



## Looking Back at Partition and Women: A Factsheet

*Anwesha Sengupta*

### Abstract

Within patriarchal structures, women are often considered as embodiments of the honor of the whole community. Accordingly, in times of ethnic, religious or other violent conflict, they become major targets. Rape has always been a potent weapon of war in humiliating and emasculating the enemy. This Factsheet provides a glimpse into the magnitude and nature of the sexual violence that was unleashed during the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947 and the issues that germinated from it.

### Author Profile

**Anwesha SenGupta** is Research and Program Assistant at Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group. She completed her MPhil in 2012 from Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The title of her MPhil dissertation is *People, Territory and Governments: Bengal(s), 1947-1952*. Her areas of interests are – displacement and forced migration, communalism and minority condition in South Asia, partition and nation building in South Asia.

Within patriarchal structures, women are often believed to be the embodiment of the honour of the whole community to which they belong. Accordingly, in times of ethnic, religious or other violent conflict, they become the major targets as attacking a woman's body signifies an assault on the family and the community. Rape has always been a potent weapon of war in humiliating and emasculating the enemy. In this context, one can study the nature of violence inflicted on women during the Partition of India in 1947.

- During the National movement, women were often represented as the embodiment of the Nation especially by the Hindu Nationalists. Paradoxically, this respect for woman within the community led to violence against the women of the 'other' community.
- Women, especially those who belonged to Punjab, were possibly the worst victims of the communal violence that accompanied the division of British India. Thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed border (estimates range from 25,000 to 29,000 Hindu and Sikh women and 12,000 to 15,000 Muslim women) were abducted, raped, forced to convert or forced into marriage. Women often internalised the patriarchal notion of their role in the society, and committed suicide in order to preserve the 'sanctity' and 'purity' of their religion. In a village called *Thoa Khalsa*, near Rawalpindi, around 96 women threw themselves into a well to avoid being converted to a different religion. In this context, Urvashi Butalia has brought up the issue of agency. She asks if we can universally brand these women as 'victims', or did they have an agency in deciding their own fate? Her findings show that in many instances, women took the decision of committing suicide on their own. However, while for some this might have been a 'choice', for others the decision must have been one they felt 'compelled' to take because of latent pressures from their community. Thus, the issue of agency remains complex because there is no clear way of determining if the 'choice' was truly an independent one or whether it was an outcome of the burden of expectations from a socio-historical and cultural context.
- The pre-partition riots in Calcutta and Noakhali (1946) set the stage for communal disturbances in Bengal. In Noakhali Riots of eastern Bengal, hundreds of women were raped. The Hindu married women were stripped off their conch shell bangles (*shankha*) and vermilion mark on their forehead (*sindur*) and forced to recite the *kalma*. The Noakhali Relief Committee was formed to provide relief to the distressed women and to recover the abducted women. Ashoka Gupta, a noted Gandhian, was involved in this relief operation.
- In Bengal, the nature of violence was different from that of Punjab. The massive, spectacular violence of Punjab was not repeated here immediately after the Partition. Violence here had a more 'everyday' nature. In partitioned Bengal, minority women faced verbal assault, molestation and abduction at the hands of the men from the majority community. Families that were on the 'wrong' side of the border (i.e., where they were minorities), often sent the young unmarried girls to the other side for their safety and security.

### A Positive Fallout?

- In Bengal, many scholars have demonstrated a 'positive' effect of partition on women: here, the refugee women from East Bengal came out in the public sphere and participated in the political movement, took up jobs and helped their families

to 'come out of partition.' Thus, partition had some emancipatory effect on Bengali migrant women. The disintegration of traditional structures could have possibly led to space of greater agency for women.

- Many women actively participated in the Communist movement that took place in West Bengal. Even in Punjab, as one scholar has noted, "Partition narrowed the physical spaces and enlarged the social spaces available to women, thereby affecting the practice of *purda* or seclusion, modified the impact of caste and regional culture on marriage arrangements and widened the channels of educational mobility and employment for girls and women."

### Government Response

- The governments of both India and Pakistan recognised the 'women's problem' and launched a programme of 'recovering and rehabilitating women'. An ordinance called Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance was promulgated on January 31, 1949, and was subsequently replaced by the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949. The Government of India announced that any conversion which took place after March 1947 would be treated as 'forced', and the women would be 'recovered' and 'rehabilitated' to their respective Dominions. Following the logic of partition, the religion of the woman was the prime determinant of her nationality. This programme, in some cases, further marginalised the women, as their opinions were not taken into consideration while 'recovering' and 'rehabilitating' them.
- The officers who were charged with the responsibility of rescuing abducted women were mostly women. Mridula Sarabhai was in overall charge of the operation on the Indian side. Social workers like Rameshwari Nehru, Sushila Nayyar, Premvati Thapar, Bhag Mehta, Kamlaben Patel, Damyanti Sahghal, Anis Kidwai and others were also involved in this process. These women social workers were assisted by the national police of their country. Every rescue operation was conducted under the supervision of a woman officer, accompanied by the police. The governments of India and Pakistan believed that the women were better placed to handle the delicacy of the situation, and to 'persuade' those who were reluctant to give up their new homes, to return to their 'own' country and 'own' family.
- Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act 1949 was not applicable to West Bengal. People like Phulrenu Guha, a veteran Congress leader from West Bengal, did not support this Act. She argued that if a woman had made a new home for herself, she should not be uprooted yet again. Indeed, this was a very controversial Act and many victims of abduction themselves resisted the states' attempts to 'recover' them. Their families were often reluctant to take them back and also many of them were by then settled into their new homes.
- The Ministry of Rehabilitation (under the Government of India) had a separate section to address the miseries of women specifically. Similar sections also functioned in the Rehabilitation Department of the States of Bombay, Delhi, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal under the state governments. Under their supervision, special homes were set up for the maintenance of unattached women and children. Besides provision of food, shelter and other necessities of life, the inmates of these homes were taught various crafts so as to make them self supporting. Work centres were set up in some camps and towns where women were trained in various crafts and earned wages for the work they did. Some arrangements were made at select places for providing free training to educated girls

in nursing, midwifery, stenography, etc. In some states, the women's sections of the rehabilitation department had employment bureaus and even marriage bureaus.

- By the end of December, 1949 there were total 30 Homes in India for the maintenance of unattached women and children with 13,133 residents. However, till then there was not a single Home in West Bengal. But by the end of December 1953, the total number of unattached women and children, aged and infirm displaced persons (including dependents) from East Pakistan in receipt of gratuitous relief in Home or Permanent Liability camp (P.L. Camp), was 39,914 in West Bengal. There were 6 Homes for women, 6 women's camps, 4 mixed P.L. camps, 5 women training centres. The Riot of 1950 had triggered large scale migration of minorities from East and West Bengal. Among the migrants, there were many women, children and disabled persons. The Government of India or that of West Bengal could no longer ignore their plight.

### Approach to 'Rehabilitation'

- Despite the efforts of the government, there have been concerns regarding the availability of these measures for all affected parties. There had been numerous allegations against the Indian state for discriminating between the Punjabi and Bengali refugees. In the case of women refugees too, the discriminatory approach of the state was evident. For instance, while the daily dole for refugee women in Bengal was Rs. 12, it was Rs. 20 for Punjab women. Generally, the living conditions in the refugee camps in western India were far superior to their counterparts in the East. Migration from East Bengal was a protracted process, whereas refugee flow from West Pakistan was restricted to the initial years after partition. Therefore, the nature of the refugee problem was different in these two areas. However, the government authorities often failed to address the refugee situation in Eastern India comprehensively.

The experiences of women during the Partition of Indian Subcontinent indicate the specific challenges they face during and after riots. As refugees, women's experiences often differ from those of men of the same religious community. In fact, the similarity in the experiences of Indian and Pakistani women reveals the importance of undertaking a study on the gendered impacts of Partition related violence. Moreover, the persistent disempowerment of women as refugees shows the inadequacy of government efforts. This also brings out the need for enhancing comparative research into the narratives of women refugees, to understand their needs and to incorporate changes in rehabilitation policy.

## Sources

Bagchi, Jashodhara. "Freedom in an Idiom of Loss," *Seminar*, February, 2002, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/510/510%20jasodhara%20bagchi.htm>.

Basu Guha-Choudhury, Archit. 'Engendered Freedom: Partition and East Bengali Migrant Women', *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 5, 2009.

Butalia, Urvashi. "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24, 1993.

Chanana, Karuna. "Partition and Family Strategies: Gender Education Linkages among Punjabi Women in Delhi," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24, 1993.

Gupta, Ashoka, et al. 'East is East, West is West', *Seminar*, February, 2002, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/510/510%20ashoka%20gupta.htm>

Gupta, Ashoka. "Those Days in Noakhali," *Seminar*, February, 2002, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/510/510%20ashoka%20gupta-noakhali.htm>.

Menon, Ritu, Kamla Bhasin. "Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian State and Abduction of Women during Partition," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24, 1993.

Reports of the Ministry of Rehabilitation Department, Government of India, 1949 -1950; 1951-1952; 1953-1954.