

## **Partition at 75: Reflections on Migrant Memories in the British South Asian Diaspora**

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### **Introduction**

This article explores memories of the 1947 Partition of British India which circulate within the South Asian diaspora in the UK, their significance, and their entanglement with memories of other historical events which have affected the South Asian diasporic population 75 years on. 2022 marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Partition of British India, 50 years since Idi Amin's expulsion of the South Asian population from Uganda and of migration from East Africa in the wake of intensifying Africanisation politics, and the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Language Movement that led towards the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of which was celebrated just the year before. These are key moments in the shared history of South Asia and Britain, and both first hand and inherited memories of them linger in the present experiences of the South Asian diaspora. Drawing on interviews conducted with people of South Asian heritage in the UK, as part of the Migrant Memory and the Postcolonial Imagination research project (MMPI, Loughborough University<sup>1</sup>), this article discusses the entanglement of (often inherited) memories of these events in the diaspora, and the ways in which they contribute to notions of home and belonging, and to the positioning (Hall, 1990) of South Asian diasporic identities in the British context. This is the first joint analysis of South Asian diasporic memories and entangled narratives of colonial movements and postcolonial migration, and its timeliness is particularly significant as 2022 represented a unique moment of intersecting commemorations for the South Asian diaspora.

For the past five years, the MMPI project has been studying the circulation and communication of memories of Partition, migration, and wider processes of decolonisation within South Asian communities in the UK<sup>2</sup>. Since the project was launched, in October 2017, we have conducted over 200 interviews with people of South Asian heritage and have worked with several British Asian arts and community organisations in Leicestershire and London, with whom we have held numerous

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<sup>2</sup> The research received full ethical approval from Loughborough University.

(guided) conversations on our research themes. One of the themes which we have seen emerging consistently during our interviews and focus groups is the perception that, for members of the South Asian diaspora, boundaries between memories surrounding landmark events such as the Partition of British India, the Liberation War of Bangladesh and the 1972 migration from East Africa are not strongly delineated but are instead rather porous, interanimating one another as they are discussed and articulated in everyday contexts.

The South Asian diaspora is by no means homogenous: apart from differences in terms of language, gender, class, caste, and religion, it also encompasses people coming from various regions of the subcontinent, from India to the Maldives, Pakistan to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan (Sahoo and Sheffer, 2014: 7). In our research, we have worked primarily with people of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi heritage, therefore the term “South Asia” in this context will be used to refer specifically to these countries within the same area. Notwithstanding the heterogenous character of the South Asian diaspora, there are also important commonalities and overlaps in the histories and experiences of people of South Asian heritage in the UK, for example the shared past under British colonial rule, or the experience of postcolonial migration to Britain<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, critical historical moments such as the Partition of British India, migration to and from East Africa, and the Liberation War of Bangladesh, reverberated across the subcontinent and beyond, and their memories form parts of interconnected narratives of collective pasts. It is precisely the entanglement of these memories, and the ways in which their transmission and communication shape the construction of contemporary diasporic identity and concepts of community, belonging and ‘home’, that we investigate in this article.

The article is divided into four parts: in the first section, we offer an introduction to the literature on memory and diaspora, and provide our theoretical framework for the analysis of memory’s role in the positioning of South Asian diasporic identities. This will be followed by a section on the MMPI project and methodology, which paves the way for the analysis of our data. The third section of the article will focus on our research findings on memories of the 1947 Partition of British India and their connections with memories of the 1971 Liberation War and migration from East Africa. We will close our article with a reflection on migrant memories and dynamics of identity in the South Asian diaspora in the UK.

## **Memory and the South Asian diaspora**

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<sup>3</sup> While the British Sri Lankan population has shared histories of British colonialism and experience of postcolonial intercommunity conflict, we focus here on the intercommunity relations between Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani communities in the British diasporic space as they are distinct for those communities who directly experienced the Partition of India.

Memories of the past represent a key component of diasporic identities. Indeed, if memory forms the terrain upon which we are able to “form an awareness of selfhood (identity) both on the personal and on the collective level” (Assmann 2008, 211), memories in the diasporic context contribute to shaping a sense of origins, giving meaning to the experience of displacement. Research in the field of diaspora studies has, since its inception, identified memories of the homeland as the binding feature of diasporic groups. Early theorisations of diaspora such as the one offered by Safran, described diasporas as displaced communities united in their “collective memory, vision, or myth around their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievement” (1991, 83), to which (critically, in his formulation,) they were waiting to return. However, research in the field of cultural and postcolonial theory has re-assessed the relationship between diasporas and their homelands, observing how diasporic groups, rather than nurturing an “ideology of return” (Brah 1996, 180) more often engage in a “re-turn” to the country of origin which occurs “without actual repatriation” (Tölölyan 2007, 649). This re-turn as the turning towards the country of origin decoupled from a desire for resettlement<sup>4</sup>, represents an important conceptual shift because it points to a more dynamic relationship between diasporas and their homelands, one whereby diasporas come to be understood as social formations emerging at the intersection of “roots and routes” (Gilroy 1993, 33) rather than being engaged in a solipsistic dialogue with the ancestral homeland.

Gilroy’s famous metaphor also introduces the question of the “un-fixed” nature of the homeland itself. Stuart Hall too criticises the idea of diasporas as displaced communities whose identities rely on “some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return” (1990, 235), and he instead proposes that cultural identities in the diaspora “are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (225). Hall places the emphasis on the re-turn that diasporic subjects perform to connect with their past, and at the same time, by talking about “narratives” of the past, he proposes that there is no absolute, fixed past that people can re-turn to. Instead, he maintains that the past “is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (226). His observations are especially important when analysing the South Asian diasporic experience in the UK, as they allow for an understanding of identity produced in relation to narratives and memories of the past which are not necessarily identical for members of the diaspora – nor are diasporic subjects expected to relate to them in the same ways. Indeed, the South Asian diaspora is composed of people whose experiences in terms of migration and relocation varies greatly – if we think for example of the differences between and within generations, and of course of what Mishra calls “old” and “new” diasporas (2007), but also of the different experiences of people who moved

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<sup>4</sup> Mishra too argues that, as a general rule “diasporas do not return to their homeland (real or imagined)” (2007, 2).

before or after the Partition of 1947, before or after the Liberation War of Bangladesh, or again of those who came to the UK via East Africa.

Hall's reflections are particularly important because they bring to the fore the centrality of memory in the positioning of diasporic identities. Similar to Hall's observation that there is no factual past accessible to re-turn to, research in the field of memory studies observes that memory too should not be seen as a fixed, unchanging representation of past events, as the work of memory is in itself a creative process. This is not to say that memories are solely the product of imagination but, as Keightley and Pickering point out, "they are acted upon imaginatively" (2012, 5) as imagination is the process through which people make sense of the past – and this is particularly true in the case of post-memory (Hirsch 2008). Working on the relationship between memory and imagination, Keightley and Pickering call "mnemonic imagination [...] the ways in which we qualify, adapt, refine and reorder past experience, our own and that of others, into qualitatively new and ongoing understandings of identity and belonging" (2017: 168). In the analysis of memories and post-memories within the South Asian diaspora in the UK this concept highlights how the past is subjected to continuous acts of reinterpretation influenced by present circumstances and experiences. Indeed, for those members of the South Asian diaspora who did not experience migration, and who do not have first-hand experience of events such as the Partition of 1947, the Liberation War of Bangladesh, and expulsion and/or migration from East Africa of 1972, these are events that are largely dependent on the narratives, and the memories, of their elders, either articulated in social settings or in mediated popular discourse. The process of making these memories 'their own' by integrating them into meaningful life narratives requires the use of imagination, and allows these events to be made meaningful in relation to their own lived experience in the diaspora (Brah 1996). In this respect, Stock suggests that:

[Later generations] are heirs to diasporic memories that are told and retold, reappropriated and reinterpreted in light of the here and now. Throughout their lives, they construct their own diasporic narratives of home and belonging out of these memories, together with their own experiences (2010, 27).

As such, memory in the diaspora represents the thread that connects past and present, and which lays the basis for the formation of collective diasporic identities.

Researching South Asian memories in the diasporic context is all the more important because they make visible the legacy of colonialism in British society and highlight the intertwined nature of British and South Asian history which tends to be ignored in public narratives of the nation. As Alexander has

observed, within Europe, official narratives of the nation have, until very recently, maintained rigid boundaries so that “the history of imperial entanglements has remained imaginatively and temporally distanced from the metropolitan centres and confined ‘out there’ in the colonial territories themselves” (2013, 595). But as people moved from former colonial territories into the metropolitan centres of the empire, they brought with them memories of events such as the Partition of British India, the Liberation War of Bangladesh and migration from East Africa, all of which bear traces of memories of colonial India and of British imperialism, thus exposing the overlaps and disjunctures between spatially and temporally distant histories, and the persistent legacy of colonial and postcolonial connections.

The movement of multiple memories of empire between past and present, as well as between what were once a colonial power and its former colonies (Great Britain, British India, East Africa), points towards the multidirectionality of memory, “a dynamic in which multiple pasts jostle against each other in a heterogenous present and where communities of remembrance disperse and reconvene in new, non-organic forms” (Rothberg 2013, 372). The multidirectional character of memory acknowledges its plural and intersecting nature as well as its ability to cross national borders and, with that, to challenge assumptions of unitary, nationally bounded memories (De Cesari and Rigney 2014, 3-7) and exclusive cultural identities, drawing instead attention “to the dynamic transfer that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance” (Rothberg 2009, 11). Studying the ways in which events such as the Partition of 1947, the Liberation War of Bangladesh, and the migration from East Africa of 1972 are remembered in the diasporic context thus provides the opportunity to understand how these memories travel across space and time, how they are made sense of in light of each other as well as in relation present experiences, and how their overlaps and disjunctures impact on intercommunity relations, as well as on feelings of community, identity and belonging.

### **Migrant Memory and the Postcolonial Imagination**

This article is based on the thematic analysis of eleven interviews conducted as part of the MMPI research project. Launched in 2017, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Partition of British India, the project explores the circulation and communication of memories of the 1947 Partition of British India, migration, and wider processes of decolonisation within South Asian communities in Leicestershire and London. In particular, our study aims to understand how memory and processes of remembering affect social life in contemporary Britain and inform the negotiation of diasporic identities in terms of intercommunity relations, questions of identity, belonging and Britishness.

From a methodological perspective, the research employs classic ethnographic tools such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participatory observation, combined with a participatory arts approach. For five years we have collaborated with several arts and community groups based in London and in Leicestershire, with which we have co-designed different creative activities around, for example, poetry, food, photography, music, etc. These activities have allowed us to investigate (inherited) memories of the empire, Partition, decolonisation and migration, as we explored the ways in which cultural practices promote processes of remembering and reflections on questions of identity, community and belonging. The contexts of our participant observations, apart from attending community groups, have been cultural ceremonies and events organised and/or attended by members of the community groups we have been working with, such as the annual theatre festival A Season of Bangla Drama and the annual Boishakhi Mela in London, or Navratri in Loughborough. In 2020 we also conducted five weeks of fieldwork in Bangladesh and India<sup>5</sup>, which involved interviewing relatives and friends of our research participants in the UK to explore memories of the empire, Partition, and migration from the points of view of those who had remained in South Asia<sup>6</sup>. By the end of our data collection period, we had conducted 204 interviews, 71 group discussions, 15 short video interviews and 16 short one-to-one interviews. Our analytical approach has been to use NVivo software to support thematic analysis based on an iterative process of inductive coding. Codes were developed collectively by the project team through the collaborative close reading of a subsample of transcripts (15), and then the remainder have been coded by the project team, with periodic collaborative coding undertaken to ensure consistency between coders.

While the majority of our research participants has a direct history of family migration from the subcontinent to the UK, many of our interviewees had also come from, or their family had come from, East Africa. We have observed a tendency to frame the 1947 Partition of British India not as an isolated event but as a part of a broader ecology of events taking place within South Asia and diasporic locations, as memories of Partition were often discussed in relation to memories of other events such as the Liberation War of Bangladesh and the 1972 migration from East Africa. It is on the basis of these findings that we have decided to explore the dynamics of these entanglements and their impact on questions of identity. The interview sample used in this article has been selected on the basis that these interviewees most clearly exemplify the particular dynamics that we have found across the rest of data. The sample comprises eleven interviews conducted with people of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and

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<sup>5</sup> The research was meant to continue in Pakistan, but unfortunately the global outbreak of covid-19 meant that we had to interrupt our fieldwork.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of the MMPI overall methodology see Hornabrook, Clini and Keightley 2021. See also Hornabrook, Clini and Keightley, forthcoming 2023, for the analysis of the movement of memories of the 1947 Partition between East and West Bengal and the UK.

Indian heritage. Of these eleven participants, five are women and six are men, and they are aged between the early 20s and early 80s (only one of them being alive at the time of Partition). Moreover, four of these research participants had direct experience of living in East Africa for some time before moving to the UK, reflecting the composition of our broader cohort of research participants.

### **Partition memories**

Research conducted on Partition memories in the subcontinent emphasises its long-lasting legacy within culture and society in South Asia (Butalia 1998; Pandey 2001; Zamindar 2007), but the “long shadow of Partition” (Butalia 2015) extends well beyond the subcontinent, reaching diasporic communities which are both spatially and temporally distant from the events of 1947 (Ghosh 2007, xxviii). In our research, we have found that, even when invested with different meanings by members of the South Asian community – depending on the geographical area they come from and the impact it had on their families – Partition still occupies an important place within the imagination of the South Asian diaspora<sup>7</sup>. A case in point is the comment offered by Mr Ajeet, a retired engineer who was born in Punjab and moved to Kenya with his family at the age of three, before moving to the UK as a sixteen-year-old boy, in the mid-60s. As we introduced the topic of Partition, Mr Ajeet was quick to specify that he did not have many inherited memories of 1947, because apart from an uncle who used to work in western Punjab but who managed “to get out” before 1947, his family was not directly affected by Partition, as all of his family was safely based in eastern Punjab or in East Africa. And yet, as our conversation continued, he later on asserted:

I think it’s something that is imprinted on our minds because of the horrors of that, nobody can forget. And even though as I say I wasn’t involved in it, my family wasn’t involved in it, but it has a place in our psyche.

Mr Ajeet’s reflections serve as a useful point of departure for our analysis, not only because they speak of the persistent relevance of Partition for the South Asian diaspora, but because Mr Ajeet’s reference to Partition remaining “imprinted” in the minds of people of South Asian heritage is reminiscent of Hirsch’s notion of postmemory, which, in her own words:

Describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these

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<sup>7</sup> Kavita Daiya also comments on the “increased relevance” of Partition in South Asian diasporic public spheres, seen in the considerable growth of transnational media history projects such as the 1947 Partition Archive as well as in the “proliferation of literary and cinematic production” around Partition (2020, 7).

experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right (2008, 106-107).

In this way, memories of Partition are not the neatly formed narratives we conventionally understand memories to be – discrete vignettes of past experience handed on between generations – but are instead deeply embedded fragments and echoes of past separation that reverberate in the contemporary experiences as a lens through which the relationships between past and present is filtered. **These reverberations can range from being knowable elements of a narratable past to operating as disruptive hallmarks of unreconciled trauma (Keightley and Pickering 2013).**

As the majority of our interviewees was born after the 1947 Partition of British India and have learnt about Partition from behaviours and stories transmitted within the family, literature, or popular culture, the notion of postmemory is particularly useful to understand how Partition memories intervene in the shaping of South Asian diasporic identities. Just like Mr Ajeet, other research participants referred to a lack of family memories on Partition (and this is especially true for younger participants of Bangladeshi heritage), but for many, even if it is now in a distant past or it did not immediately affect their families, Partition remained a central reference point in their understanding of the past because of its connection with later events such as the Liberation War of Bangladesh or the movement from East Africa, as we will discuss later<sup>8</sup>.

Not unexpectedly, one of the themes that we have seen emerging consistently in our participants' engagement with memories of Partition (or lack thereof), is that of displacement and loss. This is a theme that was discussed in the broadest terms, encompassing economic loss – with specific reference to the struggle that families had to endure by leaving their possessions behind and having to start a new life from scratch – but also loss of relationships. In this respect, participants have specifically referenced the loss of family members and/or neighbours, but also the loss of a sense of community, both literally as a consequence of migration, and also metaphorically, in terms of loss of a (idealised) broad and largely peaceful inter-religious community. Debashree for example, who moved with her family from Sylhet to the UK as a child just five years before Bangladesh won its independence, talked about Partition as the trigger for the movement of Hindus from East to West

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, many British Indian Sikh interviewees commented on relationship between Partition and the anti-Sikh violence which erupted in northern India in 1984 after the operation Bluestar and the subsequent murder of Indira Gandhi. Indeed, in the opening chapter of *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia reflects on the connection between the two as she observes that “it took the events of 1984 to make me understand how ever-present Partition was in our lives, too, to recognize that it could not so easily be put away inside the covers of history books” (1998, 4). In this article, however, we will not discuss the overlaps between 1984 and 1947, as we aim to focus on the unique moment of intersecting commemorations of Partition, Bangladesh independence, and the expulsion of South Asians from Uganda.



Bengal. Speaking about her own family, she said that it started to split “from Partition onwards”, meaning that the first family members who left East Bengal did so at the time of Partition while her parents decided to stay put, but then the movement of people continued with the Liberation War of Bangladesh, when her husband’s family, for example, moved to Kolkata. As she explained:

I’m from the north-west in Sylhet district, which is very close to the Indian border. When the lines were drawn, it was very arbitrary because that district could have gone either way. It could have really gone either way and when people realised they [Hindus] would fall into a minority, many people moved. You know, families were split from then and then again a mass exodus in ’71 but in between ’47 and ’71, people were gradually, who could, went. A lot of people went.

In her own account, Partition led not only to the loss of family members but impacted the whole Hindu community of East Bengal as its members found themselves scattered after having left their homeland: “It’s a difficult one for Bangladeshi Hindus – she explained – because they feel as though they don’t belong anywhere”.

Debashree’s account of the loss suffered by the Hindu community in East Pakistan (later on Bangladesh) echoes Intisar’s reflections on the impact of Partition on the Muslim community in India. Intisar, a retired education professional who moved from Delhi to London in in the 1980s, shared with us his inherited memories of Partition when he explained:

I learnt from my father that my grandfather was not a Muslim [League], he was from the Congress, so he was against Pakistan partition. But he didn’t go, and my father didn’t go. But my father’s sister who was married at that time, her husband decided to go for better.

Similar to Debashree’s family’s experience in East Bengal, Intisar’s family in Lucknow was divided as his father’s sister, along with other family members, he explained, had opted to move to Pakistan. This decision, Intisar added, was not unique, as most Muslim families had “somebody” who had crossed the border. Just like for Debashree, for Intisar the loss produced by Partition is not only a family matter, but it is rather a collective loss that involves the whole Muslim community, as he shared that for him “the biggest loss” had been suffered by Indian Muslims, who “had suffered loss because of Partition”.

In both instances, the family memories of Partition that participants have shared with us frame Partition in terms of personal as well as collective loss. In a similar vein Bahadur, a British Pakistani participant whose father was only a ten-year-old child in 1947, discussed the memories of Partition inherited by his father in terms of loss, meaning the loss of a home(land), just like in Debashree’s case, and also of friendships and, in a way, roots. Talking us through his father’s experiences of being forced

to leave a land he loved (he was a fierce opponent to the division and always refused to be called Pakistani, even after acquiring citizenship), Bahadur shared with us:

I felt sad for my dad because I could understand what it means to lose something you treasured so much, but at the same time growing up here, you carry all this baggage of inherited loss. There's a book called *The Inheritance of Loss* and you carry the suffering of your parents, even if it's subconscious [...] I inherited a loss. I inherited transition. I inherited migration – the history of migration. We are just another leg of migration. They chose to come to the UK for all of those opportunities that gave them. So, my sense of foundation is no less strong or weak than my own parents.

Bahadur's words perfectly epitomise the feelings of loss that we have seen being expressed by many of our participants as they discussed the movements caused by Partition. But as families, friends and neighbours were left behind so were, in many cases, family fortunes, and with them the status they held within the community they left. In this respect, Bahadur explained that the loss of material possessions was a recurrent theme in his childhood. As he explained:

My dad is a poor aristocrat, that classic story [...]. One of the main themes of my upbringing is his rejection of possession, ownership, because he sees it as so transient and so fleeting [...] We'll always compare what you have to what they have and you're made to feel guilty almost. Oh my god, I feel so guilty that I have running water and a roof over my head that doesn't leak.

By expressing the feeling of loss that he experiences as a consequence of having inherited his father's memories of migration triggered by Partition, Bahadur's comments points to the work of imagination at play in his relation to the memories he inherited from his father, showing how "postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 2008, 107).

Imagination, projection and creation are at play also in the ways in which our research participants engage with another theme that we have seen emerging consistently in the analysis of our data, and which is inevitably linked to displacement and loss, and that is the theme of hostility and violence between communities. In fact, for all of our participants, even those who had not inherited any family memories of the events but had learned about Partition in school or from books or other media, death and violence represented the corollary of the journey. Ayesha for example, a British Pakistani woman in her late 20s, told us that her family used to talk very little about Partition, but what she heard was that in Amritsar, where her mother's family used to live before moving to Lahore, Sikhs and Muslims lived together as a peaceful community, until "neighbours started changing and there was a lot of

killing”, and the family decided to leave. The violence that accompanied Partition had a very strong impact on Ayesha’s grandfather, as she observed:

I think that’s probably why he is a bit messed up like that. He was quite angry, [a] very, very stern man. He’s probably seen a lot of bloodshed. I heard a few stories here and there, like he had to hide under some bodies and people thought he was dead, because his sisters all moved to Lahore before he had.

The memory of these experiences, according to Ayesha, never left her grandfather and kept conditioning his relationships with India until his death, as in fact he kept referring to the country as “the enemy”. While she did not share her grandfather’s resentment towards India, her remarks on his anger speak of her attempt to understand him and enter in a relationship with him. Indeed, as Keightley and Pickering observe, “imagining the painful pasts of others is the precondition for empathy, and empathy is itself the precondition for sharing such pasts” (2012, 178).

Memories of violence and intercommunal animosity were also shared by Gurinder, a woman originally from Western Punjab who was only six years old at the time of Partition, and who moved to Kenya before relocating to London around 1965. Speaking of the impact of Partition on intercommunity relations, Gurinder recalled the uncertainty that accompanied her family’s decision to leave their village to cross the border into India, as they heard of the violence taking place in other cities and villages. Initially, she shared, their reaction to these rumours were approached in disbelief, considering that the relationships between Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus within her community had always been very “loving”. And yet, she told us, they decided to leave as they realised that the danger was real, and even if she did not recall witnessing any act of violence, she told us that she still has “visions” of the blood being washed away by the rain. This violence, she maintained, was a consequence of the divide created by Partition:

They became great enemies, the Pakistanis and Indians, that’s how much the conflict had been created. Pakistan sent a train with dead bodies for those Indians living on that part of the region, they sent a train full of dead bodies. And then India reacted by sending two trains with dead bodies.

Gurinder’s comment is particularly relevant because by highlighting the divide between communities she also brings up the theme of ghost trains carrying dead bodies across borders. Even though she went on to explain that she had not seen any of these trains herself, this is a recurrent image in narratives of Partition, and one which has become central to the imagination of many people in South Asia and the diaspora, having been transmitted across generations and described in the

literature on Partition, and in the media. In this respect, Intisar told us in fact that he had no idea about the violence of Partition until, at the age of 14, he came across Khushwant Singh's book, *Train to Pakistan* (1956), and learned about "the horrible stories" that characterised the Partition of India.

Even though violence is a prominent theme in memories of Partition, in many of the interviews we conducted tales of communal violence were often countered by memories of acts of kindness between communities: Gurinder explained to us how her family, once in Amritsar, saved a Muslim family from the violence of militant Sikhs who were raiding Muslim households, while Bahadur told us that his father's family received support by a Sikh family, without which they would not have made it to Pakistan. These accounts were important for our research participants because they highlighted a continuity with the past, despite the rupture of Partition: talking about the Muslim family that her own family hid and saved in Amritsar, Gurinder for example told us that they did so because they "still had very much love for our Muslim family and we were helping them to escape from that terror".

In the narratives of (inherited) memories of Partition, themes of communal violence and communal animosity are thus strongly connected to the sense of having lost harmonious intercommunity relations. However, while most of our participants expressed regret at the way in which Partition happened, indeed many expressed regrets at Partition itself, moving on from Partition is not an easy task. Partition memories evoke a complex web of emotions, nightmares and aspirations which are all but straightforward, and their legacy, in Pandey's words, is "an extraordinary love-hate relationship" between former neighbours who, despite resenting one another, still feel that "this was a partition of siblings that should never have occurred" (2001:2). The question of the relationship between members of different South Asian communities after Partition in the diasporic space needs to take into consideration also the ways in which memories of the 1947 Partition of British India intersect with memories of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, the 1972 expulsion from Uganda and the associated movement from East Africa. It is to these entanglements that we will turn to in the next section.

### **Entangled memories**

Memories of the Partition of British India do not travel in isolation. As we have argued elsewhere (2023), in the context of South Asia the word Partition, while most often used to reference the events of 1947, is also used to describe the split between Bangladesh and Pakistan in 1971. When asked about Partition Sunil, a British Indian man in his mid-50s whose family had moved to Kolkata from East Bengal after Partition, replied: "you may remember some of us have had two partitions in our lives, 1947 and 1971 when Bangladesh became independent. A lot of our very close relatives were killed in that war".

Sunil's remark is not uncommon: many of our interviewees whose families had moved from Bengal, and especially from Bangladesh, tended to talk about the Liberation War of Bangladesh in terms of Partition, and their (inherited) memories of 1971 were often discussed alongside memories of the Partition of 1947. This is mostly due to the upheaval caused by the war, and the scale of the violence that, in a similar way to Partition, lacerated communities and decimated families. Sunil, whose family's house had become a refuge for many people escaping East Bengal during the war, told us how, in his mind, the violence of 1971 felt rawer compared to 1947: "I think the '47 partition probably – I mean, maybe, the brutality of it I don't remember much apart from the stories I've heard, but the '71 is still very vivid in my memory". In a similar vein to the ways in which stories of violence during Partition were accompanied by tales of intercommunity support, narratives of the 1971 war were also at times, and to a decisively smaller degree, followed by similar stories. Even though the Liberation War of Bangladesh was not based on religion, the Hindu minority in East Pakistan had in fact become a target and Sunil shared with us that one of his uncles, who was still living in Chittagong in 1971, was saved by a Muslim family which "was very close" to their family. As he explained: "when the so-called Pakistan army was basically literally searching from one house to the other, my uncle and his family hid in one of these Muslim households for a few days. Otherwise, they would have not been able to [survive]". Similarly, Debashree recalled how her husband, who in 1971 was a maths teacher in Sylhet, was saved by a Muslim neighbour who alerted him that the Pakistani army was approaching: "one of his Muslim neighbours came and said: 'Pakistani army are very close, I think you should go' [...] he went back when it was all over". Again, tales on intercommunity support appeared to be very important for our research participants not so much because of their historical value, but especially because they marked a continuity with an idealised past which they have access to thanks to family memories. In this respect Fatima, a British Bangladeshi woman in her mid-40s, talked fondly about her grandfather's relationships with people from different religious backgrounds and recalled: "my grandfather, he used to work in a cotton mill, he was the manager, so he had Hindu workers. I remember when I was four or five years old going to the worship, which is called Puja, with him". Her reflections are important because they marked a nostalgia for a past marked by inter-communal harmony which, even though she had some experience with as a child, she was able to access in the most part through her grandfather's memory, as she maintained that intercommunity relations are not as harmonious anymore in Bangladesh.

Another important entanglement between the 1947 Partition and the Liberation War of Bangladesh that many of our respondents pointed out was their cause-effect relationship. Fatima for example, a ~~British Bangladeshi woman in her mid-40s~~, explained how the Liberation War of Bangladesh was a direct consequence of Partition:

When partition happened in forty-seven, as you know that it was based on religion not ethnicity and culture. If it were ethnicity and culture then Bengal would have been together now. [...] Hindu Muslim together. The language like the '52 language movement wouldn't have taken place. It has happened because in nineteen forty-eight Jinnah said Urdu shall be the straight language. [...] And it's not right for someone to impose language on me. That suddenly someone comes and says 'okay you can't speak in this language'. [...] So snatching language is snatching a part, a big part of you. I mean whether anyone agrees or not, whether it's a spoken or written word it's like taking a part of you. So, that has happened. So, if partition didn't happen that wouldn't have happened. But that has happened so that's why we got the nineteen fifty-two language movement.

Fatima's comment is relevant not only because it highlights the continuity between 1947 and 1971, but also because it challenges the idea of religion as the ultimate marker of national identity. The emergence of the language movement was the first and most visible crack in the nation-building project of Pakistan, as "language quickly became a primary terrain for struggle against West Pakistani domination and exploitation" (Alexander et al. 2016, 194). This is a point shared by Debashree who, while describing the migration of the Hindu community from Bangladesh as the result of the 1947 Partition that turned Hindus into a minority in East Pakistan, observed that Hindus "would not have moved", if Partition had not happened, and mentioned that "the ethnicity [between Hindus and Muslims] is the same". Their observations highlight a shared sense of "Bengaliness" that, we have found in the research, transcends national and religious borders (see Hornabrook, Clini and Keightley, forthcoming 2023) and which is projected against past and current divisions within the community.

It should be also noted that the entanglement of memories of 1971 and 1947 does not only concern people whose families come originally from Bengal. During our interview with Intisar, for example, he was quick to bring into the conversation the Liberation War of Bangladesh when asked about Partition. The connection he made between 1971 and 1947 was based on the impact that the war – which in India and Pakistan was called "Indo-Pakistan War" – had on intercommunity relations in India. He told us how he could vividly remember Muslim students, in his hometown in Lucknow, being taunted in school because, in virtue of their religion, they were seen as inevitably siding with Pakistan and he explained how "the creation of Bangladesh brought more horrible stories", in addition to those of Partition. The "torment" he said he felt at the time, made memories of 1971 more prominent for him, compared to memories of 1947, as he said that "1971 war was the main – I think to my life certainly, when we think what the partition has damaged, certainly to Indian Muslims". Intisar's comment was echoed by Ashraf, a British Indian man in his 40s who, reflecting on the legacy of Partition on intercommunity relations in the UK, in terms of current divisions, also evoked 1971: "I think the

partition, historically, had an impact, then obviously the partition between West and East Pakistan with the Bangladeshi issue definitely has played [a role]”. Intisar’s and Ashraf’s comments are important because they point to the multidirectionality of memory, as they highlight the fact that “memories are not owned by groups” and instead “what looks like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign or distant” (Rothberg 2009, 5).

But if 1971 is often discussed in conjunction with Partition, memories of East Africa too are mentioned in relation to Partition. Again, just like in the case of the Liberation War, it is the unrest of migration from East Africa following Idi Amin’s expulsion of South Asians from Uganda in 1972, the Zanzibar revolution of 1964, and, more generally, Africanisation politics, that participants tended to mention as a first thing, when asked about Partition. Anita, a young woman in her early 20s who was born and raised in Kenya before moving to Leicester for her studies, said that in her own family they did not really talk much about the “India/Pakistan Partition” (she had to double check that was what we were referring to), because that was a distant memory and it did not affect her family as much as Idi Amin’s expulsion from Uganda. Asked about any story from Partition she might have heard from family members, she replied: “not India/Pakistan, no, because I think my family was perhaps going through the whole East African thing with Idi Amin that had happened, so they probably weren’t as impacted”. Similarly, Nirav, who was born in Zanzibar and then moved to India as a consequence of the 1964 revolution, before moving again with his family to Kenya and then finally the UK, spoke of 1972 as another partition. Talking about a Muslim friend whose family had to cross the border to Pakistan, before deciding to move to Uganda, he explained:

So there was two partition in their lives they saw. So one was that when they were young, he was very young at that time, this 1948 [...] and then also they all migrated to Africa, and then 1972 again, Uganda expelled them, and they all came here [the UK].

Even in this case, the symbolic association of the 1947 Partition with the events of 1972 was not uncommon. Avtar Brah too, talking about the ways in which her family experienced the expulsion from Uganda, wrote that she was sent to stay with family in Tanzania, because her parents “had memories of the carnage at the time of Indian independence from Britain in 1947” (2017, 164).

Aside from comparing the unrest that followed expulsion with the turmoil of Partition, when asked about Partition and its legacy, our participants who had come from East Africa, or whose families had migrated to the UK from there, were particularly keen to emphasise the peaceful coexistence of different religious communities in the East African context, as opposed to the divisions that plagued

India at the time of Partition – and for some the UK too. Sharing his memories of growing up in Kenya, Mr Ajeet explained:

There was a very much settled community in the whole of East Africa, not least Kenya. So really it was just very ordinary. I think that obviously all the religions were there, you know, religions for the Indian subcontinent, and it was very – I would say it was a very amicable place. There wasn't the kind of boundaries that we find in this country with different religions, that wasn't the case when we were in Kenya, people were very free and easy. People mingled with each other, so it was like that. But that could be because people came from the Indian subcontinent soon after '47, so I think that they kept those attitudes with them. But whereas in England or in Britain things are much more delineated and that's what makes it difficult.

Mr Ajeet's reflections are paradigmatic of our respondents' perception of life in East Africa. Talking about the British Asian community he found in Leicester when he moved there with his family, Ashraf for example said that he could still remember being able to tell straight away whether people had arrived directly from India or via East Africa:

So, a lot of the people in Leicester themselves, the Hindus and the Sikhs, were via Africa. So growing up, the majority of my friends, I would say personally, were Muslims, or were of different faith, Hindus – well, my best friends were always Hindus – and Sikhs, and we were pretty close, very close. We had that sense of community. We were in a foreign land and we didn't really see each other as different religions then. [...] I think from India, they probably had a slightly different or a longer period of adaptation because, to them, they had never mixed with anybody else, apart from – forget their own religion, just their own family, just the extended family was their own community.

Even if projected against the state of the British Asian community by these respondents, the depiction of idyllic relationships between communities that we see yet again emerging with reference to a place which is both temporally and spatially distant, speak of a longing for inter-communal harmony that cut across the British Asian community.

### **Memories and diasporic identities**

As we have seen in the previous sections, memories of the 1947 Partition of India are deeply entangled with memories of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, as well as with memories of the movement from East Africa and relocation to Britain. Writing about memory and the Caribbean diaspora, Chamberlain argues that diasporic memory is driven by “the narrative of slavery – and its denial and



silencing”, which forms the basis of the stories that families transmit from one generation to the next, foundational narratives which, while not directly about slavery, “could *only* be told as a result of the particular history of slavery and its attendant diaspora” (2009, 185). In a similar vein, Partition represents the historical experience that, to different degrees, is shared by members of the postcolonial South Asian diaspora, regardless of their regional, national or religious identities, and whose traces emerge in memories of critical historical moments such as the Liberation War of Bangladesh and migration from East Africa. Importantly, as we have seen, the entanglement between these memories is not just the consequence of a temporal sequence of events, or of a cause-effect chain, but it is also the expression of the multidirectional character of memory, which, as Rothberg observes, “is not the exclusive property of particular groups but rather emerges in a dynamic process of dialogue, contestation, and exchange that renders both memories and groups hybrid, open ended, and subject to renegotiation” (2014, 126).

His observations are specifically relevant to understand the role of these entangled memories in the positioning of a diasporic identity in the British context. As we have previously mentioned, memories of the past play a critical role in the negotiation of diasporic identities, but for the South Asian diaspora, the past includes contested memories of conflict and violence between its members, to which they relate differently depending on their and their own families’ experiences. When asked about the legacy of Partition memories and their impact on inter-community relations, our respondents offered us a mixed set of responses. While none of them openly admitted being prejudiced against other national and/or religious groups, some of them singled out members of other groups as promoting division and expressing personal prejudices through indirect generalisations and anecdotes. Mr Ajeet for example told us that Partition still divides the British Asian community, and, while he pointed out to us that he did not have personal negative feelings towards them, he nevertheless singled out “the Pakistanis” as the troublemakers. Debashree on the other hand, was adamant that relationships between British Asians are very cordial, but with due exceptions:

I look back on things, but there is an identity of British Asian-ness. [...] between the Bengalis, the Indians, the Gujaratis, the Pakistanis, the Sikhs, there is, but at the end of the day if I walk down the street in Loughborough, if I see another Asian face, I will say hello or they will look up and say hello, unless it’s mainly Muslim men because they don’t believe they should look into a woman’s face, which annoys me. That’s a different thing altogether. The more enlightened, they will say hello and pass the time of day, which is a real shame because they’re missing out on my smile.

Debashree's playful comment is to be contextualised within a broader discourse on religious extremism which, she said, did not spare any community, even though she in effect singled out Muslim men as the exception within the South Asian diaspora. Intisar too mentioned the rise of religious extremism as detrimental for inter-community relations, and his reference in this case was the rise of Hindutva in India, which according to him is the consequence of the divisions exacerbated by Partition, whose impact extends beyond the subcontinent and reaches the diaspora. He also mentioned national identity as a barrier, as he spoke of the divisions between Pakistani Muslims and Indian Muslims within the community. Concerned about the rise of Hindu extremism, which he too sees as the legacy of Partition, Ashraf offered us a practical example of Partition's long-lasting legacy:

At the last election in Leicester, there was a clear campaign not to vote for the East Labour candidate because of her— I mean, I've still got the leaflets, etc, because a vote for her was a vote for Pakistan. A vote for her was a vote for Muslims. So that partition narrative, after seventy-five years or whatever, is still there.

If some participants shared with us examples of instances of divisions which, they say, are a direct legacy of the division created by the 1947 Partition, some others, and in particular the younger ones (in their 20s), spoke of more positive relationships between members of different communities, mentioning in particular the positive role of higher education in facilitating encounters between communities, and the possibility of meeting people from other religious and/or national groups at University. Even Intisar emphasised the important role played by education in bridging the divide between communities, as he said that "education, education, education can solve the problem". He also conceded that for the younger generations the situation is changing, and when talking about relationships between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, he observed:

There is a little bit of that [animosity], but [...] – again, it depends on the generation, if you are old generation, you think a different way. But the new generation they don't. I have seen Sikh girls or men marrying to Muslim girl or boy. So there is very different – happy living, new generation is doing.

The fact that members of the South Asian diasporic community relate differently to memories of the past is not surprising. As Werbner in fact reminds us:

Diasporic groups are characterised by multiple discourses, internal dissent, and competition for members between numerous sectarian, gendered or political groups, all identifying themselves with the same diaspora. The question of who owns diaspora and its foundational myths – the Holocaust, Zionism, the Partition of India, Pakistani Independence, the rise of the Prophet of

Islam – is a highly contested one. What is subsumed under a single identity are a multiplicity of opinions, ‘traditions’, subcultures, lifestyles or, to use Avtar Brah’s apt terminology, modalities of existence (Brah 1996)” (2002,123).

Within this multiplicity of modalities of existence lie memories of Partition, which continue to play a constitutive role in the positioning of diasporic identities (Daiya 2020). In particular, what we have seen is that our interviewees strategically mobilise memories of Partition, the Liberation War and the expulsion from Uganda to negotiate a South Asian diasporic identity and memories of inter-community relations in the British context.

While our respondents had different views on the impact of Partition memories on the British Asian community, the majority of them had a clear idea of the origins of the division between people of South Asian heritage, and they all pointed to colonialism. Gurinder, the only interviewee in this sample who was alive at the time of Partition, told us explicitly that Partition itself was a consequence of British imperial politics: “we married into families, Muslims married into our family – she said – we were like one happy community. We had no barriers. [...] And the British came and they put that division [...] they lit a fire and then they jumped over the fence”. Similarly, Fatima mentioned that it was British imperial politics that sown the seed of division, as they used religion “to manipulate” people. Speculating about what would have happened if the British had decided to cast a vote, a referendum on Partition, Mr Ajeet commented that “it would have been interesting to see what the outcome would have been. I can tell you that the people would have told them to get lost, you know, we don’t want to separate”.

These references to imperial politics as the key force behind Partition are particularly relevant because putting imperial politics at the centre of the division contributes to relieving the pressure between communities. It is not a coincidence that our research into memories of violent events such as the Partition of British India, the Liberation War of Bangladesh and the movement from East Africa, has seen many references to inter-religious and/or inter-national support across the South Asian community. Indeed, as Rajmohan Gandhi and Usha Gandhi suggest, these stories have a very strong healing potential (2009). Writing about the idealised image of the pre-Partition village as the “multi-ethnic, multi-religious place”, Ashis Nandy wrote that “resorting to an idyllic past” represents “a way to relocate people’s journeys through violence in a universe of memory that is less hate-filled, less buffeted by rage and dreams of revenge” (1999, 323), a way to cope with the unspeakable violence of 1947. But inherited memories of inter-communal harmony are deeply significant in relation to the ways in which people imagine South Asia and imagine themselves as British South Asians too. The projection of an idyllic past based on inherited memories is perhaps best rendered by Bahadur who,

when talking about his father's experiences in pre-Partition Punjab he reflects that it was almost "magical":

They were very comfortable, and they were also very comfortable being wrapped up in the other religions and celebrating one another's backgrounds and having this immensely syncretic pluralist view of the universe, which must have been magical.

Bahadur's use of the word "magical" to emphasise intercommunal harmony is significant not only as a reference to the past, but as a possible way of engaging with the present. Indeed, as Keightley observes, the past can be "a resource in the service of progressive aims" (Keightley 2008, 178), and it can be mobilised to imagine a community free of conflict, not only in the diaspora, but in the subcontinent too. In this respect, Rothberg maintains that "memory's anachronistic quality – its bringing together of the then, here and there – is actually a source of powerful creativity, its ability to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones" (2009, 5).

The entanglement of memories of 1947, 1971 and 1972 exemplifies the dynamic nature of the South Asian diaspora, and the "fluidity and plurality of Hindu-Sikhs-Muslims relationships" (Khan 2017, xxv). But especially, if "memory and practices of memorialisation mobilize ideas of an imagined shared past as a way of staking claims in the present and as a basis for future belonging" (Alexander 2013, 595), memories of communal harmony are mobilised in particular to counter present-day disharmony and to imagine new possibilities of peaceful coexistence in the present and in the future.

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