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## Partition and Women: Voices of Courage and Survival

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### Abstract

*The partition of India in 1947 produced a colossal tragedy that changed the course of millions of lives. Vast numbers of people were displaced, as they tried to cross over to suddenly undefined borders. Even after more than 70 years of the event the memories of Independence in 1947 are eclipsed by those of partition. The earlier works on partition have focused on elite politics, and state policies where men were the primary agent. This paper made endeavours to look at a wider canvas. Partition of 1947 was not a mere 'Political' separation, but had a far-reaching socio-economic, psychological, and cultural impact on the lives of the migrants. The paper focused on middle-class women mainly centred around oral history, which is reconstructed through the 'memories' of the victims during the partition. The paper gives a deep insight into the lives of the women who were affected by the event of partition. The research methodology used is mainly interviews. In-depth interviews of 4 partitioned effected women were conducted who unravelled how their lives were regulated by patriarchal norms, and how they saw unexpected and drastic changes during and post-partition period and went through a huge trauma and unspeakable humiliation. Here, the question remains whether the event of partition enabled them to redefine themselves anew or was it just a short-term survival strategy within the larger structure of the society. Were they really able to question and challenge the old norms or did partition re-invented these norms in newer forms?*

### Keywords

Partition, Post-colonial, Interview method, Oral history, Women.

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## **Partition and Women: Voices of Courage and Survival**

### **1. Introduction**

A million people perished away in the communal riots that followed partition and many others died out of malnutrition and contagious diseases. The figure that around a million people died is now widely accepted. This is the generality of partition; it exists publicly in a history book, but we need to understand what exists privately, in stories told inside so many houses of India and Pakistan. The revisionist studies of partition have probed the question of how the common people, especially women and marginal groups experienced partition, and thus, attention has now shifted to the refugee experience and narration of violence. It has been argued that partition remains an active category in the life of India, especially in the life of women. For Ranabir Samaddar, partition is not really a reconstruction of the past, it is a recording of a continuous present. In that sense partition is an enduring fact, living in the present as much as in the past. Partition gave rise to new social arrangements, new consciousness, and new subjectivities as concluded by Gyanendra Pandey. Due to the patriarchal and feudal setup, women were always considered to be repositories of "honor", culture, and integrity of the community. Subsequently, their lives were forced to be structured around preserving that. Partition exposed this deep-seated misogyny in the most brutal fashion. Men raped and kidnapped women of other religions to avenge their families and communities. According to Urvashi Butalia, there was widespread sexual savagery, about 75,000 women were abducted and raped by men of different religions and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion. Recent works done on Women during Partition like Bhasin, Menon, Butalia, stress have been put on the need to recognize the violence of the communities towards their own people, women, and children. In most cases, in the conventional narratives, this violence has been seen as 'honor killing' and deaths as 'martyrdom' state memories.

### **2. Methodology**

The study is qualitative in nature looking at the lived experiences of women partition survivors in understanding the gendered nature

of official discourse on partition thereby relegating the experiences and stories of women to the domain of oral history. Through this study, we have tried to bring these voices to the fore. The study was conducted in Kolkata, West Bengal. It is important to note that the data has been collected from this side of the border, that is, India. It is a limitation of this study as well. However, the focus of the research has been primarily on women in the conflict situation and who faced the aftermath. Kolkata and nearby areas witnessed the events of partition very closely. Not only were the refugee and rehabilitation camps established here at the time of partition but people migrated here from erstwhile East Pakistan and from other border areas in search of employment and women from such families were part of this study.

Narrative interviewing was chosen as the main tool of data collection because it allowed respondents to provide narrative accounts of their lives and experiences the way they wanted to. The study used the interview method where data was collected using a structured interview schedule. This kind of interviewing is an attempt to empower the respondent, ensure their participation, and also to encourage them to find and speak in their own voices. This study focussed on the meanings attached to an individual (woman) experience and also, on the way those experiences are communicated to others. As a result, narratives provide an ideal medium for researching and understanding an individual living in a social context. The narratives do not simply provide evidence about individuals, but provide means to understand more about the broader culture shared by a community of individuals. Their narratives also give glimpses of the cultural framework within which individuals make sense of their lives.

Open-ended questions were framed that enabled to initiate the interview and also in putting the participants into a narrative frame of mind. These loosely framed questions gave the scope to the narrator as well as to the interviewer to engage in and build rapport. As qualitative researchers, we often work to achieve narratives as self-observation, in which participants move to a position of interest in remembering and telling their stories in a self-reflective manner.

### **3. Voices of Women**

Things change their meanings depending on who is looking, from where, and in what context. Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin describes humans as being “the witness and the judge” – which

means that we both see and assess or what educationist J. Krishnamurti says, “*Observer is the observed*”. It is this witnessing and judging that leads to different interpretations of the same event from different people. 4 interviewees were women and 1 man. There were mixed emotions while conducting these interviews. One can understand the ramifications of partition through the experience of these women. They were mostly homemakers and didn’t have the education nor the patriarchal setup that allowed them to work. The situation was different after the partition, this left them no other options but to work. The crisis situation called for work to fulfil their survival needs of proper food and shelter. The violence led to a massacre; many lost their families. women started working in sectors e.g. needlework, bidi rollers, sex workers, nurse, etc. Those who had some qualifications managed to find a better job, while some others worked towards completing their education to enter the employment sector. Some of the women also recounted how certain families of other religions were kind enough to provide clothes as well as shelter to them in this insane situation. It was noticed that some of these women were able to educate themselves even after marriage or became the breadwinners, this was all because the situation demanded it. while the others could not continue their studies due to different circumstances. These brave women were able to leave their houses when they chose to live rather than die. Some of them were able to bring their belongings along with them while the others carried only their new hopes and memories. According to Gargi Chakravarty “Too much focus on physical abuse of women which is valid and relevant but equally important to discuss ways in which uprooted women have faced the enormous challenge of rebuilding and reshaping their lives in alien condition”.

It shows how partition brought major class stratification in society. People already inhabiting present-day India were paranoid about migration, and the population started becoming dense. Especially in West Bengal, where the migration happened twice and still continuing. Economic hardships came with it, and migration made middle-class women work neck to neck with men. Somehow, most of the people interviewed come from the well-off section of society and weren’t as much affected as we have read off. The stories do not need to be spine-chilling to be recorded, the fact that we get to have a first-hand account of migrants is a big achievement itself for this research.

In Bengal, class stratification became evident with the division of Bangal and Ghoti. Ghoti are the people already inhabiting the Indian part of the territory or Western region of Bengal and Bangals are who migrated from East Bengal. Migrants were looked down upon; their dietary habits were changing with migration. They were feeding themselves on weeds and leaves which were considered inedible for Ghotis. The first interview was of Alpana Devi, who talks how the refugee used to cry in the streets for the leftover cooked rice water (this water contains essential nutrients), another interview with Gouri Devi, who recalls how they used to be amazed, how the Bangals didn't have a maid and frowned about it.

The refugees have crawled upward in society. Arati Devi, during her interview narrates how her father helped a refugee child with education, who later became a civil servant. People have tried to help each other in those tough situations like how Mr Asok and his family were migrated from East Bengal with the help of a Muslim man. His interview was also taken to get a more diverse opinion of the partition and how this man was passionately talking about his home in Shirajganj.

The first interviewee Alpana Devi turned 100 years this June. It was fortunate enough to record her understanding of partition and the difficulties her family faced. Her father was part of the Anushilam Smaity in Dhaka and they had meetings in her house. The fact that she could recall so many things was astounding. Though many who arrived didn't have such influential backgrounds, such as Bhabani Devi her family migrated from Faridpur and they were many people. Her father died early and it was all her mother who had to look after all her 10 children. Fortunately, her father lent some money to a man and he was quite diligent enough to pay her back which helped her buy a house and do all the regular things for a household.

All these interviewed women had their own course of situation during the partition, which makes such primary narratives important for contemporary History. Conducting interviews with these women made us realize something very unique. To articulate that we would like to quote Urvashi Butalia. Urvashi Butalia in the chapter "Gender and Nation: Some Reflections from India" which was part of the 2004 book *From Gender to Nation*, explains: "*When women narrate the nation, they do so rather differently than men. In men's narratives of the nation, women are often seen as symbols of national and*

*family honor. In women's narratives, the concerns are often different: the need to keep the family together, to contain grief, to put closures on unexplained deaths, to try and somehow contain the violence that such a situation inevitably unleashes."*

#### **4. Inference**

This paper was an attempt to work in the field of Oral History, highlighting its significance in the reconstruction of history from completely different perspective and context that has yet not been explored to its fullest. Though working with memories/personal narratives can be problematic, as the objectivity may be compromised. This study showed that a comprehensive history of an event can only be arrived at once when all its different dimensions are looked into. Despite the limitation in its scope, our study has raised certain pertinent questions and hence, it was an attempt to juxtapose official narratives with personal narratives and narratives of men with that of women, thus giving a holistic perspective.

Since none of them had been interviewed before, their level of enthusiasm to share their life stories were sky-high. At the same time, certain events emerged which made them go down the memory lane and relive the horrific moments. In their different journeys to India, they mention the wide array of problems faced like food shortage, diseases, riots, rape, loot, and so on. Some of the women also recounted how certain families of other religions were sane enough to provide clothes as well as shelter to them in this insane situation. We even notice how some of the women were able to educate themselves even after marriage or became the breadwinners, while the others could not continue their studies due to different circumstances. These brave women were able to leave their houses when they chose to live rather than die. Some of them were able to bring their belongings along with them while the others carried only their new hopes and memories.

At midnight of August 15th, 1947, Pandit Nehru made the historic speech in which he said – *"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom"*. One is forced to ask the question, did the tryst with destiny that our leaders had made long years ago include this crucial twist of history also? Was it a picture of a divided 'Hindustan' that had been the cherished vision of our freedom fighters?

After the partition, the newly formed governments were unequipped to deal with migrations at such a staggering magnitude. Massive violence and slaughter occurred on both sides of the border. The partition occurred with many visible effects like people losing a great part of their motherland, due to which they became refugees in a new country with no or minimal resources. The government tried to cater to many of these problems, but there were some hidden effects of the partition which went unattended by the government. The major effect is refugees' loss of identity. Both in Pakistan and India, the refugees were humiliated at the hands of the other residents, whether it was in their own native villages or on their way to a new place.

We come across different perspectives if we go through the official records of both countries, and ask the general public or the perspective of the women interviewed. Every perspective portrays a different aspect of the difficulties people had to face, particularly women. As mentioned before, it was important for women of a family to stay extra safe in such conditions to preserve the honor of the family. Some women choose to live rather than die, due to which their grandchildren were able to hear the true stories of the partition, first-hand.

Even though it has been seventy-eight years post-partition, the feeling of hostility, and pain is still raw and palpable. Furthermore, the partition of one country into two has left the present generations wondering what if the countries were not partitioned. What if they had friends in Pakistan and that was not an issue? What if their grandparents wished to see their ancestral homes before leaving for heaven's abode? We cannot undo what has happened, nor can we answer these questions so easily. But it is our responsibility as accountable humans to make sure that these atrocities and brutalities are not forced upon more innocents in contemporary times

#### **Pictures of Interviewees on Partition**



**Mrs. Gouri Chatterjee**



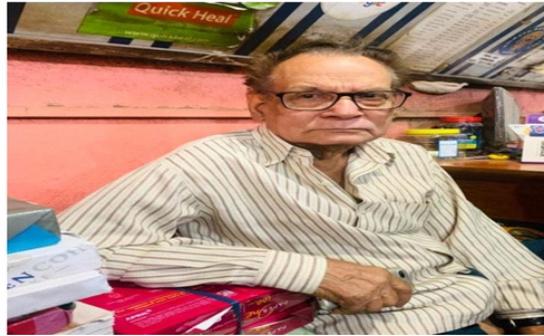
**Mrs. Alpana Dutta Mitra**



Mrs. Bhabani Devi



Mrs. Arati Bhanjachaudhuri



Sri Ashok Kumar Ray

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