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Noakhali Riots 1946: Personal Stories in Historical Memory

Parvez Rahaman¹

The withdrawal of the British empire resulted in India's partition into two separate countries in 1947: India and Pakistan. This led to a great migration in human history, and within the short space of a few months, around twelve million people moved to the newly created countries. The violence that accompanied the partition has changed the demographic outlook of these two countries, driving religious communities to settle in the right nation and forcing people to exchange their homes at a rapid speed. Victims of this division had to rush to the other side of the border and abandon their properties. Out of the two countries that were directly impacted by partition violence, Noakhali (a southeastern district of Bangladesh) had an eruption of communal riots in 1946. This article examines three oral interviews on these riots, through which a light will be shed on the concepts of violence and Hindu-Muslim relationships. The purpose of examining oral interviews is to bring marginalized voices into partition literature, which, oddly enough, have been overlooked due to the grand narratives of partition politics. However, partition is not limited just to the political account; it is more about people who bore the scar of violence and did not find any articulation in the public world. Thus, the partition is about listening to the stories of private memories in a familial space widely. Walter Benjamin writes, "For an experienced event is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before and after it."²

When starting to conduct this oral history project, I was initially worried about how I would use it in my research. Since oral history focuses on memory, I could not perceive how memory was being used as a historical tool in recent studies. But as I was interviewing people, I found that my ideas regarding the Noakhali riots were increasingly shaped by the interviewees' life stories about how, as non-political individuals, their lives were changed by the epochal event of the India Partition in 1947. Moreover, I realized how a very simple life gives new ideas of partition and violence, which is invaluable for writing history and challenging the narrative filled with false interpretation. During the time with these people that I have interviewed, I gained not only new questions for my research, but also relearned the Hindu-Muslim relationship on a micro-level. I could see that every person's story matters, which added more depth to my understanding.

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² Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (State University of New Press, 1991), 1.

From the discussion and the field work in the areas where riots erupted on 10th October, 1946 and continued for five consecutive days, it is clear that the minority Bengali Hindus' houses were burnt to ashes in most of the cases.³ As soon as Mr. Gandhi stepped into Noakhali in 1946 to heal the communal scar, things became much more controlled. Very few incidents took place thereafter. Gandhi's camp in Noakhali gave a huge relief to the people who were victimized.

"They resorted to the camp in the night," my interviewee Abani Mohan Pal said, "and came to their house in the day to remake it out of the ashes or whatever things they had to rebuild their burnt houses."⁴ The Hindu minorities had faced a material loss; since it was the time of harvesting paddy to be stored in the granary (gola), all of their paddy was burnt for four consecutive days. Abani stressed that it was quite impossible to return to the house because of the stink of burnt paddies. He also said he was tied to a branch of a tree in the backyard of their house by his father because he might get scarred from the flames.

Overall, my approach was to collect multiple memories, as Maurice Halbwachs points out "that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual."⁵



Figure 1. Abani Mohan Pal, Ramganj, Lakshmipur, Bangladesh (Photo credit: author).

While reaching the house, I came across a person around his 70s who was collecting coconuts out front. I introduced myself and told him that I am looking for Mr. Abul Khayair. He told me that was him. We then moved inside the house, and I asked him if he was interested in talking to me about the Noakhali riots. From this interview, I came to know that his house once belonged to a Hindu landowner named Dakhinarayan. When India was about to divide into two countries, Dakhinarayan left for Calcutta and sold part of his properties. Abul's father had a good

³ Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (Oxford University Press, 1993). Chapter six.

⁴ Interview with Abani Mohan Pal, 27 December 2020, Ramganj, Bangladesh.

⁵ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* no. 26 (Spring, 1989): 9. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>

relationship with the Hindu landowner and had been waiting for a long time to return the holdings. Through this conversation, I learned that this friendly relationship was sustained between them for years to come. Abul said, “You can see the place, right? It was used as a funeral site for the Hindus that left their homes. I had bargained with my father around 1973 about using the place for other purposes since these people are not coming back.”⁶ This illustrated a generational divide between the son and his father. This was not just a location to the older man; it was an important religious custom that he could not ignore. A tear streamed from his eye and while he wiped his face with a *gamacha* (napkin), he told me, “My father refused to do that because he believed they would return and he could not move it.”⁷

I also interviewed Haradan Chakraborty, a Hindu from Noakhali, about Gandhi and Noakhali riots. He asserted that there were people from both Hindu and Muslim communities that gathered to see Gandhi. Chakraborty’s ideas changed my understanding about riots, atrocities and brutality between the communities. He said:

“There were some people who permeated into the community with their evil purposes, they were highlighting people’s negative side and those who were good became their target. For example, the riots that flared up in Noakhali happened because of Golam Sarwar, who instigated Muslims against Hindus and targeted them. It led to the disruption of the community, which created an opportunity for the people to exploit a cause.”⁸

His description of riots was eye-opening, because he did not focus on the faults of Muslims, but on the problems of the community as a whole. He also mentioned how inflammatory speeches helped to disturb the peaceful coexistence. For instance, he emphasized how Muslims discussed that when they visited Hindus’ homes, the Hindu sanitized their homes after they left. This issue was openly discussed in Muslim society because they were greatly insulted by this action.

While in the middle of the interview, Chakraborty also shared how Hindu zamindars considered themselves at the peak of social hierarchy.⁹ They showed Muslims no respect and asserted their higher status over them, because they possessed the land that Muslim peasants cultivated as a sharecropper. He recites Rabindranath Tagore’s poem:

‘while the glass lamp rebukes the earthen for calling it cousin;
the moon rises and the glass lamp, with a bland smile, calls her ‘my dear, dear brother.

They did not have any sympathy for the poor, who were mostly Muslims, and never attempted to offer assistance to them. However, they looked out for themselves and those they deemed on their level. Similarly, Abul discussed the issue of the Calcutta riots, where Muslims were victimized by the Hindus. Though Muslims and Hindus disagree on many things, they appear to

⁶ Interview with Abul Khayair, 24 July 2019, Ramganj, Bangladesh.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interview with Haradan Chakraborty on December 28, 2020, Ramganj, Bangladesh.

⁹ Parvez Rahaman, “75 years of Partition: How the Noakhali Riots came to be.” *Daily Star* 18 November 2022. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/75-years-partition-how-the-noakhali-riots-came-be-3172881>

agree that zamindars are to blame for major societal issues such as insulting Muslims and creating a divide between them that was unable to bridge. The Muslims were forbidden from walking in front of their houses with shoes on and had to close their umbrella and put it under their arm when passing the house. If a Muslim was caught infringing the laws, they were brutally beaten. For Abul's perspective, it appears that Muslims lagged behind due to not focusing on English education and were exploited by Hindus who wielded the power through possessing the land.



Figure 2. Haradan Chakraborty, Ramganj, Lakshmipur, Bangladesh (Photo credit: author).

Memory is a collective remembrance of a social past that helps to morph into the common understanding of a society.¹⁰ Remembering the past is a tool to illustrate history, which is embedded into a present-oriented conceptual framework. It helps to recall the previous society with a view to the reconstruction of a coherent narrative based on specific place and time. If one account of an event varies from actual happenings of the event, it is possible that the teller is

¹⁰ Patrick H. Hutton, "Collective Memory and Collective Mentalities: The Halbwachs-Ariés Connection." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1988), 314. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23232416>

trying to insert their own version of a narrative.¹¹ However, the tendency of memory is to reinforce the past through larger cultural points of values and customs since such stories are drawn from the common understanding of a society.¹²

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¹¹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 2.

¹² Patrick H. Hutton, "Collective Memory and Collective Mentalities, 314.