

The Orgy of 1947 Violence: Abduction of non-Muslim Women from Rawalpindi and their Plight

Abstract:

In 1947 at the height of rioting in the Punjab hapless women were subjected to various forms of gendered and sexual violence. Sikh and Hindu women in the Rawalpindi Division also experienced multiple atrocities of which abduction was perhaps the most ignoble. Due to their perception as symbols of honour and pride of the “other” community which was under attack, women constituted vulnerable targets. Thus, their abduction meant defiling the entire community. In addition to representing the honour of the community, women were also considered to be mere “sexual objects” to be possessed when social and cultural boundaries broke down during the chaos. The orgy of violence against women started in March and it became severe later in August when the Partition took place. Muslim aggressors abducted Sikh and Hindu women shamelessly amid attacks on non-Muslims during the turmoil that brought the virtual collapse of the state machinery. A number of women were kidnapped after the male population had been killed or injured during raids on villages, towns, or inadequately protected trains carrying refugees. The non-Muslim abducted women were either relocated to another place to avoid capture or dissuaded from returning to their family by propaganda. The abduction and subsequent abuses caused the women physical, mental, and psychological agony, thereby, making them the primary victims of violence.

Keywords: Rawalpindi, Partition, Violence, Women, Abduction

Article:

Starting with gruesome rioting in the Rawalpindi Division in March 1947, the extent of violence escalated province-wide in August and September. The ferocity and suddenness with the Punjab was partitioned resulted in a virtual, albeit temporary, breakdown of the state apparatus in the province. Very much for this reason, the extent of the calamity was unprecedented. There is no denying the fact that the 1947 violence in the Punjab inflicted agonising and traumatic human sufferings that cannot be counted in statistics. That is the reason Partition was defined, essentially for its victims, by the savagery done to them.¹ This study presents the human dimension of 1947 rioting in the Rawalpindi Division by looking into the abduction of non-Muslim women and the pain and trauma they experienced physically, emotionally and psychologically. In March 1947 as violent assaults on Sikhs and Hindus started in Rawalpindi their women come into subjecthood as gendered subjects by their experience of sexual violence enacted upon their bodies. They turned out to be more defenceless as a direct result of her being a member of the opposite religious community and more so because of their identity as women.

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¹ Gyanendra Pandey, “Community and Violence: Recalling Partition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 32 (Aug. 9-15, 1997): 2037.

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I. Understanding Violence against Women:

To look into the abduction of non-Muslim women, it is important first to identify the operative beliefs behind this form of violence against them to grasp its magnitude. By and large, in the man-centric plan of social orders like that of South Asia, the idea of *izzat* (honour) of the family and community came to be intertwined with the sexuality and purity of women. Sexuality is viewed as an extremely private matter that is closed to open talk. As a result, a woman is seen as asexual until she marries, and her sexuality is viewed as a constant danger to her family's prestige and honour. The agrarian arrangement of the patriarchal societies further joined worth and respect with land that the family had. In the long run, what happened was that the value and regard of the community started to be vested in the land claimed (*zamin*) and the virtue of their women (*zann*). Thus, land and women became symbols of one's honour and pride. In this way, as a result of any conflict, it became basic for men of one community to defile the opposite community by attacking its "territory and women".

As the representation of macro-community women's dishonour came to be linked to the community to which she belonged. Because of this mindset, the shattering violence during Partition ran its course on women with much greater force. Women's bodies became destinations for men's competition for "assertion and identification of the community", wherein horrors of all kinds were played upon by men of the rival community.² The demonstrations of savagery were not just designated towards women fundamentally; rather these were focused on the community which was under attack. Women turned into a kind of living conduit through which the "other" community was targeted and scarred for life. The perpetrators of violence harboured such a feeling of animosity and attacked women to demean the men of the opposite community to which the women belonged. In this specific manner, there was an intersection of violence, communalism and gender as the acts of aggression were firmly anchored to the communitarian identities of the women belonging to either the Sikh or Hindu religion.

Additionally, the religious sentiments and feelings of the "other" were violated through violating the women of their community. Such a sense of violence became deeply imprinted on the psyche of the opponent and found its outlet while doing the same to the women of another community. Violence against the Sikh women during the Rawalpindi massacres in March 1947 hurt the religious sentiments of the Sikh community so badly that they enacted violence upon the Muslim women when they found an opportunity later at the time of Partition. In this respect, one can see an uncontrolled and brutal "chain reaction of violent acts" against women irrespective of their religious identity. The use of violence against women's bodies was a way to convey a danger to men of the community to which the women belonged.³ Stained with the spirit of vengeance, men of one community settled scores by committing excesses on the womenfolk of the

² Sumit Saurabh Srivastava, "Revisiting Partition, 1947: Gender, Community and Violence," *Social Action* 64 (April-June 2014), 129.

³ Arunima Dey, "Violence against Women during the Partition of India: Interpreting Women and their Bodies in the Context of Ethnic Genocide," *ES Revista de Filología Inglesa* 37 (2016):107.

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opposite community. Thus, violence against women was also used as a coercive instrument to inflict wound on the “other” in vengeance.

Apart from women as a personification of honour, one cannot overlook sexual motives at play that led to violent attacks on women during the 1947 violence. Women were seen and treated as objects for “sexual pleasure” and the seductive target was the women of “reproductive age”.⁴ Although those aged 13 and 14 were the most at risk and the agony was such that even the old women were not spared.⁵ Compelled by men’s sexuality, which Veena Das calls “male desire”, men fell into a condition in which they could not handle their hunger for sex when the cultural and social constraints were removed by the chaotic situation of the time.⁶ It is a masculine desire that is regarded as “natural” and so “normal”, and the woman body serving as the “natural site on which this desire is to be enacted.”⁷ The sexual motivation was such persuasive that the neat boundaries between “them” and “us” also got removed by human lust during Partition. It is this terrible aspect of violence to which Saadat Hasan Manto refers in his Partition-related story ‘Khol Do’ (Open It) wherein culpability as perpetrators of violence enacted upon on a kidnapped girl named Sakina’s body rested alike on her abductor and rescuer.⁸ The kind of brutality where the worst aggressors of violence turned out to be rescuers of the same community as depicted in Manto’s ‘Khol Do’ transforms the paternalism of “rescue” narratives to propose that male-centric violence and male-centric protectionism are separated by a razor-thin boundary.⁹

In 1947 not only in Rawalpindi but elsewhere in the Punjab also women went through numerous kinds of aggression wherein they were “disenfranchised as sexual objects, communal commodities and patriarchal property”.¹⁰ Every heinous act perpetrated against women serves as an allegory for “the place that women’s sexuality occupies in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relation, between and within religious or ethnic communities.”¹¹ Women were positioned between “symbolic abstraction and embodiment” and in exchange for dramatics acts of violence they were used a medium.¹² Moreover, at the crossroads of communalism and patriarchies, there was the subordination of women’s personhood in which they became inconsequential from rape and abduction to killings by their menfolk and where actions were controlled by the patriarchal

⁴ Kamla Patel, *Torn from the Roots: A Partition Memoir*, trans. Uma Randeria (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2006), 35.

⁵ Andrew Whitehead, “Brutalised and Humiliated.” *The Indian Express* (Delhi) 1 August, 1997.

⁶ Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 27.

⁷ Das, *Life and Words*, 27.

⁸ Saadat Hasan Manto, “Open It,” in *Black Margins: Sa’adat Hasan Manto Stories*, ed. Muhammad Usman Memon (New Delhi: Katha, 2003), 200-203.

⁹ Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence* (London: Routledge, 2005), 109.

¹⁰ Kavita Daiya, *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender and National Culture in Post-Colonial India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 65.

¹¹ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women’s in India’s Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 41.

¹² Jisha Menon, *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan and the Memory of Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 121.

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arrangement of the community. The men engaged in the acts of violence felt compelled to prove the superiority of their community as if these acts were acts of victory for them.

II. Abduction of non-Muslim Women from Rawalpindi and Their Plight:

Of various kinds of brutalities against women during Partition, “the abduction of women was the most shameful of the crimes that was so widespread and undertaken so blatantly and with such cowardice that no parallel can be found in the world.”¹³ The atrocious violence against women began in March 1947 during the massacres of the Sikhs and Hindus in the countryside of Rawalpindi, Attock and Jhelum districts. In addition to killings, arson, looting, the abduction of Sikh and Hindu women also took place. In one estimate about 400 Sikh and Hindu girls and women were abducted in the wake of massacres and were said to be in possession of Muslims in Attock and Rawalpindi districts.¹⁴ This was, however, only a precursor to the wide-ranging atrocities against women that would take place five months later across the province. At the height of communal mayhem in August-September 1947, the vast majority of rapes and abduction of women of all sections occurred across the Punjab. During the same time, there was a recurrence of rioting in the Rawalpindi Division with intensified attacks on the Sikhs and Hindus, unfolding horror and destruction that took their women and children in its orbit once again.

Mob savage brutality unleashed by the Muslims knew no bounds when attacks were carried out on Sikh and Hindu villages or targeted suburbs, and the Sikh and Hindu women and girls were abducted after the male population was massacred. Despite the fighting, it was rare for any young girl to be killed, though they were injured at times. They were taken away and their abduction was usually followed by the heinous act of molestation, rape, or/and forcible conversion, or/and forced marriages. The viciousness had deranged the minds of Muslim perpetrators so much so that the body of a woman was viewed as a land of the enemy to be conquered. And rape was played out on women of the religious “other” to inflict shame on the other community and sabotage the national honour the women symbolised. The act of rape functioned symbolically as means to pollute the generative source, i.e. women, and this abuse extends to the future generations who were thus symbolically stigmatised. It is also important to understand that kidnapping of the Punjabi women in 1947 was not just an unusual happening in a society experiencing severe short-term disruption. Abduction was conspicuous in the Punjabi society as misbehaviour in inter-clan rivalry and also as the activity of *goondas* (thugs) and *badmashes* (gangsters).

¹³ Anis Kidwai, *Azadi ki Chhaon Main* (New Delhi: Qoumi Iekta Trust, 1974), 180.

¹⁴ On 24 March Sardar Jagjit Singh, M.L.A, along with Giani Kartar Singh met with Jenkins and handed him over a paper originally containing ten points, but was expanded by them to include fourteen about various issues arising after March violence. One of the points concerned with the recovery of kidnapped Hindu and Sikh girls from Rawalpindi and Attock districts. Sardar Jagjit Singh Mann told Jenkins that these girls were in possession of Muslims. He put the number of abducted women at about 400. The paper is attached with a Note by Jenkins of interview with Giani Kartar Singh and Sardar Jagit Singh Mann, 24 March 1947, IOR: R/3/1/176.

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At any rate, there were several cases of abduction of Sikh and Hindu women by the Muslims organised in mobs and raiding the non-Muslim villages or non-Muslim quarters in specific localities in towns as violence engulfed the Rawalpindi Division after Partition. For instance, in September 1947 a large Muslim crowd launched a terrible attack on Harnoli, the richest market town in Mianwali *tehsil* of Mianwali district, after having failed twice in their attempts to do so in which the Hindu residents met with some casualties to repulse the attacks. During the third attack, more organised than before, more than half of the population (being 6000 people), were reported to have met their death and about 800 non-Muslim girls and women were taken away by the Muslims.¹⁵ The sufferings of Hindu and Sikh women were not over even after they were abducted; rather their abduction signalled innumerable atrocities and sufferings lined up for them. In the Dinga town (Gujrat district) a dreadful assault on the non-Muslims took place on 6 September 1947 resulting in substantial loss of life and property and it was reported that over 300 girls were abducted.¹⁶ In the aftermath of the abduction, many women were subjected to sexual violence of rape and had grief-laden hearts and disturbed minds, and there was no one to vent their feelings on, no one to unburden their hearts to. Krishna Baldev Vaid, a Hindu fictional writer and the author of the famous Partition novel *The Broken Mirror*, escaped the Dinga riots (Gujrat district) and stayed in a refugee camp in Mandi Bahauddin before moving to East Punjab. Krishna Baldev Vaid recalled the misfortune of a girl he met in the camp:

And there I saw that girl. . . who was very beautiful, and we all had puppy love for. . . and she was delirious. . . she had tried to jump from something . . . I used to go and sit with her and her mother. . . and she was feverish and she was delirious, and later on I heard that she died. . . and she was dying. . . she used to talk incoherent stuff for days, for days, so painful.¹⁷

Besides kidnapping of the non-Muslim women during attacks on villages towns, women were taken away in particular situations where a large number of disoriented and inefficiently sheltered refugees were assembled or on the move. In another instance, in village Dehal (Mianwali district) at a railway station situated 15 miles to the south of Bhakkar, the Hindu inhabitants, who were mostly wealthy merchants, were given evacuation order to get ready with “one trunk and one bedding per family” to depart for the railway station where they were supposed to board a special train to Bhakkar. On 3 September 1947, a day before they were to evacuate, a large armed crowd of about one to two thousand Muslims attacked the Hindus in the night and killed and looted them. “210 young girls and women were abducted in the course of the night and not a single girl who was either a virgin or

¹⁵ K. C. Kalra, District L. Officer, *Report of Work in Mianwali District*, L. A. R. File No. LIC/7, in Kirpal Singh, ed. *Select Documents on Partition of Punjab, 1947: India and Pakistan* (Delhi: National Book Shop, 1991), 677.

¹⁶ *Report of Work in Gujrat District*, L. A. R. File No. LIX/9, in Singh, ed., *Select Documents on Partition*, 636.

¹⁷ Krishna Baldev Vaid, interview by Andrew Whitehead, in Delhi, on January 12, 1997, interview tape 29, side B, in *India: A People Partitioned*, 1998.

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grown-up escaped the vigilant eyes of the *goondas*.”¹⁸ In such situations kidnapping of women frequently became a part and parcel of general looting for one of the many reasons that women were regarded as men’s property.¹⁹

In an atmosphere of heightened communal feelings and ensuing rioting at the time of Partition the Hindu and Sikh minorities of the Rawalpindi Division constituted vulnerable targets and their women, tragically, were more volatile. When refugee trains were targets of the worst attacks and massacres on both sides of the border, there was widespread abduction of women of all sections of society. The ineffective and insufficient arrangements failed to ensure safety and protection during migration which facilitated the perpetrators of violence to carry out heinous acts against women. In one of the worst attacks on refugee trains, it was reported that out of about six thousand refugees only one thousand were able to make it safely on a refugee train from Pind Dadan Khan (Jhelum district) bound for Amritsar, carrying Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pind Dadan Khan Refugee Camp and other neighbouring places to East Punjab in September 1947.²⁰ The train completed its journey from 19 September to 21 September with one captain, Mohammad Aslam Khan as in charge of the train, and about 20 Muslims and 6 Sikh soldiers and it was attacked at several places between Jhelum and Amritsar. As the train started its journey from Jhelum it was attacked at the Haranpur railway station by a large Muslim crowd armed with spears, axes and guns, and bombs were thrown at the train near the outer signal. Later, during its journey, it was attacked at several places before ultimately reaching Amritsar. The Fact Finding Committee set up under the Indian Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation reported that about eight hundred people were killed and two hundred wounded, and about seventy-five young girls were abducted in the attack at Haranpur.²¹ However, with the efforts of Lala Avtar Narain Gujral, District Liaison Officer Jhelum, some women who were abducted at Haranpur station were restored, while some women were reported to have been transported to Sargodha.²²

On 24 September 1947 in another train massacre perpetrated by a Muslim mob at Kamoke railway station (Gujranwala district) on a refugee train coming from Pind Dadan Khan carrying over three thousand refugees towards East Punjab, an estimated 400 Hindus and Sikhs were killed, with about the same number injured and a large number of women reported to have been abducted.²³

¹⁸ Kalra, District L. Officer, *Report of Work in Mianwali District*, L. A. R. File No. LIC/7, in Singh, ed., *Select Documents on Partition*, 673.

¹⁹ Andrew J. Major, “‘The Chief Sufferers’: Abduction of Women during the Partition of Punjab,” *South Asia XVIII*, Special Issue (1995): 61.

²⁰ The Report of Dist. Facts Finding Officer Hukam Chand Hans, Facts Finding Branch, the Indian Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, Delhi, in Singh, ed., *Select Documents on Partition*, 619-20. It is, however, difficult to know to what extent the number of casualties and abduction is credible.

²¹ Singh, ed., *Select Documents on Partition*, 619.

²² Singh, ed., *Select Documents on Partition*, 620.

²³ Punjab Police Secret Abstract of Intelligence, week ending 27 September, 1947, Vol. LXIX, 469. However, Chaman Lal Pandhi the Facts Finding Officer of the Fact Finding Committee appointed under the Indian Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation gave the death toll as at least 3,000 in a report submitted to Delhi. See, The Report of Facts Finding Officer Chaman Lal Pandhi, Facts Finding Branch, the Indian Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, Delhi, in Singh, ed., *Select Documents on Partition*, 631. According to *Civil and Military Gazette* there were 418 non-Muslim casualties following

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The following statement was given to a chief liaison officer by Shrimati Laj Wanti, a widow of Shri Manank Chand, age 23 years of Khatri caste and resident of Nurpur Sethi, district Jhelum. It provides some indication of the horrors of women as a result of abduction. She narrated the Kamoke train carnage:

The women-folk were not butchered, but taken out and sorted. The elderly women were later butchered while the younger ones were distributed . . . All the valuables on the persons of the women were removed and taken away by the mob. Even clothes were torn in the effort to remove valuables. My son was also snatched away in spite of my protests. I cannot say who took him away. I was taken by one Abdul Ghani to his house. He was a tonga driver. I was kept in the house for over a month and was badly used . . . After about a month it was announced by beat of drum that the Hindu Military had arrived and those of its inhabitants who had Hindu women and children in their possession should produce them at the police station.²⁴

She went on to state further that during the one month that she spent in the house of Abdul Ghani she was told that “there was no food in India, the relations of all Hindu women had been killed and no one was prepared to have them back into their homes”.

She is reported to have said:

We were also told that we must state before the police and other authorities that were not willing to return. The 150 women who were produced at the station, Kamoke, were taken in tongas to Gujranwala. Out of the women collected only 20 got up and said that they wanted to return to India. I was one of them. The remaining lot was put into the trucks and sent back to Kamoke by the Sub-Inspector of Police. We were then taken to the Hindu refugee camp and put into trucks which brought us to Amritsar.²⁵

The account is taken from SGPC publication, *Muslim League Attacks on Sikhs and Hindus in the Punjab, 1947*, and it is difficult to determine to what extent it is credible. However, the residents of Kamoke whom Ilyas Chattha interviewed during his research vividly recollected the “*kat-lo-garat*” (mass killings) of Hindus and Sikhs and “*aghwa*” (abduction) of their women at Kamoke railway lines in 1947. One of the respondents Ghulam Khadar says:

The people attacked the train at the station and killed many Hindus and Sikhs. The attackers were not the locals; they came from out of Kamoke. Yes, many non-Muslim women were also abducted in Kamoke. The

the incident which lasted for 40 minutes. See, *Civil and Military Gazette* (Lahore), 26 September 1947 and 27 September 1947.

²⁴ A statement of Shrimati Laj Wanti, widow of Shri Manank Chand, age 23 years, caste Khatri and resident of Nurpur Sethi, district Jhelum, to the Chief Liaison Officer, Lahore, in G. S. Talib, *Muslim League Attacks on Sikhs and Hindus in the Punjab 1947* (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1950), 261. The volume is a reprint of an old book compiled in 1947 by Sardar Gurbachan Singh Talib, principal of Lyallpur Khalsa College, Jullundur, and published in 1950 by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee.

²⁵ Talib, *Muslim League Attacks*, 262.

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people took them away in other outlying areas so that military could not find them. One of my relatives took a woman to Sheikhpura and lived and worked there in a brick-kiln for many years. This woman converted to Islam and became pious . . . She was a Patwari woman . . . Islam allows this.²⁶

The accounts above indicate that the kidnapped women were right away transported to other places in fear of recovery from the authorities. The abducted women were also dissuaded through propaganda to go back to their families and they were preferably converted to the religion of their abductors. Such religious transformation of the abductees was intended to purify the “impure” element in the abducted women for the marital union permissible by the religion of the abductors. The conversion was, thus, seen by the perpetrators to provide a legitimate basis for their morally wrong act.

The most appalling feature of abduction of women during Partition was that women were picked and distributed like commodities; the “hot stuff” would be distributed among people of influence while the “substandard” falling to the share of the attackers. An Indian social worker Damyanti Sahgal learnt during the recovery operation in Gujrat district that “there was a nawab (a member of elite) who would sit on his throne (here it means the seat) and the abducted girls would be paraded before him and he would choose the pretty ones. The ones who were young, he used to feel them, the older ones he would give away. The girls could not do anything, no protest, nothing. He would say give such and such in category no. 1, or category no. 2, and the best ones, keep them in the *zenana* (usually a secluded place for women in the household).”²⁷ The irony was that women came to be seen and treated as objects, especially when they were kidnapped and sold, often four to five times before “ending up as slave-girls in factories”.²⁸ In this regard, armed Pathans, operating in bands, were perhaps the worst offenders in West Punjab, especially in the districts of the Rawalpindi Division, who carried off women and sold them to Muslim men. A report from Sargodha claimed “the Pathans brought a large number of abducted women from Kashmir front and they had been selling these like cattle and chattel. There were cases in which a woman had been sold thrice or four times. The Pathans made this a regular trade.”²⁹ In early 1948, the Pathans had become so out of control that they were said to be abducting even Muslim women for sale, and the Government of Pakistan had to set up special camps to house them.³⁰

In a society where a woman’s sexuality is a symbol of “manhood”, its destruction is such a source of shame and disgrace that retribution can be a potent motivator for women’s abuse. The abuse and violation played out on the non-

²⁶ Interview with Ghulam Khadar, Kamoke, 16 February, 2007, in Ilyas Chattha, *Partition and Locality: Violence, Migration, and Development in Gujranwala and Sialkot, 1947-1961* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 141.

²⁷ Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998), 156.

²⁸ *Tribune*, 29 December 1947, cited in Major, “‘The Chief Sufferers’,” 62.

²⁹ *Report of Work in Sargodha District*, L. A. R. File No. LIC/7, in Singh, ed., *Select Documents on Partition*, 690.

³⁰ *Tribune*, 12 January 1948 and 6 February 1948, cited in Major, “‘The Chief Sufferers’,” 62.

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Muslim women in March 1947 during the Rawalpindi massacres paved way for brutality against the Muslim women at the hands of men of rival communities amidst turmoil during the partition of the Punjab. The Sikhs were especially so infuriated by the atrocities of Rawalpindi massacres that they would meet in *gurdwaras* and take an oath that “whatever has happened with our women in Pindi, we will not let that go unavenged.”³¹ Later in August, the Sikh *jathas* were involved in the abduction and abuse of Muslim women in East Punjab when they got an opportunity. Ironically, in the context where violation and abuse have to be avenged, “revenge” is not perceived and treated as violence rather it is presented as just an act of recompense.³² This “revenge” led to the distinction between “our” violence and “theirs” and created validation for further violence in which it eventually got displaced on the evilness of the “other”. The protagonists of violence in vengeance recognized “their” violence as acts done as a duty, as a response to the call of the times, serving the cause for a community. However, with the pitiless rationale of all such savagery, it was women who at last were most violently dealt with as a result of rioting in the Punjab in 1947.

³¹ In one particular instance, an Indian social worker Damyanti Sahgal recalled that at the time of Partition in Jandiala village near Amritsar, Sikhs met in the *gurdwara* and took oaths that on such and such day we will put an end to *Musalmaans*. They said, “whatever has happened with our women in Pindi, we will not let that go unavenged.” For more see, Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 114-115.

³² Pandey, “Community and Violence,” 2044.