Gendered Violence during the Partition of India

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Abstract: The partition of India is a history of one of the largest displacement of humankind. The drawing of border between the two nations led to tremors of violence that were felt by people on both sides of the boundary. This violence which had a predominantly gendered character and women in particular were the prime target. Women were situated within the frames of community honour, religion and the larger country. Consequently the violence targeted at them was primarily targeted at the community of she was a part of. National fantasies play upon with the supposed connection between women, nation and land and each act of violence has specific symbolic meanings and consequences. They treat the women’s bodies as territories to be conquered and marked by the conqueror.

Key Words: partition, gender, violence, women, nation

The partition of India in 1947 marked the birth of two counties, India and Pakistan, and the end of British colonialism in South Asia. This caused one of the greatest human convulsions of history. The move towards the “two nation solution” was accompanied by an unprecedented mass migration (between ten to twelve million people) to and from areas that were to become India and Pakistan. Never before or since, have so many people exchanged their homes and countries in such less time. It also marked the violent deaths of an estimated (estimations of different organisations vary) one million people, and widespread sexual savagery, about 75,000 women have said to be abducted and raped (Butalia 1998:3, Menon and Bhasin 1998: 35). Thousands of families were separated and killed, homes were destroyed, crops left to rot, villages abandoned and property destroyed. The affects of partition were unprecedented and is visible and felt even today.

The word ‘partition’ meaning a simple division, a separation, as Urvashi Butalia points out, is so inadequate to describe what happened in 1947 and people how lived through it. Pointing out to the inadequacy of language to capture the emotions and pains of humans, she argues that terms like partition, batwara or takseem, can never really absorb the myriad meanings of this event and many layers of experience that people had lived through (Butalia 1998:361).

The political ‘facts’ of partition is known but what is hard to discover is the ‘particular.’ The abundance of political histories on partition is almost equalled by the paucity of social histories on it (Menon and Bhasin 1998:6). As Butalia points out, behind these facts lay human beings, real flesh and blood figures whose lives were profoundly affected by partition. Some lived with a permanent sense of loss and regret, some with the trauma of rape and torture, some with the knowledge that in the past they have killed (Butalia 1998:94).

It is only when we look beyond facts that we are able to discover the different and multi layered histories of people upon whose bodies and lives history has been played out. Historical documents can never approximate, even nearly, the pain, anguish, trauma and ambivalence of people who have lived through this. History had no place for personal narratives and what partition meant to people whose lives it affected the most, till Gyanendra Pandey tried to investigate what he calls “fragments.”

This paper tries to look at these “fragments” and local traditions of history. It attempts to reflect on the experiences of the ‘particular’ and the smaller actors on the margins, particularly women, whose voices never found a mention in any official discourse on partition. A resounding silence surrounds the ways in which women got implicated in this violence precisely because of the patriarchal underpinnings of history as a discipline (Butalia 2000: 180). “Hardly ever, and hardly anywhere, have women ’written history’ (Menon and Bhasin 1998:14).

An understanding of partition through a gendered lens marks a shift in the attention from public to private, from high political story to local everyday account, from official history to personal histories and from mainstream to margins.

The story of 1947 while being one of the successes against colonialism was also a gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession. Broadly, the paper tries to look at the experiences of the “the second sex” and how the female body and sexuality and the attached notions of chastity, sanctity and purity became so crucial and indeed problematic, in the questions of national and community ‘honour.’ Various other threads got entangled within such a
complexity: women’s identity got submerged and defined in terms of the larger religious and national identity where she was either a Hindu or Sikh or Muslim woman but never just an ‘individual woman’, women’s sexuality and their bodies were singled out as privileged sites of violence and it became the carrier of ‘honour’ of the religious community and the larger nation, abduction and rape was not only seen as an act of infringement of the physical body, but as causing irreversible and lifelong harm to the ‘other’ community.

Women were - and still are – made up to be the repositories of honour of the community and therefore the violence during partition was always of a sexual nature.

Since women’s experiences of partition are shrouded in complete silence, any tracing of such experiences has to rely on what Menon and Bhasin has based their work on memory, oral history and narratives. This is important because while on one hand women’s voices and experiences have no official documentation, on the other hand rape and abduction was something that had to be hidden in the private and forgotten in darkness.

**Nations formed on the Bodies of Women**

The nature of partition violence had a gendered character where women were seen as the carriers of ‘honour’ of the community, religion and also the larger nation. The very formation of the nation of Pakistan out of the territory of Bharat, or, the body of Bharatmata, became a metaphor for the violation of the body of the pure Hindu woman (Butalia 1998: 183). The country whether referred to as Bharat or Hindustan, was imagined in feminine terms (as the mother) and partition represented an actual violation of the physical being of this mother. The figurative conflation of nation and woman’s body explains the predominant emphasis on purity and sacredness of women. The honour of this body being as sacred as it was, needed protection developing the easy equation between manhood and nationalism. Women thus were devoid of any agency and were reduced to mere ‘objects’ of protection. This turned women into both – an object of protection and a target of violence, both physical and discursive – at the same time.

National fantasies play upon with the supposed connection between women, nation and land. As a result of this connection women are usually cast as mothers and national emblems. In the context of partition, the women who ‘voluntarily’ offered themselves for death to preserve the ‘honour’ of the community, are remembered as martyrs and glorified as ‘sacrifice,’ and the women who somehow survived are outside the bounds of history.

Very large number of women were either forced into death or ‘consented’ to it ‘voluntarily’, to avoid sexual violence against them, at the hands of men of the ‘other’ community and to preserve the sanctity and chastity of the individual, family and community ‘honour.’ This indicates the extremely crucial position that women’s sexuality occupies in an all male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations.

The partition violence targeted women not as individual but rather as sexual beings. Menon and Bhasin point out women were raped and stripped “just as bananas are peeled” and were made to parade and dance naked, they were raped in the presence of their men folk, their breasts were amputed , their genitals were marked with triumphant slogans like “Hindustan zindabad!” or“Pakistan zindabad!” , womb were slit and foetuses were killed. Such gruesome violence is carried out on the pretext of not only harming the woman but also simultaneously translating this into stigmatizing their very source of origin and hence also their future generations. The basic purpose of sexual violence and mutilation, explains Sudhir Kakar is more or less a conscious wish to wipe the enemy off the face of the earth by eliminating their very means of reproduction and nurturing. Each of such act raping, stripping, parading naked, mutilating and disfiguring, branding the breast and genitals with slogans, knife open the womb and killing the foetus – has specific symbolic meanings and consequences (Menon and Bhasin 1998:43, Butalia 2000:183). Each treated women’s bodies as territories to be conquered and marked by the conqueror.

Female womb was treated as a ‘territory to be occupied’ which can be successfully conquered only through the forceful impregnation of the woman. Through rape, the seed of the ‘other’ is implanted, hence stigmatizing and making ‘impure’ the future generations. Because the woman is perceived as the source of reproducing the ‘pure race of nation’, this pollution that has visited her needs to be ‘cleaned’ (hence cleansing the enemy’s off springs). Post partition hundreds of women were put under “medical check up” (a euphemism for abortion) to eliminate the possibility of the woman bearing the enemy’s child and thereby “polluting the biological national source of patriarchal family” (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 44, EPW April 1993). If unsuccessful in producing a ‘pure’ nation the woman’s body itself is treated as a traitor.

After the phase of physical violence got over, there was another more subtle form of violence perpetrated by the state on either side of the border. Women were forced to undergo compulsory “medical check up” with a purpose of cleaning the women of any unwanted stain. Her identity was fixed with that of the nation. Devoid of any individual agency she was invested with the responsibility of preserving and also rebuilding the pure nation.
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