

Book Review

**Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*,
New Delhi: Viking, 1998,
Price: Rs. 295.**

Urvashi Butalia is an Indian feminist and historian. She was born in Ambala, Haryana, India in 1952. *The Other Side of Silence* has been one of the most influential books in South Asian studies in the past decade. The book, a product of more than seventy interviews Butalia conducted with survivors of the partition, emphasizes the violence against women in the collective experience of the tragedy. Originally from a family of Partition refugees, she chose to discuss the horror and brutality at the time. According to Butalia, Partition is not a closed chapter in history. Her study is based on *Oral History*.

The partition of India into two countries, India and Pakistan, caused one of the most massive human convulsions in history. What was partition meant to achieve and what did it actually achieve? Cyril Radcliffe, the English lawyer, was given just 36 days to draw a line between India and Pakistan. Within a space of two months in 1947 more than 12 million people were displaced and a million died. More than 75,000 women were abducted and raped. Countless children disappeared. Homes, villages, communities, families, and relationships were destroyed. Yet more than half a century later little is known of the human dimensions of this event. In *'The Other Side of Silence'*, Urvashi Butalia experiences their private pain—at the centre of this epochal event.

Through interviews conducted over a decade and close examination of diaries, letters, memoirs and the occasional parliamentary documents, Butalia discusses how the marginalized groups of actors in Indian history, women, children, and *harijans*—the lowest of the low in Hindu society—have been affected by this upheaval. The interviewees clearly reveal the bitterness of Partition in their private lives.

Butalia has composed her book from what she calls “the underside” of Partition history, from the oral narratives of ordinary people, primarily from women and other marginalized groups like children and Harijans. But she has also reminded us how we cannot rely on the interviews of women taken in front of their male family members because they would never allow them to talk about their ‘personal lives’.

She has at times mentioned the general hatred towards the Muslim community but did not interview a single person from the community herself. This, in a sense, shows her bias. She interviewed Bir Bahadur Singh from ThoaKhalsa, Rawalpindi. He told her, “I feel that our elders were so guilty towards the Musalmaans, that they sinned so much against them that for the next hundred years we deserve to suffer whatever punishments there are for us. We deserve them, we have sinned so much.” While discussing various groups of society, she should have discussed one of the more important groups of Muslims to balance out her study. She tried her best to avoid biases. She talked about Muslim suffering but never interviewed them directly. Instead she used the interviews taken by others, like Peter and Satti. They interviewed Murad, a *tonga* driver, for their film. In that interview Murad revealed how ‘class is not so easily dismissed after all’ and that ‘landlords go to the landlords and the poor go to the poor.’

She criticized herself at times and tells about the drawbacks of collecting oral history from such sections of society. For example, when she talks about the children in chapter 6, she says, “No history of Partition that I have seen so far has had anything to say about children. This is

not surprising: as subjects of history, children are difficult to deal with. The historian may well ask: how do you recover the experiences of children, as children? As a tool of history, memory is seen to be unreliable at the best of times, with little to offer by way of 'facts'. Childhood memories filtered through the prism of adult experience—these may be acceptable as autobiography, but not necessarily as history. How, then, do we make sense of the experiences of children?"

At the end, she mentioned her intention of working on the positive stories of partition, on how people were ready to help each other during that trying time. This aspect still needs to be explored more.

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