

“Partition: Recording Untold Stories of Forced Displacement
from the Creation of India and Pakistan”

Guneeta Singh Bhalla, [1947 Partition Archive](#), UC Berkeley
summarized by [Stephen Pitcher](#)

Guneeta Singh Bhalla began the 1947 Partition Project to address the mysterious absence of eyewitness accounts or widespread discussion of the Partition of British India, the largest forced migration in human history. The victims do not wish to recall it, as that would be unlucky; the perpetrators have their own motives for wishing the matter shoved under the rug; it is not mentioned in textbooks; and commemoratives or memorials are nonexistent. This is a human tragedy on the scale of the Holocaust, and it is as if it never happened. It was not only the source of intensely bitter suffering while it took place, but its lingering, indeed escalating, political aftermath has been enormous and potentially catastrophic. The region was left with two mutually antagonistic nations armed with nuclear power; Bhalla described it as the second most militarized area in the world, and said there was a perception that “We’ve inherited it.” Why, she asks, have we *inherited* it?

It was in the light of this strange, seemingly complete omission from the historical record that Bhalla decided to form a project dedicated to collecting, recording, and archiving oral histories of the Partition. The Partition Project, operating out of UC Berkeley, is regarded as a start-up, but Berkeley wanted to adopt a different, non-profit approach, involving the provision of office space and mentorship. The Project is donation-based but expects licensing eventually.

It is frequently taught that India was a single, huge empire; in fact, it is comprised of 565 states, with a wide variety of languages, religions, and cultures. The two states primarily affected by the Partition were Punjab and Bengal, and when Partition occurred a state of absolute lawlessness descended on them; in the first three weeks, almost 3 million people died. An attempt to restore order resulted in the installation of a system which, Bhalla said, “didn’t really resonate with local population,” most of whom had no idea they were living in a country called India.

Q: What kind of challenges do you face . . . I mean, who’s available after all this time?

Children of children; “We know people who. . . .”

A: We’re functioning in a state of urgency. The people interviewed are in their 80s, 90s, over 100.

Q: Do you accept second-hand accounts?

A: Not yet. We’re so short of resources just dealing with the first-hand histories. There were an estimated 15 million people migrated in 1947 alone. There’s also an interesting link between occupation and religion, so if one potter switches religion all potters do. It leads to great upheaval.

Q: There's also the concept of an ancestral home, being forced to leave yours with the clothes on your back; you couldn't bring, say, a cow—people were taking a bare minimum.

Q: 15 million people on the road—how many came the other way?

A: 7.5 million each way. We know today—it recently came out of British archives that the British government had decided the details down to the last chair. People thought it was random, but I wasn't.

Q: How do you prepare people to interview?

A: We do workshops online; there's a Google handout. We're creating a video now for interview preparation, with a little quiz at the end. There are standard procedures for collecting oral histories, things that separate them from media interviews: open-ended questions, giving as much power as possible to the interviewee.

Q: You mentioned that in history courses this era is not taught. Is there a movement now for opening up about that?

A: I don't know if there's a movement I did read in an article that in Delhi a book came out with a chapter on Partition, based on oral history. We're hoping our work will help [bring the topic to light].

Q: Why did this have to happen? Did the government determine there needed to be a population shift?

A: We're still trying to understand how mass migration happened. That's the thing: most people who underwent it still don't know why it happened.

Q: Were they shocked when it turned violent?

A: So it says in books, but that seems disingenuous. It's not clear what was going on, but some people surely knew after three weeks. Actually, the British viceroy, although his job was over, came back . . . it could have been done much better.

Q: Some must have refused to move.

A: Yes, like dual religionists. And some just died.

Q: You could also use this solution [recording oral histories] to follow what happened in Bosnia.

A: Absolutely. We want to make our platform available to anybody who wants to come in and document anything—even things that happened in the U.S.

Q: What kind of connections have the archives made to scholars—it doesn't seem like you could watch all [65090?] videos, so how do you deal with accessibility?

A: The archives are not accessible. It would take tremendous resources to make all the videos accessible, and it would be irresponsible to make them available—it would endanger the participants. We're developing protocols so scholars can come to our headquarters.

Q: How have you dealt with linguistic problems?

A: On our team we have people who speak all these various languages.

Q: What would be the advantage of working with StoryCorps?

A: We tried to work with StoryCorps at first, but they have various different policies, and they don't do oral histories. Anyone can narrate anything; there's a forty-minute limit, and it's audio only. We have no limit and welcome video; we don't even have stories as short as forty minutes! They're great though: they have lots of resources and go everywhere.

Q: Did you say you didn't want to share the stories?

A: No, our whole purpose is to put them out there, but we're not streaming them: there's a huge problem of material getting to repressive authorities. It's been a problem with the Holocaust. But we're setting up places where the physical collection is available.

At this juncture Dr. Bhalla began to show examples of the Project's holdings—video clips of interviews with Partition survivors. They include tales of brutality, chaos, and defiance. For the most part the survivors told their tales with contained, but perceptible, emotion; but the final clip, filled with grotesque details like the teller's father hiding in a broken grave, the wholesale appropriation of the family's possessions, and a child's having to leave his home with nothing but a single bag, was imparted almost without affect. Dr. Bhalla said of this old man that he was too afraid of emotion to reveal it in the interview, adding "He's still like that."

You can browse some of the collected stories and find more out about the 1947 Partition Archive at

<http://www.1947partitionarchive.org/>