

Rehabilitation of women

Both sides promised each other that they would try to restore women abducted during the riots. The Indian government claimed that 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women were abducted, and the Pakistani government claimed that 50,000 Muslim women were abducted during riots. By 1949, there were governmental claims that 12,000 women had been recovered in India and 6,000 in Pakistan. By 1954 there were 20,728 recovered Muslim women and 9,032 Hindu and Sikh women recovered from Pakistan. Most of the Hindu and Sikh women refused to go back to India fearing that they would never be accepted by their family, a fear mirrored by Muslim women.

During the Partition of India violence against women was an extensive issue. It is estimated that during partition between 75,000 and 100,000 women were kidnapped and raped.

Partition: the price of freedom and the price paid by women

The dawn (emergence) of freedom from colonial rule in the subcontinent has forever been marked by the agony (sufferings) of Partition. The bloodshed, sweat of terror and the tears of helplessness made the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan simultaneously the most signifying and the most traumatic moment in South Asia's history. What has often been forgotten, however, is the price paid by women and children.

~~Cyril Radcliffe's awards of the division of Punjab and Bengal were announced on 16 August, 1947.~~

Within a week, about one million Hindus and Sikhs had crossed from West to East Punjab. In the week following, another two and a half million had gathered in the refugee camps in West Punjab. Between 23 August and 6 November, 1947 transporting more than two million refugees inside India and across the border in Pakistan. Of these, 1,362,000 were non-Muslims and 939,000 were Muslims.

News of riots and violence during this colossal chaos created even more violence, which was organised and systematic. Now infamously termed as 'August Anarchy' (lack of Govt System) (Swarna Aiyar 1998), the train massacres that occurred in every refugee train in Punjab between 9 August and 30 September killed thousands of people. By the time the Partition exodus was over, it was estimated that almost 5.5 million Hindus and Sikhs crossed over from West Pakistan to the new India and nearly 5.8 million Muslims travelled in the opposite direction (D. A. Low 1998). Estimates of the dead vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a later Indian speculation), but it is now widely accepted that nearly a million people died during Partition of India (Urvashi Butalia, 1998).

The effect on women and children: In addition to widespread killing, the Partition riots are also the story of the rape, abduction and widowhood of thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed borders. Incomplete and unreliable data make it hard to come up with the exact number of women and girls abducted during the Partition riots. The official estimate of the number of abducted women was placed at 50,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan. (Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, 1998).

Indian and Pakistani authorities used the term 'recovery operation' to describe the carrying out of plans to return abducted (kidnapped) women to their own states, communities and families. Soon after Partition, the Indian and Pakistani states decided that this was the most appropriate phrase for an 'operation' where women were not given any rights or choices to decide about their own future.

Through the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation in India and its Women's Section, under Rameshwari Nehru, between December 1947 and December 1949, from Pakistan 6,000 women were 'recovered' and 12,000 from India. Most 'recoveries' were made from East and West Punjab, followed by Jammu, Kashmir and Patiala. Approximately 30,000 Muslim and non-Muslim women were recovered by both countries over an eight-year period. The total number of Muslim women recovered was significantly higher – 20,728 as against 9,032 non-Muslims. While most 'recoveries' occurred between 1947-52, women were being returned as late as 1956.

The micro-narratives on the margins of the nation in both India and Pakistan, and the fractured realities, indicate that Partition is also a gendered narrative of nation building.

we had little idea about the lived experiences of the gendered narrative of Partition, for example. There have been some fragmentary and depressing references to women being treated like criminals or contaminated (impure) in the transit camps set up as temporary shelters for them before they were sent

home to their respective countries. During the mid-1990s, some scholars focusing on India's experiences – eg. Aparna Basu (1997), Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1996, 1998), Urvasi Bhanja (1995, 1998) and Andrew Major (1998) – started finding documents that opened a whole new series of investigations into the human rights abuses of the abducted and 'recovered' women and children.

The feminist historiography on gendered experiences of Partition offers two important insights. Firstly, the ritualised violence inscribed on bodies by members of the 'enemy' community as a sign of conquest and humiliation of the *Other*; secondly, how both men and women from one's own community perpetrated sacrificial violence in the name of honour.

The oral history projects also demonstrate how the 'recovery' operation was framed by both India and Pakistan and how through this, women suffered a second trauma inflicted by their 'own' state, community and family. Abducted by members of the 'enemy' community, yet 'recovered' by the state of which women were considered citizens, they were forced to leave behind the 'post-abduction' children with their fathers. The social workers (such as Miridula Sarabhai, Kamalaben Patel and Anis Kidwai) and the law enforcement agencies acted as agents of the state and on numerous occasions had to forcibly bring back the women, who did not want to leave behind their children or who by the time of the 'recovery' had settled in their new lives.

The state was eager to control women's sexuality by exercising its rights over the body, refugee, family life and, most importantly, motherhood. The discourse of morality, the nation building process and the euphoria (joy) over the success of the anti-colonial movement offered limited space for ordinary women (or men) to express their grievances. Moreover, it was impossible to challenge the political elite, who were in control of the nation-state. Women had little control over their lives. In most instances, this compromised women's agency and right to make their own choices. The state devised policies based on the national idea of how women's interests should be perceived, and no departure from this was acceptable.

Agony of women during Partition

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My doubts were due to the fact that I had been told completely different versions based on personal experiences by elders who were actual witnesses to the painful drama as compared with official versions recorded in textbooks. From a sociological perspective, no aspect is as vital as the catastrophic impact the lives of people who endured massacres (genocides) and rape, witnessed the slaughter of other communities and saw forced migrations and mass.

To discover the truth, I interviewed senior citizens from various locations in Rawalpindi and its suburbs where violence was widespread during Partition. I visited Thoha Khalsa, a village of Kahuta, for four consecutive days earlier this year. This village is located southeast of Rawalpindi, and was home to a very large community of Sikhs before Partition.

I have recorded four stories as narrated by the local residents of Thoha Khalsa who witnessed the tragic incidents of that time. Later, with the help of my two Delhi-based friends, Gurpreet Singh Anand and Raj Aryan, I recorded an online interview of Bir Bahadur Singh, who left the village during the disturbances from 6-13 March 1947. No Sikh or Hindu remained in the village after the March 1947 rioting, except one girl, Phagwant Kaur, who was married to a local Muslim resident of the village and had converted to Islam.

There are many incidents of honour killing of women in partition stories. Muhammad Aslam witnessed Sikh women jumping into a well to take their own lives. Here is an excerpt from his interview:

"I am originally from Thoha Khalsa; I was 16-year-old in 1947. We were living peacefully in the village. People were very friendly and co-operative. Sikhs were very rich people as they ran the shops and had thriving businesses. They often helped us on money matters. I used to visit Darslan Singh's house quite often. On the evening of March 6, Muslim mobs from the surrounding villages entered Thoha Khalsa and gave ultimatums to the Sikhs to convert. On that evening, the impact of their presence was negligible due to the lateness of the hour but the actual clashes started the next morning, when their numbers swelled to some thousands. After resisting for three days, the Sikhs hoisted white

flags from their *havelis*. They had only acted in self-defence. But when defeat and dishonour was imminent, Sikh men started killing their own women. I still remember when Bhansa Singh killed his wife with tears in his eyes. They all gathered in the central *haveli* of Sant Gulab Singh. In the span of some hours, I witnessed the deaths of almost 25 women. It was such a horrible scene. For six days, the whole village witnessed orchestrated looting and killing. While their men fought, the Sikh women started gathering near a well around the garden. It was almost after noon, and I watched from nearby with two of my friends. Some of the women held their children in their arms. They sobbed desperately as they jumped into the well. In about half an hour, the well was full of bodies. I went closer and realised that those who were on top were trying to submerge their heads. No space remained. A few came up and jumped again. It was a terrible scene. They were determined to die rather than sacrifice their honour. In one week, all the remaining Sikhs and Hindus were compelled to leave their native place.”
