

Essay  
**Suicide and the Partition of India:  
A Need for Further Investigation**

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**Abstract:** A search was undertaken to document cases of suicide during the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947. Cases were found for India and for women. The experience of those in Pakistan and of men was hard to locate. There is a need for further investigation to provide a fuller picture of suicide during this period.

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The plan to partition India (into India and a regionally divided Pakistan) was announced on June 3, 1947. The movement of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to the other territory began in earnest in August and September, 1947. There followed a massive disruption as more than ten million people moved from one country to the other across the western border alone. Villages were abandoned, crops left to rot, and families separated by the new borders. The governments of India and Pakistan were completely unprepared for this.

But more than this disruption, there was a genocide as members of one religion slaughtered and raped those of the other religions. Estimates of the dead range from 200,000 to two million, while about 75,000 women were abducted and raped by men of other religions and sometimes by men of their own religion. In particular, the humiliation of women was foremost, including raping and disfiguring women in front of their relatives, tattooing and branding them with 'Pakistan, Zindabad' or 'Hindustan, Zindabad' marking a half-moon on their breasts or genitalia, and amputating their breasts.

To prevent capture, torture and death at the hands of others or forced religious conversions, people murdered their own children, spouses, parents and other relatives. Some also committed suicide. Pennebaker (2000) mentions women who jumped into wells or set themselves on fire,

sometimes individually, but on occasions all the women in a family together.

This topic has political and socio-cultural aspects, and it is easy to offend one or more groups by discussing partition. The focus here is on suicidal behavior. Some of the articles and books cited do have a bias, but the issue of suicide during such times of genocide is of scholarly importance. This essay will mention the apparent bias of the reports and try to find some "facts" independent of the bias.

***The Indian Perspective***

Butalia (2000) talked to and recorded the experiences of those in one region during this crisis, the Punjab. She heard from her informants tales of hundreds of women jumping into wells (and sometimes being forced to jump) to avoid capture, rape, abduction and forced conversions. One informant reported watching more than ninety Sikh women jump into a well in her village in Rawalpindi on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947, when it was under attack from Muslims. The informant jumped in too with her children, but survived because the water was no longer deep enough for her to drown. When the well filled up, villages dragged the women who were still alive out of the well (p. 35).<sup>1</sup> The incident was reported in the April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947, edition of *The Statesman*, an English daily newspaper. The informant's brother-in-law had already killed his mother, sister, wife, daughter and uncle, and her daughter was also killed. Before they jumped, the women were given some opium mixed in water. The brother-in-law poured kerosene on himself and jumped into a fire and, later perhaps, his son also

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<sup>1</sup> The newspaper accounts reported that three women were saved.

committed suicide.<sup>2</sup> Later, India's Prime Minister, Nehru, visited the well, and the English closed it up.

This incident has acquired iconic significance, illustrating the bravery and manliness of the Sikhs, although Butalia points out that it was women who died. *The Statesman* compared the "sacrifice" of such women to the mass immolations of Rajput women when their husbands were killed in wars. Those women who survived are typically seen as "inferior" to those who died. The deaths of those who died are seen as "saving" those who survived these times. But it is likely that the villagers would have been killed, abducted and raped if the attackers had not withdrawn. Butalia, however, notes the failure of the men in such incidents to defend their village and retaliate, but instead acquiesce in the murder and suicide of their family members.<sup>3</sup> Butalia also questions the extent to which the suicides of these women were "voluntary."<sup>4</sup>

Another survivor interviewed by Butalia reported seeing a girl, who was being dragged away, jump into a canal to escape and another who jumped off a roof to avoid rape and abduction (Butalia, 2000, p. 271).

Butalia recounted one story from information obtained from newspapers and memoirs. Zainab, a young Muslim girl, was abducted as her family tried to move from India to Pakistan, and sold to a Hindu, Buta Singh, who married her. They came to love each other and had children, but a program was set up by the two governments to "rescue" abducted women and return them to their new countries. Zainab was found and forced to leave Buta Singh.<sup>5</sup> Buta Singh tried to change the decision and to go to Pakistan. He converted to Islam and applied for a Pakistani passport. He was refused. He applied for a short-term visa which was granted. When he arrived, he found that Zainab had already been married to a cousin. Zainab, almost certainly under pressure from her family, rejected Singh in front of a magistrate, and the next day Singh threw himself under a train and died (Butalia, 2000, p. 103). His suicide note asked to be buried in Zainab's village, but the villagers refused this request, and Singh was buried back in Lahore in India. This tale has become a legend, with books and a movie based on it.

Menon and Bhasin (1998) also noted that women jumped into wells or set themselves on fire either singly or in groups. The Fact Finding Team set up by the Indian government recorded that, in

Bewal Village (in the Rawalpindi district), many women committed suicide by self-immolation on March 10, 1947. They put their bedding and cots in a pile, set fire to it and jumped onto it. A school teacher, whose family was in a camp that was attacked on August 26, 1947, reported that his daughter had a man try to strangle her three times, but she survived despite losing consciousness (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 42). Many women carried vials of poison around their neck so as to have the means for suicide easily available should it become necessary (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 46).

One male informant told Menon and Bhasin that his town of Muzaffarabad was raided in October 17, 1947. The Hindus were overpowered and surrendered. Their money was taken, and they were marched away. His three sisters swallowed poison, and then several women jumped off a bridge in order to drown in the river. A female informant who survived this incident recalled that women committed suicide using opium (which was slow) and then using a faster-acting poison. Another informant told of a woman who tried to throw her 10-month old baby on a burning pile, but someone saved the baby. Later the mother and this baby escaped and hid in a cave. When the mother heard that her husband had been killed (falsely), she swallowed poison and died. Three women in this village refused to take the poison or kill their children, and later they were accused of cowardice, their "lack of courage in facing death" (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 54).

Menon and Bhasin (1998), like many others, reject the term "suicide" for these deaths. In their opinion, the women did not voluntarily endorse the honor code and choose death. If they had not committed suicide, they would have been killed by their own kin and neighbors to "protect their honor." Menon and Bhasin note that acquiescence does not imply consent, and submitting is not the same as agreeing. Pandey (2001) prefers the term "martyrdom" to describe the suicides on the Hindus and Sikhs.

On the other hand, these women were caught in a horrendous bind. They faced rape, mutilation and torture. Some individuals might choose suicide over this. However, the role of the men in murdering their kin and forcing suicide upon them took away the women's freedom of choice. It is unknown what these women might have done if the men had not exerted pressure. These women grew up in a culture that held these values, and so they may have been enculturated sufficiently so that they would have chosen suicide "freely."

In contrast to the myth that has grown up around the suicides of Hindu and Sikh women during this time, Pandey (2001) pointed out that some women did flee. He reports that some boys were disguised as girls for these escapes to escape death if they were captured. Some argued that it made sense to convert to Islam in order to have their lives spared

<sup>2</sup> Most of the accounts of this incident mention only women, but Butalia's informant said that boys jumped in also.

<sup>3</sup> Butalia notes that women were sometimes traded to the attackers in return for freedom.

<sup>4</sup> Pandey (2001) notes that the village had been under attack for three days, and the Hindus and Sikhs had fought, but could no longer hold out.

<sup>5</sup> Supposedly, Singh's brothers feared that they might lose his property to Zainab if Singh died and so reported the situation to the authorities. Zainab's family wanted her back so that she could claim her property in Pakistan.

and, although some of those who advocated this were murdered by their kin, some Sikh families did convert. Pandey also notes that a few families, on both sides of the border, were willing to sacrifice young women to abduction in order to buy security for the family (Pandey, 2001, p. 195).

#### *Problems With These Accounts*

The reports cited above have two biases: (1) they are written from the Indian perspective, and (2) they are written from a feminist perspective. The result is that it much more difficult to locate examples of suicide during partition in Pakistan and in men.

When Indian authors write about the mass suicide of Sikh women in the village in Rawalpindi mentioned above, they note that the village was under attack by Muslims (as were many others in the region). They fail to note that Sikhs attacked Muslim villages in the Jullundur and Amritsar districts, as well as packed refugee trains heading for Pakistan, often operating from the safety of neighboring Sikh princely states (Talbot, 1998). Thus, the violence was perpetrated by all sides, and it is hard to place sole blame on any one group, save perhaps the British, Indian and Pakistani authorities who failed to anticipate the horrendous problems that partition was likely to create and, therefore, failed to prepare adequately for partition.

#### *The Pakistan Experience*

What was the experience of the Muslims during partition? In commenting on this, Indian writers minimize the trauma for the Muslims. They assert that Muslims were less concerned with the purity and impurity of women, and so they would have been more willing to take women back who had been raped or abducted by Hindus. Muslim women, they argue, would not have been stigmatized by their society (e.g., Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 77). It would, of course, be useful to have a Muslim perspective on this issue.

During the repatriation of women back to their home country, Menon and Bhasin (1998) cite a report that Muslim women abducted by Hindus often refused to leave their new homes, and some threatened suicide when threatened with forcible repatriation.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that suicidal behavior was not unknown in the Muslim population.

#### *Conclusions*

Clearly, a large number of suicides occurred during this violent and turbulent time. However, the majority of cases located are of Indian women. Cases occurring in Pakistan and by men are

rare. There is a need for further investigation in order to arrive at a fuller picture of suicide during this era.

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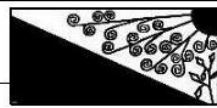
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<sup>6</sup> Menon and Bhasin note that 20,728 Muslim women and 9,032 Hindu and Sikh women were repatriated after partition.

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