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**PARTITION MEMORIES IN BANGLADESH: INTERPLAY BETWEEN  
OFFICIAL HISTORY WRITING AND FAMILY NARRATIVES**

*Masters Thesis*

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Fire in the bosom, longing in the eyes, and the heart-burn-  
nothing can solve the problem of separation.  
Where did the sweet breeze come from and where did it vanish-  
the street lamp has no news yet.  
Even the night's heaviness is just the same;  
still the moment of salvation has not arrived  
for the heart and the eye.  
So let's press on as the destination is still far away.

(Faiz Ahmed Faiz; Freedom's Dawn.

Jigar ki ag, nazar ki umang, dil ki jalan,  
Kisi pe chara-e-hijran ka kuchh asar hi nahin.  
Kahan se a'i nigar-e-saba, kidhar ko ga'i?  
Abhi charagh-e-sar-e-rah ko kuchh khbar hi nahin;  
Abhi girani-e-shab men kami nahin a'i,  
Najat-e-dida-o-dil ki ghari nahin a'i;  
Chale-chalo ke vo manzil abhi nahin a'i.

(Faiz Ahmed Faiz; Subh-e-Azadi)

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## *Foreword*

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## *Abstract*

This essay discusses how Partition (of British India) is remembered today in Bangladesh and how personal memories and narratives may differ considerably from public history writing. It examines the influence of state, community and family on the formation of popular memories about Partition. The idea of homeland or “desh” has been associated with the idea of motherland. The concept of “desh” has been used as an important tool for strengthening the idea of national integration. However, to the displaced persons the word “desh” corresponds to a different meaning. It refers to the ancestral land which had been lost for ever. It only exists in memories. The essay tries to understand the nostalgia for a lost homeland cherished by the uprooted Muslims from West Bengal on the basis of the memories.

It attempts to answer the questions ‘how do we know what we remember (of Partition)? Is what we remember, what we used to know? What relationship is there between what we remember and what we experienced?’ Literature which discusses the relationship between memories and history and identity formation of a nation provides the framework for this analysis.

*Key words: British India. Partition. Memories. Family narratives. Official history writing.*

## I. Introduction

### Problem Area

This thesis was driven from my life experience as a (grand) child of a refugee family that migrated from British India, the land that they had known as their own for hundreds of years, to Pakistan, a new born country on the other side of the border.

Summer of 1947, in what we call today South Asia; British India was partitioning between India and Pakistan. The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, is perhaps the most tragic of all political events to affect the region in its long political history. The partition divided Hindus and Muslims who had lived together for hundreds of years. It led to endless boundary disputes, three wars between the two neighbors, a nuclear powered arms race, and state sponsored terrorism. In what is termed as the greatest human migration, some 15 million people were displaced from their homes as a result of the partition, with Hindus in Pakistan moving to areas in West Bengal and Punjab in India while Muslims from India crossing the border to migrate to the other side. The partition was marred by large scale violence with the death of a million (some estimate it up to 1.5 million) citizens and countless others suffering.

The displaced people settled into new environments and adopted new identities. The partition of the country led to the partition or division of the land and forced people to migrate to a new country, East Pakistan. These people moved out of their ancestors' land bearing the trauma of violence and humiliation. While these same groups moved in to the new land with the hope of building a new life. These twofold, if not multifold sentiments remained with them throughout the rest of their lives in the new land. In the new country, namely (East) Pakistan, they built their new lives. After a certain period of time the state of Pakistan broke apart in a "bloody" civil war and former East Pakistan became once again a new state: present day Bangladesh.

East Pakistan became another new country, namely, Bangladesh. Pakistan was founded on the basis of its religious homogeneity which eventually did not work and the people on its eastern part chose their ethnic identity of being Bengali over their religious identity. This idea was contrary to the original idea of the creation of Pakistan that led to the partition of British India.

The immigrants of the 1947 partition from West Bengal of British India to East Pakistan, later Bangladesh are the direct witness of the repeated reshaping of their country. They were first moved out of their original land for their religious

belonging to Islam. They were forced to suppress their ethnic identity of being Bengali under their religious identity of Islam. This same group later found themselves in a new country Bangladesh for their ethnicity.

### **Problem formulation**

The creation of Bangladesh is a blatant evidence of the failure of the Two Nation Theory, in other words to the partition of British India itself. Writing of modern South Asian history is significantly occupied with this issue of the Partition. In Pakistan, there is a continuous effort in reiterating the argument of the Two Nations theory or the *raison d'être* of its creation. Similarly at the other corner of South Asia, in Bangladesh, history writing has also been playing an influential role in reaffirming its own creation which is paradoxically a counter argument of the Two Nations theory. As a consequence more focus has been given on the history writing of the freedom struggle of Bangladesh to reaffirm its morality while over the years we can see that there is a wilt of interest in remembering the history of the Partition.

However, the people, who migrated to East Pakistan from the West Bengal of British India, are still bearing the memories of the Partition. The survivors of this generation are quickly disappearing, yet memories of partition still retain a strong and powerful hold on the subcontinent and has been passed on to the next generation. Their memories might have become lightened over the years. Or it might have become tainted by repeated reading of public history of the state formation of East Pakistan and later Bangladesh.

### **Aim of the thesis**

In my thesis, I am going to review the issue of construction of history in the backdrop of the 1947 partition among the people on the eastern border of British India that created the new border chalked out by the Radcliffe Award between West Bengal of India and East Pakistan and later Bangladesh.

My focus of the thesis will be to study how Partition is remembered today in Bangladesh. Also, how personal memories and narratives may differ considerably from public history writing. I am going to limit my research only to two Muslim refugee families who migrated from the West Bengal to East Pakistan.

In my study, I will be trying to understand the nostalgia for a lost homeland cherished by the uprooted Muslims from West Bengal on the basis of the memories of Partition. In the nationalist discourse, the idea of homeland or 'desh' has been associated with the idea of motherland. In the process of nation building, the concept of 'desh' has been used as an important tool for strengthening the idea of 'national integration'. The usage of the word desh in contemporary popular culture and

politics wants to construct the idea of a nation. However, to the displaced persons the word *desh* corresponds to a different meaning. To them it was the ancestral land which had been lost forever due to Partition. It exists only in memories and nostalgia.

The overall aim of this study is to contribute to the social history of Bangladesh by offering a perspective on Partition from below. The interplay between official history writing and family narratives is central to my investigation. My hypothesis is that family narratives may be influenced by the official history writing, but differ from it in significant ways. As Urvashi Butalia said, “the generality of Partition exists publicly in history books. The particular is harder to discover; it exists privately in the stories told and retold inside so many households in India and Pakistan.” (Butalia, 1998; 4)

I will study the influence of state, community and family on the formation of popular memories about partition, by analysing how partition is remembered by the Muslim refugees who migrated from the West Bengal to East Pakistan.

### **Research question**

How do we know what we remember (of partition)? Is what we remember, what we used to know? What relationship is there between what we remember and what we experienced? Or, is it just the residue of past experience filtered through the bumps of time?

‘In which way does family history differ from how the state decided to project Partition?’ Which elements of personal memories are transferred to the next generations? Also, could one say that family narratives share similar characteristics and amount to a popular discourse on Partition? What do the different family members know about the official history about Partition as taught in schools and provided by the media? What is their opinion about it? Do they find that it accords with their family narrative or does it differ in significant ways? Further, the thesis will address the interplay between public and private memory.

### **Review of Previous Research in the field**

Historians in South Asia in general showed very little interest in Partition studies until a decade ago. Even today major works on Partition narratives are mostly concentrated on the northern Indian experiences of Partition. As Urvashi Butalia remarked “..... for some time the Partition experience on the eastern front received comparatively less attention”. (Butalia August 18, 2007: lecture at ISS, New Delhi) On top of this, Partition is hardly being studied in Bangladesh as “researchers show greater interest in the freedom struggle and independence of Bangladesh which is



effectively making us forgetting the history of Partition”, commented Dr. Shirin Akhter who is a Professor of modern South Asian history at Jahangirnagar University in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, one commendable work, originated from Bangladesh, is ‘Uprooted and Divided’ by Meghna Guha Thakurta where a methodology was developed for the use of family history in understanding the Partition. Here Dr. Thakurta applied a comparative framework to understand the similarities and differences in the Partition experiences (related to gender in particular) of Hindus and Muslims. (Thakurta, 2002) However, Partition narratives of families who migrated from West Bengal in India to the then East Pakistan is an altogether missing piece in the historiography of the emergence of Bangladesh.

The scenario is slightly different on the other side of the border. At the beginning of 1990s, Prafulla Chakrabarti published “The Marginal Men”, which opened a new chapter in the field of Partition study. (Chakrabarti, 1999) It reconstructed the untold story of the sufferings of the refugees from East Pakistan and their unbelievable struggle for resettlement in West Bengal in India. One of the most significant works done so far in the field of Partition narratives is Urbashi Butalia’s book “The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India” which is a compilation of oral narratives on Partition, in many cases from the marginal voices of women, children and dalits. (Butalia 1998). It vividly narrated the tragedy, trauma and pain that the Punjabi migrant families suffered during Partition.

Ranabir Samaddar in 1997 edited a volume which is a collection of essays written by eminent historians, sociologists, and political scientists on the Partition of 1947 as it happened in the West Bengal of India. (Samaddar, 1997) One of the articles in this volume was Pradip Kumar Bose’s “Partition—Memory Begins Where History Ends” focuses on the relationship between history and memory.

Another very recent work in the field of Partition narratives, which also is a great inspiration of this thesis, is Ravinder Kaur’s “Since 1947: Partition Narratives Among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi”. In this book Kaur records everyday life of the Punjabi Sikh and Hindu migrants in three resettlement colonies in Delhi. It describes the process and “coping strategy” of these migrants of becoming locals. (Kaur 2007: 217-219)

Suvir Kaul edited “The Partition Memory: Afterlife of the division of India” dealt with issues as diverse as literary reactions to Partition; the relief and rehabilitation measures provided to Partition refugees. (Kaul 2003)

Ritu Menon edited “No Woman’s Land” was the first of its kind which included writing by women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh on Partition of India. It records women’s perspective on the Partition, based on experiences of these three countries. (Menon 2004) In this book, “Two women, one family, divided nations” by

Meghna Guhathakurta records life stories narrations of Partition by her mother and grandmother "... in whose lives Partition had played havoc". (Guhathakurta as cited in Memon 2004)

"Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition" came out in 2000 and is edited by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin. It is a compilation of articles about how Partition affected women and how they found their place in the lands within the redrawn boundaries. The articles also dealt about the concepts of nation, religion community and freedom in light of the Partition. (Menon and Bhasin 2004)

A significant work on how and why Partition happened; the leading up events before Partition is "Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India" edited by Mushirul Hasan (Hasan 2000). It examined recent historiographical debates and evaluated old theories on how and why Partition happened and suggested fresh research in the field.

The other three very important books that evaluated and re-evaluated of events between 1905 and 1947 are i) "Bengal Divided: Hindu communalism and Partition" by Joya Chatterji (Chatterji 1995), ii) "Bengal Divided: The unmaking of a nation" by Nitish SenGupta (SenGupta 2007), and iii) "The Great Partition: The making of India and Pakistan" by Yasmin Khan (Khan 2007). The later two are very recent and published only in 2007 while work of this thesis was already underway. The first two books focused on the political and social processes that led to the demand for Partition in Bengal which was a Muslim majority province. Joya Chatterji explained in her book how the demand for a separate homeland for the Hindus was seen the only way to regain the Hindu influence. The book justified the stratified and fragmented society in Bengal which moved away from the mainstream of Indian nationalism. (Chatterji 1995) Yasmin Khan's "The Great Partition" examined the context, execution and aftermath of the Partition. (Khan 2007)

### **Analytical Framework**

*"The past is myself, my own history, the seed of my present thoughts, the mould of my present disposition"*

- Elizabeth Tonkin (Tonkin,1992: 3)

In this study I will look at the interconnections between memory, cognition and history, and show how they helped to shape the individual selves. To turn it around how individual's memory can be influenced by history. Individuals are social beings, formed in interaction, reproducing and also altering the societies of which they are members. I will try to explain this relations with Hermeneutic circle which says that the movement of understanding "is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2005; 53). On the other hand, I will argue here

that the past is not only a resource to deploy, to support a case or assert a social claim, it also enters memory in different ways and helps to structure it. I will analyse how a social portrait is drawn from the memories and past experiences in light of which the present and the future decisions are built.

## II. Methodology

### Design and Aim

A case study design was adopted because this thesis is “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context.” The case study is interpretative in design and the primary empirical material is based on interviews with the witnesses of the Partition. (Yin 2003: 12-14).

With the help of an interview guide I obtained primary qualitative material (Mikkelsen 2005: 125-127; Kvale 1996) where my “story teller” respondents narrated their memories of Partition and the generations of “story-teller” respondents expressed their subjective perceptions on Partition. Here I should explain that I am labeling the witnesses of Partition as the “story-teller” respondents while their next generations are labeled as “generations of ‘story-teller’ respondents.

The interview guide (Appendix) is focused in design (Yin 2003: 90-91) and covers three main areas: first hand memories of the Partition as recalled by the witnesses whom I am labelling here as my “story-tellers”, elements of personal memories that are transferred to the next generations, family members knowledge about the official history about Partition, whether they find that it accords with their family narrative or does it differ in significant ways? During interviews some respondents further modified my questions and gave supplementary information, while others seemed not keen on discussing the topics I wanted to talk about and instead put more emphasis on other subjects such as politics in the region in general. This is a feature of the semi-structured interview, where the view of the respondent is expressed and additional questions can be asked that may lead to new and unexpected information contextualizing the respondents lives (Mikkelsen 2005: 169).

My research is primarily based on the narratives of the Partition as it is remembered today by some of the witnesses (“story-tellers”) and narratives of Partition as is known by children and grand children of the primary “story-tellers”. This research takes its point of departure in the narrative approach that can be supplemented under the umbrella of “social constructionism”. It is not easy to define “social constructionism”. “Social constructionism” accepts historical and cultural change as intimately related to knowledge and that language (narrative) is central to everyday life and experience. (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999: 06) It also says that language

(narrative) plays a significant role in the formation and structuring of our experience. Narrative is a “major way in which people make sense of experience, construct the self and create and communicate meaning”. (Chase, 2003: 79) Also, our narratives are social constructions. The narratives we tell about our experiences are constructed and sustained through daily interactions in the course of social life. While Others’ narratives about Us affect our stories about ourselves, and we need Others’ ongoing legitimization of our own life story in order to uphold our account. Life stories incorporate different selves into a consistent identity by providing a sense of personal continuity over time. However, the different aspects of the same self can nonetheless be identified in the voices of the characters in the narratives by Others. (Lindgren, 2004: 52-53)

### **Collection of Material**

#### Access and selection of respondents:

There are hundreds and thousands of families in Bangladesh who originate from the other side of the border and have migrated to this piece of land which is Bangladesh now. Some of these families have migrated during the 1947 Partition or sometime soon afterwards. While some other families migrated right after the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. Later, some families migrated to this land after Bangladesh got its independence in 1971. Since my research objective is to study how Partition is remembered today in Bangladesh, I chose to interview direct witnesses of the Partition who crossed the border in 1947. Since this study is for my masters thesis and the word limitation for the final research report is ten thousands, I considered to limit my research only among two Muslim refugee families who migrated from the West Bengal of India to the then East Pakistan.

The selection of the families was random. However, the families who became cases for this thesis were chosen primarily because of easy access from my parent’s place in Dhaka where I was staying during my fieldwork.

My research community consists of 17 individuals of whom two respondents are witnesses of the Partition, I call them my primary Story Tellers. Of the rest, ten are family members of these two primary respondents. While carrying out my interviews with my respondent families, I realized there was a critical absence of Partition narratives in official or public history. Naturally it made me especially inquisitive to know the reason behind this situation. I decided to discuss this issue with secondary school teachers and finally spoke to two teachers. I chose one public and one private school for this; chose one teacher from each school. After these discussions or informal interviews I still could not reach to any clear idea why text books do not address Partition. Therefore I decided to interview members of National Textbook Board. Unfortunately it was not possible to get appointments

with the members. Thus I decided to interview a retired member of national text book board. Also, I chose to discuss the issue of public/official history writing with two academics, renowned historians in Bangladesh whose area of expertise is South Asian history.

### The Process:

Participant observation and open-ended unstructured interviews were considered as the only methods suitable for this thesis. The interviews were in qualitative of nature. The aim of the interviews was to "...obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomenon" (Kvale 1996: 30).

I organized my fieldwork research in two parts. At the beginning I chose to discuss the Partition among two Muslim refugee families who migrated to then East Pakistan. Here, I listened from my respondents how Partition is remembered today by them and how personal memories and narratives may differ considerably from public history writing.

In addition to the interviews which were my first hand source of information, I also used secondary sources of information such as books, news magazines, newspapers. Studying both the first hand and the secondary sources of information offered the opportunity for cross-checking and verifying accounts.

### Modifications:

I had to make little modification in my original fieldwork plan. Originally, I designed to the field work interviews firstly, among the family members of the witnesses of partition whom I am calling "story tellers" and then to interview experts or scholars in the field of history/south asian history/ history writing to discuss about the public or official history writing. However, while doing the research among the family members of the witnesses of Partition, I realized there was an acute absence of the issue of Partition in official history writings, especially in school text books, in Bangladesh. My respondents (family members of the "story tellers") often confessed to me that they hardly have come across any writing (neither fiction nor non-fiction) written by any Bangladeshi which dealt about Partition. Since school text books are the most organized form of documenting public history, I decided to interview school teachers and text book board authority at this stage. This is how the second part of my fieldwork was initiated. In the second part, I interviewed some Key Informants (secondary school teachers, text book board members and academics in this field) to have a clearer insight of the interplay between private and public history writing.

First part of the fieldwork:

During the first part of the fieldwork I made several interview sessions with my respondents, two families who migrated to the then East Pakistan. I made several visits to my respondents' houses at different times during the days. Sometimes I went to listen to their stories in the morning; had breakfast with them; the stories continued; I spent there until after lunch. Both my primary "Story Tellers" or witnesses of the Partition are quite aged; one of them is in her early 80s (and the other one is in his late 60s. Both my "story tellers" preferred me to visit them in the mornings and afternoon "when I (she) am (is) lonely at home and have nothing else to do but remembering my (her) long lost days of childhood which will never come back again" as Ayesha told me. Or "why don't you visit me in the morning or in the afternoon? I will be very glad to have someone to talk to about my home town ("desh bari". If we literally translate it then "desh" is "country of origin" and "bari" is house but the interpretation of the word "desh bari" is "home town") as responded Aziz when I asked for his time to interview him.

However, I also visited Ayesha and Aziz's houses in the evenings on some days, to talk to them again in the presence of their children or grand children and also to interview these children (their spouses) or grand children.

I carried out these interview sessions with families between October 26th and November 30<sup>th</sup> 2007. A total of 20 days were spent in the field during this phase of the fieldwork. During this period, I tried to spend as much time as possible with these families. I ate with them; watched TV soap-operas and cricket with them, one time I fell sleep at Ayesha's place when I was too tired; sometimes I helped them in making meals and afterwards cleaning the kitchen. I tried as much as possible to observe and engage in their way of life, and interactions with their children. Although the duration of my research was relatively short, I believe participant observation was crucial to my research. As Dewalt and Dewalt (1998, p. 264) argued that participant observation "enhances the quality of the data obtained during fieldwork ... [and] the quality of the interpretation of data". From the informal and semi-structured interviews which were more like casual discussions about Partition, observations, there was a continual formulation of an understanding on how various aspects of the respondents' lives still bear the memories of Partition that they have been carrying with them throughout the last 61 years.

12 in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 of my respondents of two families who migrated to the then East Pakistan, during the first phase of the field work. The interviews were semi-structured<sup>1</sup>. I decided not to record the interviews for mainly two reasons: first, because often I interviewed them throughout the day. During these discussions my respondents talked about not only Partition but many other

issues, too. Secondly, both my primary “story tellers” looked hesitant when I told them that I wanted to record their account. While they looked relaxed when they heard that my plan is to learn about their memories of Partition and that they can talk about it as long as they want to. Thus, I decided to take notes while they narrated their stories.

Later, the analysis of the gathered information was done by thematically classifying the notes, then relating each portion of relevant materials to the analytical framework.

Second part of the fieldwork:

Interviews with school teachers and national text book board:

During the second phase of the fieldwork, I interviewed two secondary school teachers to get their opinion about the relatively little focus on Partition in school text books. Here, I should explain the schooling system in Bangladesh in brief. Schooling is divided among primary, which is for age group of 6 to 10 (five years in total); secondary level, which is for age group between 11 and 16 years (six years in total) and then intermediate level, which is only for two years and for the age group of 17-18 year olds. I decided to interview secondary school teachers since secondary schooling is the longest schooling period in Bangladesh; students spend six years in total during this phase.

I chose one public and one private school for this; chose one teacher each from each school. I also, interviewed a retired member of national text book board which is the authoritative body responsible for writing school text books.

All my respondents in this phase of the fieldwork declined to be named in the report. They echoed the same concern “I am only a teacher. I am teaching whatever is written in the books. I didn’t write these books.” As responded one of my respondent while the other said “... Please don’t forget I am only an employee of the government. .... Yes, I am a teacher, too. But I am supposed to teach whatever is written in the books and not the knowledge I have gathered in my life time.”

Interviews with academics/historians:

Also, I chose to discuss the issue of public/official history writing with two scholars, renowned historians in this country whose area of expertise is South Asian history. One of them is Professor A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed, a leading historian who was awarded the highest civilian award of the country for his contribution in education. The other scholar is Professor Shirin Akhter, who has been teaching South Asian

history at one of the very first public universities in the country and who has also been studying the role of women in different areas of South Asian history.

### **Reliability, Validity, and Reflexivity**

I am aware that it is not possible to make large generalizations about the topic based on only a few life-story narratives. Thus, my aim was to contrast and see differences, as: Certainly no individual life history can be said to be representative in its entirety ..., but, ... it may be possible to abstract various themes from the lives of individual members of a given social category that are indeed representative of most of the members of this category and hence provide empirical knowledge that can be generalized. (Davies 1999: 170)

My role as a listener/interviewer who belongs to the post-independence (independence and creation of Bangladesh) generation did not experience force migration must be taken into account when considering reliability. I have grown up in a rather politically stable country in comparison to my primary respondents, the witnesses of Partition, the “story tellers” who lived under three flags in their lives—first under the British Empire until 1947, then under the Pakistani flag in East Pakistan and finally under the Bangladeshi flag now since 1971. I was concerned that my respondents may not want to share their feelings and thoughts with me. However, myself being a child and grand-child of a family who also left and lost their “desh” on the other side of the border proved advantageous. Many times during the interviews I noticed my respondents were considering me as one of them; I was being accepted within the imaginary border of the migrant/refugee “us” against “them”, the original inhabitants of this land.

A satisfactory degree of trust was established through spending many days from morning to evening with the families. There were details I believe the informants would not have revealed unless they trusted the interviewer. Language and specially dialect was another advantage since my respondents speak in my mother tongue, Bangla. Interestingly, I also share the same dialect with my respondents; dialect that only people in West Bengal of India speak into. Therefore I was able to rely totally on the reliability of the empirical materials.

### **Ethical considerations**

This thesis follows the Centre for East and Southeast Asian Studies’ ethical guidelines for carrying out fieldwork research. My identity as a student researcher of Lund University and objective and nature of the study was made clear at the very beginning of the fieldwork. Moreover, I made sure that anonymity of the informants was guaranteed. I also sought informed consents before each interview. Therefore,



the respondents were also aware of their voluntary status, right to terminate participation, and how the collected materials would be used.

The issues of public history writing is a political, therefore is sensitive and often criticism of state policies surfaced during the interviews. This stressed my responsibilities to uphold confidentiality of the informants. Nevertheless I am convinced that my study respondents will not be exposed to any harm or risks as a result from this thesis.

### **III. The memories**

For conducting the interviews I had created an interview guide with a list of questions and issues to be addressed throughout the interview. I preferred to have a casual and relaxed discussion with my respondents, especially with the primary “story tellers”, therefore I quickly discarded the guide as it introduced an element of formality into a discussion. Instead I decided to keep the main issues of discussion in my head. I made sure all the pre-decided issues were addressed in each interview; I brought them up myself if they were not brought up by the interviewee herself/himself.

#### **Memories of Partition: Interviews with “story-tellers”**

I am recording here major parts of Ayesha and Azizs’ memories of the Partition.

As Ayesha’s remembers:

“Kolkata. 1946. I was in my early 20s. Was already married and mother of a new born son. Kolkata was my home; the only city I had ever lived in. My husband used to teach in a government college there. My parents, five brothers and a sister were also in Kolkata; some of them working and some were studying there. One of my elder brothers and sister were married, too. But my husband’s family was from Chittagong, East Bengal; a land I have a vague idea of. I only knew it was crisscrossed by many long rivers and had covered with paddy field.

Kolkata. A day in late 1946. I still remember, it was hot, muggy and rainy. The air was smoky. Kolkata was on fire. This city which never sleeps had come to a stop. No trains were moving. Streets were empty. Only occasionally a cycle ridden by a “Shaheb” (literally means “master” in Bangla but is commonly used to describe “white-men” in general and an Englishman in particular) or a military jeep was rushing by. Gutters were filled with bodies of dead men and women. I heard from my husband and neighbours that “riots” had erupted in the city and thousands of Muslims were killed. It was the first time I came across this word “riot”. I learned riot means Hindus were killing the Muslims. We used to live in a Muslim majority

locality. Still we were feeling very scared. We were hearing stories that the Hindu thugs were killing any Muslim they could lay hands on without mercy. ... My eldest brother who was studying medicine at that time had a very good friend who was Hindu, Hemonto'da (his name). They had a winter-house inside a forest, far away from Kolkata. He offered that house to us for staying until the situation in Kolkata improved. I moved there with the rest of my siblings and my mother. And with God's mercy that year we were saved.

Kolkata. Beginning of 1947. By then we came back to Kolkata. The reality of Partition was descending on us. We were hearing that Muslims should be leaving for Pakistan because the land no longer belonged to them. Many of our neighbours and relatives had left already on a temporary basis, leaving their houses intact in Kolkata or the outskirts. Soon it was July of 1947. More rioting followed. We were hearing terrifying stories every day that Hindu thugs were going to a locality and killing all the Muslims they found. The city was divided into two large camps - Hindus and Muslims.

Soon the question of whether to leave or not to leave was debating over and over again in our family. My eldest brother was studying medicine at that time and was an active member of the Congress decided to stay back. While the rest of the family decided to move to East Pakistan. But we were a large family. It was not possible for us to leave together for many reasons. My parents were in their late 50s at that time. While my son was only a few months old. So we decided to get divided into three groups. My father was a government servant and he opted for East Pakistan as his place of work. He had to join his work in Dhaka soon. So he left with a two of my brothers. I went to stay with another brother and his wife and family in another part of West Bengal which was not touched by riot yet. While the rest of my family (my mother and other siblings) crossed the border but did not go straight to Dhaka. I stayed at my brother's place a few more weeks and then finally it was time to leave my beloved homeland, too.

I also joined the rest of my family, except the brother we had left in Kolkata, in Dhaka.

Dhaka. It was a very small, quite place in the late 40s. It almost did not look like a city. There were too few people. Almost no car or bus. Most of the streets did not have any lights, so in the evenings everything went dark. And people spoke Bangla very differently! I could see that it was the same language we were speaking still very different! It was a very interesting to find all Muslim people around us! There were very few Hindu families. I tried to adopt to this new land.

It was not until the early 60s when I went back to see my Kolkata. I went to our old place. Almost everything remained the same only the houses were now occupied by

unknown Hindu families. I couldn't find many of my old friends. But it was very nice to see my eldest brother. By now he is a doctor and had become quite reputed doctor in his locality. My younger brother who had migrated with us to East Pakistan also went back to Kolkata, his old city. He was an art student in Dhaka. He finished his studies and went back and settled in Kolkata again and never came back to Dhaka since 1970 when our father and one of the brothers died. Our mother died in 1982, still my brother did not come to Dhaka.

I have been visiting Kolkata ever since whenever I get the chance. I used to go to "Poush Mela" (winter carnival) every year until two years ago. Now I have become too old to travel. I used to take my children, their wives and grand children with me. They also enjoyed it so much. At least that is what they told me! (she said with a joking smile). I found my childhood friends. I spoke to them over phone while in Kolkata. But couldn't manage to meet them. Afterall I had to depend on my children. I am too old now to move alone. My children are young. Obviously they have more interest in shopping and sight seeing than taking their old mother to her long lost friend!

My children never asked me in detail what exactly happened in 1947. But they often want to know about my childhood. I think they find it exotic, very different from their childhood and surroundings in this country. I love telling them my stories; sometimes I think I tell them the same stories many times! So I don't think my children know what Partition days were in reality. I never even see them reading about it in schools books. I think they only got to know about it a little bit from "Purbo-Poshchim" (East-West, a very famous novel Sunil Gongpaddhya, a renowned writer of this time from West Bengal, India). I think, my children know a lot more about the events that led up to the independence war in 1971 and the war itself; about the war heroes and martyrs. It is sad that my own children know so little about an event (referring to Partition) that completely changed my life's path; uprooted me forever from my homeland."

As Aziz remembers:

"We are living in Bangladesh since 1947. We migrated as refugees in 47's Partition. We crossed the border and started staying in Rangpur. We had to leave all our property when we crossed the border in riot in 1947. My father was a lawyer. So he opened his legal practice there. There were not many lawyers in Rangpur during those days. So it was not very difficult for him to make his name in the town as a good lawyer. Eventually he bought a house there and we made this new country as our home.

We used to live in Jalpaiguri in India. My father was a lawyer in that town. He also became Vice Chairman of the City Municipality. Not many Muslims had the

opportunity to hold this prestigious post during those days. My maternal grand father was a land-lord and used to own a number of tea gardens in Duarse.

I was ten at that time and was studying in minor schools (schools upto grade six). Yes, I do remember the day we left our homeland and migrated to this new land. I remember it very clearly. I wonder today how I can still remember that day when I have forgotten many other events that happened much later. We were six siblings and all of us were very young at that time. In fact I was the second child of my parents, so I had four younger siblings. My mother died when my youngest sibling was a toddler. So we used to stay with our paternal grand mother. On that very day, our father told us to flee the house through our back door with our grand mother and to a shelter/camp which was at one end of the town. We all took rickshaws but we were too many to ride in one rickshaw. So my grand mother took the younger ones with her in one rickshaw and I was with my elder sister in another one. After going a little further I and my sister had lost our grand-mother on the way! And we didn't know either where exactly was the shelter/camp. On the way we saw some Hindu rioters breaking into a Muslim house. I was very afraid of my sister. I was thinking of a way to hide her from those thugs. But I didn't know where to run! Then we told the rickshaw puller to ride towards a bridge which was nearby and we hid under the bridge. I remember that the rickshaw puller was also a Muslim. I don't remember anymore how long we had to stay there. It felt like for ages we had been there! And the whole time my sister didn't say a word! Then at one point we sensed the rioters had left the area. And we came out from under the bridge and finally found our way to the shelter/camp. My grand mother and other siblings had already reached there. Still we didn't know what had happened to our father. I think he reunited with us after two days. It was a shelter which was guarded by policemen. Still it was not very safe since most of the policemen were Hindus and they were frequently been threatened by the rioter thugs. The day our father had reached, we heard that a train was going to East Bengal/East Pakistan. We bound on the train. Our father told us that he had gone back to our house in Jalpaiguri after the thugs had left and he found everything in ruins.

Jalpaiguri was a beautiful town. During those days Jalpaiguri was one of the most important towns in that region. Later when we first came to Dhaka in the 1950s, Dhaka looked very empty and undeveloped. In school, in my class we were only two Muslim students including myself. The rest of the kids were Hindu. We used to celebrate all the Hindu religious festivals with them. However, I remember that whenever we were in a Hindu household, we used to be treated differently. If I had asked for water, they used to serve us with reluctance and afterwards they used to put aside the glass separately. So even at that young age, I knew that I was different from my Hindu classmate and that we could play together in the field but we were not very welcomed inside their houses.

I did went back to Jalpaiguri. I always had wished to go back to the town where I grew up and where I had left my friends. I couldn't do it until 1980. It was not very easy to visit India in the 1960s and later in the 1970s. Besides I was working in Pakistani Army. Even later when I left army and joined the civil service in independent Bangladesh, all civil servants needed permissions from the Home Ministry if they wanted to visit India. Also, in the 1970s and later 1980s a special permission was needed to go to Jalpaiguri because of the Naxalite movement there. Still I managed to go back there in early 1980. I traveled to Kolkata and took a bus to Jalpaiguri pretended to be an Indian.

Many things have changed in the town. Still it was same old town that I had known in many terms. I told you before that my mother died when I was very young and before Partition. So my mother's grave was in Jalpaiguri. I had a vague memory of the place where it could be. I found the place, found the grave as well. It was all covered with long grasses that have grown over the years. One could hardly recognize that there was a grave under the bushes. I cleaned it myself. Put a plaque with my mother's name on it again.

I tried to find my teachers. It was not easy. Most of them have passed away by then. I still got the whereabouts of one of them. Found out his house and met him there. He was so happy to see me that he broke down in tears.

I found out one of my classmates as well. I went to their family house where he used to stay in the 1940s. I got to know that the same family was still there. I went to the house; the door was open and saw an old man sitting in a couch. I asked my friend's name and if he was at home. The old man asked me how I know him. I told him that I used to study with him in minor school many years ago. He took a close look on me. And then asked with an emotionally choked voice, "am I seeing a dream?" This was my friend who had grown old by then and I didn't even recognize him. We spent the next few days walking around the town, meeting few more old school mates.

Unfortunately I have lost touch with my school friends again. Some of them had visited me many years ago. They stayed at my place and I showed them around. Our postal service is frustrating! It was not easy to keep in contact with people outside the country. We didn't have emailing and telephone connections.

I visited the town three times since migrating to this country. After I got married I took my wife with me to show her my old country.

It was not very easy for me to travel frequently to India. I joined the Pakistan army in the early 60s and I was with it until I left my job in the late 60s. As an army man, I was not allowed to visit India on personal grounds. Again, after the liberation war in

1971, I joined the civil service of Bangladesh and then it was not easy either to travel to India. We need to take authorization from the administration besides taking visa from the Indian government. One time I traveled with my children to India. But they preferred to stay back in Kolkata while I and my wife went to my old hometown in India. They were not interested to go with us.

We studied about Partition in early Pakistan time in the late 40s and 50s. Our text books were written from the Muslim League point of view. The partition was portrayed as freedom from British and the majority Hindu's rule of the minority Muslims. But what freedom it has brought to the mass? We have been oppressing the minority Hindus now. I remember when I was in the Pakistan army in the 1960s, we had only one single Hindu army officer! This Hindu officer was also a Bengali and we became very good friends because there were not many Bengalis either in the army. He later became one of the Sector Commanders in Bangladesh's liberation war against Pakistan in 1971.

Not only in Pakistan or Bangladesh but it is the same situation in India too. Muslims there are still economically and socially oppressed by the majority Hindus.

My children ask me about my childhood in India. So I tell them the stories. However I don't see them reading about Partition in their school texts or in other books. Well ... I don't think that our school textbooks now write on Partition. I cannot remember seeing them reading about it. But I have seen college history books where they have described Partition but again it is written from the Muslim League point of view. Although they do get to read about 1971's independence struggle in schools. Independence struggle is very much present in school textbooks. Well ... I think it is quite natural in a sense that Partition is less dealt with in school text books than independence struggle of 1971. Afterall 1971 is still very much fresh in our memories."

#### **IV. Discussion: Interplay between public and private memory**

The rest of the interviews were carried out for two reasons, *first*, to verify how much of these memories were transferred to the next generation of these Partition witnesses. And *secondly* to get an insight about the interplay between private and public memory. In which way does family history differ from how the state decided to project Partition: What do the different family members know about the official history about Partition as taught in schools and provided by the media? What are their views about these differences?

## **Transferring of memories:**

*"What is the use of remembering"?*

At the beginning, both Ayesha and Aziz were reluctant to speak about Partition. The very first question they asked me was, "what is the use of remembering?" As Aziz said, "I have buried my memories too long ago." I tried to read this silence with the help of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) where she explained, "Surely this reluctance pointed to something". It could be either because of the "horrific nature of the events" or because of people's own complicity in history." (Butalia, 1998, 11). Unlike other histories of killings and violence, there were no "good" or "bad" ones in the Partition history. Every family has a history of both being victimised and on the other hand acting as an aggressor.

*"Chosen memories"*

At one point during the interview with Aziz, I asked why he thinks Partition occurred. He revealed a memory which I later discovered Aziz had never shared with anyone in his family. He continued, "If there was any function at our Hindu neighbours' house, I would go. But they would never eat with me or any other Muslim. They would show us the plate at one corner in the room and would asked us to bring the plate and then would serve us food. They used to throw rotis from a distance so that it doesn't touched by and "untouchable" i.e. Muslim man." And at the end, would ask us to clean the plate and keep wherever it was. They would not even touch the plate. But when we used to invite them, they would never come. We never had any untouchability practice among us, the Muslims." Aziz was visibly shaken after sharing this little memory.

## **Family history versus state decided projection of Partition**

*"Selective amnesia"*

Throughout the course of my interviews with Ayesha and Aziz, I noticed time and again that there was a complete absence of memories of Hindu neighbours being killed, or Hindu houses being destroyed. I was being told only selective memories of the Partition. This, in other words, is termed as "selective amnesia" by historians. (Butalia, 1998, 350). "This is my story. And of my siblings. And of my parents who were already old at that time and who had to leave literally everything, they had known in their entire life, behind and got on a journey towards the unknown. You'll never find these stories (of Partition) in books. These stories only live inside people's hearts." as commented Ayesha. In my study I tried to search for the motive behind this- why these stories of common people are not in "books". When I asked Ayesha what in her opinion is the reason for this, she replied, "because all our life we are

trying to forget the Partition". I asked Aziz the same question, and he replied, "In this country, we are all trying to forget some of the country's past. We are only remembering what we choose to remember. .... We are trying to forget the Partition." As Ashis Nandy put it, "In this part of the world there is a belief that we must forget some things to reaffirm a moral universe, to ensure that the ghosts of the past do not haunt us. We do not live by history but by narratives and memories that have built-in principles of forgetfulness. As we have built new nation-states and millions have rebuilt their lives, we have not been able to lay our ghosts to rest". The political cultures of all the three countries (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) have remained mired in a past that can neither be owned nor disowned." (Nandy, 1997: 3) Historiography tries to "dissipate amnesia and cultivate memory" However, in this process historiography itself is selective and explains only certain aspects of the past. (Buttafucio, 1980) This way, memories of Partition still playing an active role in public policy making. "We memorialise selectively, and thus produce histories that are sanctioned by the state. We remember by refusing to remember." (Kaul, 2003: 2)

I went back to my other respondents, the family of the Partition witnesses with the same question when they also confirmed that they don't find discussion on Partition in Bangladeshi literature or in public life. Ayesha's eldest son, Ahsan replied, "People in this country are not sure what to do with Partition! They know that it had happened in their country's life at one point. However, they are not comfortable with the fact that at one point they were part of what is today India. There is a strong anti-India sentiment persists in this country. On the other hand, there is also a very strong anti-Pakistan sentiment among people and they are grateful for India's involvement during our liberation war with Pakistan" (what was West Pakistan at that time). Suvir Kaul explains similar thought by saying, "We remain, as a national culture, uncertain and anxious about the place of Partition in our history. It remains the unspoken horror of our time." (Kaul, 2003, 3)

## **The history that we learnt**

### *Partition versus Independence*

My younger respondents, Ayesha and Aziz's grand children and children told me that the events of 1947 were described in the school text books as part of the history of independence struggle from the British rule and the creation of Pakistan. Nevertheless, from the very beginning East Pakistan was considered to be the "poorer cousin to the real Pakistan" and the "bloody cracking apart of the country and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 were already visible in 1947". (Khan, 2007, 189) Aziz' daughter said that school books do not describe "the stories of families like ours. It never mentions how many people were killed in riots." I asked them why they thought is this contradiction between the written history with their own knowledge of family history of 1947, Aziz's son Ryan replied, "because our



governments do not know if they should remember the independence or the Partition. It is convenient to remember the independence and glorify heroism of our political leaders than to take blame of the riots and thousands of killing and lost homelands". This comment was reflected in Suvir Kaul's explanation, "we thus teach our children "no-fault" nationalism. (Kaul, 2003: 9). Responding to why school text books are not describing the "subaltern" history of Partition, both of my respondents who are teaching in secondary school for the last 10-15 years, said that school textbooks are written by groups of writers commissioned for this work by the government directly and naturally they reflect the government's version of the history. One of the teachers, Parveen Sultana, commented, "school textbooks are the voice of the government that teaches the children." While, Mashiur Rahman, the other respondent asked, "In which country government bothers to tell stories of the common people? To them it is more important to give the 'right image' of the country." Similar comment was made by Aatur Rahman, former member of Dhaka Education Board, "Government appoints writers for the school textbooks. These people are paid government officers. Why would they go against the government policy?" In this connection, I interviewed renowned historian Professor A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed and he commented, "There is an acute absence of original thinking in this country. The textbook board is run by some 'wooden headed' bureaucrats who has no spirit for knowledge."

### *"Bangladesh is Bangladesh"*

As my respondents confirmed that Partition is almost never discussed in public life, nevertheless it is very much present in their private family life. I went back repeatedly to my other respondents, the family members of both Ayesha and Aziz to learn their knowledge about Partition and how they learned about it. I found out that they all learned from either their parents or grand-parents who crossed over the border and carried with them the memories of their lost homeland. "My *dida* (grand-mother/far-mor) always tells us stories of "her country" - about her friends that she never met in last fifty years; about the house where she grew up; what they used to do in Puja (the Hindu religious festival); about cricket matches that she used to watch at the stadium in Kolkata", narrated Afsana, Ayesha's 23 years old grand-daughter. "I find her stories very exotic because I never had been to any Puja here in Bangladesh in my entire life! ... some of the words that she uses are also very unusual although I am used to them since I have been hearing them all my life and I think I also use some of the words. But my friends think my *dida* speaks Bangla in a very different accent and they often don't understand many of the words that she says", she continues. "I heard them telling others, 'Afsana's grand-mother is from India'". "I have also seen *dida* becoming very happy and excited when she meets someone who is also a migrant from India. She becomes friends with her/him very quickly even if she/he is a complete stranger. .... These types of situations make me a little self-conscious. I start to feel distant from my *dida*." ... "Sometimes when my *dida*

meets someone from “her country” she introduces the other person as “look she is also from “our country”. I find it even more embarrassing since I don’t consider myself to be an Indian.” It is very interesting to note here that while Afsana is expressing her embarrassment as her grand-mother considers herself to be Indian sometimes, although at the same time Afsana herself is saying India *is* her grand-mother’s country.

When I asked Afsana if she tried to learn about Partition from other sources besides her grand-mother, she replied, “Well .... I am not very keen on learning about Partition. Partition is always something to me that questions my identity. I believe I am a Bangladeshi, a true Bangladeshi and I prefer to remain like that. ... I like hearing my *dida’s* stories but they are only stories to me.” When I asked her who is to her opinion a true Bangladeshi, she explained, “Someone who considers *only* Bangladesh is her homeland. We have fought a long and bloody war to have this country. Yes, we have many similarities among us in all South Asian countries. Still we are distinctively different from each other. Bangladesh is Bangladesh.” Because of the reality of having been born out of the legacy of Two Nation Theory and subsequent failure of it, in Bangladesh, on one hand, the mullahs try to affirm national identity by invoking its dominant religious characteristic and on the other hand the secular forces try to put more emphasis on its ethnic Bangali identity; more specifically “Bangali Muslim” or “Bangladeshi” identity. But this “secular constitutional obligations and democratic aspirations are often under pressure from theocratic agenda of the mullahs” (Kaul, 2003: 8).

Another respondent, 22 years old daughter of Aziz, Kushum commented, “History is there at the back but I prefer to look forward into the future than into the past. We need to get on with our life. Partition is a history belonged to someone else; to another time.” As Yasmin Khan explained, “Partition has to be integrated into the bigger story of nation-building.” (Khan, 2007: 172).

## V. Analysis

*“That which we remember is, more often than not, that which we would like to have been; or that which we hope to be. Thus our memory and identity are ever at odds; our history ever a tall tale told by inattentive idealists.”*

- Ralph Ellison (Ellison, 1995: 199)

Memory, is not simply the retrieval of information and facts, but an imaginative, fluid activity which involves subjective impressions and meanings. As I mentioned earlier, Urvashi Butalia explained that horrific nature of the events or because of people’s own complicity in history, people choose to treasure certain memory over the others. In other words, people try to forget certain memories. This process of remembering and forgetting memories are closely related to the process of assuming

a certain identity as a group or community. The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering: and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity. This is why the retelling of memories by the Muslim Partition witnesses never mentioned the atrocities done on the Hindus by Muslims during Partition. These witnesses were clearly identifying themselves with the Muslim sentiments.

The nation aspiration of identifying themselves as “Muslims” and to project how it is distinctively different from other religious groups, in general and Hindus in particular became stronger throughout the years since Partition. The State, first Pakistan and then Bangladesh, chose the Muslim identity for the nation in order to project it as the natural national unity factor. During the Pakistan era (1947-1971) Islam was considered by the ruling regime as the only binding force between the otherwise culturally different West (the present Pakistan) and East (present Bangladesh) of the country. However, after Bangladesh got independence in 1971, successive regimes tried to project Bangladesh as a Bengali or Bangladeshi Muslim country. Dr. Shirin Akhter commented, “There is plethora of museums, national holidays, commemorative occasions, and commemorative documentaries to bring the past into everyday parlance. All these State initiatives primarily project the contribution of Muslims in Bangladesh’s independence struggle.”

This absence of any initiative by the State to remember the Partition trauma has influences at the individual level. The Partition refugees who crossed over the border have seen throughout their lives in the new homeland how the State is practicing various measures to forget the Partition. With the aspiration of adopting the new country as their new “homeland” these refugees chose to bury their past life. As both Aziz and Ayesha asked me in turn, “what is the use of remembering (Partition)?”. Aziz said, “I buried my memories (of Partition) a long time ago.” Ayesha in the same context mentioned, “all our life we are trying to forget the Partition.” Through this process of identifying themselves with the people of their new homeland, they chose to forget certain memories that were deemed “unwanted” for achieving future aspirations of the nation as a whole. At one point during the interviews with Aziz, he mentioned that he never shared with his family the facts (or memories) of being treated like “untouchables” by his Hindu neighbours. This remembering-through-forgetting gives birth to a conception of the nation as an extended family.

These individual memories were being projected onto group or groups and through which those groups framed and represented its past and the future. As thinkers of Hermeneutic circle explains that the movement of understanding “is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2005; 53). The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes explicit understanding in that the parts, that are determined by the whole, themselves also determine this whole. Diverse thinkers, such as Ernst Renan, Benedict Anderson,

Etienne Balibar, and Eric Hobsbawm focus on the nation as a symbolic field in which narrations of a particular group of “people” are linked together through the memory and forgetting of past collective experiences and future aspirations (Siobhan, 2001; 11-12). As Ernst Renan famously said, “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common and also that they have forgotten many things (Renan: “What is a Nation”. 1882 in Anderson; 1996:199)”

This aspiration of getting merged together with the mainstream followed through the next generation of the Partition refugees. As one of my interviewees commented at one point, “Well .... I am not very keen on learning about Partition. Partition is always something to me that questions my identity. I believe I am a Bangladeshi, a true Bangladeshi and I prefer to remain like that. ...” In her opinion a true Bangladeshi is someone who considers *only* Bangladesh is her homeland. This generation of youngsters whose family at one point crossed over the border to adopt this land as their new homeland, prefers to look forward into the future than into the past.

## VI. Conclusion

In Bangladesh there is no institutional memory of Partition. The state has never tried to build any memorial to show respect to thousands of people who died in riots in Noakhali and Barisal, for example. There was never any initiative taken to mark the places on the border through which millions of people crossed over. Partition is the ugly side of the freedom from the two hundred years of British rule. It is not only in Bangladesh, but also in India and Pakistan, too, the state actively strives to forget this dark side of the Independence (from the British). However, people remember. And people forget, too. All these family memories tell us the history of millions of people who had to go through confused struggle, violence, sacrifice, loss of homeland, adopting of new identities and loyalties, which is collectively referred to only as the events of 1947; this history might be called “human dimension” of the history. Unfortunately, this human dimension of history somehow occupies a lesser status in “history”. These family memories give generations, born after Partition, a better understanding about the history. However, this learning is also influenced by the state publicised version of history that they are learning. On the other hand, memory itself is not unbiased either. Just as state decides which version of history to propagate, people also actively choose only some selected memories to transfer to the next generation and to forget the others. Memory is a complex phenomenon for memory is much more than what the mind can remember or what objects can help us document about the past. It is also about what we do not always consciously know that we remember until something actually jogs our memory. Nevertheless, we can only know about the subaltern history of Partition through national and family mythologies; through collective and individual memories.

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## **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Witnesses of the Partition**

- Name: Age:
- How long have you been living in Dhaka?
- Where have you lived before Dhaka? (I'll go to the next issue if she answers she was on the other side of the border before moving to Dhaka. I am assuming she will since I will do this interview with the oldest people in the family who apparently look born before Partition)
- When you left India how old were you?
- Do you remember it? Do you remember the day you left?
- What do you remember of your childhood days?
- Have you met your friends later? (after leaving India) If yes, then how was it? If no, then why not?
- Are you still in touch with your childhood friends? If no, then why not? If yes, then why?
- Did you go back to the old place where you used to stay (in India)? Why and how was it?
- How often you visit your ancestral place?
- Are you in touch with the rest of your family who stayed back in India? If no, then why not? If yes, then why?
- Have you taken your children to your ancestral place?
- Did they like it? What was their reaction? Was it your decision to show them their ancestral place?
- Did you also read about Partition in school? What was written there? How similar was it with what you have experienced?
- Have you seen your children or grand-children reading about Partition in school books?
- Did they ask you about it when they read about Partition?
- Do they also read about Independence struggle of 1971?
- Partition or 1971 war, which of these two are being narrated more in books (mostly text books)?
- How do you feel about the absence of Partition in books?

### **Other family members**

- Name: Age:
- What do you know about Partition? (not sure if I should ask this question! May be I should only ask "how did you learn about Partition?")
- Where did you hear about it?
- Do you talk about Partition (memories) in the family?
- Did you go back to the old place (in India) from where your family comes? Why and how was it?
- How often you visit your ancestral place?



- Have you taken your children to your ancestral place? (in case the respondent has children)
- Did they like it? What was their reaction? Was it your decision to show them their ancestral place?
- Are you in touch with the rest of your family who stayed back in India? If no, then why not? If yes, then why?
- Did you also read about Partition in school? What was written there? How similar was it with what you have heard in your family?
- Have you seen your children reading about Partition in school books?
- Did they ask you about it when they read about Partition?
- Do they also read about Independence struggle of 1971?
- Partition or 1971 war, which of these two are being narrated more in books (mostly text books)?
- How do you feel about the absence of Partition in books?

## PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

I am giving here a list of my total of 17 respondents according to their category:

- Primary Story Tellers: 2
- Families members of these two primary respondents: 10
- Key respondents: Secondary school teachers: 2
- Key respondent: Retired secondary education textbook board member: 1
- Key respondent: Academics/historians: 2

Basic profile of the two primary “Story Tellers” and their family:

Family A:

- Name: Ayesha Khatun (not her real name)
- Story Teller’s age: 83 years (was 22 years old when she experienced Partition)
- Sex: Female
- Widow; writer/novelist; mother of five middle aged children (four sons and one daughter); has nine grand children who are between 3 to 34 age group; has two great grand children who are between 13 months to 3 years old.

Family B:

- Name: Aziz Ahmed (not his real name)
- Story Teller’s age: 67 years (was only 6 years old when he crossed over the border in 1947)
- Sex: Male
- Married; father of two children who are in their mid to late twenties; retired public servant.