

Women and the partition of India

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“Behind every successful man there is a woman”

Abstract: *Women, the backbone of every society, is said to be the ultimate strength and support behind the success of an individual. There is a lot of differentiation and discrimination in the name of gender as males and females. Nevertheless, this difference does not exist in nature from the time immemorial. A female describes out various characteristics which is different from that of a male, varying from factors such as Physical, Mental, Biological and Reproductive. These are inborn and inbuilt right from the time a mother conceives a female child.*

Key Words: *Partition, Women, Abduction, Rape, Killing, Riots, Refugees, Recovery*

Introduction

Women globally face many problems such as injustice and inequality both in the terms of economic factor and human rights. Women are not being treated at par with the men and are enjoying equal statues with men. No doubt in the modern day they have now became active participants in all walks of life, but they have been abused,

harassment at work place and also rape is common and day to day news of present India.

From the time immemorial in every war between kingdoms the women had to bear the worst of the violence. Similarly in the partition of 1947, women become the worst victims of rival groups. The physical weakness of women is one of the major causes for their exploitation by men. Amidst the partition both Muslim and Hindu men took the advantage of her weakness. During the partition, the superior men (what they thought of themselves) of both the religions were involved in killings, rape, abductions, murdering, forcible conversion, marriage, death and plundering the innocent women and finally the independence of both the nations stand on the scrape and deathbed of women.¹ Women who were not participants in partition and most of them who did not what is Partition and why it happened had to face most atrocious consequences of it. The only thing they knew was that country is partitioned and they had to live separately in an independent nation. All the people men, women and children, young or old aged were forced to accept the partition decision

¹ Major Andrew J., *The Chief Sufferers: The Abduction of Women During the Partition of the Punjab*, Journal of South Asian Studies, Vol. XVIII, 1995, p. 57.

taken by Hindu, Muslim and Sikh leaders. The people were forced to leave their homes and lost almost all property. The refugees had no option other than to move to the refugee camps for shelter and food. Some took shelter to their relatives houses but those who don't have relatives across the border had to stay in refugee camps.² About one to two million people were believed to have died, thousands of children lost and abandoned and between 75,000 to 100,000 women abducted and raped.³ Apart from rape and killing many women are sold into prostitution, or forced into marriage by the men of other religions.⁴ They were also forced to accept the new religion. Ritu Menon writes, Women were sold in markets and gifted to the friends as someone gifts baskets of oranges and grapes to the friends.⁵ Many of them were sold as commodities in the market places for Rupees 10 or 20 a piece. They were bought and abused physically and sexually by their abductors and buyers.⁶ Women were either killed by their own

family members or they commit suicide to protect the honour of the family and to maintain their sexual purity.⁷ In village Thao Khalsa in district Rawalpindi about 90 women and girls jumped into the well to protect their honour.⁸ However the exact figure of the women abducted are unknown and estimates vary. According to Leonard Mosley about 1 lakh women were abducted, raped, forcibly converted or sold on auctions.⁹ Urvashi Butalia figures the number of women who were abducted or raped on either sides of border was about 75,000.¹⁰ Indian government estimated that about that about 30,000 non Muslim (Hindu and Sikh) women abducted in Pakistan and Pakistan government estimated that there were 50,000 Muslim women abducted in India during riots.¹¹ Andrew Major states that 40,000-45,000 women in total were abducted, while as Masroor estimates that about 60,000 Muslim women alone were abducted. The number of abducted Muslim women was twice as that of Hindu and Sikh women writes

² Butalia Urvashi, "Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition," Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 28, No. 17, 1993, p.13.

³ Scott Bede, "Partitioning Bodies: Literature, Abduction and the State", Interventions, International Journal of Post Colonial Studies, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2009, p. 35. See also Talbott Ian, *A tale of two cities, the aftermath of the partition for Lahore and Amritsar, 1947-57*, Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 41, 2007, pp. 53-56

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Menon Ritu and Bhasin Kamla, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998, p.76

⁶ Scott Bede, *op.cit*, p.36

⁷ Abraham Taisha (ed.), *Women and Politics of Violence*, Haranand Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2002, p.20

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Mosley Leonard, *The Last Days of British Raj*, Jaico publishing House, Bombay, 1971, p.248

¹⁰ Butalia Urvashi, *The Other Side of the Silence: The Voices from the Partition of India*, Viking, New Delhi, P.132

¹¹ Major Andrew J., *op.cit*, p.68-67

Andrew Major.¹² Begum Tassaduq Hussain estimates that the number of abducted Muslim women was about 90,000.¹³ Suvir Kaul writes, there is no reliable record or document about the number of families who were separated, the number of fields destroyed or the crops in the fields that were left to rot, the number of persons missed and killed, the number of homes destroyed and the difficulty of the journey of people who fled from their paternal lands.¹⁴

The violence towards women in the partition was not only assault and dishonors her dignity, but to assault her community and family, her culture and nation. The violence on the women by the men from other community ranged from “stripping, parading naked, mutilating and disfiguring, tattooing or branding their breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans, amputating breasts, knifing open the womb, raping [and] killing fetuses.”¹⁵ Andrew Major while writing plight of women observers that men were fighting as soldiers to achieve the homeland and the women was compared to a territory that every man wants

to occupy and she becomes polluted.¹⁶ While according to Bapsi Sidwa, women was like an object whose soft body was used to release their anger by men as revenge and to celebrate victories both by losers and victors.¹⁷ During the partition the women was not considered more than an object whose body was used to take revenge from other community. Even some times some beasts from their own community took the advantage of violence and they became the victims of their lust. Their breasts and genitals were branded with slogans like *Pakistan Zindabad* or *Hindustan Zindabad*. The meaning of rape was not just humiliation, but to sow one’s own seed in the enemy’s womb.¹⁸ Their bodies with painted messages and slogans become envelop to carry message of one group to another.¹⁹ Veena Das on violence against women writes:

“The bodies of the women were surfaces on which texts were to be written and read-icons of the new nations. But women converted this passivity into agency by using

¹² *Ibid*, p.69

¹³ Kiran Naumana, *Punjab Migration 1947: Violence against Muslim Women and the Settlement*, A Research Journal of South Asian Studies Vol. 32, No. 1, January – June 2017, p. 163

¹⁴ Kaul Suvir (ed.), *The Partition of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, Indiana University press, Bloomington, 2001, p.208

¹⁵ Pandey Gyanendra, *Community and Violence*, Economic and Political weekly, Vol. 32, No. 32, August 9-15, 1997, p.2037

¹⁶ Major Andrew J., *op.cit*, p.

¹⁷ Bahri Deepika, “*Telling Tales: Women and Trauma of Partition in Sidhwa’s Cracking India*”, Interventions, International Journal of Post Colonial Studies, Vol. 1, No.2, 1999, p.218.

¹⁸ Butalia Urvashi, “*Community, State and Gender, on Women’s Agency during Partition*”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXVIII, No.17, April 1949, p.14

¹⁹ Bahri Deepika, *op.cit*, p.218

*metaphors of pregnancy-hiding the pain, giving it a home just as a child is given a home in the woman's body."*²⁰

The engraved messages on their genitals and other body parts, their scars, as well as their trauma, and the names of numerous rapists cut into their arms and breasts served as evidence that they were violated by the others. The inscriptions of national slogans on women bodies as well as declarations of possessions engraved on their bodies, through tattooing of names and dates, created the situation where the women, her community and nation as a whole would never be able to forget the violation and the humiliation of their bodies by others.²¹

Thousand of these women were rejected by their families and husbands and many of them were traded by their own families in exchange of their freedom. Many of the abducted women were not accepted by their families and they have to either live in ashrams or to enter in brothels.²² Especially in India their families rejected them and shut their doors for them. In India two *Ashrams* were opened for the women who were rejected by their

families.²³ Jawaharlal Nehru in early 1948 appealed to the public to accept the recovered women back and declared:²⁴

"I am told that there is unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women back in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls and women require our tender and loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back and give them every help"

Muslim women were easily accepted back by their families in Pakistan. Some organizations in Pakistan did a commendable work for the recovered women. Particularly the *All Pakistan Women's Association* and Muslim League worked hard for arranging the marriages of these women.²⁵ In the time of conflicts and violence women always become the target of communal groups as the violation against them was symbol of assault on

²⁰ Didur Jill, *At a Loss for Words: Reading the Silence in South Asian Women's Partition Narratives*, TOPIA, Vol.4, p.62

²¹ Kidwai Anis, *op.cit*, p.142

²² Singh Jasbir, "Women, Violence and the Partition (1947)", *The Punjab Past and Present*, Patiala, Vol. XXXVII, Part II, October 2005, p.65

²³ Mehta Rini Bhattacharya, Debali Mookerjee-Leonard, *The Indian Partition in Literature and Films: History, Politics and Aesthetics*, Routledge, New York, 2015, p.37

²⁴ Khosla G. D., *op.cit*, p.75

²⁵ Jeffery Patricia, Basu Amrita (ed.), *Appropriating Gender: Women Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, Routledge, New York, 2011, p.30

community honour. Mankekar on this writes, “Rape is a dominant image in popular narratives not just of partition but of all communal conflicts in India”.²⁶ Similarly during partition the Kafilas (caravans) were attacked, women were kidnapped and raped and assaulted repeatedly during partition genre. During this assault many women get pregnant and were later forced by their families to abort to retain their purity²⁷ and also many women who during this time gave birth to the child of their abductors had to left their children to either their abductors or to the orphanages.²⁸ In this brutal violence women could not express their pain. Violence affected every community in some way or other by the assault and abduction of women.²⁹ Veena Das an anthropologist on the pain of women writes that men of both the communities (Muslims and Sikhs) used the body of women as a medium through which they communicate with each other and the political programme, the slogans and the victory of both India and Pakistan was inscribed up on their bodies.³⁰ Veena Das also adds that the lives of women were framed by the notion that they were to bear permanent witness to this violence, doubly articulated in the domains of kinship and politics.³¹

Anis Kidwai wrote, “So similar that at times we were compelled to think that someone else had planned the whole scheme, made two copies of it and handed one over to each side”. The bodies of women were coded as sites for patriarchal protection or destruction.³²

During the months August and September the riots busted on large scale in both the Punjab’s. The British writer estimated that one to two lakhs were killed in East and West Punjab. The men were infected with the spirit of revenge and the victims of their revenge were the womenfolk of the opposite community.³³

Conclusion

During the partition of India both Non Muslim and Muslim women went through mental and physical torture. The physical weakness of the women was major cause for women to be exploited and biggest weapon for men to exploit them. They were the greater sufferers of the partition and both Muslim and non Muslim men took the advantage of their weakness to show their superiority over them. They were not only humiliated through abduction by the men of other communities, but were also

²⁶ Meiner Carsten and Veel Kristin (ed.), *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes Crises*, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2012, p.141

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Khosla G. D, *Stern Reckoning, A Survey of the Events Leading Up to and Following the Partition of India*, Oxford University press, 1949, p.75

²⁹ Meiner Carsten and Veel Kristin (ed.), *op.cit*, p.141

³⁰ Das Veena (ed.) *Word and the World: Fantasy, Symbol and Record*, Sage, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 187, 189.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.56

³² Kidwai Anis, 2011, p.216

³³ Singh Kirpal, *Partition of Punjab and Women*, *op.cit*, p.113

killed or forced to commit suicide by their own families to save the honour of family and community. During the tough time of partition women met the same fate everywhere. They receive nothing except violation and humiliation but lost everything when they lost honour and esteem in the society. The men of the opposite community in the guise of abuser victimized women repeatedly through abduction, rape, mutilation murder and suicide destroyed womanhood and motherhood. There were large numbers of women stories of partition, among them several were narrated and several died with their narrators forever. Several remain hidden to save honour of the family and community and lost forever to history.

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