Prologue

The Linguistic Setting

The Partition of India remains the largest episode of retributive genocide and mass displacement in history (Aiyar 1995). It is estimated that between 200,000 and 2 million people were killed in the retributive violence that ensued, while between 10 and 17 million people were displaced in a haphazard transfer of population. In the process, approximately 3.4 million refugees went missing (Brass 2003b; Khwaja, Bharadwaj and Mian 2009). What began as a haphazard migration for safety – as people found themselves on the 'wrong' side of the border – was later formalised between India and Pakistan as a transfer of population (Bharadwaj and Mirza 2019).

This book is an ethnography of the memory of this historical rupture – its afterlife. It is based on 14 months of intensive fieldwork in Delhi and its surrounding National Capital Region where I located and worked with over 50 first-hand survivors of the 1947 Partition of India. My research specifically focuses on Hindu refugees from the north-western Pakistani districts of Mianwali, Dera Ghazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu, Quetta (Balochistan), Multan and Mianwali. Barring a brief trip to Dehradun, the overwhelming majority of Partition survivors I spoke to live in Delhi and its surroundings.

For the most part my fieldwork involved drinking copious amounts of tea with my informants as we discussed politics, history and their everyday lives. As a project that combines oral history with participant observation, this book relies heavily on the recording, transcription, interpretation and translation of the words of my informants. It is for

this reason that detailing the ethnic and linguistic setting of my research gains added relevance.

Being a third-generation Partition migrant, my connection to the Partition is deeply intimate. Delhi was the obvious site for my fieldwork because my family's Partition survivors and their friends are settled there. This personal connection is visible throughout my research, shaping my search for informants as well as my engagement with theory. Due to the snowballing nature of my search for informants – that branched out into the kith and kin networks of my family's elders – all of my informants hail from the Derajat region and the North-West Frontier Province. All my informants were aged 80 and above at the time of interviews (2017–2018). Most of the people who find a mention in this book were close to 85 years of age. Roughly two-thirds of my informants happened to be men, an accident of social relations. All of my informants were upper-caste, middle-class and Hindu. They belonged to a mix of castes such as Khatri, Arora, Bhatia, Malik and Brahmin.[1] All of them came from well-off zamindar families. Quite a few even owned businesses in addition to hereditary land titles.

The stories I have documented here tell the story of the Partition as it unfolded in this north-western region of Pakistan. The Derajat region is located in the area where the Pakistani provinces of Punjab, Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhawa (formerly North-West Frontier Province) meet. The Derajat region is identified as a culturally distinct region, partly due to the fact that it is home to the Saraiki language. The historical districts of Dera Ghazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan, Quetta, Mianwali and Multan are most closely associated with the Derajat region and the Saraiki language (Hashmi and Majeed 2014). However, as my informants continuously reminded me, Saraiki is something of an umbrella term for the closely related dialects of Derawali, Mianwali-*boli* (or Mianwali dialect) and Multani. These dialects also bear a close resemblance to Punjabi. Today, Saraiki is the major language of this region (in Pakistan) and is spoken by approximately 25–40 million people (Hashmi and Majeed 2014).

North-west of the Derajat region, in the North-West Frontier Province, the main languages spoken were Pashto, Persian and Urdu. My informants from Bannu and other remote parts of this province saw themselves as neither Saraiki nor Punjabi, but as Pashtuns and/or

Pathans. As my key informant Pooran Chand told me, in the years immediately following the Partition, the Frontier refugees asserted their ethnic identity partly through their refusal to marry into Punjabi families.

However, much has changed in the post-Independence, post-Partition context. Although remembered by the survivors of the Partition and some of their children, these regional identities have been subsumed within a larger Punjabi and Indian cultural identity. The grandchildren of Partition survivors, that is, the people of my generation, identify as Punjabi or Delhiites or whatever other local Indian identity they consider relevant. None of the people of my generation speak Saraiki or any of its dialects. Among the families of my informants, Hindi appeared to have replaced these dialects as the mother tongue. This is in contrast to Pakistan, where Saraiki has emerged as a slow-burning ethnic question, complete with the demand for a Saraiki province (Butt and Ahmed 2016).

The only settings where I observed an explicit emphasis on these (legacy) regional identities was in the activities of the organisations formed by Partition refugees, namely the All-India Mianwali District Association and the All-India Derawal Sahayak Sabha ('Volunteer Assembly'). These volunteer-based organisations were founded by Mianwali and Derawal Partition refugees in the 1950s with the explicit purpose of resettling their respective communities. However, by 2017 these organisations had become a mere shadow of their former selves. Almost all of their active members were aged 60 and above, with little to no involvement of young and middle-aged people. Although these organisations still organised annual meet-ups for their members, the general tone of these events can be best described by what Michael Herzfeld (2005) once referred to as a nostalgia for *real* community. Nevertheless, these organisations and their events were instrumental in my search for informants.

As a result of these transformations in culture and identity over the last 75 years since the Partition, my interviews and fieldwork interactions were almost entirely conducted in Hindi. However, given the diversity of the linguistic context of my research, other languages too often made an appearance in the speech of my informants. At times, either for dramatic effect or subconsciously, my informants spoke the occasional

sentence or phrase in English, Urdu, Saraiki or Punjabi. Notwithstanding such instances, Hindi was predominantly the language in which my fieldwork was conducted.

Having been fluently bilingual in Hindi and English from an early age, I was able to transcribe and translate my informants' words with ease. My larger concern around translation in this context was not regarding my ability to convert words from one language into another. Rather, the challenge lay in confronting translation as an added layer of interpretation.

I have endeavoured to preserve the emic vocabulary of my informants as far as possible. Readers will observe numerous instances in this book where I have preserved the Hindi/Punjabi/Urdu words of my informants and explained their meanings in accompanying commentary. I have done this for words and phrases that do not have a direct English translation and to convey something of the literariness or emotive context of my informants' speech.

Paying attention to the literariness of my informants' speech has also informed my engagement with theory. This is most visible in Part II, where my analysis of the theodicical discourse of sacrifice partly hinges on the deconstruction of the gendered connotations of my informants' use of the word *purusharth*. The translation and interpretation of this word is part of a larger dialogue with my informants and their memories of the Partition.

In my transliterations of these vernacular words and phrases, I have strived for phonetic accuracy. Dispensing with the use of diacritics, I have written these words phonetically using the Roman alphabet. There is nothing novel or controversial about this. Almost every English-speaking Indian netizen would have encountered such transliterations in the form of mass-forwarded vernacular jokes. Wherever I was in doubt regarding the 'correct' transliteration of a word, I merely turned to the vast literature on South Asia for guidance. In this way, my transliteration of vernacular words follows colloquial linguistic practices and former scholarly transliterations. Occasionally, I also sought my mother and my grandaunt Anjali's advice on the translation and transliteration of particular words.

Ultimately, by preserving some of the literariness of the speech of my informants, I have tried to convey the individualised and personalised

tone of these narratives. There is no master narrative of the Partition. What one finds instead is a constellation of independent voices that contextualise, organise, localise and mobilise their memory in relation to certain common frames of reference. As an ethnography of the last generation of Partition survivors, I consider the documentation of this polyphonous voicing an important scholarly objective. I hope that my work will sustain our ongoing dialogue with the suffering and violence in our past and present.

Note

1 I have not mentioned the specific castes of specific informants in their introductions as part of persistent efforts to preserve their anonymity. Some of my informants shared their last name with the name of their caste (for example, Arora and Bhatia). I have therefore used the somewhat generalising gloss of 'upper-caste' with a twofold objective: to make the caste dynamics at play intelligible to a larger non-South Asian non-specialist audience and to obscure biographical details.

Part I

The Past and the Present

Introduction

Death and the Problem of Theodicy

This book is primarily about death and suffering. It is an ethnography of the memory of the 1947 Partition of India and how its survivors make sense of the Partition's death and suffering decades after the fact. Although I worked with close to 50 informants while compiling this book, there was one person who was instrumental in the conceptualisation of this overarching theme: my late grandaunt Sneh.

My grandaunt Sneh died on the night of 7 June 2018. Her death came as a complete shock. Earlier that night, we had spoken on the phone and made plans for the following day. But it was not to be. She had a heart attack later that night and by the time her children drove her to the hospital, it was already too late. It was all over in a little less than an hour.

Through the course of my fieldwork, she and I had become quite close. She was the last surviving sibling of my late maternal grandmother. But growing up, I had not had the chance to spend much time with her. That year that I spent living in Delhi, she affectionately imposed a grandmotherly relationship on me. She would call me frequently to check up on me and would get annoyed if we went a week without talking on the phone. It was almost always my fault!

Sneh, or Nani Masi as I used to call her, was born in 1946 in Rajanpur, a small town in the district of Dera Ghazi Khan (now in Punjab, Pakistan). She was only an infant during the Partition. The youngest of four siblings (by quite a distance), she was relatively shielded from the chaos of the time. She remembered growing up in Kingsway Camp (Delhi) and later in the resettlement colony of Palwal, a satellite town 60 kilometres from Delhi. Her father – my great-grandfather – Chaudhry Pooran Chand[1] was a renowned lawyer in his

time. He was even appointed the resettlement commissioner of this area. Until as late as 2018, a certain generation of people in Palwal still remembered how he had spearheaded the resettlement process in this area. As his last surviving child, Nani Masi quietly embodied his legacy.

In her youth, she had been something of a rebel. In contrast to the sheltered upbringing my grandmother had received, Nani Masi had enjoyed a degree of freedom and independence that was quite unusual in the context of its time. She was 11 years younger than my grandmother. This meant that Nani Masi was in school when my grandmother got married. Although only a teenager at the time, she would travel alone on public transport, from Palwal to Delhi, to visit them. As she described it, she had been fairly *chust* (street-smart) all through her life. Even after marriage, she often made her way on her own, sometimes even with a child or two on her hip. She and her husband had taken entire road trips on their motorcycle, often with their children balanced finely between them. She loved remembering the spontaneity and free-spiritedness of her younger days.

Ultimately, it was her failing health that changed everything. The last 10 years of her life were marked by a steady decline. The slide had begun soon after my grandmother's passing in 2006 and intensified after her husband's death in 2010. By 2017 her health was dire. Her stomach and face had swollen up alarmingly. She could barely walk now. And even with a stick for support, just hobbling around her home left her breathless. While she was still quite sharp, her near-complete bed rest had impacted her mental health.

Yet she did not let her failing health stop her from becoming a part of my fieldwork. She used her vast network of friends and family to find me a number of informants. And, whenever she put me in touch with a new informant, she insisted on accompanying me to our first meeting. So, as I made numerous trips to Delhi and Palwal, she came with me. She would not have it any other way.

Those long drives are some of the fondest memories I have of her. Away from the rest of the family, she spoke her mind, unfiltered. Nani Masi and I rarely saw eye to eye on anything, but it was through these conversations that we truly bonded. She told me about her quarrels with her children, and we gossiped ad infinitum about the petty politics of her household. She also shared her memories of my grandparents

and of my mother's childhood. It was during one of those conversations that she told me that she saw a lot of my mother in me – that like her, I am self-reliant and independent. This was important to her.

Another time, she shared one of her best-kept secrets: she had a fondness for drinking. She told me that often after she and uncle (her husband) had put the kids to bed, they would have a glass of Scotch together. She had never touched alcohol outside the home or in anyone else's presence. Her 'transgressions' had remained safely ensconced within the four walls of her household. She still had a half bottle of Scotch hidden safely in her TV cabinet. After we got home that day, we had half a peg together, for old time's sake.

Looking back, I feel these trips were like the second coming of her younger days. They gave her an excuse to get out of the house and back on the road, to rekindle old friendships and acquaintances, to meet people one last time. They were a partial return to the restless rhythms of her youth. A final hurrah!

During my fieldwork in Faridabad I fell into a routine where, after having spent an evening talking to a group of informants in Rose Garden, I would drop by her house for a chat. Her house was a short drive from the park. True to form, she always had a box of sweets and lemonade ready for me. We would sit together, have a chat and I would make fun of whatever melodramatic soap opera she happened to be watching at the time. For her part, she would tease me about my receding hairline and warn me that no one would want to marry a bald man like me. Sometimes she would call on me for lifts to the market. But for the most part, we would just sit together, catch up, gossip, and then I would return to my aunt and uncle's house just in time for dinner.

Her sudden death was a profoundly dislocating experience. While her presence had had a great impact on my fieldwork, in death, she came to fundamentally structure my engagement with theory. On a basic level, her death reminded me of the fragility of life, especially that of my informants, the elderly – the last generation of Partition survivors. But on a deeper level, her death marked the beginning of my engagement with the philosophy of death and suffering: theodicy.

It was during her funerary rituals that I first observed theodicy at work. Everyone in my family had their own story about her death. Some of my relatives framed her death as the result of long-time neglect.

Her strained relations with her children, especially one of her sons, was common knowledge. She had also spent her last years visibly struggling with her health while no one appeared to have offered any substantial help. To them, her death was symptomatic of a larger social issue: the neglect of the elderly. Others found comfort in the fact that she had not suffered – that her death had been swift and relatively painless. Emphasising the alleged painlessness of her death – its lack of suffering – they contrasted her death with those of other relatives who had not been so 'fortunate'.

Others focused on the large number of mourners who had attended her *chautha*.[2] They found comfort in the way that this reinforced a sense of community – that she was loved by the community and that the community had turned out to pay their final respects. Through the recursive retelling of these stories in shared settings, they combined to create a narrative that sought to reconcile the life she had lived with the death she had suffered. On a deeper level, these narratives grappled with the overwhelming force of two related questions: 'why/how had she died?' and 'why do bad things happen to good people?'

This essentially is the problem of theodicy: the attempt to reconcile death and suffering with belief in a meaningful cosmos (a *nomos*: the order of things). Traditionally, theodicy comprised a body of knowledge that asked how evil can exist despite a truly universal, benevolent deity (Herzfeld 1992). Peter Berger, Berger and Kellner (1974: 166) define theodicy as 'any explanation of human events that bestows meaning upon the experiences of suffering and evil'. The term 'theodicy' was developed by Leibnez in his attempts to reconcile suffering, misfortune and death with belief in a just and benevolent deity (Simko 2012). Max Weber (1965) built on Leibnez's work to use the term in a sociological sense to 'describe interpretive vocabularies, religious or secular, that explain evil and suffering' (Simko 2012: 881).

Weber (1965) understood theodicy as a way of reifying belief despite one's lived experience of a flawed world. Weber posited that 'the social character of entire societies may be conditioned by repeated attempts to come to terms with "the experience of the irrationality of the world" as encountered in acute instances of human suffering' (Wilkinson 2013: 129). Building on Weber's largely religion-focused work on theodicy, Michael Herzfeld (1992: 7) argues that the goal of