Introduction

Seventy years ago, the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan at the time of independence caused the largest forced migration in human history. The violence of this era, however, impacted on men and women differently due to the pervasiveness of ideas about izzat (honour), gender-based violence, and perspectives that viewed women as an extension of the physical territory that was being so fiercely contested. It could be argued that women's stories of their own experiences of Partition have been neglected.

This youth-led exhibition is an effort to contribute towards redressing this imbalance. Aik Saath and Culture Studio have been working together to support young people from Slough to interview women who lived in British India at the time of Partition. Their stories and memories are integrated into this exhibition and provide insights into the experiences of women during this tumultuous era.

Before Partition

Before 1947 most of the villages and towns in British India had been very mixed with Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims living happily side by side. Many people have good memories of what life was like before the tensions that led to Partition arose.

“It was quite a big town, Chichawatni, and we were living there peacefully, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs. There were no problems.”

MRS APROITA MOHAN

“People would celebrate each other's festivals, like when it was Eid, Hindus and Sikhs would also celebrate and when it was Diwali, we would celebrate. We used to live happily together and there were two Muslim houses and then three or four Hindu houses and then one or two Sikh houses.”

MRS SHAMMAKHTAR

“Community relations prior to Partition were good. When members of the Muslim community got married we went to their weddings. If we ran out of something we could go to their houses and borrow items. Women from the different communities would mix and gossip together on the rooftops.”

MRS GURMEET KAUR JUTLA

In the 1930s and 40s, as the possibility of independence from British rule edged closer, debates about the future of India became more fraught. Different groups had contesting visions for India's future.

The Indian National Congress campaigned for the state of India to be secular, not connected to any particular religion. Initially, the All-India Muslim League simply lobbied for safeguards to be provided for Muslims within India. However, the two leading political parties were unable to reach an agreement over what would happen in the longer term and the focus of the Muslim League gradually shifted towards a campaign for a separate state. This state would be called Pakistan. It took time for the Muslim League to win widespread support from Muslims but in the 1945–6 elections it was hugely successful, particularly in parts of British India like the United Provinces, Punjab and Bengal.

The Shiromani Akali Dal, a Sikh political party, opposed the creation of Pakistan but argued that if a separate Muslim state was to be created then a separate Sikh state should also be formed, as areas where sizable Sikh populations lived in the Punjab would be split between two countries. The last Viceroy of India, Lord Louis Mountbatten, was given the urgent task in early 1947 of finding a solution to this political crisis.
The Announcement

At a press conference on 3rd June 1947, Lord Mountbatten announced that the British government had made the decision that the division (Partition) of India into two separate states would be the only option. The date of independence was also announced as midnight on 14th/15th August 1947.

"I was just nine years old when they announced Partition. I didn't understand what was happening, our elders didn't really tell us anything and we didn't ask any questions. All we knew was that it was something bad and we felt very confused and frightened because all of my paternal grandparents lived in Lahore."
-MRS PUSHPA KHARBANDA

Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a respected British lawyer, was given the task of drawing up the boundary line between India and Pakistan. Radcliffe had never been to India before and arrived there for the first time on 8th July 1947. As Chairman of the Boundary Commission he had just over five weeks in which to complete his task.

Although Pakistan celebrated independence on 14th August and India on 15th August 1947, the actual border between the two new states was not announced until 17th August. Two provinces of British India – the Punjab and Bengal – were divided between the two new countries. Communities, families and farms were cut in two by the boundary line and the largest migration in human history began, as millions of Muslims travelled to West and East Pakistan (the latter now known as Bangladesh) while millions of Hindus and Sikhs headed in the opposite direction.

"I lived with my extended family and my siblings. Cousins would eavesdrop on the adults’ conversations. We heard from them that girls were being kidnapped. We heard them say that everyone would die. I asked my mother, “Mother if everyone will die then how will we live?”
-MRS DARSHANA VARMA

"My mum had packed just a few things, books because she loved reading, a few clothes for us and lots of food. She said we don’t know what’s going to happen, so we took big canisters of different types of food."
-MRS AMRITA MOHAN

"We took the last train and us children hid under the floor boards of the train in case it was attacked… My mother said “I've hidden money in your clothes by sewing it into the seams.” In the salwar she showed us a stitch that we would need to remove to take the money out."
-MRS GURCHARAN KAUR BANSAL

Preparing to Leave

The dividing lines of Partition meant that millions of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who had shared neighbourhoods for generations, suddenly found themselves on the ‘wrong side’ of the new border. Almost 15 million people are estimated to have migrated between 1947 and 1951. Hindus and Sikhs fled to India and Muslims to the newly-created state of Pakistan.

As Partition happened so quickly, people often had very little time to make plans or think about packing up their belongings. Some people fled their homes with essential everyday items such as clothes and money, others choosing more sentimental objects such as books and photographs. Others took items that they thought would be helpful in rebuilding lives wherever their journey took them.

"We took nothing. We didn't have time to take anything. My brother-in-law came and we had to quickly go with him."
-MRS DARSHANA VARM

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Even Sikhs and Hindus already living in India and Muslims in what had become Pakistan still packed emergency suitcases as a precaution because it was a time of such uncertainty and danger. Mrs Swaran Kaur Bansal remembers packing a suitcase of clothes for herself and her new-born baby, keeping it ready under the bed in case she had to flee at a moment’s notice.

A few people were lucky to be transported by motor vehicles or aircraft but the majority made the dangerous journey by train or in long convoys (kafila) on foot.
Journeys

Travelling during Partition was both challenging and dangerous regardless of the means of transport that was taken. The people who journeyed by foot often suffered awfully. They faced horrific conditions; they had little to no food to eat despite walking for long hours. Many wells were poisoned so people were advised not to drink from them, meaning that a large number, including children, became severely dehydrated in the heat but with no choice but to continue moving forward.

Trains were often targeted as they were frequently packed with refugees from both sides. They were also the sites of some of the most violent events of Partition, including the 26th September train massacre which left 3000 Muslims dead and over 1000 injured.

“There were a lot of atrocities that happened. It happened on both sides, no one side held back. Whoever came in the way they killed and a lot of women were taken advantage of.” MRS SHAMIM AKHTAR

Many people stopped at refugee camps along the way and faced all sorts of challenges. Women were giving birth and others were suffering from dysentery and other contagious diseases. Mrs Raj Rani Arora’s family travelled through many villages on their gruelling journey which began on 13th August 1947. Mrs Arora lost her infant sister to disease and her grandmother. She almost lost her brother to a disease her family suspects was caused by drinking infected water. They witnessed communal violence and distressing scenes before reaching the Sacha Sauda refugee camp.

“We had massive thorns stuck in our feet. They would dig into our flesh. We would keep walking and walking - but we had no idea where we were walking to... At the refugee camp there was hardly any water and women would fight over it and pull each other’s hair... Everyone helped each other if they could but they also needed to put themselves first to survive.” MRS ARORA

Mrs Amrita Mohan recalls that despite this suffering, children retained the innocent ability to make new friends and play with other refugee children. Her mother was a nurse and one of her responsibilities was to look after the babies who had been abandoned, orphaned or separated from their parents.

“Every day my mum used to come in with babies whose parents had left them on the road. My sister and me, we would play with them. We were young, and these babies were like a Godsend, we used to love playing with them.” MRS AMRITA MOHAN

The Suffering

The horrors of Partition haunted those who lived through them. Having to uproot themselves so quickly meant jobs and businesses were lost and homes and treasured possessions had to be abandoned.

Perhaps even more devastating was the loss of friendships. Communities that were once mixed had no choice but to separate, leaving friends and neighbours divided. Mrs Kharbanda remembered vividly the moment when she and her best friend, a Muslim girl named Sabra, were parted.

“We held on to one another, for so long we held on to each other, and then she had to join the kafila (convoy) and go. I never saw her again.” MRS PUSHPA KHARBANDA

An estimated one million people died, either killed by members of other communities or by diseases that were widespread in refugee camps. Thousands of families were destroyed, either through separation or loss of life, their homes burned and villages abandoned.

Approximately 75,000 women from both sides were raped, kidnapped, abducted, tortured, killed or forcibly impregnated by men of the ‘other’ religion. Those who were raped were often considered shameful by their families. In some cases, heads of families would kill their female relatives or convince them to commit suicide, so as to safeguard against dishonour being brought to the family name.

Being exposed to such horrific events meant that many people were left in a state of trauma, suffering from various mental illnesses that would have a devastating impact upon their subsequent lives. There was no support or help for people to cope with such experiences:

Mrs Gurcharan Kaur Bansal was a small child at the time of Partition but spoke of the effect it had on her mother. On their journey over the border into India, her mother witnessed the beheading of several men which left her traumatised.

“She never spoke for a long time after that. She only began to speak again when she got to India.” MRS GURCHARAN KAUR BANSAL

Even post-Partition, people often lived in fear of the future. Mrs Perwaz recalled feeling anxious and afraid in the immediate aftermath of Pakistan’s formation, as the years ahead held many uncertainties.
The Aftermath

In the years following the chaos of Partition, as violence began to subside and refugees reluctantly accepted that their previous lives were lost to them, people started to build new lives in their new homes. In order to survive, many of the women and girls who had been abducted were forced to integrate into new communities. However, those among them who struggled to come to terms with the trauma that they had faced proved unable to move past the turmoil of Partition and sometimes decided to take their own lives.

By December 1947 an agreement had been reached between the Indian and Pakistani governments for the recovery and restoration of as many displaced women from both new countries as could be found. In 1949 the Indian government passed the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act and worked with the Pakistani authorities to return women to their respective countries and original families. Women’s voices often went unheard and their lives were dramatically affected by decisions made on their behalf. Again, women found themselves being forcibly removed from their homes, only this time it was by governmental officials. They were given no choice about their future, as both states gave police and military officials the authority to transfer women and children against their will.

Many resisted being uprooted all over again as by now they were settled into their new homes and the lives that they had created. They were afraid of being rejected by their birth families upon their return to them; they were unwilling to leave their children behind (something the Indian government required of all children born of a Muslim father); and they were terrified at the thought of yet another upheaval.

“He said would you like to go [to England], I said I would love to go, I’m a student of English Literature, I would like to see the land of Shakespeare.”

Mrs Amrita Mohan

Life in the UK

Once the conflict had settled, people began rebuilding their lives, starting businesses, making houses into homes and creating communities.

In the 1960s and 1970s many people migrated to Slough from India and Pakistan to meet the labour demands created by Britain’s post-Second World War economic boom. Many of them found upon moving here that they were once more living in an integrated community, that their neighbours again included a mixture of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Despite their painful memories of Partition and ongoing political tensions in South Asia, they often developed friendships and formed bonds based on their shared cultural interests and backgrounds.

“I had a neighbour when I came to this country and she was from Pakistan and she helped me with my Urdu … when I was in school I learnt Urdu, but then after Partition the Muslim teacher who taught us had left, my dad saw that I was good at it and helped me continue but after a while I started to forget, so when I met her she would help me and when she would go to Pakistan we used to write letters to each other in Urdu and she would help me by correcting my mistakes.”

Mrs Pushpa Kharbanda

“The houses had signs that said No Asians, no dogs and no Irish, it was hard to find houses, this made Asians come together. You weren’t Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, you were just Asian.”

Mrs Nahid Perwaz

“A baby boy was found in the jungle. No one knew if he was Hindu or Muslim. An older childless couple were given the baby and they raised him as their own.”

Mrs Manzoor Khan

“Slowly, slowly people began to recover. The houses that were burned down were removed, building started to happen.”

Mrs Shamim Akhtar

Women sewing Punjabi.
(The National Archives, INF 10/257)

1. Mrs Darshana Varma
2. Mrs Nahid Perwaz
3. Mrs Pushpa Kharbanda
4. Mrs Amrita Mohan
This exhibition has been created by young volunteers from a range of backgrounds, including young people with roots in India and Pakistan. Some of the participants have been on a journey into the history of their own communities, whereas others have learned about the communities of their peers. Regardless of their backgrounds they all agree that the lessons of Partition are both valid and vital today as the division of states along faith or sectarian lines remains a policy option that is still being discussed for some of the world’s most intractable conflicts. Furthermore, in an era of horrendous violence, women suffered differently and in ways that need to be recognised and remembered. The young volunteers that were at the forefront of efforts to create this exhibition would like to dedicate it to the eleven women brave enough to share their stories and memories of Partition and its legacy.

“Interviewing the women taught me that destruction can be brought to a community so quickly but that healing can take place eventually. Men and women suffered in Partition but women suffered differently - they had so much hardship in their lives.”

SANNA

“It was an emotional project, learning about what the women had faced in their lives.”

WIKTORIA

“They were so strong being able to tell us their stories. We need to look more at history to understand the past and to create a better future.”

RUBY

Together As One

The Interviewees

1. Mrs Raj Rani Arora was twelve during Partition. Her family were originally from the village Askalguhar in the Gujra Wala district in Pakistan. She and her family fled to Amritsar and she came to live in the UK in the 1960s.
2. Mrs Amrita Mohan was six years old when Partition happened, her family had to leave her town Chichawatni and they travelled to Amritsar, eventually settling in a small village near there. She settled in the UK in the 60s.
3. Mrs Darshana Varma was eight years old at the time of Partition, her family lived in a small village in the Punjab. She settled in the UK in the late 60s.
4. Mrs Swaran Kaur Bansal was seventeen at the time of Partition, her family lived in a small village in the Punjab, she came to the UK in the 1960s.
5. Mrs Manzoor Khan was nine during Partition. Her family lived in a village in what is now known as Azhad Kashmir. She moved to the UK in 1975.
6. Mrs Nahid Perwaz was eight years old while Partition was taking place and she was living in Lahore at the time. She came to the UK in 1961.
7. Mrs Ishrat Ansari was four during Partition, her family moved from Dheradun to Sindh by train. She settled in the UK in 1967.
8. Mrs Pushpa Kharbanda was nine during Partition. She grew up in Hoshiarpur, Punjab and came to the UK in 1960s.
9. Mrs Shamim Aichter was nine at the time of Partition. Her family moved from Jalandhar to Lahore, she came to the UK in 1968.
10. Mrs Gurmeet Kaur Jutla was seventeen at the time of Partition. She moved from Karachi to Punjab, India and came to the UK in 1964.
11. Mrs Gurcharan Kaur Bansal was born in 1946 and was a baby at the time of Partition. She made the journey from Quetta to India. She moved to the UK in 1966.
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Culture Studio CIC
Culture Studio CIC is an emerging creative cultural production company that is passionate about the transformative power of arts. As a not-for-profit, we promote dynamic arts and crafts collaboration and exchange between India and the UK through enterprise and cultural projects. We champion the creative case for diversity and are always looking for innovative ways to use culture to help generate social and cultural impacts. Culture Studio CIC inspires people and communities to make the arts part of their lives by producing imaginative arts, cultural and heritage projects that celebrate inclusivity and diversity.

Aik Saath – Together As One
The words ‘Aik Saath’ mean ‘Together As One’ in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. They also embody the ethos of our charity – we believe in working together to prevent violence and hatred and to strengthen our community. Aik Saath was established in response to gang violence between young people from Asian backgrounds in Slough in the late 1990s. The founders of our organisation believed that young people needed to lead the efforts to resolve this conflict and almost 20 years later young people are still leading Aik Saath through peer-led training, youth provision and projects led by young people.

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