

Writing Oral Histories of Partition

This project grew out of the fifteen oral histories that I collected over the two months of a Shansi-In-Asia Grant, spent in India, during the summer of 2014. Combining oral and written histories, ethnography and memoir, these personal stories explore the impact of the 1947 Partition on individual lives. The project's multidisciplinary method has been informed by sources in creative writing, South Asian history, Punjabi language and literature, and postcolonial studies. My informants were chosen by tracing familial connections on my father's side to friends and communities in Delhi and Himachal Pradesh. After returning to Oberlin in the fall of 2014 (the first semester of my sophomore year), I collected two more oral histories: one from a Punjabi man at the Kendal retirement community and one from a Punjabi man in Cleveland.

My interest in the partition started out as a way of understanding my grandmother. At the end of her life, my dadi told me about living through the ethnic violence that consumed Delhi in the late 1940s, which resulted in the death of her Muslim neighbor. Her large family lost their ancestral home in Punjab, and she helped her mother care for fifty of their relatives for the greater part of a year. When I travelled to Delhi and Shimla to collect oral histories of the 1947 partition of South Asia I was nineteen, and largely ignorant of the Partition's fraught histories. I had taken one class on Modern South Asian History the spring of my freshman year. Though my father was born and raised in India, I was unable to speak any Indic languages that would assist me in gathering these interviews. Thankfully, I did understand some conversational Hindi, because while the interviews were conducted in English, reflexive Hindi and Punjabi phrases used by the informants often expressed deeper and more nuanced meanings. While conducting research in India, my father's family became my most valuable resource, providing me with a broad network of people who could be tapped for accommodation and reference. In social situations, I slipped in uses of *auntie ji* and *uncle ji*, bits of propriety that won me acceptance into Indian society for the months that I collected oral histories. Roughly, I knew that Partition was the largest mass migration in history, shifting some fifteen million people from their homes: millions of Hindus and Sikhs to what is now India, millions of Muslims to what is now Pakistan. Partition became a genocide that reportedly killed one million people, but official records of the event were never kept.

Collecting the interviews was often a deeply personal experience, because in many instances, I stayed with the people I interviewed, slept in their homes, ate their food, looked at their family photographs. Some people presented me with tokens to remember them by. In 2016, the first person I interviewed that summer, Manmohan Singh Mitwah, passed away. The interviews themselves ranged from at least forty-five minutes to several hours, and the longest interviews took place over a period of several days. In total, the summer produced over twenty-seven hours

of material. I have used transcriptions of these interviews to develop the narratives for this project, which has also served as my creative writing capstone.

In the fall of my sophomore year, just after returning from my In-Asia grant, I took a Nonfiction workshop and began exploring a variety of narrative methods for framing the finished interviews. This class, taught by Professor Azita Osanloo, exposed me to a wide spectrum of non-fiction genres, including journalism and profile pieces, memoirs, essays, travelogues, and social commentary. We studied non-fiction forms as well as their ethical constraints. I drew from the non-fiction that I became acquainted with in this class to write my stories of the partition. Unexpectedly though, when I began writing, I found myself paralyzed by the fear of hurting or offending the people I had interviewed. But as Professor Osanloo pointed out to me after she read the first draft of my first interview, my reticence did not make for good writing. And so while I struggle even now with the implications of living histories, I have found a way to write them. Professor Osanloo continued to work with me on these interviews in a private reading in the spring of 2015, before taking a permanent position at Centre College.

Since the fall of 2015, I have been working on these stories with Sylvia Watanabe, first in a private reading and now for my capstone project. Professor Watanabe, who has extensive experience writing oral histories of nuclear disaster in Japan, has been invaluable. Particularly, she has helped me throughout the editing process to retain the integrity of characters' voices. As my last creative writing project at Oberlin, this capstone gave me the opportunity to hone in more deeply on the process of writing these interviews. My process of revision has become a great deal more conscientious, and has involved focusing both on the macro level of each interview's narrative arc and on the micro level of line-by-line editing. I feel I have finally found an appropriate narrative voice and form for each interview.

In addition to my creative writing courses, I continued to study South Asian history: I took a Post-Colonial Anglophone Literature class with Professor Anu Needham, and a seminar on Gandhi and Non-Violence as well as a class on the Environmental Histories of South Asia with Professor Michael Fisher. Additionally, in the summer of 2015, I was granted a Critical Language Scholarship to study Punjabi language intensively in Chandigarh. On my own time and in private readings, I read a number of books grounded in oral and familial histories: *Punjabi Century* by Prakash Tandon, *The Other Side of Silence* by Urvashi Butalia, and *Voices of Chernobyl*, *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *Secondhand Time* by Svetlana Alexievich. I have also sought out literature that created alternative histories by blending fiction and non-fiction: *A Train To Pakistan* by Kushwant Singh, *The Emigrants* by W.G. Sebald, and *Savage Harvest* by Mohinder Singh Sarna. I was particularly struck by *The Impossible Country* by Brian Hall, a travelogue through Yugoslavia just before the country's dissolution. Hall writes about hearing 'echoes,' as people used the same language to talk about each other or describe particular events. I was struck by this because in India too, while talking about Partition and different ethnic communities, the people I spoke with used a common language to describe what they experienced individually. This phenomenon relates to the historiographical notion of 'cultural memory'—

how society creates and maintains history in the collective domain. I studied cultural and collective memories in a course with Masha Gessen this spring titled "Remembering Stalin's Terrors," which also helped develop my ways of thinking about history and memory. It is not surprising that links can be drawn between the cultural memories of partitions in South Asia and the partitions of Eastern Europe. Indeed, such parallels reveal an imperative for whoever is willing to seek these stories out, and underscore the universal nature of the ways people make sense of large-scale violence and trauma.

Over the past four years of writing and thinking deeply about these stories, I began to understand how history interacts with lived lives. I reconsidered the way that violence is explained to me, often through the lens of history, which sometimes offers up abstract justifications for violence. Oral histories are important not only for what they reveal about violence, but also for what they reveal about the conditions under which that violence occurred. Each story defines Partition by the manner in which Partition forever altered a particular person's life.

In the future I will develop these stories into a book. I aspire to continue engaging with partition-histories in other parts of India, particularly in Kashmir, and to develop my understanding of ethnic conflict by comparison with partitions in Israel, Palestine, and the former Yugoslavia.

My First Interview: Mohni Chacha

My cousin and I take a serpentine road through the mountains, driving from Delhi to Himachal. The road is only wide enough for one and one-half cars, and at each turn I grip my seat, as a crescendo of car horns bursts into the air, and we pass within a breath of another vehicle. Municipal signs flash by, cautioning drivers to “Be Gentle on My Curves,” and we continue upwards into a thick forest of Deodars, which coat the ground in their spiny green needles. Purple flute-like Jacaranda flowers fall behind the car’s tires, swept up in the constant breeze of the Himalayas. We travel from Delhi to Shimla on the Grand Trunk Road, then Shimla to Mashobra on the Hindustan-Tibet Road, and at last we enter the gravel driveway of Mitwah Cottage, where Mohni Chacha is waiting on the deck. He is my grandmother’s younger sister’s husband’s younger brother, but I call him Mohni Chacha for efficiency.

Mohni greets me with a crushing hug, and I get a mouthful of white head-hair and beard-hair all at once. My eyes flick over his shoulder towards the hills, where the clouds slither down like vines. The fog that has subsumed the forest, presses against our tiny meeting at Mohni’s cottage. Mohni releases me, following my eyes to his ethereal setting, and he says that Mashobra is full of mysteries: “mist and trees.” He laughs at his own joke. Most things are jokes for Mohni Chacha, greetings and goodbyes, tragedy and humiliation. Though he retired as an Air Force officer, he considers himself a poet. If it were still a viable career option, I think he could have made an excellent living entertaining some royal patron. He insists that we take our time and offers me an alcoholic beverage, a clear white whiskey, then he laughs and I don’t know if he’s joking.

The servant’s daughter comes outside with an offering of tea and biscuits. Mohni Chacha looks over at the girl who is no more than twelve years. He accepts her tray, pointing to a makeshift table before him: a tree stump, and over it, a plank of wood, and over that, an alarmingly pink table cloth. After the girl sets the tray down he takes her around the waist and pulls her towards me,

“She’s smart,” he says, “this darling girl is so smart.”

His eyes are watering behind clear glasses, as he props her up. With the great affection he displays for her, I wonder at the way Mohni presents her to me, as some reflection of his goodness or generosity, or egalitarianism. I hardly have an understanding of Mohni’s relationship to the little girl. And yet, in my memory there is only his arm around the girl’s waist, the other hand flat against her stomach, pushing her into the middle of our conversation to introduce her. I could not smile back.

Mohni is watching me, and the girl smiles at her shoes.

“Ask your mummy to make some pakoras, sweetheart,” he says.
The girl nods in his direction and disappears into the cottage.

Placing my teacup on the tray, I ask if he is ready to start the interview. For a second dismay quivers on his face before he smooths it over with a thick smile. He tells me we have plenty of time, we could walk to a hill nearby and watch the sun set, he has so much planned for us, what’s my hurry. I chuckle, turning on the video camera and removing a notebook and a pen. Mohni maintains his jolly tone as he calls to his wife, whom I know as Balle Auntie, to come outside. She emerges from the cottage with a dish towel over her shoulder, and asks in her usual brisk way,

“What is it?”

Mohni beams up at her, “Will you entertain our dear Sarah for a moment?”
When she complies Mohni excuses himself. Without warning, for thirty minutes and with my video camera still paused, Mohni shies away from the interview. Balle Auntie sees to me while he gathers his thoughts inside. He has never spoken about these memories, and he was only a boy when it happened. I glimpse Mohni in front of a wooden cabinet next to the kitchen. He pours himself glasses of clear alcohol, drinks them one after another.

Outside, Balle Auntie and I sit together, bantering, waiting for her husband. Balle Auntie used to be a great beauty. She was a dancer, she was once on the cover of a magazine that’s now framed in their living room: in a glossy frame, twenty-something Balle Auntie contorts herself into a flower. In the picture black kohl magnifies her dark eyes, bells dangle from the wrists of her tilted body, and the edge of a sheer dupatta just barely touches her red lips. This was taken around the time Mohni first saw her dancing. I think anyone would have fallen in love with woman in the picture. Mohni won Balle Auntie’s affection because of his own passion, or maybe his magnetic eccentricity. And of course, Balle loves to laugh. Now, Balle Auntie almost always wears her hair up, in a bun stuck together with an old silver clip. She takes off her glasses and turns to me, asking, “What is it you want to know?”

I only want to know what his experience was.

“But what are you looking for? You’re looking for something.”

I think these are important stories. I think they’re more than stories.

She nods, unsatisfied. But when Mohni comes back she chides him for wasting my time.

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The interview starts with my voice stating our location, the date, his name. I ask about his name. He uses his pen name, which is his daughters name: Mitwah, meaning soulmate, “a friend of heart.”

“I picked her diamond name and put it on my crown-less head.”

Mohni was born Manmohan Singh Mitwah on 7 June 1942. He was born in Lahore and he lived on Manohar Street with his five siblings, his parents, his grandparents, a few distant relatives, “oblique friends.” A big Punjabi, Sikh family. They lived in Lahore until Mohni was five-years old, when the partition came into effect and Lahore was given over to Pakistan. Mohni Chacha’s Sikh family was targeted and forced to flee during the ethnic violence that tore Lahore’s community asunder.

“Life before partition had sweeter episodes,” the speech is sticky with undercurrents of his Urdu, “those memories become more transient than the memory of agonized moments.”

The daily-life, daily happinesses vanished under “the looming large of the happening eventual of partition.”

Historically, Lahore could trace its ethnic diversity back to the 11th century. But Mohni says, the city he grew up in was a sort of preamble to the Partition.

“In fact,” he says, “it was so homogeneous that, uh, we used to play a bit of *Gulli Danda*.”

Gulli Danda is a Punjabi name for an amateur sport, somewhat like cricket, played largely in rural areas and small towns of South Asia (and in Italy). The game requires only two pieces of equipment: a *danda* and a *gulli*. A *danda* is a long wooden rod “that can be cut from anything and everything,” but “it should be grippable.” The *gulli* is a six-inch piece of wood, like a pencil sharpened at both ends. If a player successfully hits the *gulli*, he yells out his cot (a bet) on how far the *gulli* has gone. To help me understand how the game is played, Mohni depicts a scenario:

As a boy, Mohni would miss the *gulli* many times before hitting it. He might send it one-hundred meters far, but for his cot he would say *two-hundred* meters. He would over-cot because, as he puts it, “Who the hell would measure that kind of distance?”

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Even if his opponent “was a die-hard,” and insisted on measuring, Mohni would welcome the challenge, and shout, “Go on then! Throw the dice—Go on, measure, tough luck!”

The other boy would start to measure, while Mohni prayed. But suppose there was even ten meters extra to Mohni's cot. 'Hah!' the opponent would yell, 'And where is your mother? Where is your father! Make up a lie!'

"That was a very abusive format of rejoicing your victory," says Mohni, now throwing his head back with hearty laughter, wheezing slightly, peeling back his lips and revealing his missing teeth.

"Then the smile falters. "The pulsating facet of victory and defeat and pride and humiliation thereof, were very sharp. And, you thought you have won the whole half a world if not full. That pride got lit in your dreams."

Every time a player failed to flip the *gulli*, the *danda* scratched the ground beneath him. If a boy was not invited to play, he would grow bitter and pee on the playing field, "to make the ground unplayable." Mohni suggests that this is human nature, and that such a boy, "was a spoil sport."

"If I am not allowed a piece of cake, then let me throw the cake away from the window." Such a boy, says Mohni, "almost caused World War III."

Our conversation shifts again, as Mohni ticks off a list of the reasons why one boy might ruin the game for everyone else:

"Reactivity in the social order, revengefulness here and there, the angst thereof—I think that's another big rationale that's become part of me. I can almost forgive anything in life, except myself."

Mohni tells me that the worst sort of felling is "when you get dropped by your own esteem, by yourself." He smiles, boyishly, only enough to discern the color of his teeth. He raises his white, shaggy eyebrows. Getting dropped by your own esteem is like falling from a cliff, "either small fall or big fall."

This is how Mohni speaks naturally, without separating the trivial from the grand. A thought occurs to me and I jot it down: that for Mohni, everything flows into one another. Then, he says, matter-of-factly,

"I personally feel you don't much change in life. Allow the cushion in you to absorb the angularities of the social fabric, and such elbows and nails of social order... and you will come to know that human nature is so very, so very emphatically universal. The lingua franca might be slightly altered...but that's not very material. Material is the emotive substance of it." He begins to laugh and cuts himself short, "in due course."

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After a brief break, Mohni begins to describe his experience of the partition. As early as 1946, Mohni, who was four-years old, felt the life around him changing. In June of that year, unprecedented communal violence was spreading across India. Minorities, Muslims, Sikhs, were calling for autonomy if India was to be independent. Equal rights in an independent India did not seem guaranteed by the vast Hindu majority, a majority by more than eighty percent.

Mohni remembers being fond of sleeping on the roof of their three-story house. That's why, in 1946 he remembers seeing pin-prick blazes from his spot on the roof, as the fires started in Lahore.

"I used to ask my mother, what is that lit portion in the horizon in the middle of the night," and she would tell Mohni that they were Muslims. Her words, spoken in Punjabi, made sure he knew that the fires were not bonfires, not celebrations, but she left him no explanation. He remembers the distant fires, his mother words, Muslims chanting all around him, *Allah ak-bar*; this is the shape his memory takes.

Mohni began having nightmares. He remembers that the fires grew, the violence increased, fires enveloped *kutcha* houses, the football arena. His mother told him that things were not normal. "I found the word Muslim often given to me as a...reason. I used to protect my younger sister away from them."

Mohni started to hear gunfire. He remembers the shriek of passing bullets, and one family friend in particular, Mr. Bajaj, who had a double-barreled gun. Mr. Bajaj would take turns with Mohni's father to guard their houses. They mounted the gun through slits in the parapet. Mohni would fall asleep, and wake to find himself lying on the roof. He says he would wrap himself around whichever of the men was the gun-man. The first time Mohni heard a gun fired at close range was a mis-shot of Mr. Bajaj's double-barreled gun. He says that in the smoke he could almost taste the gunshot.

Mohni says he shrunk, and clears his throat. He drinks from the glass in front of him, apologizing. He feels himself on "the conveyor belt churning back to that era..."

Mohni was five, an age not to be given explanations. He would only hear his father whispering to his grandparents; he saw fires, had nightmares. These were the facts surrounding him, swimming in front of him. His father told Mohni that they would face something difficult very soon. From inside their house, Mohni heard leather shoes making their crunching noises on the street.

“I am glad childhood is ignorant. We largely remained ignorant, and thus largely remained happy.”

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After months of feuding amongst the representatives of the Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. In June of 1947, the British announced a plan to partition the country. On August 15, 1947 the British left, the former colony was granted the status of a dominion, and the partition went into effect, a date six months earlier than planned.

Mohni doesn't know when his family left, sometime before August. It was sometime in June or July. He does remember leaving:

“We descended the stairs, the elders flocking me.”

Legs followed legs as the moved up the street, in a parade to the gate.

“We were so docile, helpless. We marched, dragged our feet. I had no footwear. I was wearing my mother's underclothing. I was told by my mother to hold my younger sister's hand as if it was my own extension of hand.”

Mohni's mother tied *ta'wiz* around his and his younger sister's neck.

“*Ta'wiz* are lockets that usually contain prayers and are symbols for good luck, amulets. But these were different. I was very amused to see myself getting very rich. A ten rupees note was folded and refolded and folded beyond recognition and pressed into that *ta'wiz* with a huge statement from my mother and others: this is your back-up against any untoward incident. We could be separated!”

Mohni was five and his sister was three. He was not to let go of his sister. If separated from the family, they were to jump into a well, said his mother, to save honor.

Mohni's grandparents had resolved to stay behind in Lahore. When the rest of the family left, Mohni's grandparents locked the doors of the house from within. On the few occasions that his grandmother spoke of this time, Mohni's *dadi-ji* recounted that their friends in Lahore became their enemies. People stood outside their house, brandishing swords at them. One day, Mohni's *dadi-ji* was standing outside with her head covered by a shawl, and it was stolen from her head.

Mohni thinks that his grandparents stayed because they were from an era that still believed in the protection of their god. Later on, Mohni's father returned for them with an armed escort of police officers.

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When Mohni left his home on Manohar Street, he didn't know that he would never come back. His family made their way to the Railway Station.

"There is no drama like the Railway Station."

Mohni stood on the platform with his mother and his sister. His father worked in the railways, and had gone to find them a compartment. Mohni stayed close to his mother.

"I thought there was no more beautiful person than her ever—*ever*. She used to love a golden clip in her hair. She had beautiful flowing black hair, and very, very lustrous eyes."

On the platform, a strange man loosed the clip from her hair with a dirty stick. Hair tumbled down his mother's back, and the man with the dirty stick shooed them away.

Mohni Chacha wags a finger at me, teaching me this lesson: "That's the one single node of hatred in me. Because he did it to my mother." He says, "Unpardonable."

At the Railway Station in Jalandhar, "I was what I was at that age."

A man with a red fez appeared at the door of their rickety train compartment. Mohni saw the man plead, to be let in. Everybody inside said to close the door, close the door! Hush! But Mohni's father ushered the man into the compartment, pushed him into the bathroom and signed to him to stay quiet. The man slumped to conceal himself on the floor. Mohni was hiding under one of the seats. He prayed that the train would move, keep the man with the red fez safe.

A hoarse, young, angered voice was yelling from outside, "Where is that *suwaaar ka bachcha*?" Where is that pig's son?

One of the bathroom windows was not fully closed, and someone outside might have seen the fez of the on top of the man's head. A group of Sardarjis shook the rickety compartment as they stepped inside, holding *kirpans* and blood-soaked *talwars*. They looked around, and seeing Mohni's body poking out from under the seat, dragged him up by his shirt collar. Mohni was what he was, which was five and fez-less.

The Sardar who had pulled him out shook Mohni by his collar and asked again, "WHERE IS THAT *TOPI-WALLA*?" (Where is the man with the cap?) Before anybody could answer the door to the toilet came open. Before another word was said the man in the red fez was dragged out into the middle of the rickety train compartment, and a red slash appeared on his throat. The man looked up at Mohni's father, before being thrown away, onto the platform.

"I don't think I have seen a human body in greater agony."

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When we are nearly finished with the interview, Mohni discusses his experience during the 1984 Sikh riots. He explains how this event evoked in him memories of the partition.

On the day that Indra Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh body guards, Mohni took a bus from Simla to Chandigarh.

“The bus stopped, and a few people got off.”

From afar, he heard people chanting: *Hara Mahadeva*, meaning Shiva and great god. A group of men walked towards the bus carrying sticks and bamboo rods. They had *tilak* markings on their foreheads, having come from a temple. Mohni was dressed in Sikh attire, at the time when Mohni still wore a turban. Mohni was hit from behind by a long wooden rod.

“I thought my bone cracked and I saw some blood from my ear. In self-defense, I yanked out the iron rod that is buried into the engine oil. Before I knew anything, I had put it into somebody’s soft mass of the stomach area.”

The mob assaulted people on the bus, until Mohni jumped into the drivers seat and tore off in the direction of a police station five kilometers away.

“The mob abruptly became meek.”

Mohni says that this event had a great impact on him, comparable to, and brighter in his memory than the partition. After this incident, Mohni decided to cut his hair, which is forbidden in orthodox Sikhism, and he stopped wearing a turban.

By the time this anecdote finishes, night hides Mohni’s eyes behind the reflections on his glasses. Our only light is a bare bulb placed on the table now cluttered with empty glasses. I am wearing a jacket and he is wrapped in a shawl. Mohni is drunk, but never short for words, and eloquently, he declares that the partition was “not desired, not engineered, but every so often it happens.”

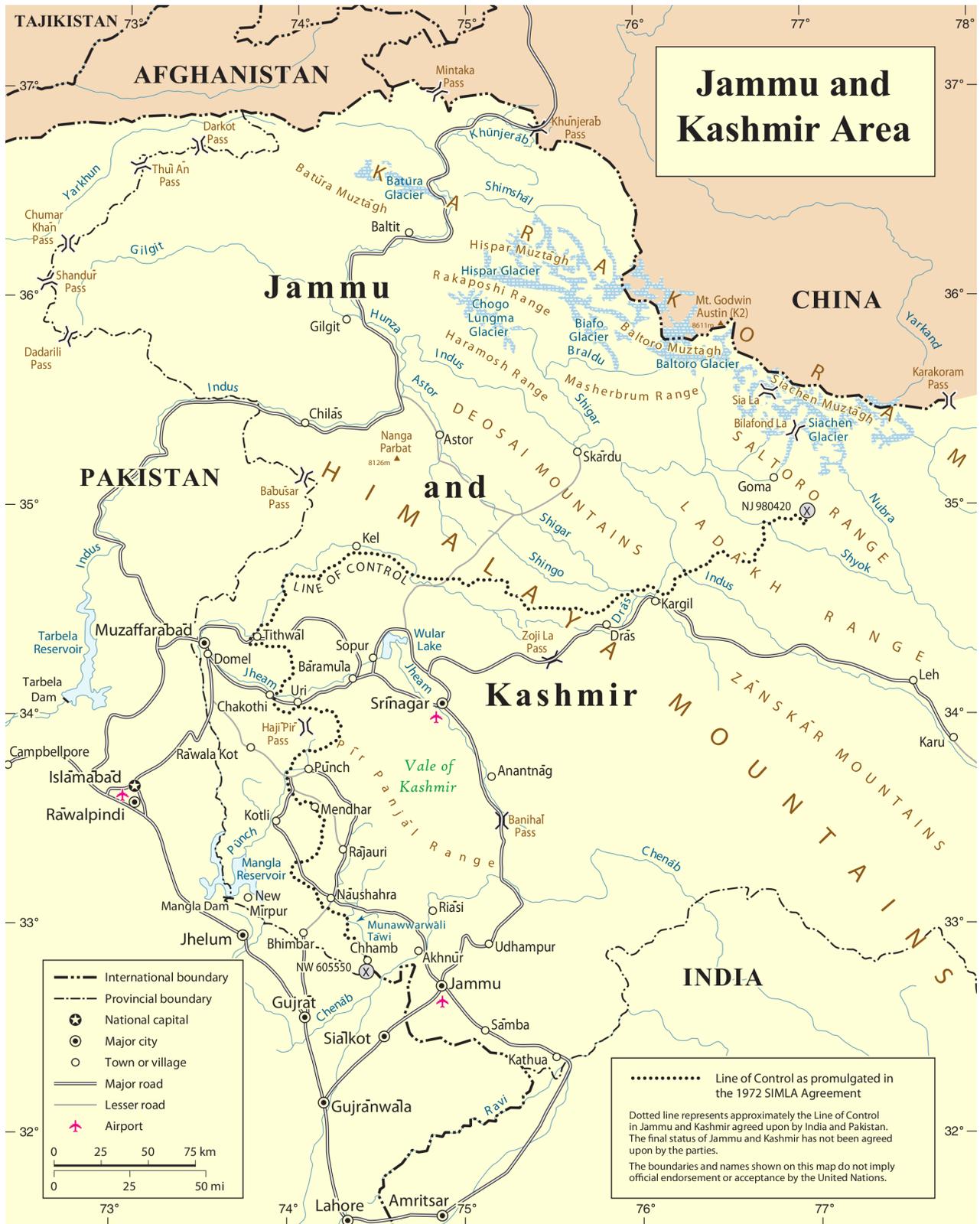
“Partition fades away in the light of the present turmoils, into almost a very, very passable factor.”

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After the interview, I spent the night, and as I brushed my teeth and got ready for bed, Mohni Chacha was bustling around in his study. When I came out of the bathroom he handed me a yellow scroll stitched with patterns in gold-colored thread. I untied the knot that kept it rolled, and deciphered his elliptical script: “May the head and the heart be your loving friends—stay—thysself!” I thanked him, feeling dizzy from being pulled into this older, more formal world of his, holding a tiny scroll in my hands. And then he handed me a wooden mirror, with an elephant carved onto its wooden frame. Below the glass in black ink he had written, “For they cool reflections.”

The next morning, Mohni instructed Nirmila to wake me up with hot chai and biscuits, and after the house was returned to its proper order, the dishes cleaned, my bed put away, the bathroom floor dried after our bucket baths, Mohni Chacha drove me to my next interview in Shogi.

It rained steadily as Mohni wound his rickety caravan around the Himachal hills. He played a CD of old Bollywood tunes, and hummed along. His reckless and fast driving brought us to Shogi in thirty minutes, and when we reached, he jumped out, flung open the side door, and hustled me out. With a tight hug, he slid a packet of salty namkeen into my bag, told me to eat and drove off honking. His shaggy white hair peaking out of the driver’s window as he yelled back at me, “All my love!” like something that someone would say at the end of a story. In that same mythical way, I watched his caravan disappear around the corner and into the hills. I had only a moment to wonder what I had gotten myself into, then I turned towards the block of apartment buildings where Nina Auntie lives and headed to the next interview.



A Kashmiri Pundit in the Kangra Valley

Palampur gets its name from *palum*, which means an abundance of water. Palampur is a town nestled in the lush greens of the Kangra River Valley—a valley whose tea was so exceptional in 1882 and 1883, that it was said to be superior to all other tea produced in India. The earthquake of 1905 forced the British to sell their tea plantations and leave the riches of Kangra Valley to indigenous farmers, who cultivated small plots on the abandoned British estates. Gradually the hills have been reshaped into staircases of rice-paddies.

Brij Lal Dhar is my reason for coming to Palampur, or rather, a few miles north of the town to the village of Kandbari. Within this community of farmers and goat-herders, Mr. Dhar's house is large and awkward, emphasized by its bright blue color.

Mr. Dhar is a Kashmiri Pandit, meaning he is of the high Brahmin caste specific to the Kashmir. Kashmiri Pandits are the only remaining Hindu community native to the Kashmir Valley. In the year following the Partition over twenty percent of the Kashmiri Pandit population migrated due to ethnic conflict. In the 1990s a further 100,000 of the 140,000 remaining Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave by Muslim extremists.ⁱⁱ

As I knock on the door of his bright blue house, a servant answers. Mr. Dhar is taking a nap, and she seats me on the deck to wait for him. From the deck on a clear day, the Dhauladar mountains tower over the village, and down the road I can hear bells ringing at the Ashram. Mr. Dhar shuffles outside in chappals. He is tall, and though the top of his head is perfectly bald, his voice is muffled by a thick grey mustache. He wears tinted glasses and a white kurta-pajama. He walks over to stand in front of a wooden rocking chair, and I introduce myself.

Mr. Dhar sort of smiles, "So you're interested in the Partition?"

When I confirm this, he asks, "Why is that?"

I tell him that my own dadi had shared stories with me, and Mr. Dhar nods, "Oh yes," he says, because he had known my dadi. He points to a stack of chairs on the corner of the deck, and tells me to pull up a chair for myself. Mr. Dhar takes his own seat in the rocking chair behind him.

"How long are you here?" he asks.

Only a few days, I reply.

"Oh, I thought you were staying in Kangra longer than that. Now, before we start, you want to ask me questions about my experience? My individual experience? Not about how it happened and what Nehru did or anything, because that is a very big subject."

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Brij Lal Dhar was born in Srinagar, Kashmir on 1 October 1928. His parents' names were Mishni Haqqim and Lala Mali. For four or five generations Mr. Dhar's family provided medical care in Kashmir.

"I mean the type of medicine that was there at that time. They were not doctors in this modern sense. They were treating people. Indigenous medicine, using local knowledge of herbs and medicines to treat patients. My family developed their own creations of medicines over a long period of time. It was more based on herbs, non-toxic. We were fairly well known in that area. Actually some of my nephews are still doctors. Not here. They're all over. None of them live in Kashmir. We have all left. We have scattered all over. New York, Singapore, Beijing. I mean, extended family is scattered all over. India, Pune, Bangalore."

Mr. Dhar's father was the first man in his family to choose a profession outside of medicine. His father taught English at CMS, the Christian Missionary School, and later became the principal there.

I ask Mr. Dhar about his mother, because he hasn't offered any information about her.

"She mainly managed our food," he says.

Mr. Dhar's mother cooked and cleaned for the family. They did not keep servants. In the Kashmir Valley of Mr. Dhar's childhood, it was essential for families to preserve enough food to last them through the freezing winters, and Mr. Dhar's mother managed the drying of fish and kept a store of potatoes underground.

"I didn't help with that," says Mr. Dhar, "we boys didn't help with that. We would go to the market and run errands, but drying food, this was done by my parents."

Mr. Dhar was one of five children. At home they spoke Kashmiri, and at school they learned Urdu and English, even a little bit of Persian.

"Growing up, most of my friends were Muslims because they were the majority."

But listening to Mr. Dhar, he makes no distinctions between his childhood friends who were Muslim and those who were Hindu. He says that they were all very active, and together they went swimming, boating on Dal Lake, climbing the mountains surrounding the Valley.

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In 1947, Brij Lal Dhar had just finished high school.

“There were not any universities in Kashmir at that time, and if you wanted to keep studying you had to go to Lahore. And so I went to Lahore sometime in July.”

Mr. Dhar thinks he must have arrived after July 15th, after the Indian Independence Act passed in the British Parliament, because already at the time of his arrival it had been announced that the country would be partitioned into the Union of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. This Independence Act also specified that British rule would come to an end one month later, in August. Mr. Dhar says that everyone in Lahore was tense, but nevertheless, he still accepted a place in a Christian College in Lahore, going so far as to pay his first semester’s tuition. He, like so many others, could not imagine a division that would make it impossible to travel easily between Lahore and Kashmir.

In June of that year, Sir Cyril Radcliffe had been appointed to be chair of the boundary commission, which would establish the line of Partition. He had never before been to India, but in the span of only five weeks, Cyril Radcliffe would engineer the division of roughly 88 million people. Until August, those living in the regions that were to be partitioned, Punjab and Bengal, were suspended in the uncertainty of which territories would go to India and which would go to Pakistan.

“All people around Lahore were getting armed. Though there were fortunately not these AK-47s and fancy things. We just had knives, swords, some odd firearms. Lahore was divided into sections: Muslim areas, non-Muslim areas, sometimes areas were divided even between Sikhs and Hindus. Each locality was defending itself against each other.”

With a slight pause, Mr. Dhar says obliquely, “At night there would be some stray incidents. People would come to each other’s locales at night and start fires. They would raid each other’s houses. During the day, if you went into that area they would probably stab you or beat you.”

Mr. Dhar says that the police were mostly Muslims, *Punjab ka*, Punjabi Muslims. In the chaos that was subsuming Lahore, Mr. Dhar saw members of the police choose to protect Muslims, rather than Hindus or Sikhs. This angered and scared him. Mr. Dhar was a student staying in a hostel in the center of the city with friends, other students from Kashmir, young men between eighteen and twenty years-old. At night they would go out,

“We were also part of the party. We were defending ourselves with whatever, whatever we had.”

I ask Mr. Dhar if he took part in helping others in any way.

“Yes. Yes, if somebody got injured we would.” His hand gestures out to the side, as if his answer can be seen there, in front of me.

“That was not easy to do on the street, not very organized, but of course we helped. We got beaten, we beat.”

I ask him about his participation in the violence.

“I mean, we were there,” his forehead becomes creased, and his words falters. He seems to realize that he is hardly talking, and repeats himself, more clearly, loudly, “We were *there*, sometimes we got involved, occasionally we would throw a stone or something. The experience was just like, you know, kids fighting. Sometimes it became serious.”

“This went on until the actual day of partition. The actual day of partition was in Lahore 14th August. Pakistan *became* on 14th August. But even then we did not know whether Lahore would be part of India or part of Pakistan.”

Mr. Dhar informs me that the line of Partition was still only notional at that time, meaning that even after Pakistan came into existence, the specific demarcations of its boundaries remained a question. It was unclear whether the boundaries would make allowances for businesses or infrastructure, or anything else.

“Even if an area had a Muslim or Hindu majority, often the majority was held by only one or two percent, like in Gurdaspur, which in 1947 was fifty-one percent Muslim and forty-nine percent non-Muslim.

“Until Lahore itself was divided,” Mr. Dhar says, “Hindus thought it would go to India and Muslims thought it would go to Pakistan.”

On 17 August 1947, the city of Lahore went to Pakistan.

People who were really influential, people who had friends, the upper class, they helped each other to get away. They had cars. Some people thought it was madness and that it would only last for a few days, so they gave the keys of their properties to their friends. They kept some valuables with them, but they believed they would come back after a week or ten days, when this thing would be over.”

Mr. Dhar smiles.

“But I was still there, in Lahore, up until the 17th or 18th of August. My problem was that I needed to go to Jammu, then home to Srinagar. But we could not get there because they were blocking all the roads and checking people, who is a Hindu, who is a Muslim. We stayed in a hostel with lots of other boys, so we didn’t feel that much fear. Till the police came and they told us, please leave.”

Mr. Dhar, along with his classmates who were also from Kashmir, began planning a route to Jammu. It would have been impossible, they thought, to travel by the route most familiar to them: through Sialkot, North of Lahore, then from Wazirabad on to Jammu.

“We thought, we feared that we would be butchered on the way or something.”

He waves his hands as if swatting at flies.

“On the 18th we went to the railway station, but there was a lot of firing going on.”

Mr. Dhar describes seeing the regiments of the army, the Gurkhas and the Punjabis, fighting with each other. Mr. Dhar and his classmates were forced to leave the railway station, and eventually they crossed state borders on tongas (horse-drawn carts). They walked most of the way to Amritsar, avoiding main roads, occasionally hitching rides on tongas if they were getting lost. They ate wherever they could, at temples and Gurudwaras, until they finally they crossed the border into Amritsar.

“In Amritsar we stayed in a camp, and everywhere people were refugees. I felt a bit relieved that we were not killed, because that was the area where many people were being slain. Each moment was tension. We were planning all the time how to go, which route to take.”

At that time, there was no road into Jammu from the new boundaries of India. He and his friends realized, with horror, that in order to return home they would have to go back across the boundaries into Pakistan.

“Somebody told us there was a railway line going from Patankot up along the Kashmir border. So we returned to the railway station wearing sort of neutral clothes, clothes that did not indicate that we were either Hindu or Muslim. We wore trousers and blue shirts. But there was tension everywhere. We were suspicious of other fellows, of what the others might do to us. We boarded the train, and I don't think we paid any money, or nobody asked us for a ticket.

“At a small station, suddenly some people got down, I think mostly Muslims. They thought they had reached their stop. But that area had already gone over to India, and there were all these Sardars coming on horses, with blue, with swords.”

Mr. Dhar watched as the people who had stepped off from the train were slaughtered by the Sardars riding horseback.

“The train moved and you could see dead bodies on both sides. And there was, you know, one dead body was swollen, had been lying there for two or three days.”

Bodies were thrown over the train tracks. As the train began to move, a metal cattle-catcher mounted to the front of the train cleared away the bodies, so that the train could continue on.

Mr. Dhar and his companions disembarked the train at Sialkot, in Pakistan. Jammu was about twenty kilometers away, and to get there they would have to catch another train. But then they were stopped by Muslim League guards.

“The guards were all young men, like us. They would not allow us to get in and we became restless, because once the train left we were at their mercy.”

The guards blocked the train with their bodies, dismissing Mr. Dhar and his group saying, *Mabajir arrai, Mabajir arrai*, telling them to make way for the refugees who were coming.

“The moment the train started, we pushed these people out of our way. We were desperate, I think. We got more strength, and some fell down with the train—” Mr. Dhar breaks off.

After a pause, he says, “Then, we finally reached Jammu.”

I ask him what he might have been feeling during that time.

His answer begins in a fast, high pitched voice:

“I told you this already, sometimes we felt frightened, sometimes exhilarated. What we were doing made us feel that way.”

I do not probe Mr. Dhar any further, about the violence that he and his friends may have participated in. Instead, I ask him what compelled him:

“Mostly it was fear. It was fear when we met someone, because they might come and attack us. Lots of fear. Lots of tension. All that time, people being murdered. People would come and attack. We didn’t get involved in it. We did not plan what would happen in the future and all that.”

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In the summer of 1947, when Brij Lal Dhar finally returned to Kashmir, his home was in a state of uncertainty. Kashmir had joined neither Pakistan nor India. As a Princely State, Kashmir could choose to join either India or Pakistan, or, it could choose to be independent.

When discussing his homeland, Mr. Dhar seems to begin the story of Partition anew:

“Kashmir was a big state, as big as France or Hyderabad. Big states wanted to be independent, but they had relationships with India: railways, roads, telegraphs. These things had to be continued, so most of the states signed what was called the Stand-Still Agreement, and states that accepted the agreement were under Indian jurisdiction as far as defense, foreign affairs and communication goes. That was very clever of Sardar Patel.

“But Kashmir had a peculiar situation, it had a Hindu Maharaja and a Muslim majority of seventy-seven percent. In some areas that was not so. There was a Hindu majority in Jammu, a Buddhist majority in Ladakh.

“The Maharaja did not sign the Stand-Still Agreement, nor did he agree to join Pakistan. Eventually the Pakistanis got aggravated and they sent in tribals—tribals are the Tali-

ban and all that living in the North Western Frontier Province between Pakistan and Afghanistan. And they were mostly Pashtuns. Under British rule Pashtuns had their own laws and their own guns, and they could not enter British territory without a permit, they had to deposit their guns at the border. Then the Pakistanis not only welcomed them across their borders, but they armed them and told them to go to Kashmir.”

Before 1947, Mr. Dhar had wanted to join the army. He was rejected at that time, because his eyesight did not meet army standards. When the Pashtuns came, Kashmir had a small army of about nine-thousand people. One-third of the army was Muslim and two-thirds were Hindu, or Dogra. On the night the Pashtuns invaded the Valley, the main road from Pakistan was being guarded by a battalion of Muslims.

“So they came, these raiders, and it was a cake-walk, actually. Because the raiders instigated the Muslim soldiers who revolted. Or, the Muslim soldiers allowed the raiders to come in.”

The commanding officer of the Kashmiri army was a Hindu. Mr. Dhar tells me that the Maharaja himself had instructed the commanding officer to remove the Muslim elements of the armed forces.

“The commanding officer said—no no no, I know them, I have fought with them in Burma for five years. They are very loyal. But the tension was so much, and their loyalty didn’t matter. So they revolted and the raiders marched in. They killed the others who were sleeping at that time.”

Mr. Dhar asserts that the Muslim faction of the army joined with the raiders to kill the Hindu faction of the army (the Dogra battalion).

“When they invaded nobody could stop them, because there was no army between where they entered at Dhamaid and Srinagar. So, they reached a place called Mohra, where there was the only hydroelectric project then, it was one of the first in India. It was supplying power to Srinagar, the capital. The raiders destroyed it or damaged it. And it was *Dussebra* that day, and it was a great function, parades and all that.”

Dussebra is the celebration of good’s triumph over evil, Rama’s victory over the evil Ravana in the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. Lord Rama slays Ravana, and claims his lovely wife Sita, who had been stolen by the demon king. On *Dussebra*, government offices, banks, and businesses are closed. Performers act out scenes from the *Ramayana*, and processions take to the streets, celebrating. Candles are lit, houses are decorated, the streets are packed. The citizens of Srinagar were celebrating when,

“Suddenly the electricity went off. Everyone turned to each other asking, what happened? That was the time when people in Srinagar realized.”

Raiders swept through the Kashmir Valley like wildfire, reaching the largest town between Muzaffarnagar and Srinagar, a place called Barahmullah. There, the army from Srinagar managed to hold them off for many days, blowing up their bridges to keep the raiders at bay. The armed forces of Srinagar were outnumbered and ill-equipped.

“The Maharaja had no artillery or anything.”

The raiders pillaged markets and shops, ignoring the direct orders of their commanding officer to capture Srinagar first.

“They started looting and raping, killing. They killed nuns and raped them. Doctors, patients they killed. They killed anyone, and there was no army to protect us. They were, you know, they were indigenous people, they are no different.”

Maharaja Hari Singh prostrated himself before the Indian government, asking for military assistance to push the raiders back, to put an end to the violence consuming Kashmir. But the government wanted the Maharaja to declare Kashmir an Indian territory.

“India said you must sign under the dotted line, but Pandit ji (the Maharaja) said no, the people have to support you.”

In the meantime, to defend themselves, the people of Srinagar organized a civilian militia, and so, the partition thrust Brij Lal Dhar back towards his first dream of joining the army.

“Anybody could join. You only had to be able to shoot a gun. But not everybody was given a gun, because they didn’t have that many. It was all ad-hoc.”

Mr. Dhar was one of only a few men to be given proper guns, and because of this, he led an entire unit. Mr. Dhar guesses that the unit was one-hundred people. Within his unit, the civilian militia used sticks as weapons, and some, he says, did not even have sticks.

In October, the Indian Army arrived:

“We became an organized militia, and they selected some of us to join the Indian Army. They selected me, and I commanded between fifty and one-hundred people. If the Indian Army hadn’t come, I don’t know what would have happened.”

The Indian government has historically located the origins of the Kashmir dispute at the invasion of Pashtuns from Pakistani territory in 1947. In response to the violence enacted by the tribesman, in late October, the Hindu-Dogra factions organized a widespread massacre, which has been called an ethnic cleansing. It targeted Muslims in the Eastern districts of Jammu. A team of British observers commissioned by the Indian and Pakistani governments estimated that 70,000 Muslims were killed and another 400,000 Muslims

fled to West Pakistan. In 2013, the book *Kashmir: The Unwritten History* by Christopher Snedden was published, contending that the Kashmir conflict began during protests in Poonch and Mirpur, protests by people discontent with Maharaja Hari Singh's rule. The protesters went on to form the government of Azad Kashmir (region of Kashmir administered by Pakistan). "The Kashmir dispute," joked Snedden at a launch of his book, "is so old that if it were a person, it would be entitled to a pension."ⁱⁱⁱ

Mr. Dhar says that in October 1947, "murders were going on all over India—In Punjab, in U.P., in Delhi—people were getting killed because of their religion. In Jammu it happened. My house was only three kilometers from the fighting, and we could see them fighting."

Mr. Dhar explains that at that time, they did not realize what the partition would mean.

"And now, we tend to think of it as a very bad thing that could have been avoided. Something like twenty million people moved from here to there, and from there to here, all in the span of six months."

I add that it is the largest mass-migration in history, and Mr. Dhar reacts sharply to my comment.

"Yeah, I know that," the tenor of his voice breaking, "people dying on the roadside, or getting killed. People from the other side would attack them and vice versa. It was terrible I saw people walking for miles and miles. Lines of people that extended for miles."

The Green and Gold Pendant

I meet Harjinder Kaur the day that I interview her. She is a member of the old railway colony—Anand Vihar. Living in Anand Vihar, naturally, Harjinder Kaur has many shared acquaintances and common friends with my grandparents. More than these friends and acquaintances however, I learn that Harjinder was once my dada's (father's father) secretary. One year on Vaisakhi my dada gave her a large painting of Guru Gobind Singh, which she remembers to this day with a deep fondness.^{iv} Perhaps because of this painting, Harjinder Kaur agrees to meet with me happily, almost enthusiastically. I arrive at her house on-time, which startles her.

"The coffee isn't ready yet!" she worries.

But that's not a problem, I reply.

"Well, we could start and then have our coffee? We could break when the coffee comes, or, we could wait for the coffee?" She wonders aloud, trying to perceive my opinion on the question of when we should drink the coffee she hasn't made, a question, which has suddenly overwhelmed the importance of the interview.

Not knowing Harjinder Kaur, I hasten to unpack my things on the table, fearing that she may abandon our conversation. I brandish a notepad, a camera, a microphone, all the while placating—Well, as you like, whatever makes you most comfortable.

Harjinder's eyes widen as each new article is revealed from my backpack, before letting out a deep and full-bodied laugh. "*Teek hai*," she says, relaxing a little, perhaps because she hadn't expected me to take her words so seriously. She nods with a tight-lipped smile, indicating that she is ready to begin.

"My name is Harjinder Kaur, and I belong to Pakistan, and the place where I belong is Rawalpindi."

Her father and mother were Sardar Singh and Jaswant Kaur.

"They used to call me Jinder." she says.

What is your birthday?

"Shall I disclose it?" She laughs so hard it throws her head back. "I was born in 1933."

A servant brings in a tray of coffee and snacks. Harjinder indicates where he should put it. She pours the coffee for me and then for herself. I take a sip and she smiles. She and I, now with all of our equipment before us, resume the interview.

Harjinder's father, Sardar Singh, "was a good looking man with a good personality."

He had provided for his family very well: he was a successful and respected electrical engineer who owned a shop in the center of Rawalpindi called *Sardar Singh & Company*. “Before 1947,” Harjinder says, “we lived like kings.”

Her family—her grandmother, her father, her mother, her grandmother’s sister, her father’s cousins—eight to ten people lived in Mohalla Anand Pura, in a central district of Rawalpindi.

“Our home was very big,” she says convincingly, as if meeting her in her current home, in a middle-class house in the railway colony, was a contradiction to the size of her home in Rawalpindi.

Harjinder’s mother did much of the house-work: she did the cooking and sewed the family’s clothing.

“The clothes were all stitched in the house. We hardly had a tailor.”

The family did not keep full-time servants, meaning that no servants lived with them, but people came to clean the house, sweep and mop the floors, and servants did their laundry and cleaned their dishes. Harjinder’s family lived in the city, but they kept animals: buffaloes, a dog, a cat. Harjinder remembers feeding the buffaloes oil cakes that she made herself :

“My duty was to make the *khosa* (oil cake). I made it in the evening, and fed it to the buffalos in the morning. We had a tin, and in it I would mix straw, *channa ki dal*, cotton seeds, and oil.”

Harjinder’s was the first family in their neighborhood to own a radio, “because my father was dealing electrical goods. All of the *moballa* (neighborhood) would come over to listen to the news.”

The *moballa* came nightly to listen to the news. “We had a very big house,” she says, lifting up her hand to express its height. So the entire *moballa* fit in her family’s drawing room, which Harjinder says was already packed with her father’s hunting trophies: leopard and lion skins hung on the walls, ornamented with a rack of stag antlers. There wasn’t a radio station in Rawalpindi, and instead they listened to the program in Peshawar.

Most people received their news in Urdu, Punjabi, and English from the papers *Milap*, *Pratap*, *Veer Bharat*, and *The Tribune*, which were all published in Lahore.^v Before radios became essential to the home, the news from Lahore circulated throughout the North West Frontier Province (N.W.F.P.), Sindh, and Delhi. The politics surrounding these papers often reflected their contents. During one incident, the *Bharat Mata* daily ran a headline that said (in Urdu) “Mahatma Gandhi’s Latest Nonsense,” and the paper was forced to publish a front page apology the next day.^{vi}

But Harjinder did not concern herself with the news. She was young, she socialized when the *mohalla* came over, and in general, she preferred listening to music on the radio. She used to love to sing along with winding *ragas* and sticky-sweet *ghazals* professing divine love.

Harjinder was a musician. She had started learning the harmonium when she was five years old, at her father's insistence. She began to sing, and soon learned to play the sitar as well. Two days a week after school, Harjinder napped for one hour before beginning her music lesson with the master. The master was a private teacher hired by her father to perfect Harjinder's pitch, and he was a Muslim man. Harjinder sang folk music, because "my father was very fond of music."

"When I was ten years old, I used to sing in big houses and on the stage."

Harjinder was requested to sing at the gurudwara (Sikh place of worship) during holidays, and at public gatherings in the mansions of her father's friends.

"My father was very well-off. He played the *tabla* (drums) with me while I sang," she says. Harjinder's face becomes flushed with affection for these memories.

She breaks off—reaching for her coffee cup, taking a sip, turning to me—"I hope the sugar is okay. Take some of these," she indicates the food that she and her servant have laid out. I shake my head, no thank you, I just had breakfast. "Oh but this is very good, you will like this," she says, handing me a plate and putting biscuits on it. I accept it begrudgingly. When I ask her to continue telling me her story, I let out an exasperated puff of air, which she does not miss.

Sometimes, Sardar Singh would take his children to the circus. Harjinder recalls the animals on display: tigers in cages, an elephant on a bicycle. There was one act performed by monkeys that they found very amusing. A man would lead a group of monkeys into the crowd, and provoke a male monkey to irritate a female monkey. Then the male monkey would kiss her, to makeup.

Harjinder's father was always happy in those days. Harjinder supposes, because had many friends, some British, some Hindu, some Muslim. He and his friends enjoyed drinking, but at that time in Rawalpindi, liquors like scotch were only available in two places: British-only clubs, or the British-Indian Army's military canteens. Sardar Singh would not be admitted into British-only clubs, but he could get into the canteens as a guest of his friends who were in the army. Rawalpindi was the army's headquarters, and as a successful, respected man in society, Sardar Singh went to the canteen nightly.

When World War II began, life in Rawalpindi began changing.

“I remember very little,” whispers Harjinder.

Harjinder remembers that there were blackouts at night, when all the lights were supposed to go off, and they had to cover their windows with newspapers. She could hear airplanes going over the house, and occasionally an alarm would sound throughout the *mohalla*, alerting its residents to seek shelter in one of the underground bunkers.

“In our area they had bunkers.”

The alarms would sound a second time, which meant that they could come out again. During World War II, the British-Indian army feared arial attacks in Rawalpindi by the Axis Powers. Japan had already bombed Calcutta, and from that time the Northern states of India remained vigilant.

Atrocity did not strike Rawalpindi in World War II, and Harjinder’s family survived. This was a temporary state, because for Harjinder everything was lost in the 1947 Partition, and more than anything was the undoing of her father.

Harjinder Kaur was fourteen years-old when her father’s shop was destroyed. *Sardar Singh & Company* was the first store to be looted in Rawalpindi, in March 1947. The windows were smashed and the radios and electronic appliances that the store sold had been taken. Boulders, rocks, and bits of glass were scattered over the shelves and across the floor. Sardar Singh’s shop was destroyed, empty. The Muslims in Mohalla Anand Pura came to Sardar Singh and apologized on behalf of this tragedy.

“They told my father that the mob had looted his store without knowing whose shop it was. The mob was made up of Muslims from *outside*, (not Muslims from their *mohalla*), but they apologized because they had lost control of the riot.”

“My father was Akali, and my mama (mother’s brother) was a Congress fellow. Muslims never liked Congress people. They like Akalis.”^{vii}

“Did things get worse after that?” I ask.

“My father filled the shop again. He never wanted to come to India. He said we’ll stay there in Pakistan. My relatives told him, if you don’t go send your children.”

At first, Sardar Singh thought the violence would subside, instead of leaving, he took precautions. He wrapped their house in electrical wires, creating a make-shift electric fence around them. The family slept together on the top story of their house, outside. They saw fires and heard mobs, heard the sounds of people being murdered on the street below them. Harjinder says she didn’t sleep for half of March, for fear that they would come to her house.

“Any day they would come.”

Eventually, their entire *mohalla* was divided, sleeping in the same houses together to protect themselves:

“All of the Sikhs and all of the Hindus used to stay in one place.”

People stopped going to work entirely. The newspapers stopped coming; Lahore was in disarray and newspapers weren't being printed at all. Rumor became news as the atrocities that people were hearing or witnessing spread through communities, infecting them.

In May 1947, Sardar Singh decided to send Harjinder, her mother, her two younger sisters, and her one year-old brother to India. He sent them with one carpet, Harjinder's sitar, and a suitcase filled with Harjinder's mother's jewelry.

“We were packed up in a car, and sent to the train station in Lahore. We had no troubles there, and caught a train to Bathinda, where we met up with my mama.”

They stayed in Bathinda through August, after the date of Partition had passed, and then shifted to Delhi. There, they searched for houses abandoned by Muslims looking for a place to live.

“We occupied an apartment in Karol Bagh. We just wanted to have a shelter, you know? We didn't know what would happen tomorrow.”

Harjinder, her mother, three siblings, and their mama lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Karol Bagh. They had no income, except for the earnings Harjinder's mama used made by selling bananas on a handcart. They lived on these earnings for six months.

The family still hadn't heard anything from Sardar Singh or their grandparents, who had stayed behind in Rawalpindi. They waited everyday for news, whether or not Sardar Singh was alive, or if he was dead, or if he was coming at all.

One day, someone, Harjinder doesn't know who, sent word that her grandfather was arriving by train. They went to the railway station to pick him up, and instead found him lying dead on the platform. A mob had been waiting by the train to ambush it and kill its passengers. Harjinder's grandfather had been shot and left for dead.

“We just picked up his suitcases. We couldn't get his body.”

Lawlessness was pervasive in Delhi at that time. But there was an important difference to the violence that was being enacted in Delhi:

“*Muslims* were being looted. *Muslims* were being killed. We saw the dead bodies.”

In Delhi, mobs of Hindus and Sikhs were seeking retribution for what they had lost in Pakistan. Mobs of typically thirty and forty people with sticks or guns, armed with whatever they could find, hunted down Muslims in Delhi. They tracked down Muslim residents in houses, and on the streets they identified Muslims by their clothing.

“We had no sympathy, I tell you. We had no sympathy. We used to say, it should be done like this, because it was done to us. You see?”

I ask Harjinder if she might have felt sympathy, because she had so many Muslim friends in Rawalpindi.

“We had loved them, and they loved us, but nobody could help. Whenever these things happen, it is always mobs from outside. They are not those local persons known to you.”

The Muslims in Delhi remained strangers.

One day, Harjinder came to know, by word of mouth, of something that occurred in the village outside of Rawalpindi, the village where her grandmother and her great-grandmother were from—Kahuta.

“All the girls jumped into a well, all eleven-years old.”

Many of these girls were Harjinder’s friends. She tells me that her friends in Kahuta died because they were “very healthy and all the girls were good-looking girls.”

Because of this, Harjinder tells me, the girls were afraid they would be raped, or their relatives were afraid. Harjinder explains that the girls jumped into the well in order to save their honor.

The news passed from mouth to mouth, and in this same way, circulating by hearsay, they scrambled to find out who had jumped, and if they had known anyone.

After some time, Sardar Singh found his family in Karol Bagh. He wandered around Delhi asking people if they knew where his family was staying, and that is how he discovered their apartment.

“He came with three clothes only from Pakistan. I don’t know how he came. When he came he said, the whole train was murdered.”

His clothes were torn and bloody. He said he had survived by hiding under dead bodies in the compartment. But even then, Sardar Singh was desperate to leave India and return to Rawalpindi.

“He couldn’t go back. He wanted to go back but he couldn’t go. There was no way to go back.”

In Delhi, Sardar Singh didn’t want to look for work again. He was an electrical engineer, and he could not work as a street vendor. Harjinder has no negative feelings about this fact. Her father was incapacitated by the shock of losing all that he had built for himself and for his family.

I ask if her mother ever looked for work.

“There was nothing, *beta*, nothing in those days. Everybody used to do either the handcart, or some selling in the market, like that.”

To support the family, Harjinder’s mother slowly sold away all of the jewelry they had managed to take with them. The first thing they sold was the carpet, which was a very old and very valuable Persian rug. Somehow, they were able to keep Harjinder’s sitar, which she continued to play even after they first landed up in Delhi. In those early days in Delhi, she used to play, and after some time she didn’t feel like playing anymore.

What happened to the sitar? Do you still have it?

“No, I gave it away twenty-years back” Harjinder says nonchalantly, without any of the excitement she had shown before, when, just an hour ago, she had first beamed about her time as a musician.

They had no electricity or running water in Harjinder’s new home. She and her sister used to walk half a kilometer away, to a public tap, to fill buckets of water for their family. Her family’s situation meant that Harjinder and her siblings had neither the money or the time to attend school.

Between 1947 and 1948, eighty-three banks failed in India. Harjinder’s father had kept the family’s entire savings in one of these banks. So, without knowing it, Harjinder’s family had left Pakistan with all of their monetary assets in May, 1947: the carpet, the mother’s jewelry, and Harjinder’s sitar. Many families left their homes in this way, believing that they would return, bringing with them only what they cherished. Other families, perhaps because they knew they would not come back, or perhaps they acted on suspicion, went to great lengths to save their valuables. Harjinder tells me the story of how her in-laws were able to save their money:

They were Sikhs living in Pakistan. When the Partition came, they were forced out of their home. They had enough time to gather their things, and stuffed a *razai* (bed quilt) with gold coins, then sewed it back together again. The family laid it down onto a bullock cart, and had their grandmother sit on top of it. The family pushed the cart across the border, with the *razai* and their grandmother. When the family met with mobs along their journey, the mobs, seeing the old woman, passed by them untouched.

Slowly, beginning in 1950, the Indian government began to give compensation for assets that were lost in the upheaval, provided that migrants had sufficient documentation of those assets.^{viii} Harjinder’s family was legally given the one-room apartment that they were occupying, in lieu of their palatial estate in Rawalpindi. They were given a vacant space

on Janpath, a main shopping district in Delhi, as compensation for *Sardar Singh & Company*. But they couldn't afford to start a new business, and Sardar Singh had lost any desire to own one. He sold the government allotted space on Janpath, and that money was used to help finance an education for his daughters.

How did your father pass away?

"It is a very strange story. Very strange." Harjinder closes her eyes and looks up towards the ceiling. She inhales. "He left one day. One day he said, 'I'm going to the gurudwara,' and he never came back."

When was this?

"It was nineteen fifty-seven"

After you were married?

She nods.

What was your father doing in those days?

"So, he could do one thing. No building could be certified without an electrician. He would sign the licenses for money, that a building had passed its inspection, whatever money he could get, whatever houses.

"And even at the end he would say, one day I'll go to Pakistan and have my business there... He started drinking, to forget it."

We sit in silence.

After a while, I ask, what happened to your mother, after he left?

"My mother kept waiting for him, till she died." Harjinder laughs darkly, to herself. "Even at midnight if someone was knocking, my mother used to say, that my father might have come."

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After we are finished with the interview, I thank Harjinder Kaur, and the words "I love you" rush from her mouth. Harjinder Kaur, whom I am meeting for the first time, smiles and tells me to wait. She disappears into another room, and a moment later she returns, smiling still. She sits down opposite me, and places a piece of jewelry into my hands: green glass petals held together within a metal frame. I hold up the pendant at eye-level, glancing from the gift to her eyes, radiant and happy, then back to the green and gold pendant, the likeness of a flower in bloom.

ⁱ United Nations; UN Cartography; *Jammu and Kashmir Area*; Wikipedia Commons.

ⁱⁱ The Hindu-Muslim violence in Kashmir of the 1990s can be traced back to 1984, when mobs of Kashmiri Muslims were incited to violence by the politician Gul Shah, who declared that Islam was in danger. In 1988 a separatist insurgency formed from the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, which organized violence aimed at Kashmiri Hindus in the 1990s. Communal violence reflected political skirmishes taking place in highest levels of the Kashmiri government. In 2015, more than a year after I speak with Mr. Dhar, the Supreme Court of Jammu and Kashmir found that only one Kashmiri Pandit family had since returned to the Valley.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bhattacharya, Budhaditya. "Reimagining Kashmir." *The Hindu: Metroplus*, 1 March 2013. <<http://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/reimagining-kashmir/article4465702.ece>>.

^{iv} Vaisakhi is a Sikh holiday, celebrated in the Punjab as the birth of the Khalsa brotherhood. It is the day that the Khalsa was born, and Sikhs were given a clear identity and a code of conduct to live by, led by the 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh.

Khalsa has a double meaning: it is a way to refer to the Sikh nation, and literally, an army of initiated Sikhs. Guru Gobind Singh inaugurated the Khalsa in 1699, establishing spiritual leadership of Sikh society in the Guru Granth Sahib, (the Sikh holy book and the 11th, living Guru), while the Khalsa became responsible for all executive, military and civil authority.

^v Harjinder recalls some of the most prominent pre-1947 newspapers in Lahore: *Milap* is a Hindi newspaper; the word means agreement or concord, and originates from Sanskrit. *Pratap* is an Urdu newspaper; it is a boy's name that means heat, glory, splendor, majesty, and originates from Sanskrit. *Veer Bharat* no longer exists, but it means brother (*veer*) India (*bharat*); the word *veer* comes from Punjabi and the word *bharat* comes from Hindi. *The Tribune* is an English newspaper.

^{vi} The reminiscences of Abdul Hameed, a writer born in 1928 in Amritsar. Hameed describes how a joke between the paper's news editor (Dharam Vir) and one of its calligraphists was the cause of the headline, "*Gandhi ki taza barza-sarai*." The next day, recalls Hameed, "all hell broke loose." <<http://www.indiaofthepast.org/images/pdf/ahameed/lahorehindupapers.pdf>>.

^{vii} The Akali movement was originally begun in the early 1920s, to reform *gurdwaras*. Here, I infer that Harjinder Kaur's father was a member or believer in the *Akali Dal*, a Sikhism-centric political party in India. In 1947 they lead the Khalistan movement, a Sikh nationalist movement which called for the creation of a separate country (Khalistan—"Land of the Pure"—literally meaning land of the Khalsa), which would have been a Punjabi-majority state. The proposed country Khalistan ranges from the Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh (as capital of Khalistan), half Rajasthan, Kutch, and some parts of Gujarat.

^{viii} See the powers vested in the Custodian of Evacuee Property.