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# Narrative absence: An 'Untouchable' account of Partition migration

Ravinder Kaur

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*The core of symbolic communities, like the community of Partition migrants, is formed through the discursive ownership of historical experiences—for instance, the loss of human lives, personal property and dismemberment of national territory; followed by the restoration of that loss through examples of successful refugee resettlement and national self-assertion. Within the master narrative of Partition migration history, however, the experiences of forced movement and resettlement suffered by the 'Untouchables' are obscured. Popular accounts of violence, forced movement and suffering are largely built around the narratives produced by upper caste and upper middle-class migrants and exclude the experiences of Untouchable migrants. This narrative absence becomes a gauge of both the discursive and physical exclusion of 'Untouchable' refugees from the legitimate community of Partition migrants. Such a meta-version of Partition history constitutes the realm of the normal, outside which 'Untouchable' narratives exist as an aberration in the theme of modern citizen-making in post-colonial India. In this article, I examine these 'aberrations' to provide an alternate reading that helps us challenge the master narrative of Partition migration history.*

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## I

### *Introduction*

**Two Chuhras** were busy sweeping the roads of Lahore during the Hindu-Muslim violence. While the Hindus were trying to flee away from the violence, Muslims were pouring into the city from India. One sweeper asked another if he knew why people were running here and there. The other answered that the 'Hindus are running to India while Muslims are

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looking for Pakistan. But we don't need to escape to another place and nobody is going to touch us'. And they continued sweeping the empty streets.

This joke is a popular one, often narrated by upper-caste Punjabi migrants in India and Pakistan. Its significance lies in its subtle and ironic conclusion: untouchable groups were neither in the communal scheme of things nor in the making of the modern nation-states of India and Pakistan. They were neither Hindus nor Muslims and therefore were not even fit for communally motivated killings. The joke is meant to highlight the 'Untouchable' status of these caste groups since their very condition of untouchability became a potent defence mechanism against mass violence. The sympathetic message, if any, is that these people did not need to escape from the extraordinary violence that threatened Hindus and Muslims, but needed to escape from the violence inherent in their everyday lives. The joke ends with the two Chuhras continuing to sweep the street long after everyone has left. The continued act of sweeping underlines the historical irony of 'Untouchable' communities *not* attempting to change their traditional roles even in such a cataclysmic situation. The listeners are expected to laugh at the punch line because the apparent irony of the situation is lost on the sweepers. This isolation from the cataclysmic events is incomprehensible for Hindu, Sikh and Muslim migrants whose experiences of Partition were so far removed from those of the Untouchables. Such caste-based experiential differences and discursive distances have seldom found representation in the narratives of Partition migration, especially since the archetypal Partition migrant, the 'Hindu refugee', was produced through the act of displacement and the religious identity of the displaced. The distinctions of caste and class have rarely been dredged up once they were conveniently submerged in the common experience of mass population migration, officially called the 'exchange of populations', during India's Partition.

This article contends that the common experience of displacement neither bridged nor rendered caste distinctions irrelevant. Untouchable migrants were separated physically from the upper-caste Hindus through a maze of governmental policies of resettlement between 1947 and 1965, as well as alienated discursively from the popular narratives of migration and resettlement by the upper-caste Punjabi migrants. Thus, the physical separation manifested, for example, in housing arrangements for Untouchable migrants in shanty towns far removed from upper-caste

migrant neighbourhoods, meant that Untouchables did not inhabit the same social space as their upper-caste counterparts. This in turn meant that the experiences of the Untouchable migrants were rarely either acknowledged or circulated in the popular discourse of Partition migration. Thus, a telescopic vision of Partition history often reveals common patterns of migration, like routes, means of transport, destinations and resettlement strategies, across various caste groups. However, a closer view reveals diverse patterns and a complex social re-ordering based on prevalent norms of caste distinctions. As a consequence, the Untouchable refugees were 'naturally' settled in camps and colonies away from the ones inhabited by the upper-castes even though it was never a stated governmental policy.

This study is located in one of these exclusive camps for Untouchable refugees in central Delhi called Rehgar Pura.<sup>1</sup> The settlement is located next to the now-sprawling commercial area of Karol Bagh. This is where a large number of Punjabi upper-caste refugees had set up their commercial enterprises as well as their homes in 1947. The place had been a middle-class Muslim locality built a few decades before Partition to relieve the congestion in the walled city quarters. Rehgar Pura, an Untouchable colony, was located further south of Karol Bagh where many Muslim sweepers and leather workers resided. Non-Muslim sweepers also resided in the area especially after the Delhi municipality started large-scale recruitments from among the Punjabi Chuhra communities to keep the city clean (Prashad 2000).

During the Partition riots both upper-caste and Untouchable Muslims fled the Karol Bagh and Rehgar Pura areas since these were among the prime locations where maximum violence took place in Delhi. The Untouchable non-Muslim refugees were resettled in the Rehgar Pura locality

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on primary material collated during my fieldwork in Delhi in 2001–2002 and then in 2005. It includes (a) a quantitative survey with over 500 respondents spread over three Partition resettlement colonies in Delhi of which Rehgar Pura was a central part, (b) personal interviews with over fifty individuals in those colonies and beyond, and (c) finally, ten life histories obtained over a period of time in Delhi. The narratives produced here are chosen as representative of a majority of the accounts that I came across in my fieldwork.

On the historical fixing/making of hierarchy in caste and untouchability, this article draws on the work of Nicholas Dirks (2001), Dipankar Gupta (2000), Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany (2000), Ghanshyam Shah (2001) and Gail Omvedt (1995) among others.

where new mud huts were constructed for them. Many years later, *pucca* sheds called *Sau Quarter* (one hundred quarters) were constructed by the government. Within the locality these are known as the Partition houses, distinct from the houses occupied by those who had settled there before Partition. Rehgar Pura is now relatively prosperous compared to other Untouchable colonies located in east and north Delhi. The main reason for this is its proximity to the commercial activity in Karol Bagh. Skinning hides, tanning and shoe manufacturing have emerged as major cottage industries in Rehgar Pura where most houses are connected with the leather trade in one way or another. Many upper-caste traders from Karol Bagh took advantage of the cheaper real estate in Rehgar Pura and purchased property to use as storage sites or manufacturing units. The tall four-storied, newly-constructed and freshly-painted buildings are evidence of rent earned on property by the original owners.

The first glimpse into the resettlement process of Untouchable migrants can be obtained from brief mentions in the archives of official files and documents at the Ministry of Rehabilitation. The Untouchable migrants are officially termed as 'Harijan refugees' in these accounts. The Annual Report mentions that a Harijan section of the Ministry was established on 15 February 1948 to 'settle uprooted Harijans' (GoI 1947–48: 24). The projects accomplished through this section include (a) the allotment of a total of 50,000 acres in Karnal and Bikaner to 570 Harijan families from East Punjab and 4,000 families from Bahawalpur respectively;<sup>2</sup> (b) the construction of 301 houses for Harijans in Ahmedabad; (c) securing employment for 407 Harijan refugees as sweepers and for seventy Sindhi Oades [Odhs] as construction workers; and (d) the establishment of a housing society for Harijans in Delhi (ibid.: 24, 68). On the Delhi resettlement, the report further states that:

At the end of August 1948, the Rehgapura scheme was almost completed. Two co-operative housing societies for Harijans were formed and a share capital worth Rupees 4000 was subscribed till 31st August 1948. The Harijan families also secured tarpaulins to cover their roofless huts (ibid.: 68).

<sup>2</sup> In other words, a total of 4,570 families received on average a little over ten acres of land each.

The cooperative societies mentioned here are the Rameshwari Nehru cooperative housing societies that were allotted land to build housing facilities for the Untouchable refugees in the Rehgar Pura area of Karol Bagh.<sup>3</sup> This piece of information in the Annual Report allowed me to associate the well-known Untouchable colony in Karol Bagh with the Untouchable migrants of Partition.

## II

### *The master narrative of India's Partition*

Though Partition historiography has grown considerably in volume and scope in the past decade, it is yet to draw upon the personal experiences and oral histories of Untouchable migrants. Urvashi Butalia's seminal work (1998) remains exceptional in this regard with its attention to caste tensions in the Partition process, particularly in Punjab.<sup>4</sup> The exclusion of Punjabi Untouchable communities from the communally-charged process of Partition, except for the participation of particular individuals as functionaries of the Congress Party, is noted by Mark Juergensmeyer (1982) in his study of the Ad Dharma movement for social reform. This claim of political disengagement is challenged in the specific context of the United Provinces by Ramnarayan Rawat who argues that Partition made available new opportunities to Untouchables to articulate a separate *acchut* (Untouchable) identity particularly in the United Provinces (2001: 114–15). While the presence of the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation in Partition politics is a clear indicator of the high degree of political mobilisation and articulation within Untouchable communities, we are yet to learn about the lives and experiences of Untouchable individuals who accidentally found themselves amidst the Partition drama as refugees.

In order to understand the absences and omissions in Partition history, we need to delineate what is popularly imagined as a 'common minimum narrative' of Partition migration and resettlement. By 'common minimum narrative', I mean a simplified and compressed version of complex, multi-layered personal experiences that the migrants often recount. On the one

<sup>3</sup> It is named after the social activist Rameshwari Nehru who was actively involved in the freedom struggle as well as in refugee resettlement work later.

<sup>4</sup> Urvashi Butalia narrates the life story of Maya, an Untouchable Punjabi woman who is left unhurt by the violent mob when they learn about her caste identity.

hand, this allows individuals to deflect attention from personal events that may have been painfully suppressed over the years and, on the other, to claim a community based on experiences shared with fellow migrants. More often than not, the common minimum narrative is followed by an admission that the narrators' personal experiences did not match what they believed had happened to millions of other migrants. The 'differing' narratives, therefore, challenge the master version of Partition historiography. When repeated frequently and/or authenticated and acknowledged by multiple public authorities like state institutions, community leaders, retired government officials or intellectual authority as represented by the writers, poets and artists who become chroniclers of social and political history in their fictional work, this common minimum narrative takes the shape of a 'master narrative' that seeks to relay the historical 'truth' about a given event.<sup>5</sup> The master narrative of Partition among Punjabis in Delhi is split into two levels: The last journey when non-Muslims were displaced from West Punjab to India; and the resettlement process during which the migrants made the city of Delhi their new home. While the last journey is characterised by the loss of lives, homes, property, means of livelihood and national territory, the resettlement process is marked by the restoration of that loss through the success of migrants in establishing their new homes, businesses and powerful lobbies in local Delhi politics.<sup>6</sup> The recognition of Punjabi migrants' success is evident in the following quote from a government publication issued in 1967 after the resettlement process was deemed closed by the Indian state:

I would therefore like to place on record my admiration and appreciation of the high quality of the human factor in the Punjabi refugee that has enabled him to remake his life in Delhi and give to the refugee households here a position of importance that is likely to grow into one of dominance over the coming years (Rao 1967: xx).

However, this master narrative is characterised by a near absence of Untouchable migrants in popular accounts. The quintessential Punjabi 'refugee' thus constructed, always spoken of in masculine pronouns, is

<sup>5</sup> The term 'master narrative' was earlier used by Gyanendra Pandey (1991) to describe the widespread discourse on communal violence that was historically rooted in British colonial interpretations of violence, community and identity-making in colonial India.

<sup>6</sup> The themes of loss and restoration are fully dealt elsewhere (see Kaur 2004).

implicitly understood to be someone from the socially respectable castes. For instance, in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* [2006 (1956)], one of the most popular works of fiction based on the Partition and the subject of numerous films and television serials, the main characters are mainly identified through religious affiliations—for example, Jugga hails from the powerful Jat Sikh peasantry of Punjab—whose caste origins are implicit to the readers of the text.<sup>7</sup> The description of professions attributed to the fictional characters like money lenders, businessmen, landed peasants, soldiers, clerks, preachers and school teachers allude to the four-fold caste structure. The Untouchables are placed outside this caste hierarchy and therefore, deemed unfit for any social interaction—sharing food and inter-marriage, etc.—bar professional or contractual work, where the Untouchables render the services of sweepers, scavengers or other such tasks considered polluting by the upper-castes.

The collective memories of Partition violence and migration are voiced, written and publicly disseminated by prominent upper-caste Punjabis (see for example Anand 2001; Narula 2002; Neville 1998; Tandon 2000). This means that, to a large extent, our knowledge about Partition migration is obtained from the narratives told by the upper-caste/middle-class because, not only are these narratives repeated orally in detailed forms, they are also frequently made available in print as memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, newspaper reports and public speeches. The Untouchables do not get lost in the knowledge thus produced; rather they form the inevitable large canvas—the background—against which upper-caste/middle-class stories are told. Partition, then, becomes a mass-produced event, the narration of which can be authenticated only when staged against the anonymous, blurred backdrop of 'the masses'. In the course of this, upper-caste/middle-class narrators not only tell their 'own' stories, but also define the experiences of 'others' therein. The distinctive body of Untouchable experiences is ignored and superseded by the oft-narrated dominant narrative of the middle-classes in Punjabi migrant society.

<sup>7</sup> While the four-fold *varna* system ranks brahmins at the top of the caste hierarchy, 19th century social-religious reform movements in Punjab meant that the brahmins lost their social pre-eminence. Instead, the Khatri (Punjabi version of Sanskrit kshatriyas) and Jats, landed peasantry whose upward mobility was due to recruitment in the British colonial army and generous land grants, became dominant communities in the region.

The discursive absence does not mean that the Untouchables were physically absent from the Partition drama, but that they were not included in the stories of injustices meted out to the 'Hindus' by the Muslims during the Partition violence. Their numbers were sometimes included in government statistics to show the size of the non-Muslim population that needed to be evacuated from Pakistan. But the statistical category of 'non-Muslim' did not make them full Hindus even though many had taken to Hindu reform sects like the Arya Samaj since the late 19th century. The government created separate refugee camps, separate mass housing schemes and separate job arrangements for them, mostly as sweepers in the city municipality. This spatial and occupational separation was in accordance with the upper-caste Hindu ideal of keeping the polluted castes at a distance so that their shadow or touch would not pollute others. Thus, what emerges is a somewhat tragic account of Untouchable migrants from West Punjab who were kept out of the Hindu upper-caste and middle-class narratives of Partition. It is not only the fear of contamination at a physical or social level that seems to be of importance to the upper-caste Hindus but also the wish to keep partition narratives sacred and protected from contact by the Untouchables.

### III

#### *Untouchables as non-Muslims*

The communal logic of a Partition based on religious identities necessitated the submergence of caste-based intra-communal fissures within Hinduism. The unceasing inter-communal violence ensured that identities derived from religious affiliations took precedence over other ascriptive affinities. The categories used in everyday discourse about the events of Partition were broadly 'Muslims' versus 'non-Muslims' or specifically Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs as borne out by newspaper reportage from 1947. For instance, an editorial comment on the Punjab situation states that:

[T]he state of anarchy prevailing in parts of East Punjab and in practically the whole of West Punjab has already led to large scale migration from one area to another. The very fact that almost the entire non-Muslim population of Lahore has left the town and that there has

been a similar movement of Muslims from Amritsar and surrounding areas is enough to show that the total number of refugees on either side must run into many lakhs.<sup>8</sup>

It is significant that ordinary people were identified by their professed religious affiliations and not on the basis of their political, caste or occupational moorings. While it was simple to categorise people as Muslims and non-Muslims, it was quite problematic to define and stratify the category of non-Muslims into that of Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Scheduled Castes (SC). In West Punjab, Muslims comprised 78.7 per cent, Hindus were 10.3 per cent, Sikhs 7.4 per cent, Christians 1.5 per cent and SC 1.4 per cent, of the total population of 15,717,390.<sup>9</sup> Hindu Untouchables and the newly converted Christian populations were largely concentrated in the newly-settled canal colony districts of Montgomery, Lyallpore, Sheikhpura and Sialkot.<sup>10</sup> As a rule, most Christians were converts from among the Scheduled Castes but, in the Partition process, they were regarded as being outside the tripartite conflict involving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. In all, an estimated 20 per cent of the West Punjab non-Muslim population risked violence and forced migration, of which at least 10 per cent consisted of the Untouchable sections of Hindu society. It is this tenth part of the non-Muslim migrant population that often remains missing in Partition narratives.

Though most accounts are built around the upper-castes, odd references to the untouchables appear in official documents. A report submitted by an Indian officer in charge of the evacuation of Hindus and Sikhs in Montgomery district details cases of violence, arson, forced conversions and abduction of women by Muslim gangs.<sup>11</sup> While the main body of the account focuses on the desire of Hindus to be evacuated and the lack of

<sup>8</sup> 'Exchange of Populations' in *The Hindustan Times*, dated 26 August 1947, New Delhi.

<sup>9</sup> Population proportions derived from the Census of India.

<sup>10</sup> The district-wise figures were: Lyallpore (SC 4.9 per cent; Christians 3.7 per cent); Montgomery (SC 3.2 per cent and Christians 1.9 per cent); Sialkot (SC 5.5 per cent and Christians 6.2 per cent); Gujranwala (SC 0.8 per cent and Christians 6.6 per cent); Sheikhpura (SC 2.6 per cent and Christians 0.7 per cent). This was due to the migration pattern followed in the canal colonies where entire villages moved to new settlements in West Punjab. The traditional menial or service castes comprising the untouchables moved to these new villages and towns along with their old patrons.

<sup>11</sup> 'Report of Work in Montgomery District', LAR File no. LIX/2, November 1948, in Singh (1999: 640–49).

cooperation by Pakistani officials, the plight of Untouchable communities is occasionally mentioned in passing:

Traders from Montgomery and Okara tehsils and peasants from Pakpattan were approached and a large number of them showed willingness to be evacuated provided they were granted safe escort. Similarly Harijans from the Chichawatni sub tehsil also desired to be evacuated. A large number of Harijans, Oads, Rajputs and Bazigars were evacuated from the interior of the district during the following days.<sup>12</sup> The last foot convoy who (sic) crossed the Indian border through Head Sulemanki consisted of Bazigars, in the first week of May 1948. Most of the Harijans became converts to Christianity for fear of life but when the Liaison officer approached them they showed readiness to be evacuated and came out in large numbers (Singh 1991: 648–49).

The date of evacuation, May 1948 in this particular case, shows that the Untouchable caste evacuation took place at the tail end of the entire migration process. Migration among the upper-caste/middle-class had started long before August 1947; it reached its peak between August–October and the officially-organised evacuation was considered completed by December 1947. The delay in Untouchable caste migration had its own convoluted logic. As a report by an Indian fact-finding committee noted:

They (Muslims) became anxious to get rid of the land-holders so that they could divide their land, amongst the Muslim refugees. At the same time, they became averse to the migration of the *kamins* (menials) and the Harijan non-Muslims for they could be useful slaves of the community. These people, on the other hand, found life gradually becoming intolerable. Cases were known in which Harijans who had embraced Islam only to save their skin did not like and consequently

<sup>12</sup> Bazigar and Oad are Untouchable castes while Harijan (children of God) is a term of respect given by Gandhi to the Untouchables. Rajputs normally belong to the Kshatriya or warrior caste but the Kshatriya origin of various castes is frequently disputed. For example, Rehgars in Punjab often claim a Rajput origin that is not accepted by others.

exhibited a desire to migrate to the East Punjab [*sic*]. Most of them had embraced Islam as a matter of expediency, to save their skin and pro-perty in the hope that some day the Hindus should come back to Pakistan and the old order would be established.<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis on conversion to Islam 'to save their skin' is an oft-repeated sentiment in the official narrations. It was presumed that most Hindus and Sikhs were waiting to be rescued and were just biding their time till such an occasion arose. The role of liaison officers in concertedly campaigning for migration among the non-Muslims is hardly mentioned. The extent and organisation of this campaign is evident in that each district had a full time District Liaison Officer (DLO) who worked with the Pakistani authorities at the district level and directly reported to the Chief Liaison Officer stationed in Lahore. The detailed district-wide reports filed by these officers show the level and scope of their role as catalysts in migration. A telling example is the episode that took place in Wah camp in Cambellpore district. Raja Gazaanfar Ali, the Pakistani minister in charge of refugee relief did not favour mass migration by non-Muslims and actually went from camp to camp persuading Hindus and Sikhs to return to their homes. The Indian liaison officer in Cambellpore, thus, reports:

This Refugee minister of Pakistan led a one man crusade against the non-Muslim exodus. He went touring through the length and breadth of West Punjab, organised lectures, had parties to propagate [*sic*]. He had undertaken to approach the problem from all possible reaches. He contacted big landlords, (Muslim) League workers, and influential Muslims in the area. He warned the masses that Hindus and Sikhs were gold sparrows who if once fly away [*sic*] will bring about tremendous loss in many ways to Pakistan. He sought discussion with our Liaison officers, contacted representatives of various groups in the refugee camps and advised them to go back to their villages [...] the inhabitants of which would extend arms to welcome them. Influenced by this

<sup>13</sup> 'Report of Work in Gujranwala District', LAR File No LIX 12, November 1948, filed by Chaman Lal Pandhi, Fact Finding Officer, Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation in Singh (1991: 632).

propaganda, organised by Raja and Colonel Rab Nawab of 15th Punjab then stationed at Kahour, district Cambelpore, a good number of refugees left Wah camp for their respective homes.<sup>14</sup>

The regret at the return of non-Muslim refugees is obvious in the way the Pakistani minister's efforts are dubbed as 'propaganda'. The following passage makes apparent the proactive role of the liaison officer in inducing migration:

This was a little before I took over there. Out of these [the returned migrants] some managed to return [to camps] by themselves others including inhabitants of Billomar and Chumatra approached me with request to pull them out. The Sikhs of Chumatra were over-confident after the speeches and assurances given by the Raja until not before long when four of them were murdered in the broad day light in the bazaar and the remaining were given shelter in the police station.<sup>15</sup>

In the report, the murder of four Sikhs is stated as a self-explanatory outcome of their decision to return home. Thereafter, expressions like the 'desire of Hindus' are used repeatedly in the various reports to establish the role of officers as mere facilitators towards the fulfilment of collective Hindu wishes. However, the occasional reference to the reluctance of both upper-caste as well as untouchable non-Muslims to migrate does creep in every now and then:

About 10,000 persons have still to be evacuated from this (Lyallpur) district. They are mostly converts, Bazigars and Scheduled Castes. About 5000 Bazigars and one thousand camels are being collected in three centres. I have asked the MEO (India) to arrange for their evacuation by foot. I may add here that these Bazigars previously refused to get out of Pakistan.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 'Report of Work in Cambelpore District', LAR file no. LIX/6 dated November 1948 in Singh (1991: 626).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Chief Liaison Officer (India) to Chief Secretary, East Punjab dated 29 April 1948 in Singh (1991: 612).

Another report from Montgomery district states that:

About 70,000 non-Muslims were still left behind as converts, all over the (Montgomery) district. Traders in Chichawatni sub tehsil and Hindu Arora Zamindars in police station Noor Shah were found stranded as converts. They were demoralised, their movements were restricted and they were being treated as Untouchables and suspects by the Muslims. These converts were called Din Dara and were considered to be a ruled nation. Out of fear of murder and loss of property they were not willing to come out openly. They were all contacted and it was realised that most of them were willing to come out provided they were guaranteed safe evacuation with their household articles.<sup>17</sup>

The same report relinquishes responsibility for those who refused to move out after repeated appeals:

It would thus appear that most of the persons who wanted to be evacuated have been evacuated and those who were left behind have been approached over and over again and are not willing to migrate, being satisfied with their lot. Amongst them are Lala Ganga Ram Khera of Tibi Jai Singh and Lala Bhagwant Dass alias Ghulam Rasul of Malkan Hanse and Diwan Mul Raj of Matki police station Haveli and they might be left to their own fate (Singh 1991: 649).

The individuals named here are all upper-caste Hindus who had apparently chosen to stay in Pakistan. In most documents, only upper-caste names appear on their own while untouchables appear collectively as groups to be considered separately from upper-caste Hindus. The final estimate of those who needed to be rescued from West Punjab as in April 1948 is given in Table 1.<sup>18</sup>

More than half the total estimate pertains to Untouchable caste groups like the Bazigars, many of whom had converted to Islam. While it is clear that Untouchable communities were coaxed to be a part of the migration process, the details of the journey and their final destination remain

<sup>17</sup> 'Report of Work in Montgomery District', LAR File no. LIX/2 in Singh (1991: 645).

<sup>18</sup> Chief Liaison Officer (India) to Chief Secretary, East Punjab, in Singh (1991: 613–14).

Table 1  
*Evacuation of Untouchables from West Punjab*

<i>Name of District</i>	<i>No. of Persons to be Evacuated (approx.)</i>
Dera Ghazi Khan	30 (almost all converts)
Muzaffargarh	398 (328 converts)
Multan	1,200 (100 converts)
Montgomery	5,000 (almost all converts, all Bazigars)
Sheikhupura	1,900 (all converts, including 1300 Bazigars)
Sargodha	300 (all converts)
Mianwali	900 (list of 566 is available)
Lyallpur	10,000 (all converts, mostly Bazigars)
Jhang	1,623 (all converts, including 660 Bazigars)
Gujranwala	2,000 (all converts)
Lahore	2,000 (all converts)
<b>Total</b>	<b>25351</b>

unclear in these accounts. Though they exist in the government records, there is little in the popular discourse that brings alive their individual and collective experiences. They appear in India again as Harijans faced with the larger problems of caste discrimination but no longer as Punjabi refugees. Their discursive 'discovery' itself becomes a foremost requisite before their voices can be heard and shared.

#### IV *An 'Untouchable' location*

At first glance, Rehgar Pura did not seem very different from the 'normal' refugee colonies in Delhi. There were old men who had migrated from Lahore, Sialkot and other places in West Punjab sitting in the public park talking about local neighbourhood politics. As usual, women were less visible, audible and accessible in the public spaces but I was allowed inside the homes to talk to the women as well. Yet, compared to the other colonies, there was a marked difference in the way people responded to queries. To begin with, no one had ever visited them to talk about their history. It was clear that questions about their migration journey came as a surprise to them and that they had never considered themselves a part of the larger Partition discourse even though they had gone through, more or less, the same political events that the others had. They were a part of contemporary Dalit politics in a variety of ways. Rehgar Pura

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had been the place where Kanshi Ram, the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), had started the Bahujan movement in the early 1970s.<sup>19</sup> As a result, most residents were deeply involved in local and national-level politics. However, not everyone was currently affiliated with the BSP though they were connected to it from its inception.

A temple dedicated to the Hindu goddess Ashthabhuj, located in the centre of Sau Quarter, told a different story of how the Untouchable migrant groups had taken to Hinduism. Most of the homes I saw were not very different from the upper-caste Hindu homes that I had visited in the way they displayed icons and images of the goddess. At one level, there was a symbolic contradiction in the Hindu images displayed on the mantle-piece in an Untouchable home. The idea of purity and pollution had ensured that Untouchables were not allowed to enter Hindu temples, draw water from the same source or come in physical contact with upper castes in any way. Thus a physical and spiritual separation was considered essential by the brahmins to maintain caste purity. The goddess was a symbol that did not actually belong to the Untouchables, since they had taken to a number of other forms of worship that were exclusively theirs, instead of participating in a religious community dominated by upper castes. Popular among them were the religious sects of Balmiki, Ravidas and Bala Shah, which were built around the ideals of a caste-less society, equality and non-discrimination woven with different stories of the origins of the Untouchable castes. These sects, on the one hand presented a non-Hindu spiritual avenue for the Untouchables who had not converted to Islam or Christianity and, on the other, became symbols of protest against the oppressive brahminical system. Thus, going by the social-historical developments in the Chuhra and *Chamar* communities in north India, one would expect to see a Balmiki temple in the locality. The presence of a Hindu temple presided over by a goddess who is popular among upper-caste Punjabi Hindu migrants revealed new social-political dimensions in the lives of the Untouchable migrants.

The personal histories of the residents in Rehgar Pura gave some clues to this unexpected feature. One of the regulars in the municipal park was Ram Das who was born in 1920 in Lahore to a Chamar family engaged in the business of making shoes. He would sit every day in the park with

<sup>19</sup> The BSP is a Dalit political party with areas of influence in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. It is the first Dalit party to have gained political power in Uttar Pradesh.

other men, most of whom were also refugees like him. They spoke in Punjabi alternating it with Marwari Hindi and, while speaking to me, they would try and switch over to ordinary Hindi. Ram Das narrated his account of the last journey he undertook along with his family:

I lived in Mohalla Mishri Shah close to Delhi Gate in Lahore. I lived at least the first thirty to thirty-five years of my life in Lahore. My father had migrated to Lahore from Rajasthan for better employment opportunities. We originally come from Rajasthan. We had done very well for ourselves. We had built a whole basti, a colony called Mishri Shah where more than sixty-seventy families of 2,000 or more people lived. They all came from our Rehgar biradari originating in Rajasthan. We had proper mud houses. The mud was as good as the cement you use here in Delhi. We had a Rehgar Sabha which would organise community functions and gatherings regularly. During the summers [when] it was very hot, we would gather in the morning to drink sherbet, eat food together and talk. Our children went to DAV schools and got education.<sup>20</sup> We had an Arya temple in the locality. We were into social service. On 11th August 1947, I remember, we had to leave all that. There was an old Muslim man who knew us and he came to our colony. He said that we should leave. He had seen a group of Muslims who had sworn with their hands on Koran that they will create *jihad* [holy war] by killing all the Hindus they would encounter that day. Our Musalman friends helped us by lending us carriage in their tongas (most were tonga drivers). They dropped us at the railway station in the city. So, it was 11 August that we left everything we had. I had already got married and had children also by 1947. I brought all of them along to Delhi by special train. We came to Rehgar Pura because we had relatives and members of our Rehgar biradari living here. In Delhi, everyone said, one gets employment more easily than in Rajasthan.<sup>21</sup>

Another account by Sewa Ram noted that:

<sup>20</sup> DAV (Dayanand Anglo-Vedic) schools were run by the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform sect.

<sup>21</sup> This and all subsequent personal narratives are derived from open-ended interviews spread over days that I conducted in Delhi between August 2001 and March 2002.

[The] government helped us a lot. The Congress government was very helpful. They made these quarters for us. Today the value of these quarters is very large. People who have sold their places here have become *lakhpatīs* (millionaires). Government gave us loans, work; social workers would come to us. They really helped us. We were living very well here. We were well provided for. But the government today (led by the Bharatiya Janata Party) is draining us. There is so much unemployment and inflation. Those who live on manual labour are pressed hard. Day before yesterday the cooking gas cylinder became more expensive. We have to pay hundred rupees more now. The income from labour does not increase at the same rate as the expenses. Congress made something out of us. When we left Lahore we were very sad. But even birds are sad when they leave their nests. But everybody has to leave one day. This body is also a home for the spirit. We all have to leave it one day.

In some ways, Sewa Ram's account is not very different from the accounts of upper-caste Hindu refugees. They were threatened with Muslim violence just like the other Hindus were. Their stories of helpful or villainous Muslims are quite like that of ordinary Hindu and Sikh refugees. They took almost the same travel routes—trains, foot columns, trucks—as did many others and arrived in Delhi for similar reasons, that is, they had contacts in Delhi or they expected to gain better economic opportunities. Their entry into the Hindu religion had already started when the Arya Samaj movement gained ground in Punjab. The Untouchable groups were among the main targets for the movement, since they had to be protected from conversion to Islam and Christianity. The extent of Arya Samaj involvement is evident by the fact that the children of the Rehgar community were admitted into to Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (DAV) schools. Arya temples had been introduced in various places and Lahore was one of the places where Arya organisations had successfully taken root. With these developments, the Untouchables had, in a way, begun entering the category of non-Muslims. The association must have become strong enough for the Rehgar community to be threatened with attack by the local Muslims. Thus, their departure took place in circumstances similar to those of the upper-caste Hindus.

Yet, their accounts were also different from upper-caste narratives. To begin with, the Untouchable migrants did not move away from the

violence-prone areas before the actual Partition like the upper-caste migrants. They were among the last non-Muslim groups and communities to migrate from West Punjab. The divergence between their narratives and those of middle-class/upper-caste Hindus is also evident in how the untouchable refugees fully acknowledge the role of the government in facilitating resettlement. They duly credit the government for their social and economic success. This is something that is often avoided by the upper-caste Hindus since it challenges the myth of their own role in successful refugee resettlement. The Untouchable refugees remain beholden to the Congress government whose policies of rehabilitation dramatically transformed their lives. Most of them said that they could never have dreamed of making such economic gains in their lifetime had they remained in Lahore. The rupture in their lives had proven to be a positive turning point. They received systematic support from the state that would have never happened in ordinary circumstances.

Such an account of resettlement is hardly what one expects to hear when the level of support given to the upper castes is compared with that provided to the Untouchables. State support for refugees was determined by their class and caste. This was not a stated policy but the existence of multi-layered schemes shows that each such scheme was aimed at different sections of society. The hallmark of the resettlement policy was compensation, that is, the level of support depended on what one had lost in Pakistan. The aim of the state was to compensate that loss and no more. This left people like Sewa Ram and Ram Das out of that compensation loop since they did not own much. Provision of housing for the poor has rarely been a serious agenda for the colonial as well as post-colonial state in India. Thus, the lack of proper housing forces such groups to inhabit such 'illegal' colonies. Upon their migration to Delhi, the Chamar communities, like all other Untouchables, were provided with mud huts in a location that was already inhabited by Untouchable groups in Delhi. In a way, they were located by the state in a place that was already polluted by their fellow caste members. They were, as was the norm, given jobs as sweepers with the municipality or encouraged to set up shop as shoe-makers. Their traditional caste occupations were the basis of the facilities that they would receive from the state.

V

*Untouchability in the 'normal' realm*

The Untouchable migrants had something in common with upper-caste Punjabi migrants, that is, they had also moved from place to place in search of opportunities before they moved to Delhi during Partition. Their permanent 'roots' in West Punjab were as debatable as that of Punjabi colonists who had migrated to canal colonies in late 19th century.<sup>22</sup> Many Untouchables had moved within the colonial empire in India, and therefore, travel or temporary stay seemed to be the rule rather than the exception. Their frequent itinerancy also facilitated their encounters with the Arya Samaj. This link between travel and openness to new Hindu reforms becomes clear in the personal story of P. L. Kanojia, a retired section officer in the Indian government. Kanojia belongs to the *Dhobi* (washermen) caste and he was born in Lahore from where he migrated to Delhi after Partition. He differs considerably from Sewa Ram in that he lives in a 'normal' residential colony in outer Delhi that is unmarked by caste distinctions. His home is a modern two-storeyed house—an undistinguished middle-class home equipped with modern electronic gadgets and a young male domestic worker and ample security arrangements against theft. In many ways, he represents those who have broken out of the barriers of untouchability. He also differs from Sewa Ram in his political preferences in that he is a supporter of the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS, a Hindu nationalist organisation) while Sewa Ram is a firm Congress loyalist. He narrated his life story thus:

My father had a small shop to wash and iron clothes in Lahore city outside the Lahore railway station. There was an Australian building

<sup>22</sup> After the annexation of Punjab in 1849, the British colonial administration undertook massive irrigation projects in West Punjab, building a network of canals across the region. New irrigation possibilities called for a new class of agriculturists who could make the irrigable land productive. This led to mass migration around the turn of the century from East Punjab to the new canal colonies in West Punjab. The same Hindu and Sikh settlers were to migrate en masse again to East Punjab, Delhi and other parts of north India when Partition took place in 1947 (see full description in Kaur 2007).

on McLeod Road, I think. [The shop] was close to that. On one extreme corner, there was a Hindu mohalla where the entire population was Hindu. Sanatan Dharma Sabha also had property there. There was a big temple and a Sanatan Dharma College. It was the first college established in Punjab. We lived there. I was born there. My father was uneducated but his ambition was to educate his son. He got me admitted to the DAV school which was an organ of the Arya Samaj. It was a very powerful organisation in those days, first socially and then politically. I had the privilege of meeting many big people like Mahatma Hans Raj. We had a very good time in those days. DAV was the best institution in those days. My family originally came from Uttar Pradesh. They were Dhobis. The British had adopted the Indian system of having many servants in the household. So they would have a dhobi, a *mashki* (water carrier), a Brahmin *maharaj* to cook, a *durban* to guard the door. The British would also have *pankhe-wala* to fan the sahibs during summer and a *polish-wala* to shine shoes. Each officer would have a full household that employed ten or twelve Indian men. They were well cared for and they got a place to stay in the servant's quarters. These days government officers simply rent out the servant quarters to earn extra money. Or they demand that the dhobi iron their clothes for free. This did not happen in those days. The allotted facilities were given to servants. Every time the officer would be transferred, the entire household would travel with him. We were called the service classes. We were part of the British cantonments. The ones who left their villages like this to enter British service, they never went back to their native place. A large number of them remained in Punjab after their retirement. My grandfather was one of them who chose to stay in Lahore. He helped my father open this ironing business.

Hindu leaders were afraid that Christian missionaries would want to convert us. We had seen the British from close quarters. They were our enemies who had enslaved us. Arya Samaj did the right thing by opening schools that gave an Indian education. They also taught us English. Poor and low caste people like us could study at these schools for free. I had the fortune of having Pandit Jagannath and Pandit Vishwanath as our history teachers. They taught us about the golden history of India and also the history of England. Such books were

selling like hot cakes in those days. The school was established in 1926 or 27. I could have never got that quality of education elsewhere.

This narrative clearly shows that Untouchables groups who frequently moved in the Punjab region had already come into contact with the Arya Samaj and a new Hindu identity. Their close interaction with the British had disillusioned them enough with the colonial regime to respond favourably to the Arya Samajis. The repeated stress on the DAV school and the level of education it imparted shows that Kanojia was deeply grateful for the education and subsequent opportunities provided by his Arya Samaj membership. He was able to separate himself from the other Untouchables to carve out an unmarked middle-class existence for himself and his family. However, this did not mean that Kanojia was easily accepted by his upper-caste colleagues even when he had accepted a Hindu education and way of life:

After I had joined government service, I became a member and office-bearer of the SC/ST employees' union. We had separate unions for upper-caste and Untouchable employees. I was a grade II officer and yet they did not allow me to join the officers' union. The SC/ST union was full of grade IV employees mainly employed as sweepers, peons and office boys. I was instead asked to become their office bearer as I was one of the few who could speak English. I often wondered why I had to join the SC/ST union. My colleagues were polite and respectful but they were resentful of the SC quotas in jobs. I was well qualified and hardworking so I always got respect from them.

Kanojia was clearly reluctant to voice his discontent fully since that would immediately detach him from his upper-caste colleagues. He drew solace and legitimacy from his membership in the SC/ST union because of the fact that he had been asked to lead the union since he was one of the few Untouchable employees who was well educated. His status as an office bearer set him apart from the ordinary members who belonged to the lowest rung in the official hierarchy. Any hint of resentment was diffused by noting that the behaviour of his upper-caste colleagues was 'polite and respectful' towards him. When he spoke of his life as a government

employee, he constantly shifted between personal pride at having gained a high official position and silent resentment at the caste barriers and discrimination that prevented him from realising his full potential.

However, despite their different narratives, Sewa Ram and Kanojia were bound together in their acknowledgement of the state's role in resettlement. The critique of the Indian state that I encountered when interviewing upper-caste Hindus was not only absent, but was replaced by fulsome praise for the state. The explanation for this seemed two-fold. One, as Untouchables, people had learnt not to expect any just distribution of wealth, resources or opportunities from those above them in caste, class or social-political power. The little they got from the state was seemingly unexpected and was therefore more appreciated than it would otherwise have been. Two, the enormous rise in property prices in Delhi, including in Rehgar Pura, meant that Untouchable refugees had gained far more economically than they could have ever hoped for.

This seemed to be a constant theme that was brought up regularly to demonstrate their contentment in life. The tiny plots of land where their mud huts stood in the late 1940s were now sites of multi-storeyed houses. Most plot-owners had contracted with a private builder who would invest his own capital to build the entire house. After construction, the builder and the owners would each own two floors in the house. The owners could reside on one floor while renting out the other. This gave them a well-built home to live in and also ensured a fixed income from rent to support them in their old age. This strategy of building and renting out has been practised all over Delhi since the late 1980s when certain restrictions in the building by-laws were removed. The city's growing population and the consequent shortage of residential and commercial space has made such private arrangements highly lucrative. The limited social parity that economic success provided to these Untouchables has led them to be more grateful to the authorities than their upper-caste counterparts.

While complaints against the state authorities are far and few among the Untouchable migrants, it is still striking that this group did not get even a fraction of the amount of various grants and loan schemes earmarked for upper-caste refugees. Between April–August 1948, the Rehabilitation Ministry spent a total of Rs 2,000 on Harijan relief and formed two co-operative societies with a share capital worth Rs 4,000 to construct mud

huts. When compared with the figures of low-interest loans worth £7,171 (Rs 98,601) and \$39,710 (Rs 131,043) provided to the children of refugee parents studying abroad, the amounts given to the Untouchables are a pittance (GoI 1947–48: 23).<sup>23</sup> The discrimination in favour of upper-caste refugees does not seem to have been a big issue for the Harijan Sevak Sangh (HSS), a government-established agency that worked specifically for the welfare of Untouchables. Its offices were situated in the Kingsway Camp area where a large majority of the refugees resided. Its monthly letter of February 1948 gives an interesting glimpse into its main priorities.

The main highlight of the letter is an item about Orissa where Harijans entered the Jagannath temple in Puri where 'following the refusal of entry to Harijans by the priests and temple authorities, a batch of Harijans and caste Hindu volunteers offered *Satyagraha* at the temple. After two days the district magistrate had the temple doors opened and the Harijans are now entering the temple and worshipping without obstruction'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in Assam, temples were reportedly thrown open to Harijans.<sup>25</sup> The newsletter reported that, at a Harijan conference held in Adampur near Jalandhar in East Punjab, the government had announced two constitutional Acts for the betterment of Harijans.<sup>26</sup> It is clear from these reports that the HSS addressed a wider agenda of issues that had larger implications for the Untouchable population. Untouchable refugees figure only in one instance in this newsletter where the general secretary of the HSS is stated to have submitted a report on the plight of Harijan refugees from Sind.<sup>27</sup> This shows that discrimination against Untouchable refugees—in the distribution of relief funds and opportunities—was considered to be low priority even by an organisation created for the benefit of Untouchables. Protest against discrimination was, however, voiced in a letter

<sup>23</sup> The conversion into rupee amounts is based on the currency exchange rates for 1948 (£ 1 = Rs 13.75; \$ 1 = Rs 3.30). Since these figures are not on a per capita basis, we cannot strictly compare how much each Untouchable and upper-caste refugee received on average. However, it is safe to assume that the number of student loans were small, since foreign education was not very common at that time.

<sup>24</sup> AICC Papers File no. G-24/1947-8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

from B.R. Ambedkar to Jawaharlal Nehru highlighting the plight of Untouchable refugees. This is the only instance I could find where the word 'discrimination' is clearly used to describe their situation:

1. The SC (Scheduled Castes) who have come to East Punjab are not living in refugee camp[s] established by the Government of India (GoI). The reason is that officers in charge of these refugee camps discriminate between caste Hindu refugees and SC refugees.
2. It appears that relief and rehabilitation department has made [a] rule that it is only refugees who are staying in [a] relief camp [who] can receive ration, clothing etc. [O]n account of their not staying in the refugee camp for reason mentioned above[,] the SC refugee are not getting any relief. This is a great hardship.<sup>28</sup>

The discrimination mentioned here, however, did not get a thorough redress even though the letter was written as early as 18 December 1947. The mud huts in Rehgar Pura appeared a few months later under the aegis of the Rameshwari Nehru cooperative society. The caste discrimination among the refugees did not become a major source of concern for political parties, ministry officials or even organisations like the HSS.

## VI *Conclusion*

This article has attempted to insert the missing parts—Untouchable refugees—in the Partition resettlement puzzle. Though the Untouchables remain discursively absent in popular narratives of the Partition, they did physically migrate to India. Their experiences, losses and journeys do not appear to be particularly different from that of the upper-caste Hindu migrants. Like their upper-caste counterparts, the Untouchable migrants in Delhi had an urban, mobile background as they moved from place to place as a service class attached to the British colonial administration. Almost a century-long interaction with the colonial empire meant that the socio-economic conditions and personal aspirations of

<sup>28</sup> Dr B.R. Ambedkar Papers File no 1–3, R-2922, Nehru Memorial Library, Delhi.

the Untouchable service class had been considerably raised. The influence of the late 19th century social reform movements was manifest in the Untouchables being recruited to religious groups like the Arya Samaj. For Hindu, Sikh and Christian missionaries, Untouchable identity seemed negotiable, capable of being cast aside, as Untouchables became objects over which missionaries competed for conversion. This trend continued during Partition as well when, evidently, India and Pakistan competed to gather the Untouchables on their side. While Pakistan wanted to retain Untouchables in order to avoid losing traditional menial labour, Indian liaison officers lobbied hard to make them leave their homes in order to 'prove' that they were suffering at the hands of the Pakistani state. In this process, the Untouchables who would, otherwise, have remained socially marginalised were nationalised.

The Indian nation's claim upon the non-Muslim Untouchables, however, did not immediately improve their conditions. Upon their arrival, they faced discrimination and separation from their upper-caste counterparts. They were housed separately from the upper-caste migrants in the transit camps as well as in the permanent housing. They were settled in the existing Untouchable housing colonies on the margins of the city. The financial assistance provided to these individuals and groups was pitiful and meagre in comparison with the state schemes for assistance to upper-caste migrants. Interestingly, caste discrimination was never a stated government policy but the creation of a separate agency for the Untouchables meant that they were no longer included in the general category. Their separation from upper-caste groups led to the integration of Untouchable migrants with the existing Untouchable groups in Delhi. This integration also served to diminish their distinctive experiences of Partition. Clearly, while religion remained the distinctive discursive fault line in politics, class and caste structures were considered settled facts rather than facts to settle.

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