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Author(s): Urvashi Butalia

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Community, State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India

Urvashi Butalia

Introduction

It is difficult to date historical events in any precise way for their beginnings and endings are not finite. The partition of India into two countries, India and Pakistan, is an event that is said to have taken place in August 1947, yet its beginnings go much further back into history and its ramifications have not yet ended. For many of us, who were first and second generation children after partition, the event lives on in our minds, not so much through historical records as through the tales that are told and retold, particularly in north Indian families, of the horror and brutality of the time, of the friends and relatives who continue to live across the border and of visits to ancestral homes, much of this creating a yearning for a—largely mythical—harmonious past where Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims lived happily together. This ideal is something that we continue to hold on to in the face of an increasingly communal present.

So major an event—descriptions of practically all communal strife hark back to it ('it was like partition again', 'we thought we had seen the worst of it during partition, yet ...')—but so inadequately recorded. The records we have look at partition mostly in terms of its constitutional history, the government to government debates, the agreements and disagreements between Nehru, Gandhi and Jinnah, the growing divide between the Congress and the Muslim League and so on. Hardly any attempt has been made to record the experiences of ordinary people on both sides of the border. Within a short space of time, sometimes overnight, millions of people were turned into refugees. How did they cope with this dislocation? What equipped them to deal with the trauma that must have accompanied this uprooting? How did they rebuild their lives? What help did the State provide? What part did such resettlement play in reshaping or changing the shape of the cities or villages where the refugees

had settled? What have been the implications of this large exodus or influx of refugees in terms of communal, sectarian strife? These, and a host of other questions, remain largely unanswered today. Other experiences remain even more unexplored: the experiences of women and children. In a larger work, researched jointly by Sudesh Vaid and myself, we have attempted a kind of people's history of partition. In this paper though, it is the story of women (and partially that of children) that I wish to start telling.¹

Questions about history

My own journey to this exploration has been a peculiar and circuitous one. For me, that route is as important as the exploration itself, and one which forms part of this project. I am not a historian, but I was led to this work through a process of political engagement with history, contemporary communalism, and activism within what we describe as the 'women's movement'. Like most Punjabis of my generation, I have been brought up on stories of partition, stories which have, in some way, inured many of us to the very horrors that they tell. The need to begin to understand partition in more depth only became real to me after the 1984 anti-Sikh riots² in which hundreds of Sikhs were brutally killed, and by the subsequent escalation of the Punjab problem. It was around this time that I also began to explore my own family history, which is also one of division, with one relative remaining behind in what became Pakistan, and opting to become a Muslim, and the reopening of family contact with him after more than 40 years.³ These, and other circumstances, convinced me of the need to attempt to understand how 'ordinary' people experienced this event—which is what we call history—in the hope that this would throw some light on the world we live in today. And while not wanting to valorize or romanticize either the notion of 'ordinary people', or that of 'raw experience' (for both are not unproblematic concepts), and without counterposing them to those represented in the disciplinary narratives of history, I do feel that such materials must form part of the complex whole we call history.⁴

There is obviously no way that history can incorporate all experiences at all times for much depends on who writes history,

when it is written, who is written about and so on. After 1984, it became clear to me, through the increasing communalization of our society, that certain kinds of historical explorations become important at particular times. Why had the history of partition been so incomplete, so silent on the experiences of the thousands of people it affected? Was this just historiographical neglect or something deeper: a fear, on the part of some historians, of reopening a trauma so profound, so riven with both pain and guilt, that they were reluctant to approach it? This had, for example, been true of the history of German Nazism. And could it be that just as, for many people, 1984 acted as a sort of catalyst, so also for many historians, the renewed experiences of communal strife brought to the surface personal and family narratives of 1947 in a new way, and thus forced many of them to come face to face with partition again, albeit in a different way? And did this new confrontation expand and stretch the definition of what we call history?⁵ These were some of the questions which led me to this work. I do not claim here to be writing a new, a different history, but simply to be making an exploration that is important to me, and that I find difficult to ignore. I am aware of the many pitfalls in using experience and memory as tools for historical reconstruction.⁶ Experience is mediated through historical understanding, and memory is subject to selection and mediation. People choose to remember certain things depending on who they are, how they are placed, their class, their economic and political circumstances, their gender and indeed their perception of the interviewer who might act as a catalyst for such memories.

Questions of feminism

A second route that has led me to this exploration was my work as a feminist and an activist in women's campaigns, which made me want to look specifically at women during partition. Why was it that we heard so little about them? How had they experienced the anguish of the division, the euphoria of the newly-forming nations? My assumptions were simple: firstly, that these questions had remained unasked because of the patriarchal underpinnings of history as a discipline. I also believed (and this view has been

considerably qualified since) that in times of communal strife and violence, women remain essentially non-violent and are at the receiving end of violence as victims, and that they are left with the task of rebuilding the community. These assumptions inform much historical writing on violence, as well as the thinking of feminist groups, as the two passages that follow—one taken from an activist pamphlet, the other from a book by an activist—testify:

I am a woman
I want to raise my voice
because communalism affects me

In every communal riot
my sisters are raped
my children are killed
my men are targeted
my world is destroyed
and then
I am left to pick up the pieces
to make a new life
It matters little if I am a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh
and yet I cannot help my sisters
for fear that I may be killed
or that they may be harmed.

Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed, women whose children and husbands are sacrificed in the name of national integrity and unity. And for every fire that is lit, it is women whose job it is to painfully build a future from the ashes.... We women will have no part of this madness, and we will suffer it no more.... Those who see their manhood in taking up arms, can be the protectors of no-one and nothing.⁷

... communal confrontations are normally engineered and led by men. Women are often primary victims, having to bear the brunt of the effects of communal violence, whether

it is rape or loss of male members of the family.... On the whole, women have rarely been active in communal riots and have a clear interest in avoiding them.⁸

When I began working on partition, soon after 1984, much of what I found fell conveniently into these patterns. It was only much later that a different kind of questioning began. In 1990, I participated, as part of an investigative team sent by the People's Union of Democratic Rights (PUDR) in a fact-finding mission into Hindu-Muslim riots in Bhagalpur where more than a thousand Muslims were killed. I began to look for evidence of my beliefs—that women are the worst victims, and have to also face the added threat of sexual assault. What I found was something rather different. In one instance of the killing of some 55 Muslims in urban Bhagalpur, a Hindu woman had tried to protect them, but had been stopped by her neighbours (all women) from even giving water to the dying and wounded, though they begged for it. In another case, we heard that while men broke down houses after an orgy of killing, the women assisted them, carried away the bricks, and washed away the blood. A third scenario was enacted in a largely Muslim village where a group of women almost turned violent when they suspected I was a Hindu. These few examples can today be multiplied many times over.⁹

It became clear to me that I needed to examine the many contending and complex forces that both act upon women and make them act in times of communal strife. For feminists, the task of retrieving women's agency has meant recovering strong, outspoken, powerful women who can then form part of our struggle for liberation. Indeed, in our anxiety to reclaim powerful women, we tend to regard every kind of agency as positive.¹⁰ The Muslim women who questioned and nearly attacked me in Bhagalpur, or the Hindu women who refused to allow water to be given to the dying and wounded, were certainly exercising a kind of agency. But could we, as feminists, see such agency as unproblematic and empowering? Were these women not allying themselves with the interests of their community, however patriarchal, male-centred and oppressive it may have been, and in doing so, acting against other women? If so, were they not reinforcing patriarchies within their communities? How then could we speak of 'empowerment'? These kinds of

questions led me to my work on partition, not with any expectation of finding answers, but in the hope that such questions would perhaps reveal some of the complexities of this major event. Further, that they would point to the ways in which those of us who are involved in feminist and civil rights activities and campaigns, could be better equipped for what is bound to be a long, and in today's deeply divided context, despairing struggle.

My essay is divided into three parts. The first looks at particular incidents that took place in Rawalpindi before partition, in March 1947. In the second section I look at the newly formed Nation-State and how it dealt with the question of women after partition, and in the third I examine, mainly through memoirs and personal accounts, the relationships between women who worked on behalf of the State with the State, and between them and the women they worked with. Throughout I will focus mainly on the related questions of agency and violence.

I: The Community

A resounding silence surrounds the question of women and partition. It may seem a truism, but bears remembering nevertheless, that at least half of the millions who were dislocated, killed, uprooted were women. A substantial portion of the task of reconstruction and rebuilding fell on them. Although not many women figured in the negotiations that preceded and followed the breakup of India into two countries, some (like Mridula Sarabhai, Premvati Thapar, Rameshwari Nehru and others) were prominently involved in the execution of many of the decisions. In addition thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed borders (estimates range from 29-50,000 Muslim women and 15-35,000 Hindu and Sikh women) were abducted, raped, forced to convert, forced into marriage, forced back into what the two States defined as 'their proper homes', torn apart from their families once during partition by those who abducted them, and again, after partition, by the State which tried to 'recover' and 'rehabilitate' them. Untold numbers of women, particularly in Sikh families, were killed ('martyred' is the term that is used) by their kinsmen in order to 'protect' them from being converted; perhaps an equivalent number killed themselves.

There are accounts of innumerable rapes, of women being stripped naked and paraded down streets, of their breasts being cut off, of their bodies being carved with the religious symbols of the other community.¹¹ And then there are other, less obvious, traumas: for many, particularly middle class women, the dislocation meant that the option of marriage, supposedly a part of 'normal' everyday society, was closed off, and they had to live alone, or as 'spinsters' with their families. Others were widowed, lost their homes and possessions, and were left to build lives on their own, for which many of them were ill-equipped. Several had to spend their lives in women's homes as permanent refugees. Many of these women are alive today, their stories still untold.

When we began our investigations—in a rather random way—we were led, first of all, to the incidents of March 1947 in a number of Sikh villages around Rawalpindi: Thamali, Thoa Khalsa, Doberan, Choa Khalsa, Kallar, Mator and others. Here, during an eight day period from 6 March to 13 March much of the Sikh population was killed (estimates suggest 4-5000 dead), houses were decimated, gurudwaras destroyed. In Thoa Khalsa, some 90 women threw themselves into a well in order to preserve the 'sanctity' and 'purity' of their religion, and to avoid conversion. A small community of survivors from these villages lives in Delhi and keeps alive the memory of these deaths by holding an annual remembrance service in the local gurudwara, in which the incidents of that week are recounted by survivors. The tales of the women's sacrifice occupy a prominent place in the ceremony. It is they who are seen to have upheld, by offering themselves up for death, and more particularly 'heroic' death, the 'honour' of the community. Here is one such account:

in Gulab Singh's haveli 26 girls had been put aside. First of all my father, Sant Raja Singh, when he brought his daughter, he brought her into the courtyard to kill her, first of all he prayed (he did *ardaas*) saying *sacche badshah*, we have not allowed your Sikhi to get stained, and in order to save it we are going to sacrifice our daughters, make them martyrs, please forgive us....

Then there was one man who used to do coolie work in our village. He moved forward and ... caught his [the

father's] feet and he said, *bhapaji*, first you kill me because my knees are swollen and I won't be able to run away and the Musalmaans will catch hold of me and make me into a Musalmaan. So my father immediately hit him with his *kirpan* and took his head off ... [then] Nand Singh Dheer, he said to my father, Raja Singa, please martyr me first because my sons live in Lahore ... do you think I will allow the Musalmaans to cut this beard of mine and make me go to Lahore as a sheikh. For this reason kill me. My father then killed him. He killed two and the third was my sister Maan Kaur ... my sister came, and sat in front of my father, and I stood there, right next to my father, clutching on to his *kurta* as children do, I was clinging to him ... but when my father swung the *kirpan* (*vaar kita*) perhaps some doubt or fear came into his mind, or perhaps the *kirpan* got stuck in her *dupatta* ... no one can say ... it was such a frightening, such a fearful scene. Then my sister, with her own hands moved her *dupatta* aside and then he swung the *kirpan* and her head and neck rolled off and fell ... there ... far away. I crept downstairs, weeping, sobbing and all the while I could hear the regular swing and hit of the *kirpan*s ... twenty five girls were killed, they were cut. One girl, my *taya's* daughter-in-law, who was pregnant ... somehow she didn't get killed and later my *taya's* son shot her with a pistol ... [but she] was saved. She told us, kill me, I will not survive ... I have a child in my womb ... she was wounded in the stomach, there was a large hole from which blood was flowing. Then my mother and my *phupad* sat together and Harnam Kaur said to them—her name was Harnam Kaur—she said give me some opium. We arranged for opium, people used to eat it those days ... in a ladle we mixed opium with saliva ... She said the *japji saab path* ... just as the *japji path bhog* took place so did her bhog. Completely as if she was prepared for death ... few people can do that ... she had death in her control and it was only when she wanted it that death took her. For nearly half an hour she did the *path* ... half an hour and then as she spoke

her last *shlok*, she also ended. She knew she would die ... so much control ... over death.¹²

There are any number of such stories, of both men and women—although the number of women is much larger than those of men—offering themselves up for death, or simply being killed, in an attempt to protect the ‘purity’ and ‘sanctity’ of religion. While most able-bodied men felt they could go out and fight, and kill if necessary, for the women and children, as well as for the old and weak, a ‘martyr’s’ death seemed to be the only option preferable to conversion to the ‘other’ religion. A second story relates to a different incident from the same village:

One more story from our village ... in the *morcha* when the military came ... no, the military did not come ... people were collecting ... when I went there there was one Hari Singh, he signalled to me to get out ... like this, get out, get out ... he was sitting like this and he was signalling to me that the Musalmaans had cut his tongue off, he had refused to become a Musalmaan. Then we left the *morcha* and we all went to the banks of the river where we collected. There was a well there ... at the well Sardarni Gulab Kaur ... in my presence said *sacche badshah*, let us be able to save our girls ... this incident of 25 girls of our household had already taken place [25 girls had been killed] ... so she knew that Sant Raja Singh had killed his daughters and other women of his household ... those that are left, we should not risk their lives and allow them to be taken away... so, at the well, after having talked among themselves and decided, they said, we are thirsty, we need water, so the Musalmaans took them to the well ... I was sitting with my mother, this incident of the 25 women had taken place, we had come out of the *morcha* ... so sitting at the well, Mata Lajwanti, who was also called Sardarni Gulab Singh [Kaur], sitting at the well, she said two words, she did *ardaas* in two words, saying *sacche badshah*, it is to save Sikhi that we are offering up our lives ... forgive us and accept our martyrdom ... and saying those words, she jumped into the well, and some eighty women followed her... they also jumped in. The well filled up completely...

one woman whose name is Basant Kaur, six children born of her womb died in that well, but she survived. She jumped in four times but the well had filled up ... she would jump in, then come out, then jump in again ... she would look at her children, at herself ... till today I think she is alive.¹³

For several days after these villages were surrounded and under attack, the people had been hiding out in what they felt were 'safe' places: large houses, and gurudwaras. Negotiations were current at the time for the release of the villagers in exchange for money and arms. In Thoa Khalsa in particular, even during the time that the women and children had been sheltering in the gurudwara, several had been killed by their families, who feared danger and conversion. Thus for the ninety women who threw themselves into a well, the step they took was one for which an 'atmosphere'—for want of a better word—had already been created by the community in the preceding week. This is the backdrop against which we need to see their decision. Basant Kaur, a grandmother today, was present in Thoa Khalsa when the women took the decision to drown themselves. She remembers the time, after the incident, when they were finally rescued by the military and taken to Rawat:

They brought us there. From there ... you know there was no place ... nothing to eat, some people were eating close by but where could I give the children anything from ... I had barely a few paise ... my elder son had a *duvanni* (two annas) with him, we thought we would use that ... my brother's children were also hungry ... but then they said the *duvanni* was no good (*khoti*) ... [weeping] such difficulties ... nothing to eat, we had to fill their stomachs ... today they would have been *ranis* ... so many of them, *jethanis*, children ... I was the youngest ... now I sit at home and my children are out working and I keep telling them these stories ... they are stories after all ... and you tell them and tell them until you lose consciousness¹⁴

Stories of this kind of mass suicide, or of women being killed by their own families, are legion. How do we read these accounts? Specifically, how can we read agency, victimhood, violence or indeed anything else, back into such accounts? What can we learn about

the nature of power in the particular villages we are looking at, for that understanding must reflect on the violence women faced. These questions are not easy to answer, not only because of the paucity of materials, but also because of the nature of the narratives that we do have, for we must ask, whose retelling are we listening to, and when? Whose imperatives have we brought to the discussion?

Let me, however, deal first with the question of victimhood. At one level the assumptions about women as victims are true enough: when we look at the women in Punjab during partition we see, quite clearly, the violence they suffered. Abduction and rape are part of this scenario, as I shall detail shortly, as is suicide. The statistics we have are horrifying: in Doberan 70 women were abducted, in Kahuta this figure was as high as 500, in Harial 40, in Tainch 30, in Bamali 105, in Rajar 95 and it is said that in Rawalpindi alone between 400 and 500 women were abducted.¹⁵ Even worse, abducted women were often sold from hand to hand and were ill used by their captors. Anis Kidwai records:

We have considerable evidence before us to show that 75 per cent of the girls are still (probably in 1949) being sold from one man to another. [These] girls of tender years have not been able to settle down anywhere, nor will they be able to settle down for many years. Their youth is being sold for a few thousand, and lustful men, having satisfied their lust for a while, begin to think of the monetary benefit that could come from their sale.¹⁶

But what of the women who took their own lives, or who 'offered' themselves up for death? Can we see them only as victims? Or did they play some part in the decision to take their own lives? Let us, in order to examine these questions, look at the particular context of Thoa Khalsa. The areas surrounding the village were under attack for eight days, from 6 March to 13 March, the day on which the mass drowning took place, and for these six days practically everyone in the village was aware of the discussions and negotiations that were going on. If we are to believe the survivors, the decision to drown was taken by the women themselves, and was spearheaded by Sardarni Gulab Kaur, otherwise known as Lajjawanti. It is true that most of the survivors we spoke to are male, but even in Basant Kaur's account, while she grieves over the loss

of lives, she does not question the decision of the women. Can we then surmise that the women of Thoa Khalsa were not mere victims but were acting upon a (mis)perceived notion of the good of their community? Did the suicides corroborate the ideology that the honour of the community lies in 'protecting' its women from the patriarchal violence of an alien community? The natural protectors by this reckoning are the men, who at this particular historical juncture, are unable to offer such protection. One can thus suggest that the women could well have consented to their own deaths, in order to preserve the honour of the community. There is here, as there must be in all such patriarchal 'consent' on the part of women, an element of choice. But, in any case, the 'decision' must have been one they felt 'compelled' to make because of the particular circumstances of the situation.

'Choice' after all is not simple to reconstruct, and it might be argued that my reading of its conflicted existence back into this incident is dictated more by my involvement in the contemporary discourse of feminism, than by the incident itself.¹⁷ Were women, for example, involved in any of the discussions that took place in the village? Or were they simply at the receiving end of decisions that had been taken by the men, even though both Basant Kaur and Bir Bahadur Singh—and indeed other accounts of this incident—seem to suggest that the decision to jump into the well was arrived at spontaneously after a discussion among the women? In the absence of any accounts from the women themselves we can perhaps go so far as to say that 'agency' and 'victimhood' are not simply opposed categories, and can be seen as operating simultaneously here. In instances like the events at Thoa Khalsa, precisely because the honour of the community seems to be at stake, a particular kind of agency on the part of women becomes celebrated as 'heroic'. As we shall see in the next section, a different kind of agency (where women attempt to act on their own behalf) becomes a subject for collective censorship, something to be covered by a veil of silence, and something that calls for the State to assume the role of the patriarch and the family. But here I want to look briefly at the question of violence.

I would like to suggest that the manner in which the 90 women of Thoa Khalsa 'chose' to die was no less violent, although certainly

different, from the generally visible violence that formed part of partition. But so patriarchal are notions of violence, that we only see it as relating to men. And so communalized have such notions become, that we see violence only as relating to the 'other', the 'aggressor'. This obscures several things: many women of Hindu and Sikh communities must have seen their own men as being perpetrators of violence against them, for just as there were 'voluntary' suicides, so also there were mass murders. That is, women faced violence from both their own families and their own communities. In this context we can see why the danger of conversion loomed so large for various communities: conversion, rape and forcible marriage—the fate that in all likelihood awaited many women—meant a violation of community honour and purity, which, displaced onto the bodies of women, became the pretext for the killing of the women, or for their suicide. (In the next section, which deals with the State, I will attempt to explore another, and different, dimension of this question.)

The ramifications of acts such as the mass drowning, particularly in terms of their symbolic and memorial importance, are, if anything, much wider and deeper than those of what one might, rather cynically, term the 'routine' violence of communal strife—the killing and looting and so on. In many of our interviews we found that women had been quite active in taking up arms and fighting. For example, they formed part of the Muslim League National Guard, which was said to have been instrumental in the Rawalpindi killings. But, as we can see in the remembrance rituals for the Thoa Khalsa incident, for men, the potential for violence on the part of their own women, or their agency in this respect, has to be contained and circumscribed. They cannot therefore be named as violent beings, as agents with a capacity for violence. This is why their actions are narrated as sanctified by the tones of heroic, even otherworldly, valour. Such narratives are meant to keep women within their *aukat* (their ordained boundary), which is one that defines them as non-violent. Their actions are thus re-located into the comfortable symbolic realm of sacrifice for the community, victimhood and even non-violence. To actively remember these women as symbols of the honour of the family and community is then also to divest them of both violence and agency.

II: *The State*

Let me begin with a newspaper report (*The Statesman*, 15 March 1947) which relates to the incident above.

The story of 90 women of the little village of Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpindi district ... who drowned themselves by jumping into a well during the recent disturbances has stirred the imagination of the people of Punjab. They revived the Rajput tradition of self-immolation when their menfolk were no longer able to defend them. They also followed Mr Gandhi's advice to Indian women that in certain circumstances even suicide was morally preferable to submission.

About a month ago, a communal army armed with sticks, tommy guns and hand grenades surrounded the village. The villagers defended themselves as best they could ... but in the end they had to raise the white flag. Negotiations followed. A sum of Rs 10,000 was demanded ... it was promptly paid. The intruders gave solemn assurance that they would not come back.

The promise was broken the next day. They returned to demand more money and in the process hacked to death 40 of the defenders. Heavily outnumbered, they were unable to resist the onslaught. Their women held a hurried meeting and concluded that all was lost but their honour. Ninety women jumped into the small well. Only three were saved—there was not enough water in the well to drown them all.

This report of the Thoa Khalsa incident testifies to the valorization of one kind of violence during partition, which, as I discussed in the previous section, continues to be lionized today via the memorial rituals performed in gurudwaras. Another kind of violence, however, became a cause for State concern and was treated rather differently. Figures vary widely, but it was said at the time that some 50,000 Muslim women had been abducted in India, and about 33,000 non-Muslim women in Pakistan. Families reported the loss of these women, and both States had to respond and set in motion a machinery to trace and recover them. But, as we shall see, things were not so simple. On 6 December 1947—a bare three and a half

months after partition—the two newly formed nations came to an agreement on the question of ‘recovering’ those women who had been abducted, and ‘rehabilitating’ them in their ‘native’ places. This vocabulary of recovery, rehabilitation, and homeland was actually a euphemism for returning Hindu and Sikh women to the Hindu and Sikh fold, and Muslim women to the Muslim fold. Both countries agreed that this was what had to be done. Even for a nation like India that defined itself as secular, then, the natural place/homeland for women was defined in religious, indeed communal terms. We can thus detect a disjunction between its professedly secular rhetoric (although secular was also really understood in religious terms) and its actively communal (for which read religious) identification of women. Women who had been taken away by the ‘other’ community, had to be brought back to their ‘own’ community and their ‘own’ homeland—the concepts of belonging and otherness were of course defined for women by the men of the respective countries. They themselves did not have a choice.

The agreement arrived at between the two nations was known as the Inter Dominion Treaty, which was later enacted as an Act of Parliament, the former being possibly among the first agreements between the otherwise hostile nations. Mridula Sarabhai was said to have been the moving spirit behind this Treaty (she had submitted a 14-page background note on it to Liaquat Ali Khan) as she was particularly concerned about the fate of abducted women. The terms of the treaty were clear: women on both sides of the border who had been abducted were to be forcibly recovered and restored to their families. Some of the clauses were as follows:

1. Every effort must be made to recover and restore abducted women and children within the shortest time possible.
2. Conversions by persons abducted after March 1947¹⁸ will not be recognized and all such persons MUST be restored to their respective Dominions. *The wishes of the persons concerned are irrelevant and consequently no statements of such persons should be recorded before Magistrates.* [Emphasis added]¹⁹
3. The primary responsibility for recovery of abducted persons will rest with the local police who must put full effort in this matter.

Good work done by police officers in this respect will be rewarded by promotion or cash awards.²⁰

4. MEOs [Military Evacuation Officers] will render every assistance by providing guards in the transit camps and escorts for the transport of recovered persons from the Transit camp to their respective Dominions.
5. Social workers will be associated actively with the scheme. They will look after the camp arrangements and receive the abducted persons in their own Dominions. They will also collect full information required about persons to be recovered and supply it to the Inspector General of Police and the local Superintendent of Police.
6. The District Liaison Officers (DLOs) will set up Transit camps in consultation with the local Deputy Commissioners and the public workers and supply information regarding abducted persons to be recovered.
7. Coordination between the different agencies working in the district will be secured by a weekly conference between the Superintendent of Police, and local MEO, the DLO and the Deputy Commissioner. At this meeting progress achieved will be reviewed and every effort will be made to solve any difficulty experienced.²¹

Although the agreement carefully and consistently refers to 'persons' (except in Clause 1), it is the fate of *women* that is being discussed here. This is quite clear from the activity that followed, where large-scale rescue efforts were mounted to locate and rehabilitate women. Little attention was paid to men in this regard, presumably because they were able to make their own decisions. I have been able to find no record at all of similar recovery of men, and although there was some discussion on children (clearly they complicated the picture considerably) it was fairly cursory, which is ironic given that they were among the foremost victims of such dislocation, violence and trauma. Anis Kidwai does mention that some sort of pressure was brought to bear on Muslim families in Delhi to move to Pakistan, but this was quite different from legislation that was passed to address the case of women. Later, in 1948, the two countries reached an agreement that specified the terms of recovery

in each dominion, and ordinances were issued in both countries. In India the ordinance was to remain in force till 1950, at which time, because the work of recovery was still continuing, a Bill was moved in Parliament on December 15. The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill took in PEPSU (the Patiala and East Punjab States Union), the United Provinces of East Punjab and Delhi and the United State of Rajasthan. The Bill, which came in for considerable debate in Parliament, expanded upon the clauses of the 1947 Inter Dominion Treaty.

The key officers charged with the responsibility of rescuing abducted women were themselves women: Mridula Sarabhai was put in overall charge of the operation and assisting her (or otherwise involved in the operation) were Rameshwari Nehru, Sushila Nayyar, Premvati Thapar, Bhag Mehta, Kamlaben Patel, Damyanti Sahgal, and others. These social workers were assisted by the police of the country they worked in, including one AIG, two DSPs, 15 inspectors, 10 sub-inspectors and six ASIs.²² Every time a rescue operation was to be mounted, a woman officer was required to go along, accompanied by the police and others. In the eyes of the State, women were better placed to handle the delicacy of the situation, and to 'persuade' those who were reluctant to give up their new homes and to return to the national-parental fold. Persuasion was clearly a euphemism, since the agreement had categorically stated that the women's wishes were of no consequence. Later, Clauses 2 (8) and (9) of the Act quite clearly stated that women could be kept in camps and that this could not be questioned in court, nor could they, if they did not agree with their 'rescue', bring any legal action against the State or its officers. The feeling that women would be better qualified to handle such a 'delicate' task was also shared by some of the key women like Padmini Sen and Mridula Sarabhai who insisted that women should be sent to rescue women.

That the State was fully aware of the delicacy of the task is indicated by the following: the Sixteenth Meeting of the Partition Council had decided, in early 1948, that both dominions should take charge of refugees in their areas and that no refugees should be forced to return to their own areas unless and until it was clear that complete security had been restored and the State was ready to resume responsibility for them. But for women they said:

The Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation has set up a Fact Finding Branch in consultation with the Red Cross, an Enquiry and Search Committee with the special objective of tracing abducted women. Already 23,000 names have been given to Pakistan. For the recovery of abducted women the government depends at present on the active assistance of military authorities, district authorities, women and social workers and prominent persons. Concerted efforts continue to be made for the recovery of abducted and forcibly converted persons. On December 6 a conference of both Dominions was held at Lahore and it was decided that both Dominions should make special efforts to recover these women. More than 25,000 enquiries about abducted women who are in Pakistan have been received by the Women's Section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation ... nearly 2,500 have already been rescued ... the main obstruction facing our rescue parties today is the fear harboured by the majority of abducted Hindu women that they may not be received again into the fold of their society, and the Muslims being aware of this misgiving have played upon the minds of these unfortunate women to such an extent that many of them are reluctant to come away from their captors back to India. It has been mutually agreed between the two Dominions that in such cases they should be forcibly evacuated.²³

Forcible evacuation, however, was not that easy. Sometimes the women themselves resisted—out of fear of a second dislocation, a repeat of the trauma, another uprooting, or of non-acceptance, or because many of them were actually happy and settled in their new situations. Some others were happy to return. Ironically, the women officials who were seen to be well suited to persuade reluctant women to return, understood only too well the fear and dilemmas faced by those they were 'recovering', and over a period of time began to question the nature and necessity of the enterprise. Many social workers such as Kamlaben Patel and Damyanti Sahgal used their positions to help women who did not want to be thus rescued. Anis Kidwai, who worked as a social worker in Muslim refugee

camps in Delhi sums up the dilemma of the abducted women poignantly:

In all of this, sometimes a girl would be killed or she would be wounded. The good '*maal*' [goods] would be shared among the police and the army, the second rate stuff would go to everyone else. And then these girls would go from one hand to another and then another and after several hours would turn up in hotels to grace their decor, or they would be handed over to police officers in some places to please them. And every single one of these girls, because she had been the victim of a *saazish* [conspiracy], she would begin to look upon her 'rescuer' perforce as an angel of mercy who had, in this time of loot or killing, rescued her, or fought for her, and brought her away. And when this man would cover her naked body (whose clothes had become the loot of another thief) with his own loincloth or *banian*, when he would put these on her, at that moment she would forget her mother's slit throat, her father's bloody body, her husband's trembling corpse—she would forget all this and instead thank the man who had saved her. And why should she not do this? Rescuing her from the beast this good man has brought her to his home. He is giving her respect, he offers to marry her. How can she not become his slave for life?

And it is only much later that realization dawns that among the looters this man alone could not have been the innocent, among the police just he could not have been the gentleman. But all were tarred with the same brush. Each one had played with life and death to 'save the honour' of some young woman, and thousands of mothers and sisters must be cursing these supposedly 'brave men' who had abducted their daughters.

But by the time this realisation came, it was too late. Now there was nowhere for her to go: by this time she is about to become a mother, or she has been through several hands. After seeing so many men's faces, this daughter of Hindustan, how will she ever look at the faces of her parents, her husband?²⁴

The women's fear was real. Their non-acceptance by Hindu families became a major problem: suddenly the State, so quick to come forward with its 'recovery' was at a loss about the re-integration of these women into the new nation, which became, in the eyes of the State, almost synonymous with their families. Anis Kidwai, Kamlaben Patel, Damyanti Sahgal, all three of whom worked with abducted women, indicate this. Several factors were at work here: families had filed complaints about missing relatives, particularly missing women, but between the filing of complaints and the actual recovery, months, sometimes years, would pass. In the interim the women would often have married, or become mothers, or simply settled in their new homes. Anis Kidwai wrote: 'But now a different problem arose. The majority of the girls did not want to go back'.²⁵ The dilemma for their families was a different one. Some of the women were now 'soiled', they had lived with, married, borne children to the men of the 'other' community, they had therefore 'diluted' the 'purity' of the community, how could they now be taken back? And what was to be done with the visible results of their impurity, their sexuality—their children?

So acute was the problem that both Gandhi and Nehru had to issue repeated appeals to Hindus, asking them not to refuse to take the women back into the family fold. In a public appeal made in January 1948 Nehru said: 'I am told that sometimes there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women [who had been abducted] in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take up. 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'.²⁶ And Gandhi said: 'I hear women have this objection that Hindus are not willing to accept back the recovered women because they say that they have become impure. I feel this is a matter of great shame. That woman is as pure as the girls who are sitting by my side. And if any one of those recovered women should come to me, then I will give them as much respect and honour as I accord to these young maidens'.²⁷

For several years afterwards—indeed well into 1955, and up to 1957—the fate of these women was of considerable concern to the two governments. Legislative Assembly records for the years following 1947 show an ongoing concern with and debate about how

many women had been rescued, where the largest number of recoveries had taken place, why other places had done badly and so on. Interestingly, although it was women who were key to the actual recovery operations, the questions were raised mainly by men. The fact that fewer Hindu women were recovered from Pakistan than Muslim women from India became a matter of great concern and figures on how many had been recovered, or concern about the slow rate of recovery, came up often. For example, in answer to a question in Parliament the following figures were given: from April 1951 to the end of January 1952, 1703 recoveries had been made in India as against 629 in Pakistan.²⁸ Most of the recoveries, however, had been carried out in the first two years: till December 1948 some 12,000 women had been recovered from India and 6000 from Pakistan. This disparity in numbers was a cause of great concern in Parliament and came up for repeated discussion: why were fewer of 'our' women being rescued and more of 'theirs'? Of course both 'ours' and 'theirs' were understood only in religious terms.

In the Parliamentary discussion that followed the presenting of the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Bill—which later became an Act—one Shri J. J. Kapoor from Uttar Pradesh said:

I extend to this Bill my wholehearted support and I congratulate the great humanitarian consideration which has actuated it.... For what could be considered to be of greater humanitarian utility than the work of restoring abducted children to the lap of weeping parents and restoring abducted sisters to loving wives and abducted wives to pining husbands? ... no greater sin and no greater crime was perhaps committed than the one relating to the abduction of innocent children and women, and it must be our sacred duty to restore abducted persons to their original families irrespective of the period of abduction.... There are, however, one or two things to which I would like to draw the attention of the honourable Minister. One of them is that Uttar Pradesh seems to me to have been dragged within the purview of this Bill because in the chart that has been supplied to us by the government, I find that during the period commencing from 1st January 1951 right up to this date, there has not been a single case of any abducted

person having been recovered in U.P. Not only that, even in 1950 there were only two cases. Thus it does not appear to be necessary at all to tarnish the fair name of U.P.²⁹

In the ensuing discussion further figures were traded. Another M.P. (this time from West Bengal) mocked Kapoor's concern about 'geographical considerations', while Guha, also from West Bengal, asserted: 'abduction is one of the most abominable offences a man can commit and in the matter of honour of women, there cannot be any question of religion or nationality'.³⁰ And yet, these were the very questions that dictated the nature of the whole enterprise: questions of religion and nationality. The women were Hindus and Muslims and they had to be brought back to their Hindu and Muslim nations (this was complicated by Muslim women from Kashmir, which India saw as part of its territories). They had no legal recourse and their rights as citizens of a State that was, at that very time, declaring itself to be opposed to discrimination on grounds of sex or religion, were non-existent.

Notions of honour as defined by the community and family often paralleled those defined by the State. For communities and families, the women were seen as taking upon themselves the task of preserving community and racial honour, and honour was understood as a function both of the mind—which is why the biggest danger was forcible conversion—and the body, for after conversion would follow sexual congress with the male of the 'other' community. In many instances women themselves internalized these ideas, which could be one reason for the mass suicides. While many women did not undertake to similarly uphold the honour of the nation (or if they did, we have no record of it), the State itself invested them with this attribute, and therefore their rescue or recovery was seen as a 'humanitarian' task, an 'honourable' enterprise and so on. Moreover, it was an enterprise which allowed the State to recover, and claim as its 'own', the woman's body, and thus to assert its (the State's) legitimacy. The interests of the patriarchal family and the patriarchal State converged in their perception of women's place in the larger community.

But there were also differences in how the State and the community approached the question of women. While for the community a woman's sexual purity as well as her community

and/or religious identity were both important, for the State her religious identity was equally crucial. The State was committed to rescuing women who were already in a state of sexual 'impurity', having often lived with their captors, and it faced the difficulty of persuading reluctant families to take their women back. Hence Gandhi's and Nehru's exhortations to families to accept their sisters and daughters back. These were not the only such pleas: the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation is said to have issued a pamphlet which quoted Manu in order to suggest that a woman who had had sex with someone other than her husband became purified after three menstrual cycles, and could then be taken back. Similarly, we were told in one of our interviews that stories were published which openly claimed that Sita had had sex with Ravana, and that despite this she remained pure.

The State did not, of course, enter into the task of recovery entirely on its own. Just as families filed reports of missing relatives, so also they recorded missing women. Many of the reports were filed by men, but, somewhat paradoxically, later it was these men who often refused to take women back. The enormity of numbers acted as pressure on the State to take up the task of recovery. Interestingly enough, although both countries traded figures to see who had succeeded in flushing out more women and 'restoring' them to their 'families' (the word often became synonymous with nation), there was no disagreement between them on the necessity of the task, although often their functionaries felt differently. We have seen some of the ambivalence in the attitude of the women social workers. Kamlaben records another ambiguity: often hefty Sikhs would come outside camps and weep, asking that their women, Muslim women whom the State had given back to their original families, be restored to them. The functionaries would respond that they were only doing their jobs, which they would lose if they did not return the women to their rightful homes.

If these were the problems posed by abducted women, the children (on whom I touch only briefly here) born of their union with men of the 'other' community posed quite another. Throughout this paper I have dealt only with experiences from one side of the border, and largely with the experiences of Sikh and Hindu women. For the Sikh and Hindu communities, and indeed here they had clear

support from the State, the children born of these unions somehow posed bigger problems than the women. The women could be, in many ways, 'purified'—because they had been forced into their situations—and brought back into the family, religious and national folds, but a child of a Muslim father and Hindu mother was a more difficult issue. In the debates on this subject, suggestions were made that such children should be treated as war babies and left behind in the country in which they were born. Kamlaben says that she and others argued that where war babies were concerned, it was the mothers who stayed behind after soldiers left. Other solutions were then suggested: infants could come along with women to the camps, but if their families objected, the children would have to stay behind in the camps and the social workers would have to find homes for them. Older children were meant to stay with their natural fathers, and unborn children in the womb would clearly have to be aborted. Damyanti Sahgal points out that abortion—'safaya' [cleaning] she calls it (and in Jullundur it was known as 'medical treatment')—was taken up by the State, and specific hospitals were targeted (she names Kapur hospital in Delhi). These hospitals, according to her, made vast amounts of money on such 'cleaning' operations. The project was financed out of a special budget put aside by the State, and this at a time when abortion was not yet legal in India.³¹ Kamlaben Patel corroborated this. She said that pregnant women were taken to Jullundur where they were kept for periods of up to three or four months—enough time for an abortion—and given what she referred to as 'medical treatment'.³²

A Lahore conference discussed the problem of children born of mixed unions. It was generally felt that it would be better to leave them with their fathers. However, at Mridula Sarabhai's insistence, women were allowed to take their children with them to Jullundur where they would keep them for 15 days, after which they could decide whether they wanted them or not. Anis Kidwai tells the story of a young woman who could not decide: eventually she left the child with Kidwai, making her promise that she would look after it and keep the mother informed of where the child was placed. But, Kidwai writes, although they made such promises, they were seldom able to keep them.³³

Why did the question of the recovery of women become so crucial to the Indian State as well as to families? Many issues were at stake here: for men, who in more 'normal' times would have seen themselves as protectors of women, the fact that many of 'their' women had been 'abducted' spelt a kind of collapse, an emasculation of their agency. Unequal to the task of recovery, they now had to hand their prerogatives over to the State, the patriarch of the new national family. The State in turn provided coercive backing for restoring and reinforcing patriarchal norms within the family. For the post-colonial, deeply contested, fragile and vulnerable State, the rescue operation was an exercise in establishing its legitimacy. Thus, both for the legitimation of the State and for the restoration of the community, the recovery of women and other related questions of gender and sexuality became crucial.

What about the women who resisted, who did not want to return? Can we suggest that in this extraordinary situation, removed from the simultaneously coercive and supportive context of their communities, and often of their class, they were trying to exercise their own will, their own agency? Unlike the women of Thoa Khalsa, these abducted women were in a sense in a 'no-man's land', and thus when they acted or attempted to resist being restored to their original families, they were exercising a very different kind of agency. The silence that surrounds these issues is part of the general silence on the pain and trauma of partition. At the same time the silence about women's experiences specifically reminds us that at stake here are not only questions of State authority, but also questions of identity, of agency, of religion and of sexuality. As far as the Indian State was concerned, women were defined in terms of their religious identities, an unusual stance for a supposedly secular State to take. And the children of mixed unions, visible reminders of crossed boundaries, did not fit easily into categories of Hindu or Muslim. The women however saw themselves differently—as members of a community, as Sikh or Hindu, or Muslim, as mothers, as women—and acted upon these different identities. It is to the women themselves that I now want to turn.

III: *The Women*

How do we begin to understand the experiences of these women and children which have remained shrouded in silence? What tools we have at hand to begin this exploration? There are very few official records or facts and figures that are available. Indeed, what we are dealing with lies beneath and beyond facts and figures, in the subtexts that are personal diaries, memoirs and accounts of survivors, and which add an entire dimension to official history. While these voices are not more sacrosanct than those of official records, they are equally important. In any case, apart from a few sporadic discussions on the fate of the abducted women, most records are quite silent on their experiences. We know little about the women who took their own lives, or about those who 'offered' themselves up for sacrifice, and of how they arrived at such decisions. We know just as little of how many women actually wanted to be 'rescued', how many were ready to face a second trauma or dislocation. We do not know what their feelings were about the larger discourses that defined the spaces around them, the discourse of nationhood, the State, or of 'freedom'. Were they aware of these issues at all? Did they feel involved in them? Their stories can today only be recovered, and then too partially, through the accounts of survivors and through contemporary memoirs and writings.

But such accounts are also incomplete: we know for example, that the violence of partition also included the sexual assault and rape of thousands of women. Many were killed, thousands were abducted and untraceable, there were any number of voluntary and forced abortions, and separations from the children born of rape. Accounts of survivors mention these details only in a fairly general sort of way, for they are difficult to articulate particularly because of the stigma they continue to carry. Women will not speak of them, nor will families, although the accounts of women's 'heroism' can be freely elaborated. So while this paper records stories of heroism, it must remain silent on stories of humiliation and horrific suffering, for no one speaks of them.

What of women who acted on behalf of the State and went into both countries to rescue their abducted sisters? How did they feel? We are fortunate here to have some written accounts and memoirs, and some interviews. Kamlaben Patel, one of the officers who worked under Mridula Sarabhai (who had overall charge of the rescue operations) said that she felt 'sandwiched', caught between being an officer of the government and being a woman who felt for the women she was rescuing. But, she went on to say, 'I worked as a woman, not Muslim or Hindu, but as a woman and it was as a woman that I felt for other women—it didn't matter if she was Hindu or Muslim, if she had been abducted, she had to be returned to her relatives. It was because of this that sometimes I had to fight with my own people'.³⁴ But when she learnt from Mridula Sarabhai and Rameshwari Nehru that some women were refusing to return to their 'homes', that they had even changed their religion, Kamlaben said that she 'found this difficult to believe. This conversion should not be considered conversion and such marriages as they have made should not be considered marriages.... today it is necessary that those women who have been forcibly abducted, should be taken away from the 'paraya' [other] men who have made them slaves in 'paraya' houses and they should be brought to their 'real' homes'.³⁵ So although Kamlaben clearly felt sympathetic towards the women she was rescuing, she did not seem to question the notions of 'paraya' and 'real' homes which the State had created.

Anis Kidwai, who worked in relief camps at Delhi, felt differently. She writes: 'the reader will find it difficult to understand how I felt as a woman on hearing about these hapless women who did not want to return. I kept trying to convince everyone that they needed to think coolly and calmly, to understand why it was that these women did not want to return. But no one was willing to listen'.³⁶ On the whole, it seems as if more Muslim families were willing to take women back, perhaps because Islam does not have the same strict codes of purity and pollution that Hinduism has. But there were some Muslim men who were reluctant; Anis Kidwai points out that they would grind their teeth and their faces would fill up with religious pride and righteousness: 'Shame on these women, they would say. But had they ever tried to understand the predicament

of these women: an oppressed woman, one who has always lived in purdah, one who has, before this, not looked at a man other than her father and her brothers, and who now believes herself to be a loose woman, a bad woman, because she has lived with another man for months, she has lost her honour... who will take her back?³⁷

For the State, the rescue operations were premised on the assumption that women of a particular religion should be restored into the fold of that religion. Anis Kidwai, however, questions how much meaning religion could have for women, particularly some Muslim women: 'And what does she know of religion anyway? At least men have the opportunity to go to the mosque, and pray, but the women, Muslims have never allowed them to stand up. The moment they see young women, their eyes become full of blood: run away, they tell them, go off. What are you doing here ... the culprit is within themselves, but it is the women they make run away: if they come into the *masjid* the whole *namaz* is ruined. If they try to listen to the last call of the month of *ramzan*, everyone's attention is distracted ... if they go into a *quawali*, the sufis will turn their attention from god to the world'.³⁸

Interestingly, it is only in the accounts of these women, Kamlaben Patel, Anis Kidwai, Damyanti Sahgal, that we find something approaching an understanding and sympathy for the dilemmas of the women who were abducted, or who left voluntarily, and were reluctant to return. And yet, their own stances vary: Kamlaben, for example, speaks sometimes as an 'Indian', a 'nationalist', at other times as a 'Hindu', sometimes as a 'social worker', and sometimes, by her own definition, as a 'woman', this last category often subsuming all others. Anis Kidwai also speaks of how she felt as a woman separately from how she felt as an Indian, and Damyanti's articulation is also similar: 'of course we felt for the women we were flushing out—sometimes we had to use the police to bring them out. But what we were doing had to be done'.³⁹ In spite of their sympathy for the abducted women, all of them continued to act on behalf of the State, and chose not to question why national honour, on both sides of the divide, was staked so powerfully on women. For both countries it seemed almost as if the loss of women to the 'other' religion meant more than any other loss. This feeling seemed to be shared by both men and women. Kamlaben tells the

story of the women's insistence in parliament that they be allowed to be part of the search committees, and yet does not really question the rationale for the State's concerted attempts at rescuing the women. She recounts how the two sides (or rather, men on the two sides) perceived this:

women were exchanged for women, politically they were recovered and exchanged, the fewer we give away from here, the more popular we will be; our political workers also had the same feeling, because the fewer you give away the more popular you will be in Punjab and the more your status would go up, and the same thing would happen here.⁴⁰

Kamlaben goes on to describe a particular case in court (all disputed cases had to come up before a Tribunal and Kamlaben appeared on behalf of India in this one) which relates to seven women and their children who did not want to be rescued. Kamlaben's Pakistani counterpart Rabiya Karigar, also a woman, came along to offer her moral support 'as a woman'. This is Kamlaben's account:

I swore on the Koran and then I presented our Inter-Dominion agreement saying we are working under this and we don't only take women from here but also from India and send them here. Then suddenly there was a shout from the back benches ... they shouted, we don't want them but we don't want to give you our women. In court the Christian lawyer who was arguing on our behalf had a resolution passed against him and was boycotted. The judge then said the agreement was nothing but a piece of paper and that unless this could be turned into law they had no use for it. Immediately there was a *habeas corpus* on seven people and we had to leave, but you know Amritsar was only an hour and a half away, and news travels very fast and by the time we got there, there were four or five *habeas corpus* there on several women so that they shouldn't be allowed to go back ... everyone kept going on about fewer women coming from there, more going from here. They would say, '*chale gaye heere, aa gaye kheere*' [the diamonds have gone, only cucumbers return].⁴¹

She points out that for disputed cases there was a tribunal, but that the two Superintendents of Police on either side would quarrel:

you see, we had a tribunal for disputed cases of Muslims who claimed to be Hindu and vice versa. There were psychological reasons for this. It was very difficult for me to say she is a Muslim and should be sent back to Pakistan, our SP could get very angry, he would feel this was politics, and I would say, no, if this was politics, we would not be doing it here, we'd do it with Muslims in our own country. If we have four crore Muslims in our country, what do we want with 400? If there are four crore Muslims in India it's because of progress. Those who have settled and made up their houses, we're not planning to pull them out, but those who have been abducted, we have to shelter them. I would say, I'm not playing politics, I'm not a Muslim or a Hindu, or a Christian. I'm a woman and it's because of this that I'm doing what I'm doing.⁴²

There is irritation here at the objectification of women, but there is also pride at the 'largeness' of India which can have 'four crore Muslims'. In spite of the understanding, sympathy and anguish women like Kamlaben felt at the fate of the abducted women, they aided the entire rescue operation mounted by a patriarchal state, thus participating in its continuing violence towards them. Their consent is then similar to the kind of consent given to the violence of patriarchal ideas by both men and women in incidents such as the mass suicide by drowning discussed earlier.

Apart from the notions of honour and virtue that provided the rationale for the rescue operations, there were also more material considerations. One particular story, again culled from personal memoirs and newspaper accounts, relates to a Laila-Majnu like story which became a legend in Pakistan. A young Muslim woman, Zainab, was sold to one Buta Singh, a peasant from Amritsar district. Buta Singh married her, they fell in love and had two children, both young girls. For several years after her disappearance, the girl's relatives, mainly aunts and uncles who lived on land contiguous to her family's, made efforts to trace her. Finally, six years after her 'abduction' she was traced. She refused to return, but the family wanted her to marry their son in order to keep control of

the family property which might otherwise have been taken over by the state. Finally, she was forcibly taken away, and she took her younger child with her. Buta Singh then made desperate attempts to get to Pakistan, so much so that he was suspected of being a spy. Finally, he converted to Islam and found his way to his wife's village. He discovered that Zainab had been married off to her cousin. The case came up before the Tribunal. Buta Singh was confident that his wife, who had time and again declared herself to be happy with him, and who had been forced to go back, would stand by him. But in court Zainab denied Buta Singh and gave his child back to him. The lovelorn and bereft man then committed suicide, and it was only later that a persistent journalist (a woman), managed to get a confession out of Zainab that she had been coerced into rejecting Buta Singh. At stake here, on both sides, was property. Buta Singh's own family in East Punjab did not want him to marry and were happy when Zainab was taken away, because they did not want a fragmentation of their property. And Zainab's family wanted her back for the same reasons.⁴³ What, one wonders, had 'religion' and 'homeland' to do with the lives of these two young people ?

Conclusion

Perhaps the most difficult part of this exercise is to draw all the different threads together into a conclusion. As I have said at the beginning, my intention here was to pose particular questions, rather than to provide answers. For me, although the root of these questions is located in 1984, they became most urgent in 1990, during the Bhagalpur investigation that I have referred to earlier. A different, though analogous, set of questions came up in another such investigation, once again for the People's Union for Democratic Rights. In 1989 a group of women, many of them in their sixties, went on strike outside the house of the then Home Minister, Buta Singh, demanding an increase in their pension. Many of these women were refugees from the time of partition, they had spent much of their lives in camps, many had been widowed, perhaps some had even been 'rescued' although no one spoke of this. Now, close to retirement age, they were demanding of the State the right

to a pension that would enable them to live with dignity. This same State had continued, albeit in an arbitrary sort of way, to act as the stable patriarch for these women, providing them with work in its sewing production centres. Late in their lives, having been rendered homeless, alone and widowed by partition, most of them had no other family to turn to but the State. In this strike, then, was expressed a different kind of political and collective agency, ironically directed against the State that had at once been quite coercive and violent towards them.⁴⁴

An interest in history, and an involvement in civil liberties and women's movements formed the starting points for this exercise. In the process I discovered how difficult it is to talk in generalized terms about women, history, the question of agency, of identity, of the meaning of violence, without being aware of how identities are contextually dictated, and often both overlapping and conflictual. As my work developed, it became clear from the accounts of Partition that women often play out multiple and overlapping identities. Thus the women who committed mass suicide could have done so out of fear of rape; equally, they could have been acting, at that particular point, as members of their community and class. For those who resisted rescue we can perhaps say that they acted on behalf of themselves, and their children, born and unborn. And for those who staffed the rescue teams, different identities operated at different times: now a servant of the State, a member of a new nation, a Hindu, a woman. Thus our understanding of agency too needs to take into account notions of the moral order which is sought to be preserved when women act in particular ways, as well as the mediation of the family, community, class, religion and gender.

In the remembrance rituals that take place in gurudwaras in different parts of the country, women's 'heroic' steps in offering themselves up for death are valorized, while their abductions are glossed over. These valorous women are now beginning to find their way into small booklets and illustrated comics which are distributed free or sold very cheaply, and which are used especially to tell stories of religious martyrdom to children and to school them in their religion. The story of these women is by no means over. Today, more than ever before, questions of women's participation in violence, of their activism as well as their collusion, are being

raised. While it is important that historians look at areas they have left untouched, it is equally crucial that women activists do some introspection and examine their assumptions about women—rather than make simplistic assumptions about the power of women, we do much better to capture the complexities of their struggles.

I should now like to go back to some of the questions raised at the beginning of this paper. In a well-known story, 'Khol Do' (Open Up), Saadat Hasan Manto tells the story of Sakina, a young Muslim woman who has been abducted. In trying to track down his daughter, Sakina's father comes across a group of young men, would-be 'rescuers and protectors' and appeals to them to find her. Sakina is found by these 'social workers' whose protection consists of raping her repeatedly. Shortly afterwards, the father hears of a young woman resembling his daughter being in the hospital. He goes to see her and finds Sakina semi-conscious. When the doctor walks in, he sees the room in darkness, points to the window and asks the father to open it: 'Khol do', he says. Sakina's hands automatically go to the drawstrings on her *salvar*, to undo its knots.

Sakina's story was not uncommon at the time of partition. But all too often, because women have found it difficult to give voice to such experiences, they have remained outside the pale of history. Historical silence is compounded by familial silence: these are things that cannot be talked about; tales of heroism can find a place in collective memory, but abduction and rape must remain at the margins. Because historical records acquire a kind of transparency as objective truth, these experiences are seldom able to enter them—they exist in the realms of pain and silence, and are to be found, if at all, in memory, in fiction, in memoirs. If we are to recover these experiences, we will have to turn to such 'unconventional' sources. Personal narratives and oral histories are among these sources. Here too recovering the experiences of women, children and marginalized groups requires a different methodological apparatus, different tools. Most of our interviews, for instance, were conducted in 'family situations'. In the presence of their men, the women's speech tended to remain within what we might call 'acceptable boundaries'. As interviewers, therefore, we had to be doubly aware of the nuances, the silences, the body language, and indeed of our own location vis-à-vis our interviewees. These are the details that

enrich oral narrative and also render it 'unreliable' for traditional history.

Nevertheless, for me the process of recovering women's histories through oral narratives has been an enabling one: it has allowed me to see, through the unfolding of these histories, not merely events, but also processes and therefore meanings. And in doing so, to begin to understand the different contexts in which identities are formed, created and reformed over time. I would like to end by saying that for me, this exploration has just begun. In the process many other avenues of research have suggested themselves. It is important for example to look into the literature, cinema, music and popular culture of the time to see how they articulate women's experiences. Equally we need to think about how modern memory, through its narratives, 'creates' the reality of partition, and what impact these narratives have on people's lives. These are the dimensions and continuing repercussions of partition that I hope to examine in future work.

Notes

1. This essay is part of a larger work of an oral history of Partition begun originally with Sudesh Vaid, to whom, along with C.V. Subbarao, I owe a debt of gratitude. Much of what I say below is based on our joint work, but the analysis I make and the conclusions I draw are, of course, mine. Many friends have read and commented on various drafts of this paper and I am grateful for this. They include: Tapan Basu, Uma Chakravarti, Sanjiv Kakar, Suvir Kaul, Ania Loomba, Gyan Pandey, David Page, Kumkum Sangari, Sumit and Tanika Sarkar and Ravi Vasudevan. A different version of this paper appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly* 28: 17 (1993).
2. An important work that records interviews with victims and others is Uma Chakravarti and Nandita Haksar, *The Delhi Riots: Three Days in the Life of a Nation* (Delhi: Lancer, 1985).
3. I must also add that I was 'led' into this work by my participation as a researcher in a documentary film on Partition entitled *A Division of Hearts* (London: Mistral Films for Channel 4, directors Peter Chappel and Sati Khanna).
4. For me, it was also important to think of history as processes rather than events. In India, we know so little of our history after 1947 because

somehow history seems to have stopped there. Yet, did Partition, for example, really come to an end in 1947? Can we package it away so neatly as if it did not live on beyond that time?

5. I am grateful to Tanika Sarkar for discussing and clarifying this point with me.

6. I use three kinds of sources in this essay: interviews with survivors and those who were involved, memoirs and published sources such as books (where these are available) and parliamentary debates for the relevant period. These, naturally, provide three, sometimes more, different perspectives on various questions.

7. From a pamphlet brought out by Women Against Fundamentalism, Delhi, n.d.

8. Gabriele Dietrich, *Some Reflections on the Women's Movement in India: Religion, Ecology, Development* (Delhi: Horizon Books, 1992), 20.

9. A great deal of work has been done lately on the involvement of women in communal organizations and in communal violence, particularly by Tanika Sarkar, Teesta Setalvad, Flavia Agnes and others.

10. This point is made more succinctly and elegantly by Kumkum Sangari in 'Consent, Agency and Rhetorics of Incitement', *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Occasional Papers on History and Society*, Second Series, 59, 27 and *passim*.

11. Figures quoted here, and subsequently, are taken from the following sources: G. D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading Up To and Following the Partition of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1948, rpt. 1989), Appendix II; Gurbachan Singh Talib, *Muslim League Attacks on Sikhs and Hindus in the Punjab 1947* (Delhi: SGPC, 1950, rpt. Delhi: Voice of India, 1991); Ministry of External Affairs, Central Recovery Organization, List of Non-Muslim Abducted Women and Children in Pakistan and Pakistan-Side of the Cease Fire Line, Jammu and Kashmir State, India (Delhi, 1954).

12. Bir Bahadur Singh, personal interview. Interviewed by Sudesh Vaid and Urvashi Butalia.

13. *Ibid*.

14. Basant Kaur, personal interview. Interviewed by Sudesh Vaid and Urvashi Butalia.

15. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning* and Talib, *Muslim League Attacks*. Appendices and *passim*.

16. Anis Kidwai, *Azadi ki Chaon Mein* (Hindi) (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1990), 142-43. My translation. Translated into Hindi from the original Urdu by Noor Nabi Abbasi.

17. I am grateful to Ravi Vasudevan for this point.

18. March 1947 was set as a kind of cut off date. Women who had disappeared before that were given the benefit of doubt; it was presumed they could have gone voluntarily, but after March, when the first real violence began in Punjab, all disappearances were taken to be tantamount to forcible abduction.

19. Although the Act refers, quite carefully, to persons, it is clear that the reference is to women. Although there is sufficient evidence to show that all kinds of pressure was brought to bear on men to move from one country to the other (whether they were Hindu, Muslim or Sikh), I have not been able to find any record of any male persons being forced, by the State, and against their will, sometimes after changing their religion, to move.

20. The system of offering incentives for the number of recoveries officers made led to bizarre, though predictable, results. Often police officials would exaggerate the numbers of 'rescued' women. This would create problems for social workers who then had to explain where these large numbers of women had gone.

21. Kirpal Singh ed., *Partition of Punjab 1947, India and Pakistan* (Delhi: National Bookshop, 1991), 572.

22. Satya Rai, *Partition of the Punjab*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1965.

23. *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Partition Council*.

24. Kidwai, *Azadi*, 142-43.

25. *Ibid*.

26. *Hindustan Times*, January 17, 1948.

27. *Hindustan Times*, January 17, 1948.

28. *Parliamentary Debates* (Lok Sabha Debates): Proceedings other than Questions and Answers, 1 (part II): 677-87.

29. *Ibid*.

30. *Ibid*.

31. Damyanti Sahgal, personal interview. Interviewed by Sudesh Vaid and Urvashi Butalia.

32. Kamlaben Patel, personal interview. Interviewed by Urvashi Butalia. I am grateful to Sonal Shukla for her assistance in this interview.

33. Kidwai, *Azadi*, 146.

34. Patel, personal interview.

35. *Ibid*.

36. Kidwai, *Azadi*, 146-47.

37. *Ibid*.

38. *Ibid*.

39. Sahgal, personal interview.

40. Patel, personal interview.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Som Anand, 'Lahore: A Memoir.' Unpublished Manuscript, chapter 17. This incident is also referred to in Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight* (Delhi: Vikas, 1976), 457-60.

44. *Sadda Hak, Ethey Rakh* (Delhi: People's Union for Democratic Rights, 1989). This is a report on refugee women workers in Delhi.