

Refugee Women during 1947 Partition

Dr. Pooja Prashar

Head, Dept. Of History, DevSamaj College For women, Ferozepur, Punjab

Abstract

The history of India witnessed the world's largest movement of population ranging from 10-18 million during its 1947 partition during the India and Pakistan independence. This catastrophe left 2 million dead and more than 10 million displaced in a few days. The worst sufferers were women who faced horrible brutalities. Thousands of women were abducted, raped, mutilated. Some British soldiers and journalists claimed Partition's brutalities were worse to Nazi death camps. Those horrified incidents left physical and psychological scars on women. Under the psyche of family honor, most of these women never had the chance to tell their stories and chose to let silence take over instead. Yet, there are numerous writings, movies, pictures depicting the pain and suffering of women. However, a comprehensive source of information providing exhaustive reporting of such writings and other documents still lacks. This paper will analyze various efforts being made to depict and preserve memories of refugee women including through oral history sources.

Keywords: Partition, Refugee Women, Violence, Museum, Memories

After almost three centuries of Colonization, the ecstasy of independence of India was accompanied by the trauma of partition of united India in two parts on communal grounds, i. e. Pakistan as a Muslims State and India as a secular nation. This greatest divide of the nation caused the largest movement of population in the world during 1947-51, uprooting 10-18 million people on both sides and leaving one to two million killed. In terms of size and rapidity, the Partition of India in 1947 constitutes one of the greatest instances of voluntary and involuntary mass population migration in modern history. The communalism used by Britishers as a triumph to divert people's attention from freedom revolution, which resulted in lack of cultural homogeneity, distinct antagonism, political ambitions of elites of both communities and feeling of being safe within with one's own community at a realm of power were the major causes for partition. The state of Punjab paid the highest price of division as the state itself was divided in two parts, leaving the western part within newly formed Pakistan and the eastern part in India. According to the census report of 1921, the western most areas of Punjab were Muslim dominated which decreased from western to eastern parts of Punjab. The Hindu population was vice-versa and was predominant in hilly areas and southern districts. The Sikhs were concentrated in Central Punjab. The four main districts having Sikh population were Ludhiana, Amritsar, Faridkot and Patiala. Based on population predominance, 16 districts forming 55% of population and 62% of geographical area of the state were allocated to western Punjab and remaining 13 districts, 5 princely states comprising 45% population forming 33% of the area came to the share of eastern Punjab. The division of Punjab became a useful pawn to politicians on both sides as Muhammad Ali Jinnah (founder of Pakistan) thought to use the Sikhs as hostages for exchange of Muslims on Indian side, while statesmen on Indian side were of the opinion that had the claims of Sikh leaders to create a separate Sikh homeland been met, whatever extra territory they gained would accrue in India. It is estimated that around one million civilians died in the accompanying riots and local-level fighting, particularly in the western region of Punjab during partition. Both sides of the fence were persecuted by killings of a high magnitude.

Women constituting approximately 50% of the population remain at the center of vulnerability during violence reigns, be it communal violence, refuge to other nations, plight in their own country, repatriation and even during resettlement. On partition of India women became the worst victims in the hands of rival groups as they were separated from their families and in many cases even from religion. Before partition women were confined to the boundaries of homes with little or no active

representation in political and economic spheres of the nation. However, they were regarded as repositories of honor of the family as well as of the community. Any dishonor to them was eyed to cause humiliation to the male members in the community and disgrace to the community in society. Therefore, in order to humiliate other communities, women and young girls were targeted at large. Women lost their husbands, children and became victims of abduction, rape, molestation, forcible conversion and marriage. In worse cases they were paraded naked and were offered as gifts to friends like physical commodities.

The agony of witnessing the near and dear ones dying due to malnutrition, sickness and fight, fear of losing home, belongings, dignity and identity wrecked women. During this period, there have been numerous cases of honor killing where husbands killed their wives, and fathers killed their daughters or brothers kill their sisters to prevent their exploitation by other communities. The women themselves jumped into wells in groups and threw themselves and their girl children in fires to escape abduction and rape by the enemy. The self-killing of 96 women of ThoaKhalsa is heart shaking of such incidences. The data available from different sources reveal that 75,000-85,000 women were abducted on both sides. The violence was not restricted to peasant and middle classes only, the elites suffered too. Vickie Noon, English wife of Sir Feroze Khan Noon (a prominent Muslim), had to stain her face with shoe polish and wear 'Sari' with a red Tilak on her forehead to change her identity to escape from the Sikh bands. Though the level of anguishes differed, almost every woman was affected by the partition. The programmes for recovering and rehabilitating women to their original homes initiated by governments of both sides have always remained the subject of criticism. These programs furthered the pain of abducted women who had settled into families of other communities and had children, as they did not want to get uprooted again. Despite the appeal of Jawahar Lal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, to the people of his country to accept back the abducted women as their intent was as pure as of others, family members of many denied to recognize them due to fear of getting defamed in society. This resulted into 13,133 unattached women and children on Indian side, who were provided shelter at 30 homes. Disappearing testimonies - need for preservation Women equally shoulder the responsibility for building up homes, communities and society along with men. The trauma of partition accompanied with riots wiggled women. They got uprooted from their social and cultural context and their identity became greatly disturbed. As women were circumscribed within the borders of home, they never experienced exposure to the outer world and were lacking the skills to make themselves self-sufficient. But circumstances pushed many women from all classes to earning and supplementing family incomes to rebuild their lives. The exposure of women to unknown lands with responsibilities of rebuilding homes and establishing their identity, especially in absence of their husbands as they were killed during riots, added more to the challenge before them. The official data merely presents numbers about the victims of partition. Their social and psychological loss still remains unaccounted. However, leaving behind their sufferings and beating pain, those brave women accepted their fate and established themselves, their families, with or without their husbands, in new settings. Seventy years have passed since the partition of India and a large majority of eyewitnesses to the painful separation have passed away. The remaining few will also abode for the heaven in the next few years. Many of the surviving witnesses with some conscious experiences are not healthy enough to recall and share their accounts. In the coming few years, perhaps we would not have any refugee women to learn from her personal experiences of partition.

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