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## Geographies of Memory and Spaces of Belonging: Journeys of the mind and displaced populations

Indira Chowdhury

Centre for Public History, Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology

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## **Geographies of Memory and Spaces of Belonging: Journeys of the mind and displaced populations<sup>1</sup>**

Indira Chowdhury

Centre for Public History, Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology

### **Abstract**

The Partition of India in 1947 created for its victims an obvious sense of displacement accompanied by a disintegration of family, community and their sense of place. Oral history enables us to examine how a remembered past confronts the glorious story of nation-building which a new state is anxious to instill in all citizens. This encounter between memory and history reveals the entangled dynamics between two kinds of journeys – the journey that creates citizens and the inner journeys undertaken when remembering the vanished landscape of the past. Oral history enables us to understand how the memory of spaces and places left behind create alternative identities that question the history of the new nation.

### **Refugees and Citizens**

On 17 August 1947, two days after the independence of India on 15 August and three days after the foundation of the new state of Pakistan on 14 August, the Partition of India was announced. The line that demarcated the boundary between India and Pakistan was named after Sir Cyril Radcliffe, Chairman of the two Border Commissions who was in-charge of dividing the territory and 88 million people. With the Partition, the British had created, what Urvashi Butalia, one of the first scholars to write on Partition, has called – “one of the great human convulsions of history”. In her words: “Never before or since have so many exchanged their homes and countries so quickly.”<sup>2</sup> The coming of Independence on 15 August 1947 brought with it the creation of Pakistan and twelve million people became refugees moving between India and East and West Pakistan. The mass

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<sup>1</sup> I have presented different parts of this material at my keynote address at the “Moving Memories: Oral History in a Global World” at Sydney in 2017 as well as at the Insight Lecture at University of Newcastle in October 2020. I thank Paula Hamilton, Lynette Shum, Graham Smith, Sue Bradley and all participants at both meetings for their insightful comments. I would like to thank Soumitra Kumar Choudhury, Biswaranjan Dasgupta, Parthasarathi Dasgupta, Reba Pal and Sushmita Basu for discussing details of our family history with me. As always, this article has gained substantially from the insightful discussions with Vivek Dhareshwar.

<sup>2</sup> Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, New Delhi: Viking (1998). See also, Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, New Delhi: Kali for Women (2000).

migration of the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities were accompanied by slaughter and violence. Contemporary British estimate of the dead was 200,000 while a later Indian estimate put the figure at 2 million – but it is now accepted that 1 million people died in the riots or of starvation and disease. About 75000 women were abducted and raped and thousands of families divided. For the generation that witnessed Partition either because they experienced displacement themselves or saw the refugees pouring in, the Partition was a reality to be lived with. Since 1947, the Indian state has celebrated 15 August as its Independence Day ignoring the significance of 17 August. It took India more than seventy years to officially acknowledge the Partition. Finally, on 17 August 2017, the Government of India commemorated the Partition of India.

This article will focus on the relationship between space, memory, and the processes of meaning-making in oral history in the context of the Partition of India. I shall draw on memoirs as well as oral history to explore the relationship of those who experienced the Partition to the spaces and places they were forced to abandon and those they made their own. Our present situation where Covid-19 has rendered all that was once familiar, remote and unrecognizable perhaps puts us in a better position to understand the kind of role memory plays in anchoring communities that are displaced, forced to relocate and rebuild their homes and identities in spaces that were once distant and unfamiliar. This article shall look at that process of relocation and the ways in which new places and spaces came to be shaped by the memories of places and spaces left behind.

The history that my generation was taught at school ended with Indian Independence and then we learnt Civics which included learning the Rights and Duties of Citizens. And yet, the refugee experience was all around us as we grew up. In and around Jadavpur University where I studied and later taught, the Partition and its memories were ever present since the refugees were settled in areas nearby. Almost until the 1970s, these areas were demarcated “Refugee Areas” on maps or referred to as the “Colonies” instead of being identified by the names the refugees who had settled there had given them: Bagha Jatin, Sree Colony, Bijoygarh, Netaji Nagar to name only a few. But Jadavpur University itself (known then as the College of Engineering and Technology or CET) was involved in exceptional ways with the refugee crisis of 1947, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Triguna Sen, then Principal of CET. Dr. Sen had turned the refugee crisis into a learning opportunity for students by shutting down the college and instructing students to volunteer to serve food and water to the refugees camped at Sealdah station. Students also designed food trolleys at their workshop so the serving of food became a more efficient process.<sup>3</sup> These lessons of service, adaptation and sympathy are unusual today; they were rare lessons even at the time. And yet, the refugee experience was not included in the history textbooks of Independent India.

The history that I was taught at school focused on Independence and the making of the secular Indian state. It was only in 2007 that sixty historians and teachers got together under the leadership of Krishna Kumar, director of NCERT to devise a new National Curriculum Framework within which the new syllabi of different subjects could be thought through. Thus Partition entered the history textbooks for the Senior School Arts stream and through this, oral history came to be recognised as a resource for understanding the experiences of people.<sup>4</sup> The NCERT textbook was an

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<sup>3</sup> See *Lessons in Living: Stories from the Life of Triguna Sen*, put together by the Centre for Public History, Bangalore, pp. 82-83; pp. 106-107.

<sup>4</sup> See *Themes in Indian History III: Class 12 Indian History 3 Unit 14: India Pakistan Partition*, NCERT Text Book English Edition, New Delhi: NCERT, 2007, p. 401. [Henceforth NCERT, 2007]

attempt to break the silence around Partition in the teaching of history. For writers and filmmakers, the Partition was a subject that offered an opportunity to explore not just a historical moment but ideas of citizenship and identity. For the film maker, Ritwik Ghatak, the independence of India came at a price and he was unwilling to celebrate that independence – almost all his films focused on the Partition and its aftermath. In his films, the refugee can never find a foothold in this new nation-state. There were reasons for this. The Indian state had created mechanisms that insisted that migrants embrace the new identity of “refugee” before being conferred citizenship. As Haimanti Roy puts it: “refugees were central to how such new configurations of citizenship and belonging came into being.”<sup>5</sup>

The process by which a ‘refugee’ became a citizen involved a journey that began with the espousal of a demeaning identity that could be sloughed off only after an arduous and bureaucratic journey. This passage into citizenship was also a journey into self-sufficiency and it was one that “refugees” never allowed themselves or their families to forget. This identity was distinctive and went beyond political identity conferred by the state and has showed up often in oral history interviews. As Balram Bahri tells his granddaughter, Aanchal Malhotra in her book, *The Remnants of a Separation: A History of Partition through material memory*” (2017):

“Independence forced us to flee, made us refugees, but Dilli forced us to stand up on our feet. We had no choice. We have eaten the *anaaj*, the ration of refugees, we have endured the hardship married to that label, and we have risen above it. Dilli is responsible for that. It has moulded us into the people, the family, the business we are today. Never forget that in the blood of independent Dilli flow the unending and tireless sacrifices made by the refugees who poured into its landscape during the Partition. We have built this city, and it has built us.”<sup>6</sup>

This journey as we shall see involved recounting memories of a place left behind and the building new spaces that they came to occupy – spaces where new memories could be made in the present by reconfiguring memories of the past.

## Memory Communities and Spaces and Places

Violence, dispossession and the loss of home remains a theme in all Partition narratives. As Marianne Hirsch has pointed out, in the context of the holocaust, the sense of trauma is also transmitted to the next generation who could not possibly have had that experience and survives in them as post memory.<sup>7</sup> The intergenerational transmission of trauma in the post-Partition generation has been looked at by several scholars.<sup>8</sup> Those who witnessed, experienced and even perpetrated

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<sup>5</sup> Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-65*. 2012, p. 11. See Chapter entitled “Refugees and the Indian State”, pp. 184-220.

<sup>6</sup> Aanchal Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation: A History of Partition through Material Memory*, Delhi: Harper Collins, 2017, p. 91-92.

<sup>7</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. "Family pictures: Maus, mourning, and post-memory." *Discourse* 15, no. 2 (1992): 3-29.

<sup>8</sup> See Sukeshi Kamra, “Engaging Traumatic Histories: The 1947 Partition of India in Collective Memory”, pp. 154-177; Kavita Panjabi, “A Unique Grace”, pp. 48-63 and Alok Sarin *et al*, “Bad Times and Sad Moods”, pp. 248-264 in Urvashi Butalia ed., *Partition: The Long Shadow*, Delhi: Viking/Zubaan, 2015,

violence (the violence of Partition was perpetrated by all communities that experienced it) rendered the trauma more intense as people became “simultaneously the subject, object and instrument of violence”.<sup>9</sup>

Historians who have studied the Partition have remarked on the tension between history and memory interpreting it in terms of the community’s refusal to accept historical explanations for the trauma experienced. As Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “History seeks to explain the event, the memory of pain refuses the historical explanation and sees the event causing the pain as a monstrously irrational aberration.”<sup>10</sup> Recent work, based on oral history in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, point to uses of memory through oral history interview in coping with inherited trauma.<sup>11</sup> Instead of separating history and experience, I am suggesting that the those who experience trauma carry with them a sense of the past that is no less historical. It is the memory of pain that shapes historical explanation and creates a productive tension between history and memory. It is pain that fuses memory and history. Shared trauma creates a memory community where understanding and sympathy for each other’s suffering can exist even without words. It is the memory community, which acknowledges the memory of pain, even when it is unspoken, endowing it with a framing narrative. The presence of a memory community enables the sharing of memory and results in Maurice Halbwach has called collective memory.<sup>12</sup> Memory, as we know, thanks to recent work in the field of memory studies and oral history, are not about actual events but the meanings they carry and the ways in which those events made sense to us and fit into our understanding of our experience.<sup>13</sup>

Any understanding of the Partition remains elusive without understanding the role and function of the memory community.

Oral history and its emphasis on listening, alerts us to the existence of a memory community, which I am suggesting, is a community that makes it possible to share and to listen.<sup>14</sup> The dispersal of the memory community and its absence makes it impossible to recollect meaningfully; it silences the traumatised. Sunanda Sikdar whose memoir, *Dayamayir Katha*, translated by Anchita Ghatak as *A*

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<sup>9</sup> Das, Veena and Ashis Nandy, “Violence, Victimhood and the Language of Silence”, in Veena Das (ed.), *The Word and the World: Fantasy, Symbol and Record*, 1986: Sage Publications, p. 194.

<sup>10</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 32 (1996): p. 2144.

<sup>11</sup> To name only a few: Salman Rashid, *A Time of Madness: A Memoir of Partition*, Delhi: Aleph Books, 2017; Firdous Azim (ed.) *Inherited Memories: Third Generation Perspectives on Partition in the East*, Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2020, Anjali Gera Roy, *Memories and Post-Memories of the Partition of India*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> See Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory*. University of Chicago Press, 1992. Also, David Thelen, “Memory and American History”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Mar., 1989), pp. 1117-1129.

<sup>13</sup> See Portelli, Alessandro. *The battle of Valle Giulia: Oral history and the art of dialogue*. Univ of Wisconsin Pr, 1997; Michael Frisch, “Introduction”, *A Shared Authority: Essays in the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany: SUNY, 1990; Alistair Thompson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the legend*, Monash University Publishing, 2013; Paula Hamilton, “The Oral Historian as Memorist”, *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Winter - Spring, 2005), pp. 11-18; Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a generation: Italy, 1968*. Wesleyan University Press, 1996 and also David Shields, “Memory”, *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, No. 46 (2009), pp. 32-36.

<sup>14</sup> For an understanding of what listening does to the listener in oral history, see Norkunas, Martha. "The vulnerable listener." In *Oral History Off the Record*, pp. 81-96. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013.

*Life Long Ago*, speaks about her life in East Pakistan after Partition. She witnesses her Hindu neighbours leaving the village leave one by one.

As they left, they cried, “Buri, we are leaving. We are unlikely to ever meet anyone from here ever again. Do look us up when you too are in Hindustan.

Well, we did reach Hindustan, finally, but we never again met any of them. We didn’t know then that Hindustan was such a huge place and it was impossible to find anyone here.” [*A Life Long Ago*, pp. 12].

The geographical expanse of India contrasts with the small village where everyone knew everyone else. In India she cannot find any of the people she knew in her village. There is no one to share her memories with. The memory community has scattered. Added to that is the fact, her aunt, with whom she had grown up, was devastated when he had to finally leave the village. This made her vow that she would never speak about her life in the village of Dighpait in East Pakistan, a promise she keeps for the entire duration of her aunt’s life. When she does begin writing about her village after a decade, she recreates the village community from memory and in memory; after dispersal, the community and the spaces they belonged to could only be gathered together in memory.

Such memories of remembered communities that speak of a time and a space where Hindu and Muslim communities lived in harmony were earlier dismissed as “nostalgia” – and until recently never considered to be valuable historical resources. In their two-volume exploration of the Partition and its impact on Gender in Bengal, Jasodhara Bagchi, Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Subhasri Ghosh show how the “working of memory”, often challenges mainstream history – presenting a narrative that is different from the “Grand Narrative of mainstream history”.<sup>15</sup> At present, even though oral histories of the Partition are not collected by the National Archives of India, they are archived as resources in the Partition Museum at Amritsar and in digital spaces ever-growing in density.<sup>16</sup>

### **Landscape, Community and Memory**

For displaced communities, memory often intervenes in defining the relationship between landscape and identity. Oral history offers us access to a community’s experience of physical environments and the knowledge of local culture. This relationship can be embodied or romanticized but it always demonstrates how past and present intersect.<sup>17</sup> Space itself, as geographers have theorized, exists in and through multiple interrelations, its many trajectories overlaid and enfolded in time and material practices.<sup>18</sup> For displaced communities, landscapes or places that they once knew as “home” are no longer accessible and invoked in memory. Yet, those memories of space and place emerge as markers of identity.

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<sup>15</sup> Jasodhara Bagchi, Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Subhasri Ghosh, *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vols 1-2, Kolkata: Stree, 2009, p. xiii.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.partitionmuseum.org/> There are two digital resources that keep oral histories of the Partition: <https://in.1947partitionarchive.org/> and <https://citizensarchiveofindia.org/>

<sup>17</sup> See Shelley Trower ed., *Place, Writing and Voice in Oral History*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; in particular, Shelley Trower, “Regional Writing and Oral History: From China Clay to Eden” (pp. 87-106); Paul Thompson, “Wivenhoe Landscape Remembered: From a working river to romanticized nature” (pp. 107-126) and Steven High, “Mapping memories of Displacement: Oral History, Memoryscapes, and Mobile Methodologies”, (pp. 217-231).

<sup>18</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*, Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2005.

How are the spaces within absent landscape evoked? Writing about the long-cherished sense of belonging that the refugee carries with them, Bashabi Fraser says:

Whenever a Bengali from erstwhile east Bengal (later East Pakistan and now Bangladesh), meets another Bengali she/he always asks in the course of the introductory preliminaries, ‘Where are you from?’. The palimpsest reading of such a question would be deciphered as ‘Are you from east Bengal? Which district?’ The sense of dislocation and displacement which accompanied the declared (i.e., the refugee who registered herself/himself as a refugee in government records) or undeclared refugee from east Bengal, has remained evident in this leading question, which sets the stage for establishing an identity along regional lines, in the land of the Padma, which triggers a whole familiar process of longing, nostalgia and loss for those ‘good old days’, against these ones of endless struggle.<sup>19</sup>

The topography is made memorable and recounted in many contexts. Sometimes the geographical boundaries become ways of speaking about the politics of where one belongs. Sunanda Sikdar who was brought up by her foster mother (her father’s sister), recalls her childhood visits to India from East Pakistan where she would meet her siblings (who were growing up with their parents in India). Her siblings would argue and tease her about the plentiful natural resources that originated in India and the lack of such resources in East Pakistan.

“Do you have rivers in your country?” my brother asked.

“Of course,” I said, “we have many rivers – the Padma, Meghna, Buri Ganga, Dhaleshwari, Ichhamati and the Brahmaputra, And we have many other rivers in our country.”

And my brother said, “Those rivers have gone to your country from our Himalayas. If we block the source you won’t get any water in your country. Wait and see what happens to you folk then.”

“What can you do?” I asked angrily. “Only Jawaharlal Nehru can do things like that. Nehru won’t do such things. He is a good man.”

The brothers and sisters, all of them ganged up against me. They began to fight with me and said that while they were great friends with Nehru, I hadn’t even the remotest acquaintance with Ayub Khan. I didn’t carry on arguing with them. They were adept liars and I found it impossible to keep up...

With every passing year I realised that my brothers and sisters and my parents were very good people. However, I knew that they would never be part of my deepest joys and sorrows because I had my own private world which I could never tell them about.” [*A Life Long Ago*, pp. 132-33].

For Dayamayi (the name that Sunanda Sikdar’s foster mother has given her), the rivers and water bodies that are part of her life in her village are not merely geographical markers or even natural resources but make up her space of belonging, a space she shared with her village community. It is this space that she and her foster mother finally leave in 1961. The space she refers to as *desh* and

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<sup>19</sup> Bashabi Fraser, “Introduction: The Bengal Partition Relived in Literature”, *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*, London: Anthem Press, 2008, p. 6.

the space that becomes too painful to talk about after they start living in Calcutta. As they had boarded the train, she recalls:

I looked at Ma's face that day and promised myself that I would never again speak of home – of *desh*, our land. Ma and I never spoke of *desh* again with each other. This is one promise I was able to keep, and till the day Ma died I didn't say a word about home – about *desh*, our land. [*A Life Long Ago*, pp. 172].

Dayamayi's refers not to the nation-state but to *desh*, evoking an intimate connection to the land. *Desh* is a place with which one has a cultural bond – it holds together the land of one's birth and growing up; it is also the land of one's ancestors – it is the “place to which one belongs” culturally.<sup>20</sup> It is *desh* that evokes nostalgia. And it is this idea of *desh* which contrasts sharply with history that the nation-state envisions. The “imagined community” that Anderson argued, joins people into a historically constituted community constructs its history with a vision for a future. But *desh* which has a space only in the memory of the displaced has no future. As Anasua Basu Raychaudhuri,, another scholar of the Partition puts it, “ for the homeless, for the displaced people in Bengal, their *desh* does not seem to have a future. It only has past... it is a place of no return. It can only be revisited in memories and nostalgia. It has lost its *spatial existence*.”<sup>21</sup> [Emphasis mine].

Remembering and sharing memory, then, becomes the only way in which a spatial existence can be affirmed for the displaced. Oral history offers us rich ways in which spaces and places emerge within material practice.

### Artisanal practice as evocations of space

Identity and spaces of belonging are often revisited through practices – especially through rituals, through artisanal work and in ways of using one's hands. It is through practices that the elusive space of *desh* can sometimes be re-visited. *Sumita* Biswas who now makes a living from creating *kantha* embroidered cloth, was born in India of refugee parents in Ghutiarisarif in West Bengal – where her parents settled after Partition. Now a resident of one of the suburbs of Kolkata, in an oral history interview she recalled stories about *kantha* embroidery in villages of erstwhile East Bengal, now in Bangladesh

SB: *Kanthalas* were made in Bangladesh – in Haripur and Jessore.

IC: Is that so?

SB: Generally, in Haripur, Jessore and all these districts. You see, there was a reason for that. The reason was that all those regions in Bangladesh were all swamp areas. There would be a lot of water there. I have heard it said that that there was 27 to 28 feet of water, so the fields would be submerged most of the year. Sometimes they could grow paddy and sometimes they could not. And when they couldn't farm,— when there was water all around, there was no work to be done, there was no work in the paddy field. That was when

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<sup>20</sup> Anasua Basu Raychaudhuri, “Nostalgia of 'Desh', Memories of Partition”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, No. 52 (Dec. 25-31, 2004), p. 5657.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p, 5659.

women stayed home and that was the time when they made those *kanthas*. And they used have this [contest] thing—in the neighbourhood —

IC: Like a competition?

SB: “What are you doing? Which *kantha* are you making?” *Kanths* would be shown around. At that time there was no paddy work in the fields, so they would just do the *kantha* work.

...If we make a *kantha* now, we keep it very carefully. In the past, they would spread the *kanthas* to sit on while eating. They would make with old sarees and use the *kantha* to cover several valuable things. But they would not sell them in the market. It was just that they didn't sell anything in the market, but they would make a lot of pieces like make a piece with *kantha* and attach tassels all along the sides. They would make covers, pillow-cases.<sup>22</sup>

Sumita speaks of the history of her craft linking it to districts in what is now Bangladesh. Never having visited the villages her parents came from, as she was born on the Indian side of the border, I am surprised by the familiarity with which she recounts this history along with place names. The creation of products out of *kantha* embroidered cloth is a relatively recent phenomenon in India and Bangladesh – it began more than a decade after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. *Kantha* embroidery was usually done at home and objects were created for household consumption – new products such as scarves, stoles and bed spreads were made for commercial consumption by craft NGOs on both sides of the border. Sumita's “recollection” of how this craft was practiced in villages of what is now Bangladesh alerts us to a form of post-memory resulting in the replication of memory and nostalgia not her own. These stories, which she recounts, belong to the oral culture of nostalgia that her parents and the larger extended family participate in. Indeed, it is not unusual for Bengalis who are on the Indian side to identify with villages and localities that the previous generation had left behind. Endless repetition about the village left behind brings alive for Sumita's generation, a rural life that she, by virtue of living so close to Kolkata, cannot hope to possess. These family and community memories about craft objects can be seen broadening out what Aarathi Ajit in another context has called “oral heirlooms”.<sup>23</sup>

Sumita consolidates the family memory as she speaks about the craft she now practises in another space, indeed in another country and in another time and in a completely different context. It is the existence of this memory community that makes it possible to recall that lost space. In the next section I want to look at the loss of memory and what it might mean for understanding the loss of spaces.

### Memory loss and lost spaces

In 1974, I was visiting my father's uncle in Calcutta. I was not well that day and was resting. While the entire household was away working, my great grandmother who was in her 90s at the time and as I later understood, suffered from dementia, hovered about trying to see how she could make me feel more comfortable. There was one thing she kept repeating to me: “You don't have anyone to call

<sup>22</sup> Oral history interview with Sumita Biswas, Sasha project, 30 June 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Aarathi Ajit, “Oral heirlooms: the vocalisation of loss and objects”, *Oral History*, Vol. 43, No. 2, DISJUNCTIONS (AUTUMN 2015), pp. 70-78. Accessed: 29-08-2017.

your own here, do you, dear? Don't worry, when he returns from work in the evening and after the horses are fed, I shall ask the coachman to take you home to your own people." I was quite taken aback by her pronouncement – in fact, I found the anachronism amusing. It seemed to me my great grandmother had lost her mind. Or surely, she would not say that I had no one to call my own? I was after all, the daughter of her favourite grandson – one she had brought up in her home in Comilla. The horse and coach sounded like an bizarre fantasy to a child brought up in very large middle class family that had struggled for years to build a family house. Years later, as I started interviewing her youngest daughter, my father's youngest aunt, this memory surfaced again, bringing with it a very different understanding.

My great grandmother, Suruchibala Dasgupta had lived until 1966 in Comilla (now in Bangladesh and in East Pakistan at the time). Her husband, my great grandfather, Prakash Chandra Dasgupta had opted to remain in East Pakistan after Partition. At that time, all his children and grandchildren were in India. Even so, for them Comilla remained home. My great grandfather felt, he was a lawyer whose practice was in Comilla and since he planned on working until the end, moving to Calcutta or any other part of India would not be a viable option. His children visited often. Indeed, in 1962, I was taken to meet him by my father. As I interview my father's aunt, Madhabi Roy Choudhury, I realise that most of the family worked in Calcutta well before Partition. It took them more than 24 hours to cover the distance from Comilla to Calcutta ( "2 hours to Chandpur by train. From Chandpur, we would take the steamer to Goalunda which took 12 hours. Then the train from Goalunda to Sealdah which took 8 hours"). But they undertook the journey often. In fact, even after Partition, she spent two years between 1949 and 1951 with her parents in Comilla. But the Indo-Pak war of 1965 put an end to those visits – the border was no longer porous. In 1966, when my great grandfather died, the family could not be there at Comilla. For Madhabi Roy Choudhury, the day remains marked in memory: "30 July was my birthday – but from 1966 it is no longer my birthday but the day my father died."<sup>24</sup>

War had made communication difficult for a while. My great grandfather's letters to his children were posted to a cousin in Vienna who then posted them to India. After he died, it soon became clear that my great grandmother could no longer manage in her house on her own. As her youngest daughter tells me, "Our father had a trusted assistant, Humayun Miyan who knew what was to be done with the money and with the property. But my mother never got in touch with him and everything was taken away by a relative. Had she contacted him, she would be taken care of. Our relative sold portions of the house and did not give any money to my mother. In a few months she could not manage there and was living in great poverty. We brought her to India through the Petrapole border in north 24 Parganas in West Bengal. When I last visited, I remember a discussion about how the two countries would be re-united and we could all be together again. I told my father that hostilities were escalating. It would be better if he gave the house away – there was no children's hospital in Comilla and he could give the house for a children's hospital. But that did not happen."<sup>25</sup>

When she describes the large house, the gardens, the pond in the middle and the horses, the coach and Gani Miyan and Sikandar Ali who looked after the horses, it triggers my own, very faint memory (kept alive only by stories recounted of that visit by my parents) of the place I had visited in

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<sup>24</sup> Oral history interview with Madhabi Ray Choudhury, 1 February 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Oral History Interview with Madhabi Roy Choudhury, 5 September 2017.

1962. And for the first time, it strikes me that my great grandmother was describing her house and the life she had left behind when she was trying to send me to my own people! In her mind, she still lived there – not in this tiny rented house, in a crowded alley in Calcutta where there was only a sliver of sky caught between buildings. Her memory of her abandoned home was ever present. In her mind, that’s where she lived – where it was open and where she still had control over the running of the house. In her memory – that house in Comilla remained hers. After her move to India in January 1968, she lived with her various children shuttling between Agra in the north, our small town Burnpur in West Bengal and Calcutta where her first-born lived. She never spoke of *desh*, though she sang the songs from there every evening as she oiled my hair and tied it into a tight plait. She never complained but I wonder now how she coped. As she aged and grew infirm, dementia set in and she no longer knew the members of her larger family. But I wonder now if it was age and frailty or living for many years with a lost sense of self that hastened dementia and cognitive impairment. Or is dementia too easily identified with the loss of memory – a collapse of an understanding of the past? Looking back, I find that in her mind she still lived in the house she had known to be her home. In many ways her story illustrates the predicament of refugees – uprooted from home and whatever was familiar and experiencing on an everyday basis the intense loss of an earlier form of identity. Many of them spoke about *desh* with nostalgia knowing they would never go back – knowing too that they would never fully belong to this country of which they were now citizens. Many of them never spoke about *desh* at all but in their minds they continued to live there. Once again signalling a refusal to insert oneself into a glorious history of independence and freedom that the new nation had embraced.

## Conclusion

We began with the Partition of India and saw how this moment was observed by the Indian state only seventy years later. What the Indian state had chosen to commemorate after 1947, was Jawaharlal Nehru’s “tryst with destiny” speech that spoke of India having to redeem its pledge as it awoke to “life and freedom”. This inaugural moment also signalled the freedom to choose the past that would hold the new nation together. That past, as I am arguing was a contentious one and within two decades, the rough terrain was evened out and indeed, refitted with a history that ended with the emergence of Indian state. By the late 1960s – two decades after independence, the state began to actively foster sites of memory, replacing colonial statuary with statues of freedom fighters. After Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination on 30 January 1948, nearly every city renamed one of its major streets after him. All these actions could perhaps be seen as the state’s attempt to create an “imagined community”.<sup>26</sup> But the state’s attempt to create a new nationally conscious citizen was not something that the refugees could relate to. For those displaced, the question remained – was this the new India that the freedom movement had promised? Most refugees who had lost their cherished homeland and entered this new nation, in a state of being “uprooted” [in Bengali, the word for refugee is *udbastu* or “one who has been uprooted from his/her home [bastu]” – found this story of freedom promoted by the state hard to make their own.

As refugees rebuilt their lives they found that the only way the new boundaries drawn by the state could be transgressed was through memory– by recollecting a life elsewhere where they had land, a

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<sup>26</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (London, 1991).

home and work that could keep body and soul together. These accounts were often sentimental and laced with nostalgia. These accounts, as I have attempted to show, were attempts to make sense of the past and give it a place in the present within which they were now ensconced. The boundary between past and present was often blurred in such recollections. Nostalgia – memories of another place were not merely sentimental but they were ways of “active unbelonging” – they challenged the heroic and nationalist stories of the state. While many within the refugee community nurtured a deep hatred for the “other” community, in their nostalgic reconstruction, they created a space where friendships and mutual dependence seemed possible. Harking back to another time and place expresses perhaps an unwillingness to insert oneself into the history of independent India – it was a means, indeed, perhaps the only means by which those who experienced Partition could hold on to a past which would never become History.

In this paper, I have tried to trace the relationship between memory, space and displaced communities by analysing written memoirs of the Partition of India alongside oral history interviews. While memoirs hint at lost geographies, oral history interviews elaborate the mechanisms through which memory communities are built. The act of participating in creating and sustaining a memory community is a way of possessing the lost past, of asserting one’s sense of belonging to a space that was no longer accessible and indicating a form of passive resistance to the agendas of the state. Reminding us that memories shape human beings and the spaces they see themselves as belonging to more than state agendas have ever cared to acknowledge. Perhaps this understanding can help us – oral historians – create new directions for our craft and demonstrate how we could use it for better understanding of forced migration, especially now when new lines are being drawn to define and dispossess “refugees”. It is oral history and its deep engagement with memory that can enable us to understand the past and the role it plays in the present and push us to imagine new futures that might be possible for refugees where they are not defined by dispossession, deprivation and distress but by the stories that they carry with them.

Spaces that are recreated and habitable in memory have, like the remembered events that Walter Benjamin talks about in another context, have infinite possibilities.<sup>27</sup> It is in such remembered spaces that the displaced seek refuge and find ways of anchoring themselves.

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<sup>27</sup> To remind ourselves of Benjamin’s observation about Proust: “For an experienced event is finite - at any rate confined to one sphere of experience, a remembered event is infinite, because it is merely a key to everything that happened before and after it.” Walter Benjamin, “On the Image of Proust”, in Michael Jennings *et al* eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol 2, Part 1 1927-1930*, (trans. Rodney Livingstone and others), Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 238.