DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

The 'Digital Turn' in Partition Studies: Reading the *1947 Partition Archive* via the Lens of *Archive Fever*

Dr. Sukriti Bhukkal

Assistant Professor

Department of English,

PGGCG, 11, Panjab University, India

Email:sukritibhukkal08@gmail.com

The 'Digital Turn' in Partition Studies: Reading the *1947 Partition Archive* via the Lens of *Archive Fever*

Sukriti Bhukkal

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

Abstract

The paper studies the paradigm shift in the field of Partition studies because of the 'digital turn' and the role that the website 1947 Partition Archive plays in it. Digitalization goes beyond just a change in medium and critically questions the power and control that is rooted in traditional archives. According to Jacques Derrida in Archive Fever (Derrida 1996), the archive, conventionally, is not an independent depository but a disputed realm wherein who is in power becomes relevant in deciding what should be preserved, who will have access and which memories shall be popularised or repressed. Derrida's assertion of the concept of "fever", i.e., the necessity to remember and a concurrent anxiety of forgetting, highlights the intrinsic apprehensions involved in the process of archiving. The 1947 Archive obstructs state-controlled discourse by focusing on the new technology to democratise the production of memory and, consequently, prioritize excluded narratives that failed to find a place in official historical accounts. It emphasizes personalised stories, oral histories, and emotional experiences over impersonal bureaucratic records. It allows for simultaneous existence of varied and often contradictory stories of agony, migration strength and (be)-longing. By revising the archive as an inclusive and heterogeneous space, this digital archive contests traditional definitions of archival data and the control it exercises. In line with Derridean archival theory, it re-evaluates the gatekeeping of records and encourages an all-embracing dialogue with the past. The *1947 Archive* elucidates the manner in which digital archives diligently rewrite the (de)-construction and sharing of history in the digital era, enabling more moral and humanistic forms of recording memory history.

Keywords

Digital, Partition, Memory, Participatory, History

Sukriti Bhukkal
DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

Introduction

"I have no roots. I can be put anywhere," says 76-year-old Aftab Ansari. He was nine when his family took a train to Pakistan from Delhi on August 11, 1947, three days before the Partition was announced, leaving behind everything in Allahabad. The journey, both physical and metaphorical, denotes the emergence of a long-lasting feeling of displacement as they moved away from everything that was familiar to them. Ansari's assertion of rootlessness encapsulates the profound psychological effect of Partition, a traumatic experience shared by millions who not just witnessed the catastrophe but were at the receiving end of its horrors. The Partition of British India in 1947, apart from being a political decision of dividing a territory, was an acute human tragedy. Approximately 14 million people were dislocated, and the area saw one of the most vicious and gory mass migrations in modern history. Despite these facts, for decades, the primary focus has largely been on the elites of the political sphere and on the decrees given by Nehru, Jinnah, Mountbatten, and others. In the recent past, however, there has been a remarkable transition in Partition Studies, with focus shifting to personal accounts, oral narratives, and the so-called ordinary tales of common people. This change has been supplemented by the development of digital media.

The 'Digital Turn' (Smith 2023, 45) in the recording of memory is not limited to its medium, but it questions the dominance of centralised and 'official' archives. As Jacques Derrida describes in *Archive Fever* (Derrida 1996), archives are not neutral repositories of memory, but they are governed by political leanings, which in turn decide the resultant selection and exclusion. Derrida describes the "fever" as the compulsion to remember with an accompanying panic of

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

forgetting, thereby unveiling the conflict that resides at the core of archival production. (Derrida 1996, 19).

The 'turn' (Smith 2023, 45) in Partition historiography has led to a transfiguration in how the scholars, researchers, and in general, the audiences deal with the complicated and tortuous repercussions of the 1947 Partition of India. For most of the period after 1947, scholarly and popularly reading of the history of the Partition were influenced mainly by official records, i.e., state-controlled archives, government reports, census documents, and literary reproductions. These traditional platforms, as observed, have the tendency to lend importance to the viewpoints of the politically powerful and state-led institutions. The lived realities of common people have oftentimes been pushed to the margins by these regime-controlled narratives. The digital turn, however, has brought into the mainstream the voices of people and communities who have been excluded from the archives. In the context of Partition Studies, this change has made possible a more comprehensive and an all-encompassing approach to recording memory and the trauma that comes with it, especially via the utilization of oral stories and community-sourced history. *The 1947 Partition Archive* stands as a pioneering example of this shift, wherein it strives to conserve and collate the lived experiences of migrants from the Indian subcontinent, i.e., India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. What distinguishes this project from the others is the process of digital storytelling, as it integrates digital copies of "antiquated photographs, documents, and images of personal objects of historical value, gathered from personal collections." By lending priority to affective memory over official records, the *Partition Archive* disturbs the traditional hierarchies of history.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

Instead of interacting with the stories of survivors as ancillary or anecdotal, the project foregrounds them at the core of historical investigation. So, it is not just able to (un)silence the silent voice but also change the dynamics of the ways in which history is being recorded and remembered. This "democratization of historical documentation" (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.) is emblematic of how archives are conceived and understood. Conventionally, archives have been linked to power, control, and state legitimacy. In this context, Derrida states that the archive is rarely a neutral collection of information. It is, in fact, limited by the questions of access, authority and interpretation. Derrida asserts that the urge to control and preserve mostly co-exists with "exclusion and loss" (Derrida 1996, 7). Each attempt to remember is simultaneously an act of forgetting, as a choice becomes necessary about what is included, what is excluded, and who is deciding that. Viewing the website through the lens of Derrida's work, it becomes easier to grasp the political and epistemological elements of the digital turn. The *Archive* appears as a "counter-archive" (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.) that, by its very nature, poses a challenge to the supremacy of the state-controlled discourse and is able to take back the right to remember. It avoids the temptation of sanitizing or homogenizing memory; instead, it accepts the possibility of plurality of perspectives, disagreements, and emotions. The digital nature of the *Archive* allows it to transcend the temporal and spatial limitations. The testimonies become, as a consequence, accessible to a "global audience, including descendants of Partition survivors, academicians and the diaspora community" (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.). The exploration of history through interactive maps, timelines, and searchable databases has given rise to newer forms of engagement, and this ease of access is a more participatory way of interacting with history. Visitors of the

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

website, thus, are not just passive recipients but have the capacity to become active participants in recording memory.

The digitalisation of oral histories, at the same instant, raises significant methodological and ethical concerns. For example, how are stories cataloged? Who decides which narratives are to be showcased? What happens to the testimonies on these websites when they evolve or cease to exist? These questions recall Derrida's warning about the unpredictability and the precarious nature of all archives, including digital ones. Even though digital archives declare immortality, their existence does depend on technological and institutional policies and developments. Nevertheless, in spite of these challenges, the *Archive* stands as a critical point in historical practice and public memory as it re-envisions the lineations of memory and particularly, partition memory. The project not only preserves history but also catechizes the basic process by which historical records are created, remembered, and propagated in the digital age.

Exploring Archival 'Memory' and Practices

Central to the analysis of key works associated with archival memory and practices is Urvashi Central to this tradition is Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Butalia's text comprises research that was conducted for over a decade and includes extensive interviews, archival documents, diaries, letters and memoirs. It reveals the intimate and intensely gendered experiences that official documents fail to take into account. By recording women's narratives about abduction, sexual violence, forced conversions, and displacement, Butalia, along with unveiling forgotten memories, challenges historiographies that

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

are embedded in patriarchal silences. Her work successfully expresses that the trauma of Partition is carried beyond the politics of it and seeps into the social fabric through violence perpetrated against women and families. Moreover, Butalia also incorporates the voices of socio-economically marginalized groups, such as those of children and Dalits (Butalia 1998). In this light, she widens the horizons of archival practices as she enters a space that surpasses the elite and male-centric narratives. "The other side of silence" becomes apparent as her personal family narrative, the excruciating separation, loss, and alienation experienced by members are accounted for. While writing about these experiences, she also explains the complicated intergenerational aftermath of trauma that only oral histories can reveal.

Jacques Le Goff's *History and Memory* similarly questions the long-established archival epistemologies by highlighting that archives operate as tools of power that create what is remembered or forgotten. Le Goff's concept of the "democratization of social memory" proposes expansion of historiographical methods beyond elite or state-sanctioned records. He also advocates for the inclusion of oral histories and other forms of popular memory, thus challenging "exclusive narratives imposed by political authority" (Le Goff 1992, 99). Le Goff demonstrates that archives are not impartial but are greatly influenced by the politics of memory and the construction of identity. This assertion validates Bhalla's *Archive*'s subversion of traditional archival gatekeeping that has been predominant for ages.

Ted Svensson's "Curating the Partition: Dissonant Heritage and Indian Nation-Building" provides a critical viewpoint on the obstacles that digital oral history projects are confronted with in balancing the conflict between individual memory and collective historical understanding.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

Svensson cautions that even though intimate narratives are precious for personalising history, their isolated presentation can cause the fragmentation of Partition's broader socio-political contexts. It can also lead to the production of a depoliticised and sanitised heritage discourse (Svensson 2020). His critique calls for curatorial ways that embed testimony within historical frameworks to avoid over-simplification and to acknowledge varied legacies of colonial violence and nationalist testimonies. Svensson's intervention is against uncritical and celebratory digital projects, in favour of reflexivity and critical contextualisation.

Pippa Virdee's recent research complements this critical engagement by examining the digital transformation of memory practices associated with Partition (Virdee 2023). Virdee interrogates how digital archives, including the *Archive,* analyse the complexities of accessibility, authenticity, and scholarly enthusiasm in representing complicated, often contested memories. She underlines the risks linked to digital mediation of memory, that is, the inclination toward the flattening of accounts or unintended reproduction of hegemonic discourses, while taking note of the transformational capacity of digital platforms. Her work insists on the requirement for a persistent critical reflection on the politics of representation and inclusion in digital oral history projects, asserting that democratization must come along with epistemic vigilance.

In addition, Paul Veyne's epistemological description in *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology* deconstructs the assumptions of historical objectivity, focusing on history as a socially negotiated narrative shaped by contemporary ideological forces. Veyne's skepticism vis-à-vis the concept of a singular historical truth stresses the rationality of plural, contradictory accounts, accentuating the importance of diverse narratives such as those that are conserved in oral

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

histories. His text places Bhalla's *Archive* within a postmodern historiographical framework that favours multiplicity of narratives and complicates the claims of a clear conclusion, aligning with the *Archive*'s position as an organic, contentious domain of memory production.

The aforementioned works produce a detailed theoretical framework that places the *1947 Partition Archive* not only as a reservoir but as an evolutionary epistemological and methodological endeavor. By consolidating gendered and subaltern narratives, challenging the authority of archives, and critically interacting with digital memory practices, these interventions illustrate how archives become sites of power, resistance, and continuous re-negotiation. The Archive typifies the digital turn in Partition studies, where memory, history, and identity are actively and explicitly re-viewed.

Decentralisation of *Archive* and Derrida's *Archive Fever*

The advent of the *Archive* marks a crucial shift from traditional archival structure by decentralizing the construction and exhibition of historical understanding. As opposed to the conventional archives, which are mostly institutionally curated and state-controlled, the digital and community-sourced initiative unfolds newer forms of historical engagement. It tends to privilege individual memory and lived experience over top-down narratives. To comprehend the impact of this shift, it is necessary to view Derrida and his text *Archive Fever*, which offers a fundamental critique of the character, role, and politics of the archive.

Derrida views the archive, as mentioned before, as a site of power that is moulded by the hierarchies of authority, ideology, and institutional control. The archive has the potential to

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

determine what is memorised and, by extension, what is forgotten. He terms it 'archontic power': the capacity of commanding, classifying, and guarding knowledge.

The act of archiving, according to Derrida, is never not biased; it will always involve a process of selection, omission, and curation—all of which are connected to larger regimes of truth and legitimacy.

Thus, archives not only store the past, but they are proactive in its construction (Derrida 1996, 2-4). For a long time, the predominant narratives of the 1947 Partition have been comprehended via formal archives that are governed by the state, such as the national libraries, public record offices, and governmental organisations. These institutions have conventionally emphasized the macro-historical dimensions of Partition: the role of important political figures, the legislative mechanisms of decolonisation, and the geopolitical remapping of borders. While it is important, this reading subverts the profoundly human repercussions of Partition, experienced by millions. The "official" archives frequently push to the periphery the voices of those who are already marginalized, such as the experiences of women, Dalits, economically weak Muslims, tribal communities, and rural migrants. Their experiences of abduction, sexual violence, separation, and survival are either absent or misrepresented in these records, as they are found to be more concerned with administrative factors. Therefore, *1947 Partition Archive* emerges as a powerful alternative as it collects oral histories directly from the survivors, most of whom are old, illiterate, or located in ignored areas. Their testimonies are chronicled in a multilingual format, which comprises audio, video, and written transcripts, and then converted into a digital form that is accessible to a global audience. The radical expansion of its scope aligns with Derrida's opinion

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

of the archive as being both a site of desire and anxiety or 'archive fever'. It can be postulated that the tension between preservation and erasure is embodied by Bhalla's *Archive*. On one hand, it responds to a pressing need to preserve rapidly waning memories, and on the other, it recognises that no archive can thoroughly encapsulate the complications associated with the Partition. The stories gathered are partial, subjective, and fragmented, but it is precisely this affective element that acquires meaning and disputes the illusion of archival totality.

In addition, *Archive* reconstructs not only "what" is archived but "how". The methods - "crowdsourced documentation, volunteer-driven interviewing and open-access dissemination" (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.) undercut the hierarchical logic of conventional archives. It transfigures the archive from a static, custodial foundation to an effective and inclusive process. This methodological shift can be equated with Derrida's insistence on a more free-flowing, open-ended conceptualization of the archive. An archive that is less concerned with control and more to do with engagements, exchange, and ethical competence. The ramifications of this decentralisation of archival practices are far-reaching and extensive. The *Archive* recovers hushed voices and at the same time, impels the scholars to revise the methods and their sources utilised for historical inquiry. It also demands that Partition Studies should shift beyond textual analysis and elite historiography so as to achieve a more grounded, broad-based approach. Furthermore, it provokes a re-definition of historiographical authority itself, i.e., who will record history? What will count as evidence? How should we manoeuvre through the politics of memory in the context of postcolonialism, where the testimonies of the state often downplay minority experiences? Herein, the website represents a shift in the pattern of how the history of Partition is recorded, accessed,

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

and understood. Through the decentralisation of memory and embracing a public-spirited approach, it defies the limitations of conventional state archives and leads to new opportunities for a more just and community-based historiography. In the context of Derrida, the *Archive* has subjected the simple repository of memories to metamorphosis, where the ethics, politics, and poetics of memory are continuously challenged and reconceptualized.

Case Studies from the *1947 Partition Archive*

(i) Aftab Ansari

Ansari, in his seventies, narrates a passionate remembrance of his family's journey from Delhi to Pakistan on 11 August 1947, merely three days before the official declaration of Partition. When he was nine, he was unexpectedly uprooted from Allahabad, leaving his *home*. In his trembling voice, he recounts the chaos of departure: hastily packed photographs, neighbours who turned into strangers overnight, and the dreadful terror of a journey with no definite destination (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.). There is a sense of 'unbelonging' in his description, and while defining himself, he states, "I can be put anywhere". He is seen to be evoking the Derridean paradox of the archive, i.e., the desire for preservation that cannot be separated from the anxiety of loss. His narrative stands in complete opposition to the triumphant narratives of national liberation, re-looking at 1947 not as the dawn of freedom but as a wound experienced by many. Conventional archives, ruled by what Derrida terms 'the authority of consignation', have the tendency to negate such affective recollections. The focus is more on empirical documentation instead of existential truth. In opposition, the oral archive notes the shock of remembrance itself: pauses, repetitions, and emotional cadence that denote the presence of trauma. In this regard,

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

Ansari's narrative is what Aleida Assmann terms the 'cultural work of memory' wherein the process of remembering becomes a way of repairing history (Assmann 2011). The *Archive,* by recording the story, performs a dual task: it disturbs the administrative monopoly and legitimizes emotion as historical confirmation. By virtue of being a part of the *Archive,* Ansari's story earns a transnational scope, placing a person's pain within a larger diasporic experience.

(ii) Joginder Singh

Singh's oral narration from the *Archive* foregrounds an aspect that has usually been ignored—gendered violence of decolonisation. He was born in Pakistan in pre-partition Lahore, and in a frenzied journey to India, he was separated from his six sisters, who were kidnapped by armed men (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.). Tormented by suppressed years of grief, he expresses that he never got to see them again. The experience is emblematic of both personal regret and moral complications of historical silences. In reminiscing about the fate of his sisters, Singh is seen to be performing an act of archival protest. State documents are observed to sanitize Partition's sexual violence, reducing women's violation to mere footnotes or statistics. These deletions, produced because of political interests and patriarchal arrogance, generate what Butalia called "the buried voices" of Partition. Singh's narrative unveils the buried spaces of mourning, rendered invisible by the twin facets of nationhood and honour. His statements transcend the bounds of verifiable accounts and break into the terrain of affective witness, when emotion is testimony. The lack of closure in Singh's life, characterised by a lifelong search and perpetual waiting, constitutes what Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory", a state wherein trauma resonates across generations (Hirsch 2008). As Singh's private anguish is transformed into collective

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

reflection through the space of the digital archive, it allows for the right to mourn publicly that has otherwise been denied. His narration is also cathartic and political as it emerges from the spectral presence of what can never be entirely archived: the lost bodies of his sisters.

(iii) Praful Kumar

Forced to flee his home in what is now Kashmir, Kumar witnessed the murder of both his parents, his father shot in front of him and his mother brutally killed with a sword (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.). His narrative, which is punctuated by silence and unexpected bursts of clarity, indicates the erratic temporality of trauma where memory refuses linear comprehensibility. His story reveals the paradox of childhood memories: he speaks both as the subject who suffered and the adult who recollects. This duality is better articulated by Cathy Caruth, "trauma that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (Caruth 2016). His description of wandering in refugee camps, unable to understand his parents' killings, exhibits the psychological disturbance that the child survivors of violence suffer from. Kumar's story also conveys an internalized dissonance of memory, a fluctuation between forgetting and compulsive recall that no official record could communicate. His story, layered with pauses and tears, connotes the presence of affective truth and the act of narrating his pain, becomes an experience that exposes him to that torture again.

The importance of children is also foregrounded as critical figures in Partition memory studies, through Kumar's narration. Child survivors, unlike adults whose recollections are relatively coherent, embody what Dori Laub terms the "rupture in witnessing". These testimonies,

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

thus, contest the conventional dependence of narrative order and call for newer methodological approaches in line with emotions and silences.

Also, in its digital form, his story promotes subjectivity as a valid aspect of knowledge and trauma, which was once an unmentionable element, becomes a legitimate mode of collective memory.

(iv) Sardar Amar Singh

Singh, born in 1932 in Chak 89 RB, Lyallpur, narrates the violent tragedy that was unleashed on him, his family, and caused the loss of assets such as property and livestock (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.). More importantly, it led to the loss of tightly knit community networks that lived through generations. His account focuses on his journey from his ancestral land to alien territory, and along with it, the psychosocial ruptures that came with the displacement.

His narrative reminds one of Butalia's critique, wherein she asserts that Partition's human cost extends far beyond border demarcation to incorporate loss of home, identity, and affiliation (Butalia 1998, 22). By highlighting Singh's life, the *Archive* counters redundant accounts that have homogenised migration as mere statistics, not including any personal accounts of affliction. The *Archive*, in a way, restores the emotional, psychological, and material ruptures experienced by individuals.

(v) Krishna Kumari

Kumari, hailing from Rawalpindi, Pakistan, reveals the gendered dimensions of the Partition, an underrepresented discourse in historical and archival practice. Her haunting

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

experience of abduction in the midst of communal riots divulged the systemic attack on women's bodies during the tumultuous point of history, namely, sexual violence, forced conversions, and honour killings (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.).

Her story lays bare the limitations of a misogynist historiography that does privilege masculinist notions of nationalism while diminishing women as victims or symbols of honour. In this light, Butalia argues that women's stories unsettle the 'heroic' and patriarchal narratives of Partition by changing silence into vocal testaments that opposed state-sanctioned accounts (Butalia 1998, 37). Kumari's account illustrates these "buried voices", lending epistemic control to silenced histories and expanding the *Archive*'s mandate. Also, it contributes to trauma theory by exemplifying Judith Herman's conception of trauma as the fragmentation and fracture of memory, and the act of giving a statement serves as a link between silence and speech (Herman 1992, 24). As Kumari records her story, she undertakes a task by stitching fragmented memories back into a collective past. Through her narrative, the *Archive* emerges as an active agent within feminist historiography, exhibiting that archival work must adopt gender sensitive methods that highlight women's lived experiences.

(vi) Abdul Rahim Khan

Born in 1940 in Amritsar, Khan's account too offers a child's viewpoint on the violence of Partition, thereby expanding the Archive's extent to include inter-generational psychological impacts of displacement. Even though he was young at the time, Khan distinctly remembers the panic and disorientation during the family's expulsion (The 1947 Partition Archive n.d.).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

Though young at the time, Khan vividly recounts the panic and disorientation during the family's migration, underlining how such early traumatic experiences form a part of his and his descendants' emotional landscape. His narrative elaborates on the transmission of unresolved historical pain to subsequent generations who inherit the memories through familial and cultural modes. This story too aligns with Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, which proposes that the heirs of survivors remember trauma via mediated sharing and not directly. This transmission shapes their identity and sense of belonging in profound ways (Hirsch 2008, 106). Khan's description of dealing with anxiety, dislocation, and fragmented affiliations shows this dynamic and highlights the Archive's role in protecting narratives that challenge simplistic, event-focused histories. Moreover, Khan's story examined the epistemological limitations of archival knowledge. This account aligns with Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, which posits that descendants of survivors "remember" trauma not through direct experience but via mediated transmission, shaping their identities and histories in profound ways (Hirsch 2008, 106). Khan's description of enduring anxiety, dislocation, and fragmented belonging vividly illustrates this dynamic and highlights the *Archive*'s role in preserving narratives that challenge simple and specific histories. Furthermore, Khan's testimony calls into question the epistemological boundaries of archival knowledge. Trauma Studies also reveal that the typical archival practices usually eliminate emotionally charged and discontinuous childhood memories because they cannot conform to narrative coherence or documentary verification (Caruth 2016, 4). The addition of his testament, therefore, indicates *Archive*'s undertaking to expand archival norms to espouse subjectivity as a form of historical recordkeeping.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

Theoretical Implications

Studying the *Archive* via the foundational theoretical frameworks of Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak allows for the inquiry to be placed within broader conversations of subalternity, memory, and archival power. The combination of the Archive's oral histories and Derrida's discourse on the archive enables the expansion and redefinition of what comprises historical knowledge, which in turn makes history a more participatory, fluid, and ethically complex practice.

Guha's revolutionary work with the Subaltern Studies Group established a critical structure that does not accept history as the domain of colonial or nationalist elites alone. Guha and his group intended to retrieve the "small voices" of peasants, workers, and other socially excluded groups usually not included in dominant historiographies (Guha 1983). His work gives attention to the significance of "history from below", where subaltern agency, reluctance and subjectivity obturate the controlled narrations written by colonial or nation-state powers (Guha and Spivak 1988, 9). In this regard, the *Archive* is crucial in positioning individual testimonies in the centre that induce the lived trauma of dislocation, loss, and survival - dimensions erased by the prevailing national histories that are infatuated with just political and territorial interests (Guha and Spivak 1988, 10). The *Archive*, hence, fills a historiographical gap, prioritizing plural and intersectional experiences that contest unified and teleological narratives.

Along with Guha's research work, Spivak's critical commentary, particularly her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" investigates the constraints and potential of subaltern agency and representation (Spivak 1988, 271). Spivak interrogates the manner in which subaltern voices,

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

especially those of women and other dismissed sections, have been repressed or silenced within mainstream discourses, including historical archives (Spivak 1988, 287). She elaborates on the epistemic violence that characterizes representation, warning that while the subaltern may "speak", the super-structures of power negotiate and often appropriate their speech. The oral record in the Archive, thus, performs a dual task: the recollecting of suppressed histories of trauma and gendered violence frequently deleted in official records, while also raising significant concerns about the methods in which these stories are recorded, archived, and made accessible in digital forms (Spivak 1988, 277). Bhalla's *Archive* urges on recognizing affective memory, pauses, silences, and tone as valid historical evidence, in line with Spivak's assertion for a deconstructive approach that regards subaltern alterity without subverting it by hegemonic compartments.

Derrida's conception of the archive further magnifies this theoretical synthesis by highlighting that archives are not passive storehouses; they are powerful sites that actively shape collective memory by determining what is preserved and what is left out (Derrida 1996, 7). The *Archive* leverages the insight of *Archive Fever,* wherein there exists a desire to preserve history coupled with the apprehension of loss and erasure. The digital project transforms the archival practices via crowdsourcing and community participation. A shared, dynamic process of memory production is achieved by dismantling the historiographical authority conventionally monopolized by the state and its led institutions (Derrida 1996, 22). It becomes important within the field of Partition Studies, where trauma and displacement produce fragmented and deranged memories impervious to closure or single truth claims. The *Archive*, because it is digital, expands its reach worldwide and is also able to incorporate diaspora voices. These inputs complicate ultra-nationalist

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

historiographies by transcending geographical borders and inviting conversation on hybridity, identity, and generational dissemination.

The digital project's methodology includes primary scholarly debates on historiographical democratization. Memory plays the role of cultural work, repairing and disputing official historical forgetfulness (Assmann 2011, 120). The *Archive* undertakes this task by elevating oral histories as legitimate sources, thereby challenging institutional gatekeeping and disrupting elitist ways of producing historical knowledge. Additionally, the *Archive*'s digital framework allows for interplay, interpretation, and collaboration, indicating what Ann Rigney describes as the shift from "memory to mediators of memory" where cultural memory is actively produced and mediated rather than inactively protected (Rigney 2004, 143). This flexibility encapsulates the possibilities and multiplicities of Partition memories, rejecting teleological nation-building narratives and presenting, instead, a constellation of memories that collectively shape a more inclusive framework of historiography. Moreover, the *Archive*'s interaction with diaspora narratives is necessary for going beyond nationalist restrictions. The website participates in what Michael Rothberg theorizes as "multidirectional memory" by including stories from dislocated communists globally. Trauma is remembered across communities in a manner that contests simplistic victim-perpetrator binaries and national borders (Rothberg 2009, 29). This global and decentralized point of view augments Partition historiography by integrating voices of amalgamation, cultural negotiation, and inter-generational trauma, themes often sidelined in territorialized histories. The implications of the *Archive* are observed across scholarly fields of subaltern critique, postcolonial studies, archival practices, memory studies, and digital humanities. The *Archive* re-interprets

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

historical knowledge as engaging and comprehensive, influenced by Guha's focus on recovering subaltern agency, Spivak's critical interrogation of representation and voice, and Derrida's concept of the archive as a potent site of memory and forgetting. It interprets how digital technologies can equalise history-making by broadening its approach, encouraging community co-existence, and accepting the fragmented, open-ended nature of memory.

Methodological Challenges

Memory, by its virtue, is subjective and fluid and shaped by affect, temporality, and the explanatory necessity to create meaning amidst trauma. The challenges in the methodology involved in the *Archive*'s utilization of oral narratives are indicative of wider discussions within oral history, memory studies, and archival theory. Unlike official records that claim objectivity and archival fixedness, oral histories reveal heterogeneity, silences, and select remembrances that change across narrators, contexts, and time (Zafar 2025, 29). This fluidity, while challenging traditional historiographical paradigms, is primary to the *Archive'*s epistemological perspective, which prefers emotional and embodied truths as important aspects of historical understanding. Oral history, instead of factual accuracy, leads to knowledge production through "interpretative truths" (Portelli 1991, 55) that unveil how communities memorize and try to make sense of their past. They also shed light on the affective aspects of history, reproducing trauma and resilience in a manner that static written records cannot. The *Archive* subsumes this receptivity by granting errors and contrariness in discourses to appear, allowing for a critical engagement within the deep-rooted instability of memory itself (Raychaudhari 2021, 69). This methodological ease lines up

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

with Paul Connerton's concept of 'social remembering' where memory is ritualised, contested, and re-constructed rather than being permanent (Connerton 1989, 42).

Even so, scholars dealing with such oral archives are confronted with the tedious task of balancing authenticity with critical scrutiny. Inclusions, deletions, and digital transcription invariably mediate the narratives, expressing concerns about "archival re-ordering" that can amend or expunge traits of subaltern voices, as Ayan Raychaudhari warns while reflecting on the India-Pakistan Partition oral/histories (Raychaudhari 2021, 71). This modification or even amplification of specific memories may duplicate the same power dynamics oral history seeks to disrupt. Furthermore, Pippa Virdee and others have highlighted that digital oral archives, by their dependence on voluntary participation, pre-existing socio-economic and gendered exclusions, thereby repeat the already prevalent archival silences (Zafar 30). The 'digital turn' in archival practice also means that oral histories can be contextualized carefully, juxtaposing personal testimonies against broader socio-political structures to avert "essentialising or romanticizing memory" (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, 121). Also, Ann Rigney upholds a "dynamic" interaction with archives, where users identify archives as organic entities that evolve and are shaped by contemporary social, political, and technological factors (Rigney 2004, 158). This demands a reflexive methodology that can handle the way in which digital access, annotation, and transfer can affect the production and reception of memories. Further, Marianne Hirsch discussed the concept of 'postmemory' as mentioned before, describing how trauma permeates through generational boundaries, leading to memories that are comprehended and interpreted across time (Hirsch 2008, 15). Oral narratives in the *Archive* time and again reflect this perpetual negotiation, with the storytellers re-constructing events while grappling with the consequent socio-historical

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

shifts and personal retrospections. Therefore, the challenges of the *Archive*'s oral history approach stand for the epistemological tensions between memoir and history, emotion and evidence, subjectivity and objectivity. This necessitates the application of a methodology that is interdisciplinary, ethical, and contextually foregrounds both the power and the invisibility of oral histories, especially for digital memorial practices.

Conclusion

Guneeta Bhalla's *The 1947 Partition Archive*, as an initiative, stands for a paradigm shift and moves beyond mere digital preservation to represent a critical intervention in historiographical practice. The participatory and decentralized model, by its very existence, puts up a challenge to the hegemonic, state-centric narrative that has for a long time controlled the historical discourse on Partition. The *Archive*, therefore, along with Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial theory, questions the 'elitism, exclusion and silencing' (Guha 1983; Spivak 1988) embodied in official archives and national histories. The Archive discards the concept of a singular or monolithic truth as it elevates the voices of common people who generally face prejudice on the basis of gender, caste, religion, or geography. In this attempt, the project has re-visioned historical knowledge as plural and occupying a terrain that is contested.

Derrida's *Archive Fever*, while providing a powerful theoretical framework, is able to justify that archives are imbued with power dynamics and determine what is to be protected and what is to be pushed into oblivion. The history, thus, that emerges from these traditional archives is partial and provisional, and the *Archive* shifts power from institutions to individuals.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64501/q3fxm776

What also needs to be pointed out, however, is that several critics have also warned against the misuse of memory and its wrongful commodification. The digital format makes memory accessible but is vulnerable to such exploitation. Also, a cautious approach should be adopted while celebrating subaltern speech, and the complexities attached should not remain ignored. Accordingly, the *Archive* must continuously navigate the oscillation between enabling subaltern presentation and re-inscription of exclusionary epistemologies. Moreover, the *Archive*'s transnational character is able to upraise Partition as a global historical event, bringing the memories of the diaspora too into focus. In conclusion, the *Archive* accepts ethical, manifold, and participatory memory-making. Contesting mainstream narratives and informed by Derrida, Guha, and Spivak, the digital project redefines archival authority and exemplifies the possibilities of historiography in the postcolonial era.

References

Assmann, Aleida. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge University Press.

Butalia, Urvashi. 1998. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Viking.

Caruth, Cathy. 2016. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. JHU Press.

Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1996. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. University of Chicago Press.

Guha, Ranajit. 1983. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Oxford University Press.

Guha, Ranajit and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds. 1988. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Oxford University Press.

Herman, J. L. 1992. *Trauma and recovery*. Basic Books.

Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. "The Generation of Postmemory." In *Poetics Today*, Vol 29, no. 1. pp 103-28.

Holstein, James A., and Jaber F. Gubrium. 1995. *The Active Interview*. SAGE Publications.

Laub, Dori. 1991. "Truth and Testimony The Process and the Struggle." In *American Imago*, Vol. 48, No. 1, Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma. pp. 75-91. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26304032.

Le Goff, Jacques. 1992. *History and Memory*. Translated by Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman. Columbia University Press.

Portelli, Alessandro. 1991. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. State University of New York Press.

Raychaudhuri, Ayan. 2021. "'This, Too, Is History': Oral History, the 1947 India–Pakistan Partition and the Risks of Archival Re-ordering." In *Oral History*, Vol 49, no. 2.

Rigney, Ann. 2004. "The Dynamics of Cultural Memory: Transnationalism, Globalization, and Local Memory." In *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol 7, no. 2 (2004): pp. 155-75.

Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford University Press.

Smith, Michael D. 2023. *The Abundant University: Remaking Higher Education for a Digital World*. MIT Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. University of Illinois Press. pp. 271–313.

Svensson, Ted. 2020. "Curating the Partition: Dissonant Heritage and Indian Nation Building." In *International Journal of Heritage Studies* Vol 26, no. 7. pp. 650–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1781679.

The 1947 Partition Archive. https://in.1947partitionarchive.org/.

Veyne, Paul. 1984. *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*. Wesleyan University Press. https://archive.org/details/writinghistoryes0000veyn

Virdee, Pippa. 2023. "Histories and Memories in the Digital Age of Partition Studies." In *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* Vol 46, no. 3. pp. 495–510. https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2022.2097877.

Zafar, Masooma. 2025. "Digital Oral Archives (1947 Partition Archive) and Material Memorial Turn in the Partition Historiography." In *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society* Vol 38, no. 1.