UNIT 3  WOMEN AND PARTITION

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, we have read the different forms of political participation of women in early 20th century. How it dealt the processes of government at the community level -in voting and contesting elections and so on. In this Unit, we will focus on the tumultuous and tragic events that accompanied the creation of two countries India and Pakistan in 1947. The partition of India was witness to large violence and emotional upheaval and devastation that ultimately led to the formation of two new nation states.

Many feminist writers have tried to recover the history of partition through recording personal accounts and oral narratives of those who survived in the violence and trauma of partition. This has offered a different perspective on the history of partition. Thus, this Unit will focus on the feminist recovery of the history of partition which tries to look at how ‘ordinary’ women and men have experienced the partition, the way the state and the community tried to control the sexuality of women and the nature of sexual violence that women experienced.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you shall be able to:

- Explore the voices of women and men in the history of partition;
- Discuss the narratives of women that show us the control of women’s sexuality;
- Explains how communities have tried to claim its identity through ‘body/bodies’ of women; and
3.3 BACKGROUND

Partition was an event which is marked by violence. Although more than six decades have passed since 1947, it continues to have traumatic significance for the history of the sub-continent and retains its significance in the contemporary period. Gyanendra Pandey (2001) argues that the experience of violence helps ‘making of the community’ as well as the ‘subject of history’. The feeling of mixed euphoria of becoming an independent nation and the discomfort of partition and violence that accompanied in the decision. This particular event of partition has a peculiar importance in the life of both the nations. The study of the formation of the Indian nation state and the political economy of the post independent India needs to start with the critical event of partition.

There is no dearth of literature on the issue of partition; this has become a field of inquiry for many. While looking at the history of partition, we try to understand the partition that happened in 1947. On the one hand, the books on political history of partition gives us details regarding the debate between different political groups and leaders like the Congress and Muslim League or the role of the British in the division of this sub-continent. On the other hand, one finds the records of violence, displacement and mass migration. However, as underlined by Veena Das (1995), Urvashi Butalia (1998), Ritu Menon (1999) and others point out that the millions of people who have been given barely any space in the discourse of partition were the separated families, whose anxious anticipation of return of a lost member form the basis of tragedy that supplanted the violence of bereavement. How they rebuilt their lives were never evident in the ‘written history of partition’. Hence, the feminist historians have questioned the experience of the people who suffered in the process of partition and articulate their writings as historiography of the partition.

Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin (1998) state that in ‘political histories of partition’, it is rare to find out the ‘feminist historiography of the partition’. The feminist historiography is significant because it helps us understand the unheard voices of women. It also recognizes how nation, family and community try to construct ‘their’ identity through ‘their’ possession of the female body. Further, it helps us to rewrite the gendered history of partition. Partition related literature consists of official records, parliament debates, private papers, literary writings, treaties, political histories, memoirs and analytical writings. The critical look at these works helps us understand the complexity of the event. The literary, autobiographical text, oral historical and other sources are noted as important sources to know the partition,
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offering us a different account other than the official one. The narratives which were collected by feminist writers have underlined that no story was complete or comprehensive (Bhasin and Menon 1998). The extensive interviews of women who were ‘victims’ of partition points out that it would be difficult to express the ‘singular experience’ of partition because they experienced a ‘multifaceted experience’ bound by tragedy. Their narratives highlight the entanglement of women, nation and community. Let us now study some historical facts regarding partition.

**Partition of the Sub-continent**

The planning of the ‘partition of India’ was declared on June 3, 1947 without stating the boundaries. The Boundary Commission decided later to draw the boundary. First, the discussion on the partition and the official announcement of it forced many families to migrate from one place to another. In November 1946 after the Noakhali riots, there was a discussion on how to manage the migration by setting up some mechanism for safe transit and control of violence against the minority community. Violence broke in different parts of the continent which further pushed people to migrate. Those who were migrating were mostly doing it in groups with a feeling of being trapped.

Significantly, many women and children were kidnapped/ killed or remain orphaned. It was estimated that eight to ten million people had crossed over from Punjab and Bengal. The violence was rampant. Yet, was very organized and systematic. Allegations were made by both the parties about the active involvement of political leaders from the Muslim League and the Jamaat as well as the Hindu Mahasabha or the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. Violence was justified in the interest of self-defense. However, in such an anarchic situation, economic factors too played an important role.

3.4 HONOUR OF THE FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND NATION

Narratives recorded by historians of the memories of people who experienced partition were full of violence. In this section, we will focus on the violence done on women by men of the ‘other community’ and by ‘their own family members’. The violence that accompanied partition was characterized by murder, destruction of religious places, houses of the other community and profaning everything that was held sacred. The magnitude of sexual violence experienced by women during the partition remains unparalleled.

Sexual violence is considered as not only an assault on that particular woman but against her family / community and above all honour of the community. A woman is seen as the representative of her family, community and nation’s honour and her identity is intrinsically linked with her body
and her being. Her protection is not so much about the protection of the individual woman’s autonomy and dignity as it is about her family, community and nation’s identity and autonomy.

Thus, there was overall anxiety about how to protect women from within the own family / community in order to protect the honour of the family. It was known that women were mainly victims of violence by men of the other community. However, as recorded by different works on women and partition, in their journey of relooking partition history, they were introduced to the fact of how women were forced to end their lives or were killed by their own kinship male members. This was never recorded as something odd or unwelcome instead was legitimized and remembered as a ‘willing sacrifice’ by the family and by women themselves (Menon and Bhasin, 1998). This was accepted because there was a fear of rape, conversion or forced marriage outside of the community which itself amounted to social death and a violation of the honour of the family, community and nation. The surviving male and female members of the partition of violence told stories of how they had lived under constant threat of rape and humiliation. The ways these women had adopted to be ‘honourably dead’, some had committed suicide/ set themselves on fire along with their children or consumed poison.

The feminist historians questioned how one would interpret ‘suicides’ and ‘murders’. Butalia in her book, ‘Other Side of Silence’ (1998) raises the question of why women’s existence was perceived as a threat to the dignity and honour of the community and in a strange twist of circumstances men taking lives of women were looked upto as saviors of both honour of the community and the honour of women. Pushing women to death was chosen as better alternative not only by men but also by the women themselves. The narratives of women who had survived the violence or men who had witnessed or executed killings highlight the fact that the major threat or anxiety wasn’t just violence which could have been countered but the fear of conversion that couldn’t be countered (Butalia 1998). The scale of violence and the forcible conversion on both sides generated the fear. Men sensed an assault on their masculinity as their ability to honour and safeguard the virtue of ‘their’ women as seriously challenged and limited.

Regulation of women’s sexuality and fertility is understood to be a crucial task of masculinity and in the event of their inability to do so, men preferred to kill ‘their’ women rather than have their masculinity assaulted and challenged. Women who died for the sake of ‘honour’ of their family / community/ nation in the face of a threat of rape or conversion have been celebrated and honoured as martyrs. Women were subjected to being stripped, paraded naked, mutilated and disfigured. Their breasts were branded and their bodies and genitalia were tattooed with triumphal slogans or religious symbols. Atrocities like amputating breasts, knifing open the
womb, raping and killing fetuses point out to the brutality and cruelty of the violence inflicted on women; but are also stark expressions of how masculinity is constructed as the ability to stamp an imprint on ‘women’, their bodies and sexualities.

Communities construct their notion of honour and identity around women, to be precise the sexuality of ‘their’ women. Menon and Bhasin (1998) argue that the sexual nature of violence further consolidates the patriarchal assumption that reputation and control of women’s sexuality constitutes manhood.

**Check Your Progress:**

*Explain the experience of partition as written by feminist historians.*

In the next section, we will look at the ways in which the same concept of the honour was carried forward in the debate over the Bill of recovery of abducted women and children and the way it was implemented.

### 3.5 RECOVERY OF ABDUCTED WOMEN IN POST PARTITION INDIA

In this section we will review the Act known as **Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 1949**. This Act was passed in 1949 and remained in force until 31 October 1951. This section will concentrate on how this
particular Act came into existence and then to understand the place of the ‘woman question’ when both the nation states were claiming its legitimate position.

The need to frame and pass such a law has to be understood as underlined by Veena Das (1995), in the context of how in South Asia, the process of decolonization was accompanied by the creation of the nation state. It was also accompanied by unprecedented collective violence. The Government of India based on reports from liaison officers of the Military Evacuation Organization underlined that more than 2,00, 000 people had lost their life, and around 1,00,000 women were abducted and raped during the partition. There were conflicting claims by both India and Pakistan about the number of abducted women. In Constituent Assembly, India had claimed that 33,000 Indian women were abducted by Muslims and the Pakistan government claimed that 50,000 Muslim women had been abducted by Hindu or Sikh men. An important demand was put forth by the people/citizens in front of the government for the recovery of women. A similar demand was placed before the official agreements and also by the various administrative mechanisms for the recovery of women. Against this background, the recovery operation was initiated by both India and Pakistan.

This operation was never imagined as only correctional move or an effort to bring back normalcy. As Veena Das emphasised (1995) that it became a matter of national honour. On 3 September 1947, the inter-Dominion Agreement was signed and in 1949 the law was passed. This Bill was debated in the Legislative Assembly especially to set out the terms of the recovery, defining who can be termed as abducted and the process of recovery and powers to be given to those who were officially employed to recover people. This Act gave tremendous powers to police. There was a fundamental suspension of democratic and fundamental rights of the women and children who were identified as ‘abducted person’. The main anxiety expressed in the debate was twofold in nature mainly – how to recover these abducted individuals and suspicions about the intentions of Pakistan. The Indian parliament expressed great faith in non-communal and spirited social workers as well as its moral obligation to recover these abducted women and children. However, implicit in the expression of faith was an attempt to highlight Pakistan as immoral and their representatives as less trustworthy. Minister Gopalswami Ayyangar was pressurized by the members of Assembly to put constant pressure on Pakistan for the implementation of this Act.

Immediately after the agreement was signed between the two countries parts of Kashmir were raided and women were abducted by large groups supported by the Pakistan government. This led to a discussion in the Indian parliament on whether Pakistan could be trusted with the recovery operation. The debate between Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava and Minister Gopalaswami Ayyangar on India’s stand about abducted Muslim women from Pakistan.
establishes that, from the beginning India wanted to represent itself as protective and responsible towards its citizens in comparison to Pakistan. In the debate Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava raised doubts about the ‘morality’ of Pakistan, doubted the sincerity in implementing the recovery operation and reminded everyone about the betrayal by Pakistan in case of Kashmir or canal waters.

By reviewing these incidences, he further argued that India should retain recovered Muslim women as hostages till Pakistan returned ‘our’ women. As a rebuttal, Minister Gopalaswami Ayyangar argued that making recoveries was part of the responsibility of a civilized government and also underlined that if India kept Muslim women as hostages then India wouldn’t be any different than Pakistan. In this context, the tradition of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharat* was also invoked to reiterate that Indian civilization has always been respectful to women. The suggestive implications of othering and demonizing Pakistan cannot be removed from contemporary readings of this debate, while Indians/ Hindus/ Sikhs were venerated, Pakistanis/ Muslims were vilified.

Menon (1999) argues that in the debate of partition the two things were attempted, one was to establish the image of a newly formed government as responsible, secular democratic. Secondly, it is based on ancient civilization codes of conduct and at the same time invoked an ancient Hindu tradition of chivalry toward women and their protection and honour. Many feminist scholars on the Bill in the Parliament shows the concern and anxiety about women who were abducted, the preoccupation with the issue of conversion and the loss of control over women’s sexuality which resulted in a collective humiliation of the community and the nation. Nonetheless, even with all its shortcomings the Act was passed. The interviews taken by Bhasin and Menon (1998) of the social workers have pointed out that the operation of recovering abducted women was carried out with extraordinary zeal and zest. Social workers went out of their way to search for those who were listed as abducted/missing by their families. Some women were left behind to secure the safety of the other members of the family, or were separated from their families while travelling, some were sold, some became the second or third wives, got converted, married.

Feminist historians have critiqued the description of every woman living or located in the house of the ‘other community’ as abducted and hence in need of being recovered. In many instances the women and their new families resisted recovery. New families and new attachments had been created, attempted recovery, created anger, hurt and resistance. The state however remained unmoved in its resolve to recover abducted women and settle them with their ‘real’ family. For instance, Das (1995) shows in her writing how resistances were silenced by applying best interest theory. The state worked in collusion with the social workers not in the interest of these women but in the interest of national and communal honour.
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The children born to abducted women remain yet another tragic aspect of history. Both India and Pakistan were not interested in addressing the issues of children born in troubled times. According to the Bill (Recovery of Abducted Women and Children) of recovery of women and children abducted at the time of partition, a child born to a woman after 1 March 1947 was considered as born out of ‘wrong’ sexual unions and thus illegitimate. These marriages of abducted women were declared null and void by the law. However, after declaring these children as illegitimate, the question that who should be responsible for these children became crucial. Thakur Das Bhargava invoked the ‘ancient Hindu logic’ of the man’s seed being the basis of life thus granting more rights to the man over the woman as far as the child was concerned. There were many other voices that tried to nuance this complex issue and draw attention to the essentially constructed and constituted nature of the ideas of illegitimacy etc. However, none of were paid any heed to and a universally applicable law that was passed came into force (Das, 1995).

The State’s standardized definition rendered the status of the children born to ‘abducted’ women vulnerable and complicated. These children were made undesirable by the State’s proclamation. Most of the families agreed to take ‘their’ ‘abducted’ women back on the condition that they would leave the children born out of ‘illegal’ sexual relations. Children and women whose families never claim them remained under the guardianship of the State.(Menon and Bhasin, 1998). Many children that were left behind in refugee camps were sent to orphanages and many pregnant women were coerced into abortion wherever possible.

This shameful history of silence and violence indicates the anxiety produced by sexual violence against ‘our’ women and children born out of such unions. The State acted like the quintessential patriarchal family— guarding and regulating the woman’s sexuality and fertility.

The universalization of all women found within families of ‘other’ religious communities as abducted women glossed over specific variations such as inter-community marriages arranged by the villagers in order to safeguard and protect the women of the village. Communities have faced crisis, evolved flexible kinship practices. However when the State assumed the role of the protector and tried to create abstract and rigid notions of honour and legitimacy that completely disregarded the flexibility inherent in kinship practices when faced with a crisis. Families and communities evolved many creative responses to the crisis—from inter-community marriages (with property being left behind as a guarantee for good care) to of course killing of the daughters.
Feminist historians have highlighted that after sometime neither state nor families were interested in restoring these women to their ‘real families’ so many of the recovered women remained permanently as refugees. The state had also divided these women into widows and abducted. Women were claimed as unattached, poor, dislocated widows or as abducted. Both categories did not have family structure or male kin, so the state had to support them. The major anxiety was of guarding their sexuality. However, the response of the state was different to them. There was an effort on part of the state to re-assimilate the widows into the economic or social mainstream. However in case of abducted women, political and civil rights were denied to them as their identities conflicted with the rights of the community (Menon 2002), and they always remained at on the mercy of the state.

Check Your Progress:

Thus, we have studied that how laws created divisions between human beings. The sexuality of women became the important discourse in the entire process of partition.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

This Unit attempt to understand the history of partition through a gendered lens. It tells us the history of formation of the nation-states of India and Pakistan. The partition was bureaucratically imagined and executed with very little consideration for the impact on the lives and livelihoods of ordinary men and women on either side of the new borders. Thus the Unit points out and reiterates the questions asked by feminists, why historians neglected the history of partition. Is this then historiographical neglect or
refusal to cover up the trauma (Butalia 1998), or do women have a country
(Menon 2002). The Unit ‘recovered’ an account of women who have suffered
forms of violence carried out by both, their own community and by the
other community. How threat of violence and the possibility that they will
bring shame to the family forced women to kill themselves. The feminist
scrutiny of the legislative debate on recovery act points out the collusion
of the patriarchal interests of the family, community and the nation.
Complete neglect of children and apathy about restoring them to their
parents’ points out larger issues of legitimacy and illegitimacy.

3.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss ‘The Recovery operation’ initiated by the state. Do you think it
was patriarchal in nature?

2) Explain the role of family and community in regulating the woman’s
sexuality and fertility during the process of partition.

3) Describe the interconnection between sexual violence on women and
the question of honour?

4) Critically debate on how women who were killed or had committed
suicide at the time of the partition were celebrated as ‘honourably
dead’.

3.8 REFERENCES

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3.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

