

Gendering Oral History of Partition

Interrogating Patriarchy

Women's lives in the Punjab, hitherto regulated by strictly set patriarchal norms, saw unexpected and almost drastic change as Partition set in. The motif of Partition has centred on the humiliation and trauma that women encountered and witnessed. While it is true that women were, in countless instances, Partition's ubiquitous victims, in very many ways the chaos and temporality of the post-Partition period allowed several of them to redefine themselves anew. This was not a self-conscious effort, the government too took on the role of "care-giver" but the exercise of "redefinition" questioned the sanctity of old notions and gave several women a new identity altogether.

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The Partition of India in 1947 produced a colossal tragedy that changed the destinies of vast numbers of people living in the subcontinent. Millions were uprooted and devastated, as they crossed suddenly defined borders and bore the brunt of Partition in a way that still defines their existence. The violence that shook north India was so dramatic that people were separated overnight, friends became enemies, properties were lost and people were left with no homes but those that would only exist in memory. Even after more than 50 years of the event the predominant memory of 1947 is of Partition rather than independence. While the earlier works on the subject focused on studying elite politics, state policies and reading only men as agents, the present paper intends to depict the period on a broader canvas. It argues that the Partition was something more than a mere "political" divide and certainly beyond what happened in 1947, that it had far-reaching socio, economic, psychological and cultural consequences on the lives of the migrants. This paper centres around the life histories of Punjabi middle class women who in 1947 migrated from the pre-Partition west Punjab to Delhi in search of a safe haven.

Punjabi refugees did not come to Delhi at once or in one go. They migrated mostly in groups. They first went to other places and settled down temporarily in east Punjab or in Jammu before eventually reaching Delhi. Being the capital, Delhi was considered to be a safe option as recovery camps and rehabilitation programmes were in operation here. It was seen as a land of opportunities with possibilities of business success; besides, there was abundance of unexplored land to the south and the west of Delhi, which could be used for refugee resettlement. Hence, refugees flooded Delhi, spreading themselves wherever they could, transforming it into a "Punjabi" city.¹

Many women, who had never before stepped outside domesticity, now out of sheer exigencies of survival, joined the workforce after the Partition in a scenario when most of them were not adequately skilled or equipped to undertake the arduous task of sustenance (at times single-handedly). They rose up to act as direct sustainers, carving out new avenues of earning and supplementing family income, to cope up with new challenges. Many of them became dependent on state help who set up various transit camps, relief centres, rehabilitation homes, vocational or training centres and cooperative societies for this purpose. Or still others

were helped by various voluntary and social organisations, but most significant were women's own endeavours to resettle themselves.

However, while social scientists of various disciplines have written endlessly on the tragedy of Partition, they have hardly focused on how this phenomenon altered gender roles. This paper studies the spatial reorganisation and resettlement pattern of Punjabi women in Delhi and examines how the newly built surroundings and changed circumstances did not allow women to be simply reframed into old Punjabi patriarchal norms in a new nation, i.e., post-Partition north India. It examines how in times of social and political upheavals (especially those arising out of ethnic or communal conflicts), the division between private and public spaces becomes radically altered. This in turn provides women with a liberating experience. As Karuna Chanana asserts, family strategies are often responses to external changes and macro policies and developments influence dynamics and structure of families. Hence, Partition, though it narrowed the physical spaces, enlarged the "social spaces" available to women.²

Partition pushed women into fashioning new survival strategies and opened up new avenues of education, training and employment for them and women acquired the status of sustainers, as boundaries between private and public shifted back and forth to accommodate this reorganisation. However, women's entrance into the public space was legitimised on the basis of women's domestic roles as wives, mothers and daughters. The qualities associated with domesticity were evoked, like those of care, self-suffering and family obligations even as women's "coming out" was justified as the demands of the displaced nation, communities in need of survival and families bereft of a bread earner. This paper then argues that these changes and role reversals were indeed short-term strategies in a largely patriarchal world.

I

Pre-Partition Punjabi kinship relations were strictly organised on the basis of patriarchal descent. The Punjabi household was based on the concept of a domestic family or joint family where all members of a domestic unit (with common kinship relations) lived together, constituting a single unit, 'ghar' (house). The unity

of the Punjabi household was symbolised in its joint cooking arrangements, common property interests (like farm land) and organising economic activities jointly.³ Caste was of crucial significance in all walks of life. Castes were further divided into sub-castes which formed the units for arranging marriages.⁴ Daughters were taken from and given to families in castes and sub-castes of equal rank. Culturally, too, Punjab was divided into regions marked by distinct cultures, language, customs, styles of life, etc. Marital alliances were forged within a region with similar practices. Coupled with these were the prohibited degrees of kinship relations ('gotra') and the practice of village exogamy. Thus, "endogamous" as well as "exogamous" restrictions operated simultaneously in forging marital alliances.⁵ As Paul Hershman, in *Punjabi Kinship and Marriage (1981)*, demonstrates.

Punjabi, Hindus and Sikhs have a society based on exogamous patrilineal descent groups where "wives" are taken and "daughters" given. It is the wives who supply the heirs of their husbands' descent groups, so their sexual activities must be strictly controlled as they affect structurally, the internal politics and recruitment of the group. But daughters are married in their husbands' villages and it is there that their sexuality is of critical importance.⁶

Hershman points out that it was not uncommon in Punjabi families to keep only the first girl child and subsequent female children were killed at birth.⁷ In her recent book Veena T Oldenburg locates this female infanticide within a complex of caste pride and dowry expenses, tracing it as far back as late 18th century.⁸ Marriage was associated inexorably with the practice of dowry, in which it was the bride's side, which had to bear the burden.

Thus, as Veena Oldenburg states, at the time of the child's birth, if a daughter was born, the mother turned her face to the wall, knowing well the cruel end of birth that awaited the offspring. In various, ways, this order was executed. Sometimes the nurse stopped the infant's breath for a few crucial moments with her hand, more often the objective was effected by neglect, by exposing the baby in winter to the cold floor, and in the summer to enervating heat.⁹

Heera Lal Chabra recalls his childhood, when he accompanied his father twice along with other members of the kin to bury his newly born sisters.

I was all of eight to 12 years, when I remember accompanying my father for the burial of my sisters, whom I now suspect were poisoned by my mother with the milk of 'Ak' tree. Having daughters was like incurring a lot of expenditure. My father had a small shop in Rawalpindi, probably he could not afford a decent marriage for them. Moreover you have to be so protective towards a daughter... anyway after their death, nobody ever talked about them and we told everyone they had died of illness.¹⁰

An oft-quoted proverb recited at the time of burying the dead female infant, who was buried with a piece of raw sugar placed between her lips and a piece of cotton in her hand, further affirms the prevalence of infanticide:

Gur Khaien, pownee kuttenn,
Aap na aieen, bhaiyan ghulleen.
(Eat your raw sugar, and spin your thread, but go and send a boy instead.)

The couplet, suggests Oldenburg, has intriguing implications. It was sung by pregnant mothers, who sat at the spinning wheel

eating raw sugar (since folklore even today has it that a craving for sugar means that the woman is carrying a boy and a craving for sour things means it is a girl). The chanting of the verse and the placing of raw sugar in the mouth of a dead child and a piece of cotton in her hand gives the tale a touch of a heathen ritual that lends it credibility.¹¹

However, once the girl child was accepted (allowed to live), she was closely guarded by the members of the household. She was carefully watched and chaperoned on all occasions because her parents feared any possible gossip, which might damage the good name of their daughter and endanger any future marriage negotiations.¹² Her movements were carefully guarded lest she attracted a man's attention before her marriage. Thus, a woman was born into her father's house and village (her 'peke') and it was here that she learnt to respect her father and idolise her brother as future guardians and protectors. One of the games little girls played was 'kikli' and the following rhyme was chanted as pair of girls swung each other round and round:

Kikli Kalir di,
Pag mere vir di,
Dupatta meri bharjai da,
Phitte muh javai da.

(kikli kalir di, A turban for my guardian brother, a head veil for my brother's wife, polluted face of son in-law.)¹³

This rhyme, as Hershman shows, reflects much of Punjabi kinship in it. On her wedding day, a woman's brother (honourably called 'vir') wears a turban, and the brother's wife a veil. The cursing of the son-in-law epitomises the strange bitter-sweetness of Punjabi relationships.¹⁴ The relationship of a woman with her parents' household was a strange one. She was brought up carefully as 'paraya dhan' (someone else's property) and after her marriage it was her husband and his household, which became her patriarchal world.

II

During the colonial period, while such practices remained a norm, there was an emergence of nationwide movements discussing the "woman's question". This question was not of "what do women want?" but "how can they be modernised?". New opportunities such as subordinate jobs in colonial administration (civil services and army) followed by professions like medicine, engineering, law coupled with the introduction of English education and printing press, produced a new middle class which began to redefine gender relations, to fit the changed social and cultural milieu.

Humiliated by their colonial status, the Indians of the late 19th century were obsessed with the issues of strength and power. They needed an explanation for what had led to their defeat at the colonial hands and if they accepted the European theory that the status of women was integral to the strength of the civilisation and the European conclusion that Indian customs were degrading to a woman's status, they gained an explanation for their defeat and a prescription for reform.¹⁵ Hence, the reformers viewed women as their subjects, to be reformed through social action, education and legislation. In the early 20th century, Punjab too was caught in the maelstrom of reform, with movements like Arya Samaj for the Hindus, the Singh Sabha for the Sikhs and Anjuman-e-Islamia for the Muslims of which the high caste middle class was an active participant.

It is in this context that Anshu Malhotra in her book, *Gender Caste and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab*, has attempted to probe gender relations among a middle class composed of high caste Hindus and Sikhs in the period between 1870 and 1920 in Punjab. While many reformist Sikhs and Hindus either denied or reconceptualised caste, the book draws attention to the ways in which older privileges shaped newer identities. This in turn had an impact on gender relations. As reformers took on the challenge of “modernity”, they developed new notions of an ideal femininity, underlying which were oppressive cultural practices. Thus, the old venerated ideal of the ‘pativrata’ was reinvented by the new elite to pin women down to the new role expectations demanded of them. If the pativrata wife became the ideal, its opposite was the wilful, obstinate, and sexually aggressive ‘kupatti’ (a quarrelsome woman) bent upon stripping men of their fragile honour. The ideal of wifely devotion, with all its material, social and cultural connotations allowed men to deal not only with wives but also widows, daughters, sisters and mothers.¹⁶

Through a study of the literary genre of ‘jhagras’ or ‘kissas’, Malhotra demonstrates that there was during this period a constant stress on the necessity of maintaining social norms, underlying which was a need to “control” female sexuality. In one of the ‘kissas’, Kani Variyam Singh delights his male audience in the description of a young girl’s beauty,

Kajal dhar gadke, chalen tu chatti kadke, madan naag chhadke...
(Underlining your eyes with kohl, you walk thrusting your chest like a snake on the ground.)¹⁷

However, the author is quick to point to the danger that could emanate from such uncontrolled sexuality and therefore the need to rein it through marriage. The father of the girl is shown to be so afraid that the girl will turn disreputable, metaphorically presented as the staining of his “white turban”, the mark of his honour, that he marries her off in hurry.

Hoi jo badkar hai kariye jhat biah, ujjal meri pag nun na kar deve siah
(Now that she is turning depraved, let us quickly marry her off, or she may stain my white turban).¹⁸

Similarly, Oldenburg demonstrates how the popular Punjabi legend of the celebrated 16th-century lovers, *Heer Ranjha* was given a new spin to show that shameless women could bring dishonour to their families. Ranjha was a handsome Muslim jat who was smitten by love for the beautiful Heer, of the Sial clan from Jhang in western Punjab. Heer was forcibly married by her parents to Khaidon, but yearned for Ranjha. They then eloped and the lovers’ elopement enraged the families on both sides. Heer’s father and brother relentlessly pursued the couple through the woods of Punjab and the two were accidentally separated. Heer was captured, poisoned and buried in a tomb. Before the internment was complete, Ranjha arrived on the spot, managed to get himself inside the tomb, and died next to his beloved. Their tragic end was blamed on Heer’s “immoral” and “unwomanly” behaviour, which brought dishonour to her clan.¹⁹

Thus, right from her childhood, there was a stress on the need to “control” a woman. She was to be trained to be a dutiful wife. Education was considered dangerous, as it promoted the location of women’s sphere outside the home, even though there were some girls’ schools. No wonder, an educated woman was often

described as westernised, sexually aggressive, and rejecting domestic drudgery, all symbolic either of the thwarting of patriarchal hegemony, or outside its sphere of control. As Rukman Devi, in the course of her interview recalls:

I along with my younger sister, were studying at the girls’ school in Gujranwala. Our father worked as a police officer with the ‘sarkar’. We were looked upon as more westernised in our outlook. My father’s relations often accused him of spoiling the family’s name as we used to often meet the daughters of English officials. Under their pressure, I was taken out from the school (in class VIII) while my sister was studying at the time of ‘batwara’. I was then made to assist my mother in household work.²⁰

There were serious impediments in education for girls. By 1926-27 only 110 girls had matriculated in Punjab, while 3,723 could be described as literate. By 1932-33, there was only one girl to five boys undergoing instruction, and most of this was confined to the urban areas.²¹ Even where learning was imparted to girls, the lessons were intended to suit them in their future role of being a pativrata wife. Gurmukh Singh, principal, Dev Samaj Girls High School, described the ideal of Hindu womanhood at the Hindu conference held at Ferozpur in December 1914:

[The woman]... has to keep the house neat and clean, to be a dutiful daughter and sister, to please her husband when he is tired and worried, treat him with a song and instrumental music at times, nurse and cheer him up when ill, comfort, console and counsel him in his difficulties and struggle for life, to cook his meals and practise household economy, to attend to his relatives and friends, to give birth to and bring up children, to act the ministering angel in his misfortunes and to heighten his joys and lessen his sorrows.²²

Thus, the importance of the performance of office work (‘naukri’) by men was underlined, and women were supposed to perform unconditional service (‘seva’) not only vis-à-vis their husbands but also towards the extended joint family. While performing that seva she was required to observe certain norms. A woman after her marriage was strictly to undertake ‘purdah’ and veil her face from all her husband’s senior kinsmen. She was to be restricted to the domestic domain, never disobey her elders and never to talk or laugh “shamelessly” with the male members of the household. As Kulwant Chabra recounted in the course of her interview:

We lived in a joint family, we had a ‘sanjha chuhla’ (joint kitchen) where all the womenfolk used to gather at night and cook in big ‘tandoors’ (fire burners). We observed purdah and served hot food to the men, while they sat in ‘charpais’ after a day long tiring work. When I was tired, I obviously did not like the system, but yes we gossiped and had a good time – where do you find such a system today? ²³

Today a woman in her 1980s, living in Jangpura, Kulwant Chabra, was then a young woman with four children, i e, three sons and a daughter. She recalls how in “those days” women could not come in front of men without purdah or with their hair open. They could not talk (unless in case of an emergency) with the male members of the extended family. She herself studied till class VIII, after which she was “honourably” married off to a railway employee. She was proficient in ‘bunai-kadhai’ (knitting and embroidery). She fondly remembers a “baby suit”, which she had gifted to one of her Muslim neighbour’s newborn child.

In sum, before Partition, most Punjabi women lived within strict patriarchal norms. There were considerable constraints on their mobility. Going out to work was unheard of. There were restrictions on spatial mobility to protect female chastity, virginity and family honour. This ideology underlying the practice of purdah and seclusion prevented girls from accessing schools. In the presence of family and social constraints, the customary and ritualistic norms expected of a widow were highly stringent. Not only was she considered inauspicious, a “necessary evil”, a burden on the family but her remarriage was also strictly prohibited.

The Punjab report of the census of India (1921) noted that in Punjab there were 27 widows under the age of five, 2,835 under the age of 10, 8,963 under 15 and 26,400 under the age of 20.²⁴ As Anshu Malhotra notes:

It was the pativrata wife who was promoted as the ideal for women to emulate, an ideal, which was meant to dictate women’s lives even after the death of the husband. Remarriage of widows involved making a mockery of that ideal, as it could only be pushed at the cost of the logic of devoted wife, for how could a woman, who married two men be a faithful pativrata?²⁵

Charu Gupta in her book, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community*, talks of the ambivalent attitude of Sanatan Dharmists and Arya Samajists in the late 19th century towards widows. The Sanatan Dharmists, supported largely by brahmanical patriarchy, resisted widow remarriage. They defended enforced widowhood and argued that widows must suppress their sexuality. Stringent codes of behaviour ensured that licentious impulses would not occur. The widow was not to decorate her body in any way nor eat hot (‘tamasic’) food. She could not sit among men or sleep on a soft bed, neither apply perfume nor adorn herself with flowers. The use of ‘mehndi’, jewellery, betel and ‘kajal’ was prohibited.²⁶ Orthodox Hindus stated that if widow remarriage was accepted, love between husband and wife would greatly decrease, and wives dissatisfied with their husbands would poison them. It was even argued that widows would kill their legitimate children in order to remarry.²⁷

Arya Samaj reformists, guided by certain humanist and social zeal, argued for widow remarriage only for the virgin widows. Reformists located themselves from the outset in what they regarded as “real” tradition. They did not concede that they were pushing for innovation, rather they claimed to restore the glory of the Hindu past. They pointed out that they were attacking specific social evils and priestly despotism while preserving the general authority of the Vedas. They thus gave evidence from the ‘shastras’ that if a widow had no sexual relationship with her husband and she was a virgin, then she could be remarried. However, one of their main arguments advocating widow remarriage remained that widows were unable to control their lust, and that this led to abortions, infanticide and prostitution.²⁸

Thus, a widow in Punjab was to follow a plain, simple life. Their presence was considered inauspicious and they were denied participation in festivals and family and community celebrations. They were asked to lead restricted and secluded lives. The widow was a cook and a servant, a nurse and a housekeeper. Even if she showed a desire to keep herself busy by studying, working or by any other means, she was rebuked. As Leela Devi who had lost her husband in an accident in 1938 recalls:

I was all of 12 years when my parents married me off in Punjab and was all of 14 years when my husband died. Since then I was seen as a mark of misfortune for the entire family and as a widow was made to live in seclusion. I was sent back to my parents’

house by my in-laws as they considered me inauspicious, casting a black shadow on the family. At my parent’s house too I faced ostracism. I was no longer allowed to play or talk to outsiders. The whole day I worked towards the household chores. Once I showed my desire to study at which point my ‘bhabhi’ (brother’s wife) remarked, ‘yeh banegi mem’! (she wants to be a ‘mehsahib’). Later, I was remarried by the Arya Samajists to Sukh Ram (1949) who died in Partition violence, but my life as a Partition widow in Delhi was different.²⁹

III

When the Partition plan was formally announced in June 1947, to most women (as to men) it meant something very vague, something that happened at the level of “high politics”. They did not have an idea of what would comprise “Pakistan” and what would be retained in “Hindustan”. However, soon panic followed. As riots, lootings, killings, rapes, abduction, forcible conversions and violence spread, people were forced to move “out” of their “original” homelands into strange, “alien” places across the border. Many innocently believed it to be a “temporary” feature. People hastily locked their homes and left overnight with some cash and jewellery assuming that once the violence would subside they would come back, if not to settle, at least to collect their belongings, sell their houses and settle professional and business matters. As Kanta Seth asserted, ‘Kaun ujadna chahta tha’? (who wanted to be uprooted?).³⁰

Some people were however, forced to move “out” without any material possessions as they were either looted before moving or were raided and plundered on their way by men of “other” communities. In the wake of communal frenzy, people lost everything in a very short span of time. Most of the women still do not understand why people fought so bitterly during ‘batwara’? Why could Nehru and Jinnah not contain the riots? Why did they (the innocent) have to be victimised for something they were not responsible?

Amidst communal turmoil women were targeted as the chief victims of humiliation at the hands of men of rival communities. Many witnessed loss of homes, murders, lootings and abuses, and were victims of rapes. There were those who were abducted, forcibly converted or married. Innumerable women were separated from their families, lived in open refugee camps and gradually made the move to step out to work. Their journey was a tough one, which continues even today as people have not recovered yet from the trauma of Partition. The energies of almost two generations have been employed in rebuilding lives shattered by the violent uprooting of Partition.

In spite of the utter confusion, psychological imbalance, deep pain, emotional strains and losses, women “picked up the pieces” of their lives to adjust to new places in the capital city of Delhi. Some of them became beneficiaries of state help, as following Partition, the Indian state assuming itself to be the parent protector (‘mai-baap’), undertook the task of rehabilitation under the supervision of various social workers. In September 1947, the ministry of relief and rehabilitation set up a women’s section, with the purpose to provide them with necessary skills for employment. Women were offered training in teaching, nursing, embroidery, knitting, stitching, typing, pickle making and basket weaving, etc. at various vocational training and technical production centres.³¹ Most of these centres were established between February and August 1948. To begin with there were eight centres in Delhi and by 1951 their numbers had increased to 13.³² Besides,

various cooperative societies also sprang up for generating employment for women. An employment bureau was set up in coordination with the ministry of labour for placing women in professions.³³ Many women ventured into self sustenance, they worked as domestic helps, did packaging jobs in mills and factories, sold newspapers, taught in schools and started small kiosks and later initiated their families into business. Through such initiatives, refugee women have made a world of difference to the economy, society and the expanding urban morphology of Delhi. Today, Delhi has expanded to four times its size in just half a century and even as the city continues to grow, it retains the edgy character of being the “refugee” city.

While going out to work arose clearly out of exigencies (chiefly financial) yet this phenomenon altered the lives of women as in the course of this process a lot of women did break away with the old Punjabi patriarchal norms. Most of them came from families who had controlled their mobility, right from childhood onwards, but in this period of migration, traditional restrictions on their mobility could not be imposed, and as refugees they lived in the open surroundings of camps and were exposed to the harsh realities. Many women were raped by men of not only other caste but the “other” community. Those who were abducted went through several hands. Begum Anis Kidwai, a prominent social worker of the times sums up the trauma of the abducted girls as follows:

To come from a small village and have to live in a camp, then on the order of the police to leave that camp and join a kafila. Being attacked on the way and following that, the abduction of all young women. Then as if they were loot, their division among the police, the army, the attackers: these were the things on which Hindustan and Pakistan were made.³⁴

Thus, the notions of female chastity, virginity and family honour which were upheld in the pre-Partition days could not be universally adhered to. In many cases the state tried to recover the abducted women and place them where they “rightfully belonged” and many women despite terrible fears of their families not accepting them back were forcibly reintegrated with their families, though many chose not to come back and carried on to rebuild their lives despite tremendous hardships. Such facts are further highlighted in the interviews, for instance, the one conducted with Resham who tells us:

I being a Muslim by birth belonged to Mianwali (now in Pakistan). Jugal Kishore was a Hindu who lived in the same village and we used to love each other and had plans to marry. At the time of Partition he was threatened by the rioters and asked to leave. Our marriage in that situation would have been impossible. Jugal’s family moved to Jammu and both of us fled to Delhi, married each other and took a house on rent in Arjan Nagar. Our neighbours, (Karam Chand Kohli’s family) were from Rawalpindi. We developed family relations with them, I used to cook ‘kababs’ for them and they treated me like their daughter. In September 1950, Jugal showed a desire to visit his parents in Jammu. We knew they would never accept me but he was adamant to go, but only never to come back. I do not know what happened, ‘bauji’ (Karam Chand Kohli) tried to find out but we could not find his whereabouts. Someone said he was killed, others said he had committed suicide. I was shattered and grieved. I had no one here, and could not go back to Mianwali, my brothers would have slit my throat or killed me as I had lived with their enemy and was “impure”. Bauji then got me a small job in a nearby shop of packaging items like pulses, etc. Later he married me to Kundan Lal, one of his employees in his factory. I accepted the decision

of my fate and carried on, struggled to make a living and rebuild my life. Later we bought a small house in Tilak Nagar, continued to work, bought a moped and had five children. My ‘mayeka’ (parental house) is still in Arjan Nagar. Kundan Lal died few years back and my children are all married and busy in their own lives. Despite several hardships, Delhi after Partition gave me a new identity.³⁵

Many families witnessed the loss of kinsmen who were either killed, separated on the way, or chose to stay back and in that case, Partition resulted in the break-up of joint families. Even where they were retained, women in camps which were cramped places, could not be kept secluded all the time. For example, they could not afford to veil their faces from male members all day long.

In many families the onus of sustenance fell single-handedly on to the women as they were either the only surviving adults or the men had gone insane or were physically injured in Partition violence. In such circumstances they became the sole earning member and this resulted in a prolonged struggle leading to delay or no marriage for some of them. As Kanta Seth puts it:

I was all of 17 or 18 at the time of Partition, had two younger brothers and a ‘bhabhi’ (elder brother’s wife) who survived Partition. To save us from the riots, our parents and elder brother had sent us in advance to Ropar where my ‘chacha’ (father’s brother) lived. Later, my parents and brother were killed in the riots. Now the whole responsibility of sustaining the family fell on me as my brothers were too young. We came down to Delhi with my father’s old friend, who lived here. He got me into a training centre for ‘silai’ (stitching) at Pahar Ganj. After that I worked with the cooperative society to sustain ourselves and to educate my younger brothers. Bhabhi was remarried by a group of Arya Samaji social workers in Ropar. But who was to look for a groom for me? Moreover where was the time for marriage? I got married at the age of 32 years, only after my brother started earning. ‘Maine bahut mehnat kitti hai’ (I have worked very hard). I used to travel by bus to my centre, had all sorts of men making passes at me. Sometimes it used to be dark by the time I would return at which point our neighbours used to taunt and tease my brothers. I do not want to recall those bitter days...*kya fayeda?* (what’s the use).³⁶

It is worth noting that all those women who underwent hardship always insisted on their daughters getting educated and thus becoming self-reliant. Some of them were instrumental in educating their children. Those mothers, who had felt their own vulnerability acutely, viewed getting a degree as crucial, as this would enable their daughters to get jobs if necessary. This did not mean that education would lead immediately to employment but that it would equip them for it. Women (and men) after the Partition were very keen that their daughters should not have to face a similar situation. With the dispersal of the joint family, sisters and daughters could no longer be expected to be looked after by their male kin. Hence, it became expedient to equip them with requisite skills so that they could fend for themselves. Partition had widened the channels for educational mobility.

Education for young girls was also encouraged by the state. The January 1949 issue of *Rehabilitation Review* records the fact that in Delhi 100 girls were enrolled in a Mehrauli residential school for girls and 225 in Bal Niketan and Gram Sevika Shiksha Kendra. Eight primary schools with a strength of 1,000 children – half of them girls – were started. The number of girls receiving training in nursing was 10, in basic education

25 and in fruit and vegetable preservation under the ministry of agriculture 40.³⁷

Indeed, even a casual glance at the education records for the years 1946-47, indicates a significant shift in the enrolment of girls in schools and colleges. Not all of this can be put down to Partition but Delhi being largely settled by refugees the influence could be significant. During the year 1946-47 the number of girls' colleges in Delhi was only two with an enrolment of 580 students. By 1949-50 the number of women enrolled in Delhi had increased to 1,927. Clearly a large part of this difference is on account of refugees going in for higher studies in Delhi.³⁸

Partition produced a large number of unattached women. In December 1949, Rameshwari Nehru stated that the number of unattached women being looked after by the government in October 1948 was 45,374.³⁹ A large number of these were widows. The government set up a special section within the ministry of rehabilitation to administer to their needs. The state took over the widows of 1947 as its own responsibility. In acknowledging this, and by stepping in to oversee their reabsorption into the social and economic life of the country, it assumed itself to be a benign and secular agency which could not subscribe to or reinforce traditional biases against widows. This is not to say that in the course of rehabilitation traditional patriarchal attitudes suddenly and miraculously disappeared, yet Partition made for some uncommon changes in their situation.

The Congress appointed a Central Relief Committee (with Sucheta Kriplani as secretary) and a United Council for Relief and Welfare (with Lady Mountbatten as chairperson). These associations operated in various refugee camps and relief centres and cooperated with the government in setting up schools, hospitals and production and training centres to rehabilitate widows. The aims were to establish vocational centres and rehabilitation homes, introduce programmes of education, give orphaned children in adoption, arranging remarriages of young women and granting financial aid and employment.⁴⁰

While Partition for widows meant loss of family, of residence, of community and of social and economic status, yet this very disruption brought with it changes in traditional patriarchal attitudes toward them. The post-Partition state facilitated their entry into the economic mainstream and into dignified selfhood. As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin rightly assert, in this scenario the ritual and customary sanctions against widows were temporarily suspended. Widows who were earlier treated as ritually inauspicious, socially stigmatised and traditionally shunned, were now in the absence of family, assimilated into the country's economic and social mainstream.⁴¹ Since these women were seen as "widowed by history", the state stepped in as a guardian and enabled them to do away with a life of seclusion. Instead of being socially ostracised, some of them (specially the younger ones) were remarried and thus taboos regarding the sexuality of widows were temporarily relaxed. Those who remained single, in order to support themselves went out to work and in this process interacted



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with outsiders. At work, they could not possibly follow purdah all the time, neither was it demanded of them. They kept their heads uncovered, wore coloured 'dupattas' and could no longer be kept in seclusion. As Jaspreet Kaur, a resident of Malviya Nagar now in her 90s tells:

I was married to 'sardarji' when I was all of 16 years. I hardly knew writing as I had only studied till class three or four (I do not remember). My whole day in Lahore would pass looking after my ailing mother-in-law and doing household work. Sardarji used to run a paint factory. My 'jeth' and 'devar' (husband's brothers) all worked with him in the factory. I could not imagine talking to them bareheaded. Once, I laughed over a joke with my devar and my mother-in-law did not eat her food that day. I used to be indoors, though going out to market in the day time was allowed...during Partition riots sardarji was killed, I heard the gunshot that killed him. I came to Delhi with his brothers and their families and my two daughters. I was a widow, but in refugee camps, could not cover my head all day long. I used to wash clothes for others... Finally we got a house in Malviya Nagar as a 'muawza' (compensation). But after paying the meagre amount for the house we were left with no money. Soon my jeth got a job in Ludhiana and he shifted with his family. I lived here with my devar and his family. While he opened a small shop here, I joined the professional three months 'silai' (stitching) centre at Kalkaji. It was a complete change of lifestyle, now it was all about striving to sustain. I used to travel by local buses, at times walk down to save some pennies. Of course, I could not afford to keep myself indoors! As in that case how could I have brought up my children? 'Main kissi te bhar nahin panna चाहन्दि si' (I did not want to be a burden on anyone). Gradually, I started supplying knitted and stitched baby suits to a wholesale supplier in Malviya Nagar. Myself and 'bhabhi' (devar's wife) knitted the whole day. Sometimes I was required to be out late in the evenings. Knitting whole day made my fingers swell... I hoped to educate my two daughters and contribute to my devar's income. I did not cover my head all the time, it was not possible, neither was it asked for. I married my daughters off after educating them till class X. I worked very hard towards it... But thank 'wahe guru' that I had a supportive family.⁴²

Today, Jaspreet Kaur popularly called 'biji' by her kin and neighbours, is an active member of women's satsang in Malviya Nagar.

IV

Partition then produced enormous disjunctions with far-reaching changes. Displacement and violent uprooting caused by this cataclysmic event pushed millions into carving survival strategies in new surroundings. Among the worst affected were millions of hapless women whose vulnerability came out more acutely in forced migration. Amidst abduction, rapes, loss of family and separation, however, these women displayed tremendous resilience and exemplary courage. They became subjects of governmental intervention, as the state saw them as not only the repositories of familial and community honour but also of national honour. They found their new shelters in the open surroundings of refugee camps or in cramped refugee settlements, which sprang up all over Delhi following the Partition.

These changed surroundings did not allow them to be simply reframed by older norms of female chastity, mobility, education and work. Hence, they enlarged their social spaces, broke taboos around widowhood, altered the notion of a

dutiful pativrata, acquired mobility and education as well self-reliance and dignity. This is not to say that the Partition was a liberating experience. Certainly, it did dissolve (though temporarily) strict distinctions between the private and the public. However, their entry into the visible sphere only denoted an extension of their duties as the caring and self-sacrificing sex. It increased their responsibilities in addition to regular household work. Women subsequently in no way acquired the agency to question their everyday life problems, deep-rooted in the patriarchal social order, which required social revolutionary efforts. [47]

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Notes

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- 3 Paul Hershman, *Punjabi Kinship and Marriage*, Delhi, 1981, p 57.
- 4 Karuna Chanana, op cit, p 168.
- 5 Paul Hershman, op cit, p 173.
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- 7 Ibid, p 156.
- 8 Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *Dowry Murder: Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime*, Delhi, 2002, p 54.
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- 24 Census of Punjab, Punjab Report, 1921, p 204.
- 25 Anshu Malhotra, op cit, Delhi, 2001, p 94.
- 26 Charu Gupta, op cit, p 303.
- 27 Ibid, p 304.
- 28 Ibid, p 305.
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- 30 Interview with Kanta Seth, Pahar Ganj, Delhi, July 11, 2001.
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- 33 Report of the Women's Section, op cit.
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- 35 Interview with Resham, Arjan Nagar, Delhi, October 4, 2001.
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- 38 Ibid, p 97.
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- 40 Rameshwari Nehru Papers, op cit.
- 41 Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries*, New Delhi, 1999, p 162.
- 42 Interview with Jaspreet Kaur, Malviya Nagar, Delhi, July 14, 2001.