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The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India

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Oral History Association Book Award 2001

The partition of India into two countries, India and Pakistan, caused one of the most massive human convulsions in history. Within the space of two months in 1947 more than twelve million people were displaced. A million died. More than seventy-five thousand women were abducted and raped. Countless children disappeared. Homes, villages, communities, families, and relationships were destroyed. Yet, more than half a century later, little is known of the human dimensions of this event.

In *The Other Side of Silence* , Urvashi Butalia fills this gap by placing people—their individual experiences, their private pain—at the center of this epochal event. Through interviews conducted over a ten-year period and an examination of diaries, letters, memoirs, and parliamentary documents, Butalia asks how people on the margins of history—children, women, ordinary people, the lower castes, the untouchables—have been affected by this upheaval.

To understand how and why certain events become shrouded in silence, she traces facets of her own poignant and partition-scarred family history before investigating the stories of other people and their experiences of the effects of this violent disruption. Those whom she interviews reveal that, at least in private, the voices of partition have not been stilled and the bitterness remains.

Throughout, Butalia reflects on difficult questions: what did community, caste, and gender have to do with the violence that accompanied partition? What was partition meant to achieve and what did it actually achieve? How, through unspeakable horrors, did the survivors go on? Believing that only by remembering and telling their stories can those affected begin the process of healing and forgetting, Butalia presents a sensitive and moving account of her quest to hear the painful truth behind the silence.

The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India Details

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From Reader Review The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India for online ebook

dianne says

This is a fantastic, incredibly important work; a careful, detailed, & thoughtful collection of “truths” about the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

This brilliant author continually tries to deconstruct; and does an admirable job of recognizing her own voice in what is written. Unlike many historians she realizes that there is nothing but relative truth. She has collected memories, with all of the pros and cons of those, told by people who survived this human catastrophe, along with enough didactic history to allow those (me) with inadequate knowledge of the standard history to understand.

Folks, as usual, all seemed to have a piece of the puzzle. From the standard ‘history’ we know that as independence neared, religious differences took on massive import, not previously as prominent and certainly not as divisive. Many ideas as to the cause of the severity of the hostilities, once Partition began, exist. One (Hindu) survivor told of the inequity in treatment of Muslims by Hindus and Sikhs in pre division Punjab, and felt that to be the cause of the violence and anger:

“How can it be that two people living in the same village and one treats the other with such respect and the other doesn’t even give him the consideration due to a dog! How can this be? They would call our mothers and sisters didi, they would refer to us as brothers, sisters, fathers and when we needed them they were always there to help. Yet when they came to our houses, we treated them so badly. This is really terrible. And this is the reason Pakistan was made.”

Interesting that of the many supposed catalysts for all of the violence, it was a Dalit (Harijan) woman, someone from a very marginal oppressed group, who spoke of how everyone used to live together in community, with intermarriage between Hindu and Muslim, friendships and celebrations all shared. She pointed out that this all changed because of the English. She was the only one who spoke of the divide and conquer tactic used to convince all that the (newly described) “other” was at fault for all problems, leading to enmity and hostility severe enough to require the English to govern. This point was not even hit upon by others as particularly important.

The English were, of course, aware of this etiologic tactic:

a woman who had not previously told her story - tells of an English deputy commissioner - well before partition - who was complaining about how Gandhi has:

“...given us a lot of trouble...we’ll leave because we have to, we’ll leave, but not before we have taught him a lesson. We’ll leave such a state of affairs that brother will fight brother, sister will fight sister, there will be killing and arson and rape... (*it will be so bad that*) he will raise his hands and plead with god to send us back.....take down the date...That will happen - and everyone will say Oh god, send them back...”

This is so familiar to me as it is just the reason given by many USAians for why the USA can’t leave the middle east - “they’ll just kill each other! It will be chaos! Civil war!” Arrgghh.

Hundreds of thousands of women were abducted, raped, killed, sold. The inadequate effort afterwards, to find and return them to their families was sometimes resisted by the women themselves - who, by then, had married and had children with their abductors:

“They refused to go back. Impossible as it may seem, there were women who...had formed relationships with

their abductors or with the men who bought them for a price. At first, I found this hard to believe, but there is a kind of twisted truth in it. One might almost say that for the majority of Indian women, marriage is like an abduction anyway, a violation, an assault, usually by an unknown man. Why then should this assault be any different? Simply because the man belonged to a different religion?"

One abducted woman said:

"Why are you particular to take me to India? What is left in me now of religion or chastity?"

These stolen /raped/abducted women who desired to stay on with their perp was a much discussed issue AFTER Partition - "How could MEN allow this state of affairs to continue?" (the men wondered). The women were forced back, meaning they were separated from their children the 'illegitimate' products of these unions. Everyone else could choose which country they wanted. Except these victimized women. Males *under the age of 16* and **women of any age** were to be considered abducted and forced back to their families whether they wanted to go, or not. Guess females never grow up.

"The women had to be brought back, they had to be 'purified' ...Only then would moral order be restored and the nation made whole again, and only then, as the Organizer (a Hindu newspaper) points out again and again, would the emasculated, weakened manhood of the Hindu male be vindicated."

Many children were left behind, abandoned, especially during the most chaotic, acrimonious days of transition:

"the important thing was to save themselves..."

I wonder if a belief in reincarnation made these atrocious, inhuman acts acceptable to those who perpetrated them? Well, hey - they may die now, but there are lots of other go-rounds to be had....?

Many women were slaughtered by their own family in the name of "purity". One man had witnessed all the women in his family killed - beheaded or drowned:

"Even today when I remember it...I cry, it helps to lighten my heart. A father who kills his daughter, how much of a victim, how helpless he must be..."

Yes, you read that right - *what a victim HE must be.*

Help me, Durga. Innumerable women were slaughtered by their own family in the name of **the men's** purity. Why & how is this even remotely ok? These men, these murderers - precious souls...are celebrated for their bravery. Annually. In places of worship.

How is this different than Guyana 1978? Why is Jonestown deemed collective craziness, and this mass murder is, uh, 'culture'??

"...such acts are represented...as valorous acts, shorn of the violence, and indeed coercion, that must have sent so many women to their deaths."

Along with carefully trying to understand and listen to the stories of women, often actively suppressed by the family, Ms. Butalia sought the stories of marginal groups. The Harijans, (aka Dalits, untouchables) didn't consider themselves Hindu - or anything but Harijans. They had nothing to be looted, nothing to lose - which gave them a kind of immunity. Further, the work they did (cleaning toilets, dealing with dead bodies, sweeping...) was not work any other group wanted:

"And there was a bizarre kind of immunity that their work bestowed on them:...if you kill a landlord, another will come up in his place. But if you kill someone who cleans your toilets, it's probably difficult to find a ready replacement."

Soon, both countries were trying to force them to stay!

The most upsetting immunity to me, however, will always be the tacitly approved wholesale mass murder of women. i don't know why i still find it astounding that women's bodies, sexuality, even their children - still

belong to men, in so much (the majority?) of the world. That hundreds of thousands can be slaughtered and no one found to be, or even THOUGHT to be, guilty. It was justifiable homicide - after all, they might otherwise be touched by a Muslim.

Ah, you say, but it's their *culture*. So is the abuse of women all over the world; so is genital mutilation and female infanticide.

When i lived with the Acholi in northern Uganda i frequently argued with the local men (as they smoked, drank and played cards - doing NO work) about how unfair and cruel it was that women did ALL the work, did everything. i was told, usually with a smirk - "it's our culture". Gag me.

Shakthi says

The author has done justice to the characters in the book by not merely translating their stories of partition, she has retained the essence and feelings of partition in their own words. This book is a beautiful work of oral historiography. I like how she alienates herself and presents the facts which are most often ghory and painful in a very matter of fact way. When our history books stop with Independence and partition this book brings out the other side of the silenced history the story of the unheard, unseen and unfelt. This is the story that is hid behind the silences of our history books.

Liz says

This is an important read. A collection and discussion of oral histories from Partition, when the British gave up control of India and the countries of India and Pakistan were formed. This was a brutal time, with anywhere from 200,000 - 2 million estimated deaths, 12 million displaced people, along with rampant rape and abduction. This book tries to tell some of the stories of the women, children, and other classes left out of the typical historical narratives about this time period. I found this book of "lost voices" particularly compelling.

On the historiography side of things, the author points out the complexities and issues involved with attempting to collect these types of oral histories about events that many people want to forget or want to be remembered in different ways. If you are a fan of history, this discussion alone makes the book worthwhile.

It is a challenging read due to its content and a lot of knowledge about Partition and Indian culture is assumed. I found myself frequently using the handy glossary in the back of the book. However, even if you are unfamiliar with the history of Partition, this book is a worthwhile read. I'll be thinking about it for a long time.

Raad says

Disturbing, and necessary, like all of Butalia's work. As good now as it was 15 years ago. It helped me to pose difficult questions about Partition to my own fam. And I'm glad I did. When my aunt died a few years

ago, my cousin contacted me about her experiences, saying it was the only documentation of her mother's journey in a bullock cart, hidden under hay for four days. If Butalia's book had not existed in seeking out Partition stories in Punjab, I would have never been inspired to quiz people about the Bengal side. Thank heavens for this book.

Letitia says

Butalia brings a feminist voice to the history of India/Pakistan Partition. This is by no means an easy read. The historical events themselves are heart-wrenching enough, but Butalia couples it with interviews from those who lived through the Partition and the horrors they faced. This is a valuable work in the oral-history tradition, and brings a unique perspective to an historical account that is well-known, but has rarely been shared with this level of emotional, psychological depth.

Shaheena says

This book was something every Punjabi to read. Although the author admits her stories are from one side due to restrictions, both sides can relate. She has done an amazing job of putting history in a different light. This is a subject those lived through are reluctant to talk about but we must learn from it. There are parts of this book that made me gasp out loud. That is something I've never done ever reading hundreds of books. The horrors of humanity in the largest mass human exodus of history is astonishing. And that this can happen to any group anywhere at anytime is scary.

Ulrika Eriksson says

It's hard to understand how this tragedy is so relatively unknown and therefore this book, describing the horrors people went through, is very important indeed. Especially as the partition, of course, still is an open wound in the relations between the two countries. A part of India became Pakistan 1947 and when the new border was a fact, many found themselves being on the wrong side of it. During two months 12 milion hindus and muslims were displaced, one million died and 75000 women were raped and abducted. Urvashi Butalia wants to tell this story from the women's perspective. The book consists of recorded interviews written down verbatim. Sometimes I found them a bit difficult to read. It's anthropologic/academic in style. I read this book because of Tarquin Hall's recommendation of it in his own book The Case of the Deadly Butter Chicken, an entertaining and informative detective story where the crime relates to this time in India's and Pakistan's history

Hadley McCollester says

Read this book for my sociology class called Collective Memory and Storytelling. Although I was aware, at least peripherally, of the violence and trauma incurred during the partition of the Indian subcontinent, this book changed my perspective entirely. I really appreciate the focus on individual stories and the author's

awareness of her own opinions and biases. She asks the questions that we are all thinking, even if she does not have the answers.

Neo says

This is a moving account of the Partition of India. As history is mostly written and viewed as a single gender concern, this one accounts for all the horror that women had to go through. Families have silence the history of women. Urvashi brings this out and questions our views on our own prejudices which more often than not we are so happy to comply with.

Pratibha Suku says

A tale of trauma is the partition of India in 1947. "History of pain and anguish that dogged the lives". This book is an attempt to vocalize the pain, anguish, sense of loss and the ultimate silence that has captivated the life of mass. Women and children in particular became the "unwitting victim of the tussle for pretty power between the two countries".

The title of book is quite befitting. But chapters are structured in a bland manner. The insights and analysis presented in between the interview is mostly repetitive.

The centrepiece of book is the multiple interviews that Ms Urvashi has taken over the years. The horrendous crime that people did or faced and its consequences and ramifications which still loom in their life are well pointed out in each and every saga. "History does not give you leave to forget so easily".

The insane govt policies and act is also mentioned in between. Like "Abducted Person Restoration and Recovery Act" - a male child under age 16 yrs or a female of whatever age..." females of any age then could be a abducted person but with male children the question of their being abducted ended at age 16, the age at which they presumably moved from being minors to major - could it be that those drafting felt that the age of 16 a young male was capable of deciding which identity he wanted to adopt where he wanted to live and belong and that women -no matter what age - were not similarly capable?"

So this is kind of Hard Read but also an Informative Read

Melisa says

A very hard read as there were so many painful stories.

Gita Madhu says

I was drawn to this book because my mother's family came over to India during the Partition. The title was also significant as I learned very little of what happened, first hand, from my mother. She always told me that she and her sister had been sent off to India long before the bloodshed began. Many years after she passed away, a cousin sister told me that, in fact, my mother had witnessed the turbulence. She also told me that my mother was in some sort of post where she wore a uniform. But, she stressed, all this was to be kept

a secret. For me, this was the other side of silence.

Urvashi Butaliawrites in a very bland tone, using the interview format at times, a dry descriptive note most of the time and, rarely, introduces an element of drama. We are launched into her experiences with her personal story, though, even in this, she maintains a neutral stance. Her maternal uncle chose to stay back in Pakistan and converted to Islam. She goes to meet him but her family remains convinced that he did it to acquire property. Not for a second does the academic style falter, yet it is not entirely shorn of heart.

Indeed, many such tales emerge, where some made use of the tragic turn of events to confiscate the property of others, even that of relatives. In this way, we see to what uses the Partition was put by diverse actors.

Throughout, Ms Butalia restrains herself from bias and, it was significant to me that she includes accounts of Hindu brutality to balance Muslim acts. I was, personally, shaken to the core when, after years of being fed, by my parents and ambient society, with the myth of Islamic tendencies to butcher, I heard a bloodcurdling first hand narrative.

I had joined a neighbourhood sewing class in my early thirties. A dear old lady ran the class. As is the habit of age, she was wont to entertain us with tales from her youth. Mostly, it was amusing-how her mother-in-law would lead her to her husband's bed at night and escort her back afterwards, and how the double bed has destroyed our morals.

But, on one occasion, she graphically related how she and other young women stood on a balcony or terrace and watched Muslim families being burned alive and how they cheered. I think I grew up in that second far beyond the capacity of my physical age.

As must be expected from the founder of Kali for Women, she has a section on women which explores the violence against women. These stories range from suicides, failed and successful, honour killings where men killed the womenfolk before the other party "besmirched" the family honour and, of course, the expected rape and murder of women on both sides. Yet, the author manages to find the unexpected in all this -a love story albeit a tragic one where a girl, sold over and over, finally lands up with a man who loves her, only to be snatched from him in the initiative of the respective governments to restore abducted women to their families. Butalia, also, had to face being the object of violent loathing when she was personally party to one such restoration. It is not always simple and straightforward to set past wrongs aright.

One snippet stands out in my memory of the reading: an incident where a Britisher tells an Indian employee that they, the British, are leaving India but not without creating havoc. There is, thus, an indictment of sorts, something of which we are all, we who were and are, involved, aware at some level or the other.

Although the book is hard to read for the most part, given the textbook like nature of its treatment, it has places where a more human face emerges-a whole section is devoted to one particular lady. In this part, the style becomes more journalistic, following this woman's experiences in the dangerous past down to her life in the present and even up to her death. It was a curious look at those violent times, seen through the eyes of a rather amazing person.

Reading this book in light of the ongoing attempt to record first person accounts from those times, raises questions: will all this lead to more heartburn?

I think not -silence is a cancer. Sweeping things under carpets is never very hygienic. And I am convinced that many stories will emerge showing the triumph of human goodness on both sides than those which make us all hang our heads in shame.

In seeking to write this review, I came across one article which referred to “the harkening back to an—often mythical—past where Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs lived together in relative peace and harmony”. I wonder at the cynicism. I was raised with descriptions of the warm friendships between Muslims and Hindus/Sikhs, of my grandmother’s Muslim besties with whom she hung out all day, smoking a hookah and having a great time. I wonder because, even today, it is so instinctive and easy for a Hindu Indian and a Pakistani to be friends—good friends.

What if such close bonds incur jealousy? After all, should our two countries be healed and embrace business and other partnerships, will not prosperity flourish in the region? What keeps us both down benefits those who would still like to see us as barbaric in our violence, those who, most probably, orchestrated all that bloodshed back then.

Shreya Vaid says

One of the great human convulsion of history, which lead to the death of 200,000 precious lives (the contemporary British Figure) to two million (a later Indian estimate), 75,000 women abducted and raped, lost to sexual savagery. A line is drawn between India and Pakistan, The Other Side of Silence of millions who were lost.

The Other Side of Silence: Voices from The Partition of India by Urvashi Butalia chronicles the stories of partition which were never spoken of. We all know about the regular stuff that we learn from our history books, the stats, the stories, the political movements, the aftermath, and rectification. What we do not know is what unfolded among people who were there and witnessed everything. The author focuses on such stories only, which can give you a much deeper insight into the stories of partition. The Other Side of Silence, which explores the stories embedded in the minds of people, which they haven't shared with anyone.

The Other Side of Silence is divided into eight sections, each describing an important aspect of partition. Starting from blood, Urvashi speaks about her long lost Mama Ji, (mother's brother), Ranamama, who preferred to stay in Pakistan only. Urvashi takes on both sides of the story, her mother's and her brother's too. Her mother speaks to her about how many difficulties and life-threatening situations she faced when she traveled thrice to Pakistan to get her family in India. But her brother refused to move an inch and also made their mother stay behind, so that when the day comes, he can take over the ancestral property. On the other hand, Ranamama, in a haunting melancholia remembers his sister and her sacrifices. But he explains his side of the story. His sacrifice, his hard decisions, his other side of silence, his conversion to an alien religion to survive the brutal world.

"No one forced me to do anything. But in a sense, there wasn't really a choice. The only way I could have stayed on was by converting. And so, well I did. I married a Muslim girl, changed my religion, and took a Muslim name. But I have not slept on night in these forty years without regretting my decision, not one night"

The second chapter of The Other Side of Silence describes how the partition really happened. How a single man with a pen in his hand and with a map, drew a line and gave birth to two countries. The third chapter shared the silence of women who were abducted during the partition. 75,000 women abducted from both sides of the border! In a horrific account, the author also shares that apart from rapes, specific kinds of violence had been visited on women. Many of them paraded naked on streets, their breasts were cut off! To

defile their purity, they were forced to have sex with men of other religion. A separate committee was also set up to relocate such women, but surprisingly, many of them never wanted to be found. Many of them wanted to stay where they were, their essence brutally murdered, but surviving.

I have heard many stories of partition from my grandmother, who used to live in Peshawar and on an unfateful night, she had to leave everything behind and come to India. But this completely different picture of partition is something which I have never heard or come across. Something very disturbing yet enlightening. How a decision which was meant to benefit people, turned into a disaster which gulped lives of many. When partition was announced, people were given a free will, to stay or to migrate. But the rise of communal violence and threat from unsocial elements made many people move.

Overall, The Other Side of Silence is a book that will leave you spellbound and in tears. A factual account of partition, many readers would like to skip pages and read the stories straight. But better not do that, because understanding the facts also will help in relating to stories in a better way. Though not everyone's cup of tea, The Other Side of Silence is definitely something to have on your #TBR. To understand the sacrifice of many lives to create two nations which don't see eye to eye anymore, India and Pakistan.

Tushar Gargava says

This is a tough one to write. The complexity lies in the method I have to take to analyze the book.

As a whole, the book written with the aim to discuss the true stories of partition elicited by careful interviews nails it down. If you read it with a clear mind, it will make itself heard. It managed to shake me well.

But then there's the problem that the author can't write well. Her structuring is disappointing to the level where I almost wanted to scream at her. She narrates the entire chapter using, and often quoting, pieces from relevant interviews, and then inserts the interviews at the end promising new insights.

As she asserted many times throughout the book, it is not about facts, but about how the victims of the partition of India went about it. The book wants to reach out and make sure we remember.

Mainly, the book wants to make known the atrocities that the women were made to go through. While you would find it hard to believe that such events took place, you would also see no other way out. Which is shameful and exactly how the author wants us to feel.

I don't like feminists mainly because they're confused within themselves. They don't understand what they really want, and end up making absurd statements. But feminists like Urvashi Butalia are simple in their approach and understand how complex it is still. These are the kind of leaders women want.

Anyway, I found a new stepping stone to start with history. Nothing works better than understanding it through the voice of people who lived through it first. Technicality can always be found in reference books anyway!

The book is a light read in terms of language, but it might be heavy for an innocent heart. Tread carefully!

Cheers to reading!

Nikhil Kumar says

Silence and speech. Memory and forgetting. Pain and healing. They are the heart of this book about Partition of Punjab. It uses silence and words - of men, women and children - to decipher the voices of partition: how rape and abduction turned into valor and heroism, how victims as well as aggressors were all survivors, how some memories were kept alive to forget others, how the violence 'out there' turned into violence inside of people, how the social hierarchy and rituals of Partition in India still exist - such that after more than 70 years we haven't come to terms with our own history.
