



A NATION PARTITIONED OR HOMES DIVIDED? THE SEVERED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THE STATE, COMMUNITY AND ABDUCTED WOMEN IN THE POST PARTITION PERIOD

Author(s): Rachna Mehra

Source: *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 73 (2012), pp. 1391-1397

Published by: Indian History Congress

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44156342>

Accessed: 19-03-2020 12:55 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Indian History Congress is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*

A NATION PARTITIONED OR HOMES DIVIDED? THE SEVERED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE, COMMUNITY AND ABDUCTED WOMEN IN THE POST PARTITION PERIOD

Rachna Mehra

Partition memories, bitter and sweet alike, continue to haunt the migrants and creative writers even today. The stories of partition have come to us through its many representations — political, social, historical, testimonial, literary, documentary and even communal. It is one occurrence in our recent history, in which, familial recall plays a significant role in any general reconstruction of the event.¹ A nostalgic narrative of partition is primarily structured in two ways – one, that constantly yearns to visit the pristine past and such reminiscences are punctuated with what happened ‘before partition’ and ‘after partition’. The other and rather troubled sort of recollection harps on the irreparable loss of property and ‘honour’ of the women. A historian has to oscillate between the two extremes to understand and articulate the emotional turmoil experienced by people.

This paper attempts to trace the impact of partition on women, especially those who were abducted, converted, married and later recovered by the state. My choice of this topic is conditioned by the following factor: history writing on partition is often accused of being largely political and gendered in a specific way. The grand narratives have primarily focused on the causation of the vivisection of the country. Such preoccupation with the ‘high politics’ has often eclipsed the documentation of the concomitant ‘history from below’. According to Ramchandra Guha, the people who were marginalised ‘...were not partition arbiters, but lesser known figures left to grapple with the aftermath. Most remained its hapless victims, others fell to villainy.’² Furthermore, suffering/trauma caused due to partition usually found expression either in literature or was confined to the domain of anthropologists. It would be interesting to employ a multidisciplinary approach to partition, along with a historical one, as a good remedial intervention to unravel the potential of oral history as an alternate archive.

In order to unveil the intricate triangular relationship between community, state and gender, it is important to delve into the issue of abduction and subsequently the recovery of those women. I have

endeavoured to look at the literary, cinematic and the official representations of abduction in order to extract the women's experience of violence and displacement from the general perspective on partition. The respective roles of the newly independent states of India and Pakistan would be interesting to explore as the assertion of paternal benevolence towards the refugees was in conflict with the image of the benefactor state as seen in the 'Recovery of Abducted Women' Act. The Hindu/Muslim/Sikh community was implicated in this entire process of recovery wherein the initial demand for restoring abducted women later changed to the conditional acceptance of those women who disavowed their children born out of wedlock rape or owing to conjugal relations with the abductors.

Abduction and its Antecedence

The abduction of women during partition was not a novel phenomenon, except for the fact that it happened on a colossal scale. There are recurring references of molestation of Hindu women by Muslim men in Bengal in the 1920s. At about the same time, gender became a critical marker of the politicized Hindu religion in United Provinces (hereafter U P) too. Pradip Kumar Dutta avers that from the second half of 1923, stories — circulated mainly by newspapers — began to speak about the oppression of Hindu women by Muslim goondas located principally in Eastern Bengal.³ Newspapers like *Amrita Bazar Patrika* which conducted incessant campaigns, publicized the issue. At the Benaras session of the Hindu Mahasabha, in 1923, Madan Mohan Malaviya voiced concern and called upon the Hindu community to defend their womenfolk. A Women's Protection League was founded in 1924 consisting of prominent members of Bengali Hindu society.

It is interesting to note that the Women's Protection League blamed only the Muslim 'goondas and not the entire Muslim community for abduction. Therefore, Pradip Kumar Dutta suggests a political angle to such abductions that later acquired a communal color. The Montford reforms (1919), enunciated the expansion of the powers and representation of the local and district boards. Muslims who controlled these boards resorted to communal reservation of election seats and local educational facilities. In this context, 'abductions' provided a platform of counter mobilization to the mofussil Hindu bhadralok whose powers of patronage and control were being attenuated by the changed contours of local politics. Mostly lower caste Hindu women were raped. Hence, the bhadralok inferred that the weakness, poverty and the isolated character of the Hindu society and the majoritarian character of the Muslims, led to the abductions. This meant a collective action

was needed against the Muslims who were perceived as a threat by the Hindus.

The degradation of Muslims was carried out in gender specific terms in U P, in a manner similar to that in Bengal. The Muslim male was increasingly depicted as a rapist and an abductor. The trend was discernible in colonial U P since the nineteenth century, when certain essential cultural stereotypes of Muslims were created, often using the figure of the woman. Noted Hindi writers like Bhartendu Harishchandra (1850–1885), Pratap Narain Misra (1856–94) and Radha Charan Goswami (1859–1923) portrayed medieval Muslim rule as a chronicle of rape and abduction of Hindu women. Such depiction of Muslim male was not confined to U P. By the end of the nineteenth century, a code of conduct was instituted for Sikh women by Punjabi novelist Bhai Vir Singh through his novel *Sundari* written in 1898. The Muslims and Afghans rulers were denounced as tyrants in the novel due to their hostile attitude towards the Sikhs. Bhai Vir Singh constructs the Sikh identity cohering not only for the defence of its own women, but all women, from the depraved Muslim rulers.⁴

A common viewpoint developed through various tracts, stories and essays, whereby the purdah system, sati, child marriage, and in fact all social evils were attributed to the 'lecherous character' of the Muslims.⁵ The alleged abductions of Hindu women can be regarded as the key factor in polarizing the Hindus and the Muslims in the politics of the 1920s. According to Tanika Sarkar, the home in the nineteenth century Hindu imagination was seen as a site for asserting the freedom of male Hindu control which had waned in the public domain. Pradip Kumar Dutta asserts that the 'abducted woman' became a sign of threat to the emasculated male dominion in Bengal. Thus, both in UP and Eastern Bengal the fear of Muslim male gradually spread. The rhetoric of preserving a woman's sanctity made her body a source of fear. This kind of fear is sometimes less derived from actual acts of violence than from perceptions of violence.⁶

Gyanendra Pandey suggests that the general discourse on partition still functions like a gigantic rumour, albeit a rumour commonly presented as testimony.⁷ People often spoke confidently on behalf of the victims. They sometimes gave first hand accounts of an unwitnessed event. In the case of abduction of women, the common methodology followed is to focus on written reports of some contemporary example of violence and follow it up through later written/oral versions.

Abduction of Women during the Partition of India

The Noakhali carnage in Bengal in 1946 and the partition in 1947, resurrected the fear of the 'other' community. The formidable fear was

resurrected by conventionally stereotyping Muslim men as being libidinous whereas even Sikhs and Hindus were no less responsible for the sexual violence against women. Partition validated perpetration of violence against women by their own kith and kin, euphemistically known as 'honour killings'. This was justified as a pre-emptive action to preserve the modesty of the women. Thus the patriarchal community exonerated itself by imparting legitimacy to its own acts of violence. Gyanendra Pandey proposes that violence and community are constitutive of each other. The victims and the aggressors were often the same people. There was a distinction drawn between 'our martyrdom' and 'their violence' and 'their attacks' and 'our revenge'.

The historical writings on partition tend to dismiss violence as a mere 'aberration' in the entire episode. The occurrence of violence is perceived as something removed from the general run, an exceptional moment, which is not part of the natural course of history. The historical discourse has experienced great difficulty in capturing and re-representing the moments of violence.⁸ Pandey contends that historians have often used history as a disciplinary device to distance themselves from the fearful events of the past thus transforming the history of an event into a history of its causes or origins. Therefore, in order to enlarge the scope of history, it is imperative to supplement it with oral accounts. In a similar vein, fictional portrayal of partition has enabled many to not only empathise with the suffering and trauma of partition but also to understand reality which is difficult to glean from the factual data or the official reports. At the same time it is a knotty task to interview those 'women' or their families when abduction and rape is perceived as a stigma symbolising 'shame' and disgrace to feminine and community honour.

Romanticising or Humanizing Abduction through Fictional Narratives and Cinematic Representations?

The need to focus on literary representations of partition ensues from the limitations of official history in explaining how relationships collapsed and normal beings began to display inexplicable bestiality. The literary representations have successfully articulated the manifold experiences triggered by partition. A creative writer does not make conspicuous attempts to be historically authentic or politically correct while exploring the human dimensions of such a grave tragedy. Thus, literature on partition as a creative expression of a specific memory or experience, has paved an alternative way through which an individual tries to grapple with the past. An interesting feature of many such narratives is the sensitive mapping of the inner terrain of female psyche, which brings out her unspoken pain and trauma.

The concept of 'exile' has been metaphorically used by many writers to explain the banishment suffered by the women abducted during the partition. In Jamila Hashmi's story 'Exile', the acute alienation of the woman married to the man who abducted her is akin to the story of Sita whose exile is never going to end.⁹ In Bedi's 'Lajwanti', Sunder Lal who raises slogans for the rehabilitation of the abducted women accepts his wife willingly but her erstwhile identity is uprooted or exiled forever. Many women were left untouched by the State Recovery Programme, who reconciled themselves to their circumstances. Veena Das argues that in the absence of any customary forms of sharing and mourning, the survivor told the story repeatedly to oneself in order to exorcise the lingering past.

Jyotirmoyee Devi has vividly portrayed the turmoil and resilience of a forlorn woman through her protagonist Sutara in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*.¹⁰ This novel focuses on the violence and possibly the rape of a Hindu girl in East Bengal and her subsequent marginalization by her own community in post partition India. Jyotirmoyee Devi brings out how male aggression and socially condoned patriarchal values make women pay for crimes of which they are the 'chief' victims.

Alok Bhalla elucidates how fictional writing on partition in India is different from historical writing not only in terms of the stories it attempts to tell, but, also in terms of how it constructs the past and represents it. Bhisham Sahni confesses that part of his novel *Tamas* is autobiographical. His characters are based on real life.¹¹ The sensitive portrayal of abducted women in films like *Chhaliya*, *1947-Earth*, *Pinjar* and *Khamosh-Pani* has played a remarkable role in capturing and conveying the essence of suffering caused by partition. Defilement of communal honour through the violation of a female sexually, is a theme that resonates through the entire process of nation making. At this stage it would be interesting to explore how the 'honour' of the newly independent nations is intertwined with the role of the state and community as realised through the Recovery Act.

Recovery Act: Resolving the Crisis or Creating a Sordid State of Affairs?

It was agreed on 30 May 1948 that both the dominions would enact legislation, after deliberations, to facilitate and regularize the recovery of abducted persons. The Government of India enacted an ordinance called 'The Recovery of Abducted Persons Ordinance' on 31 January 1949. A similar ordinance was promulgated in Pakistan in March 1949 to regularize and legalize the recovery procedure. It defined the "abducted" in the following terms:

“Abducted person” means a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age who is, or immediately before the first day of March, 1947, was, a Hindu or a Sikh and who, on or after that day, and before the first day of January 1949 has become separated from his or her family and is found to be living with or under the control of a Muslim individual or family.¹²

On 16 July 1949, a Bill was introduced in the Indian Legislative Assembly to replace the re-enacted ordinance. In the Constituent Assembly N Gopalaswamy Ayyangar introduced the Bill. He divulged that the total ‘recoveries’ from the period 6 December 1947 to July 1948 came to about 9,362 in India and 5,510 in Pakistan.¹³

A clause in the Bill which fuelled debate was that all marriages, post 1947, which took place after conversion, stood null and void. The scope of this clause was narrow as it did not specify those marriages, which had taken place with the ‘consent’ of the woman. Another pertinent issue raised was regarding the procedure to be followed in case the abductees had adjusted and reconciled to their environment and were unwilling to return to their kith and kin. The untrammelled powers given to the tribunal deciding the recovery cases was deeply resented. The verdict given by the tribunal was deemed final and could not be challenged in the court. By 3 May 1956, Pakistan had recovered 9166 non-Muslim women and the Indian government had recovered 20,982 Muslim women.¹⁴ It is evident that the recovery project, which was vigorous in its initial stages gradually abated in a decade’s time. The government also relaxed the rules regarding recovery as many women were married and settled with their abductors.¹⁵ However the Indian government was criticised for the relentless and rigid implementation of the Recovery Act in the earlier stages.

Conclusion

‘Abduction’ signified the assertion of the identity of one community over its rival counterpart through the appropriation of its women. A corollary to abduction was forcible conversion and marriage, which was perceived as an outrage to the family, community honour and a grave setback to the religious sentiment. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin argue that the recovery operation of the government of India, albeit humanitarian and welfarist in its objective, was implemented especially in India to reconcile to its own dismemberment and to fulfil its duty towards its citizens. The recovery of the women was the vindication of the honour of the emasculated nation.

It is difficult to dismiss the recovery policy of the government as an act of paternal despotism or a project which could salvage the

diminutive status of India after its vivisection. Each abduction case is unique and merits separate attention from the myriad perspective of the state, the government officials, the community, the family and the 'affected' women themselves.¹⁶ Nevertheless it is nothing less than a challenge for any historian to write about the lives of those women whose testimonies or memoirs remain elusive even today.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 2000, p. xi.
2. Ramchandra Guha, 'The In-Betweens: They Too Wrote Our History', *Outlook*, August 22, 2005.
3. Pradip Kumar Dutta, "Abductions and the Constellation of a Hindu Communal Bloc in Bengal of the 1920s", *Studies in History*, 14, 1, 1998, Sage Publications, pp.37-88.
4. Gurpreet Bal, "Construction of Gender and Religious Identity in the First Punjabi novel *Sundari*", *Economic and Political Weekly* (hereafter *EPW*), August 12, 2006, pp. 3533 -3534.
5. Charu Gupta, "Historical Antecedents of Politicized Hindu Religion in Uttar Pradesh and its Implications for Women", Paper presented in Seminar on 'Identity Formation, Nationhood and Women', Centre for Women's Development Studies, September 2005.
6. Meghna Guha Thakurta, "Uprooted and Divided" in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (ed.), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkata, Stree, 2003, p. 100.
7. Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 91.
8. Gyanendra Pandey, "In Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today", *EPW*, 16 March 1991, p.559.
9. 'Exile' Story by Jamila Hashmi in Alok Bhalla (ed.), *Stories about the Partition of India*, Volume 1, New Delhi, Harper Collins, 1994, pp.39 – 54.
10. Jyotirmoyee Devi, *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga, (The River Churning)*, New Delhi, Kali, 1995.
11. Bhasham Sahni in an interview, in Alok Bhalla, *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home*, Delhi, Oxford, 2006, p. 113.
12. *The Gazette of Pakistan*, Ordinance No.VII of 1949, Ministry of Refugees and Rehabilitation, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (hereafter NMML), Delhi.
13. Extracts from the Constituent Assembly of India, Legislative Debates in Act no.65of 1949, FII-LXVI, NAI, Delhi.
14. Progress of Recovery Work, Private Papers of Mridula Sarabhai, NMML, Delhi.
15. Ramchandra Guha, 'Refugees and the Republic' in *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, Pan Macmillan, 2008, p.95.
16. Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, New Delhi, Viking Penguin, 1998.