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## Fragments of Memory: India's Partition and Curating Narratives in Partition Museums

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### Abstract

The Partition of India in 1947 into two nations, India and Pakistan, was a cataclysmic event marked by violence and mass displacement. Although a subject of intense study among scholars, Partition was never memorialized in a designated space—no museum, or commemoration of the event was ever attempted. It was in the 71<sup>st</sup> year of India's independence that a newly conceived Partition Museum opened in the historic border city of Amritsar in Punjab. Another Partition Museum was set up in the capital city of New Delhi in 2023. The Museums display of 'artefacts' carried by the fleeing survivors of Partition violence; Art works by eminent artists depicting Partition horrors and trauma; audio-visual and archival galleries of photographs and interviews with Partition refugees—all focus on the 'voices silenced in the pages of history.' In today's world rising awareness no longer confines the construction of historical narrative to the historian's domain but has placed it into the hands of society as a whole. This paper explores the role of Partition Museum in Delhi for curating the memory of Partition, examining how narratives of violence and loss, courage and resilience, hope and optimism are displayed and mediated through exhibitions. Some important questions to be addressed would involve the kind of collective memory being invoked—nationalistic or reconciliatory? And more importantly how it impacts contemporary attitudes towards Partition—whether the memory generated is mindful of the complexities of our collective past or not.

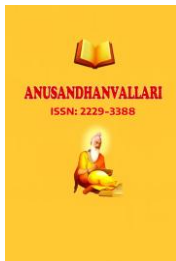
**Keywords:** Memory, Museums, Curatorial function, Partition Museum India

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### Introduction

India achieved independence in August 1947 and was immediately partitioned into two states of India and Pakistan. The Partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947 marks one of the most significant events in modern history, reshaping the Indian subcontinent and leaving a profound impact on its people and its geopolitics. The decision to partition British India was formalized through the Indian Independence Act of 1947, which was based on the Mountbatten Plan proposed by Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India. The plan aimed to create two separate nations—Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> However, the partition process was rushed and chaotic, leading to widespread violence, displacement, and loss of life as millions of people migrated across newly drawn borders to align with their religious communities.

The communal riots that engulfed the subcontinent following this decision, especially in the province of Punjab which was now to be divided between the two countries, led to massive transfer of population. It is estimated that nearly 15 million people were displaced on both sides of the border. About 4.7 million Hindus and Sikhs came into India from western part of Punjab alone which was now a constituent of Pakistan. Almost a similar number of Muslims left the Indian side of the border to migrate to Pakistan. The figures of those killed in the ensuing communal violence remain unconfirmed and contested.<sup>2</sup> Partition led to the displacement and suffering of countless individuals, with communities torn apart and lives irrevocably changed. The legacy of partition



continues to influence the socio-political dynamics of the region, fueling ongoing conflicts and tensions between the two nations of India and Pakistan.

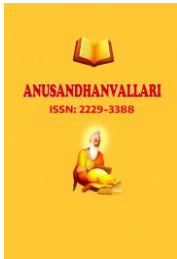
### **Museums and Memorialization**

Museums not just collect, preserve and chronicle material objects of the past for future generations but in the process of selection also define what is important for historical preservation and giving meaning to the past. Today, this construction of narrative through museum spaces may be viewed as an effort to “give voice to the disenfranchised, the oppressed and the silenced”.<sup>3</sup> However it must also be remembered that the visitors to museums also engage in their own way with the objects on display. They thus bring their own meanings to the narrative being constructed and displayed in the museums. The understanding of History is also thus transformed into a personal version far removed from the professional discourse.

Thus, the exhibition and display of objects in museums gives a sense of permanence to the memory of cultures transforming it into “an extra-institutional memory of the museum visitors ... a notion of memory objectified, not belonging to any one individual so much as to audiences, publics, collectives, and nations, and represented via the museum collections”. In this recollection of the past the house key has become as the most emotional symbol of refugee memory of lost homes all over the world<sup>4</sup> reflecting their desire to return home on day. As Susan Crane points out, in collecting these objects, museums not only store cultural memory, they are also directly involved in creating and manipulating it: “Preservation in the museum fixes the memory of entire cultures through representative objects by selecting what ‘deserves’ to be kept, remembered, treasured...”<sup>5</sup>

In recent years collective memory and historical museums have become popular both in academic discourse and in the public sphere. Since the 1980s memory studies have become the focus for recovering and reconstructing the past in ways which had eluded dominant historical narratives. Memory studies have now become popular area of study in various disciplines. Thus, terms like ‘collective memory’, ‘social memory’, ‘historical and cultural memory’, ‘living history’, ‘living tradition’, ‘remembering’ have risen to prominence in academia worldwide and in public domain.<sup>6</sup> This development, specifically in Europe can be traced to memory culture after second World War; subsequent end of the Cold War and unification of Europe and a historical experience of fascist and communist regimes which demands its own place in this remembrance narrative.<sup>7</sup> The transfer of intergenerational memory within family and society has impacted how memory is retrieved and also the materiality of memory. It would not be wrong to say that from mid twentieth century onwards there began a shift in the West which focused on the question of past violence. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum started in 1993 thus set a precedent for societies around the world dealing with past violence and its memorialization.<sup>8</sup> A detailed exploration of the increasing number of museums as alternate sites which record ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ are outside the scope of this essay but it should suffice to mention a few other examples of institutions which display new forms of commemoration intended for societies to come to terms with their past such as the House of terror in Budapest Hungary ; Chile museum of Memory and human rights ; the US Holocaust Memorial Museum Washington and the September 11 Memorial Museum to just name a few.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time museums have also faced criticism ‘that instead of preserving history, the museum would destroy it’ by removing objects away from their natural environment. “Placed in the foreign context of the museum, the objects are meaningless caricatures. The museum thus attests to the failure of the present to construct a reasonable relationship with the past.”<sup>10</sup> Similar opinion has been voiced by Adorno<sup>11</sup>, and in Nora’s work<sup>12</sup> where museums, memorials and archives are described as ‘prosthetic artefacts to replace natural connections to reality.’<sup>13</sup> However, One cannot deny that museums also serve to record man’s exploitation and inhuman behaviour towards fellow human beings as is evident from founding of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience “dedicated to remembering past struggles and addressing their contemporary legacies”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless the criticism remains



as to the selection and presentation of evidence, whether it is material from elite classes or representative of ordinary peoples struggles and to what extent this evidence can be manipulated for the construction of social and cultural narrative. As Davison points out museums may be seen more as “sites of selective instead of collective memory”.<sup>15</sup> However, a new understanding has also emerged that different views can become part of the collective and thus the collective voice can include multiple perspectives and a more inclusive representation of community memory can be created.

### **Memorialization: Case study of India**

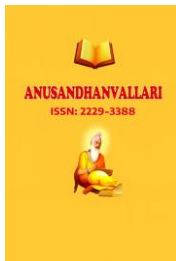
Although a subject of intense study among scholars, Partition was never memorialized in a designated space—no museum, or commemoration of the event was ever attempted. Even once the idea was mooted it was deemed ‘unworkable.’ Partition affected people differently. The experience of Muslim majority regions of Punjab and Bengal was different from UP, Sind, and NWFP. All communities—Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were impacted on both sides of the borders. According to R. Guha “the task of a curator of a putative partition museum shall be infinitely more complex. It may be easy enough to represent the British in villainous terms. But it is far more difficult to be even handed when it comes to the other actors. This is because Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs all subscribe to a narrative in which they were the principal victims.”<sup>16</sup> A different perspective though contends that ‘the country needs a national museum of the partition of India.’ Salman Akhtar reiterated that such a museum would help the people to ‘mourn the trauma of partition’ in a public space and in turn serve as a “national clearing house of information regarding what actually happened in 1947.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Case Study: India**

In India, Museums have developed as repositories of national memory. Museums in India with their colonial origins reflected a complex interplay of power and knowledge and worked as a tool for colonial control. After independence, Museums became dynamic spaces promoting cultural identity and nationalistic goals of unity in diversity.<sup>18</sup>

It was in the 71<sup>st</sup> year of India’s independence that a newly conceived Partition Museum opened in the historic border city of Amritsar in Punjab. The newly defined borders between India and Pakistan had made Amritsar a border city which became the first point of refuge for millions of Hindu and Sikh refugees. Amritsar had also witnessed horrific Partition violence and a large number of Muslims had also fled from India to Pakistan. It seemed pertinent then that the first museum dedicated to the memory of this tragedy of Partition in India be constructed in Amritsar. The museum was conceived in 2015 under the patronage of “The Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust” in New Delhi, India, with the principal goal of setting up the world’s first museum and memorial on Partition. Subsequently another Partition Museum was set up in the capital city of New Delhi in 2023. Delhi as the capital city had also been transformed into a Punjabi city as a result of mass migrations of Hindu and Sikh population from West Punjab. The Partition Museum was thus intended to be a space of memory, healing and reconciliation. The Museum displays ‘artefacts’ carried by the fleeing survivors of Partition violence; Art works by eminent artists depicting Partition horrors and trauma; audio-visual and archival galleries of photographs and interviews with Partition refugees—all focus on the “voices silenced in the pages of history.”<sup>19</sup>

The Partition Museum focuses on the memories which remain unaccounted in official writings. Established as a ‘Peoples Museum’ the museum is intended to fulfil the need to depict Partition as it was experienced by the People.<sup>20</sup> The different galleries of the museum trace the trajectory of India’s national movement to its culmination in independence from British rule and Partition into two nations India and Pakistan. A recent addition to the galleries showcases the “lost homeland from Sindh,” a region located in the extreme south-east of the subcontinent



which became part of Pakistan after Partition. The museum also has on display artefacts donated by Partition survivor families. On display in these galleries are objects such as “utensils, trunks and clothes, a wedding sari, a jewellery box”, and other artefacts belonging to people from diverse backgrounds which appear as symbolic of the refugee’s journey of Partition. Besides these, there are prominent displays of artistic expressions on Partition in the form of paintings and sculptures contributed by eminent artists as Satish Gujral, Kishan Khanna, Arpana Caur and others. The museum also houses oral accounts of Partition refugees which are accessible to visitors through the audio-visual experience. The museum also provides a platform for academics, artists, film makers and writers to engage with the theme of Partition, migration, loss and recovery, courage and resilience through its various seminars, talks and film shows etc. An immersive experience, Partition Museum thus aims to become a repository of “information, documents, footage and stories” of the “human cost of Partition”<sup>21</sup> and the cataclysmic event which defines the nations memory.

However, beyond the curatorial function of this museum which acts as an intermediary between “past atrocity and present social justice” lie several questions which need to be examined. Although the museum proposes to provide a democratic space for public memory and expression of dissonant heritage as well as commemorative practices, it overlooks the complexities of Partition. As pointed out by Pippa Virdee, such ‘state-sanctioned heritage making’ sites and digital projects with the goal of offering memory for mass consumption run the risk of “decontextualis [ing] testimonies....”<sup>22</sup>

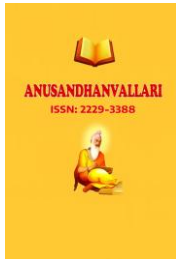
Undoubtedly, the use of oral history and testimonies recorded in the Partition Museum and other digital archives have created an alternative archive. This ‘public way of curating the event’ away from official histories or state driven narratives of the event in turn raise questions of ‘remembering and forgetting.’ What and whose memories are being documented and preserved in the public domain? As pointed out earlier by Susan Crane, museums are not just a repository of cultural memory but are also responsible for ‘creating and manipulating memory.’ Selection of objects reduces how the past is conveyed in the present or not represented in the present. This complexity of representation in the museum’s collection and its differing meaning raises more questions. Is the interaction cathartic or does it encourage a healing process? And more importantly how does the individual memory contextualise with the wider historical perspective. There is a need to exercise caution in the use of this knowledge curated through museum exhibitions and other digital sites which document hitherto unarchived and unheard voices as “these uncritical and commercialised ventures in Partition studies rather than opening the field are in the danger of reproducing statist narratives”<sup>23</sup> The question of Partition violence is not an easy subject to deal with, the plurality of truths and complex relationship between communities which ruptured during those tumultuous days does not make it an easy subject of recall or investigation. These ruptures impact communal relations within the nation as well as India’s interaction with its neighbours.

Memorial museums which serve as repositories of oral narratives and personal objects of remembrance and profess to convey a people’s experience of Partition also need to supplement this account with historical interpretation. It is important that any engagement with the past event must not only elicit empathy but also encourage the visitor to contextualise its historicity. The trauma of Partition and lived experience needs to be transmitted in all its complex and multiple ways for those who are curating the narratives and also for those engaging with it.

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## Content Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the development and trajectory of anti-colonial movement in the subcontinent is outside the scope of this work, however for those interested, a few selective readings from the enormous literature on the subject are recommended—Anita Inder Singh, A. (1987). *The origins of the partition of India, 1936-1947. India*: Oxford University Press; Jalal, A. (1994). *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*,



UK: Cambridge University Press; Talbot, I., Singh, G. (2009). *The Partition of India*. UK, Cambridge University Press; Khan, Y. (2007). *The Great Partition*. Yale University Press; Zamindar, V. F. (2007). *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*. UK.: Columbia University Press.

<sup>2</sup> See, Ansari, S. F. D. (2005). *Life After Partition: Migration, Community and Strife in Sindh, 1947-1962*. Pakistan: Oxford University Press; Kaur, R. (2007). *Since 1947: partition narratives among Punjabi migrants of Delhi*. India: Oxford University Press; Roy, H. (2012). *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-65*. India: OUP India.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Gable and Richard Handler 'Public History, Private Memory', in Amy K. Levin (ed.) *Local museums and the construction of history in America's changing communities* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2007) p60

<sup>4</sup> Duggal, K. S. (2007). *Whom to tell my tale: an autobiography*. India: National Book Trust, India; Hoodbhoy, N. (2011). *Aboard the Democracy Train: A Journey Through Pakistan's Last Decade of Democracy*. U K, Anthem Press; Murshid, N. (2013). *The Politics of Refugees in South Asia: Identity, Resistance, Manipulation*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis; Neeti Nair, 2004, "We left our keys with Our Neighbours: Memory and the Search for Meaning in Post-partitioned India, *acamedia.edu*, accessed 24 April 2026.

<sup>5</sup> Susan A. Crane 'Introduction', in Susan A. Crane (ed.) *Museums and Memory* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2000) p3

<sup>6</sup> Halbwachs, M. (2020). *On Collective Memory*. United States: University of Chicago Press; Connerton, P. (1989). *How Societies Remember*. United States: Cambridge University Press; Erll, A. (2016). *Memory in Culture*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan; Churnjeet Mahn, Anne Murphy (2017) *Partition and the Practice of Memory*. Germany: Springer International Publishing; Guneeta Singh Bhalla, Udayan Das, Fahad Nahvi, Amardip Kumar Singh Ed. *10,000 Memories: A Lived History of Partition, Independence and World War II in South Asia*. United States: 1947 Partition Archive.

<sup>7</sup> Kłás J. "Historical Museums: Between Collective Memory and Politics of Historical Memory". In: Gawel Ł, Kocój E, eds. *Cultural Heritage - Management, Identity and Potential*. Jagiellonian University Press; 2015:107-130.

<sup>8</sup> Levy, D., Sznajder, N. (2010). *Human Rights and Memory*. United States: Pennsylvania State University Press; Olick, J. K. (2013). *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. UK: Taylor & Francis; Rothberg, M. (2009). *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. United States: Stanford University Press; Sodaro, A. (2018). *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*. United Kingdom: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>9</sup> In 1999 many of these museums joined together to form the 'International Coalition of Sites of Conscience,' and now include 370 members from 70 countries. See [www.sitesofconscience.org](http://www.sitesofconscience.org) These museums are working towards transforming 'the lessons of the past to find innovative solutions to related social justice issues today.' Young, J. E. (1993). *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. Germany: Yale University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Kay F. Edge and Frank H. Weiner 'Collective memory and the Museum', in Ian Russell (ed.) *Images, Representations and Heritage: moving beyond modern approaches to archaeology* (New York, Springer, 2006) p227

<sup>11</sup>Theodor W. Adorno (trans Samuel Weber) *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982)

<sup>12</sup>Pierre Nora (1989) "Between memory and history: les lieux de memoire", *Representations* 26 (1989): 7– 25

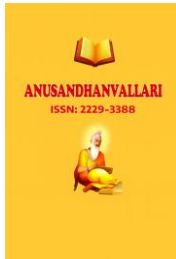
<sup>13</sup> Ibid p7

<sup>14</sup> International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, currently with seventeen members worldwide ([www.sitesofconscience.org](http://www.sitesofconscience.org)). These museums are "dedicated to remembering past struggles and addressing their contemporary legacies

<sup>15</sup> Patricia Davison, 'Museums and the re-shaping of memory', p186, in Gerard Corsane, 2005, *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*. UK: Routledge.

<sup>16</sup> Guha goes on to explain why any comparison with Holocaust museums and the Partition tragedy of India was fraught with complications. In the case of the Holocaust, it was very clear who were the perpetrators, and who the victims. In the case of Partition, on the other hand, the victims were also the perpetrators. He further expressed his reservations that the museum instead of proving to be a 'vehicle of reconciliation' on the contrary might 'create new fissures, open up old wounds.' Guha, R. "Memorializing Partition: The best memorial is one that reconciles, not disrupts", *Telegraph*, 13 August 2013

<sup>17</sup> Salman Akhtar, A Partition Museum, *Times of India*, 2 January 2008



<sup>18</sup> Kavita Singh, Saloni Mathur ed. (2017) *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia*. India: Taylor & Francis.

<sup>19</sup> The Partition Museum in Amritsar as well as in Delhi are heritage buildings of Mughal and Colonial era. In Amritsar the Town Hall, originally built by the British in 1866 has been transformed into Partition Museum and in Delhi the mansion of Mughal Prince Dara Shukoh dating back to 1639 passing through several hands eventually came under the control of East India Company, which explains the colonial architectural features of the building. Post-independence, it served as Delhi State Archaeology Department and in its final avatar was taken over by the TAACT under Governments "Adopt A Heritage" scheme to convert the building into the 'Partition Museum and cultural hub.' <https://www.partitionmuseum.org/museum>

<sup>20</sup> The various galleries in the museum display various aspect of the anti-imperialist struggle and are named so. Displacement, Migration; Refugee lives; Rebuilding Home and finally Hope and Courage.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.partitionmuseum.org>, Partition Museum & Dara Shukoh Library Cultural Hub Dara Shukoh Library, Partition Museum, Ambedkar University, Lothiyam Marg, Old Delhi, Delhi

<sup>22</sup> Virdee, P. (2022). Histories and Memories in the Digital Age of Partition Studies. *The Oral History Review*, 49(2), 328–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2022.2097877>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

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- [2] Theodor W. Adorno (trans Samuel Weber) *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982)
- [3] Pierre Nora (1989) 'Between memory and history: les lieux de memoire', *Representations* 26 (1989): 7– 25
- [4] Patricia Davison (2005) 'Museums and the re-shaping of memory', in Gerard Corsane (ed.) *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: an introductory reader* (London, Routledge, 2005) pp184-194,
- [5] Paul Connerton *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989)
- [6] Ted Svensson (2021) Curating the Partition: dissonant heritage and Indian nation building, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 27:2, 216-232, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2020.1781679
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- [8] Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, *The Partition of India* (Cambridge, UK:Cambridge University Press, 2009)
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- [13] Changing Oral History Practice," *Oral History Review* 44, no. 1 (2017): 94-112