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Partition Voices

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Introduction

Partition Voices is a methodological and narrative collection grounded in the belief that history lives in people as much as in paper. The subcontinent's partitions—most notably in 1947 and again in 1971—reconfigured borders and sovereignties, but they also reconfigured intimacies, languages, livelihoods, and the sense of home. This book gathers firsthand testimonies of those who crossed, those who stayed, and those born long after, to show how migration and memory have shaped the ongoing project of nation building in South Asia. Rather than seeking a single definitive account, we present a chorus of situated voices that illuminate the everyday textures of rupture and repair.

At the core of this work is an oral-history practice attentive to ethics, empathy, and method. Interviews were conducted with informed consent; narrators retained the right to review, revise, or withdraw their contributions; and translators worked to preserve cadence, metaphor, and silence as meaningful elements of testimony. We pair narrative with analysis, triangulating personal accounts with public records where appropriate, while acknowledging the gaps, contradictions, and productive frictions that memory entails. The methodology foregrounds the interview encounter itself—how questions are asked, what remains unspoken, and how power circulates between researcher and narrator.

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Geographically, the testimonies span the borderlands of Punjab and Bengal, the ports and deserts of Sindh, the mountains of Kashmir, and the princely states that navigated uncertain sovereignties. The stories move through trains and footpaths, relief camps and ration lines, refugee colonies and agrarian resettlement schemes. They capture the entanglements of caste and class, gender and generation, rural and urban worlds—domains where policy meets practice and where abstract borders become felt experiences.

The narrators are as diverse as the journeys they recount: farmers and factory workers, teachers and traders, midwives and municipal clerks, poets and police officers, students and soldiers. Some speak of loss—of homes abandoned, kin separated, documents misplaced. Others recall solidarities forged in transit, new neighborhoods built from salvaged materials, and markets reinvented through skill and necessity. Still others describe the quiet labor of rebuilding: tending to fields, opening small shops, learning new scripts, finding ways to belong.

Memory politics runs through these pages. States enshrine certain pasts in curricula, monuments, and ceremonies while other pasts circulate in family archives and community rituals, or remain submerged in silence. This book reads testimonies

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alongside these public narratives, tracing how commemoration and forgetting shape citizenship, recognition, and rights. We also attend to the affective afterlives of partition—how fear, longing, resentment, and hope are transmitted across generations and mobilized in the present.

Partition Voices is written for educators and researchers seeking both content and craft. Each chapter offers thematic entry points, interview excerpts, and analytical framings, along with practical considerations: how to design a question set, navigate translation, manage trauma-informed interviewing, and document provenance and consent for long-term preservation. We suggest classroom activities and reflection prompts that invite students to interpret contested memories responsibly and to situate their own positionalities.

The chapters proceed from scenes of departure and arrival to the processes of settlement, citizenship-making, and livelihood reconstruction, then turn to pedagogy, memorial practices, and digital archiving before concluding with intergenerational transmission. Across the book we argue that oral history does not merely supplement the archive—it expands what counts as evidence and who counts as a historian. By listening closely to partition’s many witnesses, we learn not only how nations were made but also how communities remake themselves, day after day, in the shadow and possibility of remembered borders.

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CHAPTER ONE: Lines Drawn, Lives Torn: Mapping Partition

The map is a clean thing. It is composed of lines, often solid or dashed, color-coded zones, and neatly printed names. It is the kind of object that offers certainty, a visual promise that the world can be contained, measured, and understood. Yet, the partition of British India in 1947 was not a cartographer's exercise. The Radcliffe Line, the boundary drawn by a British lawyer who had never before set foot in the region, was meant to separate the new sovereign territories of India and Pakistan. In reality, it sliced through homes, fields, rivers, and centuries of shared life. It was a line on paper that became a knife in the earth.

For millions, the arrival of this line was not an abstract political event but a physical rupture. In villages of Punjab and Bengal, in towns of Sindh and the princely states, the news arrived like a sudden weather change. Rumors traveled faster than official announcements. People listened to the wireless, read hastily printed pamphlets, and watched their neighbors pack bags or nail shut their doors. The map in a government office in Delhi or Lahore was a dry document, but its implications arrived with the force of a monsoon, shifting the very ground beneath people's feet.

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The great migration that followed—often called the largest mass movement in human history—saw an estimated fifteen million people cross new borders in a matter of months. Hindus and Sikhs moved from what became Pakistan to India; Muslims moved from what became India to Pakistan. Not everyone moved, of course. Some chose to stay, trusting long-standing relationships or calculated risks. Others were trapped by violence or circumstance, unable to flee or too old to start over. The numbers are staggering, but they are also flattening. Each statistic is a story, and each story is a map of its own.

To understand partition, we must begin with its geography. The Punjab region, with its five rivers, became the crucible of one of the most brutal transfers of population. The border here cut through fertile canal colonies, separating farmers from the land they had tilled for generations. In Bengal, the border was more porous, a deltaic weave of rivers and islands that made neat separation difficult. People crossed back and forth for months, sometimes years, unsure of which side they were on. The border was not only a line but a space of negotiation, confusion, and, occasionally, cunning.

Maps tell us what the state sees; testimonies tell us what people lived. In oral histories of partition, the border is rarely a straight line. It is a paddy field that became a death trap, a railway platform that became a temporary home, a riverbank where families

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waited for boats that never came. One narrator recalls a school atlas, its pages crisp and clean, and the moment the teacher pointed to the new boundary with a wooden ruler. The children laughed, thinking it a game, until the laughter stopped. The next day, half the class did not return.

The Radcliffe Line itself was a secret until two days after independence. On August 17, 1947, its details were published. For many, this delay meant they celebrated independence in a country whose borders they did not yet know. The uncertainty was not simply administrative; it was deeply personal. Families in Lahore, Amritsar, Calcutta, and Dhaka waited to learn if their homes would be on the “right” side. In some cases, neighbors packed their belongings together, hopeful that a border might spare them. In others, they sharpened their animosities.

Maps are also stories of power. The boundary commissions had data—census figures, electoral rolls, district maps—but data do not capture lived realities. In Punjab, the demographic concentration of communities made certain areas seem clear-cut. Yet in many districts, towns were mixed, and villages comprised multiple faiths and castes. The commission’s decisions took demographic majorities into account, but the logic often ignored intricate social ties. A district could be awarded to one country, but its people might be divided, anxious, and unprepared.

In Bengal, the border was more fluid, particularly in the eastern districts. Rivers shifted course; islands appeared and vanished. People moved with the seasons, crossing for harvest, marriage, and trade. The international boundary, when drawn, cut through this hydrological maze. Families found themselves on both sides of a line that had little to do with the rhythms of river life. In oral histories, this is a recurring motif: a village that was technically on one side but economically tethered to the other.

Sindh presents a different map. The region’s border with India is arid, and its population shifts were largely urban. Karachi, a burgeoning port city, became a destination for migrants from India. Testimonies from Sindh often speak of ship journeys, of leaving the port of Bombay for a new life. The desert border saw less of the chaotic foot traffic that characterized Punjab and Bengal, but it witnessed a distinct kind of displacement: the severing of communities that had lived for centuries in towns like Hyderabad (Sindh) and Umerkot.

Kashmir’s mapping is a story of its own. The princely state’s ruler acceded to India under contested circumstances, and the region’s borders became militarized frontiers. The Line of Control is not the Radcliffe Line, but it emerged from similar processes of division and conflict. Oral histories from Kashmir often describe mountain passes as lifelines and chokepoints, places where movement between valleys was possible until it wasn’t. The border here is as much a topographical reality as a political one.

The princely states—some two hundred territories with varying

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allegiances—complicated the cartography. Hyderabad, Junagadh, and Travancore had their own logics of sovereignty. The maps of independence had to accommodate these strange polygons, some inland, some coastal. In Hyderabad, the decision to remain independent was met with resistance, and the eventual police action reshaped demographics and power. Testimonies from Hyderabad speak of a distinct transition, not from colony to nation, but from princely order to republican administration.

Maps are visual, but partition was also sonic. The border announced itself through the sounds of trains arriving and departing, the cries of vendors at railway stations, the clatter of ration trucks, and the silences that followed violence. In oral histories, people remember the sound of a neighbor locking a gate for the last time. They remember the rustle of documents in pockets, the crumple of maps handed down from relatives. These sounds anchor memory in the everyday, making the abstract boundary audible.

A crucial aspect of mapping partition is the temporal dimension. The border did not settle all at once. It evolved through waves of migration, counter-migration, and return. Some families left, came back, and left again. Others stayed through the worst months, only to move later when a job or a school or a marriage required it. In oral histories, dates blur: is it August 1947, October, or the spring of 1948? The timeline is personal, shaped by events like the arrival of a relief convoy, the publication of a property claim, or the day a child was born in a refugee camp.

The mapping of partition is also the mapping of loss. People remember the geometry of their houses, the layout of lanes, the location of wells, and the shape of fields. A narrator from Punjab might describe a village with an accuracy that defies years of absence. They map their memories onto official maps, correcting errors, adding details, and sometimes refusing to accept the boundary because it does not match the familiar geography of their past. In this way, memory becomes a counter-mapping, an act of resistance.

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Maps can erase as well as reveal. The Radcliffe Line erased histories of coexistence by declaring them politically untenable. It replaced cultural complexity with administrative simplicity. Yet people did not simply accept this erasure. In oral histories, we see how communities negotiated, bartered, and reinterpreted the border. Some turned it into a livelihood, smuggling goods or messages. Others treated it as a temporary inconvenience, crossing for festivals or funerals. The border, in these stories, is a living thing, shaped by human action.

The cartography of partition also involved the mapping of bodies. Where one stood in terms of religion, caste, and language determined whether one was seen as belonging or as a threat. This was not only a matter of demographics but of identity cards, ration slips, and police registers. The state's map extended into the body, inscribing it with new categories. In testimonies, people describe the moment they were asked to declare their nationality, to choose a side, to prove their loyalty with documents they

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did not possess.

For children, the map was a puzzle. In schools, new atlases replaced old ones. In one story, a student from Calcutta traced the border with a finger and asked, “Where does the school go?” The teacher had no answer. Children learned to redraw their worlds, to imagine new countries on the page. This learning was not abstract. It meant new flags, new anthems, and new histories. It also meant new fears—of being in the wrong place when violence erupted.

Women’s experiences add another layer to the map. For many, movement was restricted or controlled by male relatives. The border could be a site of danger and surveillance. Yet women also carved out routes of their own, carrying children, documents, and household goods. In oral histories, women describe the border not only as a line but as a series of checkpoints, tents, and informal shelters. Their mapping is intimate, attentive to the spaces where they found safety and those where they felt exposed.

The mapping of partition is incomplete without acknowledging those who did not move. In villages and towns across the subcontinent, families remained amidst changing neighbors and shifting power dynamics. Their stories complicate the narrative of mass migration. They speak of negotiation, accommodation, and sometimes quiet resistance. The border was not always an exodus; for some, it was a redefinition of home without leaving home. These testimonies remind us that staying put can be as profound a migration as moving.

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Maps also carry the mark of official violence. In Punjab, trains became moving borders, carrying refugees from one country to another. Many never reached their destination. The trains are etched into the cartography of memory as lines of tragedy. In Bengal, boats crossing rivers became similar maps of peril. Oral histories return repeatedly to these routes, describing the smell of smoke, the sight of abandoned luggage, and the sound of screaming. The border, in these accounts, is a corridor of fear.

The aftermath of mapping involves the creation of new administrative geographies. Refugee camps were mapped with precision—tents numbered, families registered, rations allocated. Yet the lived experience of these spaces was chaotic. In one camp, a narrator remembers the map taped to the relief officer’s desk, a neat grid that did not account for the fact that families were larger than the squares allotted to them. The grid became a site of negotiation, as people reallocated space informally.

The border’s cartography is also economic. Markets that once operated across regions had to reorient themselves. Traders from Punjab who had sourced goods from Lahore now looked to Amritsar or Delhi. In Bengal, riverine trade networks adapted to the new international boundary. Oral histories describe the learning curve: new customs posts, new tariffs, new risks. The map of commerce was redrawn, often at a cost to those

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who lacked capital or connections.

In the archives, maps of partition are clean, crisp, and authoritative. In memory, they are messy, overlapping, and deeply personal. The work of this book is to place these two kinds of maps side by side, to show how official lines intersect with lived lines. This is not only a historical task but a methodological one. Oral history allows us to trace the border as it was felt, seen, and heard, adding depth to the cartography that official records cannot capture.

The mapping of partition did not end in 1947. It continued through subsequent migrations, wars, and changes in citizenship. In 1971, the creation of Bangladesh added another layer to the region's borders. The map of South Asia was redrawn again, and oral histories from that period echo earlier themes: movement, uncertainty, and the struggle to belong. The long arc of partition's geography reminds us that borders are not fixed; they are negotiated across generations.

One of the challenges in mapping partition is the problem of scale. The national border is the largest frame, but the stories often reside in the micro-geographies of lanes, houses, and fields. A narrator might describe a single gate that marked the boundary between two communities, a gate that became a line of division even before the Radcliffe Line was announced. These micro-maps are crucial because they show how partition was experienced at a human scale.

The cartography of memory also includes the routes of return. Some refugees tried to go back, sometimes to reclaim property, sometimes simply to see their homes. These journeys were fraught, often illegal, and rarely successful. Yet they form an important part of the border's story. In oral histories, return is described not as a straight line but as a loop, a detour, a dead end. The map of home is not always a map of belonging.

Partition's mapping is, finally, an exercise in imagination. To reconstruct the border as it was, one must imagine not only the lines on paper but the lives they contained. Oral histories provide that imagination, filling the map with voices, textures, and emotions. They allow us to see the border not as a limit but as a meeting point—of hope and fear, of loss and possibility. The map, in the end, is not a boundary but a bridge between stories.

The stories that follow in this book are not presented as a single narrative of partition but as a chorus of geographies. Each region, each community, each family maps the border differently. This plurality is not a weakness but a strength. It reflects the complexity of the subcontinent itself. By listening to these voices, we learn to read maps differently—not as fixed truths but as living documents, constantly redrawn by those who cross, stay, or remember.

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