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Partitioned Memories: The Interstitial Spaces of History, Orality, and Identity

Geetika Khatri & Rimika Singhvi

Abstract

The Partition of India (1947) still inflicts painful scars, performing individual memory, collective memory, and intergenerational trauma. The paper examines the ongoing impact of the event through the interrelated paradigms of Memory Studies, Trauma Theory, and Postcolonial Identity. It brings oral histories to the forefront, highlight acts of resilience and subaltern counter-narratives that disrupt state-sponsored histories. It cross-checks the emotional resonances, repetitions, and interruptions of Partition testimonies with Marianne Hirsch's Postmemory and with Cathy Caruth's Trauma theory. Folk songs, domestic artifacts, and counter-archives are assertive ways through which individuals remember their culture. They deconstruct silences in dominant archives and historiographies. The study investigates how Partition had brokered new identities after coercive displacements of communities into unfamiliar and alien lands. It focuses on diasporic groups, hybrid and ambivalently cultural, and how trauma gets transmitted to subsequent generations, attempting to make sense of broken pasts and fractured present selves. The paper argues that Partition memory is dynamic and not fixed, changing over time, and in modes and places. It urges researchers to use methods from more than one discipline and from more than one nation, particularly as virtual spaces are increasingly becoming sites to remember, critique, and mobilize the dispersed history of Partition.

Keywords: Cultural hybridity; Identity-formation; Indian Partition; Memory Studies; Oral history; Postmemory; Trauma Theory.

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 is often narrated through the blunt metrics of history, with fifteen million displaced and over a million dead, but

such figures cannot contain the inner wreckage that this event wrought upon countless lives. For those who lived through it, Partition was not merely an event but an experience, one that fractured time itself into a *before* and after, leaving behind an inheritance of silence, grief, and longing. As Urvashi Butalia says, "what is left behind is not only the memory of violence and loss, but the haunting silence of what cannot be said" (Butalia 4). Its aftershocks continue to ripple across generations, shaping not only collective memory but the textures of individual consciousness.

History, in its formal garb, often falters before the enormity of human suffering; it struggles to capture the tremor in a voice recounting lost homes, or the weight of an heirloom carried across the border. Yet it is precisely in these fragile, intimate recollections that another kind of truth resides, a truth that transcends official narratives and demands to be heard. The memories of Partition, whether spoken aloud or carried in silence, resist easy containment. They haunt language, slip between words, and assert themselves in gestures, rituals, and inherited anxieties. To engage with Partition today is to enter a layered landscape where memory and history entwined, where what is remembered and what is forgotten are equally charged with meaning. It is to listen for echoes in the silences and to trace the contours of an absence that remains palpably present.

Theoretical Framework: Memory and Trauma theory

The Partition of India remains an unfinished narrative, haunting the political, social, and cultural consciousness of the subcontinent long after its violent execution. The interpretive frameworks of Memory Studies, Trauma Theory, and Postcolonial Identity provide critical vantage points through which the layered textures of Partition memory can be explored and understood. Together, they allow us to move beyond the linearity of official history, attending instead to the spectral, affective, and dynamic dimensions of remembrance and identity formation in the long shadow of Partition.

Partition memory is not a static artefact lodged in the past; it is an active, evolving presence within cultural consciousness. In theorizing this presence, the contributions of Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann prove foundational. Halbwachs introduces the notion of *collective memory* in which memories are constructed and maintained within social frameworks, arguing that "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (38). Thus, the act of remembering Partition cannot be isolated

from the communal, political, and familial contexts that shape it. Building upon Halbwachs, Assmann distinguishes between *communicative memory* consisting of short-term everyday recollections, and *cultural memory* which is institutionalized and preserved through ritual, narrative, and cultural artefacts. Partition memory, with its myriad commemorations, oral testimonies, museum exhibits, and literary representations, fits squarely within this category.

As Assmann writes, cultural memory "preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity" (19). This is especially evident among Partition-affected communities whose remembrance of displacement and loss becomes central to their cultural self-understanding. The intergenerational transmission of Partition memory complicates these frameworks further, a process most compellingly theorized by Hirsch through the concept of *postmemory*. Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (5). It is memory transmitted not through direct experience but through narratives, images, and affective residues. Among the descendants of Partition survivors, postmemory manifests in inherited anxieties, silences, and persistent narratives of home and loss. The phenomenon underscores how Partition continues to shape identities and cultural discourses even among those who never lived through its events directly.

The cataclysm of Partition is, at its core, a profound traumatic rupture, one that resists full narrative closure. Trauma theory, particularly as articulated by Cathy Caruth, offers vital insights into the temporal and linguistic complexities of representing such an event. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma involves a crisis of representation; it is not fully grasped in the moment of its occurrence but returns belatedly in haunting and often fragmented forms: "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located in the past" (11). The testimonies of Partition survivors frequently reflect this dynamic; with memories surfacing years or decades later, often in repetitive, emotionally charged forms. The belatedness of trauma also entails a certain *repetition compulsion*, a need to retell the story in search of elusive mastery or meaning. Caruth writes that trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4).

Partition narratives, both oral and written, embody this compulsion. They oscillate between moments of vivid recall and lapses into silence, evok-

ing what LaCapra terms "acting out" and "working through" of trauma (70). Survivors may oscillate between re-enacting traumatic scenes and attempting to integrate them into a more coherent narrative. Moreover, the very limits of language in conveying Partition trauma must be acknowledged. As Veena Das observes, "the event of Partition ruptured the capacity of language to adequately signify the experience of violence" (57). Silence becomes both a symptom and a mode of testimony. Women's narratives often register these silences most acutely, reflecting both the gendered nature of Partition violence and the patriarchal constraints on its articulation. Thus, any study of Partition memory must attend not only to what is said but to what remains unsayable.

Reconstructing the Past: The Role of Oral Traditions

Partition, as a historical event, has always troubled the official archive. The sweeping violence and displacement it wrought were too vast, too intimate, and too entangled with personal lives to be contained in the ledgers and proclamations of newly formed states. To reconstruct its past is thus not merely to supplement state records but to resist the very epistemic frameworks that have shaped them. Oral traditions, spanning testimonies, songs, letters and artefacts, serve as a crucial repository of subjective truths, filling the silences and absences that formal histories leave behind.

The value of oral history lies precisely in its challenge to the coherence and authority of state-produced narratives. Official accounts of Partition, whether Indian or Pakistani, have tended to frame the event within teleological discourses of national progress, glossing over the human cost of displacement and violence. As Butalia observes, state histories often "erase the ambiguities, contradictions, and complexities of lived experience in favour of heroic or tragic simplifications" (10). Oral traditions interrupt these simplifications, offering a layered, intimate, and often contradictory view of the past. Oral testimonies foreground *subjective truth*, a category long distrusted by traditional historiography but increasingly recognized as essential for understanding events of mass trauma.

As Portelli insists, "the importance of oral sources lies precisely in their subjectivity; they tell us not just what happened, but how people perceived and experienced it" (3). The raw emotion, faltering voice, or long pause in an oral account communicates an affective truth that no official document can capture. Partition memories are often suffused with grief, guilt, longing and unresolved anger; emotions that shape not only what is remembered but how it is narrated. Such emotionally charged remember-

ing serves a vital social function. It allows communities to articulate forms of knowledge and memory that do not conform to the linear, fact-based logic of the state archive. As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin have shown, women's Partition testimonies in particular often resist nationalist narratives, foregrounding experiences of abduction, sexual violence, and loss that remain marginal in official discourse (WS2–WS11). In this sense, oral traditions act as *counter-narratives*, creating a polyphonic historical record that cannot be easily subsumed within the grand narratives of nationhood.

Yet the collection of such testimonies demands rigorous ethical sensitivity. Interviewing survivors of Partition is not a neutral act; it reopens wounds and places both the narrator and the listener in a charged emotional field. As Das reminds us, "to speak of violence is also to relive it" (43). Researchers must therefore approach the interview space as a site of care and responsibility, not merely as a means of data extraction. Consent, confidentiality, and the right to silence must be foundational principles in such work. The interviewer must be prepared to encounter fragmented, contradictory, or incomplete narratives and resist the urge to "smooth" them into coherence. As Roy notes, "oral history must honour the fissures and absences in testimony, recognizing that some aspects of trauma resist articulation" (128).

Moreover, the *affective weight* of remembering must be acknowledged. For many survivors, recounting Partition is an emotionally exhausting process; it may provoke tears, silence, or even bodily distress. The ethical imperative here is not simply to gather stories but to witness them with respect, patience, and care. The methodological complexity deepens when working with the third generations of Partition survivors. Second- and third-generation descendants often inherit narratives of Partition shaped as much by silence as by speech. In the words of Hirsch, "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation" (5). Interviews with this generation must therefore attend to the subtler forms of memory transmission; family anecdotes, everyday rituals, or the presence of inherited objects that evoke a sense of loss and longing. Malhotra's approach, combining oral testimony with the material culture of migration, offers a compelling model for capturing this intergenerational resonance (15–18).

Archival Gaps and Alternative Archives

The necessity of oral traditions arises also from the *gaps* in official archives.

The official documents of 1947 such as lists of refugees, property transfers, border commissions, offer little insight into the lived experience of Partition. They cannot capture a mother's memory of leaving her village in haste, a father's struggle to rebuild life in a refugee camp, or a child's fragmented recollection of a train journey through violence. Alternative archives, comprising folk songs, photographs, letters and family heirlooms, thus play a crucial role in preserving these dimensions of history. Stewart writes that objects function as "mnemonic traces through which personal and collective pasts are staged and relived" (135). A kitchen utensil from Lahore, a wedding sari carried across the border, or a faded photograph of a lost home embodies layers of memory that textual records cannot convey. Such artefacts allow families to maintain a *felt continuity* with a world that no longer exists physically.

Folk songs, in particular, serve as collective repositories of Partition memory. Across Punjab and Bengal, songs of longing and separation are still performed, encoding the pain of migration in metaphor and melody. These oral forms preserve emotional histories that would otherwise be lost. As Kaur observes, "folk narratives of Partition often articulate the unspoken traumas of the community, providing a shared vocabulary for grief and remembrance" (85). Institutional efforts have begun to harness and preserve these alternative archives. The *Partition Museum* in Amritsar offers a unique model, combining oral histories with exhibits of everyday objects and personal stories. Visitors encounter not only timelines and maps but also trunks, letters, and household items donated by Partition survivors. The museum's curators argue that "it is through these humble artefacts that the humanity of Partition is most powerfully conveyed" (*The Partition Museum*). Similarly, *The 1947 Partition Archive* has created a vast digital repository of video-recorded oral testimonies, accessible worldwide. This crowdsourced project enables diverse voices, across class, caste, gender and religion, to enter the historical record, resisting the exclusions of more official archives.

Yet these initiatives must also grapple with questions of representation and ethics. As Kumar cautions, "the archive of trauma is never neutral; it is shaped by who collects, who curates, and which stories are privileged" (211). Oral traditions and alternative archives thus demand ongoing critical reflection, not only about the histories they preserve, but about the politics of their preservation.

Cultural Hybridity and Ambivalence

Partition did not merely fracture geographic territories; it also fragmented identities, forcing millions to reconstruct their sense of self in unfamiliar sociopolitical landscapes. The experience of displacement, trauma, and resettlement compelled survivors and their descendants to negotiate new forms of belonging while carrying the psychic burdens of an irreparably altered past. Memory and identity became inextricably entwined, shaping how refugee communities imagined themselves within emerging national narratives and diasporic spaces.

In addition, there were largely disrupted identities, whether geographic, communal, or cultural. The theoretical resources of postcolonial thought, especially the work of Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, offer a compelling lens through which to interrogate these identity transformations. Bhabha (1994) challenges essentialist notions of identity, proposing instead the concept of *cultural hybridity*: "It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (38). Partition survivors and their descendants often inhabit such *third spaces*, negotiating between the lost homelands of the past and the socio-cultural contexts of the present. Hall likewise conceives of identity as a process; never fixed, but always in flux. He writes that cultural identity is "not an essence but a positioning" (226). This is acutely relevant to Partition-affected communities whose self-definitions are shaped by memories of displacement, new geographies of settlement, and the demands of national belonging. The refugee experience, in particular, foregrounds identity as an ongoing negotiation rather than a stable inheritance.

For Partition migrants and diasporas such as Sindhi, Punjabi, and Bengali communities, the interplay of hybridity and postmemory results in layered identities. As Rita Kothari observes in her work on Sindhi migrants, language, cuisine, and ritual practices become sites of both loss and creative adaptation. Similarly, Kavita Puri's interviews with British South Asians reveal how Partition memories, carried across borders and generations, shape diasporic subjectivities marked by both rootedness and dislocation. Migration further entails an encounter with the nation-state, a site where Partition memories often clash with nationalist narratives. As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, "Memory cannot be reduced to the past; it is always also about the future, about the possibilities that history forecloses" (109). The shaping of Partition-affected identities must thus be seen as an ongoing process, one marked by negotiation, resistance, and creative reimagination.

The mass displacement of 1947 induced more than physical migrations; it engendered what can be termed a 'refugee identity', a complex social and cultural formation marked by loss, resilience, and adaptation. In both India and Pakistan, refugees were not simply incorporated into the national fabric; they were required to perform and embody narratives of citizenship and loyalty that frequently masked deep wounds of dispossession. As Butalia observes, "Partition refugees were made to forget the lands they had left and to embrace the nation they had entered, often without choice, often at great emotional cost" (168). Nation-building projects, particularly in India, sought to subsume refugee identities within the larger narrative of national progress. Yet refugee memories frequently resisted this official script. Oral histories reveal how many survivors continued to view themselves not solely as citizens of the new nation but as displaced persons, their selfhood tethered to the lost homes across the border.

As Bhalla argues, "The refugee experience foregrounds a subjectivity that is neither fully national nor entirely alien but caught in a liminal space between homeland and hostland" (72). State policies and social perceptions further reinforced this complex identity. In urban resettlement colonies, from Delhi's Lajpat Nagar to Lahore's Model Town, refugees formed new communal networks grounded in shared experiences of migration and loss. These spaces became crucible, wherein memories of Partition mingled with the imperatives of survival, gradually producing hybrid forms of cultural expression that reflected both rupture and continuity.

The diasporic experiences of Sindhi, Punjabi, and Bengali migrants offer rich case studies of how cultural hybridity and ambivalence were negotiated in the wake of Partition. Each of these communities, while sharing the trauma of displacement, engaged with memory and identity in distinct ways shaped by language, religion, and regional histories. For Sindhi Hindus, Partition entailed not only territorial dislocation but also profound linguistic and cultural rupture. With no designated homeland in postcolonial India, Sindhi refugees grappled with a pervasive sense of unbelonging. As Kothari notes, "Partition for Sindhi Hindus meant an enduring crisis of identity, as they sought to preserve a language and culture that no longer had a territorial base" (10). In oral narratives, Sindhi migrants often express both pride in their cosmopolitan adaptability and a lingering sorrow for the gradual erosion of Sindhi language and traditions within diasporic settings (132).

Punjabi migrants, both Hindu and Sikh, experienced a different dynamic. In northern India and eastern Pakistan, the massive movement of Punja-

bis across the new borders led to violent ruptures, but also to the transplantation of vibrant cultural practices. Punjabi refugees in India, particularly in Delhi and Haryana, rapidly rebuilt economic and social capital, yet their cultural expressions, songs, proverbs, oral histories, retain a deep ambivalence toward the new national order. As Talbot observes, "Punjab was simultaneously a space of nation-making and nation-wounding, and this duality continues to shape Punjabi memory" (14). For Bengali Hindus migrating from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Partition unfolded in waves, with later migrations in 1950 and 1971. Bengali refugee narratives frequently articulate a complex negotiation between nostalgia for the cultural richness of East Bengal and the harsh realities of marginalization in post-Partition India. In the words of Chatterji, "Bengali refugee identity remains marked by both a refusal to forget and a struggle to belong" (256). The cultural hybridity of this diaspora is evident in its literature, theatre and culinary traditions, domains where memory serves both as a bridge to the past and a resource for constructing new identities.

Across these diasporas, hybridity is not simply a cultural blending but a condition of living with ambivalence, of inhabiting multiple, often conflicting places. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" is particularly useful here: it is in this space of in-betweenness that refugee identities are continually negotiated (55). Oral histories richly illustrate how Partition migrants navigate this third space, crafting lives that resist the binary of home and exile.

Memory and Identity Among the Postmemory Generation

For the Postmemory generations, those born after Partition but shaped by its transmitted memories, the challenge is not simply to remember but to make sense of an inherited past that remains unfinished. Postmemory again plays a crucial role as it highlights "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (Hirsch 5). In Partition-affected families, this inheritance often takes the form of fragmented stories, ritual silences, and the haunting presence of objects linked to lost homes. Partition Studies, therefore, reveal how young people navigate this complex legacy. Many express a desire to "reclaim" family histories through oral interviews, archival research, or visits to ancestral sites now located across international borders. Yet this reclamation is fraught with contradictions. As Malhotra poignantly observes, the subsequent generations "inherits not a coherent narrative but a series of scattered fragments, each charged with affect but elusive in meaning" (25).

The *afterlife* of Partition must therefore negotiate multiple forms of belonging; national, familial and cultural, that do not always align. Hall's notion of identity as "always in process, always constituted within representation" is especially resonant here (223). Young descendants of Partition survivors often find themselves crafting hybrid identities that incorporate both inherited grief and contemporary transnational perspectives. In diasporic contexts, such as among British South Asians documented in Puri's *Partition Voices*, the legacy of Partition takes on an additional dimension, shaped by racialized experiences in Western societies (108). At its most vital, postmemory does not simply replicate the traumas of the past but reimagines them in ways that foster empathy, dialogue, and critical reflection. Digital platforms, community archives, and transnational networks now offer new spaces for this reimagining, enabling younger generations to engage with Partition memory as a living, evolving cultural resource.

Conclusion

Partition, as this paper has explored, is not merely a historical event to be contained within the boundaries of official archives or nationalist narratives. It is a lived, layered memory that continues to reverberate across generations, shaping identities, forging counter-histories, and informing cultural expression in profound and unexpected ways. Through the lens of Memory Studies, we have seen how Partition memories are both personal and collective, etched in the emotional testimonies of survivors, encoded in the folk songs and family heirlooms of migrant communities, and carried forward in the postmemory of younger generations. Trauma Theory, particularly through the work of Caruth, has illuminated the delayed, fragmented nature of these memories, while Postcolonial Theory helps us understand how displaced identities have negotiated hybridity, ambivalence, and new forms of belonging.

Oral traditions stand out as vital tools for recovering the multiplicity of Partition experiences—offering subjective truths that resist the linearity and exclusions of state-produced history. Whether voiced in testimonies, embodied in objects, or transmitted through intergenerational storytelling, these memories provide a more humane and textured understanding of the Partition's impact. Simultaneously, the cultural hybridity of diasporic communities (Sindhi, Punjabi and Bengali) reveals how identity formation is an ongoing, often ambivalent negotiation with both past and present. For the postmemory generation, Partition is not a closed chapter but a haunting legacy, one that they inherit with both reverence and critical distance. Today, the memory of Partition retains acute relevance in South

Asia's political and cultural life. Rising majoritarian narratives, continued border tensions, and new waves of communal violence make the efforts of remembering Partition, truthfully and ethically, more urgent than ever. Memory can serve here as both a warning and a bridge: a warning against the perils of othering, and a bridge toward cross-border understanding. Community-based archives, oral history projects, and digital platforms like the 1947 Partition Archive and the Partition Museum demonstrate how memory scholarship is evolving, moving beyond the scholar's desk to embrace participatory, transnational and multimedia forms.

Future research must deepen this interdisciplinary engagement. There is rich potential in comparative studies of Partition memory across South Asian borders and within global diasporas. Digital humanities offer exciting new methodologies for mapping memory networks and visualizing the emotional geographies of displacement. Equally, more attention must be paid to marginalized voices within Partition histories such as Dalits, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and religious minorities, whose stories remain underrepresented. Only through such expanded inquiry can we continue to unearth the many layers of Partition memory, and in doing so, contribute to a more inclusive, empathetic understanding of South Asia's fractured yet interconnected past.

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