



## Beyond Borders: Social trauma and memory of Partition

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### Abstract

The Partition of India in 1947 was not only a geopolitical event but an immense human tragedy that reshaped the emotional and psychological landscapes of millions. This paper explores how the trauma of displacement, violence, gendered suffering, and the rupture of local worlds has been remembered, narrated, and transmitted across generations. It examines oral histories, literature, personal testimonies, and cultural memory to understand how communities continue to preserve and reinterpret the memory of Partition. The study highlights the enduring nature of trauma—how it transcends borders, time, and political narratives.

**Keywords:** Displacement trauma, collective trauma, communal violence, gendered violence, memory and trauma

### Introduction

Partition resulted in the largest human migration of the twentieth century, displacing nearly 14–18 million people and causing more than one million deaths. While political histories have focused on the decisions that caused partition, memory studies emphasize lived experiences, everyday suffering, and long-lasting emotional scars. Social trauma, because of its intimate nature, is often absent from official archives but vividly present in personal memories and communal narratives.

This paper examines the ways in which Partition survivors and their descendants remember the violence, loss, and uprooting that accompanied 1947.

### Social Trauma: A Framework for Understanding Partition

Social trauma refers to collective psychological wounds that a community experiences due to massive violence and disruption. In the case of Partition, trauma emerged from: Forced migration across new borders, witnessing killings and massacres, separation of families, sexual violence and abductions, the destruction of homes, villages, and livelihoods.

Trauma was not a single event but a continuous rupture—before, during, and after migration. The pain endured by survivors remained embedded in silence, fragmented memory, and intergenerational retellings.

**The Violence of Partition:** Partition in 1947 was accompanied by some of the most devastating acts of communal violence in South Asian history. Deep-seated religious conflicts

Flared out into horrific riots as borders were hastily formed and inhabitants migrated across regions. Killings, burning, and looting occurred on a major scale in cities including as Lahore, Amritsar, and Kolkata. Trains transporting refugees were frequently ambushed, killing dozens. The violence was not limited to one side; Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan, as well as Muslims in India, were targeted. The prevalence of sexual violence was particularly frightening. Thousands of women were kidnapped, raped, forcibly converted, or transported across countries. Many families were shattered or

Permanently divided. The psychological and emotional harm experienced during this time was severe. Survivors frequently bore profound scars, and many chose to remain silent about their ordeal because of societal stigma. The brutality against women was not only physical, but also symbolic, as their bodies became battlegrounds for communal vengeance. The severity and scope of this killing broke centuries of intercommunal peace, replacing trust with deep suspicion and fear. This trauma legacy continues to shape intercommunity relations in India and Pakistan to this day.

### 1. Punjab: The Epicentre of Trauma

Punjab's partition created violent ruptures. Survivors describe trains arriving full of dead bodies, burning villages, and mass abductions of women. The suddenness of violence made the trauma overwhelming and long-lasting. Memories from survivors often reflect shock, guilt, and the haunting image of lost family members.

### 2. Bengal: Slow Violence, Long Memory

In Bengal, migration occurred in waves rather than a single moment. The slow, prolonged displacement created a different form of psychological exhaustion. Refugees in West Bengal often lived for decades in camps—turning displacement into a chronic condition rather than a one-time crisis.

### 3. The Princely States and Marginal Voices

The violence in places like Hyderabad, Jammu, and Sindh often goes unrecognized in mainstream narratives. Oral testimonies from these regions reveal ignored histories of trauma, including forced conversions, loss of property, and cultural erasure.

### Gendered Trauma and Silence

Women faced a specific, brutal form of violence during Partition: abduction, rape, forced conversions, forced marriages, being separated from families. The recovery operations conducted by the governments of India and Pakistan (1947–1956) often re-traumatized women who had established new lives. Many women

carried lifelong silence, as social stigma prevented open discussion of their experiences.

Feminist historians emphasize that women's trauma is central to understanding the social memory of 1947.

### **Memory, Nostalgia, and the Lost Home**

The concept of "home"—ghar, watan, mulk—occupies a central place in Partition memory often recall shared neighbourhoods, intercommunal friendships, festivals celebrated together, everyday coexistence disrupted by sudden political division.

Even those who suffered deeply often expressed nostalgia for pre-Partition unity. This longing complicates simplified narratives of communal hatred and reveals a shared world destroyed by political division.

### **Oral Histories and the Construction of Memory**

Oral testimonies collected by historians, filmmakers, and family members show that Partition memory is deeply emotional, selective, shaped by silence, and influenced by contemporary politics. Projects such as The 1947 Partition Archive,

The Oral History Project of the Indian Council for Historical Research, and Urvashi Butalia's field interviews highlight the diversity of survivor experiences. Memory becomes a form of resistance, preserving histories that official archives overlooked.

### **Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma**

Partition trauma did not end with the first generation.

Children and grandchildren often inherit stories of uprooting, feelings of loss and longing, unresolved grief, fear of communal tensions. This phenomenon, known as post-memory, ensures that Partition remains a living part of South Asian identity.

The descendants of refugees often carry imagined memories—constructed through family narratives, photographs, and inherited emotions.

### **Literature, Films, and Cultural Memory**

Partition has been a major theme in South Asian literature and cinema.

Works by Saadat Hasan Manto, Bhisham Sahni, Amrita Pritam, Bapsi Sidhwa, Salman Rushdie, and others illustrate trauma through powerful stories of loss and human suffering.

Films like *Garam Hawa*, *Pinjar*, *Earth* (1947), and *Tamas* bring visual representation to the emotions of displacement and violence.

These cultural forms help societies confront the unspoken wounds of 1947.

### **Conclusion**

The social trauma of Partition extends far beyond its physical borders and historical moment. It lives in memories, silences, stories, photographs, and inherited grief. Through oral histories, feminist narratives, and cultural expressions, we understand Partition not merely as a political division but as a profound human tragedy.

Recognizing these memories is essential for historical healing, cross-border empathy, and a deeper understanding of shared South Asian identities.

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