

## PARTITION: THROUGH THE EYES OF WOMEN (BY USING PRIMARY SOURCES)

*Aprajita Rai & Gautami Kamrak*

*Research Scholar, Department of History, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, India*

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper describes key cases in the way Partition has been represented in the history of India and Pakistan. It more specifically examines how alternative silent voices have been become more visible from the view of the women victims of the horrifying scenes of Partition. This shift has been made possible with the use of oral testimonies to document accounts of ordinary people's experiences of this event in the history of India and Pakistan. The paper then goes on to reflect on various primary sources that have been acquired over the times of Partition as Archives, Journals, Newspapers and photographs, oral histories as recorded diaries, and a contemporary Novel.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Partition*

### INTRODUCTION

The partition of India in August 1947 not just led to the creation of two new autonomous countries, yet in addition brought about one of the heaviest migration of people in human history. Something about 12.5 million scared individuals were uprooted from their genealogical homes, fled across newly delineated borders depending upon their faiths. Hindus and Sikhs exited from lands demarcated as “Muslim” Pakistan into the “new” India, while Muslims departed Hindu-dominated India into the new state called Pakistan (West and East).

In the midst of the gigantic disarray and chaos, up to 1 million people or even more died; while numerous women experienced horrifying outcomes. They were assaulted, here and there tormented, gang raped and killed. Without a doubt, the Partition of India and Pakistan, a choice made by officials a long way from the bleeding edges, released an episode of severe degeneracy that may be unequalled in late history. The situation of refugees who migrated has seeped into the social memory and public consciousness of the two countries, Pakistan and India. Their accounts have passed down through ages by personal narratives in families and popular culture. In 1947, their excursion and lives were caught by prominent photographic artists among them was **Margaret Bourke-White** and local artist of India, **F.E. Chaudhary**, who witnessed the movement and troubles of people around him. And it has offered a unique point of view for the historians to dwell upon that phenomenon.

### OFFICIAL ARCHIVES

As per the National Archives of the government of UK, two hundred Muslim refugees and five abducted young girls were found from various fragmented corners and sent over to the newly created Pakistan on October 28 in Ferozepore district. It has been stated that around six hundred non Muslim converts and kidnapped men, Women and children were displaced and moved in motor lorries to Lahore. It is officially mentioned that from the towns like Patti, Adampur, Pamunwala,

Durepala, and Sanawala about seventy two Muslims including five abducted girls were forced to migrate and then moved to Pakistan. On October 29, in the east Punjab region, five abducted Muslim girls were found from Anipur in Jullundur area. Whereas, the troops of the second Assam regiment found sixteen abducted women and children at Radapur and then they were handed over to their families or relatives. It has been recorded that Pakistani troops at Ganda Singh Wala, two non Muslim abducted girls were recovered and they were handed over back to the Indian troops, and seventeen non Muslim women with children were recovered at Ravi Bridge, four miles southeast of Narowal by Pakistani troops. And they were handed over to the Indian troops.

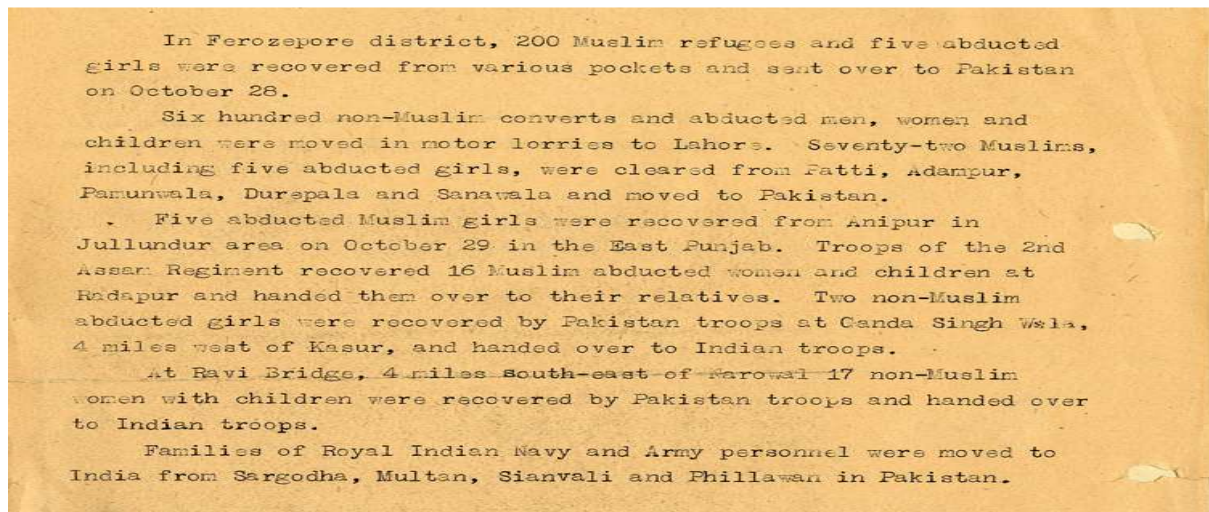


Figure 1

### Asha and the Widow as Survivor vis-a-vis the Partition

Yet another interesting ethnographic work that we acquired was that of Veena Das' work on partition and subjectivity (2000) based on the oral testimonies of 1947. In "Violence, Poisonous Knowledge and Subjectivity" Das' research focuses, on the personal accounts of several women whose negotiation with partition concerned everyday spaces of domesticity, not borders, property, and possessions. What is remarkable about Das' work is how the stories collected takes back partition into the domain of household and domesticity. Through a rereading of one of the accounts that was provided by a Partition survivor named Asha, Das negotiates the experience of partition that lies in the edges and deep corners of unspoken words with unvoiced fears and grief looking out to be acknowledged. She recounts one such narrative of Asha who was widowed prior to the partition and had nowhere safe or secure place to go after partition. In Asha's life, we are told, **"the originary moment of the violence of the Partition got woven into the events of her life because she was already vulnerable as a widow in a kinship universe of Hindu upper-caste ethos."** Widowed at the age of twenty in 1941, much before the event of partition, Asha recounts how her bereavement after her husband's death, coupled with being childless, **"weighed heavily upon her"** (Asha's husband's sister gave her own son in adoption to help her gain some interest in life. However, during the partition, Asha's family lost its property and assets and had to abdicate Lahore. Her own hometown was Amritsar, the nearest town to the border on the Indian side. This family gave refuge to many from Asha's conjugal family until other relatives came forward to help them. Asha continued to live in her parents' home but was seen as a burden by her own brother and his wife. Das quotes Asha: **"a daughter's food is never heavy on her parents, but how long will one's parents live? When even two pieces of bread are experienced as heavy by one's own brother, then it is better to keep one's honour—make one's peace—and to live where one was destined to live."**

## JOURNALS

### Those days in Noakhali...translated by Kumkum Chakravarti)

After partition, the condition of the country was devastated. The refugee camps were in horrendous condition and the people were having hard time living under such circumstances where there was no hope of life, where choices were not asked just forced and actions were implemented. In such times, refugee camps volunteers came forward to look after the needs of those who suffered.

Ashoka Gupta, now 88 years old, was engaged in intensive relief work in riot-scarred Noakhali in 1946. She and many others like Sucheta Kripalini, Renuka Roy and Sneharani Kanjilal took the path of Mahatma Gandhi and tried their utmost to help the persecuted and ravaged minority community. Ashoka Gupta recalled her Noakhali days in the monograph Noakhali Durjoger Dine. Excerpted below are some recollections.

*“It will be better if I quote here from the memoirs of Thakkar Bapa. Of the two villages, Charmandal was the larger one. Many of the homes at these places were first plundered and then burnt down. Maybe 50-52 houses were not burnt down, but they had been looted. The loss of 301 houses in Charmandal and 57 houses in Charuhita would add up to about Rs 33,700. These were the homes of prosperous farmers. The poorer people had lost about Rs 1000 worth of their possessions. The total loss would add up to Rs 5,46,503, i.e. an average loss of Rs 1,745 per person.*

*Here at least 2000 Hindus were forced to change their religion, six were forced to marry by force and one was murdered. Even six weeks after the riots Thakkar Bapa had seen people keen to leave their homes and settle elsewhere. If they went to the local police station to complain, the policemen would harass them on some pretext or the other.”* written by Ashoka Gupta

The Naokhali slaughter occurred when India's freedom had turned into the best probability, as the British were on the edge of leaving the Indian subcontinent. The Noakhali riots were the undeniable spin-off of the barbarity that came with Partition, and were considerably ghastlier. Since Hindu Bengalis were the worshippers of mostly feminine Gods, women, particularly those between the ages of 12 to 45, turned into the essential focuses of these hordes. They were assaulted, regularly before the men of her family, and persuasively changed over to Islam. As was mentioned-

*“Worst of all was the plight of women. Several of them had to watch their husbands being murdered and then be forcibly converted and married to some of those responsible for their death. Those women had a dead look. It was not despair, nothing so active as that. It was blackness”* This is what Miss Muriel Leister, member of a relief committee sent to Noakhali wrote on 6th November, 1946.

Hindu houses were burnt down with gasoline. The use of gasoline in remote areas such as Sandweep, where motor vehicles were not very common, speaks for itself that this was a premeditated attack, planned and arranged ahead of time. Temples were gutted as well. Only a handful of Hindus figured how to escape and flee down from their places with the help of local Muslims who then seized their property.

### The Statesman on October 16, 1946 Reported

*“In an area of about 200 sq miles the inhabitants surrounded by riotous mobs, are being massacred, their houses being burnt, their womenfolk being forcibly carried away and thousands being subjected to forcible conversion. Thousands of hooligans attacked the villages, compelled them (Hindus) to slaughter their cattle and eat. All places of worship in affected villages have been desecrated. The District Magistrate and the Police Superintendent of Noakhali took no step to prevent it.”*

All such scenarios that have been mentioned reflect the scenes of the time where humanity fled drastically the souls of the people. Women were considered as a mere object that could be molested anytime, anywhere in their agony.

### NEWSPAPERS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Mentioned below are some of the pictures acquired from the newspapers during the time of Partition which displays the dreadful conditions of women at the time-

#### **A Suffering Mother Crying at a Refugee Camp (circa. 1947) by F.E. Chaudhry from (THE CITIZENS ARCHIVE OF PAKISTAN)**



**Figure 2**

Above taken picture demonstrates the condition of the mothers. Here a young mother in a destitute state in the wake of not being able to take care of her child and unable to feed him/her in the Boli Camp, Lahore. Albeit the justification for the loss is obscure, it was unimaginable pain for parents to lose their kids to illness, viciousness or kidnapping. Young children also often lost their parents, friends, family and the land they belonged to. The pain they felt is highly suggestive by the picture. Homelessness and hunger deteriorated the condition of the people.



**Figure 3**

**1947 Partition - Woman with a Mutilated Face F.E. Chaudhry circa 1947**

The picture was taken by F.E Chaudhry. He captured this lady at a refugee camp in Lahore and named his piece as “**woman with a disfigured face.**” The brutality they gone through is very well demonstrated in the picture. Women were often abused during their excursion and frequently showed up at the camps after being molested. It was normal for perpetrators to mutilate women after molesting them. In fact, there were horrible acts of cutting them up, often slicing off their breasts or genitalia.



**Figure 4**

### 1947 Partition - Bruised Body of a Female Refugee F.E. Chaudhry circa 1947

Here **F.E Choudhary** captured a woman among the refugees who left India. She was witnessed exposing her body to show the injuries she has persevered and the plights that have been caused on her. These women were in a setting where the cultural standards looked down upon them exposing their bodies. Accordingly, these ladies, showing their body parts is suggestive of the pain they went through: they were in a state where those standards hardly cease to matter.



**Figure 5**

### 1947 Partition - Woman Making Her Way to Pakistan by F.E. Chaudhry circa 1947 (From the Collection of the Citizens Archive of Pakistan)

A lady with her family is making her way towards Lahore. Uprooted from her home town place in India and highly likely to have gone through an unpleasant and testing venture, the sensations of fatigue and alleviation are apparent on her and her relatives' faces. Displacements of old aged women were extremely drastic and horrendous as the chaos of loot and mobs were heart wrenching for them. If we observe these pictures carefully, we can sense that women were considered among the most horrendously awful impacted casualties of Partition. The turmoil and uprooting made them particularly powerless. They were attacked, tormented and abducted. Large numbers of the abducted women were forcefully changed over to the abductors' religion, who likewise regularly wedded them without wanting to. There are a few records of ladies and young ladies surrendering their own lives by hopping into wells, favouring that destiny than what anticipated in any case.

The encounters that have been captured of these women during the Partition of Indian Subcontinent show the particular difficulties they face during and after riots. As refugees, women's experiences were not at all alike like those of men of a similar religious community as they had to suffer even more. Truth be told, the likeness in the encounters of Indian and Pakistani women undrapes the significance of undertaking a review on the gendered effects of Partition related viciousness. Moreover, the persistent disempowerment of women as refugees shows the inadequacy of the government efforts for them.

## ORAL HISTORY & DIARIES

A retired statistician in Karachi named Nisar Akhtar, was merely six years old when the fear of tearing apart from their land and chaotic smokes after the barbarian acts of burning down houses began to rise every night from the villages surrounding his hometown in Hoshiarpur district in Punjab state, as Sikhs, his father said were burning the surrounding areas. As he says, every day from that moment they "faced the fear of being or not being."



Figure 6

After one failed escape attempt which separated his father from his family, lately they managed to runaway to a refugee camp before the beginning a twenty one day walk towards the newly created Pakistan, that was when the real nightmare began. There were Sikhs attacks on their caravan of several thousand people repeatedly. **"They would toss the children in the air with their spears.**

I saw infants, children, and elders with spears pierced in their bodies. They were moaning with pain and I passed, skipping them.

"What could I have done? People were reeling in pain and shouting for water and we were too insensitive to help them. Everybody was concerned with his own life."

He has further told as he remembers those horrifying days that how he clung to his mother's shirt to not lose her who was also carrying his newborn sister. *"At one stage, I am not sure whether knowingly or inadvertently, she left the baby lying on the ground. I asked her, 'Where is my sister?' 'I don't know,' she flatly replied... I went back and I saw her (the baby) lying on the ground and picked her up. Today she is alive with the grace of Allah."*

## NOVEL: (PINJAR 1950)

Pinjarm, a short novel authored by **Amrita Pritam** was originally in Punjabi that came out in 1950. Pinjar was translated by **Khushwant Singh** in English in 2009. The novel depicts the conditions and character of the Indian society during the

time of partition of India in 1947. Amrita Pritam has penned down her own experiences in the novel. She has portrayed the women life and their sufferings during the period of partition. Pinjar showcases the dreadful situation of women across the newly demarcated geographical borders. The novel is a tragic tale of human mistakes which exploit man's misfortunes. There have been uncountable number of cases that took place during partition, where girls committed suicide without any fault of hers. Pinjar depicts a world of social reality which takes out the theme and its meaning from the description of experienced reality. The story revolves around a Hindu girl who belonged to the family of money lenders. With the representation of this character the author depicts how the women of the twentieth century were bound to accept their conditions calling it as their fate and pre planned destiny. The Novel uses historical elements to set off a fictional plot that effectively reflects and expresses the victim's reality. The theme dramatically mirrors out the trouble and despair of women as victim of partition and its horrifying consequences. Amrita Pritam's Novel Pinjar (the skeleton) has effectively explored the despair faced by women during the time of partition. She depicts the riots, rape cases, abduction of young women of opposite religious communities. She successfully shows that how the women were just seen as a symbol of sex and objectivity for the pleasure of men. Pritam knows the sensitivity of the subject that is why she has handled it with carefully. Through the character of Pooro, the author shows a complete woman that has several roles of being a daughter, sister, wife and mother. The novel story brings light upon the problem of idea of cultural community and identity and partition victims. Pinjar is an account of alternative voice of woman during the time of partition of India. The author uses a symbol of gender and sexual element to show the plight of woman. She represents those women who were kidnapped, brutally raped and then rejected by their families. Such women are relegated to rehabilitation centres where they are subjected to all kinds of inhuman treatment. The whole story moves on an emotional ride with twists. Through this novel, Amrita Pritam has tried to voice her opinion that this partition also portraits women, the worst sufferers and victimized in different ways. Many women could become widowed or lost their children. Many of them were abducted and raped, and ultimately brought to death.

## CONCLUSIONS

As we go through the various primary accounts that have been acquired over the years to look at the past with a contemporary sense, we come across a lot of unvoiced opinions and thoughts that not have been acknowledged or discussed as others. Here, in the above paper, we have talked about the conditions of women during the time of partition with the help of several primary sources. The stories that we came across while writing our paper were witnesses of the true and real sufferers of the time concerned who were killed in excess and experienced the biggest human migration the world has ever recorded. The partition of August 1947 majorly deteriorated the lives of the people not only in India but the newly founded Pakistan as well. The loss of harmony and humanity was severely vanished and the fear of terror and separation engulfed the minds of people which created a situation where people were burning each other alive and axing them to death. Several violent incidents were witnessed that has a very negative impact on the two separated nations even today. The female centered stories, pictures, official accounts, the fictional works have somehow mirrored their plight and troublesome conditions, which is heart wrenching to dwell upon. The great divide of the British India was a life altering event that majorly effected women. Incidents of such cruelty, suggests how women lost their respect, dignity and even their bodies while carrying the burden of the honor of the community.



**REFERANCES**

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6. *Pinjar Novel by Amrita Pritam*

