The Violence of Partition

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Unit: Independence and Partition
Lesson: The Violence of Partition
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Institute of Lifelong Learning, University of Delhi
# The Violence of Partition

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12.3: The violence of Partition

Introduction: an unfinished story

In 1947 Rashpal Ahluwalia was only ten months old. His family lived in Lyallpur in Punjab. Over many generations, they had struck deep roots in their village and although the odd family member would go away on work, or travel to Amritsar and other parts of the Punjab to see relatives, the thought of leaving their home and village permanently had never occurred to them. In August of 1947, all this changed. The British decided, as they were leaving after nearly two centuries of dominance and rule, to partition India into two countries, India and Pakistan. In doing so, they claimed they were only giving in to the demands of Indian political leaders and political parties whose actions made it clear to them that Hindus and Muslims could no longer live together. As proof of this they cited the demand made by one of these leaders, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and supported by a political party, the Muslim League, for a separate homeland for Muslims, Pakistan.

However the British themselves had followed a policy of divide and rule and the division that they now cited as evidence of differences between Hindus and Muslims was largely of their own creation, even though it eventually came to be accepted, and in some cases even seen as the only possible solution, by Indians of all communities. In the years that have followed, historians and researchers have discussed and argued about how and why the decision to partition the country came about, who wanted it more – the British, the Congress Party or the Muslim League – and about whether it provided the sort of solution that it was meant to provide – putting people of a similar religious identity together in the assumption that they would not then fight with each other. Some people hold that Partition was bound to happen because of the deep differences between Hindus and Muslims (despite the fact that they had so far lived in reasonable harmony), others lay the responsibility at the door of the leaders, and some target the rulers. This chapter does not go into these details, which will be dealt with elsewhere.

For Rashpal, however, none of this had any meaning. He was an infant, and knew little. Like many others, his family too was worried by the rumours of Partition and was fearful and concerned about what the future might hold. If India was to be divided, where would they go? There was talk of the Hindus wanting India, the Muslims wanting Pakistan, but what about the Sikhs, the Parsis, the Christians, the Dalits and others – what did they want? And if they were able to say what they wanted, would anyone even listen? In the days and months leading up to Partition tension and fear were palpable, particularly in north India. The British had decided that Partition was to be on religious lines, a country would be carved out for Muslims so that the demand for a separate homeland could be met. But where would that country be? There were nowhere within India where Muslims and Hindus did not live together. If a separate country was to be created, would that mean that people would have to leave their homes and go? What would happen to their fields, their jobs, to schools, to banks? Tension grew as all these questions remained unanswered. Many did not believe the change would be permanent, or that it would affect them. After all, they said, ‘kings and rulers do change but when have the people had to change?’ But some who felt the danger was real had already begun to leave their homes and move to safer places. Others called their family members back from where they were, fearing for their safety.
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Rashpal’s grandparents had also taken such a decision and had called the entire extended family together from different parts of Punjab for precisely this reason. They felt that safety lay in numbers. However, as the tension grew, the elders of the family were forced to acknowledge that this decision could have been wrong. So fraught was the atmosphere that people no longer knew whom to trust, and even lifelong friends now began to seem like enemies, especially if they belonged to the other religion. Indeed, religion now virtually became the only way to identify a person – instead of seeing themselves as farmers, professionals, villagers, city dwellers, rich, poor, single, married, old, young, people began to see themselves as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh – and even the political discussions at the time mirrored this. Early in August Rashpal’s grandparents decided that the family should move to Amritsar – it was becoming increasingly clear that Amritsar would go to India – and they joined a large kafila, a column of people, travelling mainly on foot to cross the border into India. Just short of Amritsar the kafila was attacked by a large mob of people. Virtually everyone from Rashpal’s family – including his mother and sister – was killed. He too, was hit with a machete on his neck and arm, and left for dead. But he survived because, after the attackers left, a young boy who had hidden behind some bushes, came out and started to move away to make his way to Amritsar when he saw that the infant lying on the ground was still alive. He picked him up and wrapped him in his pagdi, taking him to a hospital in Amritsar where the child was looked after and healed.

Value addition: did you know?

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<th>Graphics showing what divided India would look like</th>
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<td>Did you know that while discussions for Partition were going on, one of the ways in which these were represented in the media was through maps. Many actual maps of India, produced at the time, showed Muslim and Hindu majority areas and speculated on what divided India would look like. Apart from this, there were also graphic depictions which showed maps with a part of India cut in half, or two tigers fighting over territory. The following two images show the covers of Time magazine, one before and one after Partition.</td>
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From one story to many

Like Rashpal’s family, hundreds of thousands of people died in the violence of Partition. There is no accurate count of how many died, how many were abducted, how many were wounded and hurt. Nor do we have enough information about who the attackers were, where they came from, what role the army and the police played, and why people who had so far lived in some sort of social contract, now began to turn on each other and do violence to each other. Information on all of these, and other aspects, so essential for us to be able to understand what happened and why, and how it can be avoided in the future, is hard to come by. Although in some instances families reported deaths and losses, many did not because their first priority was flight, and safety and shelter for those who had survived. Further, even the records we do have, have not yet been made fully available to scholars and researchers, perhaps because there is a concern on the part of the State that the material may be too explosive and may lead to further polarization and violence. Thus someone like Rashpal, and hundreds of thousands of others like him, who may wish to find out more about the circumstances that shaped their lives in particular ways, are unable to do so because of a paucity of information.

What we do know (from available records and survivors’ accounts) is that for several months before Partition actually happened, and increasingly as it became clear that it was inevitable, and that the new borders would be drawn on religious lines, fear and uncertainty took a firm grip. Incidents of mass violence began to take place in different parts of the country – although by and large they remained confined to northern and eastern India. Political leaders tried to dispel this growing sense of insecurity, again and
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again they advised people not to panic, not to leave their homes and run away. In many instances people heeded this advice, for no one really believed - or wanted to believe – that the division would be permanent, and people did not want to abandon their homes. But as the violence grew closer, and as it became clear that political leaders and parties were not averse to using this growing violence for their own ends, whipping up passions and trying to collect more and more supporters, people began to flee.

Soon, what was a sporadic trickle, turned into a great big stream. Millions of people, sometimes entire Kasbahs, abandoned their homes and joined the great caravans that were crossing borders on both sides, Hindus and Sikhs moving east to India and Muslims moving west to Pakistan. They went by train, by car, bus, air and on foot. They left behind divided families, destroyed homes, rotting crops, abandoned villages. It is believed that between 10-12 million people moved or were forced to move, and that somewhere between 250,000 to one million people died. Sexual violence too was widespread, over 75,000 women are said to have been abducted, raped, forcibly converted, sold into prostitution – by men of the ‘other’ religion but sometimes also by men of their own religion who used the opportunity provided by the general atmosphere of violence and the breakdown of law and order, to perpetrate sexual violence. Although we do not have much evidence from women who lived through such sexual violation – because it is always difficult for women to talk about rape and sexual violation as often, despite being the victims, they are the ones who are held guilty by society – we do have fictional accounts by well known writers such as Sadat Hasan Manto, and others that testify to this.

Incidents of mass violence spread all over northern and eastern India, with mass migrations sometimes being caused by violence and sometimes resulting in violence. Although Punjab was the site of some of the worst violence, the first incidents can actually be traced to pre Partition Bengal where serious rioting preceded the provincial elections of 1946. Some historians have argued that this violence was deliberately created and sustained by cynical political manipulation, so that it would eventually lead to an acceptance of Partition (Brass 2003 (2), 76-77). Others have even gone so far as to ask whether the violence took place because of Partition or whether it was actually used to create the conditions in which Partition could seem acceptable. (Satya Rai, quoted in Brass 2003 (2), endnote no 8). What is clear is that on both sides, the western and the eastern, the violence and migration of Partition radically changed the demographics of the areas from which people fled, and those to which they fled. At one time, as most weavers, midwives, tailors, craftspeople left the city of Delhi, it became difficult to access the things they made. For women, it became virtually impossible to find trained midwives. At another, if cultivators, peasants, sweepers, doctors, shopkeepers left, it became virtually impossible to run other aspects of daily life.

Value addition: did you know?

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<td>The graphics and figures below demonstrate the kinds of demographic changes that took place. They also show the extent of losses in terms of land, agriculture, and provide information about the number of relief camps, the amount of food and clothing that was required to run them, and more. Thus, they give some idea of the scale of the changes that took place at Partition. This kind of information is often not easily available. What is</td>
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shown here is information from the government, and these estimates may well have been revised as time went on.
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Area and Population of Partitioned Punjab and Bengal

West Bengal
- 28,215 sq. miles
- 24.2 millions

East Bengal
- 49,400 sq. miles
- 39.1 millions

Punjab
- 62,000 sq. miles
- 15.9 millions

- 37,000 sq. miles
- 12.5 millions

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Area, Population and Density of Population of Two Parts of Pakistan

Western Pakistan

- Population in Millions: 25.8
- Density of Population per sq. mile: 91.4
- Area: 282.3 thousands of sq. miles

Eastern Pakistan

- Population in Millions: 41.8
- Density of Population per sq. mile: 712.6
- Area: 54.1 thousands of sq. miles

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Overall, we have very little visual record of Partition. For those who were affected by Partition, safety and flight for themselves and their family members was their first priority. Very few people thought to retain any records. But, we are lucky that at the time, newspapers and magazines published some photographs, as well as cartoons and other visuals. Below are some photos taken by a well known photographer called Margaret Bourke White, who was commissioned by Life magazine. These photographs poignantly capture the tragedy of Partition.

Source: After Partition. Publications Division of India.
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Figure 12.3.1: Partition photo by Margaret Bourke White
Source:
http://racismandnationalconsciousnessnews.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/india_partition_genocide1.jpg

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Figure 12.3.2: Partition photo by Margaret Bourke White
Source: http://chandrakantha.com/articles/indian_music/filmi_sangeet/media/1940s_partition.jpg

Figure 12.3.3: Partition photo by Margaret Bourke White
Source: http://www.emailmarketingindia.com/UploadedImages/66/Image%204.jpg
Another well known photographer who travelled through India at the time was Henri Cartier Bresson, who also produced many visual images of the time. The photo below, taken by Cariter Bresson, shows refugees from one of the many camps that was set up during Partition, jumping and dancing in order to get some exercise and flexibility.

Less known, but equally, if not more, important was a group of Indian photographers who took many pictures as part of independent commissions they carried out for their newspapers or their employers. Unfortunately, we have not been able to access their pictures, although we do know that they took many.
Tracing the beginnings of violence

At times like this, it is always difficult to pinpoint a moment when the violence begins, and often the small, sporadic incidents that eventually may lead to violence on a larger scale go unnoticed. When looking at Partition riots, historians have generally pinpointed the direct action day of 1946 as a moment which marks a beginning. In 1946 the possibility and feasibility of Partition was being furiously debated by leaders, and other solutions to the problem of growing differences between the Congress and the Muslim League had not yet been abandoned. One of these was the Cabinet Mission Plan which had seemed to be broadly acceptable to both 'sides'. However, the Congress, despite having first supported the Plan, suddenly decided it was not acceptable. Angered by the loss of this possibility, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who went on to become the founder of Pakistan, gave a call to the Muslims of Calcutta (now Kolkata) to come out onto the streets for direct action to press the demand for Pakistan. Given the tense atmosphere at the time, and the fact that fear had made people resort to arming themselves as a defense against possible attacks, the call for direct action acted as a catalyst that pushed people into a terrible orgy of violence. Many who suffered would later recall how organized the violence seemed.

Geeta (not her real name) from Calcutta (Kolkata) remembers Direct Action Day somewhat differently from many others who witnessed it. It happened to be her wedding day. The groom and his party came to Calcutta from Dhaka – which was soon to become...
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part of Pakistan – and got caught in the violence. Several members of the wedding party were killed, the groom survived. The bride remembers hearing about the violence while she was still participating in the pre-wedding rituals – she recalls how the marriage ceremony had to be rushed through, and how the young couple then began their life in the shadow of the Partition, fearing even to step out of the house. The violence also made it impossible for the new bride and groom to leave Calcutta and go to the groom’s home in Dhaka. By the time things calmed down, he decided to stay on, and became a ‘ghar jamai’, something that caused him endless worry all his life. Stories like this one alert us to the unseen and unstated consequences of Partition violence, the ways in which this violence enters people’s daily lives and changes things radically for many.

Some five to ten thousand people are said to have died in Calcutta in the space of a few days as a result of ‘direct action’, with the number of injured being put at fifteen thousand. Many historians, including Paul Brass, suggest that the then Chief Minister of Bengal, Husain Suhrawardy, made the situation much worse by making inflammatory speeches (although in her autobiography, From Purdah to Parliament, Suhrawardy’s sister, Shaista Ikramullah, has denied that this was the case). The Great Calcutta Killing, as the event came to be known, created tension and suspicion among people and completely vitiated the political and social atmosphere. It was also what finally led to the acceptance of Partition as a ‘solution’.

Once the violence began, it was only a matter of time before it escalated. Copycat and revenge killings took place in different parts of the country. From Calcutta it spread in a few months time to Noakhali in the northern part of Bengal and then to Bihar. If in one place the victims were Hindus (as in Noakhali, a Muslim majority area that would become part of East Pakistan), in the other they were mainly Muslims – Bihar, for example, saw over 7000 Muslims killed. Sporadic incidents took place in other parts of northern India and news of the violence spread rapidly across the country, leading to further violence and revenge killings. One of the interesting things – which has puzzled historians and others for many years – is that just as northern and eastern India were engulfed in violence, there were other parts of the country, with an equally mixed population, that remained completely peaceful. In some cases this was due to political responsibility on the part of leaders, but in many places, it was the communities themselves who worked hard to maintain peace and ensure that the violence did not touch them.

One of the people who understood this quite early and who spoke about it frequently was Gandhi. In March of 1946, at a prayer meeting he said: “it has become the fashion these days to ascribe all such ugly manifestations to the activities of hooligans. It hardly becomes us to take refuge in that moral alibi. Who are the hooligans after all? They are our own countrymen, and so long as any countryman of ours indulges in such acts, we cannot disown responsibility for them consistently with our claim that we are one people. Mankind is at the crossroads. It has to make its choice between the law of the jungle and the law of humanity” (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi 90:64, quoted in Dilip Simeon’s lesson 9.1 in this series).

The flood of violence was not easily staunched, however, and many other places, such as Garh Mukteshwar in Uttar Pradesh, Rawalpindi in Punjab, and others came under its grip, until finally it spilled over into the actual moment of Partition in August of 1947 and
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beyond and acquired a brutality and horror that so affected many who faced it, that even today, sixty years after the event, survivors find it difficult to speak of that time.

In moments of violence like this, the first casualty is always information. For those who become the targets or victims of violence, the culprit is always the ‘other’ – so during Partition Hindus will claim that all the violence was perpetrated by Muslims, and Muslims will claim the opposite. In places where law and order breaks down and people are killed, the police and authorities will always want to play down the figures, and sometimes even destroy records. For researchers who wish to study these subjects therefore, it is difficult to find accurate information. And it is because of this that people’s accounts become so valuable. Not only do they provide information but they also tell us about aspects of the story that pure statistical data may not. For Partition histories, the stories of survivors, as well as the stories written by writers, many of whom lived through the experience of dislocation and trauma, are very valuable in helping us understand some of what happened. Equally valuable are people’s narratives.

Tanveer Ahmed, a young Pakistani living in London, for example, discovered fairly late in life that his grandmother was actually a Hindu who had been found by his grandfather at the time of Partition. Tanveer’s grandfather was a young boy at the time. A Pathan, he was recruited by Pathan armies to come with them to Kashmir to join in the battle for Kashmir. When Partition took place, in theory, those parts of India that continued to be ruled by kings and princes, could choose which country they wanted to belong to. Both India and Pakistan wanted to bring the state of Kashmir over to their side. Fearing that India would force the Maharaja of Kashmir, Hari Singh, to ‘choose’ India, Pakistan sent in groups of armies made up of men called raiders, to stop this possibility. Many young boys joined these armies without quite knowing why or where they were going. Tanveer’s grandfather was one of them, and he was ‘given’ a young woman whom he later married, Tanveer’s grandmother. For many years, Tanveer’s grandmother believed that her family had all died in the violence of Partition. It was only recently that a chance encounter alerted her and her husband to the fact that some members of the family, in particular her brother, were still alive in the Indian side of Kashmir. This was what made Tanveer decide that he wanted to bring his grandmother to India and see if she and her brother could meet, before she grew too old to travel. Determined to do this, he spent many years trying to get a visa for his grandmother to come to India to meet with her relatives. It was not easy, and Tanveer even gave up his job in England to be in Pakistan, so he could continue his campaign for a visa. After many years, he succeeded, and his grandmother was able to come across to her village near Jammu and spend a week in her childhood home, with her brother and his family. Stories such as this are important because they direct our attention to the hidden histories that lie beneath the surface – much of the history of Partition violence talks about groups of people, particularly those belonging to different political parties. The small story, the individual history, the minor narrative, seldom makes its appearance.
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The causes of violence

Everywhere that violence took place, there was something or the other that sparked things off (for example, a fracas in a mela as in Garh Mukteshwar, or a politician’s speeches as in Rawalpindi) and once it began, there was no controlling the violence because the forces of law and order – the police and army – had by this time also become communalized and divided on the basis of their religion. In Punjab, there was another circumstance that contributed to the violence and this was that in the wake of the Second World War, the army had demobilized its soldiers massively, and sent them home. Many of these men were in the Punjab and in possession of weapons, and once the conditions for violence were present, it was only too easy for them to step in with whatever weapons they had to hand. Thus in March of 1947 when violence began in Rawalpindi district – and it is generally believed that this was in revenge for what happened in Bihar but also because of inflammatory statements made by the Sikh leader, Master Tara Singh - many groups defended themselves using these weapons and others traded weapons for freedom.

Survivors’ accounts – and some documented evidence – have revealed another dimension of the violence of Partition that seldom gets talked about. When looking at what we call communal, or sectarian, violence, we tend to look only at the major communities who are pitted against each other, and do not address the fact of how this violence may affect others who are not part of the ‘battle’ so to speak, or how other stories may underlie it. During the ten days or so of violence in Rawalpindi, there were many instances of Sikh families taking the decision to kill members of their own families – mostly women and children – because they feared that they would be abducted, perhaps converted, almost certainly raped, and the women possibly impregnated by men of the ‘other’ religion. And they saw this as a blot on their own religion, so killing the women and children, rather than exposing them to possible conversion, rape, impregnation, was one way of saving the ‘honour’ of the religion.

Mangal Singh from a village near the Gurdaspur border was one such man. Together with his two brothers, they killed some eighteen members of their family by gathering them together in a gurudwara, praying for their souls, and then putting them to death. Sant Raja Singh, who lived in Thoa Khalsa in Rawalpindi was another. In Thoa Khalsa the elders got together and decided that it would be best to collect in the gurudwara so they could defend themselves. When it became clear that they would be unable to do this, they decided to put the women to death. Raja Singh killed his own daughter, Maan Kaur first, and then several others, and this terrible history was followed by some eighty women drowning themselves in the village well, in order to keep themselves ‘pure’. Bir Bahadur Singh, Sant Raja Singh’s young son, was a mere boy at the time and he stood by his father’s side and watched, as his father killed his sister, and then other members of his family. The memory of this violence has never left him. This incident became iconic, and both at the time and later, is represented as an example of the women’s heroism and courage. And yet if we compare the two accounts below, one that appeared in The Statesman, a newspaper, and another, the account of a survivor, we see the difference.

The Statesman, 15 April 1947:
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“The story of 90 women of the little village of Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpindi district... who drowned themselves by jumping into a well during the recent disturbances has stirred the imagination of the people of the Punjab. They revived the Rajput tradition of self-immolation when their menfolk were no longer able to defend them. They also followed Mr Gandhi's advice to Indian women that in certain circumstances even suicide was morally preferable to submission.”

And here is the account of Basant Kaur, a survivor:

“They brought us there [to the well]. From there...you know there was no place...nothing to eat. Some people were eating close by but where could I give the children anything from?...I had barely a few paise... my elder son had a duvanni (two annas coin) with him. We thought we could use that....my brother's children were also hungry...but then they said the duvanni was khoti, unusable, such difficulties... nothing to eat... we had to fill their stomachs... today they would have been ranis... so many of them, jethanis, children...’ (Butalia 1998, 152)

When understanding the violence of Partition it is important we keep these histories in mind because all too often, the violence of communities towards their own people and particularly towards women, is not seen as violence. In this case, virtually everyone who speaks about this violence refers to the killing of the women as ‘honour’ killing, and sees their deaths as ‘martyrdom’. And yet, the question is: how were these killings in any way more ‘honourable’ than the mass killings in Bihar, Noakhali and other places, and should we not, when trying to understand the violence of Partition, also address the violence of communities towards their own people?

Over the years, this incident of women jumping into the village well has acquired a sort of iconic status and it gets represented in both fiction (Bhisham Sahni’s novel Tamas, later made into a television serial, is the most famous work that talks of this incident) and historical account as some sort of heroic moment where the women came out in defense of nationalism, the community and the religion. However, such representations often hide other realities. We do not know how many of these women took the step of jumping into the well voluntarily. Many of them were young, some sixteen and seventeen. How strong is the feeling of nationalism and religion in people so young, and even if we are to say it is strong, the question may well be asked, is it strong enough to offer to give up their lives? Moments of trauma where people are pitted against each other, often gather around them histories of such ‘heroism’ in order to hide the horror of such violence.

In some instances, as it spread, Partition violence also became a convenient cover for people to play out old enmities and settle old scores. In Punjab (present day Haryana) an Arya Samaj teacher, Phool Singh (1885-1942) was killed in 1942 by unidentified people. His daughter, Subhasini, who inherited his mantle, was convinced that the killers were Muslims, and five years later, when Partition took place, she used the opportunity...
to ‘revenge’ her father’s killing and sent off her men to loot and decimate an entire village of Muslims, who probably had no connection at all with Phool Singh’s death. But for Subhasini Partition violence provided the right opportunity to settle this score. In this, she was not alone – there are many other such instances in both Punjab and Bengal.

If the violence was widespread, which it was in northern and eastern India, so also were attempts to contain and prevent it. In many instances, when people were threatened with violence, friends and neighbours came out to offer them help and shelter, but these stories find little mention in historical accounts. Sant Raja Singh’s family, for example, originally lived in a village called Saintha, where they were the only non-Muslims. Wealthy because of land and moneylending, Raja Singh knew each Muslim in the village, and when the attacks on the village seemed imminent, a delegation of villagers, led by Sajawal Khan, the village headman, came to Raja Singh’s house to offer shelter and protection. Suspicious of all Muslims by now, Raja Singh refused this help offered by people he had lived with all his life, and chose instead to leave the village. There are many such stories that allow us to see that even in the face or terrible violence, there was a desire among people for peace and many tried their best to ensure that peace remained.

A key person who did this fearlessly was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. It is common knowledge that Gandhi was opposed to Partition and did his best to stop it happening. But he was also a brave and fearless man, and in many places where the violence took place, he did his best to stop it. Following on the violence in Noakhali and Bihar, Gandhi did not spare Bihar’s Congress government and exhorted Congressmen to put their energies into stopping the violence. For several months after this, he walked through the villages of Bihar, often accompanied by another man of peace, Khan Abdul Gaffar (Badshah) Khan, visiting homes, offering succour, touching lives and healing by love and compassion. This journey of Gandhi’s became legendary – he encouraged Hindus and Muslims to return to their homes and to live with each other in harmony. The pictures below (Figs 1 and 2) show Gandhi, Badshah Khan and Mridula Sarabhai, the well known activist and political leader, visiting homes and families in Bihar. As Rajmohan Gandhi, Gandhi’s grandson points out, this visit of his grandfather’s is still remembered by older people, and there is even a Gandhi museum in the area.
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Figure 12.3.6: Badshah Khan, Gandhi and Mridula Sarabhai in Bihar - photo by Jagan Mehta
This was not the only time Gandhi’s presence helped to heal and stop the violence. A few months later, after Partition had taken place, Gandhi once again played a similar role. An account from a memoir written by Vina Mazumdar, a well known veteran of the women’s movement in India describes this:

"On the 15th August (1947) my brother called from Calcutta, very excited, saying ‘unbelievable things are happening here’. Following ‘the Great Calcutta Killings’, for over a year there had been acute communal tension in the city. Hindus did not consider it safe to go into Muslim mohallas and vice versa, and periodic cases of stabbing and other kinds of violence were always being reported.

While other leaders were preparing to celebrate the coming of independence, Gandhiji started off on his journey back to Noakhali, accompanied by his chief
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interpreter, Prof. N. K. Bose. Before the train reached Howrah, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee (the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University and one of the founders of the Hindu Mahasabha) and H. S. Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister of Bengal, met Gandhiji and requested him to get down at Howrah and to use his presence to prevent the massacre of Muslims at the dawn of independence.

Sitting in his railway compartment Gandhiji struck a deal. He asked ‘Will you give me an undertaking that no Hindu in East Bengal will die?’ Suhrawardy said ‘yes’. Then Gandhiji said, ‘You will stay where I choose to stay, with me and you will go with me wherever I go.’ Suhrawardy agreed to that too. Shyama Prasad said, ‘We came together to convince you that we need your presence if we are to hold back the frenzy.’

So the Mahatma and the Chief Minister went and lived in a Muslim basti in the house of a woman who had lost her entire family in the riots earlier that year. Gandhiji held prayer meetings in different places. My mother, my sister-in-law and I attended a prayer meeting where Suhrawardy (wearing a lungi and a vest) sat next to the Mahatma and sang ‘Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram, Patita Pavana Sitaram. Ishwara Allah tere naam, Sab ko Sanmati de Bhagwan.’

The peace did not last however, and by the end of the month, violence had escalated again. It was then that Gandhi decided to go on a fast. In Vina Mazumdar’s words:

“Then there was another flare up, and Gandhiji came out of his room, because there was a huge crowd assembled outside. Some of them were armed with lathis and das (sickle) and they were abusing Gandhiji. Then somebody threw a stone which just grazed his temple, so Gandhiji said ‘Agar tum log sunne koh tayar nahi ho to mera to ek hi rasta hai’(If you are not prepared to listen, there’s only one recourse open to me) I will go on a fast unto death.’

The fast began that afternoon and quite incredibly, (till today I do not know whether there was any planned organization because nobody could have known that he was going to do this) within an hour, there were repeated announcements on the radio, and bands of persons (men and women) were walking along streets and lanes reminding people that the Mahatma was fasting. One of our relatives who had always been very critical of Gandhiji, told my parents, ‘If the old boy dies out here, Bengal will never be forgiven by the rest of the country.’ The threatened riot ended within 24 hours with the Mahatma’s use of this unique weapon. The same people who had come armed to threaten him came and threw all their weapons before him and shouted ‘Eat! We have committed many crimes, but save us from that of your death.’ (Mazumdar, 2010)

Gandhi’s contribution to peace was recognized also by the colonial masters, in particular Mountbatten who sent him a telegram that read: “My dear Gandhiji, in the Punjab we have 55 thousand soldiers and large-scale rioting on our hands. In Bengal our forces consist of one man, and there is no rioting. As a serving officer, may I be allowed to pay my tribute to the One Man Boundary Force.”
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As the pictures above show, with Gandhi in his efforts for peace were Badshah Khan (also known as Frontier Gandhi) and Mridula Sarabhai and many others. We know little of their experiences because they have not recorded them, or if they have, much of the material cannot be accessed. The letter below was written by Jinnah, who, like others at the time, also worked hard to encourage people to stop the violence.

Like Gandhi and Badshah Khan, many other people – several of them unnamed – were also concerned about peace. In the mid nineties, a young woman in Lahore came across a packet of letters in an almirah in her home. When opened these letters were revealed to be part of a correspondence between two men, Harkishan Singh Bedi and Chaudhry Latif, both Partition refugees. Bedi had had to leave his home in Lahore within a day and had been unable to take many of his precious books and papers with him. Chaudhry Latif, the new resident of Bedi’s house did not know what to do with Bedi’s things and then, one day, some three months after Partition, he received a letter addressed to The Occupant. The letter said: “I write to you as a human being. I hope you will not be put out that a Hindu has written to you. We are human beings first and Hindus and Muslims only after that. I firmly believe you will oblige me by answering this letter in the name of the human bond that we share.”

In response, Chaudhry Latif meticulously assembled Bedi’s things and sent them to him in small packets. Over years, the two men, kept up a correspondence where they talked
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about everything that had made for the division between the two countries and reiterated their commitment to peace. No matter that neither Bedi nor Latif had been involved in the violence of Partition, no matter that they had not taken part in riots, but their lives were deeply affected, and their gestures of friendship therefore were, and remain, all the more important.

Understanding Partition violence

In many ways the violence of Partition defies comprehension. Researchers and historians have spent years asking themselves these questions: where did such violence come from? What caused it? How did people who had lived together in reasonable amity suddenly turn on each other and go to the extent of killing and maiming? What possible explanation can there be for the extreme brutality? At the time, these questions were bewildering. Today, with the kind of violence we have seen around us, for example in Delhi in 1984, in Bhagalpur in 1989, in Gujarat in 2002, we are, sadly, much more familiar with such violence and know how close to the surface it lies, although we are no nearer understanding it.

Partition violence is even more difficult to understand because there are no easy aggressors and victims here - it set people against people, neighbour against neighbour. The moment of Partition has often been compared to that of the holocaust in Germany but there are important differences with the holocaust where the Nazis were very clearly the aggressors and the Jews their victims. During Partition, Hindus killed Muslims and Muslims killed Hindus and many simply took advantage of the overall violence to kill and harm those they saw as their enemies. Sadat Hasan Manto, the well known writer who migrated to Pakistan after Partition (without really wanting to, but he found himself with no other alternative) wrote a large number of powerful stories that describe much of what happened at the time. One of his best known stories, ‘Khol Do’, tells the tale of a young girl, Sakina, who is raped by the very same men who are supposed to be her protectors – this was not uncommon, for men could not have suddenly changed and become sensitive towards women of their community just because the times were not so normal.

The holocaust is also seen as a genocide, where one community makes a deliberate attempt to eliminate another – this was not necessarily the case with Partition, although in certain cases attempts were made to wipe out entire communities. Nor is the description of ‘riot’ enough to define Partition violence, for riots are often seen to have an element of spontaneity about them while, as historians have shown, often the violence of Partition was very well organized, and sometimes it even had the backing of political parties. The truth is that seeing Partition violence merely in terms of ‘riots’ often helps to hide our own culpability, for many ordinary people joined in the violence and contributed to it. Some were pulled into it as part of what has often been described as a ‘mob mentality’ and many lived to regret it. But while many incidents of violence were random, and some even spontaneous, there were also numerous instances of the violence being carefully planned and executed. These many different elements make it even more difficult to understand this violence.

Rashpal’s story, with which we began this lesson, points us in the direction of another group of people who lived through Partition violence and whose concerns have hardly
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ever been addressed: children. History generally does not deal with the experiences of children, and yet, like everyone else, children too have to live through historical moments and particularly when these are moments of trauma, the scars remain for a long time. In the few months preceding and following the announcement of Partition, the terrible violence that swept across much of north India, destroyed the lives of many children. Thousands were killed, and thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands orphaned, while others lived with the trauma of what they had seen and experienced – and often not even understood – for years to come. Even in this short narrative above we have met people who were children at the time of Partition and who remember the time vividly: Rashpal, Bir Bahadur Singh, Bir Bahadur’s sister Maan Kaur (who died), and there are many, many more. It is only now, more than six decades later that doctors are discovering the long term impact of the kind of trauma these children lived through.

Just as children were impacted by Partition violence, so also, another large group of people who faced particular forms of violence were women. They became particularly vulnerable in the mass movement of people across borders where they were often abducted and taken away by the attackers. The rape of women became a common occurrence as we have seen above. In fact, rape became an indirect way for men of one community to attack those of another, by violating the bodies of their women. In some instances, the attackers even went so far as to cut off women’s breasts and tattoo their bodies with marks and symbols of the other religion. It was almost as if, in a battle being fought between men, women somehow became the ground on which this battle was fought. This was given as the reason by many men, for killing women of their own community as we have seen above – they claimed that they were afraid that the women would be abducted and raped, so they decided to protect them by killing them. Although today we know a fair amount about these histories, the individual stories here still remain difficult to capture, because particularly for those women who lived through rape, the experience has been impossible to speak about, and for years they have had to live with the silence that surrounds such violations. This has been all the more tragic because even though the rape occurred on a mass scale, most women experienced it, and lived with its consequences individually, and therefore there was no easy way in which they could speak about it.

The search for definitions

The kind of violence we are talking about here does not fall easily into the definition of a riot. The general understanding of a riot is that when people riot, it is because a situation goes out of control and they run amuck. It is also generally assumed that riots are spontaneous bursts of anger and frustration and they die down, often as quickly as they erupt – although this is not always the case. But although some of the violence of the Partition may have come out of such ‘spontaneous’ anger or resentment, or indeed fear, not all of it can be classified in this way. Historians have pointed out, and research has shown, that a fair amount of planning went into the making of this violence; often the attackers were not, as is generally assumed, ‘outsiders’, but they were known people, neighbours, friends, who used the lawlessness of the situation to settle old scores, to grab property, to coerce women into marriages, to assault them sexually.

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So if Partition violence was not a riot, what was it? By what name do we call it? Historians have discussed whether such violence could be called genocide, or pogrom, or civil strife, but none of these or other categories has been found to be satisfactory. One of the things that renders this violence so complex, and makes our understanding of it even more difficult, is the fact that it is virtually impossible to pinpoint who were the aggressors and who the victims, who were the powerful and who the powerless. In Bengal and Punjab, in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, and everywhere else the violence took place, if Hindus killed Muslims, then Muslims equally killed Hindus. Those who killed and attacked were people, and they killed and attacked other people. It was not the state against the people, or the army, or the police. Friends, neighbours, business associates, religious leaders were all complicit in a terrible stream of violence where they attacked each other, and where they prepared themselves for violence, where they looted, raped, burnt. And there were thousands of others who were equally complicit because they watched – as the police and army did – and did not do anything, or they saw, and remained silent, or they knew, and did not talk. This is particularly true of the violence against women, which, to this day, remains shrouded in a deep silence. Families whose women were abducted took the initial step of reporting their disappearance (although some did not even do that) but then, if any of the women was found (and this happened because social workers were sent out to search for the women), their families often refused to take them back because they felt they were now polluted, having lived with, or been raped by a man of the other religion. Or, as we have mentioned above, there were families who killed their own women, claiming that they were protecting them from possible rape, impregnation, pollution, and then silenced the histories of these women.

Why should we discuss how to categorize or name the violence of Partition? How does it matter by what name we call it? After all, for the people who lived through it, such violence was unspeakable, and sometimes they did not even have the language to describe it, the words to say it. These are important questions that students of history may well ask, and there are some possible answers to them. First of all, the categorizing of Partition violence as riots in many ways robs it of its seriousness, and takes away the element of planning and preparation that was surely part of this violence in many places. Paul Brass has shown how outbursts of Partition violence were very closely connected to political developments such as elections, and even for creating a situation of tension and uncertainty where Partition would then seem inevitable as the only solution. A riot also takes away culpability – for it signals that a situation was out of control, and therefore lets off not only the people who participated in it, but also those who should have acted to stop it. Given the kinds of tensions around religious identities that have grown in India today, we need to be aware of this so that we do not let people off so lightly. Understanding the nature of the violence also helps us fix the responsibility of the state. It also helps us to see how to work towards a situation where such violence never again arises. And to see our own culpability, for because ‘we’ don’t participate in riots, we somehow have convinced ourselves that we had no hand in this violence.
Writing about Partition violence

This lesson on Partition focuses on Partition violence and particularly on the violence of riots, although, as we have seen, defining Partition violence is not an easy task. It does not fit into convenient definitions of riots, or pogroms or genocidal violence. But, if defining it is not easy, writing about it is even more difficult. For many years historians have found it difficult to address Partition violence, not only because of the scale of suffering it caused, but also because of its brutality, and the ways in which it embittered relations between communities, and also affected the lives of those who were not directly involved (such as minorities, people on the margins of society). There has also been a concern, or a fear, that writing about violence without exercising caution, may lead to further violence. For example, because of the ways in which relations between India and Pakistan deteriorated after Partition, it has been almost impossible for researchers to work in each other’s countries. Writing that tells only one side of the story can therefore be very partial, and can lead to all kinds of misconceptions.

For many years, people in India and Pakistan have believed that the violence of Partition was only perpetrated by people of the ‘other’ community and they have not known, or admitted, that perhaps it was also people of their own community who perpetrated violence on the ‘other’ and on their own people. We have shown above how Partition violence sometimes provided an excuse to settle old scores, and also how families were violent towards their own people, particularly women and children. In Sadat Hasan Manto’s story ‘Khol Do’, referred to above, we see how men of one community can be violent towards women of their own community. Historians have been perplexed by how to describe such violence, and many have found that they lack the vocabulary, the language, to adequately capture the horror of what happened. All these aspects have made the violence of Partition more difficult to study.

Also, for too long, Partition history has only been looked at in terms of what happened to the major communities, the Hindus, the Sikhs, the Muslims. But even though these were the major actors, and much of the violence that took place was between these communities, the impact of Partition was felt much more widely, and in studying it, we need to look not only at the major communities but also at others such as women, children, minorities such as Christians, Sindhis, Parsis, Dalits, eunuchs, mental patients and so on. In Punjab, for example, in many places, the Dalits (then called Harijans) did not face as much violence only because they were not seen as either Hindus or Muslims. But although they may have escaped physical violence, they suffered considerable discrimination in terms of relief and rehabilitation. It is not within the scope of this chapter to discuss these. For our purposes, it is important to remember that violence, especially the kind of violence that was part of Partition, is never only what it seems on the surface, and if we are to understand how to avoid such violence in the future, we need to look at every aspect of what happened in the past, in order to understand it more fully.
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Summary

- For long, Partition historiography has focused on the factors that led to the Partition of the subcontinent. The trend now is to look beyond this ‘high-politics’ debate and focus on the experiences of the people who were displaced—the refugees.

- Such studies on the ‘aftermath of Partition’ primarily deal with the following themes: creation of borders, making of the refugees, their rehabilitation, and finally, refugee self-initiative in the process of rehabilitation and also in adjusting to the new environment.

- Borderland studies show the arbitrary manner in which these borders were drawn, paying scant regard to the ground realities and leading to a disruption in the everyday lives of the people.

- Studies which look at the making of refugees, show that in the process of identifying who was entitled to be a ‘refugee’ and who was not, whole sets of communities in the newly created states of India and Pakistan were getting alienated.

- Studies on ‘refugee rehabilitation’ focus on efforts of the state and of the refugees themselves in the whole process of rehabilitation. It also enables us to understand the extent to which the refugees had to adapt to a new home and the trials and tribulations they had to face in the process.

- In all, a complete understanding of Partition and its meaning comes across only when we look at not only what led to Partition, but also at its aftermath.

12.3: Exercises

Essay questions

1) Is it possible to categorize Partition violence easily?

2) Was all Partition violence the same?

3) Did people use the cover of Partition violence to settle other scores that had nothing to do with Partition?

4) Is it possible to easily identify victims and perpetrators in the violence of Partition?

5) Have historians found it difficult to write about Partition violence?
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Further readings


