

Partitioned Listening 001: ‘You trust your memories?’

<https://admin.thecontemporaryjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Partitioned-Listening-01.mp3>

Voices, as artefacts of the historical event of Partition,^[1] carry multiple worlds. The first of a three-part audio-essay takes Partition as a sonic environment in which silence, fiction and intimacy reverberate. Between personal testimony and public history emerges a partial tale: the British destruction of its colonial record across its empire, starting with a fire in Delhi in 1947.^[2]

Stay tuned for the next audio-essay *PL 002: ‘We shall witness’*, as it continues these themes through cross-border song and performance.

Transcript

‘A fable: Universalism and Partition were neighbours, though never good friends. Universalism would go about its business without bothering to itemise personal interactions or economic bills. A woman was not assumed to be a woman because she wore a skirt, and a man was not understood to be a man because he wore his hair short; Universalism assumed universally that while differences existed, no one particular could ever fully define a person or an issue.

Partition would follow universalism closely, and wherever it spied an opportunity to make a windfall – political, monetary, emotional – it

would move in for the kill. Working on people’s particularities, Partition used those to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others.

Not content with making gains in Universalism’s wake, Partition decided to ratchet up the implications of its logic and urged people and ideas and desires to declare independence from one another. Partition set itself up in opposition to Universalism. What Universalism traversed with indifference; Partition pinned down with identity’.^[3]

[Television programme starts]

‘20th Century History

India – the brightest jewel *[Train sounds]*

This is India, its mountains and great plains bound together by a net of steel – the railway, built during British rule. *[Solo sitar]*

The British built canals too, to water the land. They opened up the wilderness, transforming it into tea gardens and plantations.

The British have been in India as rulers for nearly 200 years, building splendid palaces and monuments all over this vast country.’

[Break; music]

It’s August 1947, and a fire is raging in Delhi. Much else is unfolding – Indian independence, the birth of Pakistan, Partition. This fire isn’t engulfing mosques or temples, nor does it affect village homes or commercial bazaars.

It isn’t the doing of mob rule, mob violence, communal violence, communal riots or Hindu-Muslim riots – although these official terms likely littered the many pages now curling up in flames. The bonfire of documents is so big that the smoke hangs over the city for days.

Evidence of 200 years of colonial rule is

burning.

[Television programme continues]

‘Against a continuing background of Hindu and Muslim riots, the plan for dividing India was hammered out. Mountbatten realised that his power to control the events by force was running out. So he advanced the date of independence to August 1947. In June the plan was accepted at last by all the Indian leaders.

Everyone had had to make a compromise. Spurred on by Mountbatten’s skill and charm.

[Mountbatten speaks]

On the 14th of August at Karachi, the Mountbattens attended the inauguration of the dominion of Pakistan. *[Mountbatten speaks]*

Jinnah was the governor-general, Muslims now had their homeland, west and east Pakistan. The Mountbattens then returned to India. At Delhi on the 15th of August, Mountbatten was sworn in as the first governor-general

[Mountbatten accepts his governorship]

Nehru was then sworn in as prime minister.

[Nehru speaks; crowds cheering]

At last, Nehru had achieved what he and other leaders had struggled for so long – independence. But behind the celebrations lay the problems of a violent Partition in the Punjab and Bengal, which was to cost half a million lives.

[crows]

For those lucky enough to escape the killing, it meant painful journeys from one part of the country to the other. Muslims leaving India, and Hindus fleeing from Pakistan. 1948 was to be the year of the refugee.

It was perhaps ironic that the railways, which had helped to unite British India, now carried

its people apart.’^[4]

[Train sounds fade out, television programme ends]

Operation Legacy was a British Colonial Office (later Foreign Office) programme to destroy and hide files from 23 former colonies. Officials were keen to avoid a repeat of the spectacle caused by the bonfire in Delhi in 1947. The operation ran from the 1950s until the 1970s, when the decolonisation of the Empire was at its height. Incinerators were now favoured over open flames.

[burning sounds]

This ongoing historical silencing is a performance of power, against which speech is a deceptive counterpoint. The colonial ordering of time – in the case of Partition – is now represented by its sonic materiality. What remains after the destruction of archives of the powerful, are voices.

According to Nikita Dhawan, hegemonic ‘norms of recognition’ determine what can be read, heard and understood as legible. She asks: if discursive violence is inevitable, why not give preference to silence over discourse? Why should one not avoid speaking?

[In Ratan Talao gurdwara, Preedy Street, Karachi]^[5]

‘People of Karachi, especially mohajirs and migrants, how we remember Karachi is really fondly as... the city that just welcomed all refugees and all migrants with open arms, and when you think about Partition violence, you always think of elsewhere. So you think of Punjab and you think of Bengal, but you never think of Karachi and Sindh as being implicated in violence, and it’s always imagined that the Hindus here left because they wanted to leave, but not because they were forced to leave.

And so basically on this site is where the largest

Sikh and Hindu massacre happens during the Partition. And I think on 6 January 1948, about 200 people are murdered here. The story of it goes that in around that time...'

[Shahana speaks to the guardian of the gurdwara]

'So, in and around that time what was happening was that already a lot of Sindhi Hindus are, and Sikhs are, wanting to leave. Because in villages and in rural parts of Sindh there is already a lot of unrest and people aren't feeling safe anymore - up until then, the city had been more or less safe.

But as more and more Muslims from Punjab are coming - they have just witnessed violence on their ends - and so they come with a lot of hatred towards Hindus and Sikhs because they've seen their women be raped and killed and... so, this neighbourhood, by 1948 in January, a lot of Sindhi Hindus have already left and a lot of migrants, Muslim migrants, have already come in and started living around.

And so in January... 6 January 1948, there is a whole troupe of around 200 Sikhs who are gathered at the railway station, and the police feel that at the railway station they are already attracting a lot of...'

[Shahana speaks to another guardian of the gurdwara, who offers tea. Shahana introduces her friends and thanks him. They speak about the state of the building]

'He's saying that in the summer because of the rains, all of the walls have fallen down, so this was actually a lot more built when I came last.'

'So it's collapsing very fast.'

'Yeah sorry so anyway, on 6 January 1948 there is a group of 200 Sikhs waiting at the railway station and the police are getting a bit worried because they can see it's causing a lot of tension among the Muslims. And so they advise the

Hindu and Sikh troupe that, 'why don't you go to the Ratan Talao' - this was known as the Ratan Talao gurdwara, and it had become a kind of refugee site - 'so why don't you go there, spend your time there, when it's time for your ship to leave the port we will come escort you to the port, so why don't you just go and stay there, you'll be safer there.'

And so these 200 people come on donkey carts from the city station all the way to here, they attract a lot of attention on the way. And by the time they reach here already a lot of specifically Punjabi Muslims have started to accumulate here and they are giving these people threatening looks. And so these people go in, and they lock the door of the gurdwara.

And um... in so many stories around Partition violence, it's the spaces of worship that protect people. So because... Guru Nanak was protecting the space, when the Punjabi Muslims tried to break in, the door wouldn't open.

And so the space really managed to protect these 200 people who are inside and by this point, right, there are all of these - so Muslims who came from India are called mohajirs - and so they had all collected weapons and knives and various kinds of equipment, and sort of, a mob had already collected.

And I guess actually, 'mob' is a pretty terrible word to use to describe Partition violence because uh... this was a lot also about property, it was about wanting to scare Hindus and Sikhs to leave this place so that the mohajirs and the migrants who were coming would have land to take over. Because otherwise there was no room for them in the city, so there is often economic ulterior motives to these so-called 'mob gatherings'.

[In Trafalgar Square, London]

Decolonisation didn't just result in the movement of people. The so-called 'migrated

archives' of the UK's (unburned) documents were transported to a facility 6 miles north of London, where they remain – if they exist at all.

The marking 'DG' on some of the papers was said to be an abbreviation for 'deputy governor', but it in fact was a protective code to indicate that they were for the eyes of 'British officers of European descent only' – meaning white British officers. These papers are still not fully released. Some suspect that material relating to the partitioning of Africa is also hiding in the vaults of Hanslope Park.

In London's Trafalgar Square, a monument to Major General Sir Henry Havelock commemorates his 'bravery' during the campaign in India, 1857. This campaign, depending on one's position, is also known as the First War of Independence or the Sepoy Mutiny.

In essence it was the first widespread struggle of resistance against the British and involved Indians of all faiths and classes.

After the resistance failed, the colonial administration enshrined in law a brutal regime of punishment, separating religious and ethnic groups from each other, ingraining new stereotypes of race and religion for good.

Today, some of these laws are still used to quash dissent in India and Pakistan – particularly protests. Havelock's statue, easily overlooked due to its proximity to the more prominent Nelson's Column, is a strong signifier of public memory. It has embedded within it a conflicting and complex interplay of Partition effects. They stretch forward as well as backwards in time.

[At an apartment in Bahria Town, Rawalpindi, Pakistan]^[6]

'How old were you?'

'I was about six, six years old.'

'Six.'

'Yes.'

'You trust your memories?'

'Yes, yes. And the other thing I remember, I can't never forget in my life, that the person who sell bangles... very heavy. We call them 'pehlwan'. He was a bangle seller. He used to live on main GT [Grand Truck] road. When we stood in our garden then we can see the whole GT road. One evening, there was a riot. And his throat was half cut. He was just lying like this, on a rickshaw.'

'And you saw this.'

'Yes. This is a scene no one can forget in life [laughs].'

'Did you see any British at that time? Police, soldiers, people?'

'No, no, all Indian soldiers, Indian police. First of all they disarmed the Muslims. We were not even allowed to keep a knife.'

'And then you had to leave your house, no?'

'Yes, we had to leave our house whenever there was a procession of Sikhs. And one day, your nani and myself, and a blind woman – very old blind woman – we were in the house alone and the Sikhs came. There were about a dozen Sikhs, with swords, without a scabbard. [laughs]

But there were other Muslims, and one other person, he just jumped from the gallery on the road saying 'Allahu Akbar', then other people also came out, and Sikhs ran away, just, they went.'

'How many days were you in the house?'

'At least four days, a week, that was the period.'

In the early 1947, or 1948, if they find any

Muslim in the train they used to pick, throw him out of the gate or window [unintelligible]. And nobody will buy your property, they used to say that the properties were... at that time there were only thousands, they would say 'we will give you a few hundred rupees, if you want to take then take it, otherwise you will go to Pakistan [unintelligible] and you will get it for free'. [laughs]

[Music; sound from explosions]

'One who can be silent, is in a position to listen, and one who listens, gives oneself over to the silences in discourses – the elusive as well as the ordered silences, the silences that are subject to our will and those that govern our language, our being.'^[2]

If we draw a line around Partition, a 'limit case', itself the product of religious, geographical lines crudely drawn, then we refute its connections to anything outside of the 'eventness' that we've laden onto it.

What does listening to private memories of the event, transformed into public memory, mean for the production and maintenance of Partition as a 'lifeworld', and what does it mean for the ethics of such production?

What evidence do we need, after we know that some evidence has been destroyed? How benign was the end of colonialism really – how do we understand historical acts of abandonment, and what protocols do we need to listen to these silences?

[Shahana continues to speak about what happened at Ratan Talao]

And so they tried breaking the door open and the door just doesn't open, and so the people inside feel that okay we've been saved, but what the mohajirs do... so around that time, there used to be a building right next to this, so they got onto the roof of the building and they threw

lit coal on the roof of the gurdwara, and the gurdwara's roof was made of wood.

And so when they threw this burning material, the roof caught on fire and people were suffocating inside and they were burning, and so from inside they had to open the door and come out, running out, and as soon as they came out, there was by now a group of up to 500 people. Some testimonies say up to a thousand people had already gathered here to kill these, to massacre these people.

The police take a good half an hour to arrive according to official records. So police are also really inefficient, really slow. And they only get here with 20 policemen, but by this point hundreds of people have accumulated.

The policemen manage to rescue some of the non-Muslim families, put them into their trucks, but the mohajirs and migrants overtake and refuse the trucks to go because they have so much strength in numbers.

And so they get on the truck, they drive back all the families, and every single person is pretty much killed. From here the protest spreads all over the city, so over the next three days all spaces of worship are attacked, all areas where Hindus live are attacked – women are raped, children are murdered, people are kidnapped. There's complete mayhem in the city and it takes the government three days to finally impose a curfew.

And so the state is also complicit in allowing this violence to go unchecked, and that again, they didn't see the Muslim and Hindu as equal citizens but clearly were prioritising one over the other.

And so, in the memory of Sindhi Hindus who are now settled in India, this event is really vivid and really an important marker for what causes a lot of families – who up until now had not considered to move to India. And I actually

ended up interviewing this one man on Skype who used to live around here before, around 1948.

So, I guess what's nice about Partition also is that you have these stories of really intense violence, but then you also have these stories of intercommunal harmony and people coming to... to help each other, so this one old man that I spoke to over Skype had this really sweet story of how a Muslim family at this time actually saves him.'

[Music]

'And so it went until a time when Partition convinced the people in its thrall to pretend to live with more finality and absoluteness than they actually did. When a sufficient number agreed to this game, Partition decided to carve up the world. Armed with geopolitical and ontological victories, Partition worked to give the very idea of Universalism a bad name.

And so it came to pass that Partition ruled the very real pretend world in which money and power and advantage and disadvantage were carved up oppositionally into ever smaller parcels. Universalism continued to describe a reality in which people are not identities, but its insight was ignored. And so they lived unhappily ever after.'^[8]

[Slow military fanfare until end]

The author wishes to thank Francesca Savoldi, Monia Dafa, Cathy Lane, Salomé Voegelin and colleagues at CRISAP, University of the Arts London.

Credits

Voice: Madhavi Menon, Usman Tariq, Syma Tariq,

Shahana Rajani, Khalid Farid

Sound design and co-production: Monia Dafa

Cite this piece as:

Tariq, Syma. 'Partitioned Listening 001: 'You trust your memories?'. The Contemporary Journal 3 (May 12, 2020).

[\[http://localhost:4200/strands/sonic-continuum/partitioned-listening-001-you-trust-your-memories\]](http://localhost:4200/strands/sonic-continuum/partitioned-listening-001-you-trust-your-memories).

[1]

The division of British India into India and (East and West) Pakistan in 1947. Partition is known for the scale of its violence and tragedy, as well as producing one of the biggest mass movements of people in history. It is subject to multiple temporal silences and is the 'limit case' in the author's PhD research.

[2]

This narrative is partly based on Ian Cobain's *The History Thieves* (London: Portobello Books, 2016), which outlines episodes of British state secrecy, drawing on declassified documents and court proceedings. It offers a stark and clear insight: even if Operation Legacy officially ended in the 1970s, the British state continues to hide colonial crimes, from Northern Ireland to Indonesia. Operation Legacy was first brought into the limelight in 2009 with legal action in the High Court in London representing test case victims of the Mau Mau Uprising (1952-1963) in Kenya. The claims arose from the systematic abuse and torture inflicted on the Kenyan people by British colonial officials. This information was missing in the National Archives.

[3]

Quoted from Madhavi Menon. 'Universalism and Partition: A Queer Theory', in *Differences* 26 no.1 (2015): 117.

[4]

Television excerpts taken from *India - the Brightest Jewel* (1977), BBC TV and Films Incorporated. Source: www.archive.org

[5]

Tour of Ratan Talao gurdwara conducted by artist researcher Shahana Rajani on 29 October 2019. A gurdwara (meaning 'door to the guru') is a Sikh site of assembly and place of worship.

[6]

Interview with Khalid Farid, the author's maternal great uncle ('nana abu'), recorded on 27 September 2019. Incidentally, there is a small replica Trafalgar Square in Bahria Town.

[7]

Nikita Dhawan. 'Hegemonic Listening and Subversive Silences: Ethical-political Imperatives'. *Critical Studies* 36, (2016): 59.

[8]

Menon, 'Universalism and Partition: A Queer Theory', 117-118.