

"Traces of Humanity" in Indo-Pak History

More than six decades have passed since India was partitioned. There is no doubt that this partition was witness to unprecedented bloodshed and looting, but at the same time stories persist in which members of one ethnic or religious community risked their own lives to save members of another. Few partition scholars have paid attention to this side of partition history. The paper makes mention of such works and the relevance of this dimension of partition for the contemporary relationship of India and Pakistan.

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History of the South Asian Subcontinent is largely the history of a traumatic partition. While there is no doubt that the vivisection of the sub-continent was tragic and brought with it a baffling lunacy manifested in chaos, arson, turmoil, calamities of rape, eviction, dislocation and refuge, there is fascinating and instructive documentation of “the traces of humanity,” instances where Muslims saved the lives of non-Muslims and vice-versa as a tool of peace between India and Pakistan. ^[1] Bitter memories of partition madness, whether lived or learned through historical narrative, continue to haunt survivors, perpetrators and their descendent generations. ^[2] It is equally important, however, to bring to light the slices of history that have been obscured by the tide of literature that focuses exclusively on the heinous side of partition.

National history projects on both sides have totally ignored such instances, and have tended to focus on a narrative that in the words of Charles Meriam is “most consciously contrived for the purpose of influencing the next generation.” ^[3] Certain writers have tried to move beyond the history of the nation-states to write about the individual anguish and pain of migrants, yet it would be apposite to state that non-fiction accounts bringing to light

evangelical acts witnessed during the partition of India have been scarce.

This paper brings to light documentation of humanitarian episodes during partition and draws certain interesting points from the accounts. But before doing so, brief background on partition history will provide a context for this omission and also analyze possible reasons why the humanitarian side of partition was excluded from the partition debate and literature. The questions dealt with here are: Have there been any efforts to deal with the “positives” of partition? If not, why not? And what sort of endeavors have been made in the more recent past to make efficient use of oral history and to bring to light some illustrations of inter-faith harmony during the partition of the sub-continent? The conclusion recommends that partition scholars and peace activists lay more emphasis on the positive dimensions of partition.

Background of Indo-Pak Relations

The painful and horrific memories of the bloodshed accompanying the traumatic partition of the Indian sub-continent and the creation of Pakistan are deeply etched in the minds of survivors. Post-partition generations, too, have been brought up on partition tales, the majority of which accentuate hatreds between India and Pakistan on the one hand and between Muslims and non-Muslims on the other. Before attempting to understand these dynamics, or the humanitarian impulse for that matter, it is important to look briefly at the background of the Indo-Pak relationship. The relationship in the aftermath of partition has been strained for the most part, with ephemeral glimmers of hope, such as the Lahore agreement signed by former Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee and former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 1999 and the cricket series in 2004 and 2005. Under that provision, fans from both countries had opportunities to interact with each other and visit their ancestral houses. Another agreement allowed bus service between the Kashmirs and between the two Punjabs. ^[4]

The history of conflict does not stem from the event of partition in 1947 alone, which was ironically designed to reduce ethnic and cultural violence. The cross-border relationship has been strained nearly continually since then and has endured two wars (1965 and 1971), escalated aggression in 1999, and the fear of full-scale war between the two sides in the aftermath of the tragic Mumbai attacks on November 26, 2008. Unfortunately, increasing violence at the hands of certain terrorist groups in Pakistan (which India argues are

responsible for the Mumbai attack) and the threat of another 26/11-like terror attack on India loom large, and conditions seem to be moving in a downward spiral. ^[5]

If one were to examine the main reason for ongoing tension between the two countries, it could likely be reduced to the fact that Pakistan believes a harmonious relationship between the two neighbors would be possible only if a mutually acceptable solution is found to the vexing Kashmir issue. India on the other hand believes that Pakistan has been using cross-border terrorism as a means of destabilizing India, and the relationship can only be cordial if Pakistan unequivocally abjures terrorism, not merely in words but also in actions.

Partition a Key Cause of Friction

These are the “official” explanations of blame offered by governments. It would be pertinent, however, to deal with another issue that has been assiduously used by hardliners to poison the minds of younger generations—the actual partition of the sub-continent that resulted in a macabre blood bath and migration of large numbers of people from India to what was to become Pakistan and vice-versa. Having been born two generations after the partition and having talked to survivors of partition, within and outside my family, I am of the opinion that the hatred and distrust stemming from this painful vivisection plays the greater role in the animosity between the two countries. Kashmir was a consequence of the geographical divide, while the acrimony and the tensions that have prevailed are a consequence, in large part, of the painful and gory partition of India.

In a book review, Khaled Ahmed articulates this point well, saying, “Hundreds of thousands got killed, women were raped and children lost. The wound of it went deep, bequeathing to South Asia one of the world’s most lethal sets of nationalisms that braked development and prosperity and unleashed poverty-provoking wars. If there was holocaust in the West, this was one in which ‘no one community could be held responsible.’” ^[6] Khushwant Singh, while echoing Ahmed’s views, opines that “The wounds of partition have healed. The poison is still in our system.” ^[7]

Partition was meant to solve, once and for all, the Hindu-Muslim question, but hatred and animosity between the two communities has only increased. In fact, one of the other negative ramifications of partition has been the pitiable condition of minorities on both sides of the divide. Among the biggest sufferers of the divide are Indian Muslims, who are looked

at with suspicion in India. This point was articulated by none other than former BJP leader Jaswant Singh in his book *Jinnah: India-Pakistan Independence*, which was mired in controversy since Singh deviated from apportioning the blame for the partition of India on the intransigence of the Congress Party, especially senior leaders such as Jawahar Lal Nehru and Sardar Patel. While his party, the BJP, holds no brief for the Congress, it could not tolerate praise for Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, as they hold him responsible for the division of what they consider one geographical unit, “Akhand Bharat.”^[8] Minorities in Pakistan also face a similar predicament.^[9] Guha is not wrong when, predicting the future, he says, “Despite their shared culture, cuisine and love for the game of cricket, India and Pakistan have already fought four wars. And judging by the number of troops on their borders and the missiles and nuclear weapons to back them, they seem prepared to fight a fifth.”^[10]

Partition literature

The literature on the partition of the sub-continent includes four types of material:

1. Chronicles/documents of the events as they happened. Some prominent examples of such works are the works of Penderel Moon and GD Khosla.^[11]
2. Historical research focusing on the high politics of the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress, such as Ayesha Jalal’s *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, The Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*.
3. Literary fiction in the form of stories that belong to a progressive tradition and express anguish at the trauma.^[12]
4. More recently literature with a thrust on oral history, recording individual experiences and including documentation of some positive episodes during partition.

The immediate aftermath of partition witnessed numerous works in the first category. From the 1960’s onwards however, there have been numerous works created that can be classified as works of fiction.

According to Ramachandra Guha, one of the primary reasons for partition fiction being the most common form of partition literature is:

The literature on the Partition of India is driven by those who had to flee religious persecution, whether Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan or Muslims in

India. In the fifties and sixties, the refugee experience resulted in a series of moving novels and stories, by writers such as Khushwant Singh and Bhisham Sahni in India and Saadat Hasan Manto and Intezar Hussain in Pakistan. The memories were too painful to set down in memoir or history, so they were camouflaged and perhaps made more evocative through the medium of fiction. [13]

Elizabeth Cole echoing these views makes the point that “In most societies recovering from violence, questions of how to deal with the past are acute, especially when the past involves memories of death, suffering, and destruction so widespread that a high percentage of the population is affected.” [14]

Another reason for the dominance of fiction is the fact that for a long while partition survivors were reticent to share their experiences for the very same reason mentioned above. This began to change with Urvashi Butalia’s interviews for *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Gyanendra Pandey’s *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, and Alok Bhalla’s *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home*. These were not only pioneering efforts in the field of partition studies, what with their efficient use of interviews with partition survivors; they also iterated the significance of oral history. [15]

While the genre of partition fiction has indisputable significance as an important interpreter of that experience, there is no substitute for documented, positive, real life episodes. But mere documentation of partition on its own is inadequate. A recent review article of works of partition literature is of the firm opinion that “Hasan’s volumes abundantly bear out that the fiction’s power is, if anything, increased when offered together with non-fictional accounts. This is particularly true in the case of oral history, interview, and other testimonial texts.” [16] Indeed, some recent works of historically-based fiction about partition have made efficient use of oral history, looking especially for what Usha and Rajmohan Gandhi call “traces of humanity.” [17]

Recent attempts to explore interfaith compassion

Partition history up until now has confined itself to a focus on the horrors of partition—for good reason, as acts of brutality overshadowed acts of compassion. And as seems true in

most historical treatments, “Ignorance is the first requisite of the historian, ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits.” [18]

Amidst the trauma and the pain of partition, there are some stories that have been obliterated, which need to be reconstructed and told, such as instances in which individuals from one community rescued members of another, at the peril of losing their own lives. This dimension is no romanticization or exaggeration; scholars believe that in at least 25-30 percent of cases of contact between ethnicities in the partition, members of one community rescued those of another. Of course, such episodes are known only to the people involved and their descendents and remain untold in the larger culture, obscured in the larger atmosphere of tension and hatred. [19] This very rough estimate is based upon a decade-long project being carried out by sociologist Ashish Nandy. He writes:

Many survivors remember how, even in those bitter days, when inter-community relations were at their nadir, individuals and communities resisted the violence. Many neighbours did succumb to greed and the temptation to loot, but others risked their lives—and that of their families—to protect friends and even strangers from the other community. A few even died to protect their wards. [20]

Few attempts have been made to document such episodes. Mushirul Hasan, a prominent historian, was among the first scholars of partition to bring to light stories such as those of Khushdeva Singh who rescued numerous Muslims. In her book *The Great Divide*, Yasmin Khan also draws attention to such instances. Several books and scholarly projects have dealt specifically with humane incidences and have helped begin the process of reconciliation. [21] Those that stand out are projects by Ashish Nandy under the aegis of the Ford Foundation and Rajmohan Gandhi. [22] I would also include my own research in a co-authored book entitled *Humanity amidst Insanity*, written jointly with two Pakistanis. It would not be incorrect to say that one of my co-authors did not realize the significance of this unexplored dimension of history until he embarked on its writing.

Some of the findings of the book were truly fascinating and nothing less than revelation, particularly stories of clergy who saved individuals from other religious communities, specifically women and children. This came as a surprise because for a long time faith has been presented as the main cause of partition. In the twenty-two cases documented in

Humanity amidst Insanity, clerics from both sides took personal risk to save someone of another religion.

On the Pakistani side, Rana Ameer Khan narrates how the Sikh community hid Muslim families, including his own, in the local Sikh temple or *gurdwara*. Says Khan: “The Sikh community hid me, my mother, other women and children in the *gurdwara* and guarded us for many days. But later when things got out of hand, my grandfather and other Muslims decided to migrate to Pakistan. Therefore under the protection of our Sikh friends we managed to reach the Ambala refugee camp where the army was deputed for the security of refugees. Under the security of army soldiers we came to Lahore by bus.” [23] Interestingly religious shrines were used for hiding these individuals. [24]

One of the Indian interviewees, Joginder Singh Kohli, also narrates how his mother, sister, and younger brother were rescued by a Muslim priest, Ghulam Nabi. The latter hid all the non-Muslim women of the village in the local Mosque and told all the Muslim men of the village, who had intended to marry these women, that marrying them without their conversion to Islam would be Anti-Islamic. This strategy to buy time worked and in the meanwhile his father returned with a military van and rescued his family members. [25]

Another interesting revelation from interviews is that many individuals escaped by using religious clothing, such as the burqa and other Muslim outfits. Interviewees on both sides narrate how non-Muslims were rescued in this manner. Joginder Singh Kohli’s father, Avtar Singh Kohli, wore a Muslim outfit and could not be recognized during the riots. Another interviewee, Harbhajan Singh, also explains how he was rescued using a burqa. On the Pakistani side, Mirza Nasir-ud-Din also helped innocent Hindus escape by disguising Muslim males in Rumi caps, while women were made to cover their heads with burqas. Dr. Asif Nisar too narrates how some Sikh families escaped by disguising themselves in shuttle cock burqas.

In one case, a senior Muslim politician sent his Muslim servants to escort his non-Muslim friends to a camp. [26] The servants however killed some of their master’s friends. On learning of this betrayal of trust, Bharana could not control his wrath and actually murdered his servants. This episode actually underlines the fact that for people like Bharana friendship and honor are paramount. While partition literature has spoken about revenge against members of other religious or ethnic communities, it has seldom made mention of punitive

actions against a community's own members. It would not be incorrect to say that with all its flaws, oral history has the ability to bring out facts that are previously known only to single individuals or a handful of people. ^[27]

In another case, a Muslim gentleman named Muhammad Yahsin was migrating from Amritsar to Lahore in Pakistan. Along with his family fled two Sikh girls whose father was abroad at the time of rioting. While on the one hand Yahsin was eager to save the lives of his family members, he actually imperiled them all to take along the two non-Muslim girls. Eventually the girls were returned to Amritsar once things had cooled down in the aftermath of partition. ^[28]

Two cases of Sikhs unfurling the Pakistani flag came out in our research. The two individuals were Partap Singh Bajaj and Bhag Singh Waraich. ^[29] The fact that non-Muslims actually unfurled the flag of Pakistan goes to show the sense of naivete and ignorance in the minds of ordinary people towards the creation of separate nation states. Parkash Tandon has noted that until August 14, 1947, many non-Muslims were not sure they would have to migrate to India. He writes, "We Hindus and Sikhs have lived under the Muslims before, then under the Sikhs and the British, and if we are now back under Muslim rule, so what? We shall manage somehow, as we have managed before." ^[30]

The use of oral history is critical in learning about these divergences because they are individual experiences known only to the people who lived them. Such individual experiences have not been sufficiently documented in serious scholarship and eye-witness accounts are beginning to fade with age. While partition fiction has made commendable efforts to portray the human dimension and compassion of events, it tends to be dismissed as mere nostalgia. Real life experience cannot be dismissed so easily, yet some very interesting facts and insights have been overlooked because of inadequate mining of oral history. It is crucial to make use of this oral history as survivors of partition who have vivid impressions of this cataclysmic event are withering away and a lot of interesting and important facts are threatened with obliteration.

A survivor of Auschwitz noted that:

Today, the last living survivors of the Holocaust are disappearing one by one.

Soon, history will speak about Auschwitz with the impersonal voice of researchers and novelists at best, and at worst in the malevolent register of revisionists and falsifiers who call the Nazi Final Solution a myth. This process has already begun. ^[31]

Having an opportunity to carry out research on this sensitive and important issue, I would like to make some recommendations for researchers, policy makers, and journalists so that such episodes will reach a wider audience and, if possible, contribute to the reduction of acrimony between India and Pakistan. First, it is important to develop a data base of survivors on both sides of the divide who were rescued by members of another community. This would facilitate greater accuracy in the research. The absence of any such record means that all interviewees are known only through networking and word of mouth. This inevitably results in the exclusion of many individuals. The other way, which may be more efficient for getting information out to a wider number of partition survivors, is the method used by Rajmohan Gandhi. To help Gandhi spread the word of his research broadly, *Jang* columnist Naji inserted a note in his newspaper column (July 20, 2005) asking readers who possessed accounts of help given to the “other” in 1947 to phone a number, for the benefit, Naji added, of researchers from India. ^[32] Research institutes and peace organizations can begin this process by creating online databases to collect and store interviews, record accounts, and distribute information.

Schools, colleges, and universities must include this history, making students aware of the “traces of humanity” during the chaos of Partition. So far only inadequate attention has been paid to such a possibility. In fact curricula on both sides of the divide have been preoccupied with perpetuating religious and cultural animosity. K. K. Aziz and Krishna Kumar in their respective works have highlighted the way in which textbooks have tended to be divisive and to play a role in poisoning the minds of young children in both countries. ^[33] In the recent past some stellar efforts have been made not only to reorganize curricula in both countries, but to jointly examine history from an academic point of view, giving acts of nonviolence and humanitarianism their due. One such effort has been made through a memorandum of understanding signed in 2006 between Ramjas College, Delhi University, and Lahore University of Management Sciences. This exchange aims to carry out joint research on partition in numerous disciplines, including history. Similar exchanges are possible between educational institutions and also between education boards of both

countries, working toward research of sensitive issues such as partition in a more rational manner. But at present such initiatives are a mere drop in the ocean. ^[34]

1. 1. The vicissitudinal relationship between India and Pakistan has resulted in half-hearted implementation of confidence building measures. Such measures should be fast tracked, measures such as “sunshine” efforts that would permit and encourage media to air the stories of victims on both sides, especially the stories of mutual aid and humanitarianism during partition. Broadcasts of these accounts will expose future generations to the other side of partition history.
2. In a similar vein, it is imperative that both countries allow free travel across borders so that partition survivors may fulfill their desires to be reunited with their kin from whom they have been separated. While there has been talk about reducing travel barriers for individuals of a certain age, neither government has had the courage to implement such measures.
3. Track two initiatives between the two countries should be encouraged to allow all people access to religious shrines that are located across borders. For example, entrance to the Sikh shrine in Pakistan is currently controlled by the Pakistani Government and Sikhs from India must obtain a visa to cross over. Communities in the Kartarpur religious corridor should organize to allow Sikhs to pay free obeisance at Darbar Sahib Narowal, a religious shrine where the founder of the Sikhs, Guru Nanak, spent the last years of his life. All communities—Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims—have a stake in such projects, as they help strengthen various religious communities internally and rebuild relationships across ethnic boundaries, reiterating a common past of religious co-existence. Two track initiatives promise to increase civil cohesion and ultimately security. ^[35]
4. There has been talk of building a memorial at Wagah dedicated to the victims of partition. Memorialization of humanitarians and those who rescued the lives of others should be included in any project to collectively remember the partition. Similar memorials such as the names of the Righteous among Nations at Yad Vashem in Israel help keep alive the memory of those who acted to save lives at great personal risk to themselves. It is time that both governments examine this idea and implement a memorialization plan with the help of NGO’s, international museum experts, and historians, transforming this dream into a reality.

Numerous individuals in the realms of academia, journalism, and peace activism have already made these recommendations, but for a number of reasons they have been unsuccessful in achieving any one of them, the primary reason being the strained relationship between India and Pakistan. And whenever there is progress, an untoward incident, such as the November 26, 2008, terrorist attacks in Mumbai, sets the process back significantly. It is time that those committed to Indo-Pak peace and harmony in general reexamine partition history in particular, lobbying their governments to take steps toward greater openness, recognition of those who protected the “other” from violence during partition, and incorporating humanitarianism into the historical record of partition. Even within academia it is imperative to remove the walls between different disciplines. Only then will the hatreds of the past, which have created unnecessary barriers, wither away.

1. 1. For clear articulation of “traces of humanity,” see “Insaniyat Amidst Insanity,” *The Sunday Tribune*, 16 Oct. 2005. See also Ashish Nandy, “Birth Pangs,” *The Times of India*, 14 Aug. 2006; and Maini et al., *Humanity Amidst Insanity: Hope During and After the Indo-Pak Partition* (New Delhi: UBSPD, 2008) for a clear understanding of how, on numerous occasions, Muslims risked their lives to save Non-Muslims and vice-versa.
2. 2. Satya P. Gautam, “Partition Memories and Reconciliation,” http://www.india-seminar.com/2006/567/567_satya_p_gautam.htm.
3. 3. Charles E. Merriam, *The Making of Citizens* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1931), 125.
4. 4. See Tridivesh S. Maini, *South Asian Cooperation and The Role of the Punjabs* (New Delhi: Siddhartha Publications, 2007).
5. 5. “Pak urges India to investigate IPL-3 ‘auction fiasco,’” *The Indian Express*, 27 Jan. 2010.
6. 6. Khaled Ahmed, “Partition: Only One-quarter Human,” book review in *Daily Times*, 15 Mar. 2009
7. 7. Somini Sengupta, “Author bears steady witness to Partition’s wounds,” *The New York Times*, 21 Sept. 2006.
8. 8. Suman K. Jha, Ashwani Sharma, “Jinnah Sardar top BJP agenda,” *The Indian Express*, 19 Aug. 2009. See also Shahid M. Amin, “Jaswant Singh’s bombshell,”

Dawn, 26 Aug. 2009.

9. 9. For an analysis of the abject condition of minorities in Pakistan, see *State, Nation, and Ethnicity in Contemporary South Asia*, by Ishtiaq Ahmed (London: Cassell, 1999), 179-182.
10. 10. Ramachandra Guha, "India's internal partition," *The New York Times*, 15 Aug. 2007.
11. 11. Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit* (University of California Press, 1962); G. D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: a Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India* (Oxford University Press, 1989).
12. 12. The works of Kartar Singh Duggal, Sadat Hasan Manto, Intezar Hussain, and Khushwant Singh come under this category.
13. 13. Ramachandra Guha, "Telling the story of the neglected victims of Partition," *The Telegraph*, 18 Aug. 2007.
14. 14. Elizabeth A. Cole, *Teaching the Violent Past: History Education and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 1.
15. 15. Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998); Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Alok Bhalla, *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
16. 16. Jason Francisco, "In the Heat of Fratricide: The Literature of India's Partition Burning Freshly" (A Review Article), *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 11 (1996).
17. 17. Usha and Rajmohan Gandhi, "Insaniyat amidst Insanity," *The Tribune* (India), 16 Oct. 2005.
18. 18. Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.
19. 19. Ashish Nandy, conversation with the author, New Delhi.
20. 20. Ashish Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 123-124.
21. 21. In the words of Elizabeth Cole, "The complex process by which deeply divided societies recover the ability to function normally and effectively after violence is known as reconciliation."
22. 22. For details on Nandy's project, see "India's Survivors of Partition Begin to Break Long Silence: Projects Document Anguish of 1947 Split," by Rama Laxmi, *The*

Washington Post, 12 Mar. 2008. For details on Rajmohan Gandhi's project, see Usha and Rajmohan Gandhi, "Insaniyat amidst Insanity: Some Recollections of 1947," *The Tribune* (India), 16 Oct. 2005.

23. 23. Maini et al, *Humanity amidst Insanity: Hope During and After the Indo-Pak Partition*, 118.
24. 24. Maini et al, *Humanity amidst Insanity*, 11.
25. 25. Maini et al, *Humanity amidst Insanity*, 68-29.
26. 26. Maini et al, *Humanity amidst Insanity*, 24.
27. 27. Maini et al, *Humanity amidst Insanity*, 24.
28. 28. Maini et al, *Humanity amidst Insanity*, 107-109.
29. 29. Maini et al, *Humanity amidst Insanity*, 73.
30. 30. Prakash Tandon, *Punjabi Saga, 1857-2000: The Monumental Story of Five Generations of a Remarkable Punjabi Family* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2000), 218.
31. 31. Samuel Pizar, "Out of Auschwitz," *The New York Times*, 28 Jan. 2010.
32. 32. Usha and Rajmohan Gandhi, "Insaniyat amidst Insanity: Some Recollections of 1947," *The Tribune*, 16 Oct. 2005.
33. 33. See K. K. Aziz, *The Murder of History: A Critique of History Textbooks* (Delhi: Renaissance Publishing House, 1998); and Krishna Kumar, *Prejudice and Pride* (New Delhi: Penguin/Viking Books, 2001).
34. 34. Mandira Nayar, "Now a Brand New Bond between Delhi and Lahore," *The Hindu*, 7 June 2006.
35. 35. For background on the Kartarpur Corridor, see Tridivesh Singh Maini, "Opinion: The Case for Kartarpur," *The Daily Times* (Pakistan), 9 July 2009. For an understanding of the issue and the work of IMTD, visit http://www.imtd.org/?page_id=64.