



UNBORDERED  
MEMORIES

SINDHI  
STORIES  
OF PARTITION

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY  
RITA KOTHARI

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2009





For the first time from both sides of the border, a collection of Sindhi Partition narratives

If Partition changed the lives of Sindhi Hindus who suffered the loss of home, language and culture, and felt unwanted in their new homeland, it also changed things for Sindhi Muslims. The Muslims had to grapple with a nation that had suddenly become unrecognizable and where they found themselves to be second-class citizens.

Not used to the Urdu, the mosques and the new avatars of domination, they were bewildered by the new Islamic state of Pakistan. Sindh as a nation had simultaneously become elusive for both communities.

In *Unbordered Memories* we witness Sindhis from India and Pakistan making imaginative entries into each other's worlds. Many stories in this volume testify to the Sindhi Muslims' empathy for the world inhabited by the Hindus, and the Indian Sindhis' solidarity with the turbulence experienced by Pakistani Sindhis. These writings from both sides of the border fiercely critique the abuse of human dignity in the name of religion and national borders. They mock the absurdity of containing subcontinental identities within the confines of nations and of equating nations with religions. And they continually generate a shared, unbordered space for all Sindhis—Hindus and Muslims.

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Sindhi Stories of Partition

*Edited and translated by*

RITA KOTHARI



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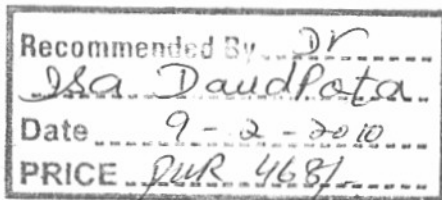
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## Translator's Note and Acknowledgements

Perhaps of all Partition migrants the Sindhis have willed themselves to forget Partition most successfully. In fact the nostalgic emotion so freely expressed by literary writers in this volume contrasts with a matter-of-fact dismissal of nostalgia and recall by a large number of Sindhi businessmen. Their mercantile spirit may have enabled them to fight more courageously, without indulging in self-pity but the forgetting has had ramifications that the community is discovering only now. The stories in this volume contrast starkly with the silence I have encountered in my sociological work. They dwell, much too luxuriously, upon a utopian notion of Sindh. As an academic trained in English literature and taught to appreciate the understated sense of fragmentation, I found myself struggling with the translator inside who wished to replicate the sentimentality for reasons of authenticity. The latter won, because apart from my own commitment to the voices in the narratives, I also see this nostalgia as a compensation for a world lost to the Sindhis. Meanwhile, it has been a struggle to deal with the intricate details of food and custom, descriptions of economy and society that can be only be understood if Sindh was available to me both physically and psychologically. In terms of time

and space, I am away from Sindh. In the city of Ahmedabad where I live, a flight to Karachi takes less time than flying to Bombay, but arbitrary and tyrannical borders have made Sindh inaccessible to me in more ways than one. Fortunately, I grew up speaking Sindhi, a phenomenon not so common in the generation after mine. The verbal structures of Sindhi came useful in learning the Perso-Arabic script in which these stories have been written. All the same, I have taken generous help from at least two people—Sahib Bijani (Adipur, India) and Shoukat Hussain Shoro (Sindh, Pakistan)—on each side of the border. I wish to dedicate this book to both of them.

I also wish to thank Laxmandas Makhija, Vidya Tewani, Heena Kewalramani, Samia Vasa, Abhijit Kothari and Shamini Kothari for supporting an endeavour that has meant a lot to me at a personal level.

*Ahmedabad*  
*19 January 2009*

RITA KOTHARI

## Introduction

Amar Jaleel, one of Pakistan's most respected and controversial writers, writes in Sindhi—an official language in both India and Pakistan. He is technically a Muslim. However, his personal creed, spiritual outlook and politics recognize no borders of religion, nation and tradition. A follower of the seventeenth-century Sufi saint, Sachal Sarmast, Jaleel draws radical courage from Sufism and fearlessly critiques any abuse of human dignity in the name of religion and national borders. He mocks the absurdity of containing subcontinental identities within the confines of nations, and of equating nations with religions.

He wrote his most controversial story 'Sard Lashun Jo Safar' (The Journey of Cold Corpses) in the face of unrelenting censorship in the Pakistan of Zia-ul-Haq. In the story, Jaleel takes us to Kundkot, a village in interior Sindh where Hindu families live in a colony called Nanak Mohalla. We are then taken to the house of Gopal, technically a Hindu (his Hinduism as incidental as Jaleel's Islam). While Gopal is busy reading a Sindhi translation of the Koran, a bunch of religious fanatics are raping his sister Savitri. Unlike most Hindus of Sindh, Gopal had chosen not to leave Pakistan to go to India. Perceiving himself to be an integral part of

Sindh, he made his family stay back in the new state of Pakistan. His troubles started not in the 1940s, but three decades later, when religious fanaticism flared up with state support. The story shows how Gopal, an ordinary man from a village, had a sophisticated and unbiased understanding of religion. The rest of the story is much too gruesome and violent to be narrated here. Not surprisingly, the story was banned in Pakistan. In India, it remains unknown beyond a tiny circle of Sindhi writers. To my knowledge, this is the only story in the Sindhi language that explicitly addresses Islamic violence against Hindus and, contrary to our expectations, it is not situated during Partition but *after*, and written not by a Hindu who suffered, but by a member of the majority community in Pakistan who empathized with the suffering.

### Disrupting Synonymies

Jaleel documents atrocities perpetrated upon Hindus in an Islamic state. He was prosecuted by the state for writing this story. Besides being a testimony to his courage, this story is important because it defies some of the unquestioned assumptions underlying our understanding of Partition literature and also helps defy some of the repetitive patterns in the literature in general. Partition fiction is generally a sensitive and detailed account of how 'millions of people were forced to leave their homes, their *bastis*, their *desh*, their *watan*, and undertake a difficult and sorrowful journey . . .' (Bhalla 2007). The journey by train or in *qafilas* is a recurring trope in Partition literature. Based on the narratives written by 'Indian' nationals—Hindus, Dalits, Sikhs—we assume the difficulties of the journey and its attendant dangers and

violence to be our window to the experience of Partition migrants coming from the newly created Pakistan. What is seldom taken into account is the fact that not all communities came by train, and hence encountered violence in physical terms. Or that some members of certain communities, Sindhi-speaking Hindus, for instance, stayed back in the new Pakistan to grapple with a nation that had suddenly turned unrecognizable. Jaleel's Gopal is one such person.

Gopal disturbs the first synonymy we make between Partition and homeland. The second synonymy he breaks is the one between Partition subjects and their ethnicity. Gopal's experiences as a Sindhi Hindu, who continued to live in Pakistan, are different from the experiences described by Kamleshwar or Intizar Hussain or Bhisham Sahni, for his subject position does not coincide with that of the author. Despite Jaleel being a Pakistani citizen, he provides a glimpse into the experience of a non-Muslim in Sindh, somewhat like Taslima Nasrin's sensitive portrayal of the Hindu minority in *Lajja*. The story, therefore, does not provide an insight into Sindhi Hindus in India, rather it sheds light on the life of a religious minority much after Partition. The assumption that every Hindu migrant speaks only of the 'Hindu' experience, and every 'Muslim' of the Muslim experience is interrogated here. This is not to say that Partition writers do not empathetically write about the 'Other'; however, these are mostly narratives of a 'good' Muslim in a story by a Hindu or a 'good' Hindu in the story by a Muslim—as small islands of humanity in a sea of bewildering hatred that engulfed the subcontinent in 1947. I wish to underscore the disruption of this synonymy to show how the Sindhi narratives are essentially transborder and are not confined by religious and national boundaries. For



instance, Jaleel's story positions Gopal, a member of a Hindu minority, as a subject, while Gordhan Bharti (see 'Boycott' in this volume) positions a poor and marginalized Jaman Koli as his chief protagonist. Similarly, Ali Baba, another well-known writer from Sindh (not included in this volume) probes the post-Partition alienation of Indian Sindhis in a story called 'Dharti Dhikaana'.

### The Notion of 'Violence'

Talk of violence has shaped most of the literary and political discussion about Partition in India. Generally speaking, print and visual narratives of Partition in India evoke in popular imagination archetypal images of mass violence and mob frenzy. However, the Sindhi Partition experience is relatively free from violent episodes.<sup>1</sup> I remember watching the first few episodes of *Tamas* in the 1980s before they were taken off the air. The episodes had been so absorbing, and the adrenalin rush so high, that I had felt let down by its abrupt end. It wasn't common to read or share books in my house, but I clearly remember watching *Tamas* with the entire family. The historical event of Partition we were watching on the screen was also the event that had wrenched my parents out of their homeland. My mother was only seven, hence too young to understand, but my father was a teenage boy and had carried vivid memories within him. When I look back now, I wonder why nobody mentioned (or thought)

<sup>1</sup>To understand why the Sindhi experience of Partition was different, and what made it relatively less violent, we need to see interconnections between Sindh's geography as a frontier region, its cultural isolation, its amalgamation of religions and the economic interdependence between Hindus and Muslims (Kothari, 2007).

of *Tamas* as a familiar story. Why did we siblings watch it without thinking of it as also being our parents' story? I would learn many years later that although Sindh and Punjab had been geographically and culturally close, their experience of Partition was vastly different with respect to violence. These departures in Sindhi Partition narratives make sense when viewed against the background of the Sindhi Partition experience.

Unlike the Punjabis and Bengalis, the Sindhis were not coming to an 'Indian' part of Sindh because Sindh was not divided into east and west Sindh. It went in its entirety to Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> This occludes from the Sindhi experience the metaphor of train-stuffed-with-corpses. A large number of Sindhis came by ship which they boarded from Karachi to arrive in Bombay and at various ports of Gujarat. Some travelled by trains from interior Sindh and came to Rajasthan. A smaller number crossed the border in the Thar desert and

<sup>2</sup>The Province of Sindh (now a state in Pakistan) is bordered on the east by the Thar desert of India and in the west by the mountains of Baluchistan; it boasts of the port city of Karachi as well as the remains of the Indus Valley civilization. Its history is chequered and is best known by the brief message 'PECCA VI' sent by its British conqueror Charles Napier to his superiors in the Bombay Presidency. Tracing its origin to the Indus Valley settlements of Mohen-jo-daro (itself a Sindhi word meaning the 'gate/hillock of the dead'), Sindh was part of various Hindu kingdoms up to 712 AD when Mohammed bin Kasim conquered it and established Muslim rule. Various Muslim dynasties ruled over Sindh undisturbed until 1843 when the British decided that its strategic importance necessitated its conquest. The colonial policies of land and education tipped the economic and social balance. The Hindu minority of Sindh which had always been rich but unobtrusive, now cornered powerful positions in the nineteenth century, evoking a strong feeling among Sindhi Muslim leaders that they had not received their just desserts.

came to Gujarat on camel back. Although the rich and prosperous Hindus of Sindh must have felt insecure and frightened in the new state of Pakistan, by and large, the threat to physical safety was relatively less in Sindh. The danger to the lives and property of Sindhi Hindus became palpable once Muslim immigrants, driven out of Bihar and the United Provinces, entered Sindh. In her autobiography, Popati Hiranandani relates the enormous fear that made her family leave Sindh. In this story, one of the few which relates instances of kidnapping and rape, it is the immigrant Muslim who is seen as the kidnapper or the rapist. The first generation Sindhi Hindus differentiated between the Muslims who came from Sindh and those who came from other parts of India.<sup>3</sup>

Three months after Partition, when Acharya Kripalani (president, Indian National Congress) visited Sindh he noted that, 'There was only a slight exodus of the Hindus and Sikhs from Sindh. It did not suffer from any virulent fanaticism. To whatever faith the Sindhis belonged, they were powerfully influenced by Sufi and Vedantic thoughts. This made for tolerance' (Kripalani, 2004, 703). The Hindus and Muslims of Sindh shared a strong linguistic and territorial identity, which brought them closer to each other than their co-religionists in India and Pakistan. It is true that this social fabric began to tear in the wake of sharpened economic disparities in the nineteenth century, and led to the success of the Muslim League. It is equally true that the rhetoric of Islamic corruption of the pure Indus civilization circulated by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) also

<sup>3</sup>Gradually these images of a vilified Muslim became generalized, at least in the minds of post-Partition generations.

made inroads after several abortive attempts (Kothari 2006). However, neither Sindh's syncretic tradition nor its polarities in the twentieth century were uniform. When we visit individual and local histories by Sindhis, there emerge many-shaded narratives that are not yet a part of our Partition imaginary.

In Narayan Bharti's 'The Document', Manghanmal, a Hindu landowner, has painful memories of how his tenant Rasool Baksh spent his own money and saw Manghanmal off at Hyderabad station. With not a shade of bitterness or anger, the story captures a beautifully interdependent (albeit feudal, and at times, exploitative) relationship between a Hindu landowner and a Muslim *haari*. This delicate balance was severely threatened during Partition, and although we don't have, in fiction or real life, testimonial accounts of physical violence, Hindu landowners in the new state of Pakistan lived in fear of the vengeance of Muslim peasants (Kothari 2007). Bharti's story is not marked by any uncomfortable memories, but by a relentless nostalgia for the life, place and relationships that Sindhi Hindus had lost access to. The rehabilitation and refugee committees in India had made arrangements for some compensation of property, but how do you quantify an ethos and claim compensation for it? A miserable, angry and bewildered Joharmal in 'The Claim' (by Bharti) declares:

Joharmal, son of Vaseymal, *nukka* Nagdev, has left the whole of Sindh in Pakistan. Now he files a claim for Sindh. It should be returned to him. The proof is the fact that Joharmal is a Sindhi, his language is Sindhi and his civilization is Sindhi.

Unlike what might be expected from Partition literature, Sindhi stories deal less with themes of betrayals and escapes.

Such stories are rare in fact. They deal more with the precarious moments of 'peace' preceding Partition, the gradual hardening of religious lines, the ambivalences about leaving or staying, the psychological violence of arriving in India as stateless migrants and re-starting life amidst hostile populations in various states, and the humiliation of living in refugee camps and interacting with the bureaucracy in the new nation state. The psychosis of fear, the separation from language and home, the shedding of tangible and non-tangible possessions constituted trauma for the Sindhis, but perhaps not in the way trauma becomes akin to physical violence in Partition Studies. My research on the Hindu Sindhis shows how in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, there was strong resentment directed at them as immigrants. As a community that, through proximity with Islam, had managed to shed the practice of untouchability, the Sindhis were subjected to discrimination in India (Kothari 2007). The humiliation of being refugees, and the contrast between the affluence and prestige of Sindhi Hindus in undivided India and penury in the glorious new nation state is a recurring theme in the oral and written testimonies by Sindhis. Deterritorialized and fragmented, the Sindhis found the moment of arrival into India far more traumatic than the moment of leaving Sindh. The Sindhis were not expected in India. They had neither a corresponding territory to come to, nor was the violence (before 6 January 1948) intense enough to generate sympathy for them. Sindh's richest and powerful religious minority of Hindus was reduced to a beggarly linguistic minority in India; its clothes, language, customs markedly different from the host communities who found the sudden influx of refugees irksome.

It is found in many instances that the refugees behave as if their miserable lot is the creation of people in this province. They must be told, sometimes with brutal frankness, that we have very little responsibility for what has happened to them. Of course in their misfortune we are one with them, we sympathize with them . . . but they must be told that they cannot turn themselves into a nuisance value and if Government have bowed (sic) down to their sentiments it is not because they proved themselves to be a nuisance. That must be clear to them. If I understood the Honorable Member Babubhai Patel he said that many of the refugees want to live in cities because they have come from cities. Well, they cannot be sticklers, they cannot be choosers. (Karandikar)

Mohan Kalpana's post-Partition narrative 'Jalavatni' is a bitter indictment of the nation state, its kafkaesque red-tape, and abusive officers who tell Mohan, 'You are a refugee, you can spend a night under a tree or near a railway track, or maidans. When you ran away from Sindh, did you ask Jinnah where should you go?' In the two selections included in this volume, the contrast between Kalpana's post-Partition acerbic bitterness and pre-Partition warmth (his RSS connections notwithstanding) is quite remarkable. Kalpana continues to be read and admired in Sindh even today, and I am told by my Sindhi friends from across the border that his flamboyance has made him particularly popular with Sindhi youth.

An equally iconic figure is Sheikh Ayaz whose description of what happened after the Hindus left Sindh is powerful and evocative.

I held the doll in my hands, and stood gazing at it. I tried to imagine its little owner who must have crossed Khokharpar and gone over to Bombay or Banaras or Calcutta, empty handed. I continued to gaze at it for a long time, and in the meantime my relatives got tired of waiting for me.

The guilt in Ayaz's voice, the fact that when opportunity presented itself, Sindhi Muslims pilfered things from the homes of Hindus is one of the cornerstones of Sindhi Muslims' memories of that period. Some justify it by recounting how Hindu traders would charge usurious rates of interest, and their falling out was entirely because of economic disparity. The conversation between Kamil and members of the older generation in Shoukat Hussain Shoro's 'Death of Fear' captures the divergent historiographies of this period.

### Ambiguity of Citizenship

Compared to Sindhi Muslims, the Sindhi Hindus have had a more awkward, but non-confrontational relationship with the nation state. It is useful to relate here a short but symbolically significant episode that took place in India. In the year 2005, a petition was filed in the Supreme Court to remove the word 'Sindh' from India's national anthem because the region of Sindh is no more in India. The Supreme Court dismissed the petition summarily, and the media ceased to take interest in it. The matter was forgotten by all as an isolated and absurd example of how the Indian judiciary was made to waste time. The implications of this however were hotly resented by a handful of Sindhi intellectuals and activists. What the Sindhis mourn most

even today is the loss of homeland. The petitioner seeking the removal of Sindh from the Indian national anthem was making even the memory of a lost homeland illegitimate. Worse yet, he sought to erase the historical roots of the Sindhis. On the other hand, Ali Baba, a Muslim writer from across the border, sensitively captures the alienation of the Sindhi Hindu in a story called 'Dharti Dhikaana'. The son born in post-Partition India teases his mother, who is nostalgic about Sindh, by saying:

'Amma, you always call the sea of Karachi, Sindhu Sagar, but there is no such sea in history or geography. The sea of Karachi is called the Arabian Sea.'

'Wah! Why the Arabian Sea? The sea became Arabian after the Arabs conquered it, do you think it was called Arabian Sea at the times of King Dahir?'

'But Aai, Sindh is under Muslim domination even now. They consider themselves descendants of the Arabs. There is only one unit in Pakistan these days. The world atlas shows no country by the name of Sindh. You keep giving yourself false assurances, Sindh does not exist anywhere.'

His mother was suddenly stung, as if by a scorpion. She looked at him wounded, and stricken, 'Ram, I don't understand what you people are taught in universities and colleges. Your knowledge is so limited. Listen, even now I have a vivid memory of how when I was a child, and a student studying Sindhi in class four, your late grandfather had taken me to the Lakhidhar pilgrimage fair. I had written

my name with a nail on a slab of Bhago Thodo—Savitri Hingorani, Standard Four, Sindhi. It's been so many years since then. I can say with certainty that the cruel flow of time must have wiped my name off the mountain. But how does that matter?'

'Amma, forgive me, I didn't know that it would hurt you so much. How do I know what a nation is? I am untouched by that experience.'

What is 'nation' for the Indian Sindhis? For the globally diasporic Sindhi community spread across three continents of the world doing business, the nation is a notional place, an idea with no physical contours. For those who live in India, Sindh has ceased to be a nation, because they can't visit it, and can't afford to talk about it since it belongs to what the rest of India considers an 'enemy state'. This has made Sindh inaccessible in both memory and reality. It also perhaps explains the silence Sindhis maintained about their past, the stories that were never transmitted, the wounds that were never shared. It is only in the literary space of stories that nostalgia for the lost nation finds articulation. The first generation writers who tell the stories included in this volume re-enact Sindh as a pure and pristine nation, an ideal haven that they (the Hindu Sindhis of India) may not be able to visit, but which remains enshrined in memory as a pre-lapsarian heaven. The idea of Sindh is often engendered, best exemplified in Sundri Uttamchandani's 'Bhoori'. The central character, Bhoori, is Sindh (endearingly called Sindhri) whom the Sindhi Hindus managed to rescue and bring with them, locked securely in their hearts. The fact that Bhoori lost her lustre, but not her virtue, when thrown into poverty and helplessness has symbolic significance for the Sindhis. It

implies that a self-respecting entrepreneurial community turned itself from *sharnarathi* (refugees) to *purusharathi* (hardworking people) without compromising their women's dignity. Interestingly, Sindh is a woman in the conception of Sindhi Muslim writers also, but the historiographical emphasis is different. In the Sindhi Muslim's right to self-determination, the Sindh nation is defined by the river Indus, by Mohenjodaro and by the Sufis. The Sindhi Hindus use the same tropes to emphasize an Aryan continuity. However, the nation remains elusive for both, constructed, fantasized and shared only in literary space and, now, cyberspace.

### Unbordered Memory

The discussion on Amar Jaleel at the beginning of this essay set the tone for an unbordered memory of Partition. It also set the tone for an imaginative and empathetic entry that Sindhis on both sides of the border very often make into each other's world. If Partition changed the lives of Sindhi Hindus who felt insecure and unwanted, it also changed things for Sindhi Muslims. After 1947, both religious communities in different ways faced challenges, from within and without, to their language, state and identity. I have discussed elsewhere that the Sindhi Muslim leaders supported the movement for Pakistan hoping to acquire economic advantages that they had lost to the Hindus. However, the Islamic state of Pakistan was new for them, and it was not easy getting used to the Urdu, the mosques, the new avatars of domination. In the story, 'The Oxen', Muhammad Daud Baloch asks a hard-hitting question: If beasts need to be in their language zone, how are humans

beings to function without one? The question applied as much to the imposition of Urdu on Sindhi Muslims in Pakistan, as to the Sindhi Hindus in post-Partition India. It is true that the Sindhi Hindus paid a heavier price by leaving their lands, homes, shops and all cultural referents behind in Sindh. At the same time, Partition also caused irrevocable changes in the lives of Sindhi Muslims who willy-nilly found themselves second-class citizens in the new Islamic state of Pakistan. The ramifications of that moment continue to be felt even today by Sindhis living in both nations.

The shared space of the Sindhis (Hindus and Muslims) in this book is an extension of a composite 'Sindhiness' in the literary community of Sindhi writers across borders who continue to read and interact with each other. The formation of nation states seized upon this composite zone, concretized in Jaleel's nostalgia for the festival of Holi that was also 'holy' for being syncretic. Many stories in this volume testify to an empathetic entry made by Sindhi Muslims into the world of Hindus, and the Indian Sindhis' solidarity with the turbulence experienced by a Pakistani Sindhi. It is hoped that this small gesture of documenting simultaneous experiences from both sides of the border would dispel the synonymy between nations and religions, and bring the discussion on Partition into the ambit of South Asia at large.

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