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## From Archives to Memories: The Historiographical Transition in Partition Studies

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### ABSTRACT

Partition being the most contested discourse has attracted a wide range of scholarship over the decades. To understand the evolving historiography this article attempts to trace the emerging trends revolving around the episodic event of partition., the millions who were uprooted across the borders and the initiative taken to provide relief and rehabilitation to them. The beginning of the discourse centred around the reflection of those who participated in the event, materialised in the form of autobiographies, biographies, diaries and memoirs. The article develops by treading into the regional dimension and locating the differentiated treatment meted out to the refugees from different regions. It then encompasses long term processes of migration, state led rehabilitation as a tool of nation building and the persistent long shadow of partition that continues to influence citizenship and refugee policies in the sub continent. Later the orientation shifted towards gender, caste and class. The focal shift of scholarship reveals that the trauma of displacement and the process of resettlement were profoundly mediated by one's social location, making the experience of widows, low caste population radically different from that of upper caste. This has challenged any homogeneous narrative of victimhood or recovery. The recent fundamental rise of oral history has transformed the historiography of partition. It has prioritized firsthand testimonies of intimate human experience of survivors. Partition memories through



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material culture, using objects like jewellery, utensils and documents as link to the past, revealing stories of displacement, resilience and lost grandeur.

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### **Introduction:**

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most transformative and traumatic moments in South Asian history. Accompanied by unprecedented violence, mass displacement, and the redrawing of political boundaries, Partition displaced nearly fifteen millions and permanently altered the social, demographic, and political landscape of the subcontinent. Refugees confronted uncertainty, loss, and marginalisation, while the newly independent states struggled to formulate systems of relief and rehabilitation amid political instability and economic constraint.

The Partition of India in 1947 has long occupied a central place in South Asian historiography, yet the ways in which this event has been written about have undergone significant transformation over time. The study of the historiography of Partition is crucial, not merely to trace changing historical interpretations, but to understand how historical writing itself has expanded to incorporate experiences of refugees, questions of citizenship, and the role of the postcolonial state. While the political origins of Partition have been extensively debated, the human aftermath of this event unfolded over decades, shaping everyday life in both India and Pakistan. Examining this evolution reveals how Partition was not a singular event confined to 1947, but a prolonged historical process whose afterlives shaped society, politics, and state formation in post-independence South Asia.

For approximately two decades following Partition, the topic was largely shaped by the perspectives of those who had directly experienced the event. The field was dominated by biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs, which invariably brought attention to "great men" and their accomplishments. Many participants and observers believed they had witnessed events of historic significance and felt compelled to document their thoughts in diaries. Lord Louis Mountbatten, the final British Viceroy in India, was acutely aware of the enormous "mission" he had been asked to perform there. He was especially concerned that official records would later speak eloquently about his conduct. Thus, a number of stories continued to unfold as the Raj came to an end.

The memoirs of a number of eminent colonial officials, both military and civil, were at the top of the list. The first of these, 'At Freedom's Door', was based on observations made by Punjabi civil official Sir Malcolm Darling during a trip to northern India in the first few months of 1947. Darling learned



during his travels "the burning question was Pakistan, to be or not to be (Darling,1949). A "ringside view" of "the last phase of the India Army's watch and ward over the country" was then given by Gen. Sir Francis Tuker, who was in charge of the Eastern Command during the split. He described communal violence in dramatic detail, especially during the riots in Bihar and the "Great Calcutta Killings," which his forces were asked to put an end to. In the early 1950s, a plethora of other accounts of the events surrounding partition became available. Subsequent works in the same genre, such as those by V.P. Menon and Penderel Moon, were also related to the partition process in their official capacity.

Early accounts by officials and observers, followed later by narratives from Indian and Pakistani figures, significantly complicated and partisan interpretations of Partition. They confine it in the nation-state's politicized and conflicting discourses. One illustration of this is 'India Wins Freedom', written by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the leading proponent of Hindu-Muslim harmony, president of the Indian National Congress from 1940 to 1946, a key player in the final negotiations for the transfer of power, and the symbol of "secular" India following independence (Tuker, 1950).

Professional historians entered the domain in 1967, apparently discontent with what appeared to be an unending stream of didactic autobiographical reflection. The idea originated with Sir Cyril Philips and his associates, who called a conference in August 1967 to reconsider division in light of its twentieth anniversary. 'The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives 1935–1947', which summarized the conference proceedings, provided a preview of the more extensive historical studies that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s.

Later, the British government's decision to publish official records on the end of empire—materialized in the twelve-volume series *Transfer of Power*, produced by a group under the direction of Sir Nicholas Mansergh—further shaped interpretations of Partition. The Quaid-i-Azam papers and other priceless historical documents became the source of endless interpretation surrounding partition. Above all, it drew the intense attention of professional historians to the final years of colonial rule, a period unavoidably dominated by the intertwined issues of Partition and the transfer of power. With the opening of archives in Britain and the Indian subcontinent itself in the 1970s, a wide range of documents became accessible, and historians called their shots. Due to their privileged access to official documents, men who had participated in historical events and wrote authoritatively about them were increasingly questioned and even viewed with suspicion. Researchers had access to more than 7,500 documents covering the final five and a half years of British rule in India owing to the *Transfer of Power* series alone.



Another scholarly project *Towards Freedom* was initiated in 1972 by the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) with the objective of publishing authentic archival documents relating to India's struggle for independence and the Partition of 1947. It attempted to enrich the historiography of decolonisation through a more nuanced understanding of Indian agency, regional dynamics, and internal political debates surrounding freedom, Partition, and the transfer of power. The project sought to bring together official records, private papers, correspondence, and contemporary documents produced by Indian political leaders, provincial governments, and nationalist organisations

With the abundance of information available, historians were undoubtedly able to start unraveling the intricate hagiographic and personal narratives that had grown over the previous 20 years. The major preoccupation proved to be "strategy" of the major participants, including Congress and Muslim League leaders, especially the mysterious Quaid-i-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and the final three Viceroy, Linlithgow, Wavell, and Mountbatten, proved to be a major concern. When we look into the Jinnah according to Indian historiography, he was a "conventional," liberal-style politician in the "secular" mold who, following a humiliating electoral setback in 1937, adopted the "communal path," insisted that Muslims have their own "sovereign" nationhood, and ultimately caused the "tragedy" of partition. He is portrayed in the traditional Pakistani perspective as a "father of the nation" who, despite endless challenges put in his way by the Congress and the British, fought to protect the "interests" of the Muslim "minority" and succeeded in establishing a distinct Muslim "nation." But this image of Jinnah has been contested by Ayesha Jalal's "revisionist" work, particularly the rigidity of his political objectives. According to her, Jinnah never "sought distinct Muslim nationhood but employed the demand to put himself on an equal standing in the administration of a united India, on par with Congress spokespersons. According to her, Jinnah desired "a full six-province Pakistan with subordinate Dominion Status under a limited central authority reflecting the principle of parity and secured by British commanded forces" (Jalal, 1985).

One beneficial element, nevertheless, was that partition studies became "regional" in the 1980s, following a trend that had previously characterized the development of nationalist historiography. Concerns changed from "all-India" viewpoints into provincial and regional settings. The new works covered a variety of topics: they examined how power-sharing arrangements operated, particularly in Bengal and Punjab; they examined the origins of Muslim "separatism" and the electoral and popular support it was able to demonstrate.



The predominant method continued to focus on Bengal and Punjab as two homogeneous regions, and the migrants were examined as a single, cohesive group. The practice of historians using empirical materials to support specific claims gained popularity. The writings of H V Hodson and V.P. Menon clearly showed this tendency (Hudson, 1961; Menon, 1957). In succeeding decades, historians like D.N. Panigrahi, Shashi Joshi, and B.R. Nanda followed the pattern of writing a chronological history of Partition, where a thorough account of the transfer of power is crucial (Joshi, 1994; Nanda, 1980; Panigrahi, 1969). The majority of these works were assembled from a governmental perspective at a time when refugee movements and violence associated with Partition were viewed as unavoidable corollaries and therefore not required in the forefront.

In order to address pre-Partition mourning, the primary trend in academic history writing highlighted violence associated with Partition and elevated the idea of high politics. By uniting the Bengal and Punjab borderlands, Mushirul Hasan was credited with bringing refugee concerns and Partition together. He disproved the so-called "hostage theory" of the Congress, which held that the latter was a defenseless player in the politics of the Muslim League and the Raj, and he disproved concerns about "high politics" (Hasan, 1993).

Moving beyond institutional and demographic frameworks, historians began to explore the psychological scars of Partition, foregrounding questions of trauma, loss, nostalgia, and the fractured sense of belonging among displaced populations. Suranjan Das, Gyanendra Pandey, and Rakesh Batabyal had studied the psychological effects of riots before and after partition, but they had not examined refugee trauma (Batabyal, 2005; Das, 1991; Pandey, 1990). However, Pandey contended that "silences generally pervade memories in discussion of violence, female abduction, and the relations of authority and subservience"; despite its particular regional constraints, this governed daily life soon following Partition.

Such approaches enabled a deeper interrogation of the Bengali refugee experience, situating their struggles for rehabilitation, citizenship, and dignity within broader debates on nation-building and state responsibility. Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay attempted to explore the actual social position or expectations of the Bengali refugees living in West Bengal, while Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarty dealt with urban refugees and concentrated on their left political affiliation and active participation in "agitational politics" after the 1950s (Bandyopadhyay, 1970; Chakrabarty, 1990). In discussions of Partition and the refugee situation in Bengal, the focus has always been primarily on West Bengal, leaving the migration of post-Partition Bengali refugees to other regions on the periphery.



However, by shedding light on their "experiences of refugee-hood," Nilanjana Chatterjee elucidated the layers of their pain or anxiety and described it as "turning an insult to strength with the help of anthropological methodology (Chatterjee, 1999). Pradip Kumar Bose highlighted their experiences regarding "the cruelty of inside and outside" by combining official documents and anecdotal sources. He attempted to explain how refugees developed a new world based on their recollections of a home back home (Bose, 1990). In her first book, Joya Chatterjee examined the Hindu *bhadralok's* role in the altered sociopolitical landscape of undivided Bengal. In her follow-up, she developed her own theories to explain what happened to those who backed Partition and how the *bhadralok* was dealing with the post-Partition environment (Chatterji, 1994).

Historians and social scientists addressed the citizenship question and other legal concerns about security and care associated with Partition and the refugees on the other side of the Bengal border much later. Ranabir Samaddar questioned the legitimacy of refugees and attempted to place their crises in a global context. He is acknowledged for performing macro-level study by combining pertinent Partition issues and refugee concerns in the east (Samaddar, 1997). Sanjoy K. Roy focused on human rights legislation and refugee protection, particularly the sociopolitical aspects of their issues in northeastern and eastern India (Roy, 2001).

This marked a further shift in historical writing, as scholars began to explore the environmental consequences of refugee settlement, including changes in land use, ecology, and agrarian structures. Manisha Deb Sarkar illustrated how the regular environmental balances along the eastern borders were disrupted by the aftermath of Partition. Land degradation, urbanization, and stress on the agricultural system were brought about by changes in the natural drainage system, ground water utilities, biotic resource conservation, food preferences, and culture (Sarkar, 2001).

A new pattern of defining the long-term impact of Partition on refugees from the South Asian perspective and the tendency of viewing it through area studies developed alongside contemporary approaches. Diverging from the earlier historiography the pathbreaking works of Tai Yong Tai and Gyanesh Kudaisya along with others like Yasmin Khan, Vazira Fazila Yacoobali Zamindar addressed the long term impacts of partition on the refugees from South Asian perspective and viewing it through area studies along contemporary approach (Tan & Kudaisya, 2000; Khan, 2007; Zamindar, 2007). The focus of this strand of writings was ascertaining the aftermath of the partition on the lives of those who lived through it.



In the last decade of the 20th century, a tendency emerged within the framework of Partition studies to uncover marginal voices in order to gain a new psychological perspective on the problem of trauma and refugee experiences. The Partition-related memoirs of Kamla Patel and Ashoka Gupta, who collected first-hand accounts from Partition-displaced women who were frequently victims of rape or other violence either after the riots of 1946 or after Partition, had a significant influence on some feminist writers and activists, including Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamala Bhasin, who came forward to restore agency to non-elite groups (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Khan, 2007). Their focus was on the human dimension with a distinct focus on gender. The refugee families' unique trauma was portrayed in this literature. Their writings were mostly based on their personal encounters with the refugee women in the field, and they attempted to record the voices of the women. This specific movement attempted to build the idea of layered refugee identities, particularly those of women, and disputed the prevailing tendency of literature on "high politics" or official histories of Partition.

As shown in the writings of Jasodhara Bagchi, Subhoranjan Dasgupta, Paula Banerjee and Anasua Basu Ray Choudhury, another simultaneous shift was the documentation and construction of narratives emphasizing gender issues based on oral sources (Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2007; Banerjee & Basu Ray Choudhury, 2011). They examined the entire debate from the macro-level perspective of writing histories and concentrated on how Partition-borne trauma altered women's perspectives.

At the turn of the 20th century, Bengali autobiographies on the lives of refugees began to emerge as another new agency tied to Partition and refugee studies. This, along with the experiences of caste refugees and oppressed classes. With an emphasis on the effects of Partition's fringe classes, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay initiated a groundbreaking project and a distinctive trend of writing on Namasudras, Matuas, and other scheduled caste exiles (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). The crises of the oppressed classes and lower castes were expressed by Manoranjan Byapari, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Jatin Bala, Asit Baran Thakur, and Kapil Krishna Thakur in their groundbreaking works. They published autobiographical works about Dalit identities in the context of refugee status. They discussed the host nation's mass mindset and the reactions of government policy to refugees.

Oral sources were incorporated into official narratives and scholarship on Partition literature emerged as the next trend in Partition studies. Newspaper pieces and journal articles published in vernacular languages, as well as novels, poetry, short stories, and refugee memoirs, started to be used. Ayesha Jalal wrote a book on Saadat Hasan Manto's literary works that presented an intimate history of Partition (Jalal, 2013). Interviews with survivors or the experiences of second- and third-generation migrants were



a significant source to understand how Partition or refugeehood was seen in their daily lives. In the instance of Bengal, Jayanti Basu referred to "designed violence" as "soft violence," although concentrating on the painful period that persisted in the generation's mind (Basu, 2013).

Three generations later, Ananya Jahanara Kabir talked about the long-lasting effects of Partition on modern cultural practices in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan (Kabir, 2013). Her perspective deviates from earlier Partition scholarship by revealing the relationship between violence, memory, melancholy, and modernity. She contends that 1947 and 1971 were connected epochal events, creating a new paradigm for memory studies in South Asia. The recent work of Anjali Gera Roy is a crucial addition to this specific field of study. She attempted to challenge the so-called official history of Partition by utilizing a variety of source sources and examined the connection between the macro and micro histories of Partition using individual recollections.

By the start of the twenty-first century, partition-related studies had become increasingly multifaceted and diverse. The majority of researchers attempted to contend that Partition has continued to be closely linked to the politics of identities despite the fields' incompatibility (since the macro studies failed to provide an overall outline of the problem and the South Asian perspectives frequently ignored regional variety issues). Even though the region is still dealing with the problems caused by Partition, it is undeniable that the experience of Partition in North-East India has never been included in traditional history texts. In addition to the ongoing insecurity brought on by the divided land, a number of pressing issues, such as boundary redrawing, concerns about the citizenship of immigrants and refugees, the lack of fencing in nearly the whole northeastern region until the late 1980s, silent human migration, and the depressed state of women living in borderlands, are the causes of their daily suffering. Some historians and social scientists, such as H.K. Borpujari, S.L. Baruah, A.C. Bannerjee, Amiya Kumar Das and Monirul Hussain, have written about Assam's colonial and post-Partition circumstances, but they have chosen to focus only on the effects of Bengali migration or the imposition of Bengali language and culture on Assamese society (Banerjee, 1946; Barpujari, 1998; Baruah, 1985; Hussain, 1993).

However, several new areas had been studied and contemporary historians had started new methods. The books by Sanghamitra Mishra, Nandana Dutta, Moushumi Dutta Pathak, Udayan Misra as well as issues pertaining to identity politics in Assam, have shed some light on the paths of human tragedy (Dutta, 2012; Dutta Pathak, 2017; Misra, 2011; Misra, 2017). However, they paid more attention to concerns of identity and community while generally ignoring the disputes around tribal matters.



Anindita Ghoshal made a significant intervention by situating Partition within a broader regional framework, covering experiences from West Bengal and North-East India to Pakistan and Bangladesh. In addition to addressing the various categories of refugees, this book expands the scope of historical studies on Partition by examining the experience of Hindu refugees in India. It also investigates the conditions of Muslim returnees in Pakistan's eastern and western regions. This book attempts to make the case that refugee studies and partition studies are in fact essential to one another. In fact, when writing on any of the concerns as a "major theme," it is frequently impossible to separate the two due to their essential nature and causal relationship (Ghoshal, 2022).

By interrogating citizenship through a comparative framework, Pallavi Chakravarty illuminated how refugee policies were unevenly applied and how women's experiences remained shaped by social stigma, insecurity, and state regulation. How did the Indian government view the refugees from West and East Pakistan? Did the policies put in place to incorporate them into the recently established Republic of India differ? *Boundaries and Belonging: Rehabilitating Refugees in India, 1947-1971* details and examines the Indian State's attempts to rehabilitate the refugees who came to India following the catastrophic subcontinental divide. The physical boundaries of India and Pakistan were established by partition and borders, but the rehabilitation programs in both nations decided the important question of citizenship, making them more than merely administrative tasks. This book explores the goals of the emerging nation-state in identifying its inhabitants by contrasting the policies and treatment of refugees from West and East Pakistan. This piece explores the extent to which state-defined stereotypes are accurate in comparison to the efforts of refugees along both borders to rebuild their lives, with a particular focus on Delhi and Kolkata, two significant refugee cities in post-Partition India. The circumstances of female refugees and their attempts to adapt to their new environment are the subject of a particular chapter. This book advances the idea that strong collaboration between the State, the host community, and the refugees themselves is necessary for a successful rehabilitation program, drawing on these past experiences (Chakravarty, 2022).

In recent years, the historiography of Partition has been significantly enriched by initiatives dedicated to recording oral history narratives of displacement and refugee rehabilitation. The establishment of The 1947 Partition Archive in 2011 marked a decisive shift towards preserving survivor testimonies through systematic, community-based documentation. This emphasis on lived experience was further institutionalised with the creation of the Partition Museum in Amritsar and later in Delhi, which integrate oral narratives with material culture to foreground refugee memory in the public domain. Digital projects such as the Indian Memory Project and Project Dastaan have extended this historiographical expansion



by combining personal recollection with visual and technological mediums. Collectively, these initiatives have challenged state-centric and archival silences, repositioning memory, experience, and rehabilitation within the broader interpretive framework of Partition history.

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