IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Recovering The Silenced: Women, Memory And Gendered Violence In The Partition Of India

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Abstract

This article examines the gendered experiences of women during the upheaval of the Partition of India, focusing particularly on the violence, displacement, and social dislocation that shaped their lives. While conventional historiography has largely emphasized political negotiations and territorial divisions, women's experiences have often remained marginal within these narratives. Building on the feminist insights of Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, the study emphasizes the importance of recovering women's narratives in order to understand how gender shaped the experience of violence, migration, and rehabilitation. The article highlights the multiple forms of violence directed at women, including sexual assault, abduction, forced conversion, and honour-based killings. These acts not only inflicted physical harm but also symbolized communal domination and humiliation. The analysis further explores how women remembered and narrated these events differently from men. As scholars such as Veena Das and Ashis Nandy have noted, women often retained the memory of violence through embodied experiences, producing narratives that reveal the emotional and psychological dimensions of trauma. By bringing these testimonies to the forefront, the article demonstrates the importance of oral history in reconstructing a gendered social history of Partition.

Keywords: Partition, Women, Violence, Rehabilitation, Oral History

Introduction

The Partition of India remains one of the most defining and traumatic events in the history of South Asia. The creation of new borders between India and Pakistan triggered unprecedented communal violence and the forced migration of millions, resulting in one of the largest refugee crises of the twentieth century. Partition: a metaphor for irreparable loss[1], it represented not merely a political reorganization of territory but a profound rupture in everyday life—marked by displacement, separation, and personal tragedy. Even decades later, the memories of this upheaval continued to shape social consciousness and historical reflection. The assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the violence that followed briefly reminded many Indians of the brutalities associated with Partition, demonstrating how deeply embedded the memory of that catastrophe remains in the collective psyche.

[1] Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

Among the many stories that emerged from this upheaval, the experiences of women refugees remain particularly significant yet historically underrepresented. Women were often the most vulnerable during the violence of Partition, facing abduction, sexual assault, and displacement, while also bearing the responsibility of sustaining families in uncertain circumstances. Their narratives reveal the deeply gendered nature of refugeehood and provide insight into the social realities of survival and rehabilitation in the aftermath of displacement. This article examines the experiences of women refugees in order to illuminate the gendered dimensions of Partition and to recover voices that have frequently remained at the margins of historical accounts.

Despite the extensive scholarship devoted to the Partition of India, much of the historiography has traditionally focused on political developments, leadership decisions, and the diplomatic processes that led to the division of the subcontinent. While these studies remain essential for understanding the structural and institutional aspects of Partition, they often leave insufficient space for exploring its social consequences. The lived experiences of displacement, violence, and survival—particularly those of ordinary people—have frequently been overshadowed by these dominant narratives. In response to this limitation, historians have increasingly emphasized the value of alternative sources such as literature, autobiographical writings, oral testimonies, and other fragmentary materials. These sources open new avenues for understanding the complexities of ethnic conflict and communal violence, while also highlighting the diverse ways in which individuals and communities remember Partition beyond the framework of official memory.

Historiography and the Feminist Approach

Within this broader effort to recover marginalized voices, the study of women's experiences has gained particular significance. Feminist historiography has underscored the need to rethink historical narratives that have long overlooked women's roles and perspectives. As Joan Kelly famously argued, women's history carries a dual objective: to restore women to history and to restore history to women[2]. The task, therefore, is not merely to insert women into existing narratives but to reconceptualize the past by placing women at the centre of historical inquiry. By making women both subjects of investigation and agents within the narrative, historians can illuminate dimensions of displacement, trauma, and resilience that conventional political histories often overlook. Such an approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Partition by foregrounding the gendered experiences that shaped the lives of countless women during and after this moment of profound historical rupture.

In their pioneering feminist engagement with the history of the Partition of India, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin[3] raised a series of fundamental questions that sought to rethink the historiography of Partition from a gendered perspective. They asked how one might embark upon a feminist reading of Partition, what kinds of questions should be asked, and what sources might enable such an inquiry. Their intervention called for a careful examination of how women's experiences could be disentangled from broader political narratives in order to problematize the seemingly universal accounts of violence, displacement, and refugeehood. Equally important were questions concerning identity and belonging: how did the categories of nation, religion, and community intersect with gender in shaping the experiences of those affected by Partition? These questions also extended to the responsibilities of the postcolonial state, particularly in relation to refugee rehabilitation policies and the ways in which these policies addressed—or failed to address—the specific needs of women refugees.

At the same time, feminist scholars have pointed out that the history of Partition cannot be adequately understood without acknowledging the widespread violence inflicted upon women. Although many accounts of Partition describe communal brutality in detail, women's experiences often remain submerged within broader narratives of suffering and displacement. The relative invisibility of women

[2] Joan Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
[3] Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

in these accounts highlights a significant gap in historical scholarship. Bringing women's experiences to the forefront is not intended to elevate individual testimony above other historical evidence but to recognize the essential insights that such experiences provide. By assigning historical value to women's narratives, historians gain access to perspectives that illuminate the gendered dimensions of violence, displacement, and survival, thereby enriching our understanding of the profound social transformations produced by Partition.

Oral history and Voices of the Women

In seeking to reconstruct the experiences of women affected by the upheavals of the Partition of India, particular reliance has been placed on sources that capture the voices of those directly engaged in the process of relief and rehabilitation. Among the most significant of these are the limited but invaluable memoirs and first-hand accounts written by women social workers who played a crucial role in assisting displaced and abducted women in the aftermath of Partition. Their narratives provide important insights into the everyday realities of refugee rehabilitation, the institutional mechanisms created to address the crisis, and the emotional complexities surrounding the recovery and reintegration of women. These written accounts have been supplemented by oral testimonies collected from the same social workers as well as from women residing in various ashrams and shelters, thereby offering a rich body of qualitative material that illuminates the lived experiences often absent from official documentation.

The geographical scope of this research has been centred primarily on Punjab and Haryana, where many of these institutions and testimonies were located. The choice of Punjab as the focal point of investigation was shaped by both personal considerations and the historical significance of the region in the context of Partition. As one of the principal sites of migration and resettlement, Punjab witnessed extensive relocation and rehabilitation efforts in the aftermath of the division of the subcontinent. Moreover, many scholars and observers have argued that the violence associated with Partition was particularly intense along the western frontier, especially in Punjab, which reinforced the perception that the scale and brutality of violence there surpassed that experienced in the eastern borderlands of Bengal. This understanding contributed to the decision to focus research on Punjab and its surrounding regions as a primary site for exploring women's experiences of displacement and recovery.

Historically, women have rarely been the authors of formal historical narratives. As a result, the archival record contains relatively few personal accounts written by women themselves. The absence of women's voices in conventional historiography does not indicate a lack of historical experience but rather reflects structural limitations that historically restricted women's access to literacy, authorship, and public intellectual spaces. Feminist historians have long acknowledged this gap and have emphasized the need to recover women's histories through alternative methods and sources that move beyond traditional written archives. In this context, the study of events such as the Partition of India requires approaches that can capture experiences that were seldom documented in official records or formal historical writings.

Oral history has therefore emerged as an indispensable tool for retrieving these marginalized perspectives. Because women have often relied more on spoken communication than written expression to transmit their memories and experiences, interviews and testimonies provide a particularly rich source for understanding their lives. Oral narratives enable historians to access the emotional and social dimensions of historical events that are frequently absent in administrative documents. For feminist scholars, oral history thus offers the possibility of uncovering voices that have long remained hidden within dominant historical narratives. By documenting women's memories and testimonies, oral history serves both a compensatory and supplementary role—compensatory in addressing the absence of women's voices in traditional archives, and supplementary in enriching existing historical interpretations with new perspectives grounded in lived experience.

While oral testimonies opened important avenues for recovering women's voices, the process of conducting such research also presented several methodological and ethical challenges. At many stages of the interviews, the researchers encountered moments of hesitation and discomfort, particularly when the women themselves turned the questions back on them. Some asked poignantly what purpose such inquiries served so many decades after the event, remarking that nothing could now undo the suffering or alter what had already transpired. Confronted with these responses, the researchers found it difficult to offer a fully satisfactory answer. Their explanation—that the aim was to document experiences of the Partition of India that had long remained ignored and to make women visible within historical narratives—often seemed inadequate in the face of the women's deeply personal memories of loss and trauma.

Nevertheless, the attempt to record these narratives was motivated by a broader historical and analytical purpose. Events such as Partition, much like personal tragedies or natural disasters, leave enduring marks on the lives of those who experience them. The effort to engage with women's testimonies therefore had a twofold objective. First, it sought to understand how individuals who were not directly involved in political decision-making nevertheless experienced and interpreted a transformative historical event. Their memories offer an important critique of conventional political histories by revealing how large-scale historical processes shape everyday lives. Second, the collection of these life stories enables historians to reconstruct a gendered social history of Partition—one that bears witness to the experiences of women and situates them within the broader historical processes of violence, displacement, and survival.

Sources and Methodology

The methodological framework adopted for this study reflects an effort to bridge the divide between official historical documentation and personal memory. Rather than relying exclusively on archival sources, the researchers employed a combination of analytical commentary and narrative testimony to create a dialogue between documented history and lived experience. This strategy allowed them to present multiple perspectives constructed from a wide variety of source materials. These included in-depth interviews with women who had lived through the upheaval of the Partition of India, as well as government records, private papers, memoirs, autobiographies, letters, diaries, audio recordings, parliamentary debates, and legal documents. By integrating these diverse sources, the study sought to illuminate aspects of history that remain obscured when only official records are consulted.

However, the use of oral testimony introduced certain methodological complexities. The interviews conducted did not conform to a strict chronological sequence, largely because memory itself does not operate in linear fashion. The process of recollection often involved revisiting the past in ways shaped by present circumstances, resulting in narratives where everyday time and life-time intersected. Each woman's account revealed how she interpreted and organized her life experiences across different temporal horizons—linking past events with present realities and future expectations. Yet these narratives were inevitably selective. Some memories were recounted vividly, while others were omitted or only partially recalled. Furthermore, not every woman spoke freely or without hesitation, reflecting the emotional difficulty of revisiting painful experiences. Such silences and discontinuities highlight the limitations inherent in oral testimony while also underscoring the fragmentary nature of historical memory.

Violence, Migration and the Gendered Suffering

The narratives collected through oral testimonies and other sources reveal several recurring themes that structure the experiences of women during and after the upheaval of the Partition of India. Among the most prominent of these is the pervasive presence of violence, which shaped the lives of countless women in ways that were both immediate and enduring. Accounts frequently recount the brutal forms of communal violence that accompanied mass migration, as well as the abduction of women that became a tragic hallmark of the period. The subsequent efforts to recover abducted women through state-sponsored programmes brought forth complex questions concerning identity, consent, and belonging. Many women who had been recovered from across newly formed borders found themselves confronting difficult choices regarding family, community, and the redefinition of their social identities.

Equally significant are the themes of widowhood, rehabilitation, and the gradual process of rebuilding lives in the aftermath of displacement. For many women, Partition meant the loss of spouses, family members, homes, and familiar social networks. Widowhood often placed women in particularly vulnerable positions, compelling them to navigate new social and economic realities in refugee settlements and rehabilitation centres. Government initiatives and voluntary organizations sought to address these challenges through programmes aimed at women's rehabilitation, including the establishment of homes, training centres, and welfare institutions. Yet beyond institutional efforts, the narratives also highlight the resilience of women who gradually reconstructed their lives and negotiated new forms of belonging in unfamiliar environments. These experiences illuminate how the aftermath of Partition was not only a story of loss but also one of survival and adaptation.

The testimonies gathered through oral narratives reveal that the crisis produced by the Partition of India was not only one of displacement but also of profound social dislocation. Among its most striking consequences was the emergence of mass widowhood on an unprecedented scale. Communal violence, killings during migration, and the destruction of entire families left countless women widowed and responsible for sustaining households under extremely precarious circumstances. At the same time, forced migration was frequently accompanied by the large-scale abduction of women and children, often followed by forced conversions and marriages across communal lines. These experiences illustrate how women's bodies became sites upon which the conflicts between communities were violently enacted.

Such experiences also reveal the operation of multiple patriarchies—those of family, community, and state—which shaped women's lives during this period of upheaval. Even as the subcontinent moved toward political freedom, women often found themselves navigating structures of control that determined their fate in matters of recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society. In many cases, violence against women was justified through notions of honour and shame, leading to acts that were perceived as "honourable deaths" or socially permissible violence intended to protect community honour. Examining these narratives from a gendered perspective highlights how women's identities were shaped at the intersection of community, caste, class, and broader political forces, thereby revealing the complex dynamics that underlay both the violence and the subsequent processes of rebuilding and belonging.

As the situation deteriorated further, the journeys undertaken by refugees became increasingly perilous and uncertain. What had initially appeared to be temporary movements soon turned into desperate attempts to escape the spreading violence. Travellers were often forced to navigate dangerous routes amid rumours, fear, and sporadic attacks, while the means of transportation themselves became sites of vulnerability. In particular, the trains that carried large numbers of refugees across the province of Punjab became symbols of both hope and terror. As documented by the historian Swarna Aiyar[4], numerous trains transporting fleeing populations were subjected to brutal attacks during the weeks between early August

[4] Swarna Aiyar, *August Anarchy: The Partition Massacres in Punjab, 1947* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998).

and the end of September 1947, turning what should have been passages to safety into scenes of large-scale massacre. It was only later, with the arrangement of specially designated "Refugee Specials," that some attempt was made to provide safer passage for those crossing the border in the wake of the upheaval of the Partition of India.

Contemporary accounts further highlighted that these incidents were not isolated occurrences. G. D. Khosla[5], who headed the Government of India's Fact-Finding Organization established to investigate the violence and the mass exodus, observed that the massacres on trains merely reproduced the savagery that had spread throughout the countryside. In the midst of this widespread disorder, economic considerations also shaped individual decisions; in some cases, propertied individuals chose to accept conversion to another religion in the hope of retaining their homes, land, and material assets during a time of profound uncertainty and displacement.

Equally significant are the testimonies of those who were involved in the recovery and rehabilitation of affected women over extended periods of time. Their accounts illuminate the institutional and social efforts undertaken to locate abducted women, facilitate their return, and support their reintegration into families and communities. Together, these narratives expand the understanding offered by written records, revealing the enduring emotional, social, and economic challenges that shaped women's lives in the aftermath of displacement and violence.

Gendered Memory and the Narratives of Violence

During the upheaval of the Partition of India, one of the most predictable forms of violence directed specifically at women was sexual assault carried out across communal lines. Women were targeted not merely as individuals but as representatives of their community, and the violation of their bodies was intended as a symbolic assertion of power. By assaulting the women of the "other" community, perpetrators sought to humiliate and degrade their rivals, transforming gendered violence into a weapon of communal conflict.

Numerous accounts from the period describe the humiliating and brutal nature of such acts. Stories circulate in both written sources and oral testimonies of women being stripped "just as bananas are peeled" and forced to parade naked through marketplaces. In some instances, they were made to dance in this state inside gurudwaras, acts designed to publicly degrade both the women and their communities. Other narratives recount women being raped in the presence of their male relatives, intensifying the humiliation inflicted upon families and reinforcing the symbolic dimension of the violence.

Faced with the threat of such atrocities, many women were driven to desperate choices in order to preserve what was perceived as personal and communal honour. Contemporary accounts refer to large numbers of women committing suicide or being forced into death to avoid sexual violation. One of the most widely cited examples is the incident in Thoa Khalsa in present-day Rawalpindi, where around ninety women reportedly jumped into a well on 15 March 1947 to escape capture and assault, an event that has come to symbolize the tragic extremes to which women were driven during the violence.

Each act of violence directed at women during the upheaval of the Partition of India carried both symbolic and physical consequences. These acts treated women's bodies as territories to be conquered, claimed, or marked by the assailant. Sexual assault, public humiliation, and forced exposure were not merely individual crimes but gestures embedded within a larger framework of communal rivalry and domination, where the violation of women signified the defeat and degradation of the opposing community.

[5] G. D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading Up To and Following the Partition of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Such acts often took place in public spaces, including marketplaces, temples, and gurudwaras. When violence occurred within religious sites, the assault acquired an additional layer of meaning, symbolizing not only the violation of women but also the desecration of sacred spaces. In other instances, the violence occurred in more private settings, yet even there it was frequently carried out in the presence of family members, transforming personal suffering into collective humiliation.

The deeply entrenched belief that safeguarding a woman's honour was essential to preserving male and community honour produced another tragic dimension of violence. Under this pressure, many families turned against their own women in an attempt to prevent the perceived shame of sexual violation. Women were sometimes forced to die at the hands of their own relatives or compelled to take their own lives. Accounts describe women being poisoned, strangled, burned, or drowned, reflecting the extreme measures that were taken in the name of protecting honour during the turmoil.

Testimonies from survivors of the upheaval of the Partition of India reveal how the memory of violence is shaped by gendered modes of narration. In interviews, individuals almost invariably recalled the widespread violence of the period as well as specific incidents that affected them personally. Both men and women openly acknowledged the particular vulnerability of women in communal conflict, yet their accounts revealed distinct differences in the way such experiences were remembered and communicated.

Among men, stories of violence within their own families were often told with a certain emotional distance. When men recounted the killing of female relatives to protect them from abduction or sexual assault, the narratives frequently took on a heroic tone. Such acts were framed as extraordinary sacrifices undertaken to preserve family and community honour, transforming deeply painful experiences into stories of bravery and moral duty.

Women's recollections, however, often conveyed a different perspective. As noted by Veena Das and Ashis Nandy[6] women were not only objects of violence but also witnesses to it. Because they retained the memory of looting, rape, and plunder within their bodies and experiences, their accounts often conveyed the violence in more immediate and personal terms. These recollections highlighted the emotional and bodily dimensions of trauma, offering a perspective that differed from the more formal or heroic narratives often presented by men.

State Intervention and the Recovery of the Abducted Women

Recognizing the enormous scale of abductions that had occurred during the upheaval of the Partition of India, the governments of India and Pakistan entered into an Inter-Dominion Agreement in November 1947. The agreement aimed to recover abducted women from both sides of the border as quickly as possible and restore them to their families. The urgency of this effort was reflected in public discourse as well. During parliamentary debates, one Member of Parliament invoked the well-known episode of Sita from the Ramayana, arguing that while property lost during the violence could be forgotten, the abduction of women could not. Such statements reveal how deeply questions of honour and morality shaped public attitudes toward the recovery of women.

To coordinate the process, an Inter-Dominion Conference was held in December 1947 at Lahore, where both governments agreed on practical measures for implementing the recovery programme. Mridula Sarabhai was appointed Chief All-India Organizer for the recovery operations, while the programme itself was administered by the Women's Section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation under the honorary guidance of Rameshwari Nehru. These efforts were later reinforced legislatively when N. Gopalaswami Ayyangar introduced the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill in Parliament

[6] Veena Das and Ashis Nandy, "Violence, Victimhood, and the Language of Silence," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 19, no. 1 (1985)

in December 1949. Though described as "short, simple, straightforward—and innocent," the bill generated intense debate, with more than seventy amendments proposed before it was finally passed.

Yet the implementation of recovery policies revealed the complexity of women's experiences during Partition. Many women had already begun new lives, sometimes forming relationships or families within the households where they had been taken. Others had children born during this period, and government regulations required painful separations between mothers and children depending on the country of birth. As one recovered woman reportedly challenged the authorities, if her marriage—whether by choice or coercion—had already taken place, how could she now be asked to return and remarry?[7] Such voices exposed the moral ambiguities of recovery efforts that sought to restore women to their "proper" place but often ignored their lived realities.

The recovery programme established after the upheaval of the Partition of India extended far beyond the immediate aftermath of the violence. Although most women were recovered between 1947 and 1950, cases continued to surface well into the following decade, with recoveries still occurring as late as 1957. In India, the Abducted Persons Act had to be renewed annually until 1956 before it was finally allowed to lapse, reflecting the ongoing difficulties faced by authorities in locating and returning abducted women.

Among those most vulnerable in this situation were pregnant women and young mothers. As the social worker Kamlaben Patel later recalled, many women faced agonizing decisions about whether to terminate pregnancies that had resulted from violence or to carry them to term. For women who were already in advanced stages of pregnancy, the possibility of abortion did not exist, leaving them with the painful prospect of abandoning their newborn children upon recovery. Such circumstances exposed the deeply personal dilemmas created by the recovery programme, where official policies often collided with the emotional realities of motherhood.

The recovery process also revealed the complex triangular relationship that developed between the state, the abducted women, and the social workers who acted as intermediaries. While government authorities framed abducted women primarily as members of religious communities whose recovery was necessary to restore communal honour, social workers often encountered women whose experiences complicated this definition. The state's construction of the abducted woman denied her autonomy by defining her solely as a victim of sexual transgression, thereby placing her sexuality at the centre of patriarchal control. As women themselves began to question or resist these definitions, the recovery process became increasingly fraught and contested.

The issue of recovery was closely tied to questions of communal identity and boundaries in the aftermath of the Partition of India. Within nationalist discourse, the abduction and conversion of Hindu women were often described as a "double blow" inflicted upon the Hindu community. As a result, the recovery of these women became symbolically important. Even when lost territories could not be reclaimed, the restoration of "their" women was presented as an assertion of Hindu masculinity and a demonstration of the moral authority of the Indian state. Notably, however, such concern was rarely expressed when Hindu women were abducted by Hindu men or Muslim women by Muslim men, despite evidence that such cases were also widespread. In those instances, the violation was not perceived as an offence against communal boundaries, and therefore did not attract the same political attention.

The recovery programme also encountered resistance from unexpected quarters. While abductors sometimes attempted to prevent women from being taken away, resistance also came from the women themselves. For some, recovery meant another forced displacement after they had already endured

[7] Aparna Basu, *Mridula Sarabhai: Rebel with a Cause* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

violence and upheaval. Women who had begun new lives or formed emotional attachments questioned the assumption that they must be restored to their previous families or communities, revealing the limits of the state's authority over personal identities and relationships.

This struggle over women's recovery highlights a deeper question: why was national honour so closely tied to women's bodies and to the fate of children born from inter-communal relationships? Women were seen as the bearers of communal purity, and children born of "wrong unions" were perceived as threats to the demographic and cultural integrity of the community.[8] In this context, recovery was not simply about rescuing individuals but about regulating sexuality and reproduction in order to secure the symbolic boundaries of the nation.

Conclusion

The events surrounding the Partition of India reveal how deeply questions of gender, community, and nationhood became intertwined during moments of political upheaval. The widespread violence, displacement, and abduction that accompanied the division of the subcontinent exposed women to multiple forms of vulnerability. Yet the responses that followed, particularly the state-led programmes of recovery and repatriation, demonstrate that women were not viewed solely as victims of violence but also as symbolic carriers of communal honour and national identity. Their bodies became sites upon which the boundaries of the newly formed nations were both contested and reasserted.

The discourse surrounding recovery reflected a larger concern with restoring communal integrity and protecting the moral authority of the state. The abduction and conversion of women across religious lines were interpreted as assaults on the collective honour of the community, which made their recovery a political and ideological priority. Organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha actively demanded the return of Hindu women, demonstrating how the issue had become central to post-Partition communal politics. However, as scholars such as Deniz Kandiyoti[9] have argued, these practices also reveal the patriarchal structures that positioned women primarily as markers of communal identity rather than as autonomous individuals.

At the same time, the historical roots of these anxieties can be traced back to earlier socio-religious movements in northern India. Reformist initiatives such as those of the Arya Samaj sought to protect and consolidate Hindu identity in the face of perceived religious competition, particularly through programmes like the Shuddhi movement, which aimed at reconverting those who had left the Hindu fold. In the aftermath of Partition, these earlier concerns acquired renewed urgency. Recovering women who had been abducted and converted was therefore seen not merely as a humanitarian effort but as a means of safeguarding the future of the community by preventing the loss of women and children to another religious group.

Yet the recovery process also revealed profound contradictions within nationalist and communal narratives. Resistance came not only from the men who had taken these women but also from the women themselves, many of whom had formed new attachments or adapted to changed circumstances. Their refusal to be "recovered" complicated the state's efforts to restore a clear moral and communal order. In these moments, women's voices disrupted the dominant narrative that framed recovery as an unquestioned act of justice and rehabilitation.

[8] Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (Kolkata: Stree, 2003).
[9] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (1991)

Ultimately, the history of abduction, recovery, and rehabilitation during and after Partition underscores the complex relationship between gender and nation-making. Women's bodies became symbolic terrain upon which communal boundaries were drawn and defended, while their personal choices and experiences were often subordinated to broader political objectives. By examining these dynamics, it becomes clear that the recovery of women was not simply a humanitarian project but a deeply political process that reflected the anxieties, aspirations, and contradictions of a society grappling with the aftermath of one of the most transformative events in South Asian history.