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## Midnight's children



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Sukhdev Singh



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Scenes from the Partition. Photo: The Hindu Archives



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Scenes from the Partition. Photo: The Hindu Archives



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Asgar bin Shahid



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Guneeta Singh Bhalla

## **Guneeta Singh Bhalla, founder of The 1947 Partition Archive, talks to DEEPA ALEXANDER on the need to document the memories of Partition survivors**

When the British Empire laid down the jewel in its crown, it resulted in more than just a transfer of power to India and Pakistan. The sundering of a subcontinent forced the largest human migration in history and the sharp fracturing of homes, relationships and identities. More than a million people, especially in Punjab and Bengal, fell victim to sectarian violence; very few were prosecuted for the looting, rape and murder. Sixty-eight years since that August, Partition is still unceasingly spoken of as a time when things fell apart, a black hole of memories for all those caught in its sweep.

Survivors, whose lives it defined, often looked back in anger or with nostalgia at a halcyon childhood, remembered the kindness of strangers, buried forever the trauma or spoke about it to their grandchildren with a wistfulness that often accompanies the passage of time. Which was how Guneeta Singh Bhalla, an Indian-American settled in California and executive director of The 1947 Partition Archive, a non-profit organisation, came to hear the story of her grandmother fleeing the mayhem in Lahore.

Speaking on telephone from the U.S., Bhalla says, “I have lived here since I was 10 and spent summers in the Punjab. My uncle, a history buff, would take us monument-visiting in and around Faridkot. As a child, I had a mandate to do something with all that history.”

But it was her grandmother’s experience that led Bhalla, a post-doctoral fellow in Physics, to give up a life in research and set out to chronicle the stories of the Partition. “In the U.S., these experiences are hardly spoken of. When I visited Hiroshima’s oral testimony archives, I was blown away by how life had changed for those who had survived. I realised that there was no such space for Partition survivors. My grandmother had passed away, taking with her a slice of

history. It was then that I decided to set up the project. These were stories that had to be told, and heard, and it had to be done quickly, as many of these voices were fast fading.”

Set up in 2010, the oral history project uses citizen historians to collect stories. These volunteers criss-cross the globe or sign up in their own cities; they have collated experiences from over nine countries in 10 languages. By 2017, they hope to record 10,000 stories. Given that many of the survivors are in their 70s or older, it’s a race against time. “We focus primarily on first-generation survivors. It’s a project that works through crowd funding. People anywhere in the world can log onto our website and record their story (some run into hours), following the guidelines of oral history recording,” says Bhalla.

Save the lone stone pillar at the Attari-Wagah border erected in the memory of Punjabis lost to Partition, there is no memorial to mark it, although it so heavily influences the spirit of the subcontinent. “We plan to set up a physical space for the archives in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the U.K. and the U.S., and are working on a map with migration routes and tools to help survivors connect.”

And connect it does. After many decades, neighbours, old friends, tormentors and the tormented all find themselves on the same page. Their experiences are as varied as the regions they come from, the religions they follow and the strata of society they belong to. “It isn’t always true that survivors made the crossing over the Radcliffe Line by foot or in long columns of impoverished caravans. Some even migrated by plane,” says Bhalla.

And some like Zaheer Alam Kidvai were even privileged to cut a birthday cake as the family travelled by ship from Bombay to Karachi. Among the notable voices are writers Bapsi Sidhwa and Khushwant Singh, artist Nek Chand and sporting icon, Milkha Singh.

The project has facilitated meetings between people who reminisced about the lives they led, the kites they flew, the girls they loved and the crushing despair they struggled with for years.

“It is an extraordinary journey that travels beyond the Radcliffe Line for both Partition survivors and citizen historians. Though we question them on whether they were perpetrators of violence or had to defend themselves against it... I don’t think publishing these stories will rake up the past. The overwhelming mood is often forgiveness and many times nostalgia for a time of communal harmony that is forever lost. There is no right or wrong story... this is just a library of emotions.”