



VOICELESS PLIGHT OF WOMEN DURING PARTITION

Aishwarya Kashyap

Class-XII, Loreto Convent, Tara Hall, Shimla, HP

Abstract— This paper focuses on the community clash in relation to Women during the partition of 1947. The species that were mostly targeted were women of all social, religious and cultural backgrounds. It is ironical in a country like India where the earth is renowned as “Mother Earth” to brutally treat and exploit the rights of women.

The condition of women during the partition was pathetic, women of all ages ethnic groups were victims, tortured and raped. Some even were stripped naked and paraded down streets to intensify their trauma & humiliation. If there was an apprehension in the minds of the parents that their girl was about to be raped, they advised her to consume poison in order to end her life. Not only this once a girl was raped, she was forced by her father to commit suicide by jumping in the well lest such an event “Taint” their family’s honour. Some rape survivors had to literally wear physical signs of their shame and rapists frequently mutilated and disfigured the girl’s skin with Markings and graffiti which included phrases like “Pakistan Zindabad” or “Jai Hind”. The paper highlights a nuanced understanding that in the name of religious/national pride women’s body and sexuality were regulated and exploited in patriarchal societies. The author highlighted the position of various women who were victimized at the hands of their male counterparts in the name of partition.

Keywords: partition, women, rape, cultural backgrounds and victimised.

INTRODUCTION

As rightly said by Narendra Modi, “If we will not remember history how can we make history”. History is one of the forms of disciplined research by means of which human mind satisfies its inquisitiveness and orients itself in the world.¹ As we all know that “The most dangerous animal in the world is a silent smiling women.” But this was not known by the suppressors of women during the partition of 1947. Though the Indians were slaves of the Britishers, they had their own slaves i.e. women of all ages, ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds. The British India can be studied from two important sources, firstly it is derived from the British Crown and Parliament and secondly from the Great Mughal and other native rulers of India.²

The partition was like a tree which had to shed its leaves one day i.e. the midnight of 14 August 1947. The summer of 1947 was not like the other summer. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year.³ There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins.⁴ But the disastrous consequences it had were like the evergreen tree which never shed its leaves of painful memories of death, extortion, abduction, rape of women, loss of life, property, etc.

After more than two hundred years of British colonization India attained its independence on 15th August 1947. The partition of the country into east and west Pakistan and India had many complex and varied reasons. Out of the several factors that explain this watershed moment in South Asian history, this paper focuses on the issue of gendered violence in the communal riots that took place during the partition. The ethnic genocide witnessed two kinds of gender based violence. Firstly, the violence inflicted on women by men of the opposite religious group, that involved kidnapping, rape and mutilation of the genitalia or public humiliation.⁵ Secondly, the violence against women was inflicted by their own family members in the form of honour killings. To ensure this safety of honour and chastity against the Muslims and Hindus the custom of Jauhar and Sati became current throughout the country.⁶ Several other social evils were also practiced like infanticide, Pardah System, child marriages, etc.⁷

PARTITION WITNESSED MISERABLE PLIGHT OF WOMEN

Women’s position was pathetic not only in the male dominated society but during partition their modest had suffered to the greatest extent. The author has focused few instances in reference to it.

¹ Murthy, H.V. Sreenivasa, *History of India*, Eastern Bank Company, 2003 at p. 1.

² Mittal J.K., *Indian Legal History*, Central Law Agency, 2004, at p. 1.

³ Singh Khushwant, *Train to Pakistan*, Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2007 at p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ DevArunima, *Violence against Women during the Partition of India Interpreting Women and their bodies in the context of ethnic genocide*, <http://dialnet.unirioja.es?articulo>, Visited on 4th August, 2018.

⁶ Singh V.S., *Indian History*, Allahabad Law Agency, 2012 at p. 317.

⁷ *Ibid.*



1. *Arghwani Begum*.⁸ At the time of partition she was 8 months pregnant with her 3rd child. Due to communal tensions she and her family decided to leave Delhi and move to Lahore. Their first destination was the PuranaQila or Old Fort refugee camp in Delhi. It was raining heavily that night and the next morning on August 15, she went into labour. However, the baby was born after 2 days the family travelled in army jeeps to the Nizamuddin Railway Station in Delhi to board a train to Pakistan. The train was attacked at Wagha Border, but somehow the infant struggled to survive.
2. *Dr. BapsiSidwa*: A renowned author Dr. BapsiSidwa who was living in Lahore at the time of partition. She once witnessed an incident when the family came upon a gunny sack. After opening it they found the body of a very young man inside it. She has captured many episodes and memories of the partition namely 'Cracking India' originally published as "Ice Candy Man" in 1988. The popular 1988 film "Earth", is based on the book.
3. *UrvashiButalia*.⁹ In her book, "The Other Side of the Silence", narrates one such gruesome incident in the village of ThoaKhalsa, Rawalpindi district. During partition, in the Sikh village, ninety women are said to have "voluntarily" jumped into a well rather than fall into "enemy" hands. The migrant refugees from this village still commemorate the event at a Gurudwara in Delhi, referring to the deaths as martyrdom, not suicide.
4. *Lena Avraham*: Before partition she was living with her family in Maharashtra. Her mother worked in a women's jail, where many women who took part in the independence movement were jailed. Once she witnessed a man being killed in front of her house. She never used to go to school alone. In 1956 she moved to Karachi as she was married and after that they migrated to India. Later she and her family went to Israel.
5. *GhulamBiwi*: Before partition she lived in Gurdaspur, Punjab. She explains that all the villages were in a state of turmoil and chaos and they had to leave Gurdaspur with their family. While travelling on foot their guardians would ask them to drop on the ground as if they were dead. There was constant firing in which her maternal grandmother died.
6. *BaljitDhillonVikram Singh*: She remembers the chaos and social tensions at the time of partition. She recalls that one night she was woken by her mother to put all her jewellery, money and valuables in a vault that was located between the walls. They all sat in a jeep and headed towards Amritsar. While they were travelling from Lahore to Amritsar she saw many dead bodies lying in ditches. Her mother tried to cover her daughter's eyes with her dupatta to prevent her from witnessing such a miserable consequence of the partition. Her father had left everything in Nonikie, her ancestral village in the hope that he would return after some time. But, they never returned and they had to live like refugees, eating turnips, mustard greens and spinach and riding on bullock carts and camels instead of jeeps and cars.
7. *GayatriChakraborty*: In 1946 her family received a telegram message that her father had been sent to prison for taking part in the freedom struggle. They decided to leave their home at Barisal to take temporary shelter at her maternal uncle's place in Kolkata as there was no other earning member in the family. In 1947, her father was released from the prison and the whole family went to Kolkata. In 1948, Mr. Chakraborty moved back to her ancestral home in Barisal to escape the riots in Kolkata. Her mother became ill and died. The family shifted to Kolkata due to the tense social environment and stayed with an uncle who lived in a refugee colony at Belgharia. Now, at very later stage she had to attend school. At the age of 21, she began studying at home privately. She got married at the age of 24.

RECOVERING WOMEN¹⁰

Some women developed new family bonds in their changed circumstances. They were forcefully asked to start a new life with strangers. The Indian and Pakistani governments did not like this complexity so they sent the women back to their original families and regions from where they hailed. Women were never asked for their consent and did not have the right to take decisions for themselves. One estimate suggests that about 30,000 women were "recovered" overall, 22,000 Muslim women in India and 8000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan in the process of recovery that took place in 1954.

⁸ <https://artsandculture.google.com?exhibit>

⁹ Class 12 NCERT Book of history, Themes in Indian History, Part III.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*



PRESERVING HONOUR

The honour of women was to be preserved by hook or crook. This idea developed from the conception of masculinity defined as ownership of Zar (Women) and Zamin (Land).

TRAUMA SUFFERED BY WOMEN¹¹

Women constituting 50% of the population remains at the centre of vulnerability during violence reigns, be it communal violence, refuge to other nations, plight in their own country, repatriation and even during resentment. As women were considered to represent the honour and respect of our community, they were made targets by the rival communities to humiliate the communities of which these women belonged to. Women were raped, abducted, tortured, forcible conversion to other religion, marriage, molested, humiliated. The women victims had to bore physical signs on their skins of “Pakistan Zindabad” or “Jai Hind”.

The violence was not only inflicted on middle classes but the elites also suffered. Vickie Noon, English wife of Sir Feroze Khan (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 hands. By means of its anti-government campaigns and by admittance to leadership of people women like Sarojini Naidu, it became closely identified with the movement for women’s liberation.

DISAPPEARING TESTIMONIES – NEED FOR PRESERVATION

Women make all the efforts to raise her family, look after the household, children and fulfill the desires of her husband. But in return the partition gave them a “good” return gift for their long drain sacrifices and commitments. Women of all ages, classes, ethnic groups, cultural and social backgrounds lost their social, cultural and personal identities.

STRATEGIES FOR PRESERVING MEMORIES OF REFUGEE WOMEN

The author researched to know about the memories of women during the partition. It is important to know about the experiences, trauma and limitations that were experienced by the women to know the past and its events. All the women cherished that before partition Hindu Muslim had brotherly relations. Many women have highlighted their conditions during the partition. Their stories are endless and painful. All the women were of the opinion that their memories should be recorded, preserved for posterity to serve as a guide to know the conditions and circumstances that prevailed at the time of partition.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude we can say that though we are in the 21st century, we are still in the clutches of inequality based on gender, religion, cultural backgrounds etc. The criminal (Amendment) Act of 2018 provides death penalty for those convicted of raping girls below 12 years of age. The amendment replaces the Criminal Law Amendment Ordinance promulgated on April 21, 2018, after the rape and murder of a minor girl in Kathua and another women in Unnao.¹² We can say that the situation of women in India has not improved from the time of partition but has become worse. The acts and laws are different in letter and spirit. Though some women are raising their voice against any maltreatment and injustice, but the reality prevails in the villages which are far away from literacy, awareness, media etc. Women should be aware and should stand united for their rights. They should give voice to their silent, hidden fears to improve their condition. Recently, on 8th August 2018 Bharat ChodhoAndolan was celebrated which again depicted several examples of women harassment. I would like to end this paper by saying

¹¹ KaurKrishanjit, Singh Nirmal and KaurSimran, *Collection and Preservation of Painful Memories of Refugee Women during Partition*.

¹² <https://m.greaterkashmir.com>



Indexed with IIJIF
Impact Factor : 1.021
ISSN: 2456 - 608X

International Journal of Legal Research and Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Refereed Online Law Journal

that “A women is like a tea bag you can’t tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water”.I rest my words by putting a question mark in the minds of everyone on the lines which are usually given in the Hindi and English books of Nursery and K.G. classes “Papa Akbar PadhRaheHaiaur Mummy KhanaBanaRahiHai”.