

Final report: Title: Safe Passage and Shelter during Partition of India: Exploring Oral Histories to Understand the Minorities Connect **Grantee:** Dr Snober Sataravala

i) **How is the Hypothesis confirmed or updated:** The preliminary report focussed on providing shelter and safe passage during the tumultuous Partition border crossing, however, the final report also explores issues of erasure of human contribution by neutral minorities; expanding it to include other minorities. Pierre Nora talks of three sites of memory- (i) Amnesia or erasure often linked to shame, (ii) nostalgia which glorifies the past and (iii) hypermemory that focusses on one singular aspect which in a sense leads to identity formation. Hypermemory, with regards to partition, should not simply be about violence. Erasure of trauma is a disservice to those, who despite absolute loss, rebuilt their lives. On the other counter narratives of hope and heroism must not be erased either, for these are essential to the future identity of the two nations. Narratives by minorities are especially crucial to stabilise or balance the unstable histories of the dominant conflicting groups. An instance of an unstable history due to erasure is **P2J287's** version of the legend of the massacre at Qissa Khwani bazaar. In his memory, Abdul Ghaffar Khan's non-violent *Khudai Khidmatgar* (servants of God) or red shirts movement against the British Indian government is replaced by Gurkha soldiers of the Royal Garhwal Rifles. The significance of this anecdote is justification for this research. Erasure in the collective memory of the Hindu population remembers the legend as martyring of Gurkhas but erases that of the Muslim population. It merges their contribution into a narrative of the nation and sacrifice of the people. The fact that they were Muslims holding their Koran's praying peacefully is erased. They become people of the town who were massacred. **Roedad Khan**, an eye witness, mentions not only the peaceful "red shirt" protestors but also the Garhwali or Gurkha regiment's sacrifice. **6X9ULB** expands on cultural erasure and loss as the Armenian Church and the two synagogues in Calcutta are defunct due to migration en masse, much of it due to fear. **Archbishop Evarist Pinto** points out that the

partition of Punjab and Bengal is thought of in terms of land and of course unbearable suffering, however, many experienced partition of family which came with its own pain. A common thread in partition narratives is trains full of corpses, **Farokh Dhunjishah Mavalwala** notices the scavengers left Karachi and yet nobody acknowledges the people who cleaned the trains so that they could provide safe passage to people. **GU6HSA, U1L2LK** both referred to the Gurkha contribution in their safe passage. Again, Parsi Commanding officers like Lt General Sataravala¹ of the Fifth Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force) who accompanied trains or the Parsi engine drivers² who operated the trains in their *sadras*³ to prove their neutral status receive no mention. This is probably because they are such a miniscule minority and hence it is all the more important to record their contributions. **Prof Ranbir Vohra**, a Hindu, working with All India Radio in Lahore realised a week before Pakistan came into being that they lacked patriotic songs or poems to welcome the new nation. Everything written, even by the Muslims, had been for India and the Congress Party. These too have been absorbed as narratives of the nation erasing the patriotic contribution of the minority. **8HF502** also comments on the role of the radio in his interview. Vohra was in charge of broadcasting messages informing families of tickets purchased, trains leaving, flight tickets using technology to save lives and ensure safe passage in an organised way. All India Radio also ran programmes for resettling of refugees and bringing comfort and solace to them.

ii) **Overall Findings:** The contributions of the four neutral minorities being acknowledged are:

Parsis: 0EYEKF, FMZ659, 66VXY4⁴, all shared narratives of their family's contribution both as an organised collective effort as well as at individual levels. **Yezdyar Kaosji** explains, for the princely state of Hyderabad the ramifications of partition were felt a year later with the rise

¹ Collins, Larry, and Dominique Lapierre. Freedom at Midnight, 1975. Print.

² Oral history provided by Sanaya Nariman,

³ Religious undergarment worn by Parsis

⁴ Mentioned in the preliminary report

of the right-wing Muslim Razakars. 13th September 1948 marked the start of the police action, a euphemism for the Indian military invasion of Hyderabad, as it refused to accede to India. Entire families were obliterated till it ended on the 18th of September 1948. His father was part of the civic guards who were civilians trying to maintain peace particularly between warring Muslim and Hindu mobs. With respect to shelter and safe passage his role would be of significance ten years later. Due to the military insurgence, an entire wing of Victoria Memorial Home of which he was superintendent, was occupied by orphans from the district of Osmanabad. The age of the orphans varied from 10 years, as they must have come as babies during the police action, to 20 years old and the numbers were in hundreds. His father's first responsibility was to ensure that the children and young adults enter mainstream society and leave the orphanage. This was a difficult proposition as they were uneducated and unskilled. He set up a technical school and stopped the corruption. He ensured that over 25 girls were married and found the boys jobs in the army. Due to the Afghan problem, **Mavalwala's** father was hired as a security guard on the goods train that went from Quetta northwards. At the time of partition, the Hindus were transferred out. Mavalwala's father opted for India but did not get a posting till March of 1948 as he was a neutral minority. The station master at Multan was a Parsi gentleman and friend of Mavalwala's family. They received a message sometime in February 1948 that the Parsis station master, his wife and dog had been killed because they assisted Hindu families escape. Mavalwala also remembers a Mr Sidwa in Karachi who was arrested in May/June 1948 for helping people cross the border. **Jeroo Patel's** father was a railway ticket inspector in Chennai. All the Parsis concur that, along with the Anglo-Indians, a number of Parsis worked with the railways especially during Partition. By default, it was inescapable that they did not have a role to play in safe passage as their neutrality would definitely have been availed of by the railways. Significant is the role of education in providing shelter. The Christian missionary schools played their part but so did the Parsi schools. **Gita**

Gidwani on migrating from Hyderabad, Sindh to Pune felt alienated in the English-speaking Hutching's School. It was the Parsi Sardar Norshirwan Dastur Highschool that would provide her academic and emotional shelter despite the initial difficulty to integrate. **Zuleikha Zar** after leaving Hyderabad, Deccan studied at the Mama Parsi School for Girls founded by the Sidwa Family.

Christians: N5IXA6, DVJBX4, I79Q8G⁵ gave instances of protection afforded by Christians. **ND7G00** remembers Sikhs and Hindus on a rampage with drawn swords. In order to escape, their Muslim milkman took shelter hiding in their garage as it was a Christian neighbourhood. All his relatives had been slaughtered, his livestock stolen and he had been without food and water for a week. **ND7G00's** mother carried him in and nursed him to health. His father's Muslim peon, before joining the caravan out, thrust an Ovaltine tin filled with gold into his mother's hand. 8 years later he returned and was given his savings. **GWNRXU** remembers their Christian employees overhear the Muslims plan to attack the family. At midnight they tossed in a brick with a letter tied to it offering assistance. The Christians divided into 2 groups to confuse the attackers. The family escaped but with only the clothes on their back. **2QOF9I's** father, due to the burning of the Hindu neighbours and the firing, decided to shift to India despite assurance from the Muslim League that as Christians they would be safe. **2QOF9I's** uncle, an engine driver, promised to stop the train at their station and collect them. A raging Muslim mob made that impossible causing him to race through to save the lives of his passengers. **2QOF9I's** father was then advised by missionaries to shift to a Christian village for safety. He sought the help of a British missionary to take them to India who initially refused but later capitulated.

⁵ Mentioned in the preliminary report

Anglo-Indians: **20KD2K, 3G4AIH**⁶ mentioned the role of both American and British Christians residing in India as well as those of mixed marriages. **FE9FT5**'s parents received news from their Muslim friend who discovered at a meeting that the locals were planning to burn their house in Jhelum. For safety, they took refuge in the field that belonged to their Anglo-Indian neighbour. **8EGNFX** had come to IEME Kirkee Poona to do a course in Radio Mechanics. 7 days after the declaration of partition 2 British majors accompanied the Muslim officers back to Karachi. As they boarded a train to Bombay the officers on the platform warned of an ambush by Sikhs. The British officers intervened and got the train full of Muslim officers through. En route when the train stopped, 60-70 rescued girls were brought for protection on the train and eventually taken to Karachi due to permission given by the British Officers.

Jews: **LK7OWJ** joined the Indian air force in 1946. During partition at night, they would go for sorties and identify burning villages. His Sikh flying instructor along with 2 cadets went armed to houses in the villages and stood guard over the women and children until the British came with trucks and took them safely to India. His wife Rebecca lived in Ajmer. The Muslim baker requested her family to shelter his daughter and he returned for her when things quietened down. **Stafford Elias** was in the Jute business. Hindus and Muslims put their jewellery and money in sealed jute gunny sacks and kept them in his warehouses for safety. Once the trouble subsided, they retrieved their bags.

iii) **How did access to Oral History Interviews change the Grantee's personal understanding of Partition?**

The research provided an understanding that there are other unacknowledged non-religious minorities like the physically challenged or for example the blind students and orphans that **Yezdyar Kaoosji** described, the rescued women referred to by **0EYEKF, FMZ659, Meher**

⁶ Mentioned in the preliminary report

Parakh, NDWKTU and others. In this selection of oral histories, narratives of people regarding the fate of residents, particularly women, in mental asylums did not feature. FMZ659's mother's idea of safe passage and shelter was to train the rescued women to be self-reliant whereas the male counter parts tended to only see marriage as a source of shelter. The difference in rehabilitating rescued women is reiterated by OEYEKF, FMZ659 and Zuleikha Zar whose mother started the Women's Refugee Rehabilitation Centre, the school, an industrial rehabilitation centre with sewing machines and a women's college. Gender and partition are inseparable. The woman's body becomes the battlefield. She is property either to be raped or to be parcelled off in marriage which is often another form of rape. Ironically, partition was also a time of opportunity for women. **Gita Gidwani** acknowledges that it was their dire financial situation, due to partition, that allowed her sister to work opening doors for her to study medicine. India and Pakistan both before and after Partition possessed multicultural diverse spaces now bereft of so many minorities like Armenians, Jews, Chinese, Burmese, Anglo-Indians and the Parsis. Partition on the basis of religion depleted the cosmopolitan attitude making it right wing and intolerant. The presence of a variety of neutral minorities in Karachi, Lahore, Calcutta and Bombay helped serve as a buffer between the various communities. Neutral minorities, due to the British influence, had greater access to education and for both genders which helped in rehabilitation. The suddenness of Partition and the unpreparedness of people for the displacement is common to all narratives. **Prof Ranbir Vohra** was told in 1946 that partition was scheduled for 1948. In 1947 Mountbatten declared that partition inevitable in 2 months' time. Irrespectively, nobody anticipated the violence and forced exodus. The stories provide an understanding of the friendships in the army and elsewhere that survived partition. **U1L2LK** shares friendships between generals. His uncle received a message from his counterpart in India warning that the Indian sniper had him in his sight and next time he should be cautious. The generals had been part of the same regiment in

undivided India. **NDWKTU's** father, overnight made Brigadier in Amritsar with 13 battalions under him, dealt with looting, murder and rape. The commanding officer in Lahore was a junior from his previous regiment in a similar situation. To stem the lawlessness, due to the absence of a border, they both met and used *chunna* to draw the Wagah border 8th October 1947. **Roedad Khan** reminiscences about a reunion with his college friends who journeyed from India. The people of Pakistan, not just the Muslims, felt great love and faith in Jinnah as a leader. They also all admired Gandhi. The Other story is that Jinnah did not want partition. Regardless, both the Indian and the Pakistani government went back on their commitment to Kashmir and the Tribal Areas respectively. Although the British military leaders, as in the case of Amritsar, deserted their posts overnight many did provide protection to the vulnerable sections of society. There was also a reverse migration as in the case of **Archbishop Evarist Pinto** who originally was from Goa and migrated along with his family to Karachi for better economic opportunity. He had Portuguese documents thus he was migrating from Goa, Portugal not India.

iv) **How may it the Oral Histories change general publics' or researchers' understanding of Partition?**

People as individuals are not disharmonious. It is situations and power that manipulates them. All interviewees maintain they lived in harmony and were tolerant of each other. The carnage of partition was instigated by outsiders and marauding mobs. Almost none of the oral histories revealed any bitterness towards the country they were forced to migrate from. Present day generations who are fed narratives of hate based on this past to justify present day religious hatred could hear a counter narrative. However, governance and politics is inescapable and exclusive of civil communities. Both sides lost and suffered equally and are doing so till date. A legacy of hate will not lead to healing. These stories are those of survival and strength which are inspiring especially during the time of Covid when people have lost so much. Listening to

the different stories and perspectives especially from minorities opens up a world of understanding of difference and similarity which is crucial to harmonious existence and building of peaceful communities.

v) **Are further studies required to complete the Grantee's research and how will this be accomplished?** In order to write an academic research people of some scholarship time will be required to research some written history both fictional and non-fictional.

vii) **List of Oral Histories Consulted so far:** 1) 7268_Yezad Sam Kapadia 2) 727_ Violet Smith 3) 1851_Perin Boga 4) 5772_Dorothy Tullett 5) 2215_Amrit Chugh 6) 2492_Dolores Anne 7) 5372_Mirza Habibullah Khaleeli 8) 5410_Manjit Kaur Kaul 9) 5748_Bharat Chandra 10) 496_Bapsi Sidwa 11) 529_Daniel Golan 12) 420_Roshni Rustomjee 13) 8542_Yousaf Maseeh 14) 428_Harminder Singh Kohli 15) 6173_Vasu Dev 16) 7820_Keki Nasserwanji Daruwala 17) 2015_Humayun Khan 18) 2305_Shiv Kumar Sharma 19) 2344_Meheryar Engineer 20) 3172_Basant Vir Kakkar 21) 2735_Rafiq Mohammed[ali] Habib 22) 636_Pushpindar Singh 23) 5877_Qazi Mohammed Anwar Khan 24) 4650_Ranbir Vohra 25) 3339_Jagjit Singh Lamba 26) 4258_Yezdyar Kaoosji 27) 7267_Farokh Dhunjishah Mavalwala 28) 2245_Meher Parakh 29) 7224_Jeroo Patel 30) 528_David Yehezkiel 31) 530_Isaac Yehezkiel 32) 7266_Ava Gopal Khullar 33) 646_Stafford Elias

34) 2476_Archbishop Evarist Pinto 35) 2959_Gita Gidwani 36) 2905_Col Parvez Andrews

37) 2239_Zuleikha Zar 38) 5685_Gurjeet Kaur Kallo 39) 3680_Usha Dyer 40) 2279_Roedad Khan

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