

‘A certain terror’: Corporeality and Religion in Narratives of the 1947 India/Pakistan Partition

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This article will take as its case study the 1947 India/Pakistan partition, and is based on a large oral history project, which took place over the last five years. In this article, I focus on selected excerpts from some of my interviews, examining the ways in which people describe religious belief, practice, prejudice and violence as corporeal experiences, with markers of religiosity often inscribed on the body. I examine how the corporeality of religious violence was not an aberration from everyday religious practices, but in effect an extension of religion as an embodied entity. In turn, I will examine how these embodied practices are reflected in the actual oral history interview itself. I will make a case for the importance of studying oral history as an embodied methodology, and the need to concentrate not just on the verbal interactions between interviewee and interviewer, but also on the meeting of the two bodies and the communication that occurs, or fails to occur between these two bodies.

Partition: A Corporeal History

Of the entire body of literary representations of the 1947 India/Pakistan partition, few examples are as iconic as the vignettes, often only a few lines long, written by Urdu short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto. Here is one of the more famous, “Mishtake,” which describes in a characteristic visceral manner, the violation of one body by another:

Ripping the belly cleanly, the knife moved in a straight line down the midriff, in the process slashing the cord, which held the man’s pyjamas in place.

The one with the knife took one look and exclaimed regretfully, “Tut tut tut! ... Mishtake”¹

The issue, upon which the man’s life is dependent is the presence or absence of the mark of circumcision – the source of what Deepak Mehta has described as “the intimate violence [which is] so characteristic of Hindu-Muslim relations in

¹ Saadat Hasan Manto, *Bitter Fruit*, translated and Edited by Khalid Hasan (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008), 409.

the Subcontinent.”² The two bodies mentioned in Manto’s sketch, the one who wields the knife and the one who is violated by it, are similarly marked in at least one way: either they are both circumcised or they are both not, and it is a sign of Manto’s literary genius that the reader is never told which it is.

The importance of being (or not being) circumcised can be seen in the oral history of partition as well. Dheer,³ a Punjabi Hindu who today lives in Kolkata, West Bengal, echoes Manto’s writing when describing his journey from Lahore to Amritsar in 1947. Like Manto’s anonymous protagonist, Dheer’s journey revealed to him the crucial importance of being (or not being) circumcised:

There were many difficulties on the way. At Ambala station, they called us towards them. “Come here, take off your trousers, clothes. Show us if you are Hindu or Muslim.” This kind of checking happened.⁴

As a Hindu, Dheer presumably was not circumcised, and therefore survived. His story proves to be an example of what Mehta has identified as the importance of the act of circumcision:

Circumcision is realized in bodies and inscribed on them. This truism becomes part of a powerful literary imagination once the circumcised body of the Muslim male is located in violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary India.⁵

Mehta’s point applies equally well to the horrific violence that engulfed what is today Bangladesh, India and Pakistan in 1947. Very few events in the twentieth century have had as large-scale an impact on life in the Indian subcontinent as the partition of 1947, which led to the formation of two states – India and Pakistan, what Meenakshi Mukherjee has called “dissimilar,” but “conjoined twins, unable to move away or move ahead.”⁶

In 1947, as British rule over the Indian subcontinent came to an end, the land and its people were divided into two new states, broadly along religious lines. Punjab in the West and Bengal in the East were divided in two. West

² Deepak Mehta, “Circumcision, Body, Masculinity: The Ritual Wound and Collective Violence,” in *Violence and Subjectivity*, Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele and Pamela Reynolds, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 79.

³ Male, Hindu, Punjabi, b.1916 in West Punjab, undivided India.

⁴ Interview with author, originally in Hindi, Kolkata, West Bengal, India, 11 December 2013.

⁵ Deepak Mehta, “Circumcision, Body, Masculinity” in *Violence and Subjectivity*, Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele and Pamela Reynolds, eds. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000), 79.

⁶ Meenakshi Mukherjee, “Dissimilar Twins: Residue of 1947 in the Twenty-First Century,” *Social Semiotics* 19:4 (2009): 450.

Punjab, along with Sindh, Baluchistan, North-West Frontier Province, together with East Bengal, formed the new state of Pakistan with a majority Muslim population. This was a state of two halves, separated by hundreds of miles of India, which had a Hindu majority. While the apparent symmetry of a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India can be destabilised in many ways – both States were officially secular on independence, and India remains so – there also remains a hegemonic perception of the binary identities of the two people in national-religious terms. In 1971, East and West Pakistan divided again, leading to the independence of Bangladesh, further complicating the nature of religious and national identities in the Indian subcontinent.

No single event in the modern history of the Indian subcontinent has had as significant an impact on the everyday life of the various south-Asian communities in the region and around the world as decolonisation and partition. In part this significance comes from the unprecedented levels of violence, certainly in recent south Asian history, which accompanied the act of partition. Inevitably, perhaps, estimates of actual numbers of casualties remain controversial. The most conservative figure of the number of deaths was that suggested by the eyewitness account of British administrator Penderel Moon who, in 1961, wrote that he believed only about 200,000 people were killed in the Punjab.⁷ At the other end of the scale, Kavita Daiya is one of a number of south Asian scholars who has put the figure at “at least two million.”⁸ Ian Talbot has argued that the number “is conventionally reckoned at around 1,000,000,”⁹ though Gyanendra Pandey has questioned the basis for this acceptance on the grounds that “it appears something of a median.”¹⁰ In short, the exact number will probably be never known. What is generally accepted is that along with the death toll, the partition led to the largest forced migration in human history, with an estimated 18 million people forced to leave their homes forever.¹¹ In addition between 100,000¹² and 150,000¹³ women were abducted, raped and often forced to convert.¹⁴ The emotional losses were also huge, as people had to leave ancestral

⁷ Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit: An Eyewitness Account of the Partition of India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 293.

⁸ Kavita Daiya, *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 6.

⁹ Ian Talbot, “The 1947 Partition of India” in *The Historiography of Genocide*, Dan Stone, ed., (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 420.

¹⁰ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 89.

¹¹ Talbot, “The 1947 Partition,” 420.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Daiya, *Violent Beginnings*, 6.

¹⁴ See for example, Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998) and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

homes: communities where they had been living since time immemorial. Most were unable to take any of their property with them; some deliberately chose to leave everything behind because they were convinced they could come back at a future date. Millions of people became destitute overnight. Returning home proved impossible, as conflict between the two states intensified, leading to multiple wars in the past seven decades. Partition comes to be a seismic event that completely transformed public and private life all over the subcontinent. After partition, nothing would ever be the same again.

Methodological Context

Over the last six years, I have been working on an oral history project on the Indian/Pakistani partition. The project was conceived with the idea that there is a need for a truly inter-disciplinary study of the memorial legacy of partition. In my work, I look at oral history narratives and literature and cinema as examples of cultural texts and argue that in order to have a fuller picture of the ways in which partition is remembered today – individually and collectively, these texts need to be studied together. So far I have interviewed about 160 people – across India, Pakistan and the UK.

My ethnographic work took the form of loose, semi-structured interviews. Where applicable, I tried to cover certain themes such as experience of violence, loss of home, migration, rebuilding life, divided loyalties etc. but these themes were designed to be as broad as possible, and the narrative of the interview was always directly led by the participant's own story. Excerpts from the interviews have been reproduced here as close to the original as possible. Interviews that were conducted in English have been reproduced verbatim including grammatical errors. Interviews in other languages have been translated by myself, unless stated otherwise, and I have tried to keep as close as possible to the sense of the original.

One of the most immediately noticeable aspects of the way people talk about religion and its many facets – religious identity, religious faith, religious ritual and practices, tolerance, prejudice, violence, is that these are embodied practices. The practice of circumcision is one example of how religion (and its many facets) is often written (or not written) on bodies, and when studying the ways in which partition and its memories affect people's religious identities, it is important to examine the ways in which bodies feature in the narration of these memories. The importance of paying attention to the embodied nature of these identities and practices assumes is even more marked when applied to oral history interviews. In this article, I will examine the embodied nature of religion and religious practice, as revealed through the equally embodied oral history interview.

Bodies and Religious Identities

The way in which one's religion is or is not inscribed on your body can literally become a matter of life and death – as was the case for Dheer and for Manto's anonymous protagonist. Circumcision is not the only way in which one's religion can be inscribed on one's body, however. Sakina,¹⁵ a Muslim woman from North India, describes a train journey she had to take by herself to fetch her children from boarding school precisely because of this corporeal aspect to one's religious identity:

Then I went, I didn't allow my husband to go – he was a Pathan, and he looked very Muslim. I could pass off for anything. So I don't know, my friend booked the seat – I don't know in what name, maybe Hindu name or Christian name, I have no idea. And of course, it was a very – I mean, nothing happened but it was a very hair-raising ride because there was a Punjabi man and his son and all the way he was just talking about no Muslim women or children even should be spared. They used to do that, they used to pick up children and throw them out of moving trains. So you can imagine what was my state.¹⁶

The mirror image of this was experienced by Manohar's¹⁷ uncle who was, according to family lore, miraculously spared on his journey across the border from West Punjab to Delhi:

So that was the most striking thing which has remained with us, all of us who have heard this. My uncle, he was on the train, and they were hacking everybody and they came to him and they said, "You are so good looking that we can't kill you. We're letting you go." He was alone.¹⁸

What exactly persuaded the mob to spare Manohar's uncle is impossible to know for certain, but it is probable that his good looks were seen to mark him out as a Muslim, just as Sakina's husband's looks were seen to mark him out as a Muslim. For Sakina's husband, his Muslim look placed him in danger on that train journey, while for Manohar's uncle, it probably saved his life. It should be pointed out that in both Sakina and Manohar's testimony, there is a noticeable and persistent slippage between ethnic identity and religious identity. Sakina links her husband's obvious visible "Muslimness" to his ethnic identity as a Pathan, and later on in the

¹⁵ Female, Muslim, b. 1920 in United Provinces, undivided India.

¹⁶ Interview with author in Karachi, Pakistan on 13 September 2013.

¹⁷ Male, Hindu, b. 1946 in West Punjab, undivided India.

¹⁸ Interview with author in New Delhi, India on 4 January 2014.

same paragraph, describes the man who wanted to kill “Muslim women or children” as “Punjabi” – he would almost certainly have been a Punjabi Hindu or a Sikh, as opposed to a Punjabi Muslim. One’s religious identity may often be written on one’s body but, like all writing, it can be coded and decoded in different ways.

It is in fact this slippage between one’s ethnic and one’s religious identity – a hegemonic notion about how religious identities should be inscribed on one’s bodies, that allows Sakina and Manohar’s uncle to pass as their respective “others.” If one’s physical features may allow one to pass safely under a mis-identification, then so may one’s clothing. Gargi¹⁹ recalls the local Muslim tailor helping to ensure the safe departure of her family, in particular making it easier for her mother to escape from Lahore.

By that time all those partition things were happening, and people were moving out and one day he said to her that, “*Bibi*”²⁰, I’ll make you a *burqa*.”²¹ She said, “No, no, no, but I want black suit.” He said, “No, you will not repent it so you will wear this.” So that happened, that, when we saw, when my father said now is the time we have to move out, so then my mother was wearing that.²²

Not entirely unlike Sakina or Manohar’s uncle, it is the cultural perception of what a Hindu or a Muslim body should look like that allows Gargi’s mother to pass as something she was not, thereby securing her and her family’s safety.

Of course, this passing could happen in the other direction as well. Chandraprakash²³ remembers an example of inadvertent passing, as his clothing raised suspicion even after he had safely made it across to the Indian side of the new borders, where the codes according to which certain objects achieved certain religious significance became unfamiliar:

Our clothes there were like this only – *salwar*, *salwar-kameez*.²⁴ We had no trousers, we learnt about them when we came here. When I left the house wearing *salwar-kameez*, my uncle came after me, he saw me in my *salwar-kameez*, and said, “Come, come on, come back home. Go and wear trousers.” I said, “But I have no trousers. I have never worn them till

¹⁹ Female, Hindu, Punjabi, b. 1942 in West Punjab, undivided India.

²⁰ Urdu word, roughly meaning, “Madam.”

²¹ Islamic female garment, covering the face and sometimes more commonly known as the *Niqab*.

²² Interview with author, Beckenham, Kent, UK 16 February 2012.

²³ Male, Hindu, Punjabi, b. 1932 in West Punjab, undivided India.

²⁴ Traditional south Asian clothing, sometimes (as here) associated with Muslims but not worn by Muslims exclusively.

today.” We were only fifteen or fourteen, had never owned trousers, only *salwar-kameez*. “But someone will take you to be a Muslim and kill you.” This *salwar-kameez* is what Muslims used to wear. Immediately, he took me to the tailor and said, “Make him four trousers. Make one pair this evening or tomorrow.” Because our clothes there [West Punjab] was *salwar-kameez*.²⁵

It is particularly interesting, and further evidence of the slippage between ethnic and religious identity that I mention above, that the *salwar-kameez* is specifically seen here to be Muslim. It is interesting to note in passing that in West Bengal and Bangladesh, this form of dress is known colloquially as “a *Punjabi*” – the slippage between ethnic and religious identities takes different forms in different contexts.

Nayur,²⁶ a second-generation British-Pakistani woman, recounts a story where such slippages are diagnosed and commented upon. Nayur’s family originate from a village near Islamabad – before her father left for the UK, no one in the village had travelled much. She recounts the story of her parents realising the oddity of a particular village wedding tradition:

My mum recalls when in the 70s my uncle had got married and she said, “It was tradition. As soon as my uncle got married we all ran in and we all put a red *sindoor*²⁷ on our head.” And yeah, she said my father...bear in mind they didn’t have videos, they didn’t have...And my father by now had come to the UK and he had seen a bit of the world and he went back in and he said, “What are you putting on your forehead?” “Oh,” she said, “it’s *sindoor*. The wedding’s happened; she’s married now.” And my dad said, “Did you know that’s a Hindu thing, that Hindus do that?” And they said, “What you mean Hindus do it? We do it when there’s a wedding.” They didn’t...because they didn’t know any Hindus because all their life they were brought up with just Pakistanis but as soon as a wedding happened they put *sindoor* on their head. And she said for them that stopped because we were told that’s not what Pakistanis do or Muslims; that’s what Hindus do so she said we just stopped because we didn’t know any different. And if nobody had told us we would keep doing it.²⁸

The slippage between one’s ethnic and one’s religious identity, and the discrepancies in the ways in which such identities are written (or not written) on

²⁵ Interview with author originally in Hindi in New Delhi, 31 December 2013.

²⁶ Female, Muslim, b. 1976 in Cardiff, Wales, UK.

²⁷ Red vermillion, worn by a woman to signify her status as married. Most commonly associated with Hindu women.

²⁸ Interview with author, Bristol, UK 3 October 2011.

one's body assume huge significance during partition. At stake in the identification or mis-identification of a body as belonging to this or that religion, was the constant presence of the possibility of violence. Zafar's²⁹ emotional recounting of his brother's death is a perfect example:

I had a young brother. About two years old. They hit him with a spear in his stomach. He was injured in the bit that covers your innards. The intestines came out. They came out. I took him [to the first-aid people], "Do something for him!" They said, "There is nothing we can do, his intestines have come out. He won't live." I said, "What then?" "Don't give him water." I asked why. "It is like this: if he doesn't drink he will live longer. If he drinks anything, it will go into his stomach and come out through his intestines. The more exposed it is, the sooner he will die. I said, "That's good!" But he kept asking for water. If he has to die, why should he die thirsty. If he has to die, why should I let him die thirsty. It will only mean he will die an hour sooner rather than an hour later. At least he won't be thirsty. But there was no water. The taps they had made were not working. The only water I could find was full of cigarette-ends. I brought that water and gave it to him, and he continued to drink it. The consequence was around midnight, he became beloved of Allah [i.e. he died].³⁰

It is noticeable how, in the narration of the event, the unnamed brother's death becomes inextricably linked to his identity as a Muslim – in his death he becomes a "beloved of Allah." In other words, he died because he was seen to be a Muslim, even though he was only two years old. The logic of partition violence determines that these bodies were violated because they were apparently perceived to be linked to one religion or another. In the process, the marks that are the evidence of violence done to bodies become inscriptions of one's religious identity, at least as it was perceived at the time.

If the fatal wounds on Zafar's brother's body in 1947 marked that child out as a Muslim, so do the wounds that Zafar bears to this day:

I was standing in the middle row [on the train] – and when they thrust a spear, I grabbed it and pulled it towards me, while he was pulling it towards him. As a result, ok, one of my feet was on this seat, and one on the back seat, like this. When he pulled it suddenly, it cut through my fingers and I was unbalanced. Someone else hit me with a spear from behind and I fell down unconscious, and dead bodies kept falling on me.

²⁹ Male, Muslim, b. c.1930 in Delhi, undivided India.

³⁰ Interview with author, originally in Urdu, in Karachi, Pakistan, 12 September 2013.

When I went to interview him, Zafar showed me the scar on his hand, faint now among the lines acquired through a long, sometimes hard life, but still visible – a visible legacy of both the violence, and his religious identity that marked him out as a target for such violence.

When those who survived partition remember those who didn't, those dead bodies and the religious rituals surrounding those dead bodies achieve huge importance in partition memory narratives. A.S.³¹ recalls his father's death on their journey across the border and the helplessness he felt at not being able to fulfil the normal Hindu rites:

Father died on the journey itself. One month and three days we walked, and from Sargodha we arrived at Amritsar. 33 days it took. 2 *lakh*³² people were in the *khafila*,³³ fifty thousand arrived, one and a half *lakh* died on the road itself. Actually, when we were coming, the Muslims put poison or something else in the drinking water. When we drank, those of us who drank it, died from that illness. When his [father's] death happened, there were bullock carts of the *khafila* on all sides, we were refugees. We couldn't go past the bullock carts, out of the *khafila* it was dangerous. My father's body is lying there, and I am alone. My mother was there and, and a sister – so I did what had to be done. The others we were traveling with were there as well. There were fields next to the bullock carts. We dug the fields, in the field, a hole big enough for the body. Just that much. Then we put the body in there. That's how I did the last rites. This is the torture we had to go through.³⁴

It is the makeshift nature of A.S.'s father's burial that speaks most powerfully to the anonymous nature of his death, 'on the journey'. The emotional poignancy of A.S.'s father's death comes largely from the way in which, through his narration, he situates it as separate and distanced from both the physical space of the home and the normality that that represents. As a Hindu, A.S.'s father would normally be cremated, and as his son, A.S. would be expected to figure prominently in the funerary rituals, including lighting the funeral pyre. Religion and normal religious practices such as funerary rituals are, of course, also always embodied practices and the abnormality of the situation can thus be depicted partially through the impossibility of the normal corporeal rituals. The heavy sighs, long pauses, and the choked voice eloquently depict the pain of the loss, and the impossibility of

³¹ Male, Hindu, Punjabi, b. c.1931 in East Punjab, undivided India.

³² South Asian counting system, equivalent to 200000.

³³ Caravan of travelling refugees, either on foot or on horse or bullock drawn carts.

³⁴ Interview with author originally in Hindi in New Delhi, India 3 January 2014.

closure through “normal” funereal practices, but these are harder to convey in a transcript.

Kiswar,³⁵ who was born after partition, has a powerful imaginary relationship with family members who died in 1947 and therefore whom she never knew. Again, her relationship with these people is, in her narrative, focussed on their corporeality, partly because there was no possibility of closure through funerary practices.

Then I just make imagine and thinking, oh my *Nani*³⁶ was like that, lying on one side, my Auntie, my *Nana*³⁷ was lying there. People were passing through; perhaps then the bodies start smelling--what happened and they put it somewhere. Where they gone? These questions come in your head [...] They didn't have a place or memorable grave or something we can go, and like my parents' graves there, when I go to visit Pakistan I go there and I pray and pray for them there as well. I pray from here as well but I go there and I make sure I always visit. I take my children to my mother and father's grave. Something, will go there every time and I go and sit and talk and cry on my mother's grave. But it's nothing for them no, nothing at all.³⁸

Like A.S.'s father, Kiswar's relationship with her family, and the religious identity that she has inherited from her family, is mediated through the abnormal end to these bodies. The uncertainty about where the bodies ended up, and how they had to be disposed affects both Kiswar and A.S.'s relationship to the dead members of their family, and therefore how they conceptualise their identity in religious terms.

Religious Bodies and Religious Spaces

Since the violence that surrounded partition depended so much on particular discourses of religion, the unification of landscape and human bodies that was a consequence of this violence meant also a desecularizing of the public space. In other words, violence against Hindus or Muslims or Sikhs in a specific public space (fields, neighbourhoods, trains) resulted in the marking out of that space as belonging to a certain religion. Those bodies that are the physical legacy of the violence remain, in their death, as part of one religion in opposition to another.

³⁵ Female, Muslim, b. c.1959 in West Punjab, Pakistan.

³⁶ Maternal Grandmother.

³⁷ Maternal Grandfather.

³⁸ Interview with author, Brynmawr, South Wales, UK, 16 September 2011.

This can be seen from the testimony of K.S.,³⁹ a Sikh from East Punjab, as he recounts the story of discovering parts of a corpse:

And then I suddenly came across there was a skull lying there, you see. And this was, I stopped in my tracks and looked at it with all my friends, and so we couldn't believe it. Because you must remember that all the massacring had started, you see, perhaps April, May, whatever, even earlier than that. And so somebody must have killed this particular Muslim – and then we had to report because, village headman, called *Nambardar*, we had to report to him, and then he had to tell the police. Anyway, at that time, the headman came and told us to shoo away from there because he has called the police. We don't know what happened later on, you see. So obviously, so this person must have died, you see, months before, and in that area the common wild animals, jackals and things like that, they must have eaten it, you see, and so probably there were some other bones, because we were actually shooed away soon after that. We don't know what other bones were found at that time.⁴⁰

What is particularly important about this story, in the context of my argument in this article, is that in K.S.'s recollections, even though the only part of the body found was the skull, it clearly and unambiguously was a Muslim. In other words, the violence that engulfed Punjab in 1947, along with the political discourse at the time, served to label East Punjab as a Hindu and Sikh space, which in turn, implies that an anonymous dead body found there must have belonged to a Muslim. Of course, statistically, it is overwhelmingly more likely that someone killed in 1947 in East Punjab would have been a Muslim, but the fact remains that most evidence suggests that reciprocal violence occurred on either side of the border. In any case, the point is rather that, as Yasmin Khan has argued, one of the consequences of “the exclusionary politics of Partition” and “the scale of the killings” was that “even non-believers or self-proclaimed atheists were labelled as members of a ‘community’ because of the group that they happened to be born into—not what they believed.”⁴¹ The context that led K.S. to assume the body he found was that of a Muslim, had nothing to do with the faith or otherwise of the individual person, but rather the space where his body was located, and the violence which was inscribed on to it. Like the example of circumcision introduced at the beginning of this article, one's religion is not so much a matter of one's belief, but rather of one's body, what is or is not written on it, and where

³⁹ Male, Sikh, Punjabi, b. 1933 in East Punjab, undivided India.

⁴⁰ Interview with author, Eastbourne, UK, 3 February 2012.

⁴¹ Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 20.

or how it finishes up at the end. Abdul Rasheed⁴², while travelling westwards, remembers a similar moment of desecularisation, as he found the physical space of a train horribly transformed:

Then at three o'clock or four o'clock in the evening, a train came and we were asked to sit in that train. Make a queue, we were sent in the, toward the train. Train, whichever carriage, in whichever carriage we went we, saw blood, flesh, on the seats. No seat was such where we can sit – there was blood, and fresh blood. We think that slaughter, Muslims were slaughtered in this train, and that train came to us now we don't know what will happen to us. Very fear, very – but what to do, in fear of our lives, we sat down on the bloody seats, bloody seats. Our clothes were in the blood, blood. When we came in Pakistan, our blood, our clothes were coloured with blood.⁴³

Like K.S., who was able to identify a skull as having belonged to a Muslim, Abdul is able to deduce that the blood on the train must have belonged to Muslims who had been slaughtered. In the process, the presence of these corporeal remains leads to the physical space (the field, the train, the nation itself) becoming invested with the same religious identity. India, through the visceral violence of partition becomes a Hindu country, where Hindus would not be under threat, and therefore any bodies that have become part of the landscape must have belonged to Muslims.

Saeed,⁴⁴ while migrating from Delhi to Lahore, remembers the relief people felt when entering a Pakistan-bound train at Amritsar, India:

And they came and knocked on the door of our compartment. We opened the door and about 24 people came in. And as they came and sat down, they all raised their hands towards Allah, and said, “Thank you, Allah – Pakistan!”⁴⁵

Similarly, Rafique,⁴⁶ who worked as a volunteer at the Walton railway station and refugee camp in Lahore, remembers the relief of people arriving by train to Lahore:

⁴² Male, Muslim, Punjabi, b. 1936 in East Punjab, undivided India.

⁴³ Interview with author in Lahore, Pakistan, 29 August 2013.

⁴⁴ Male, Muslim, Punjabi, b. 1925 in East Punjab.

⁴⁵ Interview with author in Karachi, Pakistan, 13 September 2013.

⁴⁶ Male, Muslim, Punjabi, b. 1927 in West Punjab.

There is another important thing, I think it is important to mention, that those refugees who used to come – all looted and beaten up. When the train stopped at the station, they would get off the compartments and immediately, there was this uniform practice, they would fall to the ground to thank Allah and after I would often ask – we are thanking Allah, that we were beaten, whatever happened, we have been attacked, but we are in His place now and no one can attack us again. A sigh of relief.⁴⁷

In Saeed and Rafique's narration, the secular space of the train and the station have become Islamicized, in that they now represent safety for the incoming Muslim population.

Embodied Experiences, Embodied Memory

The notion that partition was founded on the idea that Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were inescapably separate and mutually incompatible was felt first and foremost as an embodied experience, both by those who supported it, and those who did not. Many of my interviewees bear physical scars – legacies of the violence they experienced and suffered from, and whose memories they narrate to me as part of the oral history interview. Sometimes they describe their wounds, sometimes they show the wounds to me – marks on the body through which their religious identities can be read. Just like the spaces that these bodies occupy and haunt, the living bodies bear the scars of a violent descularization, as their religious identity gets forcefully written on their bodies.

In a sense, this should not come as a surprise. The fact that one's religious identity is at least partially corporeal has been well-established, and there are multiple examples of my participants expressing different facets of their religious identity through reference to their bodies. Gargi⁴⁸ paints a very familiar portrait of pre-1947 Lahore as a harmonious multi-religious city and, interestingly, depicts this notion of religious tolerance in particularly embodied terms:

I remember once my older brother, he had pneumonia, and he was about ten, eleven. And one of my mother's Muslim friends, she used to come and take me to her house and she would take all my clothes and powder and the comb and everything and she would give me bath and change me because we were five children and, four brothers and myself, one daughter – and she would take me and give me bath, my breakfast and make me ready and she used to teach me *namaaz* – how they pray, and she would make me sit in that position and fold my hands and say to Allah that please

⁴⁷ Interview with author, originally in Urdu, in Lahore, Pakistan, 10 September 2013.

⁴⁸ Female, Hindu, Punjabi, b. 1942 in West Punjab, undivided India.

make my brother better, and I would come home. And that was the routine in those, for about a month or so. So I remember that so much, like a little toddler would, learn and repeat and say, I would come near my brother and then I would sit there and I would pray a Muslim prayer.⁴⁹

For Gurbakhsh,⁵⁰ his memory of his village, in the days before partition, is of a similarly harmonious place where, again, religious hybridity and tolerance is depicted as an embodied phenomenon:

Our village Sikhs were sort of not very strong believers. Because my grandmother would go to the mosque and talk to the Imam, if, if, if, I had a boil or something on my body. She would take me to him and say “Can you say prayers on him?”, and they would say prayers on, and if it didn’t get better, she’ll go to the Hindu priest, and say “Can you say prayers on him?”, and, and, and then to the Sikh priest – it didn’t matter to her which prayer worked, but she would go to all three of them.⁵¹

If religious tolerance is felt and manifested through one’s body, then so is religious prejudice. For Shefali,⁵² born and brought up in a conservative Bengali, Hindu family, sitting down for a meal next to a Muslim woman was a physically repulsive notion:

I used to be very scared of Muslims – having heard those stories. That’s why I was so scared of Muslims. Just think, when I went to get my basic training, from my college, to become a primary teacher in Bardhaman, then they said, in the next room there is a Muslim girl. She used to sit next to me and eat. I mean, the whole thing about not being able to touch a Muslim – in our home, there was that superstition – if you touch a Muslim you have to have a bath, grandmothers used to say this. So then I sat next to her and had my rice, you won’t believe it – after finishing my food, on the way back from the kitchen, I threw up on the way back. I mean, such a kind of a certain terror.⁵³

A few years older, and from a Punjabi Hindu family, Chandraprakash,⁵⁴ displays a similar prejudice against Muslims that is centred around food:

⁴⁹ Interview with author in London, UK, 16 February 2012.

⁵⁰ Male, Sikh, Punjabi, b. 1935 in East Punjab, undivided India.

⁵¹ Interview with author in London, UK, 27 January 2012.

⁵² Female, Hindu, Bengali, b. 1942 in East Bengal, undivided India.

⁵³ Interview with author, originally in Bengali, in Bhadreswar, West Bengal, 28 March 2012.

⁵⁴ Male, Hindu, Punjabi, b. 1932 in West Punjab, undivided India.

They are a cruel type of people. Their minds are like their food. That's certainly true. You see, they eat a lot of meat. They take a goat and kill it just like that. Then they eat. Meat, mutton – this is their usual diet. In that time, meat-eating was not done among the Hindus, we used to eat *dal-roti*.⁵⁵ A lot depends on the diet. Whatever you eat, whatever is eaten, the mind becomes like that.⁵⁶

Zainab,⁵⁷ who made the journey in the opposite direction to Chandraprakash, remembers being on the receiving end of this othering process, as she recollects how she was treated by her teachers and classmates when she was in school in what is today Indian Punjab:

In the third year, I was sent to another high school. When I went there, the condition was very bad. All the teachers there were Hindu, apart from one, Sakina, she was from the Muslims. One was me, Zainab, and there was one, Mehmooda, we were the only two girls from the Muslims studying there, the rest were all Hindu. Perhaps you will feel bad now, they were not treating us well. The teachers did not check our work. We were made to sit on the same side. If we did some work and tried to show it to them, they would move their clothes out of the way, in case it touched us, or we touched it.⁵⁸

The visceral reaction to the other is reminiscent of Audre Lorde's brilliant depiction of the physicality of racism in the United States. Lorde evokes both the hatred and the fear resulting from the encounter between a little black girl (herself) and an anonymous white fellow-passenger:

I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us – probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she's looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Lentils and homemade bread.

⁵⁶ Interview with author, originally in Hindi, in New Delhi, India, 31 December 2013.

⁵⁷ Female, Muslim, Punjabi, b. 1936 in East Punjab, undivided India.

⁵⁸ Interview with author, originally in Urdu, in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, 28 March 2012.

⁵⁹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 147.

Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon's analysis of this moment from Audre Lorde's writing applies equally well to the anecdotes narrated by Shefali and Chandraprakash:

The problem is not that the woman sitting next to the young Audre *believes* that Black people are inferior to Whites, that she subscribes to an ideology of racism – although this would be bad enough. Rather, she *knows* that the brown child is repugnant – knows it in her bones, knows it before she thinks it [...] Her response is visceral.⁶⁰

It is perhaps this visceral nature of prejudice that means when such prejudice is challenged, the result can be experienced as a moment of intense physical shock. Sujit⁶¹ grew up in a conservative Bengali, Hindu family, similar to Shefali, and with similar notions about not eating with Muslims. When he moved to boarding school, under the supervision of an uncle who was a teacher and more inclusive than the rest of his family, Sujit was suddenly and shockingly exposed to a very different set of beliefs and practices. More than sixty-five years later, he still remembers the moment as one of an almost physiological impact:

One day, after school, I, uncle and Ashatul, came back home from school, back to the hostel. Uncle used to keep milk and bananas for me. That day, when we arrived, my uncle said “Both of you have a wash, and then eat the bananas with milk.” So I was in a fix. I had only brought one plate and one bowl. I had no other bowls. How will I give the food to Ashatul without another bowl? Quietly, I told uncle “I have only one bowl.” Uncle said, “The bowl is big right?” I replied, “Yes, big.” “Then both of you sit and eat out of the bowl, what is the problem?” I was shocked – eating food out of the same bowl with a Muslim, this hugely contradicted all my experiences up to that point. But I did not hesitate to eat, because Uncle was like a God to me, I did not hesitate to eat.⁶²

When Sujit narrates his memory of the moment when he was jolted out of his previous socialised prejudice, the shock can still be discerned in his voice. Near the end of the story, when he is talking about his respect for his uncle, his voice breaks down with emotion, an emotion that is experienced and displayed in intensely physical terms. The crack in his voice is audible – during the interview

⁶⁰ Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 252.

⁶¹ Male, Hindu, Bengali, b. 1928 in East Bengal, undivided India.

⁶² Interview with author originally in Bengali, in Chandannagar, West Bengal, 6 January 2014.

he was finding it visibly difficult to control his emotions and at numerous points he actually started crying.

Sujit's interview is one of many that I have collected, where it is not enough to concentrate on what is said but which demands to be read as an embodied event. In other words, corporeality is important not just in the ways in which religion is experienced and expressed, but it is also equally important when one articulates one's religious identity in the form of an oral history interview. Gestures are an integral part of the oral history interview and, especially when approaching an event like partition where, for many reasons one's religious identity came to mean so much, one cannot accurately analyse the role religion plays in one's memories of partition, if one does not take into account the physicality of the interview through which the researcher is collecting the memories. When Chandraprakash describes the relationship, as he sees it, between the Muslim diet and their values, he covers his ears in a common south Asian gesture of warding off evil. The level and depth of his prejudice would be lost if, in analysing his interview, I limited myself to his words alone. When Shefali admits to her feelings of nausea at eating with a Muslim, she accompanies it with a nervous laughter. Shefali's words demonstrate her acknowledgment of her visceral prejudice against Muslims, but what is key for me here is this nervous laughter. The physical act of laughter in that moment demonstrates a number of things – her feeling of discomfort and awkwardness at acknowledging a prejudice that she is not proud of, while also reinforcing the strength of that prejudice. In other words, by its very existence, her laughter shows the fact that she felt her prejudice was important enough to mention, albeit framed through her contemporary feeling of embarrassment. When Zainab was describing the prejudice she experienced from her Hindu teachers in undivided India, she accompanied her words with a series of crucial gestures. She prefaces her story of alienation with a caveat: "Perhaps you will feel bad..." referring to her knowledge of my own sort-of Indian, sort-of Hindu identity. As she said this she looked down, apparently to avert my gaze. Her notions of hospitality as a Pakistani woman were perhaps compromised at having to criticise "my people." When she narrates how her fellow-students and teachers did not want to touch her, she replicates the gestures as she remembers them. She flattened out her own clothes, mimicking her teacher's actions even as she narrates them. Working from the interview transcripts, or even from the audio recording, these gestures, and what they say both about the emotional force of the original memory, and the physicality of emotions gets completely lost.

Oral History: The Embodied Interview

As a practitioner of oral history, I need to be alert to the complexity of narrative as reflected through the embodied event that is the interview. Alessandro Portelli has famously called on oral historians to view with suspicion the object that is the transcript:

Oral sources are *oral* sources. Scholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only transcripts that are published [...] Expecting the transcript to replace the tape for scientific purposes is equivalent to doing art criticism on reproductions, or literary criticism on translations.⁶³

Portelli's criticism is important for many reasons, one of which is that, an exclusive focus on words, which is what, of course, the transcript largely is, does not allow enough space to discuss the complex ambiguity of one's lived religious experience, as represented in oral history narratives. It is not surprising, given the corporeal nature of religion, that, when it comes to reading religion in oral history, I need to pay attention to the corporeality of the oral history interview itself.

I will conclude by examining two further examples of the need to include the body when doing oral history work. Both of these examples relate to examples of religious hybridity and fluidity, one a memory from 1947, and the other an example of religious hybridity in the present. Rathindranath⁶⁴ remembers a Muslim teacher from his village in East Bengal (what is today Bangladesh):

*Maulavi Saheb*⁶⁵ was my, my high-school, during the time of class seven or eight. We used to do *jhulan*⁶⁶ by the side of the street. That *Maulavi Saheb* used to come, it was the God of *jhulan* or whatever, must have been *Krishna* – we couldn't understand that much then. In that time, he used to, one rupee in the brass bowl, and we used to then say “*Adaab, adaab*”, “*Adaab*” but he used to do *Namashkar*.⁶⁷

In his interview, when Rathindranath referred to the two gestures, the Islamic one of *Adaab*⁶⁸ and the Hindu one of *Namashkar*,⁶⁹ he actually accompanied it with

⁶³ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other Stories* (New York: State University of New York, 1991), 46-47.

⁶⁴ Male, Hindu, Bengali, b. 1933 in East Bengal, undivided India.

⁶⁵ An Urdu honorific, used to indicate a man of learning.

⁶⁶ A Hindu festival.

⁶⁷ Interview with author originally in Bengali, in Hooghly, West Bengal, 13 January 2014.

⁶⁸ A south Asian Islamic greeting, involving raising one's hand to one's face and bowing.

the corresponding gestures, thereby physically echoing the corporeality of religious identities as they were experienced in 1947. The bodies in 1947, and the body in 2014 make the same gesture, establishing a physical link across space and time – a link that is presumably felt to be stronger than a verbal one, hence the need to reinforce the word with the appropriate gesture. It would be all too easy for a transcript to omit to mention the gesture, and thereby efface the physicality of the interview, or the emotional importance these physical gestures have for Rathindranath and his sense of pre-partition communal harmony.

Similarly, Bandana,⁷⁰ who was born into a Bengali Hindu family, and then converted to Islam when she married into a Bengali Muslim family, uses gestures in a very interesting way when describing her own religiosity:

And in a way I am a practising Muslim. You can call me Muslim for this reason, I don't keep it [fasting] now because I am getting a bit old – but I read *namaaz* and keep *roza*⁷¹ – I do these things. I still read the *namaaz* – before I use this. The days I do this too much, those days I don't do *namaaz*. I used to do *roza*, these days I can't do it as much. In that way, there is a, you can say, a discipline now. And when there is real danger, I call Allah only. At the bottom line. So, in that sense, you can say, if somebody asks me, "What is your religion?" I will say Islam, without any doubt.⁷²

The unnamed "this" is actually a glass of wine, that she held in her hands during the interview. She points to the glass of wine she is drinking when she says that she does the *namaaz* before she drinks, and if she drinks too much, those days she doesn't do the *namaaz*. Now, any transcription or analysis of this interview that does not explain this gesture would make a nonsense of the interview. Even merely describing the gesture in brackets in transcription would not be adequate because it would not explain the decision to not mention the glass of wine and to point at it instead. Bandana is, of course, perfectly aware that the audio recorder is on and, presumably, she is unwilling to admit to her non-Islamic habits on the record. However, and equally crucially, this does not stop her from articulating the identity of a Muslim, or indeed, from the physical aspects of such an identity – fasting, and doing *namaaz*. This multi-layered complex religiosity can only be demonstrated through the use of both speech and gesture, highlighting the importance of remembering the corporeality of the oral history interview.

⁶⁹ A south Asian Hindu greeting, involving joining one's hands in front of one's chest, in a gesture of prayer.

⁷⁰ Female, Muslim, Bengali, b. 1936 in East Bengal, undivided India.

⁷¹ The day long fast during the month of Ramadan.

⁷² Interview with author in London, 11 March 2012.

Alessandro Portelli has argued, quite correctly, that the transcript is not a satisfactory replacement of the audio recording because it “inevitably implies changes and interpretation.”⁷³ However, it would be equally incorrect to assume that an audio recording can serve as a complete record of the oral history interview. As Lynn Abrams has noted, an oral history interview “involves not just language but also non-vocal articulation, performed by the body, for an interviewer who is usually both a listener and a viewer.”⁷⁴ Echoing this, Jeff Friedmann has written that:

All embodied aspects of interviewing, including posture shifts, limb gestures, facial expressions and full body movements, provide additional and important information to interviews.⁷⁵

It is strange, and slightly unfortunate that oral history is not analysed as an embodied performance more often. To be sure, this approach does pose serious methodological challenges. It is not always possible, or even desirable to video record an interview, and it is sometimes difficult to remember with enough clarity the gestures of an interviewee during analysis. Moreover, it is equally important to examine the embodied performance of the interviewer during an interview, and this becomes even more difficult to note during an interview. It does remain the case, however, that the price of not recognising the oral history interview as an embodied event is to potentially miss out on much of the complexity in the ways in which people form emotional attachments to their religion specifically, and to their life-narrative more specifically. On the side of the interviewer, it prevents a fuller engagement with the ways in which research work in the field is an embodied experience as well – my relationship with my interviews and my interviewees at times has been a visceral one, which is difficult if not impossible to think about if I limit my analysis to the words on an audio recording or a transcript.

Santanu Das has movingly written about the physical experience of handling the archives of soldiers in the First World War:

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the typewriter severed the writer’s hand from the act of writing [...] But the relationship between the two remains infrangible in the world of the archives. We leaf through manuscripts, each alone, in palpable relation to past lives, past bodies [...]

⁷³ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 47.

⁷⁴ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 131.

⁷⁵ Jeff Friedman, “‘Muscle Memory’: Performing Oral History,” *Oral History* 33:2 (2005): 36.

We carefully place back [...] what our intrusive fingers have pulled out of the envelope: the process is intimate and unsettling.⁷⁶

What Das finds unsettling is reminiscent of what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt refer to when they evoke ‘the real, the material, the realm of practice, pain, bodily pleasure, silence, or death – to which the text gestures as that which lies beyond the written word’⁷⁷ or indeed the spoken word. Relegating physical gestures and bodily movements to the margins by focusing solely on the word means disregarding much of the complexity of one’s relationship to one’s religion. When it comes to the study of partition specifically, this complexity becomes even more crucial, as partition involved, among other things, a violent re-working of the relationship between individual, physical bodies, religious groups and nation-states.

Conclusion

An oral history of partition that is alive to the embodied would be better able to examine the radical nature of these testimonies, not least in the ways through which emotional attachments are able to spill over religious and nation-state borders and, in the process, challenge their existence. Like Das’s researcher working in the archives, the oral history interview is an intensely physical experience, for both interviewer and interviewee. It involves bodies travelling in space as almost always for an interview to take place, the two bodies have to meet. The two bodies experience a shared moment of intimacy, almost always in the privacy and domesticity of somebody’s home. This intimacy is felt through the sharing of private stories – secrets communicated through word and gesture. The importance of the secrets transmitted can be seen in the physical reactions of both the interviewer and interviewee – the nodding heads, the shudders, the sighs, the sharp intake of breaths, the choked voice, the tears.

Ultimately, what these interviews demonstrate, for me, is the immensely powerful nature of emotions, both religious and secular, and as expressed through word and gesture, in terms of constructing, disseminating and responding to narratives. Like the mark of circumcision with which I began this article, the mark of emotions is often inscribed on the bodies of my interviewees and, like the mark of circumcision in Manto’s story, these marks are often equally difficult to decipher. When practising oral history, there is an urgent need to be alert to the work being done by verbal and non-verbal expressions, the corporeality of the

⁷⁶ Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12-13.

⁷⁷ Catherine Gallagher, and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 23.

experience as felt by both interviewer and interviewee, and how they can often be put to both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic uses. It is imperative that when doing oral history, we do not silence the voices of those we study by concentrating only on these voices and not on the bodies to which they belong.