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What Really Caused the Violence of Partition?

Neighbors didn't kill neighbors in 1947. Contested Partition histories need a revisit, now more than ever.

By **Guneeta Singh Bhalla**

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Hundreds of Muslim refugees jam inside and atop the engine and coaches of this train leaving the New Delhi area for Pakistan, Sept. 27, 1947.

Credit: AP Photo

“I still don’t know what happened,” remarks Ranjit Kaur toward the end of our interview.

“Why did we have to move?” she softly asks, staring at me, then through me, as her voice trailed off. Her gaze turned down toward her folded hands and she paused. She is genuinely perplexed, I can tell.

More than 70 years have passed and she hasn’t been able to reconcile Partition in her mind. Her family was attacked by a mob in their ancestral village in Narowal district, West Punjab, when they fled. She looked up at me again and her gaze hit me like a bolt. A lump began to swell in my throat but I fought it back. So many thoughts streamed through my mind: How unfair was this history? How could she live her full life in exile still wondering, seven decades later?

But this isn’t Kaur’s story alone. As she reminds me, “The only consolation was that millions of us were in this together.”

When asked about her attackers, she says, “I don’t know who the killers were. We had never seen them before. We didn’t recognize them. They weren’t our Muslim brothers and sisters in the village.”

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I’ve spoken to hundreds of individuals while the project I work on has preserved the life stories of more than 8,000 Partition witnesses since 2010. For us, a new picture of violence and what truly went wrong at the time of Partition is emerging. It is helping us put to rest many myths surrounding this history and misconstrued narratives that are often used to serve vested interests in the public sphere.

As newly kindled flames of communal violence today begin to flare across India and Pakistan, it is time we take another look at this history with access to a brand-new data set of oral histories and modern analytic tools. Much of the remembrance today about Partition is limited to artistic depictions, literature, and our emotional reactions. This was necessary and is wholly understandable as it helps us relate to what our ancestors have experienced. However, it is time now to intellectualize this history and look at it from an objective lens, learn to identify the triggers and spread this knowledge, lest we repeat the same mistakes.

What happened then and how is it increasingly more relevant today?

This month marks 73 years since India and Pakistan’s birth, and the subcontinent’s freedom from British imperial rule. In 1947 some 563 native kingdoms were merged with Britain’s South Asian territories, collectively known as “British India.” They were then reorganized into

two new countries on the basis of religion: India and Pakistan. India took the name of the former British territories in the region and maintained much of British India's original legal infrastructure.

The provinces of Punjab and Bengal were divided between India and Pakistan and the public polarized along religious lines. Mass communal violence broke out during the transition to democracy and the resulting power grab.

A common narrative many of us grew up hearing is that Hindus and Muslims began killing each other in a mad frenzy, leading to such a horrifying bloodbath that it is impossible to understand what truly took place. "Our people went mad," I have heard often.

Yet, after gathering thousands of oral histories, we are finding today that most people did not participate in the violence and were largely innocent victims. In addition, a vast majority surprisingly do not harbor ill feelings toward the "other" religion. Importantly, in a significant finding, for the vast majority of the cases, like Kaur's, victims did not recognize their attackers. And so, contrary to popular understanding, friends and neighbors didn't kill each other indiscriminately. People didn't turn on each other suddenly, in the name of religion, but rather offered protection to each other.

Perhaps less than 5 percent of the population participated in criminal activity at that time. Yet, between 1946 and 1948, some 15 million individuals were driven out of their homes and as many as 3 million killed in rioting that went out of control.

So how did this violence begin and how did it spread?

Up until the mid-1940s, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Parsis, Jews, and others had been coexisting peacefully for at least a couple centuries or more in regions across South Asia. “Before Partition, we didn’t identify each other by religion,” says Hidayatullah Khoso from Sindh province whose interview we recently archived, alluding to a more cosmopolitan make up of pre-Partition populations. Religion it seems was largely “practiced at home,” as many witnesses tell us, save for the big festivals like Diwali, Eid, and Christmas, which were more universally celebrated. For a vast majority of the people, religion was not a means for identifying one another.

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But things began to change around 1945. As World War II wound down and the British departure from its Indian territories became apparent, different political groups of ideological nationhoods — such as a Muslim-majority Pakistan, a Sikh Khalistan, a secular vs Hindu India, among other ideas — were gaining momentum. These ideas entered local politics. Isolated shootings, stabbings, and massacres based on religion began making the news, spreading fear, distrust, and anger. From the oral histories we hear, the culprits of those initial events were almost always fanatical individuals or groups aligned with right-wing religious ideologies.

With time, the lack of separation between religion and politics led to religious ideologues having representation in local political parties. We hear reports of local political leaders igniting violence through proxies like gangsters and dacoits for economic gain – the chance to

grab land, businesses, homes, or family jewels (a sort of savings account in those days) belonging to religious minorities in their constituencies. As news of British departure and the formation of India and Pakistan spread, the violence had spread beyond fringe groups and gangsters to groups of young men across villages and towns. In West Punjab and Sindh alone, wealthy Hindu and Sikh landlords were driven out in a land grab by individuals looking to gain local economic and political power. Similarly, Nawabs and large estate Muslim landowners in what is now north and central India were also attacked. Young men committing the violence back then tell us today that they did so to gain loot or to kidnap women (and gain a wife). They were guided by local leaders and lured by tangible personal gains. And so, through our oral histories we find that most of the violence occurred due to top-down political rhetoric and material incentives.

The violence went out of control with tit-for-tat crimes largely because members of the armed forces had also become radicalized. Should a policeman from a Punjabi Muslim family protect the Punjabi Muslim gangster attacking a Punjabi Hindu family — or should he protect the Hindu family? At a time of mass anxiety, distrust, and public radicalization, these lines were blurred. The violence in northern India and Pakistan came to an end when ethnically unrelated militaries were brought in, such as the Gorkhas of Nepal and the Madras regiments from southern India.

An important implication of these findings is that the violence and separation of Muslims from non-Muslims was not an inevitable outcome. It is not that “Hindus and Muslims could not live with each other,” as I often hear

younger generations lament, or as Winston Churchill famously proclaimed. It is that fringe elements were aroused by political rhetoric and their criminal acts victimized all of humanity in those regions. Disarray in the armed forces and a temporary lull in governance sparked the massacres which, it appears, could have been prevented.

To make sense of communal violence, behavioral economists have developed a number of models. A cursory look at analysis of communal violence in Rwanda and Sierra Leone reveals that certain universal conditions can lead to mass violence breaking out, such as 1) a recent return of armed forces fighting on behalf of colonial powers, 2) economic disparities between two groups defined by religion or ethnicity, and 3) disparities in political representations of the same two groups. With soldiers returning from World War II and the economically motivated nature of much of the Partition violence, at a surface level it appears Partition violence can be understood within existing models — and in fact, given the conditions of that time, seems quite inevitable in hindsight. Further research is required, and oral histories can help shine a light in that regard.

Today, with each new mob lynching in India, I see history starting to repeat itself. Each incident, like in 1947, breaks trust between groups, be they defined by religion or race. Each incident spreads anxiety and fear while inspiring other fringe groups to commit copycat crimes. As they did during Partition, radical sentiments could easily infect the minds of those in the armed forces today. Will a radicalized Hindu police officer protect the Hindu criminal or the person belonging to a minority group being attacked?

Partition led to massive loss of life and livelihoods and was a big hit to education and economies in South Asia in ways that, our work shows, we are still impacted by today. Though many of these aspects have not been thoroughly studied yet, we cannot deny the impacts. Mass trauma from that period still lingers amongst millions in the modern generation as we are now learning from new findings on post-traumatic stress disorder science and epigenetic inheritance.

Despite the violent times they endured, we find that the vast majority of the 8,000 individuals we have interviewed do not hold grudges against those belonging to religious groups that were hostile toward them in 1947. However, the next generations seem to have stronger and more jingoistic feelings toward “the other side,” which they did not experience growing up with. We posit that this is due to Partition witnesses having pre-Partition memories of pleasant coexistence with “the other” while only memories of violence and regret associated with Partition, which are more pronounced, are selectively passed down to the next generation. Those memories, combined with the nationalistic rhetoric that was a part of India and Pakistan’s nation building exercise and one-sided knowledge of ongoing wars between India and Pakistan, created a greater degree of bias in the next few generations.

Having a deeper and clearer understanding on the origins of Partition violence will play a positive role in resolving many modern social issues rooted in one-sided histories of interfaith relationships from that time period.

It is time to learn from Partition-era communal violence and radicalization before it gets out of control once again and we descend into chaos. It

has happened before. We must learn from that history. We can choose between teaching tolerance, acceptance, and understanding, or promoting intolerance and hate toward those different from ourselves. As the human population grows, our children and grandchildren will come into contact with more diversity. We can start teaching them how to respond in more productive ways now.

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