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**Collection and Preservation of Painful Memories of Refugee Women Survived during Partition: An Overview**

**Trishanjit Kaur**

Department of Library & Information Science, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab, India  
E-mail address: [trishanjit.kaur@gmail.com](mailto:trishanjit.kaur@gmail.com)

**Nirmal Singh**

Guru Angad Dev Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Ludhiana, Punjab, India  
E-mail address: [nirmal02@yahoo.co.in](mailto:nirmal02@yahoo.co.in)

**Simran Kaur**

UILS, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India  
E-mail address: [sthandisidhu@gmail.com](mailto:sthandisidhu@gmail.com)



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**Abstract:**

*India witnessed the world's largest movement of population ranging from 10-18 million during its partition during August 1947 when India and Pakistan got independence. This catastrophe left 2 million dead and more than 10 million displaced in a few days. The worst sufferers were women who faced horrible brutalities. Thousands of women were abducted, raped, mutilated, pregnant women had their breasts cut off and babies hacked out of their bellies, infants were found literally roasted. Women were used as slaves and discarded. Gangs of killers set whole villages on flame, hacking to death men and children and the aged while carrying off young women to be raped. Some British soldiers and journalists who had also witnessed the Nazi death camps claimed Partition's brutalities were worse. It left both physical and mental scars on women.*

*Most of these women never had the chance to tell their stories and chose to let silence take over instead. There are numerous writings, movies, pictures depicting the pain and suffering of women. They want these to be collected and preserved in local libraries and museums. However, a comprehensive source of information providing exhaustive reporting of such writings and other documents still lacks. This paper will analyse various efforts being made to depict and preserve memories of refugee women with special reference to 1947partitionarchive project. It will also provide a comprehensive list of various sources that focus on preserving memories of women victims of partition.*

**Keywords:** Partition, Refugee Women, Violence, Museum, Memories

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## **The great divide - bloody legacy**

After almost three centuries of Colonization, the ecstasy of independence of India was accompanied by the trauma of partition of united India in two parts on communal grounds, i. e. Pakistan as a Muslims State and India as a secular nation. This greatest divide of the nation caused the largest movement of population in the world during 1947-51, uprooting 10-18 million people on both sides and leaving one to two million killed (Bose, 2006; Bhardwaj, 2008). “In terms of size and rapidity, the Partition of India in 1947 constitutes one of the greatest instances of voluntary and involuntary mass population migration in modern history.” (Hill et al., 2004). The communalism used by Britishers as a triumph to divert people’s attention from freedom revolution, lack of cultural homogeneity, distinct antagonism, political ambitions of elites of both communities and feeling of being safe within with one’s own community at a realm of power were the major causes for partition.

The state of Punjab paid the highest price of division as the state itself was divided in two parts, leaving the western part within newly formed Pakistan and the eastern part in India. According to the census report of 1921, the western most areas of Punjab were Muslim dominated which decreased from western to eastern parts of Punjab. The Hindu population was vice-versa and was predominant in hilly areas and southern districts. The Sikhs were concentrated in Central Punjab. The four main districts having Sikh population were Ludhiana, Amritsar, Faridkot and Patiala (Kirpal Singh, 1972). Based on population predominance, 16 districts forming 55% of population and 62% of geographical area of the state were allocated to western Punjab and remaining 13 districts, 5 princely states comprising 45% population forming 33% of the area came to the share of eastern Punjab (Kanwaljit Kaur, 2010). The division of Punjab became a useful pawn to politicians on both sides as Muhammad Ali Jinnah (founder of Pakistan) thought to use the Sikhs as hostages for exchange of Muslims on Indian side, while statesmen on Indian side were of the opinion that had the claims of Sikh leaders to create a separate Sikh homeland been met, whatever extra territory they gained would accrue in India (Hajari, 2015). It is estimated that around one million civilians died in the accompanying riots and local-level fighting, particularly in the western region of Punjab during partition (Bates, 2011). Both sides of the fence were persecuted by killings of a high magnitude.

## **Trauma suffered by women**

Women constituting 50% of the population remain at the centre of vulnerability during violence reigns, be it communal violence, refuge to other nations, plight in their own country, repatriation and even during resettlement (Mehdi, 2010; Hans, 2003). On partition of India women became the worst victims in the hands of rival groups as they were separated from their families and in many cases even from religion (Pakie, 2007). Before partition women were confined to the borders of homes with little or no active representation in political and economic spheres of the nation. However, they were regarded as repositories of honour of the family as well as of the community. Any dishonour to them was eyed to cause humiliation to the male members in the community and disgrace to the community in society. Therefore, in order to humiliate other communities, women and young girls were targeted at large. Women lost their husbands, children, became victims of abduction, rape, molestation, forcible conversion and marriage, paraded naked and were offered as gifts to friends like physical commodities. The breasts of women from other communities were cut, genital were tattooed with slogans like ‘Pakistan Zindabad’ or Islamic crescent moon by Muslim hooligans and ‘Jai Hind’ or Hindu trident by counterparts on Indian side (Ghosh, 2013). The mothers were molested before their daughters and vice-versa (Duggal, 1951).

The agony of witnessing the near and dear ones dying due to malnutrition, sickness and fight, fear of losing home, belongings, dignity and identity wrecked women (Mehdi, 2010). There have been numerous cases of honour killing where husbands killed their wives, and fathers killed their daughters to prevent their exploitation by other communities. The women themselves jumped into wells in groups and threw themselves and their girl children in fires to escape abduction and rape by the enemy. The self-killing of 96 women of ThoaKhalsa is heart shaking of such incidences (Dey, 2016). Even Mahatama Gandhi went to say that ‘women must learn how to die before a hair of their head is injured’. He praised the pre-emptive suicides as signs of strength and lauded the deaths of Hindu-Sikh women in a speech in 1947 (Gupta and Chandrasekharan). The data available from different sources reveal that 75,000-85,000 women were abducted on both sides (Banerjee, 1998; Ghosh, 2013).

The violence was not restricted to peasant and middle classes only, the elites suffered too. Vickie Noon, English wife of Sir Feroze Khan Noon (a prominent Muslim), had to stain her face with shoe polish and wear ‘Sari’ with a red *Tilak* on her forehead to change her identity to escape from the Sikh bands (Collins and Lapierre, 1976). Though the level of anguishes differed, almost every woman was affected by the partition.

The programmes for recovering and rehabilitating women to their original homes initiated by governments of both sides have always remained the subject of criticism. These programmes furthered the pain of abducted women who had settled into families of other communities and had children, as they did not want to get uprooted again. Despite the appeal of Jawahar Lal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, to the people of his country to accept back the abducted women as their intent was as pure as of others, family members of many denied to recognise them due to fear of getting defamed in society. This resulted into 13,133 unattached women and children on Indian side, who were provided shelter at 30 homes (Sengupta, 2012).

### **Disappearing testimonies - need for preservation**

Women equally shoulder the responsibility for building up homes, communities and society along with men. The trauma of partition accompanied with riots wiggled women. They got uprooted from their social and cultural context and their identity became greatly disturbed. As women were circumscribed within the borders of home, they never experienced exposure to the outer world and were lacking the skills to make themselves self-sufficient. But circumstances pushed many women from all classes to earning and supplementing family incomes to rebuild their lives. The exposure of women to unknown lands with responsibilities of rebuilding homes and establishing their identity, especially in absence of their husbands as they were killed during riots, added more to the challenge before them.

The official data merely presents numbers about the victims of partition. Their social and psychological loss still remains unaccounted. However, leaving behind their sufferings and beating pain, those brave women accepted their fate and established themselves, their families, with or without their husbands, in new settings. Seventy years have passed since the partition of India and a large majority of eyewitnesses to the painful separation have passed away. The remaining few will also abode for the heaven in the next few years. Many of the surviving witnesses with some conscious experiences are not healthy enough to recall and share their accounts. In the coming few years, perhaps we would not have any refugee women to learn from her personal experiences of partition.

Therefore, there is an immediate need to preserve the memories of the victims for generations to come to remember their loss and pain. Though historians and writers like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Memon, Kamla Bhasin, Amrita Pritam, Manto, Kartar Singh Duggal, Bapsi Sidhwa, etc.

of both India and Pakistan depicted the pain and sufferings of women in their writings and many movies have been themed on partition and its consequences, the original accounts of sufferings of women are dying unspoken on the lips of preys and pain in their hearts.

### **Preservation of memories of women witnesses of partition of India**

In the global scenario several efforts have been made by various institutions, organizations, governmental and non-governmental agencies to preserve the memories of women in various contexts round the globe. Notable among these projects are: Women's Memories, Czech Republic (<http://www.womensmemory.net/english/>), You Can't Beat a Woman Project, United Kingdom (<http://www.colchester-refuge.org.uk/cant-beat-woman/>), HamariYaadein-Our Memories, United Kingdom (<http://www.millan.org.uk/groups-projects/hamaari-yaadein>), Alberta Women's Memory Project, Canada (<http://awmp.athabasca.ca/>), Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project (<http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/WVHP/>), Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame ([https://www.ok.gov/ocsw/Oklahoma\\_Women's\\_Hall\\_of\\_Fame/](https://www.ok.gov/ocsw/Oklahoma_Women's_Hall_of_Fame/)), Oklahoma Women Legislators (<https://www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/digital/wotol/women-legislators/>), Dust, Drought and Dreams Gone Dry (<http://www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/digital/dustbowl/>) and Rosie the Riveter (<http://dlib.nyu.edu/rosie/about>). The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) through Satellite meetings of 'Women, Information and Libraries Special Interest Group' and the 'Genealogy and Local History Section' has organized various conferences supporting the preservation of memories (<https://www.ifla.org>).

In India, the preservation of testimonies of partition has not received attention from government agencies. Though an exclusive effort to preserve memories of sufferings of women is still lacking, some Non-Governmental-Organizations (NGO) lead by a few enthusiastic individuals have attempted to capture and preserve the memories of partition in general, which are discussed below:

#### ***Museum of Peace***

The Society for Information and Media Studies, a non-profit NGO of Chandigarh has established the Museum of Peace at village Attari (Amritsar). It is located on the national highway at a distance of about two kilometres from the Indo-Pak border. The museum is developed to preserve architectural and culinary heritage as a part of a 'SARHAD-the taste of Amritsar-Lahore' restaurant. While the restaurant provides a taste of the culinary tradition of pre-divide days, the Museum is unique to celebrate the common architectural, cultural heritage of pre-partition Punjab in general and Amritsar Lahore in particular. The architectural design of the museum takes visitors back to the structure of buildings during pre-partition of the country. The Museum is an appreciable effort of an NGO to preserve the common architectural heritage which is being lost in both nations. The Peace Museum is intended to represent the common culture, tradition, history and community bonds that existed before partition and the agony, suffering and pain of partition using a blend of artefacts, pictures, posters, print material and technology including multimedia displays. The focus of the Museum of Peace is on the recreation of common architectural and culinary heritage of pre-partition Punjab. Since the museum is near to the border, it catches the attention of Indian spectators to the beating of retreat ceremony away from the environment of hostility (<http://www.museumofpeace.com/>).

#### ***Partition Museum Project***

The Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust (TAACHT), a NGO, set up the Partition Museum at Amritsar in October 2016. The Museum has obtained a good response from the public and a

large number of visitors, including school children, partition survivors, national and international tourists, politicians and scholars visit this Museum. The Museum exhibition has been set up in the restored portion of the Town Hall, which is under restoration, and expected to be accomplished in 2017. The Museum will be named 'Yadgar-e-Taqseem or Memories of Partition'. The Museum is part of the newly inaugurated Heritage Street at Amritsar, which starts at the Golden Temple and ends at the Town Hall. The Museum has been visited by the Hon'ble Finance Minister of India along with the Chief Minister of Punjab, and Hon'ble Union Ministers. It is being developed on donations. People have voluntarily contributed objects and documents to the Museum dating back to 1947.

The Partition Museum Project is an applaudable effort of TAACHT to work towards the establishment of a physical museum dedicated to the memory of the Partition of the United India in 1947 and its victims and survivors. The project has received the support nationally and internationally of many well-known personalities. The London School of Economics is an academic advisor in the Partition Museum project which will help in organizing academic seminars, conferences, in curating exhibitions, and producing academic publications. The British Library, the UK Parliamentary Library, the National Archives, Punjab Archives, Panjab Digital Library, Cambridge University, Southampton University and Amity University are also formally associated with the Partition Museum project (<http://www.partitionmuseum.org/>).

### ***1947Partition Archive***

It is a non-profit non-governmental organization started by Guneeta Singh Bhalla who is the Executive Director. This archive is dedicated to institutionalizing the people's history of Partition through: 1) Documenting, preserving and sharing eye witness accounts from *all* ethnic, religious and economic communities affected by the Partition of British India in 1947...2) Collecting, preserving and sharing personal items and artefacts associated with the people's memory of the 1947 Partition. 3) Bringing knowledge of the Partition into widespread public consciousness through i) creative and scholarly expression including but not limited to literature, film, theatre, visual arts, other creative medium, and academic research ii) proactive world-wide primary education curricula, iii) traveling exhibits as well as physical 'Centres for Learning' designed to memorialize the people's history of Partition and serve the public for research and educational purposes.

Interviews are conducted in the language that the interviewee is most comfortable with, such as English, Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Sindhi, Kashmiri and others. "The Archive" has been preserving oral histories of Partition witnesses since 2010. Over 3000 stories have been preserved on digital video from 320 cities in 12 countries across the world in different languages. They plan to record 10,000 stories by end of 2017. A tiny staff of four supported by twelve interns work tirelessly behind the scenes to support the 40 Story Scholars who are contributing oral histories, and over 500 Citizen Historian volunteers who have devoted an estimated 30,000 hours in volunteer labour towards recording stories (<http://www.1947partitionarchive.org/>).

### **Strategies of Preserving Memories of Refugee Women**

Five years ago the authors had conducted interviews of 30 rural women with the intention to know about the strategies of preserving their memories. They had suggested telling stories in religious places, writing names on the entrance gates of the villages, preserving articles in museums, recording their stories and preserving them in libraries. The paper was presented in Tampere (Finland) at the Women, Information and Libraries SIG Satellite meeting only.

(Trishanjit Kaur and Nirmal Singh, 2012).

For this paper efforts were made to interact with educated women living in cities and to find their perception about preserving the memories. The authors personally visited ten women survivors of partition and their kin in Patiala, Ludhiana and Bhathinda to know their opinions about the preservation of memories. It was shocking to find that the children and grandchildren of these women were not aware about their pain and suffering, as no one had made efforts to know and record the painful memories. It reflects how the testimonies are fading within 2-3 generations only. All the women shared that Hindu-Muslims had brotherly relations before partition and were always helping each other when required. They remembered the names of their Muslim friends and still cherish the memories.

Three of the four women from Ludhiana shared that their Muslim neighbours in Pakistan persuaded their families to not leave for India and stay there only. They also assured them that Hindu and Sikh families would be protected from attacking mobs. However, realizing the prevailing situation, the Hindu-Sikh families handed over the keys of their homes to Muslim neighbours (as they had a bond of trust) and left their homes with a hope to come back after the riots settled down. But they did not know that the united India was now divided in two parts and permanent borders were drawn. The women shared that they left their homes empty handed with some food and utensils only and were scared at every moment of their plight. They shared how their families survived on the little rice and other food their mothers carried with them for children, and on the food provided by people from villages near to their camps and waited for helicopters to drop food packets once in a while.

The stories are endless, the pain is everlasting, as while talking to these women it seems like yesterday only for them. Pain is personal and it depends upon the loss (human and material) and their traumatic experiences. All these women were of the strong opinion that their memories should be preserved and written and recorded or they will die with them. Public libraries could provide a common platform for the survivors to get together, exchange notes and these could be recorded along with all personal information for future generations. They all said, “Why have you come so late?” As many of their relatives and friends were no more to share the pain.

### **Plethora of sources**

For years together ‘Partition of India and Pakistan’ and ‘Women and Partition’ has been of interest for writers, research scholars, singers, poets, movie makers, feminist writers, NGOs and others. The information sources are plenty and scattered on the web also. 1947partitionarchive has a Partition library where Books, Films and Web resources <http://www.1947partitionarchive.org/library> are listed. This paper provides an exhaustive list of all kinds of sources on partition in addition to the ones given in 1947partitionarchive library, which will be of great use for future researchers ([www.partitionofunitedindia.weebly.com](http://www.partitionofunitedindia.weebly.com)).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude we are haunted by ‘Why have you come so late?’ It is exactly 70 years today, as it was on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 that India got independent. The generation that was a witness to the carnage is dying along with their painful memories. We owe it to them to preserve their memories for future generations.

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