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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 21 - WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF PARTITION

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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- During Partition, women's bodies became privileged locations on which both regimes' political programmes were ruthlessly imprinted.
- A lot of public parading of nude women, tattooing with religious symbols, and rape can be seen.
- Women were principally considered as **sacrificial mothers: the bearers and nurturers of the religion's and community's males.**
- Following any type of community conflict, female bodies were deemed unclean and a disgrace to a religion and community when they were raped.

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- Women had a **passive role** in the resistance.
- This revealed patriarchal attitudes about women's bodies in society.
- Following the Partition, the government provided rehabilitation to women who had lost their homes and family members.
- **Mob frenzy and women's bodies:**
- Women were particularly vulnerable during huge migrations across borders, where they were frequently kidnapped and dragged away by attackers.

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- The rape of women is a widespread occurrence and an indirect technique for males from one community to assault women from another community by violating their bodies.
- Private parts are mutilated and tattooed with the other religion's marks and symbols, suggesting that the woman is now indelibly a war prize.
- Women are unclothed and made to perform in the enemy community's religious shrine, which is a way of insulting both the 'Other' female and the 'Other' religion – the two most sacrosanct objects for all communities.

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- The defiled female body is a disgrace to the community and religion. As a result, their relatives killed them to protect them from an attack by a man from another religion.
- The rioters regarded the bodies of these women as the protectors of the purity of the community.
- After the riot the recovery operation of the state viewed the female body as the territory that should be conquered.
- The painful and unique experiences of these women during the partition are very much related to the **cultural construction of women, which are rooted in a gendered society.**

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- Even though the rape occurred on a large scale, most women dealt and lived with the repercussions on an individual basis, and hence there was no easy method for them to speak about it.
- According to the personal accounts of women who have suffered the brutality of Partition, female bodies are associated with conceptions of home, religious communities, nations, and national territories.
- Women's violence is used to feminize their male counterparts, who are incapable of protecting their women/community/nation. (Butalia, 1998).

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- Most of the studies of India's Partition violence describe instances of killing and looting, but do not categorize crimes like mass drowning among women as violent acts that are projected as valour performed to protect one's honour, which is intrinsically linked to their community in the case of women. (Butalia, 1993).
- The **attackers were not strangers; they were known persons, neighbours, and acquaintances** who took advantage of the lawlessness of the division to settle old scores, seize property, and compel women into marriages in order to sexually harass them.

Stigma and Stereotypes Around ‘Pure/Impure’ Female Bodies

- Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar states how, in the face of communal atrocity, the powerlessness of the male protectors had become proportional to the susceptibility of the women, as the former had, in most cases, eye-witnessed without being able to prevent rapes, abductions and murder (Rajakumar 64).
- Real-life reminiscence and confession by Satyendraprasad Biswas in “Mukto Seemanter Shesh Raat” (“The Last Night at the Open Border”) also substantiates Rajkumar’s reflection that the memory of bodily violence on women for these male riot-survivors is fraught with a combined impression of gender, experience and trauma.

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- Rajkumar sees the **mob itself as an epitome of masculine helplessness** and rage at not being able to prevent the desecration of their womenfolk by enemy groups, such that retaliating by dishonouring the enemy's "mothers" and "sisters" could be the only way of mending the injury caused to their collective male ego. She explains how, at the time of Partition, the status of "mothers, sisters" came to represent the entirety of the female population of a community.
- With an apparent return of social sanity in the post-Partition decades, the educated middle-class and socially conscious men take on from the previous episodes of masculine failure, with the aim of salving their restive memory by offering service to all those female riot victims, whom they could not protect earlier. In many cases, such men offered to marry the female victims, frequently going against their families and traditional values.



Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- Rather than centralizing only the woman as the game of the Partition atrocities, Khadija Mastoor's short story "They are Taking Me Away, Father, They are Taking Me Away" sees the Partition violence in terms of a **total collapse of the protectionist ideals** that men at the same time secured and transgressed.
- During the Partition riots, man's position as a protector and a violator were hardly differentiable, as he primarily assumed the gender roles available within familial rhetoric, seeing female citizen subjects either as part of his Self or as Other.

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- In the story, the volunteer's character is a victim of traumatized memory just like the sexually vulnerable girl, who the mob takes as a spoil of virile victory. Despite referring to the woman as a "lamb" and asking the mob to "Have pity, don't touch her," the volunteer's agony lies in not being able to carry out the chivalrous ideology that he represents. As the mob questions him: "where was humanity then, and where were you?"
- The volunteer's resistive, vocal figure transforms into that of a passive colluder, who had failed to act similarly in a previous violence. Seen in this way, the men do not remain only the actors of the Partition carnage as a generalized picture would have it, but are also acted upon as abject pawns (*Cool, Sweet Water: Selected Stories*).



Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- It is estimated that between 75,000 and 100,000 women were kidnapped and raped during the division.
- Systematic violence against women started in March 1947 in **Rawalpindi** district where Sikh women were targeted by Muslim mobs.
- Violence was also perpetrated on an organized basis, with Pathans taking Hindu and Sikh women from refugee trains while one accused that he witnessed armed Sikhs periodically dragging Muslim women away.

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- Almost one million people were slaughtered everywhere in India. In Punjab alone, 6 lakhs people were slain.
- Thousands of people were raped, and 12 million people were made homeless.
- Revenge killings occurred in several parts of the country, including **Calcutta, Naokhali in East Bengal, Bihar and Western Punjab.**

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- **Rawalpindi** had been engulfed by violence for ten days. The people were afraid of being abducted, converted, raped, and women of being impregnated by men of other religions, **Sikh families decided to kill members of their own families, primarily women and children.**
- **Mangal Singh** and his two brothers, from a village near the **Gurdaspur border**, massacred 18 members of their family by collecting them in a Gurudwara, praying for their souls, and then executing them.
- **Sant Raja Singh**, a resident of Rawalpindi's Thoa Khalsa, chose to execute the women. Raja Singh murdered his own daughter **Maan Kaur** first, followed by several others, and 80 women in the village drowned themselves to remain pure. Such events were portrayed as examples of women's bravery and valour.

Stigma and Stereotypes Around 'Pure/Impure' Female Bodies

- The account of 90 women from the Thoa Khalsa hamlet in Rawalpindi District who drowned during the Partition unrest by plunging into a well. (The novel **Tamas** by **Bhisham Sahni**) piqued the interest of Punjabis and the rest of the country.
- Such images of heroism, on the other hand, frequently conceal other realities.
- The question that remains is whether women jumped into the well out of their own volition or as a result of social pressure. Unpleasant realities hidden behind stories of such '**heroism**.'
- One of **Saadat Hasan Manto's** best-known stories, '**Khol Do**,' depicts the story of a young girl, Sakina, who was raped by a man from her own community who was supposed to protect her after Partition.

Question of Legitimate/Illegitimate Child

- Women as the repositories of religious beliefs and keepers of purity and integrity of the community. Oriental and colonial assumptions of women are synonymous with their religion – such an understanding ignores how women can appropriate their own gender to achieve social change.
- Complex position of women in politics – women's agency emerges through the interplay of gender, class and religious identities.
- The sexual and gendered imagination of ethnic communities can be traced back to colonial ideology, according to which Muslims are aggressors and forceful, whereas Hindus are tolerant and passive. The communal divide rests on such myths about the 'Other.' With the formation of Pakistan, the values were reversed, i.e. the good Muslim victimized by the bad Hindu.

Question of Legitimate/Illegitimate Child

- ***Reproducing the Legitimate Community:*** Ritu Menon
- Focus on the body of the abducted women post-partition, as well as the combined recovery mission performed by India and Pakistan.
- A seeming humanitarian endeavour in rehabilitation, yet it is a significant definer of identities and demarcation of bodies within the community, gender, and nation.
- Woman's sexuality became a focal point of arguments in a secular and democratic India since it had been violated by abduction, transgressed by forced conversion and marriage, and exploited by unlawful cohabitation and reproduction.



Question of Legitimate/Illegitimate Child

- Kandiyoti: **“The integration of women into modern nationhood, epitomised by citizenship, somehow follows a different trajectory from that of men”.**
- Such claims by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs over one's **"own"** women and children were an indicator of how India and Pakistan formed themselves in relation to each other, redefining their own and others' national identity through a determination of **maintaining honour and restore moral order.**
- Social reform movements with **widow remarriage, Sati (widow immolation)** intended to lift women's sexuality out of domain of traditional and insert it into political and social agenda of Indian womanhood.



Question of Legitimate/Illegitimate Child

- **Kandiyoti** - Wherever women serve as boundary markers between different national, ethnic and religious collectivities, their own rights are jeopardized.
- Nation as a concept itself has affinity for male society together with concept of respectability and **legitimized dominance of men over women**. (quoted in Parker et. al, (eds.) 1992: 6)
- **Benedict Anderson** - Nation is “**passionate brotherhood**” of “**deep comradeship**”. In this fraternity, women are enshrined mother (nation as mother) promotes male-male arrangements and **all-male history** - state constituted around roles of women.

Question of Legitimate/Illegitimate Child

- Re-interpretation of tradition in a selective manner, particularly in relation to **women's "proper" place in society.**
- Classic imagination: the Motherland's body is violated by the marauding foreigner.
- **Perry Anderson** - Nation haunted by definitional Others and **"shaped by what it opposes."**
- India is statedly democratic, secular socialist vs. Pakistan, Islamic, feudal, suspiciously **"un-modern"**.



Thank You

