Final Paper

Sanjeev Gurung

University of Wyoming

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This paper will focus on the analysis of violence on women committed during the partition of India. The comparative setting will be on violence from within (male family members), and violence from without (male members of the rival faction). Additionally, the setting of violence of violence will focus on the Punjab region, one of the hardest hit region during the partition.

The partition of India in mid-August 1947 was a harrowing period of trauma for everyone involved. The partition resulted in the creation of the Muslim-majority Dominion of Pakistan (including East Pakistan, which in 1971 became the sovereign state of Bangladesh) on 14th August, and the Hindu-majority Union of India on 15th August. The British were leaving after 89 years of direct imperial rule, relinquishing their crown jewel colony.1 Lord Louis Mountbatten shipped in on 1946 as the last Viceroy and the Governor-General of India on March 1947, had a partition plan readied and accepted by both the warring parties, and then preponed the date of partition from June 1948 to August 1947.2 The Indians, primarily the Hindus, Muslims, and the Sikhs, were left with an artificial border, and a forced and haphazard migration. The resulting movement of people – Hindus and Sikhs into India, and Muslims into Pakistan and East Pakistan – resulted in the largest human migration in recorded history.3 The actual number of casualties

3 Ibid., 75.
during this period is opaque at best, although a consensus figure of half a million is generally accepted.\(^4\) In the midst of these chaos, an estimated 70,000 women were abducted, raped, killed, and converted.\(^5\)

The state of Punjab, inadvertently found itself in the epicenter of violence during the partition. During the process of partition, it was decided that the state would be divided according to religious lines – Muslims were concentrated on the western part of the state, and Hindus on the eastern part. Meanwhile, the Sikh community, spread evenly around the state\(^6\), found itself in a conundrum of identity and geography as they were haphazardly put together with the non-Muslim category. Punjabi Sikh political leaders, demanded partition, however balked at the idea of the division of their state, and proclaimed the use of violence.\(^7\) It is however important to note that all the violence during the partition cannot be attributed to the Sikhs, historians agree that the Sikh community played a major role instigating and supporting mobs and riots.\(^8\)

As aforementioned, the partition and the subsequent migration was the largest recorded in human history. What is not recorded as much, is the misery suffered by women during this time. As if violent abduction, rape, death, and conversion by the opposing marauders were not enough, women during partition also had to contend with violence from their own family members as well. The violence on women during the partition illustrated the societal view of women’s

\(^4\) Ibid.


\(^7\) Ibid., 77.

\(^8\) Ibid., 81-82.
sexuality in India, that her sexuality is not hers and is controlled by the male member of her family. Women, their body, and their sexuality became equated with their men, home, their community, and the nation. Thus, geopoliticized, women ended up becoming the rope in a tug-of-war between “ours” and “theirs,” and for men to protect or desecrate.9 Women were, and are still seen, as a symbol of purity and honor, and any violation on them were seen by the opposing party as an “assertion of identity and a humiliation of the rival community.”10 This propensity to inflict violence on women was not exclusive to a particular community though: Hindus, Muslims, and Sikh men were equally culpable of crimes on the women of their own community and the women of rival communities as well.11

The idea of a woman’s honor and purity ties back to the concept of androcentrism. Deepa Narasimhan-Madhavan describes androcentrism as the idea “in which society and societal norms are viewed through a male-centric lens.”12 More often, this lens is highly skewed and portrays men’s sexuality as the norm, and women’s a reflection of the men’s, and an unequal one at that. This also meant that a woman’s body was not owned by her, but by the man – her father, her husband, her brother, amongst others. Additionally, the female body also became representative

of her family and her community’s purity and honor. Consequently, any violation against women, became a violation against the family and the community. As women’s sexuality was tied to the men’s, it also became a violation against the men.\(^{13}\)

Due to the intensely political nature of violence here, women also ended up becoming “trophies of war.”\(^{14}\) Most of the crimes committed against women were the ones you would usually associated in a similar conflict scenario - abduction, rape, death, and conversion. Rape was particularly a strong statement because as we discussed earlier, it not only meant the violation of a woman’s body, honor, and sexuality, it was also a violation of the man, her family, and her community. Additionally, a pregnant, raped woman would also be considered polluted and a traitor. Finally, forced abortion was also a common occurrence to symbolically “cleanse” the woman of the taint.\(^{15}\) Others, meanwhile, were kept as permanent hostages, some becoming unpaid maids, some as wives and sisters who themselves were lost in the chaos of partition.\(^{16}\)

In addition to these, women also became effigies of political slogans. Women became a canvas to vent political anger; Muslim women were carved with “Jai Hind” (Long live India) and Hindu and Sikh women would be carved with “Pakistan Zindabad” (Pakistan forever).\(^{17}\) These women, and others as well, would also be paraded around town naked, or forced to dance naked in mosques, temples\(^{18}\), or gurudwaras.\(^{19}\) Amputation of breasts, symbolic of womanhood, and mutilation of pregnant women, signifying the end of the family line, were other forms of

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 400.
\(^{14}\) Meera Patel, “Rape accounts still surface from India’s partition 65 years on.”
\(^{15}\) Deepa Narasimha-Madhavan, “Gender, sexuality, and violence,” 401.
\(^{17}\) Ibid.
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
\(^{19}\) Gurudwaras are place of worship for the Sikh religious community, just like mosques are for the Islamic community, and temples for the Hindu community.
violence women endured during the partition. Finally, many others committed suicide after being violated and dishonored by their captors.

Many women also ended up suffering fatal destiny at the hands of their own families. Again, the concepts of honor and purity became of primary concern, with men justifying their actions for saving the women and the community from dishonor. In a tearful retelling of his family and village’s story, Bir Bahadur Singh, a Sikh partition survivor, retells how his father and his uncles beheaded the women of the community, starting with his own daughter, to save them from abduction and rape. This threat of dishonor, again, was prevalent across all the warring communities, and many rural families would perform the killing themselves, usually executed by the family patriarch. The killings of the women included being burned alive, poisoned, and even thrown into the local wells. Similarly, many women would carry packets of poison themselves “in the eventuality that they might be captured.” Other women, meanwhile, committed suicide in the fear of falling victim to opposing factions.

As Mahatma Gandhi would later peruse, women became the chief sufferers of 1947. Yet, their stories remain untold due to the societal structures put in place by a highly patriarchal society. Women became pawns in a war waged by men. Due to the fear of dishonor and ostracization, these stories died away with their carriers.

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20 Ibid.
23 Meera Patel, “Rape accounts.”
Bibliography


