

Voice of Partition: Recording history one 'refugee' at a time



New Delhi, Aug 14 For 85-year-old Tulsi Dass Chugh, nothing encapsulates human depravity during the 1947 riots better than Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto's Partition story "Sorry".

The barely 30-word story talks about a killer's regret over driving a knife through a child, but only because he turned out to be of his own faith.

"He killed a child of his own religion, his own tribe, and only after finding that out he felt he had made a mistake. That showed how depraved we were at that point of time," Chugh, who had moved from his home in Lodhran in Pakistan as a boy of 14, said.

The now retired microbiologist was speaking at the first session of the "Voices of Partition" series organised by the 1947 Partition Archive.

Themed "Formation of Indian Identity", the event was held at the India Habitat Centre here on Tuesday ahead of India's 73rd Independence Day.

While he could not recall any "bad experiences" from his time before the partition, Chugh lamented the treatment meted out to them after they moved to this side of the border.

"When we first came in 1947, people used to hate us," he said.

They were treated differently not just when they moved from Pakistan to India but also when they were shifted from one refugee camp to another.

"That was a bad experience, not just shifting from Pakistan to India, but also from Punjab to Haryana," he said.

It has been 72 years since the mass human exodus, one of the largest, but Chugh rued that not much had changed since Partition.

"Have we changed for the better since then? I think not. Look at 1984, there are many more such incidents going on, we are still divided. We need to change," he said.

The oral history project by the Archive was formally started in 2011. The first session of the quarterly series also witnessed stories of Mukta Lall and Indra Trehon, who were aged three and 15 respectively, at the time of Partition.

Guneeta Singh Bhalla, founder of the Archive, said it was important to understand how Partition transformed people's identities.

"When I started talking to people from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, I got a very nuanced version of Indian history that is not in the textbooks.

"The thing that really stood out for me was the transformation of identity that people went through. Especially those who were from rural areas, those who were from the 500 plus kingdoms, their identities went through the greatest transformation," Bhalla said.

She added that most people did not even know they were part of a country called India until after 1947.

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"Quite often they seemed to think they belonged to their village or their home districts, or their home religion like they were Punjabis or they were Dogras and so on. They often refer to their ethno-linguistic regions or their kingdoms like Patiala," she said.

"It's important for us to understand our true histories and the origins of the identities we have adopted. So the exercise of how people adopted the new identities of India and Pakistan after 1947 is quite intriguing," she added.

The non-profit has so far recorded the oral history of 8,000 individuals from their time and experiences during and after Partition.

The archive is a global digital museum that invites Partition witnesses to share their stories, and document them to create a more empathetic world. MAH TRS MIN MIN

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