

Partition Refugees in Delhi: A Story of Resilience Against the odds

Dr. Shashi Bhushan Deo

Assistant Professor, PG Department of History, Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara.

Abstract:

This paper tries to look at the ways in which the life of some of the partition refugees unfolded over the years, stories which are an enduring testament to human grit and resilience. Beginning from real life stories of destitute women, it moves on to discuss novel ways which men devised to eke out a living in an unfamiliar land and in often hostile conditions. It also goes on to discuss how certain developments in the 1970s and 1980s, ultimately led to betterment of lives of these unfortunate victims of partition. It also briefly discusses how some of these refugees went on to become one of the most successful entrepreneurs in their chosen fields.

Keywords: Partition, Refugees, Independence, India, Pakistan, Delhi, Violence, Riots, Struggle

Introduction:

The partition of India is inarguably one of the most significant events of the 20th century. An event which saw nearly a million people dead and about 14 to 15 million people displaced from their homes and hearths. Bruised and battered, they arrived in a new unfamiliar land empty-handed or with very meagre resources. The newly independent nation-state played a very important role in refugee's rehabilitation, providing them initial relief in the form of setting up many refugee camps which provided much needed shelter and medical relief. In due course of time, the government began many Training-cum-Employment Centres, thus helping the refugees stand on their feet. Various schools and other educational institutions were also set up to aid in the task of refugees' rehabilitation. In addition to the Governmental efforts, various Non-Governmental Organisations also came forward to help the refugees stand on their feet. Above all, it was the refugees who refused to surrender to adversity, rebuilding their lives with exceptional grit and determination.

Writes famous author and columnist Kishwar Desai, "How could those who grew up in complete security ever know what it means to become a pariah, an unwanted person on the very streets where you once had friends? And then later, to undertake a long migration lasting weeks, sometimes months, to reach a refugee camp, with poor sanitation and no food or medication. To start life again, penniless, while the world was celebrating the birth of two nations, India and Pakistan. The irony of it all!"¹

Historian Sucheta Mahajan writes: "Independence Day in Punjab and Bengal saw strange scenes. Flags of both India and Pakistan were flown in villages between Lahore and Amritsar, as people of both

¹ Kishwar Desai, "How refugees of Partition inspire the youth of India and Pakistan," <http://www.dailyo.in/politics/partition-india-pakistan-ties-refugees-indian-freedom-struggle-british-rule/story/1/10894.html>, May 29, 2016. Accessed on, August 8, 2018.

communities believed they were on the right side of the border. The morrow after freedom was to find them foreigners in their own homes, exiled by executive fiat.² Thus, for the millions of people who were caught in the vortex of violence during the tumultuous and turbulent days of Partition, the joy of independence was nowhere to be found. Rather than a single historical event, the partition was an enduring phenomenon that embedded itself into the psychological and domestic lives of millions over many decades.³

On 15th of August 1947, our country got independent after a hard fought struggle for independence. It was also the day on which India got partitioned into India and Pakistan. The Muslim League under Jinnah tragically succeeded in getting their demand of a separate nation-state for Muslims in the form of Pakistan. The communal hatred and passion created around partition caused unprecedented mayhem in the country. The violence in and around partition, claimed the lives of about a million people- Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The fear created by the communal riots and the riots themselves, led to what is considered as the largest migration in human history. Famous author Ismat Chughtai rightly observed that, “Those whose bodies were whole had hearts that were splintered...in the end many souls remained behind in Hindustan [or Pakistan] while their bodies started off for Pakistan [or Hindustan].⁴

About 12 to 14 million people had to move across the newly created borders- Hindus and Sikhs moving to India and Muslims moving to Pakistan. Delhi, being the capital of the new state received the largest number of refugees. It is estimated that about half million Hindus and Sikh refugees entered into Delhi in the months after partition. The government had very little infrastructure, initially, to provide for this huge unanticipated influx. However, the government machinery swung into action soon and a massive programme for relief and rehabilitation was launched, especially after the setting up of a separate Ministry for relief and rehabilitation on September 6, 1947. In due course, it ran a number of programmes to rehabilitate the refugees. For months, however, they had to live a very hard life in the refugee camps fighting deprivation of all kinds.

In addition to the help that the government provided, a number of Non-governmental Organisations also came forward to help the refugees. One such organization was Rikhidevi Ramdas Suri Narishala (masala center) under the aegis of the ‘Servants of the People Society’, located at Lajpat Bhawan, Lajpat Nagar. The women employed at the centre prepare Masala from the stage of drying the raw material to cleaning, grinding and packing. Besides masala of different sorts, they prepare beshan from channa dal, dalia from sprouted wheat, papads, wadas, chanas, peanuts, and moong atta (flour).

The then lady supervisor at the centre, Mrs. Kapoor, a Punjabi refugee from Lajpat Nagar recounted her story on July 2002:

“I have seen the Masala centre right from my childhood. My mother was an accountant here. I used to accompany her often. From the beginning, every care was taken here to look after the welfare of the women workers (most of whom were from refugee background), by providing them with social security and adequate benefits, with ancillary facilities like production incentives, uniforms, etc. Earlier, many Punjabi women from neighbouring areas like Lajpat Nagar, Garhi, Krishna Market, Dayanand Colony

² Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition: The Erosion of Colonial Power in India*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2014, p. 202.

³ Ria Gupta, “At Delhi’s Partition Museum, Memories Take Form in Art and Artefacts”, May 17, 2023, <https://www.cntraveller.in/story/at-delhis-partition-museum-memories-take-form-in-art-and-artefacts/>, accessed on: June 15, 2026.

⁴ As quoted by Ritu Menon, *No Woman’s Land: Women From Pakistan, India & Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India*, Women Unlimited Publication, New Delhi, 2017, p. 11.

used to benefit from the centre... now most of them have grown old, some have died. Grinding masala on the chakki is a very laborious task, so older women cannot do it with ease, though women like Basant Kaur still do it. Today, we have employed women from Garhwal, Rajasthan, Bihar who are in need of money. But the centre helped many Punjabi women in sustaining themselves.”⁵

Many others like Durga Devi chose to build a life on her own. In an interview with historian Anjali Bhardwaj on 12th April 2002, Durga recounted:

“I stayed in Kothi Mem after Partition with my married sister and her family. There in gali [street], Gyan Chand used to run a small factory in his house, near the ‘tyre market’ for screen- printing on gunny bags and cotton bags used for storage. Gyan Chand used to cater to the wholesale market of Sadar Bazar. Along with some other women, I used to prepare dyes to be used in printing on the bags, we stacked piles of a hundred bags in a bundle, tied them, stitched bags, etc. With the money that I received from him, I educated my two sons and got my daughter married off. I also contributed to my sister’s household initially, and later when my sons grew older, I bought my own house in Beriwalla Bagh.

Later on, however in the 1970s, Gyan Chand had made enough money and shifted his factory to a bigger place in Wazirpur Industrial Area. By that time, his children had grown up, the family had expanded, and the work had increased. Gradually the family too shifted from Bara Hindu Rao a newly-built house in posh New Rohtak Road. With the new factory at Wazirpur, the work became more specialized and now skilled workers were employed. The women who were employed earlier were no longer required. Moreover, Wazirpur was a considerable distance from my place. After he shifted, I stayed largely at home. But later on my son started his own business in dyes.”⁶

A similar story of hardwork and self-enterprise is of Kailash Rani. She reminisces:

“We came from Jhelum to Delhi almost with no belongings and had no clue about how to start our lives afresh. I had not acquired any skills there, so I was not eligible to take up any job. I had three small children and was pregnant with the fourth one. My husband’s work, a shop in Kalkaji, was not doing well at all...it seemed as if nothing would ever work out for us...I was shattered, but used to visit Kalka Ji temple on and off. There, once, we met an old acquaintance who had settled in Chiragh Delhi. He knew the ‘pundits, and the authorities of Kalka Mandir. With his efforts, I started sewing marigold, mogra, and rose flowers in garlands and selling them at the temple. Later on I used to sell garlands, ma ka shingar (bangles, vermillion etc.), her pictures chunni, etc., too on a redi. ; life was a struggle...I used to wake up at 3:30 in the morning, walk down to the temple. Early in the morning many devotees came for ma ke darshan. I used to sell my items to them. After the morning aarti, I would make a next round to the temple. Life went on...but after 1965, I stopped going there, as by then my husband’s shop had picked up, my son had grown up and joined him. Together, they started a welding business. But I cannot forget those dark days, when my fingers would go numb stringing garlands the whole day. But I had no option...I had to live on...”⁷

Many women took up the jobs of domestic servants, did packaging work in factories or shops, worked as newspaper hawkers etc. Maina Devi was one such a refugee who had to struggle very hard to earn a living. She narrates her story in these words:

“We lived a fairly prosperous life in Lahore. However at the time of Partition we had no time to collect anything. There was fear of people looting us of our gold and cash. We could not take everything along

⁵ Anjali Bhardwaj, “Partition of India and Women’s Experiences”, *Social Scientist*, Vol.32/ 5-6 May-June 2004, pp.69-86.

⁶ Anjali Bhardwaj, “Partition of India and Women’s Experiences”, *Social Scientist*, Vol.32/ 5-6 May-June 2004, pp.69-86.

⁷ Ibid.

with us, so I dug all my gold and cash in my backyard assuming that once the riots would subside, we would go back and get our belongings. However, the time and opportunity never came. We stayed in open recovery camps all through (our journey), came to Delhi, and with Chajjiu Ramji's help (an old friend) stayed on rent in his house at Arjan Nagar. I had five children- two daughters and three sons. My husband was shock-stricken, and took to drinking. Later on he started showing sign of eccentricism.

I had the whole responsibility of looking after my children ...I had worked as domestic help in Chajjiu Ramji's house, and a few others. In the morning I washed clothes and utensils for people. In the afternoon used to go for a pheri (round) selling sweets to children outside schools. After that I used to go again to (another set of) houses for work...I could barely sleep for five hours. But I did not give up hope. Now my daughter is a doctor in Safdarganj Hospital. My husband died way back in 1987, but he was never there... I gave financial, moral, emotional strength to my family and later on in 1990s took up sanyas- I settled for a while in Haridwar. Today, I look only for peace in my life...I have struggled enough in my life, now I only want God to call me to himself.”⁸ After having struggled throughout her life in the streets old Delhi, even now she has not accepted it as her own. She still calls its people ‘Hindustani’ and craves for the streets of Lahore, her ‘Home’. The nostalgia for lost home persists and will probably persist till she leaves this world.

Now an octogenarian, Shanti Devi had to leave her birthplace, Maisoma Bazaar in Srinagar in the middle of one night for a sudden journey to Delhi in the wake of Partition riots. She recounts her story in these words:

“My father unearthed all the gold and our grandmother with the children (including Shanti and six siblings) flew down to Delhi, while my parents came separately. On our arrival we were re-united at Kingsway Camp where we got shelter and food after which we got a pucca home and a buffalo in Ritz Lane.” Thereafter, the construction of the temples and a gurudwara marked the beginning of life afresh.”⁹

Satyawati Ahuja who now lives in her house in Khan Market, had come from Peshawar. She had to live in Edward Mess before shifting to the government-built houses on a Muslim graveyard in 1952. She says: “We fought the daily battles of gathering of food and clothing but I will never forget my life in Pakistan.”¹⁰

Kuldip Chander was six years old when his family left their hometown Gunjranwala, now in Pakistan, and came to India as partition refugees. The family lived in different towns of India before finally settling down in Delhi in 1958. Chander opened a second hand bookshop in Defence Colony in 1965 after graduating from a government school in Lodhi Road. In the beginning he stocked thriller and romantic novels which he got as discards from the private libraries and from the second-hand book dealers of Daryaganj. His main customers were the young girl students and boys of schools and colleges. The shop's income, however, dwindled in the early 1980s with the advent of television and he was forced to shut it down. In 1985, he opened a stall of Mills and Boon in South Extension. In course of time the shop became a famous spot for the book lovers. He commutes daily by Delhi Transport Corporation and keeps the shop open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day¹¹.

⁸ Anjali Bhardwaj, “Partition of India and Women's Experiences”, *Social Scientist*, Vol.32/ 5-6 May-June 2004, pp.69-86.

⁹ Tanya Talwar, “Home, Then and Now”, *The Hindu*, August 13, 2010.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mayank Austar Soofi, “Our MB Man”, *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, September 3, 2010.

There are various fascinating stories of refugees devising interesting ways to eke out a living. Devichand Chopra's story of resettlement in Delhi is one among them. Born in 1932, he was a resident of Koocha Gangu Shah, Suttar Mandi in Lahore. He recalls that communal violence had been taking place in Lahore since May 1947, demanding inclusion of Lahore in future Pakistan. As his area was largely unaffected by the communal mayhem, the family did not feel the need to move elsewhere. In July, except for his father, the rest of the family moved to Himanchal to attend a marriage ceremony. The family had not thought that they will never get an opportunity to return back to Lahore and therefore, they did not carry their belongings to India while they came in July. His father also came to Himachal in August when it became clear that Lahore would go to Pakistan. They did not get an opportunity to return to Lahore and dispose off their movable and immovable property. They, thus, became resource-less overnight.

Later in August (1947), the family reached Delhi and tried beginning life afresh. He recalls: "When we came to Delhi we were penniless. The family lived in a small house in Lohe Wali Gali in Jawri Bazar. Having no money to start a business, I started going to the shopkeepers near Chandni Chowk and asked them to hand over to me their unsold stocks of clothes. I sat on a wooden platform in front of the shop and started selling the clothes. Out of the little profit made, I purchased more clothes and sold it to the passerby."

He devised another unique way to supplement his income: "In the morning I came to occupy the seat in front of the shops in Chandni Chowk. At that time there used to be a Delhi Clothes Mill depot there. As there was a lot of shortage of clothes those days, merchants came there in good numbers to purchase clothes. I used to stand in the queue of prospective buyers of clothes. But since I had no money to purchase it, I used to sell my place in the queue to other customers and earned some money. When that amounted to about 10-20 Rupees, I used that money to purchase some clothes and then sold it sitting in front of the shops. Later, in the mid-1950s his family was allotted a sum of Rs 6000 as compensation and a stall was allotted to them near the Red Fort. However, they chose to leave the shop and Devilal joined a private company. Over the years he changed many jobs, including the job of a clerk in food department. Finally, in the 1980s, he decided to devote his whole life to the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh [RSS]. Presently, he lives and works in RSS headquarters in Jhandelwala in Delhi.¹²

Sometimes, fate actually had good things in store for them. The story of the transformation of the lives of the refugees settled in Lajpat Nagar, Rajendra Nagar and Nizamudin Colony shows this.

Lajpat Nagar colony was set up by the government to resettle the partition refugees. The original allottees of this place were the refugees who were staying at Purana Quila camp. Though quite a few original allottees of Lajpat Nagar have moved to other places, yet families of these original settlers make up the most of the population of the colony. Each of the plots was of either 100 or 125 sq. yards. There are still some houses in the original condition and each of them, have been valued at over Rs. 1 Crore. The rapid transformation had begun in the 1980s when builders began making flats after acquiring such houses. The 100 sq. yard and 125 sq. yard ready-to-enter flats cost Rs. 50 lakh and above, according to the floor and location. Deepak Joshi, a businessman and an old resident of Lajpat Nagar, recalls, in the early 60s, people in Lajpat Nagar started renovating their houses. The owners started constructing additional floors or rooms to give them on rent in the mid-70s. That was also the time when the newly built commercial complex Nehru Place started bustling with activity and a large no. of big and small

¹² Devilal Chopra, interview with the author, April 1, 2013, RSS Headquarters, Jhandelwala, New Delhi

companies set shop there. People working there started looking for rented houses in Lajpat Nagar as it was very close to Nehru Place. That was the point, which transformed the class character of the erstwhile refugees.

The owners started letting out their houses on rent. Two to three bedrooms fetched Rs.1200 to Rs.1500 per month, a big money during that time.

Similar is the story of the transformation of the Old Rajendra Nagar. By the 1990s, the old refugee areas like the Old Rajendra Nagar had transformed into relatively prosperous neighbourhoods. The provisional Kaccha houses were made from four inch thick brick walls and the roofs were built of asbestos. It was meant to be a temporary arrangement, intended to last for only 5 years. Over the last six decades or so these houses have become Pucca with thick brick walls which are now, adequately plastered and roofs have been suitably cemented. Due to its central location (only 15 minutes from the posh marketing area of Cannaught Place) it has become a prime location of the city. Many property dealers realized its potential in the 1990s itself and begin transforming the Kaccha houses into multi-storied Pucca houses. The property rates soared many times higher. The houses and the part of the houses began to be rented at higher rates and the refugees began getting a steady source of income through rents. The material life of the refugees improved tremendously, many began owning cars and many other modern day amenities.¹³

Another interesting story is the transformation of the lives of the refugees settled in Delhi's Nizamuddin Colony. A civil servant who was in charge of the rehabilitation work writes:

I remember about the Nizamuddin Colony in New Delhi. It was established in an untenanted area outside Delhi which was overgrown with shrub and forests and inhabited by wild animals. When Mehr Chandji [the then minister of Public Works Department] and I took the first batch of displaced persons to Nizamuddin, we were subjected to a full round of angry abuses. They shouted at us, "You expect us to live here where not even dogs can exist. This is a haunt of wild animals. We will be looted by dacoits at night. We will be murdered. Then who will be held responsible?" At that time, we were giving them land in Nizamuddin for less than Rs. 3 per sq. yard. Today it is worth Rs. 10,000 per sq. yard. In fact, no land is available for purchase. Those very refugees who mistakenly abused us came back four years later and said: "We are sorry. We were so rude to you. We never realized what a gold mine you were giving to us."¹⁴

Not everyone's account, however, reads like a success story, but in a newly emerging city that was caught in the vortex of rapid changes, there were enough opportunities for those who were willing to bend their backs.

Sardool Singh had left Peshawar at the time of Partition and was five year old at the time. He came to Delhi and settled in the Azad Market. He recalls: "My father lost his eyesight when I was 23. I took on his occupation. Tongas were the only mode of transport then. After auto rickshaws were introduced, I started driving one. I have seen barracks that were set up by the refugees like us in Jungpura grow into four- storied tall buildings."¹⁵

Amrik Singh Bhatia, president from the community from Peshawar which settled in Jungpura, says: "I was 12 when I came to Delhi with my family. We stayed in makeshift tents in Azadpur. My father wanted us to study and make something of our lives. He didn't work for a long time. Our neighbours in

¹³ Dhooлека Sarhadi Raj, "Ignorance, Forgetting, and Family Nostalgia: Partition, The Nation State, and The Refugees in Delhi", *Social Analysis*, Issue 44 (2) November 2000, p. 5.

¹⁴ Dharm Vira, *Reminiscences*, Vikash Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi. 1990, pp.74-75

¹⁵ "Delhi, A City of Refugee Enterprise", *Times of India*, New Delhi, January 24, 2010, p.18

Peshawar helped us a lot by protecting us. I started with a clerical job in a tractor company and moved on to sale and purchase of auto parts before opening an automobile shop in Jungpura.”¹⁶

The Chaina Ram Sindhi Halwai in Chandni Chowk is yet another evidence of resilience and hard work. The shop is the post-Independence version of the Chaina Ram Halwai shop that was set up in Lahore in 1901. Chaina Ram, the proprietor, died before partition and it was his son, Neecharam, and grandson who carried the patriarch’s dreams with them across the border when the country split. Later on, they pioneered the famous Karachi Halwa in post- Partition Delhi.¹⁷

Perhaps, the most celebrated story of Partition Refugees’ enterprise is that of Mahashay Dharampal Gulati, the founder of India’s leading spice brand MDH. He was born in Sialkot, Pakistan in 1923 to Mahashay Chunni Lal Gulati. His father had started a fairly successful spice business in the form of Mahashian Di Hatti (MDH). The mayhem of partition forced the family to relocate empty handed first to Amritsar and then to ramshackled house with a broken roof in Delhi. To earn a livelihood, he began driving a tonga but the meagre income was not enough to sustain the family. He, therefore, decided to go back to the masala business and opened a shop in Karolbagh, Delhi, the MDH shop. As the time progressed, the masala business grew manifold and became a huge success. In 2017, Mahashay Dharampal Gulati became India’s highest paid C.E.O. of a consumer products company. At present, MDH has more than 60 products and is nearly Rs. 1500 crore business empire, with a number of overseas office including in Dubai and London¹⁸.

Another notable success story is that of Raunaq Singh, the founder of the Apollo Group of companies. He was born in Daska (now in Pakistan) and began his career selling second-hand steel pipes in Lahore. His family was forced to migrate to Delhi after partition and begin business as steel merchant in Gole Market, earning just one paisa a day, and living in a cramped one-room accommodation. Struggling to make ends meet, he sold his wife’s jewellery for Rs. 8000 and in November 1947 moved to Kolkata to start a spice trading business. The business was fairly successful, however, he was destined to greater success. An accidental meeting with a German steel company’s C.E.O. led to the foundation of Bharat Steel Pipes, which soon became a leading player in the sector, supplying not just in the Indian market but also exporting to Europe and the United States. By 1976, he led the foundation of Apollo Tyres which soon became the leading player in the underserved truck and bus tyre segment¹⁹.

Conclusion:

The real-life stories recounted above are only some among the many such tales of rebuilding of lives of refugees from a scratch and against tremendous odds. The present generation needs to remember that the joy of independence was also accompanied by the trauma of partition. For those affected by it, life changed all of a sudden making them strangers in their own homelands and forcing them to move across the new borders and try to resurrect their lives in new, unfamiliar territories. These ‘refugees’, however, chose not to succumb to the dictates of fate and rebuilt their lives against seemingly insurmountable

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Rakshanda Sharma, “Independence Day: Gritty rags-to riches stories of Partition refugees”, *The Economic Times*, August 11, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/independence-day-gritty-rags-to-riches-stories-of-partition-refugees/articleshow/102647725.cms?from=md> (accessed on: September 4, 2026).

¹⁹ Sundeep Khanna, “How tyre baron Raunaq Singh lost his empire- but cemented his legacy”, *Mint*, July 19, 2025, <https://www.livemint.com/companies/people/raunaq-singh-apollo-tyres-founder-partition-legacy-family-feud-11752821854100.html> (accessed on: June 6, 2026).

obstacles. The accounts of women like Durga Devi, Kailash Rani, Maina Devi, Shanti Devi and Satyawati Ahuja highlight the immense courage that the refugee women showed as they rebuilt their lives through decades of relentless hard work. Similarly, the narratives of men like Kuldeep Chander, Devichand Chopra, Sardool Singh and Amrik Singh Bhatia show how extraordinarily difficult it was to eke out a living for thousands of refugees like them in those times and how they overcame it. Many such stories of struggle and survival deserve to be told in full detail. In most of these real-life accounts, resilient individuals have risen from the ashes, rebuilding their lives through sheer grit and determination. The remarkable success stories of Mahashay Dharampal Gulati of MDH and Raunaq Singh of Apollo Tyres are prime examples of this. At times, fate too had good things in store for refugees as evident from the stories of transformation of Lajpat Colony, Rajendra Nagar and Nizamuddin Colony in Delhi.

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