

## **On Listening to Violence: Reflections of a Researcher of the Partition of India**

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### **Speakers and Listeners**

There is a folk saying in north India ; a kind of social warning given to a person in pain. Perhaps it could be understood as the kind of advice a psychologist might offer, albeit with a difference:

*Rahiman nij man ki wyatha, man hi raakho goye  
Sun ithalaiyehain log sab baant na linhe koi*

O Rahim, keep your suffering to yourself  
Listeners will only laugh at you, no one will share your pain

I am not interested in the moral economy that this proverb represents. I am not interested in deconstructing it either. But I am interested in thinking about the way in which this fragment of folk wisdom renders the act of speaking of and listening to pain a serious interpersonal affair. The social fear of being exposed as vulnerable makes the act of speaking and sharing a difficult one. The stigma of being laughed at makes the process of soliciting listeners even more difficult.

### **Researching Partition / Encountering Violence**

My interest in the dynamics of listening emerges out of the encounters I have had during the course of my involvement as a field researcher with *Reconstructing Lives*, a project initiated

by the scholar Ashis Nandy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. This project collected and examined oral histories and memories of survivors of the violence that accompanied the Partition of India in 1947. Among scholars of Partition, the estimated number of deaths during that period fluctuates enormously; between two hundred thousand and two million. The number of displacements was obviously much higher. In fact, statistical figures are used with little historical sensitivity in the writings on Partition. The historical discourse of this turbulent event, as historian Gyanendra Pandey has pointed out, continues to bear the stamp of rumour, aggregating the power not so much of verifiable truth, as of a rumoured statistic: extravagant, expandable, unverifiable, but credible<sup>1</sup>. Serious scholars, as well as right-wing political activists who want to score points, have both used numbers to heighten community and reader response to accounts of Partition trauma.

Many Partition refugees from Pakistan were re-settled in Delhi and other parts of north India. My fieldwork and research interviews were carried out during 2001-02 in the cities of Delhi and Ajmer, and in villages of Jammu (in the state of Jammu & Kashmir).

Most scholarship on the survivors of Partition violence has restricted its exploration of the speech act by problematising the figure of the speaker, the one who remembers and recounts. Yet little, if any, attention has been paid to processes to do with the act of listening. There has been hardly any thought given to the relation between violence, memory and language from the listener's perspective. A shift of emphasis from the speaker to the listener in the course of exploring the speech act helps us get another perspective on the dynamics of the sharing of the burden of violence, and the way in which the memory of violence occupies the field of the production of knowledge. This shift then enables us to understand the ways in which violence gets transmitted in the course of an interview. We begin to think about what happens to people who encounter violence through the experience of listening to accounts of it.

Writing in the context of bearing witness to Holocaust survivor testimonies, psychoanalyst Dori Laub remarks:

(B)y extension, the listener to trauma comes to be participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself.<sup>2</sup>

Following from Laub, one could ask: How does listening to narratives of mass violence affect the listener? Also, how does the state of victimhood get transmitted from the situation (one might even say the body) of the respondent to that of the interviewer?

These questions became very important for me. They compelled me to try and understand not just the discursive politics of mass violence, but also my own evolving self as an interviewer/listener and eventually re-narrator of my interviewees' accounts.

I have come to believe, as a result of the encounters I had in the course of research, that making the presence of the interviewer/archive builder more visible helps resist authority formation within the space of the archive. In the case of this project (more

specifically, with regard to the phase of the project that I am associated with) the issue of listening becomes more relevant, as interviewer and respondent generally enter into dialogue in a semi-structured environment, and the fear of half listening looms large both over the respondent as well as interviewer.

I began to realise that these exercises of structured listening, memories of incomplete interviews and the vivid accounts of the violent past that I was listening to regularly had also begun paying me visits in my dreams. I felt the need for a narrative presentation of these experiences for myself, in order to help come to terms, critically and empathetically, with the subjectivities I was encountering (in myself and others). I also felt the need to confront the pathological aspects of the discursive space of the reconstruction of memory that I was facing in my work.

Here I present some reflections and impressions that emerged during this process ; not as a seamless narrative, but as fragmentary mirrors of the disjointed accounts that I had grown accustomed to listening to. They were written at different times and address the different geographical locations in which these narratives were produced.

#### **Shanti Bai / Chimni Bai, Delhi, 2001**

I do not remember her face any more. Those who know me say that I have a short memory. It has been a long time since I last saw her. In fact, I for one have felt no reason to meet her again. The first and only meeting that I had with her was enough. One could say that it was complete in every respect. An image of that encounter, a vivid slice of time, is imprinted in my memory, but I can recall nothing of her face. The romance, the warmth and the pain ; all that I associate with that encounter ; none of that has betrayed my memory. They have all lived up to my expectations of them. Perhaps this is why I have not met her again, never even thought of going back to see her even once.

I was instructed to meet her again, interact more with her in order to extract more information about her life; but I never felt any desire even to see her. I had developed certain kind of fear. Despite the fact that I myself consciously believed in the significance of at least one more visit to her place, I have even avoided walking down the street where she lives. I simply cannot bear the pain.

On that very day, at the very instant of our parting, I knew for certain that I would never return. I did tell her that I would be visiting her and would love to listen to more about her life, in the coming days. She had very innocently welcomed the idea, and had extended an open invitation, saying, Whenever you wish<sup>2</sup>f

It never happened. The second visit has remained suspended, deferred forever. I can recall how excited I was, and how much in pain I was, even on that day when I had just finished listening to her. I do not remember how and exactly at what moment I left her side. My memory has perhaps not registered my departing gestures. However, I can vividly remember the entire sequence of events leading up to the actual interview. The amnesia that I have about the end of the meeting can be seen as having a logic of its very own. Perhaps it even demands its own interpretations. I anticipate what some of these may be, and I do

care for them. But I do not intend to resolve them, to jump over and away from them, with a neat explanatory manoeuvre, so quickly. I want the romance of the meeting to resist being contained by the violence, the pain and the suffering generated by the meeting itself.

It was an interview that I can only consider to be perfect, in its incompleteness. A scene of grief and violence like other such scenes enacted for me, and to which I listened, in countless variations, on endless occasions. Yet, in the landscape of consciousness, I am still caught within the frames of that particular meeting. Writing this text is an attempt to free myself from those chains. It is said that writing unbinds memory and its violence. However, to put those sufferings into words is itself a painful process. It is a violence of another sort.

### **Dhani Ram, Jammu Dayaran Camp (near Mishriwala), Jammu & Kashmir, 2002**

He said, *Raamdhaari ho jaye, sulah ho jaaye. Raamdhari honi chahiye* (Let there be peace, and friendship. Peace should prevail).

*Raamdhaari* means a state of being where there is no enemy; where there is love, all-pervasive and total love.

This is how he explained the meaning of the word *Raamdhaari* to me. I was talking with him in a makeshift, recently-formed refugee camp. However, I strongly felt that he was not merely talking to me. He was in a dialogue with all his hopes and all his despair. A victim of multiple displacements, Dhani Ram talked a lot about his childhood. He talked about singing songs in Dogri, his mother tongue; songs devoted to the mother goddess. He talked about the game of *kauri* that he was fond of playing in his childhood. He then added sadly that now everybody watches television and no one knows how to sing Dogri songs. When I asked him the question regarding his memory of moments of happiness (as I was instructed to do by the interview protocols), he answered, I knew joy in my childhood. Now I do not know happiness. I eat in the morning not knowing what will happen in the evening. Here we have only sorrows for company, not happiness.

### **Lambodarnath, Mishriwala Camp, Jammu, 2002**

Lambodarnath, a resident of Mishriwala Camp, has a graphic memory, but his loneliness and everlasting melancholia attracted my attention more specifically. He lives alone. On the issue of happiness he said, No happiness. I have never experienced happiness. Never, from my childhood up to now. Now see, I have never worn new clothes ever in my life. I hate pride.

### **Myself, Sadan Jha, Interviewer**

In the course of this journey of listening to violence, I had to cross various phases. Initially, I had a peculiar numbness towards the narratives of violence and displacement that I was hearing. I had an academic background in modern Indian history. I had been exposed to scholarship and readings about the narratives of violence coming from the dark corners of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

In contrast to the expectations that had been generated by my earlier reading of

Partition, I was not coming across case histories embedded in acts of violence that could be distinguished due to their great magnitude. The agencies of physical violence were not always clearly visible in the cases that I kept encountering during my fieldwork. But the terrain of displacement was certainly very rich, and the bodies of the narratives themselves were tortured enough to keep me occupied. In order to listen carefully and be available and alert on all these terrains, I conditioned myself to be hyper-conscious while listening to a narrative. I was resisting my numbness. Very soon this took its toll. I developed persistent symptoms of cough and allergy. The symptoms would not go away, and I realised that coughing came whenever memories of violence and pain made their way into the course of interviews. I would have an uncontrollable coughing fit each time a respondent began narrating their trauma. With the persistent cough came a strange restlessness. Incomplete interviews, rejections and denials of requests to meet with potential interviewees would bring nightmares and sleeplessness in their wake.

In the course of my fieldwork, I realised that there was a storm of feelings within me. I would experience strong outbursts of emotion, directed both at my own self as well as against my respondents. I also came to believe that my participation in the dialogue that I was having was subjecting my respondents to violence. I know that they were not directly aware of this, yet I did believe that there was a violence being directed towards them in number of invisible ways during each encounter.

Also, whenever I got a refusal, or when an interview was abandoned midway, and especially during those long hours when my respondents wanted to tell what I came to think of as the boring and unwanted details of their lives, this violence would spring up from the dark corners of my training in the social sciences. I now realise that this violence within me became even more critical whenever I failed to understand the nature of my own reactions, a failure that was frequent. Somewhere, my body was registering the violence, but was unable to understand and articulate it.

I am still unsure as to whether this was a specific question to do with the relationship between language and pain, or whether it was a more general issue of the epistemology of violence. Abstract questions started fascinating me. I started believing that I was doing great harm to my own body and my own self. I developed a mindset in which I was both a victim as well as a perpetrator.

Most of all, I wanted someone to listen to me as well.

## NOTES

1. Gyanendra Pandey. *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge University Press, 2001, Cambridge and New York), p. 91.
2. Dori Laub. Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitude of Listening. In (eds.) Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 1992, New York/London), p. 57.

