

# WOMEN: THE CLASS THAT SUFFERED THE MOST DURING PARTITION OF INDIA

**Ishfaq Hussain Bhat**

*Former Student, Department of English, University of Kashmir. J&K, India.*

## **Abstract:**

Many history books, novels, short stories, plays, poems and scholarly articles and papers etc have been written on the subject of Partition of India. Communal violence and bigotry has been one of the major themes of almost all these works. The entire process of Partition of India is not only a story of demographic change but also of the mass trauma, bigotry and violence that the people experienced during the course of Partition. The paper, while highlighting the sufferings and exploitation of people during the partition of India in general, will focus on the oppression and exploitation of the downtrodden women during the partition. The paper as such aims to explore and highlight the hardships experienced by women during the partition of India and its aftermath. And how people specifically women suffered during their migration, how they were abducted by the members of the rival community and how they were raped, violated and their bodies dismembered and mutilated. The focus would also be on the violation of women not only by men of the rival communities but also by their own community members; and how their own family members were not willing to recover and reclaim them after their abduction because they thought that this would bring dishonor to their family. Thus I would focus on the aspect of Partition whereby women's body became a battle field for the members belonging to different communities.

**Keywords:** *exploitation, exodus, honour killings, partition, violence.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION:**

The plan for Partition of India began with the Mountbatten Plan in June 1947. In accordance with the plan, India was not going to remain united instead; it was to become divided into two parts – India and Pakistan. Pakistan was to be made up of two parts in the North West and the North East separated by 1000 miles. Punjab and Bengal with their small Muslim majorities were to be divided and Muslim majority parts given to Pakistan. To devise all this and to facilitate such a major change, a boundary commission was set up. This boundary commission was specifically set up to draw the borders in Punjab and Bengal. Cyril Radcliffe, a British civil servant, was made the chairman of the commission. It was Cyril Fielding who was given the final say after getting advice from both the Hindu and the Muslim members of the Commission. This boundary Commission had many problems to begin with. First of all, Radcliffe had never been to India and therefore he was completely ignorant of the ground reality. He was a complete outsider and did not know anything substantial about India. Since he did not know the ground reality, he was not able to take many decisions judiciously. Another problem of the Radcliffe Commission was that Radcliffe had to work with outdated maps and census figures.

The purpose of this paper is to bring to light the horrors of partition with a focus on the exploitation of women as mere objects of desire and pity who were greatly wronged not only by the members of the rival communities but also by their own community members. The purpose of the paper is to make the audience relive the moments of extreme misery, exploitation, trauma, distress and affliction. The topic is of great importance because such events enlighten us as to how during the times of turmoil, even the best friends turn hostile and make your life miserable. The objective of the paper would be achieved by highlighting certain incidents and events that occurred during the partition of India: the mass violence and exodus, end of age-old unity between different communities, communal violence and bigotry, gendered realities of honour killings and self-inflicting violence of women, intra-community violence, mob frenzy and women's bodies, abduction of women during Partition violence and indifference of their own communities towards them.

## **II. DISCUSSION:**

In order to examine the horrors of Partition, let us discuss some of the most important incidents and issues that occurred during the partition of India and which added to the miseries of people, especially the miseries of women. In order to substantiate my ideas and to establish my point, I would also allude to some literary works and try to draw a parallelism between the representation of women during the times of turmoil and their exploitation and miserable condition in reality:

### **1. Creation of Refugees**

This entire process resulted in 5 million Muslims in India and 5 million Hindus in Pakistan migrating to the alternate country and in this entire process, Sikhs were largely ignored. Moreover, the entire process of Partition resulted in a very pathetic event and process – the creation of the 'refugee'. Becoming a refugee became a sad reality for a vast amount/number of population. Partition by creating borders and later restrictions on mobility, created two categories of 'citizens' and 'non-citizens' as well as 'stateless people' whom neither India nor Pakistan identified with. And this mass of people came to be termed by the Government of India as 'displaced persons,' 'migrants,' and 'refugees'. These 'displaced' and 'stateless people' suffered a lot in the course of Partition.

### **2. Mass violence and Exodus.**

After the Partition of India in August 1947, incidents of mass violence and bigotry spread all over India especially in the northern and eastern India with mass, migration/exodus taking place. Punjab specifically became a site of some worst violence incidents and calamity. The first incidents of violence however, can actually be traced to pre Partition Bengal where serious rioting took place as early as 1946 in the course of Provincial elections and hence initiated a process which ultimately culminated in the Partition riots, mass trauma and exodus in 1947 on the ground that had already been prepared in 1946 and, which had deliberately been left unchecked by the colonial regime. The entire process radically and drastically changed the demography of the Indian Sub-continent. There were many places from where people fled in order to save their honour and lives. Many places like Delhi soon became a place where one could hardly find any craftsmen like carpenters, masons, tailors, etc as most of them were Muslims and they had migrated to Pakistan in the course of Partition riots.

Based on the 1951 census of displaced persons, 7,226,000 Muslims had gone to Pakistan from India and more than 7,249,000 Hindus and Sikhs had fled to India from Pakistan. This traumatic exodus took place immediately after the partition of India as people somehow wanted to migrate to the areas/states that they found would be better for them and for the generations to come. Thus one can easily imagine the sad/pathetic reality that was taking place on both sides of the border. Around 11.2 million or 78% of population transfer took place in the Punjab province/region alone. Whereas 5.3 million Muslims moved from India to West Punjab in Pakistan, almost 3.4 million Hindus and Sikhs moved from Pakistan to East Punjab now in India. The images of long foot caravans, overloaded carts and trucks and, overflowing trains immediately comes to one's mind when one visualizes the 'journey'.<sup>1</sup>

Many inhuman atrocities were committed by one community on the people belonging to other communities. Many women were mercilessly and repeatedly raped and then ruthlessly butchered. Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* artistically and subtly presents such incidents of violence specifically the violence against women. The train episode presented in the novel is one such episode where we find the violation of women: "A train from Gurdaspur has just come...Everyone in it is dead...butchered...two gunny bags full of women's breasts." This mass trauma not only did add to the chaos but also made the life of most of the people so miserable that it is, in a way, not possible to express such traumatic feelings and experiences in words. The communal riots were characterized by the bombing of immigrants, and filling trains full of dismembered bodies and then sending them across the border. This had become a regular feature and both the countries witnessed a no of such incidents in the course of the Partition. This finds ample description in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* when the protagonist of the novel states: "I'll tell you to your face – I lose my senses when I think of the mutilated bodies on that train from Gurdaspur...that might I went mad, I tell you, I lobbed grenades through the windows of Hindu and Sikh I'd known all my life! I hated their guts."

### 3. Unity between Different Communities Came to an End

The entire process of Partition of India is not only a story of demographic change but also of the mass trauma, bigotry and violence that the people experienced during the course of Partition. The Partition had been done on communal lines. During the split of India, there was a mass migration of over 15 million. Since the partition was done on communal lines and boundaries had been drawn in accordance with that plan/pattern, the Muslims obviously were leaving India to settle in Pakistan and likewise the Hindus were leaving for India. Therefore, the entire process of exodus was not happening silently, smoothly and peacefully. The entire process of Partition – the creation of Pakistan – was tumultuous which resulted in large scale violence, chaos, riots, deaths and heinous crimes against humanity. This, in turn, deepened the rift between the Hindus and the Muslims and thereby shacking and destroying the unity that had been a result of more than hundred years of joint struggle against the colonial regime.

The process of communalism had started much earlier than 1940s and in fact it had started by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself when the sense of communal identity was hardening and deepening among people belonging to different communities.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Communal Violence and Bigotry:

Partition of India resulted into the end of age-old communal harmony among different communities. People became community conscious and tried to unsettle other communities by attacking them and making their life so miserable that they were left with no option other than migration because they did not want themselves being killed and their women being raped, wronged and humiliated by the rival/ stronger community members. Bapsi Sidhwa artistically portrays the inter-community violence that had become commonplace during the course of the partition of India in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. The episode in which the Sikhs attack the Muslim village Pir Pindo and when Ranna a small boy, wounded runs for life presents perhaps the vilest side of communal discord. She writes:

“There were too many ugly and abandoned children like him scavenging in the looted houses and the rubble of burnt-out buildings. His rages clinging to his wounds, straw sticking in the scalped skull, Ranna wondered through the lanes stealing chapattis and grain from houses strewn with dead bodies rifling the corpses for anything he could use...No one minded the semi-naked specter as he looked in doors with his knowing, wide-set peasant eyes.”

#### 5. Gendered Realities of ‘Honour’ Killings and Violence.

During the course of the communal bigotry, violence and riots, there were many families and communities which were taking decision to kill members of their own family and these members were invariably women and children as it was thought that they would fall prey to the frenzied mob of the rival community. Therefore they thought that it was better for them to get killed by their own family members rather than expose them to rape and murder by the male members of the rival community who were bent upon destroying the chastity of the women of the other communities by polluting and violating them. The people feared that their women and children would be abducted, probably converted, raped and impregnated by the men of other religion. Therefore, in order to avoid such circumstances and acts of heinous crime, the harsh decision was immediately and repeatedly taken by a number of families belonging to different communities. Many writers have portrayed such incidents in their works and in this connection, Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Ice-Candy-Man* proves to be a realistic documentation of the heinous crime committed on women. In this novel Pir Pindo, a Muslim village, is attacked by the Sikhs. The Muslims of the village are killed, their women gang-raped. Men, women and children are ruthlessly and mercilessly butchered. Women are so badly treated and harassed that it is decided that the women and girls of Pir Pindo would gather at Choudhary’s house and pour kerosene oil around the house to burn themselves.<sup>3</sup> During the process and course of Partition, killings of women in fact, became one of the ways of saving the honour of the women, the religion and the country

of different communities before they decided to migrate to India or Pakistan. A large numbers of instances of self-inflicting violence can be seen in many documentations of violence during the course of Partition. In her famous work *What the Body Remembers*, Shauna Singh Baldwin artistically and subtly shows how the male members of the society/community killed their own women ruthlessly: Papaji kills his daughter-in-law Kusum in order to avoid her body being violated by men of the other community:

“Papaji thinks that for good-good women, death should be preferable to dishonor.”

“Such incidents were projected as examples of women’s heroism and courage. Such incidents highlight the violence that was wrecked against women during the partition of India. The fact is that this violence against women was not only being inflicted by the members of the rival communities but by the members of their own communities who did not want, at any cost, their women and children to fall prey to the lust of the rival community members and suffer rest of their lives. Therefore, out of the fear of such incidents, they thought it better to kill them with their own hands. Many historians and writers have now started talking about this new kind of violence, where women and children were mercilessly killed by the members of their own communities and most often by their own family members. This aspect of Partition must not be overlooked and the need of the hour is to take deeper interest and do deeper research into such incidents of violence that was inflicted by the male members of these families. These incidents are not seen as violence but as ‘hounour’ killings and the death of the women is usually projected as martyrdom and as the best service that they could have done to their families, community and to the motherland. A scholar who has worked extensively in this field is Urvashi Butalia. She has spoken at length as to how the violence of communities towards their own people and specifically towards women became a norm during the Partition of India. According to Urvashi Butalia, there is an immense need to address the violence of the communities towards their own people particularly, women and children who were considered as weak and vulnerable. She refutes the projection that the women came out in defense of nationalism, the community and the religion by sacrificing their own lives. While many women must have died unwillingly without even knowing that this was the fatal fate which was waiting for them There is an immense need to address the violence of the communities towards their own people particularly women and children, it was projected as if they were doing this all in the name of respect towards their families, their elders and towards the society at large as well as to save the honour of their religion and community. Another sad story of ninety women of the little village of ThoaKhalsa, which was near Rawalpindi, who drowned themselves by jumping into a well during the communal riots to save themselves from being violated and raped by the members of the rival communities in the course of Partition. This has aptly been depicted in the novel *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni. However, such representations as has been pointed out by Urvashi Bhutalia, do not project the complete picture and in fact, they hide the reality that must have existed on the ground. An important question that arises here is that whether women took the extreme step of jumping into the well voluntarily or it was out of social pressure? Was it that they, out of the fear of being violated, wanted to end their lives or that they were being forced to do that? This is the question that largely remains unanswered. Moreover, histories of such heroism

are repeatedly woven to hide the horror of such violence. One may talk about mob violence, Partition violence, killings, rapes, pillaging that was conducted by the members of one community over the members of the other community, but one must not completely ignore the violence committed on women and children by their own community. It was extremely horrible that women were being killed by their own family members and deeper analysis and research needs to be done into such incidents of self-inflicting violence and ‘honour’ killings.”<sup>4</sup>

## **6. Intra-community Violence**

A very important aspect that has emerged over the years is that after the partition of India numerous incidents of intra-community violence have occurred. Intra-community violence simply refers to the violence inflicted on people not by the members of their rival communities but by their own community members who were supposed to protect and shield them from the violence of other communities. There are many fictional stories which highlight this grim reality of Partition whereby, women were not only violated and dishonoured by the rival community members but also by their own community members who were supposed to protect them. This is one of the vilest crimes done against humanity in general and women in particular in the history.

“Another problem that women faced during the course of Partition and aftermath is that woman simply being married to a person who wished to settle or had attempted to settle in the other country, often lost the citizenship of the country in which they had been originally/already residing. Not only did they lose the citizenship of the country but also were separated from their family, friends, neighbours and their loved ones. This feeling of loss of homeland and the loss of the loved ones still haunts the people who somehow survived the Partition of India.”<sup>5</sup>

## **III. CONCLUSION:**

To conclude it can be said that Partition resulted in a large scale violence and exodus. The process of mass migration did not run peacefully which resulted in mass trauma whereby women were abducted, raped, tattooed and then mercilessly butchered. The men and children were killed. Revenge killings became common place. The houses and markets were set ablaze. Most of the people suffered in one way or the other in the course of the Partition. Women in particular were victimized both by their rival communities and by the members of their own community. Men belonging to the rival communities violated them in order to send a message to other communities that they have not been able to protect their women and their own community. This phenomenon/process of violation of women during Partition of India became commonplace and it was, in a way, an indirect way for men of one community to attack the male members of the other community because by violating the downtrodden bodies of the women, men of the rival community thought that they had completed the project and that they had taken revenge from the rival community members. Their miseries and exploitation did not end here. As the violation of women by the male members of other religion became common place, it resulted in the process whereby their own family members killed them in order to save them from possible rape, tattooing and murder. There were families who killed their

own women claiming that they were protecting them from possible rape, impregnation, pollution and violation and thereby they silenced the histories of these women forever. These women continued to exist only in memories but in reality they refused to exist, they were not allowed to exist and there was no one to remember them. It can be said that the class of people who suffered the most during the communal Partition riots/violence is that of women. Thus, there is an immense need to understand the entire process from the aspect of gendered violence inflicted both by the rival communities as well as by their own community.<sup>6</sup> And the need of the hour is to further research on the subject by talking to the people who survived and underwent many hardships during the partition of India. The focus of most of the works written on the subject is on the physical abuse of women, which is valid and relevant but the need of the hour is to discuss the ways in which the uprooted women have faced the enormous challenge of reshaping and rebuilding their lives in alien conditions.

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