

Tales of separation

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“When Partition was announced, my father drove back in his 1926 Austin to take us and our household items to Jhang, which had now become a part of Pakistan. The one incident I can never forget happened right after we crossed the Ravi river – while walking we saw in front of us in the distance, a bare leafless tree from which hung the bodies of five dead men” -- Hamida Bano Begum.

As one rushes through the busy platform of Mandi House metro station, the striking photos of young women in black and white will surely make you pause. These photos are complimented by equally remarkable accounts of women of Partition. Begum’s story is one among these several unforgettable ones.

Put together by the 1947Partition Archive – a non-profit oral history organisation – this exhibition is set up in two parts, ‘Women during Partition’ and ‘My Heart belongs in Delhi’.

As the name suggests, ‘Women during Partition’ explores first-hand accounts of women who witnessed the Partition. Those who refused to leave until months after the Partition, and those who had to leave at just a moment’s notice.

“The Partition of India in 1947 resulted in the largest mass migration of people in the world till date. In recent years, testimonies of these migrations from those who witnessed the event have begun to emerge, resulting in a better understanding of the partition. Among these, the narratives of women, young and old are imperative as they alert us to the impact that partition had on familial life, on homes and ways of living,” reads the note.



Like Begum, who had to migrate from Ferozepur in India to Jhang in Pakistan, the walls at the metro station is decorated with the stories of nine such women, each giving a glimpse of the struggles back in the day, especially for women. For instance, Narinder Kaur Oberoi's account says, "In 1947, the general atmosphere was of utter commotion and chaos. I recall a very

troubling incident where a neighbour of ours had killed his daughter because he feared she would be killed or raped on their way to the border.”

Another account by Usha Bhardwaj, who migrated from Lahore to Delhi talks about the chaos at train stations where a fellow passenger got violent forcing her father to intervene and pacify the situation. In their desperate attempt to leave, they almost left behind one of her brother in the platform.

Taking a note from the immense significance of trains, the organisers carefully curated this exhibition at a transport hub. “It has got a huge symbolism with trains since millions of people used trains as the main mode of transportation during Partition. It only seemed appropriate for us to bring attention to this history and that too at a junction station for that,” says Guneeta Singh Bhalla, founder of 1947 Partition Archives.

Informally starting the archive in 2009, Bhalla had no intention to form this. Quite busy and happy with her career as a researcher, she first started recording the stories of Partition in Punjab, 2009, as a part of her job. “Then I realised that a lot of people wanted to tell their stories. But what was happening was these people who had such stories were dying and were taking this incredibly rich history about Indian culture with them. I notice that nobody else was taking this seriously, so I decided that we need it to make an organisation,” adds Bhalla.

Written in both Hindi and English, these accounts of women are accompanied by stories of people from Delhi during the Partition which includes migrants and non-migrants. ‘My heart belongs in

Delhi' features memories of Delhi, and its changing landscapes from their perspective.

Puran Dang, who migrated from Faisalabad, Pakistan to Delhi remembers being allotted a place in Rajinder Nagar, in lieu of their property in Lyallpur. "It was a refugee colony... we did not have water and light. We would line up with our buckets to get the water from a community tap."

Another account by Yasmin Aftab, who was born in Delhi but migrated to Lahore, reads: "My house was in one of the elite suburbs of the city – Karol Bagh. I had both Hindu and Muslim neighbours and we were all on extremely amicable terms... the riots had begun and during this time my little sister was also born. My father had to secretly take my mom to the hospital and bring them back while hiding in several instances at refugee camps in Delhi."

With over 8000 such stories in the archive now, Bhalla's biggest takeaway has been the difference between how people in that generation felt about each other compared to today. "In that generation, most people have memories of living in mixed religious communities, they do not have that kind of hatred that our generation has. I think that is something all of us should be aware of."

On the same note, she adds that this is the reason why the exhibition hold relevance now. "I think identity politics today is huge, in fact they play into elections and policy-making. They have given rise to a huge military budget. I think the exhibition asks us to pause and think about it."

Both of the shows on display have been presented by the archive last year at India Habitat Centre. Taking pieces of each of these exhibitions, they have reformatted them for Mandi House due to space constraints. The stories have been carefully selected out of the lot to show diversity and bring forward different side of the stories from different communities.

Bringing it to a wider audience, the works on display is surely a conversation starter as quite a lot of commuters can be seen halting and giving it a read.

The exhibition will be on display till the end of September

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