rescue missions in coordination with local police and army units.

The basic presumption for its success was state protection and availability of food and water for the foot journeys where the caravans could be as long as 240 kilometres with 50-60,000 refugees [ibid:16]. But there was a lack of armed guards for protection, unavailability of food and frequent attacks on the convoys, trains and motor transport. The convoy commanders even complained of lack of arms and of having to issue Sten guns without ammunition.<sup>9</sup> In such circumstances, the fortunate ones who reached safety, told of water wells and ponds en route that had been polluted with carcasses of slaughtered cows, of acute shortage of drinking water being sold at exorbitant prices and of pregnant women giving birth on the roadside or on the trucks proceeding to Amritsar [Chopra 1997:11].

In an autobiographical note, the area commander of Amritsar region Brigadier Mohinder Singh Chopra later talked of long refugee columns that entered India from Khem Karan sector into Amritsar district. Khem Karan along with Ferozepur was one of the popular entry points into India from West Punjab. These were also the sites of dispersal of outgoing Muslim refugees into Pakistan. Brigadier Chopra remembered that:

...exhausted refugees (.) sprawled everywhere, along the roads, in makeshift camps, in school buildings, in private houses, in fields and on the streets. They had trekked all the way from Multan and Montgomery. It was over these refugee columns coming on foot from Pakistan entering India at Khem Karan, that I undertook many air flights to assess the extent of the mass of humanity stretching unbroken for 15.20 miles (24-32 km). Whenever possible, we dropped food parcels with cooked chapattis and vegetable in sealed bags [ibid].

Such a humanitarian deed was, clearly, an individual act and an erratic one at that. The organised state machinery is not as visible in personal accounts as in the official ones. Despite all odds, if the refugees reached their destination safely, it was because of their own ability to organise and persevere.

“Some convoys which came from Montgomery, for instance, were fairly well organised because they had amongst them a sprinkling of retired army personnel who provided safety and security with whatever means they had” [ibid]. That arrangements were far from adequate is clear from the casualties that such journeys entailed. The official sources, while telling a story of heroism, do admit a little reluctantly that “often the sick and the feeble-bodied were abandoned by the roadside. So were the dead, with none to mourn them or perform obsequies. The living had no time for the dying and the dead” [Rao 1967:17].

Even in retrospect, the mass migration does not cease to intrigue as to “how people decided to leave their homes and lands for good” [Randhawa 1954]. After all this “decision was only a matter of few hours everywhere. The fatal decision was not long delayed, as the ring of death and destruction from all sides. The hand that was sowing the seeds in the morning was hurriedly packing in the afternoon. There was nobody that they could turn to for help, nowhere that they could go for justice. Thus the only choice before them was to say goodbye to the land of their birth” [ibid].

### Means of Transport

The reconstruction of the last journey in these different sources shows a class-divided process which could not be abridged by as momentous an event as Partition migration. The duration of

the journey and the means of transport used to undertake the journey are crucial indicators of the class differences that significantly alter the experience of displacement. The clusters of differing migration experiences can be built around the (a) foot columns – those who walked hundreds of miles over several days or weeks, (b) railway journey – a shorter journey but undertaken in highly cramped and difficult conditions, (c) military trucks – used for short distance travel but not available easily, and finally, (d) air travel – that was swift, safe, but available only to those who could pay the exorbitant price. The level of danger also decreased dramatically as the mode and duration of the journey became shorter.

A large part of the displaced population walked across the borders. The estimated number of people evacuated from West Punjab by organised caravans is given as 10,36,000, i.e., roughly a third of the evacuated non-Muslim population. The foot columns of refugees were mostly of rural origin whose major items of possession such as cattle and farm equipment could not be carried on trains and motor transport. These caravans were vulnerable to attacks while passing hostile towns and villages. So a degree of organisation was necessary for survival. They were organised with young women and children in the middle, older men and women around them with the last protective ring thrown around them by young men with crude weapons like lathis (heavy wooden sticks) or sometimes rifles.

Each looked to their own self, as “few showed pity for age or sex, and many aged or infirm persons who could not walk were deserted by their relations and left to die on the roadside. Mothers threw their newborn babies in bushes along the roadside and left them to die. The urge among the columns was to escape Pakistan and to cover the journey in the quickest possible time” [ibid:28]. Such a quick exit was possible only if one had the physical ability or the means to possess sturdy bullock carts. The ones who possessed bullock carts could place their bundles in the carts to gain speed, “others not so fortunate carried them on their heads. Among them were landless Harijans, and village workers, who did not possess any bullock carts of their own, and were accompanying their co-villagers” [ibid:28].

While foot columns were the preferred means of evacuation for the rural masses, railways were deployed to ferry the urban populace. Over a million non-Muslims are estimated to have been evacuated by rail during the peak period from August 27 to the end of November 1947 and over 1.3 million Muslims in the opposite direction. The JEM plan arranged for rail evacuation with contributions from India and Pakistan of 20 and 12 railway trains respectively to form a pool of stock for refugee movement. It was expected that five-six trains would be run between East and West Punjab on a daily basis. A “Refugee Rail” control was set up in Lahore with functions in respect to refugee movement “similar to those of Mil Rail in respect of military movement.”<sup>10</sup>

These refugee trains were known as “India Special” or “Pakistan Special”. Due to their central role as a preferred means

**Table 2: Modes of Transport Employed during Evacuation from West Punjab (Mid-August to End-November)<sup>11</sup>**

Modes of Transportation	Numbers
Foot columns	1,036,000
Special trains	10,00,000
Motor transport	31,34,000
Air transport	28,000

of urban evacuation, they have become symbolic of the last journey of the masses. Some fictional works like *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh have immortalised the train journeys that carried millions of refugees to their new homelands. The special trains were frequently subjected to sabotage by ingenious methods to waylay them when the refugees were later massacred. In Singh's novel, the saboteurs' use a thick steel wire tied atop two poles across the railway track. The plan is to derail the train when it hits the steel wire and then kill all the passengers. In a poignant climax, the hero cuts the steel wire and falls on the tracks only to be crushed by the passing train that carries his beloved and their unborn child safely across the border.

Though the refugee special trains plan was started to evacuate the refugees en masse, it served an altogether different purpose for the attackers. Instead of launching random attacks, now one could indulge in "wholesale slaughter" because these trains carried members of a single community [Aiyar 1994]. There were several methods besides derailment that were used to kill the refugees. For instance:

Sikhs on railway platforms would observe Muslims entraining, and enter the same carriages. After the train's departure, they would single out the Muslims and push them out of the carriages or throw them out of the windows, at pre-decided spots, like railside telegraph poles that were marked with a white flag. There gang of killers waited to complete the killing. Often the gangs conducting this operation had their couriers on trains who pulled the communication cord between stations, and then the killer gangs then operated throughout the train. The attacks were organised with military precision, with one half of the gang providing covering fire while the others entered the train to kill [ibid: 20].

Another way was to throw crude bombs on the train or lay a boulder on the tracks. Sometimes the tracks were tampered with, pointing towards an official complicity. An enquiry report about a train accident, for instance, points to complicity of the lower railway staff.

Yesterday, at about 2 pm, a Muslim refugee special (train) which left Ambala met with a serious accident at Shambhu railway station (Patiala state). Engine and three bogies derailed, resulting in 129 deaths and injuries to about 200 persons of whom nine died in the hospital. Train resumed its journey at 2.30 a.m. Accident [occurred] due to the train having been directed on to a deadline instead of the mainline, which is attributable either to gross negligence of railway staff or a deep-seated conspiracy. The station ASM, pointsman and the driver have been arrested".<sup>12</sup>

Many times the trains would arrive at their destinations piled with dead bodies. Such "ghost trains" would unleash another round of killings in order to send back an equal number of dead bodies on their return journeys. A personal account by Prakash Tandon, a Hindu Punjabi from Gujarat, narrates that:

One day, train crammed with two thousand refugees came from the more predominantly Muslim areas of Jhelum and beyond. At Gujarat station the train was stopped, and Muslims from the neighbourhood, excited by the news of violence in East Punjab, began to attack and loot. There was indescribable carnage. Several hours later the train moved on, filled with a bloody mess of corpses, without a soul alive. At Amritsar, when the train with its load of dead arrived, they took revenge on a trainload of Muslim refugees [Tandon 2000].

Even though train journey was fraught with danger, it was much in demand as a quick means to get away from "risk-zones". The special trains were free for the refugees who could travel to any

destination within the country of their choice.<sup>13</sup> But to get a place on the train was not that simple. The railway employees would normally be the first ones to find places for themselves and their families. A simple reason was that often the train timetables and their platforms would not be revealed until about half an hour before the departure as a safety precaution. Through their networks, the railway employees could access that information more easily than anybody else. They could place themselves at the right time and place to board the train before the rush started. Many others would take to bribing the railway employees to gain this information. The refugees were sent out in batches following some sort of priority list maintained in the transit camps. Many refugees tried to get their names scaled up in priority through their personal connections or by bribing the officer-in-charge. Even an acquaintance in the railway department could prove to be valuable in such circumstances as some refugees experienced. Shyam Lal Manchanda, a 16-year old resident of village Peepal Sawan Kapur in district Multan, was stranded in the Qila Multan camp awaiting evacuation for several days along with his family.

It was the rainy month of September when we were waiting for the "refugee special" train to evacuate us. Often the hostile Muslim groups attacked our camp. The arrangement for food and water was also not adequate. The only agency that fed and looked after the refugees actually was Multan Seva Samiti, a social service organisation started by some influential Hindus of Multan. The wait for evacuation seemed endless till we chanced upon a distant relative whose sons worked in the railways. He took pity on us and agreed to take us along on a goods train that had been arranged the next day especially for the railway employees. They were open carriages meant for transport of goods and animals. The journey was tough as we had no protection from rain, cold or hostile attacks. Many people fell sick on the way. But at least we were lucky to board the train.<sup>14</sup>

If it was important to get into the train, then it was even more vital to keep the engine driver in good humour. The driver could decide to stop the train at a hostile place or just abandon it midway. Shyam Lal's train was similarly stopped at a station called Harbanspura near Lahore for two days.

As the train was open, the passengers especially women, were jeered at by Muslims from the railway overhead bridge. We had collected stones to defend ourselves. Some people went to the driver and asked him to park the train either before or after the station and not at the platform itself. It was becoming dark and everyone was afraid of a possible attack. The driver agreed when he was paid some money at the rate of Rs 5 per family. He pulled the train back away from the crowds. We passed the night with round the clock vigils. Next day, we found out that our train had been stopped in exchange for another train at Amritsar which was full of Muslim refugees from Delhi. The reason was that an earlier train of Muslim refugees had arrived in Pakistan full of dead bodies. So our train was stopped as a guarantee for the Muslim special train from Delhi. Finally the two trains were exchanged at the border and we saw people from Delhi for the first time" (personal interview with Shyam Lal).

The special trains were packed to capacity and the refugees had to fight their way in. This also meant that it was not possible to keep the customary distance between the two sexes. The separate compartments or exclusive spaces for women had no place in such an emergency. In a personal interview, a Sikh woman who was 10 years old at the time of Partition recounted

this scene. Her family was travelling from Sargodha to Amritsar in the month of August.

At the railway platform, there was a mad rush towards the train. My father was making sure that I and my siblings did not get lost in the crowd. The women of my family would normally never go out unaccompanied and without a head cover, dupatta. A sort of purdah was maintained in our house as far as outsiders were concerned. But now my mother was standing in the crowd trying to keep her head covered and observe all the customary niceties. It almost seemed impossible to get into the train till a complete stranger offered to help us. As the door was jam-packed, we had to be thrown in through the window. And then it was my mother's turn. The stranger and my father picked up my mother and pushed her in through the window. Nobody seemed to care at that time. It was important to save our lives. This incident, later though, made a big impact on my mother. She would often talk about it and the bad times when strangers could touch other people's women.<sup>15</sup>

The gender barriers were challenged in this scenario though in a crude way. The liberty to touch female bodies is remembered by the above narrator as a demeaning incident that revealed the vulnerable position the women found themselves in. The inability of men to protect their women from the touch of strange men heightens this loss of power. While the immediate aim was to flee from violent situations and such skirmishes could definitely be overlooked, it did leave a lasting impact on the mother. The privacy she was used to had been violently intruded on. The memory of intrusion remained despite the fact that the family had escaped completely unharmed and that the stranger was merely trying to help.

Military trucks, the other form of popular transport, was used for short distances such as Lahore to Amritsar or for transporting passengers from isolated locations to the railway stations for further journeys. Around 1,200 military and civilian trucks were deployed by the MEO (India) with an additional pool of 1,000 trucks at the peak period. By the middle of November around 3,13,400 non-Muslims and 2,09,440 Muslims had been transported in this way [Rao 1967].

While all the means of surface transport were prone to risks of one kind or another, air transport was free from all such dangers to life and property. The safest and quickest means of transport was also the least widespread. It was available exclusively to the upper crust of society, mainly high-ranking bureaucrats or rich people who could afford to pay their passage. Air transport was also meant to be for ordinary refugees from "certain inaccessible points in Pakistan" [ibid], but this is rarely corroborated by testimonies of refugees, oral or otherwise. By the government's own admission:

...air transport was both safe and speedy but could not be employed for mass evacuation. But this operation had a profound psychological effect on people living under a thickening pall of anxiety and terror. In the scale of air priorities, government employees naturally came first. India was desperately short of technical personnel for the railways, posts and telegraphs, and administrative, police and office personnel as well [ibid].

The government employees were clearly well looked after as the following news report shows. The rehabilitation ministry had set up a transfer bureau, an agency specially created to cater to the state employees who were affected by the violence and population movement. The migration course followed by the government employees was different from ordinary people since their travel, stay and continued employment was arranged by the state. "The staff coming to Delhi are of three categories; those

who are posted permanently to Delhi; those who are to go elsewhere in India; and those who have left Pakistan on account of disturbances. Each category is being dealt with in an appropriate manner. A special officer has been appointed to receive all those who arrive by air and to look after them and send them to allotted residences" (*The Hindustan Times*, 'Government to Take Over Houses in Delhi', September 4, 1947).

Evidently, the government as an efficient guardian of its employees was able to transfer them out safely. For this purpose, as early as the end of August 1947, 10 aircraft were mobilised from various transport companies for six to seven daily trips between India and Pakistan. The scheduled flights between Delhi, Karachi, Quetta, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Peshawar were intensified [Rao 1967:18]. In addition, a fleet of British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) was added to the available air resources. The BOAC fleet consisted of 18 Dakota and two York aircraft and could carry out 1,962 flights at the height of evacuation between September 15 and December 7. During this period it transported 28,000 people from Pakistan and 18,000 in the reverse direction. However, these official figures exclude large unaccounted estimates of passengers carried by companies such as Indian National Airways. Although no concrete figures about the number of passengers ferried by this company and others like it are available, the extent of its services gives an approximate picture. Towards the end of August, there were continuous announcements in several newspapers from, among others, Indian National Airways about its:

Two daily services between Delhi and Lahore in either direction, effective from August 28. And effective from August 29 (1) daily service in either direction between Delhi and Rawalpindi on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays, and, (2) day return service between Delhi and Peshawar via Lahore and Rawalpindi in both directions on Wednesdays and Fridays (*The Hindustan Times*, advertorial insert dated August 28, 1947).

From August 31 onwards, the company promised that one of its Delhi-Lahore flights would call daily at Amritsar in both directions (*The Hindustan Times*, advertorial insert). The passengers could obtain information about fares and timings from, among others, Faletti's Hotel in Lahore, an elite spot for the rich and famous of Lahore and surrounding areas. Those who fled to safety had a different view about Partition. They could witness the murderous events from safe distances and, if cornered, more often than not could, fly away without ever having to face the mob. Their stories about Partition were always about their hapless servants, cooks, drivers who would go out to the city to run errands and quite often end up getting murdered. An influential Hindu "refugee" who lived in the newly established rich quarters of Lahore called Model Town narrates one such memoir.

Lahore was rife with all sorts of rumours but father never told me anything. My only source of information was our chauffer Gulzara Singh, who would exaggerate everything he heard or witnessed. Every evening I had dinner with father without even exchanging a single word. His silence and a strange expression of sorrow stamped on his countenance disconcerted me greatly. I tossed in my bed at night, wondering what Independence would bring for us. Model Town, fortunately, was not touched by the massacres in the city. "What has happened?" I asked in surprise. "Your house has been attacked", he (a Muslim friend) replied with anxiety and panic writ large on his face. For me, this was incredible. There had been no person in Model Town who had taken part in the rioting; even during the worst days the place remained peaceful. Hafeez Sahib

made a hurried trip to our house to see the situation. He came back with the news that it was still dangerous for us to go back. Someone in the neighbourhood had told him that Pathans were still keeping a watch on the area. What was to be done? Mr Bedi suggested that we should go to Delhi by air, leaving everything in Hafeez Sahib's charge. There seemed to be no other way, and father agreed to it. By the afternoon of that day, we were in Delhi telling my brother the story of our narrow escape" [Anand 2001].

The import of this narrative is self-evident. The narrator positions himself in a newly developed upper middle class locality of Lahore city. Information about the raging communal violence is gathered from the narrator's driver and servant who are depicted as friendly people. The gossipy portrait of the driver is drawn in a patronising style since nothing better could be expected anyway from people of that class. The violence and the gossip seem to belong to another world to which the narrator is connected only through the intermediary of his servants. When finally violence seems to come closer, the narrator's father compels him to seek safety in Delhi with his relatives. The fact that his experiences are far removed from what is popularly believed to have taken place is never seen as a complication worth exploring.

### Speed, Class and Forced Migration

The raging communal violence in Punjab made it imperative for the minorities to flee the area as soon as possible to safe areas. Swiftness of movement was the key to ensure survival and protection of one's self and family. Each individual tried to get away from the danger zone with the fastest possible means of transport. Of the means available like foot columns, military trucks, trains and airplanes, the last was the safest, most expensive, and therefore, out of reach of most ordinary people. Following Virilio, the safety and swiftness can be measured on a scale of class hierarchy or the *means of escape* employed are indicators of class and help us understand how, later, different classes related to the new nation and their former homeland. In population movements affected by genocidal violence and ethnic cleansing, not only is rapid movement essential for one's safety, but also has repercussions later as to how one remembers the former homeland; and how one formulates relationships with it. The speed at which one flees becomes essential to one's safety and very survival. However, the *swift escape route* cannot be accessed without the means to afford prohibitive advanced technology.

At every social-economic level across the rural urban divide, a *scale of speed and safety* can be employed to measure how different classes experienced Partition migration. Those who flew across the turbulent borders had the shortest and safest journey. It ensured that the entire violence-ridden stretches of the journey became no more than brief leaps of air travel. There was virtually no risk that air travellers would be attacked en route. Their memory of "what happened during Partition" is, therefore, limited to the stories they had heard or news reports they had read. The events of violence do not largely figure in such accounts because the narrators had seldom experienced themselves. The class category of such migrants clearly belongs at the top of the class structure. Their experiences were quite different from other urban migrants who took to military motor vehicles and refugee special trains as a means of escape. A journey that would take an hour by air would take a couple of days, sometime more, to reach the destination.

The threat level increased with the increase in the total time of journey. Since the train journeys were quicker and more affordable than the air travel, there was a huge demand for them.

While the journey became entirely free of cost with the introduction of "refugee special" trains, the demand rose to previously unmatched levels. The special trains also became the target for concentrated killings where well-honed techniques were employed to first derail the train and then kill its occupants. If one survived this organised massacre then there was a greater possibility that the survivor could carry more belongings than the migrants who travelled on foot. Even though the railway authorities had fixed a limit to the luggage that could be carried on trains, it was always possible to find a way around such limitations. The mostly urban, lower middle to middle class status of rail travellers is evident through their choice of means of escape.

The worst-off group on the *scale of speed and safety* was the foot travellers. The bulk of this group was made up of rural inhabitants who would travel in village contingents lead by the village headman. The columns were sometimes miles long with thousands of migrants hurrying across for weeks at end. The safety of the foot columns was under threat most of the time from organised communal bands, highway robbers, petty thieves and mischief-makers. They were subject to sudden and brutal attacks at all hours along the entire route. Those who could muster self-protection with assorted arms and weaponry had the best rate of survival. The differences within the foot columns were also apparent in whether people travelled on horses and bullock carts or just walked. This difference also translated into how much of their belongings the foot travellers could bring along as compared to those on bullock carts.

Of all the above possible modes of travel, those that have become part of the popular imagery are the tightly packed trains and the foot columns of weary and traumatised travellers. Air travel has never been a part of the national narrative of Partition in which the birth of the nation is linked with traumatic territorial dismemberment and loss followed later by rejuvenation attained through clear political vision, popular will and perseverance displayed by the national leadership and the people. The new nation is built on struggle, sacrifice and the indomitable spirit of the refugees who lost everything but succeeded in rebuilding their lives. The train journeys and foot columns fit this national narrative where the loss and trauma can be witnessed through various media. Air travel, on the other hand, does not entail a similar sense of trauma or loss, and therefore, is rarely mentioned in official accounts. The personal lives of the migrants are somehow linked with that of the modern Indian nation and it is the common story of endurance and success that has captivated the nation's imagination. [27]

Email: rkaur@ruc.dk

### Notes

- 1 The reference pertains to some of the most popular photos of train journeys during Partition migration that are widely used to "show" the migration. The photos are available in National Archives in Delhi as well as the Photo section of Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and are reproduced in history books as well as in some fictional work, for example, see the cover of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* in its early prints.
- 2 The "master narrative" is built upon the "common minimum narrative" of Partition since it is repeated by intellectual, social and governmental authorities as the true version of historical events. The phrase common minimum narrative is employed here to suggest a simplified and compressed version of complex, multilayered personal experiences that migrants often narrate. On one hand, this allows individuals to deflect attention from personal events that may have been painfully suppressed over the years, and on the other, to claim community based on common experiences with fellow migrants. More often than not, the common minimum narrative

- is followed by an admission that the narrators personal experiences did not match what they believed had happened to millions of other migrants. The “differing” narratives, therefore, challenge the master version of the Partition historiography. The term master narrative is earlier used by Gyan Pandey to describe the widespread discourse on communal violence that is historically rooted in the British colonial interpretations of violence, community and identity making in colonial India. See Gyan Pandey (1991) *The Colonial Construction of Communalism*.
- 3 See Acharya J B Kriplani’s report from Karachi city dated September 27, 1947. AICC Records 1947-48 where he mentions the plight of well off merchants, and learned, professional Hindu and Sikh migrants.
  - 4 This was narrated in a private interview with M M Chaddha, a refugee from Rawalpindi.
  - 5 The figures are based on estimates derived from the 1941 population census. The total non-Muslim population in West Punjab was a little more than four million while the North-West Frontier Province adds another 2.8 million non-Muslims who could migrate. Similarly, the Muslim population in East Punjab was 4.5 million in addition to over 3,00,000 Delhi Muslims who risked becoming homeless. Thus, roughly 6.8 million non-Muslims in West Punjab and NWFP and a little less than five million Muslims in East Punjab and Delhi were at risk of displacement. These figures do not include those who got killed, were forcibly or voluntarily converted to Islam, or simply refused to move away. The Punjab figures also do not include Muslim migration from United Provinces to West Punjab which would raise the estimates considerably. For estimates also see G D Khosla (1950), *Stern Reckoning*; Urvashi Butalia (1998), *The Other Side of Silence*; and Penderal Moon (1961), *Divide and Quit*. For details about the killings and development of violence read Hansen (2002), op cit; Swarna Aiyar (1998), ‘August Anarchy: The Partition Massacres in Punjab 1947’ in D A Low and Howard Brasted (eds), *Freedom, Trauma and Continuities: Northern India and Independence*.
  - 6 Francis Mudis to Jinnah; September 5, 1947 in Kirpal Singh (ed) (1991).
  - 7 The figures are calculated from the districtwise population tables of Census of India, 1941.
  - 8 ‘Military Evacuation Organisation’ by Brigadier Rajendra Singh in Singh (1991), op cit, pp 548-52.
  - 9 Convoy Commander JEM R Krishna’s Report; MEO Records No 10899/11, Vol II in Singh (1991), p 547.
  - 10 Joint Evacuation Movement Plan in Singh (1991), op cit, p 548.
  - 11 These figures pertain only to migrants from the British West Punjab and exclude estimates from Punjab princely states, Sind and NWFP. The figures are compiled from Rao (1967) and Annual Report 1947-48, Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation.
  - 12 ‘Report of Shambhu Train Accident’ in Singh, op cit, p 565.
  - 13 This was testified by most of the refugees during my survey. Moreover, no one was checking the tickets in such chaotic times.
  - 14 Personal interview with Shyam Lal Manchanda, now a resident of Delhi, December 2, 2000.
  - 15 Personal interview with H Kaur in Delhi, dated October 20, 2001.

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