

# **Abducted and Widowed Women**

## **Questions of Sexuality and Citizenship**

### **During Partition**

*Urvashi Bu talia*

#### INTRODUCTION

Partition is such a major event in India and Indian history that over this past half century it has continued to dominate collective memory, especially in north India, in a way that virtually no other event in recorded history has. 1947 is a year that is marked in India as the year of independence. At the level of popular memory however, partition often overshadows the importance of independence because of its much more direct impact on the lives of people. Virtually all fiction from northern India, whether in English, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi (Gurmukhi), Bengali has, until recently, remained preoccupied with partition. Poetry, song, cinema, story-telling within families constantly recall the sweet and bitter memories of pre-partition India and its aftermath. Yet, despite their overwhelming presence in 'culture' these aspects remain largely absent in the recorded history of partition. Reading formal history one might, until recently, have been forgiven for thinking that partition meant only government-to-government debate, and decisions and negotiation at the political level. And indeed, one might further be forgiven for thinking that this was a history marked by the absence of any attention or focus on gender. Yet in recent years, it has become amply clear that the story of partition is a deeply gendered narrative in which women were centrally implicated in a variety of ways.'

There are many points from which one can approach a gendered history of partition. The violence that accompanied partition marked women and women's bodies in particular ways: we know of the rape and abduction that happened on a mass scale, of the cutting off of women's breasts, the tattooing of their bodies. We know too that in many places women were killed by their families, in others they took their own lives, and in some they also participated in the violence.' The dramatic changes partition brought in what was hitherto seen as the 'normal' life of communities and families—caused by the dislocation, the mass deaths, the forced migration—led to another little discussed aspect, widowhood and destitution for women. Many were unexpectedly rendered single as would-be partners died, or disappeared, and the marriageable age passed. In a curious kind of paradox, partition also threw up another unforeseen consequence: the mass influx of refugees and the consequent necessity of fulfilling their needs for shelter, jobs, food, and clothing, opened up a new career for middle-class women, social or welfare work, which, in turn, enabled their entry into the public sphere in an unprecedented way.

A gendered history of partition would thus need to focus attention on the centrality of women in changes in community and family, in the making of a 'national' identity, in the communalism that so deeply marked this particular event and in many other aspects. I am not attempting such a history here. Rather, I focus here only on two related aspects of this history: the multiple and layered strands of the experiences of abandonment and abduction on the part of thousands of women and the somewhat different, but also similar, experiences of those women whose husbands died in the 'war' that was partition. How did society and the State deal with these two sets of single-or as the State called them, 'unattached'-women who were on its margins; and further, how did the women themselves cope with this experience and what kind of relationship did they develop with the State and society? In a sense, both 'sets' (I use the word with some hesitation. The women were by no means homogeneous, and the lines of demarcation between widows and abducted women were not clear cut and distinct) became the concern of the State because, left without their men (and in the case of abducted women who had been recovered, even *rejected* by their men), they were seen as somehow 'unequal' to the task of carving out lives for themselves. Further, it was felt that because many were, in a sense, left rudderless not only by virtue of being removed from their men, but somehow because the central legitimating unit of the family (where their roles were very clearly defined)

had come undone. Whatever efforts were made to restore some 'normalcy' in the 'lives of these women attempted therefore to relocate them within the fold of the family, whether real or simulated.

Relief and rehabilitation were the due of every citizen, male or female, rich or poor. Once people had been given the help needed, however, the State stepped out and left them to stand on their own feet. But for these women, there was a difference: those who could not be relocated inside families, whether their own, or new ones, became the long-term responsibility of the State, and in a peculiar twist, the State assumed the mantle of a surrogate family, a role that was simultaneously marked by a deep benevolence and a profound patriarchy.

## II

### THE ABDUCTED WOMEN

The story of partition, the uprooting and dislocation of people, was accompanied by the story of the rape, abduction and widowhood of thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed borders. The mass movement of people on foot, by bus, train, cart, left women, children, the aged and infirm, the disabled, particularly vulnerable. Little is known of the histories of these people and how they dealt with the trauma, pain and dislocation of enforced migration.

This silence is all the more surprising when one sees the dimensions of the problem. Literally thousands of women were abducted in what became two free countries. Abduction is a catchall description that has come to be used for all women (and some men) who disappeared during the confusion of partition. While it is true that many were actually abducted, it is equally possible that some may have gone of their own accord. None the less, the two countries treated all women missing or living with men of the other religion after a particular time as 'abducted' women.

On the basis of complaints received from relatives the two countries compiled lists of missing women. While there is no way of ensuring that the figures were reliable (for instance a complaint about a particular woman could often be filed separately by three relatives and this might appear in a list three times at different places), some figures did find their way into public record. From these it seemed as if the

number of Hindu and Sikh women abducted in Pakistan was roughly 33,000—although some estimates put this figure at 50,000—(this did not include women from Kashmir and it was felt that if these were added the figure could well have reached 50,000). Lists received from Pakistan showed the figure of Muslim women abducted in India to be around 21,000.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not these lists were accurate, they did serve to point to the size of the problem. It was because of this, and because of considerable pressure from the families, that the Indian State decided to mount what came to be known as the Central Recovery Operation, to locate, recover and, if necessary, 'rehabilitate' abducted women. The basic assumption of the Central Recovery Operation was that any woman found living with a man of the other religion after a certain date (and as we shall see later, there was some dispute on exactly when this cut-off point was to be located) would be presumed to have been abducted or forcibly pushed into that relationship, and she therefore had to be 'rescued'. If women protested, and said they were in one or other relationship as a matter of choice, it was assumed that such statements were being made under pressure and had therefore to be discounted.

In September 1947 the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan met at Lahore and took a decision on the recovery of abducted women. In a joint declaration they voiced what they felt was their main responsibility:

Both the Central Governments and the Governments of West and East Punjab wish to make it clear that forced conversions and marriages will not be recognized. Further, women and girls who have been abducted must be restored to their families, and every effort must be made by the Governments and their officers concerned to trace and recover such women and girls.<sup>5</sup>

Later, in December of the same year, this joint appeal was given executive strength through an Inter Dominion Treaty in which both countries resolved that all women abducted or forcibly married after 1 March 1947 should be recovered and restored and that a joint organization of both dominions would be set up to carry out the rescue work. A subcommittee was set up which was to submit a report in three days on what steps needed to be taken. Between them, the governments also decided to collect particulars of abducted women, to broadcast joint appeals for recovery, to organize transit camps in every district for the abducted women while they awaited their transfer to a central camp to be set up in each dominion, exchanging weekly statements regarding the number of abducted women. A book publish-

ed in 1952 by the Central Recovery Organization in India gives a district by district list of Hindu and Sikh women who went missing or were presumed abducted in Pakistan. The Pakistan newspaper *Dawn* (founded by Jinnah) published regular appeals for information about abducted women, asking people to supply full details of where the woman was last seen, etc.

Bringing women out of a hostile environment was not an easy job. It was difficult, first of all, to trace the woman's whereabouts. All sorts of tactics, including subterfuge and disguise, were used by the rescue teams. It was also felt that in an exercise of such a delicate nature, it was important to involve women and thus a number of women were drawn into the campaign. Indeed, the key officers charged with the recovery of abducted women were themselves women. Mridula Sarabhai was put in overall charge and assisting her were a number of women such as Premvati Thapar, Bhag Mehta, Kamlaben Patel, Damyanti Sahgal and others. It was felt that women were better placed to handle the delicacy of the situation and to 'persuade' those who were reluctant to give up their new homes, to return to the parental-national fold. Such rescue teams continued their work for several years, but as was to be expected, the work was not without problems. Almost from the beginning, it was fraught with difficulty and tension. While the two countries had agreed in principle to work together and to open up their territories to rescue teams from the other country, realistically, such openness was impossible.

In the early stages Pakistan protested against the involvement of the Military Evacuation Organization (MEO) and suggested that its duties should be confined only to the guarding of transit camps. The actual work of rescue, it suggested, should be given to the police. The Indian government was reluctant to do this claiming that in many instances the police themselves were the abductors. Abductions by people in positions of authority happened on both sides. Kirpal Singh cites several cases. In one, two assistant sub-inspectors of police went to recover an abducted woman and themselves raped her. In Montgomery, a tahsildar of Dipalpur, while participating enthusiastically in broadcasting/publicizing appeals for information about abducted women, is said to have kept an abducted woman with him for some eight months. The question was taken up at the Inter Dominion Conference in December 1947 and in January next. India's complaint against Pakistan was that it had suddenly closed off five districts of West Punjab to Indian social workers and police, claiming that they were close to the theatre of operations in Kashmir.

While the 3 September agreement quite clearly specified that abducted persons (The Act defined an abducted person as 'a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female *of whatever age* [my italics] who is, or immediately before the 1st day of March 1947, was a Muslim ...') had no real choice in the question of their recovery, and this was reiterated in the Inter Dominion Treaty, it appears from government records that this was a question of some dispute between Pakistan and India. Pakistan argued that some women were happy in their new surroundings and had offered resistance to being rescued. The Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan is said to have written to the Chief Secretary, East Punjab, thus: 'One . . . has written to say that his daughter . . . aged 13 years, has been kept by one . . . son of . . . Jat of village Bhoma, District Amritsar. In reply to his request for the recovery of the girl he was informed by the Indian military authorities that his daughter did not wish to leave her husband.' One abducted woman is reported to have said to the District Liaison Officer, Gujranwala: 'How can I believe that your military strength of two sepoy could safely take me across to India when a hundred sepoy had failed to protect us and our people who were massacred?' Another such statement was: 'I have lost my husband and have now gone in for another. You want me to go to India where I have got nobody and of course you do not expect me to change husbands each day.' A fourth said, 'But why are you so particular to take me to India? What is left in me now of religion or chastity?'<sup>9</sup> Whether or not we should take these statements at face value is a question that is beyond the scope of this paper. For example, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary we can only speculate that the women may not have been coerced into saying this. None the less, these statements do testify to a certain reluctance on the part of some women to be 'recovered' and it is also clear from Indian records that many women did refuse to come back.

The recovery operation lasted several years and during this time, women had perhaps 'settled' into families, some had 'accepted' their fate, some had had children and therefore many did not want to face a second dislocation. Social workers such as Kamlaben Patel and Damyanti Sahgal who worked in the Central Recovery Operation, spoke eloquently *of* the women who did not want to return, of those who were torn about what to do with their children. Born of Muslim fathers, for Hindu families these children would be living symbols of the pollution of the race and therefore could not be integrated into Hindu society. The fear was not unfounded. Despite the many appeals issued by Gandhi and Nehru that

recovered women were to be treated as if they were sisters and were not 'polluted', when women did return, often families would not take them back. For those who had children the situation was worse, for often they were forced to choose between their children and their 'families'. Unable to support children on their own, several chose to give them up and return to their natal families. This left the State to deal with the problem of unwanted children, a factor that contributed in a major way to the winding up of the recovery operation."

In support of its arguments that women did not want to return, Pakistan produced declarations-supposedly written by the women themselves-which were attested by magistrates. The Indian side viewed these with some scepticism, but eventually a compromise was worked out according to which 'women who ostensibly professed reluctance to be sent back to their original fold were to be segregated in social camps and there exposed to a process of resolute persuasion.<sup>12</sup> Resolute persuasion was just another word for wearing down resistance and defences, until the woman had no choice but to return to the place/family earmarked for her by the State.

The Agreement entered into by the two countries later became an ordinance (promulgated on 31 January 1949). Shortly afterwards, in the same year, the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance became an Act. Interestingly, there was no parallel legislation on the Pakistan Side although there was an Ordinance under which the Pakistani State operated. The Act provided for the setting up of a joint tribunal to deal with disputed cases. By the time legislation actually came into force-1949-the bulk of the recoveries had already taken place and numbers dropped gradually after that. In addition, according to Kirpal Singh, the majority of women who were recovered were not those who had actually been lost.<sup>13</sup> The Act remained in force till 1957 when it was withdrawn because there was opposition to it. It was also because of this opposition that at the Indo-Pak conference held in May 1954, it was discussed that some way should be found to ensure that abducted persons were not forced to go to the other country against their will. Special homes were then set up where unwilling persons could be housed and given time to make up their minds 'without fear or pressure'. How much of a choice this actually gave women is another question. Let us turn now to look at the experiences of the other large group of women who came in for State attention, the widows.

### III

## THE WIDOWS

In 1989 some three hundred women sat on *dharna* and relay hunger Strike outside the home of the then Home Minister, Buta Singh. The majority of them were over sixty years of age, all survivors of partition. Many among them had been forced to abandon their homes in West Pakistan and move to India; they had lost their husbands, sometimes other members of their families and several were left with small children to bring up.

The number of women who, in the years immediately after partition were categorized as 'partition widows', was not small. Reports of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation put the figure somewhere in the region of 75,000 with approximately 30,000 of these being from Bengal. In a note dated December 1949, Rameshwari Nehru said that the number of women from West Punjab under the care of the government in October 1948 was 45,374. A substantial percentage of these were widows. As the chart below shows, on 31 December 1953 the number of unattached women and children receiving relief from the government was 36,737. The three hundred who sat on *dharna* in 1989 then, were only a small number of this total. None the less, they were somewhat representative, coming from diverse backgrounds and histories. Some belonged to Sindh and Baluchistan, most were from Punjab and their families had been engaged in a range of occupations-from selling furniture to *kirana* (grocery) shops to petty trade of different kinds.

Eighty-year-old Veeranwali belonged to Adi Narola village (district Jhelum) and came to India in a *kafila* (foot convoy). Devi Bagya, whose husband owned a *kirana* store, came later from Karachi where migration took place after the January riots in 1948. Premvati's cultivator husband was killed in the riots in village Kana Kacha near Lahore and she came to Delhi with her three-year-old son. Sheelavati, from Toba Tek Singh, was temporarily luckier. She managed to reach Attari by train with her husband and children and spent a month in the camp there. But her husband, a chronic tuberculosis patient, soon had to be removed to hospital at Kingsway Camp and he died there after a year. Sheelavati then sent her children to a government-run home in Jullunder, and herself stayed on in Delhi. Rukman belonged to Lahore and had lived as a destitute on the pavements of Delhi for some time. Another older woman had lost virtually her entire family

Unattached Women and Children, Aged and Infirm Persons (including Dependents) from West Pakistan in Receipt of Gratuitous Relief (31 December 1953)

State	No. of homes/ infirmaries	No. of inmates in homes/ infirmaries	No. in receipt of gratuitous relief outside homes/ infirmaries	Total
1. Ajmer	1	160	48	208
2. Bhopal	1	1,704		1,704
3. Bombay	3	3,871	6,832	10,703
4. Delhi	1	1,281	50	1,331
5. Kutch	1	864		864
6. Madhya Bharat	1	128	318	446
7. Madhya Pradesh	3	328	49	377
8. Mysore	-	-	107	107
9. PEF'SU	3	1,849	76	1,425
10. Punjab	11	14,330		14,330
11. Rajasthan	7	1,678	403	2,081
12. Saurashtra	4	2,074	31	2,105
13. Uttar Pradesh	3	400	45	445
14. Vindhya Pradesh	-	-	111	111
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>28,667</b>	<b>8,070</b>	<b>36,737</b>

Note: Where December 1953 reports have not been received, latest available figures have been incorporated.

Source: Report of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, 1953.

during the riots: her daughter, her sons and their wives had jumped into a well and committed suicide and she came to her new homeland, alone, and spent the rest of her life, similarly, alone working until she began to lose her eyesight and became too old to travel. In 1989 she was bed-ridden and was trying to eke out an existence on the meagre pension the State allotted to partition widows. While these are only some instances, by 1951, some 1.75 lakh (175,000) refugees had come to settle in Delhi alone, roughly 40 per cent of whom were women, and a large percentage of these, widows."

In the early days, the government instituted a number of relief measures for the vast numbers of refugees that flowed in. These included transit camps, relief centres, vocational and technical training centres, housing boards, etc. Widows formed a category that required special attention-not only were they alone, or with small children, but they were unused to dealing with the public world. Once apprised of this, on 24 November 1947 India set up the women's section of

the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation with Rameshwari Nehru as its honorary director. The section was charged with very specific responsibilities. These were:

- (1) to organize relief to women and children, especially unattached women and children.
- (2) to help in the rehabilitation of unattached women and children.

By the end of March the following year, three women's homes had been set up in Delhi (province) and three in East Punjab (Kurukshetra, Jullunder and Amritsar). In an attempt to make them self-reliant, women in these homes were taught a variety of 'trades' including calico printing, embroidery, knitting, soap making, vegetable and fruit preservation and spinning. Apart from the government, a number of voluntary organizations also stepped in to work with women. These included the Arya Samaj, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a number of Gandhian and Christian missionary organizations, the Kasturba Gandhi Trust, the Central Relief Committee, the United Council for Relief and Welfare and later, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and others. Initially, the work of the women's section in the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation extended to the whole country, but gradually, states took on responsibility and the women's section began to concentrate its energies more on the centre.<sup>17</sup>

In 1948, a number of *silai* (sewing) centres were also set up in Delhi. Initially only eight-with some 441 workers-these centres became very popular and by 1951 their number had risen to thirteen with about 1,880 workers. Women in these centres earned between 12-20 rupees a month.<sup>18</sup>

The rehabilitation of single women and widows was based on an interesting premise. As citizens of India, all displaced people who had been forced to flee from Pakistan had a right to claim maintenance or compensation from the State. And indeed, the massive relief and rehabilitation effort-whatever its problems-mounted by the State shows that the latter was well aware of this responsibility. As a task, however, this was something that had to be timebound. Once people's claims had been settled, and they had been provided the wherewithal to get back on to their feet, they were left to rebuild their lives. With widows, and some abducted women, this was not the case. The State accepted them as a 'permanent liability', ostensibly because, having lost their men, and therefore having become (by implication) unable to fend for themselves, these women were 'unattached' and the State

had to assume the role of parent/protector to look after their interests. The following quote describes this in no uncertain terms:

The dispersal of displaced persons from West Pakistan has long been completed and there are no relief camps for them at present. There are, however, *Homes for the aged and infirm, the unattached women and children who have been accepted as the permanent or semi-permanent liability of the State.* [My emphasis.]

The Government of India have assumed responsibility for the care and maintenance of unattached women and children, the old and infirm and their dependants. Their present number is of the order of 74,000 - 38,000 from East Pakistan and 36,000 from West Pakistan. The great majority of them are being looked after in the Homes and Infirmaries specially set up for them, though a small number still continues to receive dole outside.

The aged and infirm constitute a permanent liability of the Government, but efforts are being made to train up the unattached women and children and the dependants of the aged and infirm in suitable vocations and crafts to enable them to stand on their own feet before long. Provision has also been made for their education."

The women were treated as 'war widows'. As Rameshwari Nehru said, because the struggle they had inadvertently been part of could well be regarded as a war, they had to be classed in the category of war widows and war orphans and treated as such. The State, however, also assumed responsibility for their social and economic rehabilitation as well as their 'moral well-being'. Attempts were made to provide training in a variety of trades and professions so that the women could enter into jobs, or set up their own training; others were provided start-up capital as well as things such as sewing machines, employment exchanges were instructed to place women in jobs, children were taken up for adoption, schools and other educational institutions were opened up, as were marriage bureaux where younger women's marriages were arranged. A difference was made between women who were completely alone, and those who had relatives who could help them. The latter were to be supported till such time as they became self-sufficient while the former were fully the responsibility of the State.

Initially faltering, the relief and rehabilitation operation for widows and other unattached women became one of the major welfare operations undertaken by the Indian State. The purpose of all the training that was being offered was to give widowed women a chance to integrate into the economic mainstream of Indian society. Additionally, however, it was recognized that mere economic rehabilitation was not enough. In Rameshwari Nehru's words

At the very outset the Section [the women's section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation] realized that rehabilitation is an intricate process and can be achieved only if adequate attention is paid to the *psychological, educational and emotional* needs of the women. It is of utmost importance to make them self-reliant and self-supporting and *restore their sense of dignity and worth.* [My italics.]

Here was the first of the differences between the group we have loosely identified as 'widowed women' and those who came to be seen as 'abducted women'. While the two did sometimes overlap, what marked the difference between them was the fact that abducted women had actually been in sexual contact with men of the other community, while widowed women were in some way chaste, having had sexual contact (presumably) only with their husbands. Thus it was that to them that a sense of dignity and worth was given, and it was for them that it became important to pay attention to their psychological, educational and emotional needs. These needs too, were, on the face of it, simpler than those of abducted women—for the latter, once having been exposed to the supposedly rampant sexuality of the Muslim male, who could predict what shape their needs would take? The problem was further complicated by the fact that many women had publicly said they did not want to return to their original husbands or families, some had expressed doubts but were not certain, some articulated the dilemma but saw no real choice in returning. These dilemmas did not seem to exist for widowed women. The State was their parent, benevolent, caring, and attentive to their needs, as well as protective of their reputation.

It was this same sense of dignity and worth that led the three hundred widows to sit *on dhama* in 1989. More than four decades after partition, these women remained the responsibility of the State and indeed, saw themselves as such. After all, they said, 'we are its [the State's] children. And if the parent does not look after the child when the child needs looking after, who will?' By the time their strike took place, several had managed to build small houses from the pieces of land allocated to them, their children had grown up, some had moved out and some had done the opposite—married and brought their wives home to stay. Once the only breadwinners, these widows now found themselves in the unenviable position of being dependants, dependent on their sons, or sometimes their daughters. Their agitation therefore demanded the two things that would enable them to hold on to a sense of dignity: the non-closure of their *silai* centres (which was inevitable as their numbers had depleted and other claims were being

made on the space), and an increase (marginal) in their pension. As one of them said, 'It doesn't matter that the amount is small, at least those *kambakhats* will not be able to lord it over us.' In the end, after several days of sitting *on dharna* (one of the women said, 'I walked all the way from Pakistan, I'll walk here every day if I have to until our demands are met.'). the State capitulated on the demand for an increase in the pension. In actual money terms, this amounted to an investment of a mere Rs 2.5 lakh a year on the part of the State, and that too for the few years that remained of the lives of these women. More than the money value, however, was the symbolic value. The parent-protector was fulfilling its responsibility, virtually to the end. The widows had a right to make this claim, they said, because in times of crisis, who does one turn to but one's parent. 'He is our *mai-baap*', they said, turning to the house of the then Home Minister, 'and we will place our demands before him.'

#### IV

### SEXUALITY, CITIZENSHIP AND THE STATE

In the years immediately following partition, the sexuality of women, whether Inviolable or violated, became a subject of concern for the Indian State and more specifically for the Hindu community. The concern, for example, reflected for the abducted and raped woman had little to do with her or what must surely have been her own sense of violation of her body and spirit; rather, it was a concern for male honour as it works at different levels—in the family, the community and the nation. This was reflected in many different discourses: representatives of political parties in the Legislative Assembly had extended and detailed debate on the issue. Newspapers were full of the concerns of men on the question of the abduction of women. To many writers of the *Organiser*, the weekly mouthpiece of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the fact of the mass rape and abduction of Hindu women (the fact that thousands of Muslim women too had suffered, was conveniently glossed over) was a 'challenge to our manhood, no less than to our *nationalism*' (my italics) It was something that made the nation 'writhe in pain and anguish—the only remedy to which was the 'Kshatriyaization' of the Hindu race, so that the men could do their expected and assigned task, to protect and defend the women,

and thereby to protect and defend the nation, the community and the family. In this lay the proof of their nationhood.

But how and why did widows, normally ostracized to the margins of society, come to assume such importance for the State? The Central Recovery Operation, and some of the rhetoric surrounding it, provides us with some clues to this. Of the 50,000 or so women who were said to have been abducted, or who were simply missing, the State had managed to recover only some 8,000. Rumour had it that these 8,000 were not from among those who had been reported missing. In that sense the Central Recovery Operation had been a major failure. It therefore also represented the loss of honour, of manliness, of national identity, which exercised Indian men in the aftermath of partition. Its relative failure, however, made the exercise of widow rehabilitation much more important. It is ironical that once past the crucial state of the immediate aftermath of partition, the State, parent-like, did not withdraw its support from widows (nor did they, drawing upon the same relationship, cease to make demands of the State).

Many things were responsible for the failure of the Central Recovery Operation: the difficulty of actually locating women; if they were found at all, the opposition put up by some families to their 'acceptance' into the fold; and most difficult of all, the problem of what to do with the children born of mixed unions. As is well known by now, many families who had earlier reported their women missing, now refused to take them back because they had been 'polluted' through sexual contact with men of the other race. Worse, some even had children, living symbols of the pollution which made it difficult for families to now take them in. When women *who* had children were recovered, they were faced with the impossible 'choice' of having to give up their children if they wished to be taken back into their families. And the State then had to take on the task of settling the children thus 'abandoned' into orphanages and homes. It was for all of these reasons that the Recovery Operation finally had to be closed down.

The post-partition Indian State was a fragile one, troubled and caught in a situation of enormous complexity and flux. On the one hand, were the expectations of its millions of citizens that the State would immediately address itself to the task of fulfilling the many promises on which it had come to power. On the other, were the immediate-and unexpected-tasks of the aftermath of partition: the mass influx of refugees, their need for food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, paying out compensation, locating missing relatives, dividing

assets and so on, At the heart of all this lay the problem of women—marginal and secondary as citizens, but significant and crucial as symbols. If the State could be said to have looked after its women, it could be said to have protected its honour, and rendered itself legitimate. Widows therefore presented a much more easily identifiable constituency, and indeed one whose sexuality was not called into question, and the massive rehabilitation operation mounted for them enabled the State to regain some of its legitimacy. The attempt to recover abducted women was also part of the same exercise, although of course it met with only questionable success.

The sexuality of widows on the other hand had, in a manner of speaking, remained intact and thus they did not pose the same kind of problem as abducted women did. The death of their (the widows') husbands had left them bereft and alone, often unable to fend for themselves, but they had not, unlike abducted women, been cast into the hands of the 'Other'. Nor did they have with them the unpleasant reminders—children-of such liaisons with the 'Other'. They could thus, more easily become the recipients of State attention and largesse. Thus it was that the State lavished not only attention but also created a number of social welfare schemes designed to help widows to earn a living, acquire a permanent place to live, and have the means and wherewithal, both economic and social+ to get on with their lives and be a part of society.

Where both widowed and abducted women were concerned, what could be said to have happened was that the 'normal' order of things, as reflected in the continued existence of the family, had come undone. The family was thus central to the enterprise of preserving/restoring the order of things. Women, who should have been in families, (whether their natal ones or those they had married into) were suddenly on their own, unattached, alone. Thus everything was done to help single women to bring up their own families if they had them, or to integrate into families of relatives, and failing these possibilities, to create a sort of 'family' inside welfare homes which the women could call their own. For abducted women, even though their number was small, the family was even more crucial. Having once been exposed to the 'libidinous Muslim' (it mattered little that there had been large numbers of rapes on the Indian side as well), the danger of their sexuality getting out of control was very real. Sexual chaos only reflected the chaos the nation was going through, and it was imperative that some semblance of order be restored: inside families, with

women's sexuality strictly regulated, this was possible. Where real families could not be found, it fell upon the State to take this role.

Clearly, while the State instituted what was a major humanitarian operation, and one which, with all its faults, was also beneficial to large numbers of women, it none the less constructed women differentially from men. Not citizens in their own right—and this at a time when citizenship and the question of rights were key questions being debated—but mothers, sisters, wives who had both to be rehabilitated, and protected, *who* had to be brought into the mainstream economically, but retained within the family, whether 'real' or simulated, and whose sexuality had to be kept in check. Not surprisingly, no such concern was reflected for men.

## NOTES

1. Among the recent works that have focused on partition as a gendered narrative are various essays. My own work includes an article: Community, State and women's agency: some questions on women and partition, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Review of Women Studies, April 1993; and a somewhat expanded version of this article in Ania Loomba and Suvir Kaul (eds.), *India: Postcoloniality, Literature, Culture, special issue of the Oxford Literary Review*, January 1994; also, Hindus and Muslims: men and women: communal stereotypes and the partition of India, in T. Sarkuram III. Butalia (eds.), *Women and the Hindu Right*, Delhi, Kali for Women. 1995. See also Ritu Menon and Karnal Bhasin, Recovery, rupture, resistance, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 1993 and a somewhat expanded version of this article in K. Jayawardena and M. de Alwis (eds.), *Embodied Violence: Communalizing women's sexuality in South Asia*, and, 'Of national honour and practical kinship.' in Veena Das, *Critical Events*, Oxford University Press. Delhi, 1995.

2. see Butalia, (ed.),

3. The Act defined an 'abducted' person as:

a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age who is, or immediately before the last day of March, 1947, was a Muslim and who, on or after that day and before the 1st day of January, 1949, had become separated from his or her family and is found to be living with or under the control of any other individual or family, and in the latter case includes a child born to any such female after the said date.

4. Figures here are taken from various sources including G.D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A summary of the events leading up to and following the partition of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1949, reprint 1989; *Report on the Working of the Ministry of Rehabilitation 1951-52*, and *Non-Muslim Abducted Women and Children in Pakistan and Pakistan side of the Cease Fire Line of*

## 106 *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*

*Jammu and Kashmir State*, Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 1952.

5. U. Bhaskar Rao, *The Story of Rehabilitation*, Government of India, Publications Division. Delhi, 1967.

6. See Government of India 1952.

7. In personal interviews both Damyanti Sahgal and Kamlaben Patel spoke of the different disguises and stratagems they used when engaged in the search for abducted women.

8. Kirpal Singh, *Partition of the Punjab*, Publications Bureau, Punjab University, Patiala.

**9. *ibid.***

10. Kamlaben Patel, personal interview and In her book, *Moot se Ukhda*, trans. from the original Gujarati. Delhi.

11. Damyanti Sahgal, personal interview.

12. Rao, *The story of Rehabilitation*.

**13. Kirpal Singh, *Partition of the Punjab*.**

14. Rameshwari Nehru, Private papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi.

15. A substantial amount of this information comes from an investigative report prepared by the People's Union for Democratic Rights, *Sadda Hak Ethey Rakh*.

**16. *ibid.***

17. Government of India, *Report on the Working of the Ministry of Rehabilitation 1951-52* and research done by PUDR for their report *Sadda Hak*.

18. PUDR, *ibid.*

**19. Government of India, *Report on the Working of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, 1951-52.***

20. *ibid.*., Rameshwari Nehru, Private Papers.

21. See my article, *Hindus and Muslims: Men and women*.