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**Gendered Violence and Pre-emptive Killings of Women in Thoa Khalsa  
Locale of Rawalpindi, 1947**

**Abstract:**

*The paper aims at understanding and explaining mass-suicide of Sikh women in Thoa Khalsa village during the onslaught of violence in Rawalpindi district in March 1947. It first looks into the operative beliefs that were at play behind gendered violence targeted against women, and then describe the incident of self-killings in Thoa Khalsa followed by exploring the place of Thoa Khalsa incident in Sikh memorialisation. Women, particularly the Sikh women, became vulnerable targets of familial violence because her body came to be seen as a site of family and community honour which needed to be rescued from any defilement from the religious “other”. In this regard, the tragic episode of self-killings of Sikh women in Thoa Khalsa village stands out as a reference unmatched in the entire Partition historiography. In March 1947, in the wake of the attack by the Muslim rioters the Sikh women sacrificed their lives by drowning into a well to escape suffering and humiliation from the perpetrators of violence. Sikh women were treated as symbol of a macro-community and their dishonour was linked to the Sikh panth. For this reason, their act of mass-drowning was viewed not as “community-orchestrated murder”; but it was rather hailed as an act of heroism and bravery which upheld the honour and chastity of the Sikh community.*

**Keywords:**

Gender, violence, Partition, Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpindi, Sikh panth

**Gendered Violence in Rawalpindi, 1947:**

The partition of India in 1947 is a watershed event in the sub-continent’s history which took place in the midst of unprecedented levels of violence resulting in immense human sufferings. Clearly, the violence reached its culmination at the time of partition in August but its build-up had begun with gruesome rioting in the Rawalpindi district in March 1947. The March violence in Rawalpindi, officially addressed as the Rawalpindi massacres, was sadistic and intense than anything that had preceded it. During the massacres women and children were caught up in the spate of hostility and were shown no mercy as the violence spread from customary public field of conflict to raid the private sphere. In particular, women were subjected to terrible atrocities inflicted on their bodies and minds through rape,

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abduction, self-killings, and other forms of violence. The insensate outrages against women that began in March during the Rawalpindi massacres served as the precursor to impending tragedy which unfolded as violence escalated across the Punjab province later during partition. During partition the communal mayhem was at its height as the “communal passions swept the whole Punjab community clean of all decency, morality and sense of human values”.<sup>1</sup> The human atrocities increased in frequency of occurrence and magnitude of severity, and so did the brutalities against women. Perhaps women became the prime sufferers of 1947 communal outrage in which they were subjected to terrible violence inflicted on their bodies and minds. The tragedy as rightly pointed out by Ismat Chughtai was that “those whose bodies were whole had their hearts that were splintered”.<sup>2</sup>

The female body in the context of inter-community conflicts, as Belén Martín-Lucas puts it, becomes “the territory of dispute suffering from the “softer” indoctrination from diverse social agents on silent obedience, to the extreme violence of abduction, rape, mutilation and/or murder” whilst armed conflict breaks out.<sup>3</sup> In the context of communalism in India, more so at the time of 1947 partition-related violence, the religious identity of people became a leading marker making them vulnerable in the face of communal hostility. Especially with reference to women, her distinctiveness became more exposed because of her being a woman and this had an important bearing on violence targeted against her. Both the identities of being a woman along with a woman of a particular community and religion were entwined in the notions of communalism, violence and gender resulting in the “body” of a woman becoming a contested terrain of identity, honour, and enmity.<sup>4</sup> Historically, in the mainstream Punjabi society upholding the honour and respect with regard to “women” became an important concern for both an individual and the community. Women’s identity became conflated with the identity of their community and women became the cornerstone of the identity of their community. In this process women not only became the “cultural repository” of their respective community but the idea of “purity” and “chastity” of women also came to be closely associated with that of the community to which they belonged. Therefore, the notion that the women have to be guarded from any vice that may come upon them and may defile both the nature and spirit of the community, became of paramount importance in the society.

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<sup>1</sup> Satya M. Rai, *Partition of the Punjab: A Study of Its Effects on the Politics and Administration of the Punjab, 1947-56* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1965), 257.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Alok Bhalla, “Memories of a Lost Home: Partition in the Fiction of the Subcontinent,” in *The Partition Motif in Contemporary Conflicts*, ed. Smita Tiwari Jassal and Eyal Ben-Ari (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007), 189.

<sup>3</sup> Belén Martín-Lucas, “The Most Primitive Instrument of Nationalism: Diasporic Representations of Communal Violence against Women in India,” in *The Other India: Narratives of Terror, Communalism and Violence*, ed. Om Prakash Dwivedi (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 92.

<sup>4</sup> Sumit Saurabh Srivastava, “Revisiting Partition, 1947: Gender, Community and Violence,” *Social Action* 64 (April-June 2014): 124.

Furthermore, the patriarchal control in the Punjabi society where men felt the need to control sexuality and chastity of women led to “objectification” of women wherein women’s bodies came to be seen as men’s property. In the catastrophic turn of events if the families could not protect their women from the enemy, it would be better to destroy “their property” by killing them. This was seen as “honour killing” of women by the male members of their families. Women were also coerced into sacrificing their lives to escape humiliation and victimization at the hands of the religious “others”. In either way, women were not treated as humans but rather as “object” which could be controlled, and violence against them by their own family and kin was presumed as “permissible” and not an atrocious act. Women were objectified to such an extent that it was made clear that family *izzat* (respectability) was more valuable than the life of women.

Tragically, the women’s body became a site of violence wherein not only the members of rival community played out violent acts but their own menfolk also battled to protect their “honour” and “sanctity”. A strong and general conviction that protecting a woman’s honour was essential to safeguarding male and community honour led to an entire new scheme of violence to come into play not only by men against their own women and but also by women against themselves during the massacres. Due to the fear of being caught and abducted, raped, molested, and/or converted to Islam in the face of violent attacks by the Muslims, non-Muslim women, especially the Sikh women, were poisoned, strangled, put to sword, burnt to death, or drowned to avoid “dishonour” in the family and community by their own kinsmen. Concepts of shame and honour were so strongly indoctrinated among the community that it was made evident to women that it was preferable to die than to be “dishonoured”. This idea triggered “pre-emptive” killings by women committing *khudkashi* (suicide) not exactly as forced deaths but as “voluntary” acts, thereby endorsing family and community honour that required their dying. In this regard, with the onset of communal riots the Sikh women were particularly taught that it was essential to uphold bravery, courage and heroism as central values in the Sikh faith (constituting the *panth* or community) and choose “willing sacrifice” over “dishonour” and, thus, become “martyrs”.

### **1. Pre-emptive Killings of Sikh Women in Thoa Khalsa:**

The pre-emptive killings of the non-Muslim women either in the form of self-killings or by male members of the family became an unprecedented occurrence in the face of terror during the Rawalpindi massacres. The Fact Finding Team recorded that on March 10, 1947 in Bewal village of the Rawalpindi district, “many [Sikh] women and girls saved their honour by self-immolation. They collected their beddings and cots in a heap and the heap caught fire they jumped on to it, raising cries of ‘*Sat Sari Akal!*’”<sup>5</sup> Gurmeet Singh, a survivor from Thamali village of the Rawalpindi district recounted the killings of Sikh women and

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<sup>5</sup> G. D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of Events Leading Up to and Following the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1949, reprint 1989), 109.

children in order to protect them from falling prey to Muslims who had surrounded their village in March 1947.

On the night of the 12<sup>th</sup> of March we left at 4 a.m., in the early hours of the morning. Our own family, all the people, we collected them in the gurdwara and got some men to guard them. We gave them orders to kill all the young girls, and as for the gurdwara, to pour oil on it and set it on fire. We decided this among ourselves. We felt totally helpless—so many people had collected, we were completely surrounded . . . Those in the gurdwara were asked to set it on fire with those inside . . . first, we killed all the young girls with our own hands; kerosene was poured over them inside the gurdwara and the place was set on fire . . . women and children, where could they go?<sup>6</sup>

At best the “vulnerable targets” such as women and children were killed by the menfolk of their community to escape misery at the hands of Muslim perpetrators of violence. In this regard, the Thoa Khalsa village holds a special mention due to the gruesome episode of mass suicide of the Sikh women that became a reference unmatched in the Partition historiography. This dreadful incident of violence occurred roughly between 9 and 13 March in Thoa Khalsa in Kahuta *tehsil* of Rawalpindi district. Thoa Khalsa was a small village with sizeable Sikh and Hindu residents surrounded by several Muslim villages. The village had a Sikh *gurdwara* (place of worship) and a school built by the Sikhs in the 1930s. It was a rich village with “fifty to sixty large traders”<sup>7</sup> mostly Sikhs and Hindus who were also the larger landowners and dominated the economic life of the area. In contrast, the Muslims constituted menial class and were employed as farm workers or servants, although some families had their sons in the army. Destruction visited upon the non-Muslims of Thoa Khalsa when a small party of Muslim raiders came to the village and started looting. Some fifty or sixty Sikhs repulsed the attack by running after them and killing two or three of them.<sup>8</sup> Soon after it, a large Muslim crowd banded together from several surrounding Muslim villages and hamlets, and attacked the village. The frenzied situation frightened the Sikhs and they anticipated that Muslims were going to pillage their property, kill them and take away their wives and daughters as had happened during the Hazara disturbances in December 1946. The Muslim crowd “armed with spear, axes, tommy guns, and incendiary bombs” attacked the village and met with some resistance for three days from the Sikhs but they were unable to withstand longer.<sup>9</sup> On one night some Muslims attempted to break into a *haveli*, in which many Sikh women of the village had gathered for their protection. The Sikh men who kept guard of the *haveli* threw stones at them and drove them away.<sup>10</sup> Both sides then decided to reach some sort of agreement but there appeared to have been an altercation with the Muslims demanding that the Sikhs hand over some of their women. The

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<sup>6</sup> Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998), 205.

<sup>7</sup> Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 220.

<sup>8</sup> Bir Bahadur Singh, interview by Andrew Whitehead, on 11 May 1997, interview tape 80, in *India: A People Partitioned*, SOAS Special Collections, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 83.

<sup>10</sup> Basant Kaur, interview by Andrew Whitehead, on 11 May 1997, interview tape 80, in *India: A People Partitioned*, 1998.

terrified Sikh community preferred “to kill themselves their wives and daughter than risk having them defiled by Muslim men.”<sup>11</sup> Bir Bahadur Singh, one of the survivors of communal outrage, remembered:

In Gulab Singh’s haveli 26 girls had been put aside. First of all my father, Sant Raja Singh, when he brought his daughter, he brought her into the courtyard to kill her, first of all he prayed (he did ‘*ardaas*’) saying ‘*sacche badshah*’, we have not allowed your Sikhi to get stained, and in order to save it we are going to sacrifice our daughters, make them martyrs, please forgive us . . .<sup>12</sup>

After the killings of Sikh women by Sant Raja Singh in Gulab Singh’s *haveli*, in which the Sikh inhabitants of Thoa Khalsa had sought refuge, the incident of mass suicide wherein about ninety women jumped into a well outside the village took place. Bir Bahadur Singh who witnessed this incident also had this to say about the mass suicide at the site:

There was a well . . . at the well Sardarni Gulab Kaur . . . in my presence she said ‘*sacche badshah*’, let us be able to save our girls . . . this incident of the twenty-five girls of our household [being killed] had already taken place . . . so she knew that Sant Raj Singh had killed his daughters and other women of his household . . . those that are left we should not risk their lives and allow them to be taken away. So, at the well, after having talked among themselves and decided, they said, we are thirsty, we need water, so the Musalmaan took them to the well . . . I was sitting with my mother . . . Mata Lajwanti, who was also called Sardarni Gulab Kaur, sitting at the well, she said two words, she did *ardaas* in two words, saying ‘*sacche badshah*’, it is to save Sikhi that we are offering up our lives . . . forgive us and accept our martyrdom . . . and saying those words, she jumped into the well and some eighty women followed her . . . they also jumped in. The well filled up completely . . . one woman whose name is Basant Kaur, six children born of her womb died in that well, but she survived. She jumped in four times but the well had filled up . . . she would jump in, then come out, then jump in again . . . she would look at her children, at herself . . . till today, she is alive.<sup>13</sup>

The Sikhs killing their women and women jumping into the well at Thoa Khalsa made the Muslim attackers leave the village. They fled from the scene seemingly out of fear or the loss of what they were after and turned their attention towards another village.<sup>14</sup>

## **2. Thoa Khalsa Incident in Sikh Memorialisation:**

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<sup>11</sup> Barney White-Spunner, *Partition: The Story of Indian Independence and the Creation of Pakistan in 1947* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 82-83.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Bir Bahadur Singh by Sudesh Vaid and Urvashi Butalia, in Urvashi Butalia, “Community, State and Gender: On Women’s Agency during Partition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 17 (1993): WS-14. Also see, Bir Bahadur Singh, interview by Andrew Whitehead, on 11 May 1997, interview tape 80, in *India: A People Partitioned*, SOAS Special Collections, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 207-208; Butalia, “Community, State and Gender,” WS-14; Bir Bahadur Singh, interview by Andrew Whitehead, interview tape 80, in *India: A People Partitioned*, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, “Community and Violence: Recalling Partition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 32 (Aug. 9-15, 1997): 2042.

The atrocious violence at Thoa Khalsa captured special attention after it ended and the self-killings of Sikh women were hailed as “the victory of honour over the fears of the flesh”. Suicide became the apparent substitute for the Sikh women and their community to avoid violation of their chastity and sanctity of their religion. This is most poignantly captured by Bhisham Sahni (1915-2003), a Hindi writer who himself came from Rawalpindi district, in his partition novel *Tamas*.<sup>15</sup> In Hindi language the word “Tamas” has numerous pessimistic connotations like inaction, devastation, ignorance, and so on; however, in the backdrop of the novel the word “Tamas” is generally interpreted as “darkness”, indicating the “corruption of humanist values” and brutal acts of killings and plundering during the partition violence. The novel *Tamas* was originally written in 1974 in Hindi and was afterwards translated and published into English language by the author in 2001. The novel illustrates the fortune of a Sikh family and the trauma experienced by its members located in different locations with the onset of communal violence in Rawalpindi in 1947. Haram Singh and his wife Banto, the lone Sikh family in a Muslim village at Khanpur, have to flee for their survival when the frenzied Muslims grouped together in mob loots and set their property on fire. Their son, Iqbal Singh, living in a predominantly Muslim village, has to go through forced conversion in order to protect his life; while their daughter Jasbir Kaur, in Sayedpur village with equal number of Sikh and Muslim residents, jumped to death along with several other Sikh women into the village well to escape disrespect from the Muslim rioters.

The novel is primarily based on Sahni’s personal experience of Partition and other events of the time, including the incident of mass suicide by Sikh women of Thoa Khalsa. Sahni worked with the Relief Committee in Rawalpindi when rioting broke out in March 1947.<sup>16</sup> He had personally visited the site of mass suicide on his visit to Thoa Khalsa along with the health officer to “put some disinfectant because the bodies had bloated up and come to the surface” of the well.<sup>17</sup> Sahni recounted that it was a “gruesome spectacle to see little children entangled in the legs of women”; however, he believed that there were about forty casualties in that iconic well incident.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of whether the number of death was eighty-five or forty, the tragedy is that self-killings and killing in honour were rather seen as “voluntary acts” of bravery and not as “violent acts” of community-orchestrated murder. In the novel, Sahni clearly upholds this notion when he writes that “all the women had taken their *dupattas* off their heads and tied them round their waists” as the women of Sayedpur village (Rawalpindi district) jumped into the town well and died during the attack by the Muslims.<sup>19</sup> The crucial gesture of the *dupatta* being changed from a “cloth of modesty” to a cummerbund mark an action to wrestle because in popular Indian culture “the gesture of tying the

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<sup>15</sup> Bhisham Sahni, *Tamas* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Sudha Tiwari, “Witnessing Partition through Literature: Probing Into Bhisham Sahni’s “Tamas”,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 73 (2012): 670.

<sup>17</sup> Bhisham Sahni, interview by Andrew Whitehead, in Delhi, on September 9, 1996, interview tape 17, side A, *India: A People Partitioned*, SOAS Special Collections, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Sahni, interview by Whitehead, in Delhi, on September 9, 1996, interview tape 17, side A, *India: A People Partitioned*, SOAS Special Collections, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Sahni, *Tamas*, 292.

*dupatta* (a long scarf worn by women to cover their heads) around the waist is symbolic of a determined woman who is prepared for a task ahead or/and ready to plunge into a difficult situation”.<sup>20</sup>

The mass drowning of Sikh women of Thoa Khalsa as “the victory of honour over the fears of the flesh” was hailed nearly after a month of this incident by *The Statesman*, the leading Anglo-India newspaper of Calcutta, in April 1947 in the following words:

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.<sup>21</sup>

Later in July 1947, leaflets distributed among the Sikhs of Delhi commemorated this “indomitable spirit” of the women of Thoa Khalsa and other Sikh women and men as “martyrdom” and “sacrifices”.

THE MEMORY OF THE HEROES OF JAITO AND NANKANA [who died in the non-violent Sikh struggle to regain control of their gurudwaras between 1920 and 1925] HAS BEEN ENLIVENED ONCE AGAIN BY THE ‘SISTERS OF THE SPINNING WHEEL’— THE DEATH-DEYING SISTERS OF RAWALPINDI – THE PRIDE OF POTHOAR – THOSE BRAVE DAUGHTERS OF GURU ARJAN – WHO PREFERRED VOLUNTARY DEATH – SELF-INFLICTED OR AT THE HANDS OF THEIR DEAR ONES TO AN IGNOBLE LIFE. THEY ARE PHYSICALLY GONE. THEIR SPIRIT IS AN UNDYING FORCE.<sup>22</sup>

Self-killing such as mass drowning was not seen as a specific kind of violence, instead it was represented as something celebrated to be “heroic”. The Sikhs were represented not as “victims” or “victimised” in the face of the onslaught from the Muslims, rather the constitution of the Sikh Self was “heroic” with the purpose of preserving the nobility of the community. Rameshwari Nehru, a prominent Congress personality, who visited Thoa Khalsa and its neighbouring villages a couple of weeks after the mass suicide of March 1947 sought to incorporate the Thoa Khalsa incident into the annals not only of the Sikhs but of “Hindu” heroism – the Rajput tradition of *jauhar*. She wrote that “what these illiterate women showed to the world by their actions was in no way less momentous than [the legendary Queen] Padmini’s *jauhar* or the self-sacrifice of Rajput [noble-] women” and that “this splendid incident [of Thoa Khalsa women] will be written in history in letters of gold.”<sup>23</sup> A Sikh historian, Harbans Singh wrote about the

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<sup>20</sup> Arunima Dey, “Women as Martyrs: Mass Suicides at Thoa Khalsa during the Partition of India,” *Indi@logs3* (2016): 12.

<sup>21</sup> *The Statesman* (Calcutta), 15 April 1947, cited in Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 196; also cited in Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 85.

<sup>22</sup> Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, CID Papers, third instalment, F 1, copy of cyclostyled handbill being distributed among the public (accompanying note dated July 7, 1947), cited in Pandey, “Community and Violence,” 2043; also, Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 85-86.

<sup>23</sup> Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 87-88.

continuing celebrations of the sacrifices of the Sikhs of Rawalpindi long after the massacres in March 1947. He wrote that “many won laurels of martyrdom while trying to protect their *gurdwaras*. The women jumped into wells to save themselves the dishonour of being captured by the marauders. In the village of Thoa Khalsa alone, 93 Sikh women immolated themselves in this manner. To their *ardaas* (prayer), which recounts the deeds of Sikh heroism and martyrdom, the Sikhs now added new stirring lines as indeed they had done at all difficult periods of their history.”<sup>24</sup>

The self-killings of Sikh women and their killings by their menfolk were perceived and constructed in Sikh memorialisation as the valorised responses consistent with central values of the Sikh tradition. These were not perceived as traumatic acts of familial and community violence wherein women were treated as objects to uphold and comply with the family and community honour and respect. Women in their traditional role as imposed by the patriarchal mindset of the society were perceived and projected as saviours of family honour. The women’s “active participation in their deaths does not denote their agreement based upon an individual judgement”, but is rather, “a consequence of what they believed to be their duty to society”.<sup>25</sup> It is because of this belief that the Kahuta Sikh community living in Delhi observes *shahidi diwas* (martyr’s day) every year on 13 March and recounts the sacrifices of the Sikhs of Kahuta not only to remember them but also to highlight their sacrifices to the attention of the world.<sup>26</sup> The unwavering assertion that deaths of women was supposedly a collective decision obscure an important dimension that the killings of women as “voluntary” suicide was in its very basic character a “murder”. Moreover, the notion of violence as something communalised became so prevalent that the aggressors of violence only appeared to be the religious “other”. The men of the same community killing their own women are not seen as perpetrators of violence and the women who suffered violence at the hands of their own men are not projected as victims. The incidents of self-killings during the 1947 partition-related violence such as mass-suicide of Thoa Khalsa women are instead portrayed as an episode of immense pride for the Sikh community who chose violent death for themselves rather than submitting to violation by men of other communities.

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<sup>24</sup> Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964), 194-195.

<sup>25</sup> Dey, “Women as Martyrs,” 10.

<sup>26</sup> Pandey, “Community and Violence,” 2043.