

THE PARTITION OF INDIA DURING 1947 AND THE WOMEN

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Abstract: The partition of India in 1947 is a signal event in the world history, not merely in the history of Indian subcontinent. It was seen as the inevitable price paid for the freedom of country from the British powers. The people who mostly faced the burns of this event were the women. It was estimated that during the partition, nearly 75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted by the people of other religious parties to be raped or murdered, or sold into prostitution, or forced into the marriage. This paper provides a glimpse into the condition of women during the partition of Indian subcontinent and the issues that germinated from it.

In any bouleversement when any sectarian passions aroused or violence reigns whether it is communal violence or caste or inter-state, women often become the worst victims of rival groups.¹ In the situation of a civil war, where nearly every man becomes a soldier fighting for his homeland women come to be seen as a “territory” to be occupied.² Like other gender aspects of partition, the experience of women as both the victims and survivors of violence is absent from standard historical accounts.³ The women became victims of kidnapping and rape. They were separated from their parents, families and even religion. It may seem a truism to say this, but it bears remembering that half of population which was killed, dislocated or uprooted were women. A substantial portion of the task of rebuilding or reconstruction fell on the shoulders of women.⁴ The story of the partition, the dislocation and the uprooting of people was accompanied by the story of the abduction, rape, and widowhood of the thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed borders.⁵

The mass movement of the people on foot, by train, bus and car left children, women, the aged and infirm particularly vulnerable.⁶ During the partition of India, an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted by members of other religions to be murdered and raped, sold into prostitution or forced into the marriage.⁷ Women were forced to accept new religion. If someone refuse, she was either treated badly or molested on both the sides of Radcliff line.⁸ Women were distributed in the same way that baskets of grapes, or oranges are gifted and sold.⁹ Some were sold in market place for rupees 10 or 20 a piece while others were sent as gifts to friends or acquaintances. Many of these women suffered daily physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their abductors.¹⁰ This traumatic violence meted out to many women at the time of partition demolished all sense of self, social or existential, granted to them by the established patriarchal system.¹¹

Leonard Mosley estimated that nearly 100,000 young girls were kidnapped by the both sides, forcibly converted or sold on the auction blocks.¹² In many even more tragic cases, fathers and husbands, fearing that their daughters and wives would soon be raped(or converted to another faith), persuaded and coerced the girls and women to commit suicide lest such an event “taint” their family’s “honor” or standing in society or they killed their female relatives by themselves. Stories (some unconfirmed, others proven) abound of brothers, nephews, sons and husbands killing their female relatives, to spare them the shame of forced conversion and

rape. But some women voluntarily killed themselves as well as their female children in many cases often by throwing themselves into wells or by self immolation. The women who survived these atrocities could not live further with their dark realities and committed suicide.

Apart from the sheer horror of sexual violation, many rape survivors had to literally wear physical signs of their shame- the rapists frequently mutilated or disfigured the girls' skins with markings and graffiti that reflected the violators' religious or political affinity, including tattooed phrases like "Jai Hind" ("Long Live India") or "Pakistan Zindabad" ("Long Live Pakistan") or symbols like Hindu trident or Islamic Crescent moon. Once a girl was raped, she lost her value and place in the society, she was unwanted even by her own family. In most cases, rape victims marry their rapists, get converted into their religion and never see their natal families again.

Urvashi Butalia, an Indian feminist and author, told that some of these women were sold into prostitution. "some were sold from hand to hand ... some were taken as wives and married by conversion. And some just disappeared."

The trauma of violence has impacted at least three generations since 1947, as some of the survivors are now elderly women and only beginning to reflect on the brutality they had to endure. "Much of this has involved unearthing hidden histories and bringing women's accounts into the mainstream of understanding partition", says Pippa Virdee, a professor of South Asian Studies at De Montfort University in Britain. Urvashi Butalia told the story of a partition survivor named Prakashvanti whom she met at Gandhi Vanita Ashram in Jalandhar, Punjab. In August, 1947 Prakashvanti was a 20-year Hindu wife and mother, living in village of Sheikupura, a village in Pakistan. As Muslim hordes approached her home, her husband implored her to kill herself in order to prevent her defilement and rape. He hit her hard and she fell unconscious. Thinking that she was dead, her husband departed and the Muslim attackers who arrived also left her alone (they also thought that she was dead). When she woke up, she found both her husband and child dead. Devastated, she moved to an ashram, where the rest of her life was spent.¹³

Historian William Dalrymple says, "People who a year before would've attended each other's wedding parties...are murdering each other, raping each other's daughters, roasting each other's babies spits." Amid this chaos, women were singled out for specifically horrific treatment. Many women lived in the fear of being raped. Amolak Swani, a seventeen year old girl in 1947 living with her parents in Peshawar, when she heard a Muslim mob was approaching her home, her father told her and her mother that the mob was setting homes on fire and taking women away. She says:

He was very frightened and he quickly gave my mother a bottle of petrol and some matches and told her...'if

we don't survive downstairs, then don't give up your honour. Pour the petrol on yourself and our daughter

and don't let yourself be taken into the hands of those people.'

The mob eventually passed their home, and Amolak and her family fled to Amritsar, India.

But other women didn't have the same fate. Sardar Joginder Singh Kohli, a teenager at the time of partition, recalls a woman, named Veerwali, who lived in his village in his village in Punjab province of Pakistan. He says:

a She was a very beautiful woman. But during the unrest... Muslims were chasing after her... There was a Sikh temple in our village, so she ran inside the temple to take refuge. She paid her respects to the holy book... doused her body in kerosene and set herself on fire.¹⁴

There are many incidents in the history which show that how social condition of women at that time was degraded. Women were mutilated, their breasts cut off, stripped naked with their bodies carved with religious symbols of other community, and were paraded down the streets. In his book *Stern Reckoning*, GD Khosla relates the instance of a girl whose relations were made to stand in a circle and watch when she was raped by several men.

Violence was inflicted on women by the men of their family in the form of suicides they were coerced into or murdered in the name of honour. There were also women who themselves committed suicide to keep their purity and were later glorified as 'martyrs'. The mass suicides in the town of Thoha Khalsa, Rawalpindi, with 90 women jumping into the well, was greatly publicized in the news. These women were confirming to the patriarchal notions of the society, of honour of the community resting upon the so called purity of the woman. Another kind of violence that the women faced was inflicted by the State just after the violence during partition. Many families had reported their women relatives as missing or abducted. The immense scale of such type of reports compelled the governments on both the sides to act and the task was carried out by the United Council for Relief and Welfare under Edwina Mountbatten.

In September 1947, the Prime Ministers of both the countries (India and Pakistan), met at Lahore and decided to start a program for recovering abducted women on both the sides. On 6 December 1947, an Inter-Dominion Treaty was signed for the purpose and the program was called 'Central Recovery Operation'. In 1949 the Abducted Persons Act was also passed for the same reason. Through this act, the State decided by itself who was to be considered an 'abducted person' and rights of the women were completely disregarded. After being abducted, many women eventually had adapted to their new circumstances, starting families with their abductors. Because of this very program their lives were uprooted once again. The social workers too were bound by the law to return them to their natal countries, and the matter was decided by their religions. There were also other reasons why women were not happy to go back to their families or communities. They were told exaggerated accounts of hardships in 'other' country by their abductors. Moreover, women were scared of returning for fear of being shunned because they were not pure anymore.

Regarding the children borne by these women, the State refused to recognize them as illegitimate. As a result the women were separated from their children with the children being recognized as the citizens of the country they were born in and stay with their fathers. The pregnant women either had to give their children up for adoption or go for abortion (or cleansing as they called it). While Muslim women were more easily accepted in Pakistan but in India, especially among Hindus, the issue of purity became important. The children that were able to come together with their mothers became a constant reminder of the violation and the mothers were given option of giving them up for adoption or leaving the family. Women who had to suffer barbarity during the partition, were subjected again to humiliation and rejected because they were not 'pure' anymore.

Other, somewhat lesser, but significant, effects on women's lives were also there. Many women were left abandoned and alone in life because of partition. Partition had ruptured the lives many families. Women became social workers or had to engage in other works to support their families. Sometimes, women were abandoned by their families for lack of a better alternative. On the other side, as a result of this loneliness, conditions were also created for the women to enter the public sphere, in an unprecedented ways.¹⁵

The partition forced women to become victims of the riot situation. They felt dislocation and lost their respect and dignity because of abduction and sexual abuse. The abuse these women experienced during the period of partition demonstrated that they were property and that they belonged to their family and were not considered human beings as well. Women were tied down by cultural obstacles within their respective communities through patriarchal system. Even during recovery period, women suffered from their bad experiences in the past. Men come back heroes from the war while, after the riots and the war, women's existence seem to hold no meaning at all and they remain in the calamity all the time.

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