

Partition of India and Women

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15 August 1947 had not only come with the charm of Independence but also gave the sadness of Partition- India and Pakistan. Several million people exchanged their homes and countries. A massive transfer of population took place at a very short notice, when people were not ready for the transfer. The thing became more massive when the riots began, and the worst sufferers of Partition were the women. There was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religious different from their own land indeed sometimes by men of their own religion. Women of both sides had paid the price of Independence by losing their own Independence and womanhood. The purpose of the study is not to forget the partition and to know that the biggest price of Independence was paid by women. Partition came as an inevitable part of Independence and partition created a havoc on women. No one should ever forget what happened then, on women, and take lesson from history because it is rightly said "Forgotten History Repeats."

Attainment of Independence for India on 15th August 1947 marks the end of the nearly two centuries of British rule. Independence of India was an achievement for the Indian people who had waged a long drawn struggle for freedom against the British Empire. When the Constituent Assembly met at Mid night and declared that India was now free and an Independent state. The whole country filled up with joy.¹

15 August 1947 had not only come with the charm of Independence but also gave the sadness of partition, India and Pakistan. The Partition of India represented a division of the sub-continent between a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India. This resulted in one of the greatest migrations in the history of the world.² By far the largest proportion of these refugees-....More than ten millions of them, crossed the west, to

Pakistan, Hindu and Sikhs East, to India.³

Riots and Women

Partition was and has remained a decisive event in India's social and political life, several million people exchanged their homes and countries and more that such a massive transfer of population took place at a very short notice, when people were not yet ready for the transfer. The natives were uprooted and it was certainly a horrible experience for them to give up their belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs.

The things became more massive when the riots begun. From the very next day of our independence communal trouble began to cast gloom in the Capital. There massacres took place everywhere and it accompanied the movement of the people across the boundary; and it often ex-

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pedited it. It was the news of murder and cruelty. It was learnt that in the East Punjab, Hindu and Sikh mobs had attacked Muslim Villages. They were burning houses and killing innocent men, women and children. Exactly the same reports came from the West Punjab. Muslims there were killing indiscriminately men, women and children of the Hindu and the Sikh Communities. All human values were debased and trampled. The whole Punjab, East and West, was becoming a graveyard of destruction and death. There was no difference left between human being and animals.⁴

The biggest price for Independence was paid during the partition of India, when over a million people died. Estimates of the dead vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a later Indian estimate) but that somewhere around a million people died is now widely accepted, and nearly eighteen million were uprooted from their homes and hearths and became refugees.⁵

In Novel *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh portrays the reality of the situation by laying the blame of the horrible tragedy upon both the communities,

“Muslims said that Hindus had planned and started the killing. On the other hand, the Hindus, put the blame on the Muslims. The fact is that both side killed. People belonging to both sides were shot and stabbed, speared and clubbed tortured, raped.”⁶

Partition was the darkest period in the history of Modern India. Riots brought out the brutality, inhumanity and madness of mankind. The families were divided and their homes were destroyed, villages were abandoned and the crops were left to rot. Urvashi Butalia said,

“Partition was surely more than just a political divide or a division of properties of assets and liabilities. It was also.... A division of

hearts.”⁷

Khushwant Singh in his book *Train to Pakistan* narrate the story of Man's inhumanity continues to invade in Mano Majra, a tiny village in Punjab, at the Indo-Pakistan border on the banks of river Sutlej. The tempo of death increases. The Sutlej river yield hundreds of floating corpses of Muslims tortured and Mutilated. Swelling Sutlej is another horrible sight, with floating corpses of men, women and children.... In the night, the river's looking like a sheet of paper, symbolized the bleak deeds of violence. The cries of human voices calling for help, seemed to arise from the water. The corpses floating on the water made the scene horrible. The ghastly murder of these innocent people.... Men, women and children.... Told the tale of woe caused by the partition. Khushwant Singh gives a pathetic portrayal of this ghastly scene:

“There were also men and women with their clothes clinging to their bodies; little children sleeping on their bellies with their arms clutching the water and their sating buttocks dipping in and out. The sky was soon full of kites and vultures. They flew down and landed on the floating carcasses. They pecked till the corpses themselves rolled over and shooed them off with hands.”⁸

The worst sufferers of Partition were the women. There was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religious different from their own land indeed sometimes by men of their own religion.⁹

The attacks on the women were made on two levels: firstly, women as an embodiment of the community honor and secondly, their bodies as the site of community reproduction. Dishonoring a women, you dishonor the religion, honor and culture of the man associated with the women.¹⁰

At that time women of both side suffered a worse than death—— they were raped, tortured, sold, sometime gang raped, parading naked women through town, branding the breast and genitalia with slogans like Pakistan Zindabador Hindustan Zindabad or symbol of the Hindu trident or Islamic crescent moon.¹¹

Abduction and rape were part of this Scenario. Even worse, abducted women were often sold from hand to hand and were ill used by their captors. AnisKidwai records:

“We have considerable evidence before us to show that 75% of the girls are still (Probably in 1949) being sold from one man to another. [These] girls of tender years have not been able to settle down anywhere, nor will they be able to settle down for many years. Their youth is being sold for a few thousand, and lustful men, having satisfied their lust for a while begin to think of the monetary benefit that could come from their sale.”¹²

Leonard Mosley gives a brutally frank picture of the Partition riots,

“In the nine month between August 1946 and the spring of the following year, between 14 and 16 million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were forced to leave their homes and flee to safely from blood crazed mobs. In the same period over 6,00,000 of them were killed. But no, not just killed. If they were children, they were picked up by their feet and their heads smashed against the walls. If they were female children, they were raped and then their breast was chopped off. And if they were pregnant, they were disemboweled.”¹³

Rape especially was used as a weapon not just to humiliate the women and their family, but also to see one’s own seed in the enemy womb. Those women who were impregnated with the bad seed were at that time forced to undergo abortion to maintain the purity of the community.¹⁴

Women of all ages, ethnic groups and social classes were victimized. In many more tragic cases, father fearing that their daughters would soon be raped, pressured and forced his own daughter to commit suicide or some time killed their own female relatives to protect the honor of the family. Even those women who were survived these atrocities could not live with their past realities and committed suicide.¹⁵

Urvashi Butalia says that she, I believe that in times of Communal strife and Violence, Women remained essentially non-violent and were at the receiving end of violence as victims, and that they were left with the task of rebuilding the community. These assumptions inform much historical writing on violence. As well as the thinking of feminist groups as the passages that follow, taken from an activist pamphlet,

“I am a woman

I want to raise my voice

Because communalism affects me

In every communal riot

My sisters are raped my children are killed

My men are targeted

My world is destroyed

And then

I am left to pick up the pieces

To make a new life

It matters little if I am a Muslims, Hindu or Sikh

And yet I cannot help my sisters

For fear that I may be killed or that they may be harmed.”¹⁶

(Violence is almost instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed, women whose children and husband are sacrificed in the name of national integrity and unity. And for every fire that is lit, it is women whose job it is to painfully build a future from the ashes.... We women will have no

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part of this madness, and we will suffer it no more.... Those who see their manhood in taking up arms, can be the protectors of no and nothing.)¹⁷

Once a girl was raped, she lost her value and place in the society. This resulted that, in many cases rape victims married their rapists, converted their own religion and some were sold into prostitution and just got disappeared and lost into oblivion.¹⁸

In March 1947 in a number of Sikh Villages around Rawalpindi: Thamali, Thoa, Khalsa, Doberan, ChoaKhalsa, Kallar, Mator and others. Here during an eight-day period from 6 March to 13 March much of the Sikh population was killed (estimated suggest 4,000 to 5,000 dead), houses were demolished, Gurudwaras destroyed. In ThoaKhalsa, some ninety women threw themselves into a well in order to preserve the 'Sanctity' and 'Purity' of their religion, and to avoid conversion.¹⁹

The trauma of the violence had impacted a lot much of this has involved unearthing hidden histories. On the night of August 25, 1947, a scene so dreadful, which illuminated the outskirts of Gurgaon itself and consuming their inmate men, women and children. Two dainty teenaged girls, daughter of a well-known Muslim lawyer of Hissar were on their way to Delhi by train, expected to be included in refugee convey going to Pakistan. The lustful gang attacked the train and dragged the girl out. The two were then taken to P.W.D rest house, where they were repeatedly raped by Magistrate and his accomplice.²⁰

An observer who watched the progress of column of Muslim refugees from Kapurthala state, said,

"I saw a long column of Muslim men, women and children proceeding from Kapurthala to Jullundur. The column was guarded by a few

military sepoys. The women and children walking in the Centre, flanked on either side of the road. Every now and again one of these groups would make sudden sally at the column to Muslims, drag out two or three Muslim women and run away with them. In this process, they would kill or injure the person who tried to resist them. The military sepoy did not make serious attempt to resist. By the time column arrived at Jullundur almost all the women and young girls had been kidnapped in this manner."²¹

In another incident a Lahore on September, 25 a Muslim mob of several thousand strong attacked a Sikh, Hindu refugees train at Kamoka, about 25 miles west of Lahore killing 350 Sikhs and Hindus and wounding 250, About 1000 abducted women were recovered from Shekhupura district by military evacuation.²²

Anis Kidwai wrote in his book *Azadi Ki Chhaon Mein* that, in some area women were not safe even with the police, at place, the Police officers who were appointed to protect the women, themselves committed the worst crime. they were also exploiting them as much as they can. He said,

"The better stuff would be distributed among the Police and Army while the small coin would be given to the rest (of the attackers) after this the Girls would go from one hand to another, and after being sold four or five times would become showpieces in hotels, or they would be kept in safe custody in the house for the enjoyment of police officials."²³

Two Assistant Sub-Inspectors of Police went to recover a non-Muslim woman from a village in the West Punjab and the unfortunate woman was raped by those very police officers during the night on the way.²⁴

K.L. Gauba has given the approximate figures of women abducted and raped and also of the children. It is given in the chart below.²⁵

Abducted	West Punjab	1 Lakh (Approx.)
	East Punjab	50,000 (Approx.)
Raped	West Punjab	50,000 (Approx.)
	East Punjab
Children	Murdered and maimed for life	1 Lakh (Approx.)

The Governments of India and Pakistan who had just taken over from the British, had no comprehension of the enormity of the situation. Though Military Evacuee Organization and Liaison Agencies had been established in both the Punjab's in September, 1947, nothing was done at the Government level to alleviate the suffering of the abducted women until 6th December, 1947. Following agreement was made between governments of India and Pakistan regarding recovery of abducted women.²⁶ The agreement arrived at between the two nations was known as the inter Dominion Treaty, which was later enacted as an Act of Parliament. The terms of the treaty were clear: Women of both sides of the border who had been abducted were to be forcibly recovered and restored to their families. Some of the clause were as follows:

1. Every effort must be made to recover and restore abducted women and children within the shortest time possible.

2. Conversions by persons abducted after March 1947 will not be recognized and all such persons MUST be restored to their respective Dominions. The wishes of the persons concerned re irrelevant and consequently no statements of such persons should be recorded before Magistrates.

3. The primary responsibility for recovery of abducted persons will rest with the local police who must put full effort in this matter. Good work done by police officers in this respect will be

rewarded by promotion or cast awards.

4. MEO (Military Evacuation Officers) will render every assistance by providing guards in the transit camps and escorts for the transport of recovered persons from the transit camp to their respective Dominions.

5. Social workers will be associated actively with the scheme. They will look after camp arrangements and receive the abducted persons in their own Dominions. They will also collect full information required about persons to be recovered and supply it to the Inspector General of police and the local Superintendent of Police.

6. The District Liaison Officers (DLOs) will set up transit camps in consultation with the local Deputy Commissioners and the Public Workers and Supply information regarding abducted persons to be recovered.

7. Coordination between the different agencies working in the district will be secured by a weekly conference between the Superintendent of Police, and local MEO, the DLO and the Deputy Commissioner. At this meeting progress achieved will be reviewed and every effort will be made to solve any difficulty experienced.²⁷

The Chief Liaison officer designated the District Liaison officer in every district as District Recovery Officer. In this way official machinery was established for recovery of abducted women in both the Punjabis. In the East Punjab, Miss Mridula Sarabhai and Mrs. Bhag Mehta organized women workers for recovery work.²⁸

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In all, approximately 30,000 Muslims and non-Muslims, women were recovered by both countries over an eight years' duration. Although most of the recoveries were carried out between 1947 and 1952, women were being repatriated to both the countries as late as 1956, and the Act was renewed in India every year till 1957, when it was about to lapse. Recoveries were more or less abandoned in the two or three years period prior to this, largely because Mridula Sarabhai came under some adverse criticism, and recovered was significantly higher, i.e., 25856 as against 9,336 non-Muslims.²⁹

The most Peculiar phenomenon with regard to the recovery work of women was that their abducted girls very often refused to be evacuated. They were too afraid and felt helpless, under the circumstances, some of them really believed that their husbands and other relatives had failed to protect them and hence they had lost all rights over them. Delay was yet another major factor impeding their recoveries "near and dear ones had all been murdered", etc. in certain cases, the arguments of the abducted girls were genuine. One of them said to the District Liaison Officer, Gujranwala, "How can I believe that your Military strength of two sepoys could safely take me across to India when a hundred sepoys had failed to protect us and our people who were massacred." Another said, "I have lost my husband and have now gone in for another. You want me to go to India where I have got nobody and of course, you do not expect me to change husbands every day." A third said, "But why are you particular to take me to India? What is left in me now- religion or chastity?"³⁰

AnisKidwai writes in his book:

"But by the time this realization came, it was too late. Now there was nowhere for her to go, by this time she is about to become a mother, or she has been through several hands. After seeing so many men's faces, this daughter of

Hindustan, how will she ever look at the faces of her parents, her Husbands?"³¹

Both Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had to issue repeated appeals to Hindus asking them not to refuse to take the women back into the family fold. In a public appeal made in January, 1948 Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Said:

"I am told that sometimes there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take up. Those girls and women require our tender and loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back and give them every help."³²

And Mahatma Gandhi Said:

"I hear women have this objection that Hindus are not willing to accept back the recovered women because they say that they have become impure. I feel this is a matter of great shame. That women are as pure as the girls who are sitting by my side. And if any one of these recovered women should come to me, then I will give them as much respect and honor as I accord to these young maidens."³³

Conclusion:

The Partition created complex problems for the people of India. The people were butchered mercilessly on a massive scale. The women were becoming the soft target physically and psychologically. It is not at all surprising that this bloodiest upheaval in history that claimed innumerable innocent lives and loss of property produced great impact on the minds of all the people of the Sub-Continent. Women of Both side had paid the price of Independence by losing their own Independence and womanhood. They were subjected to maximum humiliation and torture. We forget that women constitute one-half of the population of the world and they play a significant role in the society. It is very important to give them respect, and protect her.

I will end my paper with two short stories,

that tell us that there was a silver lining even in the darkest cloud. There were some very rare heartening episodes of noble deeds. In many cases the policeman of West Punjab committed excesses on women, but one example of a Police constable was rare exception. Fateh Mohammed, a Muslim Police Constable, took one Sikh Girl, 16-year-old, whose parents had been murdered in the communal riots, to his house. After taking a copy of the Holy Koran which was lying in his house, he swore before his young daughters, wife and aged mother that he would treat that girl as his own daughter. He kept his vow and served that girl for a number of months. He made an earnest effort to locate his relations in East Punjab. Ultimately, he was able to find her brother, who came to Lahore to take her, in the office of Chief Liaison Officer, East Punjab, and she gave the detailed statement how she looked after by Fateh Mohammed. Her statement is preserved in East Punjab Liaison Agency

Records No. LV-26-ES.³⁴

Similarly, S.Narain Singh of Bathinda area gave shelter to a Muslim girl of tender age whose parents had been murdered during the communal riots. He got her admitted in the school along with his granddaughters. When she came up to the age of marriage, he was able to locate one distant relative of her through the Pakistan High Commissioner's office. He also prepared dowry articles for her marriage. The dowry was handed to her at the time of farewell to that girl on the Indo-Pak border. The episode was published in the New York Times, USA, Under the title "Sweetest Revenge."³⁵

The biggest price of Independence was paid by women- Partition came as an inevitable part of Independence and partition created a havoc on women. No one should ever forget what happened then, on women, and take lesson from history because it is rightly said "Forgotten History Repeats."

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