

## Listening to unknown voices from the past: Women and their engagement with Partition

### An Abstract

The Paper deals with the oral narratives of numerous unknown women who were survivors of what we refer to as partition of the South-Asian subcontinent. The voices thereafter referred to are, published, recorded, voices as a result of the initiative of numerous academicians, scholars and researchers of the recent past. The impressions formed from the study of these memoirs, diaries and interviews aim to support this People's project by enabling researchers and myself to learn from the methods adopted by the erstwhile researchers, by drawing inferences from opinions and conclusions, to avoid pitfalls exhibited by these researchers and to steer clear of repetitions which might drive readers to label it as plagiaristic.

While the division of India into India and West Pakistan and East Pakistan in 1947 and subsequently into Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971 was equally felt as a blow to men, women and children, it is important to question why does the impact of this cataclysmic event need a gendered study? More importantly, with the stereotyped depiction of women as 'victims' and passive recipients of torture, rape as well as dole, what new do we expect to elicit from aged and ailing interviewees at the twilight of their life waiting to die peacefully in the P.L camps?

Interviews cited in this paper however reveal complicated states of mind. Is it that the women want to defy her configuration as a 'spoil of war' as a 'sexual commodity' by the state patriarchal machinery or is it that the women just hope to get away unnoticed from the greedy eyes of soldiers, B.S.F and men et al while crossing the borders and manage to live a life thereafter? What is it? Is it a psychosis of fear or an act of defiance? It is essentially these doubts and questions which drive a researcher to undertake a segregated study of woman refugees of partition.

Maurice Halbwach in her influential book *On Collective Memory* talks of 'mental illness' which could occur if there is a 'breakdown of contact between thought and things...so that the victim finds himself in a fluid and strange environment totally lacking familiar reference points' (1).

According to Halbwach, extraordinary events are also fitted in this spatial framework, because they occasion in the group a more intense awareness of its past and present, the bonds attaching it to physical locale gaining greater clarity in the very moment of their destruction. (2)

The only way the family can remain united (even though neuro- mentally) is to recall their old home and layout.

Scholars like ArchitBasuGuhaChoudhury, PallaviChakravortyGhosal, Rita Manchanda or JoyaChatterjee however refuse to homogenize experiences of women as passive survivors of

Partition with the only comfort being to repeat their tales of suffering. While it is evident from some interviews that women from very educated families and elite groups could ward off the seeming and real threats of partition, women from middle and lower class adopted different strategies.

The negligence and state apathy pushed many of these surviving women to become breadwinners, activists and even messengers of peace. The paper thus argues that so far memoirs and memories of women reveal that the impact of Partition on the Bengali migrant women has proved to be far from being homogeneous. On the other hand, it has been an extremely complex and complicated phenomenon on different groups of women.

By-

Dr. Sharmistha Chatterjee (Sriwastav)

Associate Professor and Head,

Department of English,

Aliah University, Kolkata.