

# Commemoration and the Remembered Past: Communities, Places and Memories of displacement

## Indira Chowdhury

The Partition Museum in Amritsar was inaugurated on 17 August 2017, seventy years after India's Partition. Prior to this, there was no attempt to commemorate the drawing of the Radcliffe line that created two new nations – India and Pakistan in 1947. The Partition – the price paid for India's independence – resulted in the greatest migration in human history was not mentioned in the textbooks that were designed in independent India, although narratives about it proliferated in novels, short stories, theatre and in films. The turn towards oral histories of Partition emerged only in the 1990s and addressed for the first time the dichotomy between the celebratory history of Indian nationalism and the silenced memories of the Partition. This presentation begins with a question about public acts of commemoration and people's memory. What role does acts of remembering play in our historical understanding of events? Using a range of sources from memoirs, fiction, songs and oral histories conducted with those who experienced the Partition, this presentation focusses on the sense of fragmentation of family and community that Partition evokes. "Refugees" who became citizens of independent India in 1947 had to embrace a history that did not include the landscape they were forced to leave behind. The terrain they recollected thus came to be associated with language, culture and artisanal practices, in fact, with their identity. This presentation argues that the remembered past, which has often been dismissed as nostalgia, could in fact, function as a critique of nation-building that the newly formed state insisted on. An analysis of the oral history of Partition can enable us to understand what people who experienced it remember the past and what they forget. Our search for answers could facilitate not only a clearer understanding of India's past and present but more generally enable a reconfiguration of the relationship between memory and history.

Indira Chowdhury is Founder-Director of the Centre for Public History at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design, and Technology, Bengaluru. Formerly professor of English at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, she is also the founder of Archival Resources for Contemporary History (ARCH), Bengaluru, now known as ARCH@Srishti. She has a PhD in history from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London and her book, *The Frail Hero and Virile History* (Delhi, OUP, 1998) won the Tagore prize in 2001. She was awarded the New India Fellowship to work on the manuscript of her recently published book titled *Growing the Tree of Science: Homi Bhabha and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research* (OUP: 2016). Indira is a founding member of the Oral History Association of India. She was President of the Oral History Association of India (2013-2016) and the President of the International Oral History Association (2014-2016).

### EVENT DETAILS:

**26 July 2018 - 5.40 PM**

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