A brave, moving and troubling book that voices, for the first time, dark truths about our history.
—Sunil Khilnani

The Partition of India in 1947 caused one of the great human convulsions of history. The statistics are staggering. Twelve million people were displaced; a million died; seventy-five thousand women are said to have been abducted and raped; families were divided; properties lost; homes destroyed. In public memory, however, the violent, disturbing realities that accompanied Partition have remained blanketed in silence. And yet, in private, the voices of Partition have never been silenced and its ramifications have not yet ended.

Urvashi Butalia’s remarkable book, the outcome of a decade of interviews and research, looks at what Partition was intended to achieve, and how it worked on the ground, and in people’s lives. Pieced together from oral narratives and testimonies, in many cases from women, children and dalits—marginal voices never heard before—and supplemented by documents, reports, diaries, memoirs and parliamentary records, this is a moving, personal chronicle of Partition that places people, instead of grand politics, at the centre. These are the untold stories of Partition, stories that India has not dared to confront even after fifty years of independence.

These shaming histories—so long under wraps—are narrated with honesty and clarity and informed by compassion.
—Bapsi Sidhwa

Cover: "Excised images to stain an old quilte cover, brought by my grandmother from Karachi in 1947. Version 2” by Noami Malani

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For my mother Subhadra
And my father Joginder
Who taught me about Partition
For Ramamama, my uncle
Who lives the Partition from day to day
And for my grandmother Dayawanti/Ayesha
Whose life Partition shaped
As it did her death
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Women
I first met Damyanti Sahgal in 1989. At the time she was eighty years old — a diminutive, energetic woman with mischief and humour lurking constantly in her eyes. It was her niece, Lina Dhingra, who introduced me to Damyanti. 'Talk to my aunt,' she said, one day when I was talking to her about my work on Partition, 'she has a lot of stories to tell.' Damyanti, however, wasn't too enthusiastic. 'Why do you want to talk to me?' she said, 'I have nothing to say. Just a few foolish stories here and there.' I persisted, saying I'd be happy to listen to her stories, foolish or otherwise — and eventually, reluctantly, she relented.

Having decided to speak, Damyanti fell into the project with gusto. She brushed aside my suggestions that I should go to see her in her home and said instead, that she would come to mine. 'So that,' she said, 'you can give me some coffee and lunch and I can have some fun.' Fun we did have — this was the first and only time an entire interview was conducted in my home. Normally, we had tried as far as possible to meet people in environments they were comfortable in and much of the time, these happened to be their homes. Later I realized that Damyanti's insistence on meeting in my house came from an essential sense of homelessness that had stayed with her since Partition, such that there wasn't any home that she would call her own. 'Unless,' as she told me, 'you count my little cottage in Hardwar.'

On the first day we were to meet, Damyanti arrived with her sister Kamla Buldoon Dhingra and her niece Lina. With me was my friend — and at that time fellow traveller — Sudesh Vaid. This long interview was conducted over many sessions spanning several months. Often, as with many interviews, most of which were collective rather than individual, the whole thing
would turn into a conversation with everybody pitching in. There was a point at which, in Damyanti’s interview, her sister began to question her on why she had not done this or that, another at which Kamla took over and began to speak, one at which various people walked into the room and the story Damyanti was telling us was left incomplete, and so on.

The interview that you see here, however, has few of these elements. It has been constructed as — or more correctly edited into — a continuous narrative. While I have not altered the chronology of the interview, I have, quite consciously, and deliberately, in this as in other interviews that follow, removed the questions Sudesh and I posed, as well as the interruptions and small bits of incidental dialogue and conversation. At two points, however, I have kept the conversations between Damyanti and Kamla because I feel they are particularly significant in what they point to, and presenting them as conversation, as they happened, was the only way, I felt, of capturing what those moments were about.

When I reread the transcript of Damyanti’s interview (of which the reader will see only a part at this stage of the text) now, it seems to me to fall into four broad, and somewhat overlapping, divisions. The first has to do with Damyanti’s description of herself, her life before Partition and her flight, alone and virtually penniless, from what became Pakistan, to India. This is the part you will see here. In the second part, which appears later, she speaks of her slow, and initially somewhat reluctant, involvement in what came to be known as social work, and in the third and fourth, which follow at the end of this particular chapter, of the actual work, which consisted mainly of the ‘recovery’, ‘rescue’ and ‘rehabilitation’ of abducted and raped women in Pakistan. None of these parts is clearly demarcated and each flows into the other. The third and fourth parts essentially continue the story of the second, and in some ways the description becomes quite linear, assuming the stages of the actual work: first rescue, then recovery, then rehabilitation. The first and second seem to have more danger attached to them, the third is somewhat ‘safer’, although we find out soon enough that both for the women and for the social workers, rehabilitation is fraught with its own dangers. Throughout the narration Damyanti describes a tension between herself as a social worker, a servant, if you like, of the newly formed nation-state — and in a broader sense, an instrument of her private God, her thakur — and herself as a woman who feels for other women. Just as many of the women resist their rescue, so also Damyanti makes her own private rebellion in her work. But, interestingly, she sees no contradiction between the two. The fact that she has more success with her particular rebellion has (as becomes clear in her encounters with a senior official of Pakistan and later, the Deputy Magistrate who is to certify the ages of the women she is in charge of) surely to do with her class and the access that provides her.

To me, Damyanti’s interview was one of the most important of the ones that Sudesh and I did. Over the months that we spoke together, we became friends. She insisted we call her Danti, and said we could add ‘masti’ or ‘auntie’ if we felt better. At the time we met, and for some considerable time before and indeed after, Damyanti divided her life between Delhi, where she stayed usually in her sister Kamla’s flat, and Hardwar where she had a small cottage, or room. Gradually, she began to spend more and more time in Hardwar and at one point, she refused to come back to Delhi altogether, preferring to live — and die — alone in Hardwar.

Damyanti’s story was important for other reasons too. Partition rendered many thousands of women alone in the way that it did Damyanti. It ruptured their lives, often at the point of marriage, doing away, usually permanently, with ‘normal’ life practices such as marriage. Krishna Sobti, a well-known
THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

writer and someone who has lived through Partition herself, speaks movingly of a whole generation of women whose lives, she says, were destroyed by Partition. In refugee families all available hands had to be pulled into the process of reconstruction, of rebuilding broken homes. Girls and young women were drawn into different kinds of work — domestic, professional, other. By the time things became more ‘normal’ their presences had already become somewhat shadowy. In some instances families had become so dependent on the labour of women that the women’s own desires and aspirations had to be pushed into the background. In others, they had simply been abandoned by their families, or forgotten about. From her account of her life, Damyanti was one such woman. Virtually homeless, she was pulled into social work by her aunt, Premvati Thapar. But she had little or no contact with her immediate family. Nor, if she is to be believed, were they particularly interested to know where she was. And once into social work, long years of her life were given to it. There is, however, an irony here. That very rejection by her family, the very real fact of her aloneness, allowed Damyanti to move into the public world and make something of her life. Just as a whole generation of women were destroyed by Partition, so also Partition provided an opportunity for many to move into the public sphere in a hitherto unprecedented way.

I have often wondered how Damyanti must have felt about her aloneness. In an earlier part of her interview, she speaks about her desire to look attractive, to marry ... but by the time Partition had happened, all this had been put aside. By her own description, she was too old to marry (she was close to forty at the time), but not, I think, too old to dream. Nonetheless, she took the work on, and my sense of it is that she took it on without a driving sort of ‘commitment’. She did it because she was pushed into it, and, quite simply, because it was there.

I found Damyanti’s interview important for several other reasons. According to her, it was the first time she was actually talking about all she had been through, the first time, she said, that anybody had asked her, the first time she was remembering with and to someone. Even for her sister and niece, the experiences she recounted were new. At one point Kamla asked Damyanti why she had never told these stories before. Listening to them, I found it difficult to believe that even in the closest of relationships in families, people could be so ignorant of — and indifferent to — what was going on in the life of someone so close to them. Damyanti, I think, understood this proximity of love and indifference much better than any of us, having seen and lived through Partition in the way she had. It was because of this, I feel, that she chose to live much of her life — especially the latter part — alone. In many ways, she was very close to, often even like a parent, to many of the people she worked with. But at another level, she remained separate, and alone.

It was because of this that I came increasingly to feel that in her narration of the stories of abducted women, her telling of how they had been basically rendered alone by history, Damyanti was really describing her own life. Despite the fact that at some point, contact was remade with her family, Damyanti remained essentially alone. For some time before her death, she had been ailing — she was, at this time, in Haridwar. But despite the entreaties of her sister and niece, she refused to return to Delhi where she could have access to better health care. When she died, she was, as in life, alone. Later, one of her ‘sons’ — a young man who had been orphaned during Partition and to whom she had been like a mother — went to fetch her body and to perform the last rites.

There is another reason why I find Damyanti’s narration so significant. She worked for many years in the Indian State’s recovery and relief operation. She travelled, usually accompanied by Pakistani policemen, who were often hostile not only to her, but to the whole idea of the operation, into the
interior areas of Pakistan to locate abducted women. In interviewing her, I learnt more about the nature of the relief and recovery operation and about the women who were recovered through it, than I have found in any book. I found her insights and descriptions particularly valuable in retrieving the history of such violence — rape, forcible abduction and marriage, and a further violence of the kind perpetrated by the State in its relief and recovery operation. In looking into this, the researcher is faced with a difficult dilemma: how can she recover the voices of women who experienced such violence? Ought she to attempt to locate women who have been through such violence, to get them to speak? For me, Damyanti’s description of the anguish abducted women went through, thus becomes doubly important.

For all of these reasons, I have deliberately chosen Damyanti’s narrative as the thread that weaves together this long chapter on the histories of women’s abduction and rape during Partition.

**DAMYANTI SAHGAL**

At the time of partition I was in my village Kotra. Just thirty miles from Lahore, near Railwind station on the road to Multan. Everything we owned was there. We had a factory. Because I didn’t get married, I stayed with my father. I had no mother. I was my father’s companion, whatever happened ... my father thought that because he had all his property there, his workers would help him out of whatever trouble there was. So much faith ... my uncle P.N. Thapar was a commissioner of Lahore division at that time. He sent a man to say that in Jandiala the Sikhs had held a conference, they’d met in a gurudwara and taken oaths that they would avenge Rawalpindi on the Musalmans, and had sworn that on such and such day — I don’t remember the day — they would begin the wholesale slaughter of Musalmans. So my uncle Thapar sent this message that you should go away from here because I have this confidential report that in Jandiala village, near Amritsar, Sikhs have met in the gurudwara and have taken oaths that on such and such day we will put an end to Musalmans. This will have repercussions. Musalmans will kill Hindus. They said, whatever has happened with our women in Pindi, we will not let that go unavenged ... My father said, well, this Thapar is a coward ... how can we leave everything and just go? I have so many men, they will protect me. There’ll be some noise for a few days and then everything will come back to normal. So he refused to go. Then a second message came ... my uncle said your father is stubborn, so you should go. At the most he will be killed, but you, you will be gutted ... and this is very difficult for us to tolerate. You will be gutted ... so you should leave.

Father didn’t agree ... the workers in his factory were mixed: Jats, Hindus, but on the whole it was a Muslim village so most of the workers were Musalmans ... at the time they were respectful and humble. They seemed safe ...

When I tried to persuade my father he said, well if you feel scared you go. I said but bauji, he said, no bai, if you feel scared you go. But where do I go? Then I came to Lahore. I remember asking what I should do, where I should go, my father was refusing to go. And they said the safest Hindu area is — now what is it called? Kamlia, what is that, just north of Beasa ... my brain forgets very last. Oh yes, Kulu, Kulu Manali that whole area.

Partition had started. I went alone, and there was rioting in Amritsar ... I went alone. We used to have a small boy with us, I don’t remember what his name was, Dipe or Tipu, a small boy. Bauji said you take this servant with you and money ... whatever, some two or three hundred, whatever was in the house he handed to me. I don’t exactly remember. And he said once you get there, in Kulu, Dr Devi Chand told me that they have a house there and that I should go there. You’ll be safe there and when all the disturbances finish you can come back ... So I took the servant and some rupees, some two or three hundred, I don’t know how much,
perhaps it was only a hundred. When we came close to Amritsar, we found that they had started stopping trains, killing people in them, but we were lucky. Everyone said put your windows up, they are cutting down people.

Train, train. Everyone was full of fear ... they kept saying put your windows up, put your windows up, Amritsar is coming and they’re cutting people down there. We put our windows up ... God knows what they were doing outside, we were too frightened even to look, we kept praying our train would not stop at the station. And from there our train passed straight through ... we had heard that killing and looting had begun there, that the Musalmans had also risen up in arms, so also the Sikhs. Anyway, we went from there and I went straight to Kulu, and stayed there some time in Devi Chand Vohra’s house. The small boy, the servant, was also with me. After this I left the house and went to — what was it Kamla, your nagar? I went there too, and to Manali, I roamed about a lot in this whole area, I had to stay in rest houses. In rest houses they have some specific days — they let you stay for 8-10 days. On arrival, when I got there, I used to sign, the chaprasi would bring the book, the visitor’s book and then, they would come and say now your time is up and you must leave, and we had to pay the rest house, after that. After a short while in their house they sent me to Nagar, that’s what I remember. When I left, when I ran away I went with just one or two dhotis. Yes, my father had said that once I arrived I should take a house on rent, and then send him a telegram or letter and he would come then. He said, I don’t want to come like this with you. I’m an old man, where will you carry me around? I’m not willing to go like this, but once you manage to arrange something let me know and I’ll come. But what was there to arrange?

First of all, I went to Dharamsala. That little boy realized that I had no money left, some ten days or a month he stayed with me. Then there was no money even to feed myself, let alone him. So he thought she has nothing left, and he quietly ran away. Towards Kangra, I don’t know where he went. The next day I kept calling for him, Dipu, Dipu, but he was nowhere to be seen. He had run off. Then in the rest house the chowkidar asked me for money, I told him I had no money, but that I’m from an important family and I can sign and put my name down ... I’ve run away from my home and can’t go back there. It was in the newspapers and on the radio that there was looting and killing going on there. I don’t know where my relatives are, but the moment I get news of anyone from the family, I’ll get you money. From there I went to Nagar and came back — which place was it, I don’t remember. It was another place. Here there was killing ... there were Gujars and they started killing Musalmans. The Jansanghis used to kill, they would drink and kill. Hindus can’t do this, they’re afraid. Young boys would drink a lot and then they would come and kill Musalmans. There was one young boy, small, but strong and handsome like a Pathan. I was at Dr Devi Chand’s house at that time. I was standing there when they began crying and shouting, ‘They’re going to kill him, they’re going to kill him’ and people began to plead, ‘Don’t kill him, don’t kill him, he’s so young ...’ and they replied, ‘Well, we’re telling him you become a Hindu and ... if he becomes Hindu we will leave him, otherwise we’ll not leave him.’ We tried to persuade him, we said, child, become a Hindu. But he roared: ‘I WILL NOT BECOME A HINDU, THEY CAN CUT MY THROAT BUT I WILL NOT BECOME A HINDU!’ Such courage, I’ll have my throat cut. They took him away screaming. I don’t know whether they killed him or not. Things were bad then, bodies used to be found lying around, the Beas had risen so much ... there was so much rain. I have never seen rain like that, the river broke its bounds, bodies would flow down the river ... I had no money, no clothes, only rags. Somehow I managed to buy a thali and I would scrape together some atta and cook on the thali itself ... things were bad ...

One evening, I was walking on the banks of the river ...
I had a mala in my hand, no money in my pocket ... you see, at one point I had become almost an ascetic, when I was in Kotra, when I decided that I didn't want to marry, I have been married to my god, try thakur, I loved only him, and it was because of that that I was putting an end to one kind of life. So the mala used to be in my hands and his name on my lips ...

Earlier, of course, I used to be very fond of dressing up, of looking after my figure, my sisters were fair and I was dark, but I used to be proud of my figure and I was always measuring myself with a tape measure, so much from here, so much from there ... and all those things you know, eating grapes to make the breasts grow larger, and this should be like this and this like that, so I used to examine myself, up from here, in from there, so much outwards, so much inwards ... curly hair was fashionable and we thought that putting some kinds of leaves in the hair made it curly! So I used to put those leaves and hide. Then someone said you're doing the wrong thing, you should put beri leaves, and then someone said you should put kerosene oil ... And I can't tell you how long I put kerosene in my hair ... I thought it would keep it from going white. Of course the hair became what it had to become, but I'm just telling you ... nails, waist ... and then, when God blessed me ... why and how I don't know, but after that I simply spent time in Hardwar, on the banks of the Jumna. I used to always think of my god. And then they said, my father thought something had happened to my brain, and I used to roam about alone praying, and it was in this condition that Partition happened ...

In the resthouse, there was an old chowkidar. I had not eaten for a day or two; after all, one can only eat if there is money. Just then, an officer came. He asked the chowkidar who was in the next room. The chowkidar said I don't really know, I don't understand, there's a woman — at that time I was healthy, red cheeks — she keeps the room closed, she doesn't eat or drink anything, she's been in there for two days or so, she doesn't come out or eat anything. Then the officer knocked on my door and said I'm the officer from here and am on duty here, where have you come from? I told him how I was there. He said, what are the arrangements for your food and drink? I kept quiet ... what could I say? ... Perhaps my eyes filled with tears, he felt very bad and said you come with me, you can't stay here like this, this is not right ... and he got me food and drink.

One day that old chaprasi came, the chowkidar, he said, 'I'll tell you a story. The Englishman here, the deputy commissioner' — I don't remember what name he took — 'he stayed in this rest house. I used to be his chaprasi. He came in one night and said to me, chaprasi, take off my shoes ... I have shoes on my feet take them off. And today ... I'll tell you a story ... note it down with pen and paper ... you know your baba Gandhi, he's given us a lot of trouble, a lot of trouble. That old man, he doesn't even stop for breath, he keeps telling us get out, get out. After all, where will we go? Here we are very happy. Baba, we'll leave because we have to, we'll leave, but not before we have taught him a lesson. We'll leave such a state of affairs that brother will fight brother, sister will fight sister, there will be killing and arson and rape, we'll leave such a state of affairs behind that he will not be able to control it, and he will raise his hands and plead with god to send us back ... send them back. And then what will happen ... his own men, his own people will hurl abuses at him, they will give him trouble, they will say look at this of mess you have got us into. And he pulled out a paper and said, see, take it down, see today's date. I'm telling you we will go, we're not likely to stay now, but we'll teach him a lesson before going. This will happen, that will happen and everyone will say, Oh god, send them back ...'
KAMLA: What stories these are, you've never told us these stories ...
DAMYANTI: You don't know, Kamlal you don't know anything because you were in England ...
KAMLA: No, I mean, we haven't had much time to talk ... an hour here, an hour there ... you used to come for short visits ...
DAMYANTI: And after this, I had another life altogether, and things kept changing ...
KAMLA: I know, we've never asked you how you came away ...
DAMYANTI: I came alone.
KAMLA: No, I mean we thought ...
DAMYANTI: Never, never ...
KAMLA: We took it for granted because we came from England. We knew that everyone had come, no one asked how ... we took it for granted ...
DAMYANTI: Kamlal no one was there to help ...
KAMLA: No, I mean you came and you went from ashrams ... one didn't know, the others came together ...
DAMYANTI: You know ...
KAMLA: The others came together, we thought you must have come with them all ...

I felt I had no one in the world. I didn't really know where anyone was. I was in the mountains, alone, without money. What could I do? One day, I saw two young men by the banks of the river, they were talking softly to each other. I tried to listen ... They were saying, our office is going to open, we don't have leave ... from Nagar there is the place where they've taken electricity. Kamlal, what is the name of this place? It will come back. They were worrying, it had been so many days, they had to report for their jobs. I pricked up my ears. They said there's one place, one passage through the mountains from where the police goes. It's some pass, not Khyber pass, but something ... it goes through the mountains, we'll go through there. The river was full. I approached them and asked them, very gently, are you planning to go? They said, yes, our office is opening, we have to get back, otherwise action will be taken against us. We'll go through the mountains. I said, take me along. They said no, sorry, the way is very dangerous, sometimes it is narrow, we may have to stop a night or two, and it will be difficult to reach. I said I must go, but they were adamant.

They fixed with each other to meet at a particular time the next morning. In the morning, the place where the mountains opened up, I arrived there and sat down. After all, what did I have to lose? Whatever I had I was wearing. I told myself that I would simply follow them, how could they stop me. Yes, before that I went to the jungle people. I asked if there were forest resthouses on the way and if they could book me in. They said those places were dangerous, there was still killing and looting going on there. I pleaded with them, I said somehow, if you can send me to Simla by road, there I have people. But they refused. They said we can give you money. But I refused to take it even though they kept saying you are like our sister, our mother, we know you're from a good family, but I refused. So I decided to go to the mountain ... and when they came, the two young men, they were shocked. They said what are you doing here, on this path? We've explained to you again and again that you can't go by this way, it's too dangerous. I said how can you stop me, I'm just walking on the road. I have no money. They said we'll give you money. I just couldn't take money. I wanted to get away from the place. So you know the place where the electricity comes from. Is it Mandi? I said if you get me up to there, I can get a connection to Dharamsala or Punjab, but they said the pass we're going to travel through is very dangerous. But
I kept following them, and they were very angry but they couldn't do anything about it.

Some distance ahead they stopped and opened their packets of food, and of course they had to give me some. They must have thought what a leech, what a chichar, but what could they do, I simply wouldn't leave them. I was quite weak, red eyes ... no money. A little further on we came to a small village and there they even got me milk and roti. In the morning again I was after them ... but the grass was very slippery, and our feet kept getting caught, scratched, bruised ... dying of cold, no warm clothes ... Then we reached a point, a sort of main centre where buses left from. There was also a police post, a chowki. The two of them decided that they would leave me at the police chowki since I had attached myself to them. They took me to a sort of platform and said you sit here and we'll fetch you some water or something, and they slipped away ... after all, they had to get rid of me somehow.

Then, as I was sitting there, the police came and I told them how I had got there, that I've come from Lahore and I'm related to such and such, and if you could get me to Dharamsala. They said what will you do there? I said I'll get in touch with the Deputy Commissioner who is on duty there ... I told them I have no money, but please put me on a bus somehow. You see, there I was at the chowki. My legs were swollen, my body was stiff like this, I could hardly move. What they did, they put a wire, a chain, across the road to stop buses. A bus came, and they stopped it and said you have to take this passenger. They said our bus is booked and we have no room. They said you have to take this passenger. They said ours is a marriage party, we have no room at all. They said this poor unfortunate woman is a victim of circumstance, you have to take her, you must take her up to the place where the electricity comes from, the place whose name I can't remember at the moment. They said we have no seats. Then what they did, they opened the back door and

in that little space they picked me up and put me, God help me always ... I was so stiff I couldn't stand. The bus moved off and as it did my head began to spin and I began to throw up. I was half fainting ... I didn't know what to do, I kept vomiting into my kurta, my kurta and choti, I kept filling my vomit into my clothes and I kept on being sick ... I prayed to my god. I said, O god, you keep Draupadi's shame, look at what is happening to me now, O god, help me. As I was praying, the next stop came. I couldn't even look out of the window, I was crouched over my vomit-filled clothes. The door opened and a young man, tall and smart, wearing khadi, said mataji, behanji, you come and sit on my seat. I said no, no, leave me alone, I'm dirty, I'm filthy ... I could hardly speak ... and you know he said this after quite a distance, in fact it was soon after I prayed. He said my conscience does not agree, in this state you should not be sitting here. I have a front seat, you come and sit there, and I'll sit here. I said no, I'm dirty, I'll dirty the seat. He said, it doesn't matter ... I kept crying, he simply picked me up and put me on the seat ... I kept crying, I'm stiff, I'm fixed in this position, my limbs are locked. He didn't listen to anything, he put me on the seat, dusted all the dried vomit off my clothes, and put me there and went off to sit, I don't know where.

When we reached the place where the electricity comes from, the bus stops there, and from there I had to take another bus. I tried to sit up, and someone said to me, don't worry, when the bus comes we'll put you on it. I said but I have nothing, please help me to get to Dharamsala somehow, that's all I want. Then the young man stood up. He said, I live here, and work here. I have a house here, you come with me. I said no. He said, why? I said, no beta I can't. He said I cannot stand this, we can't leave you in this condition, you'll have to come. I said I can't climb the mountain. He said don't worry, I'll get another man and we'll take turns at carrying you up. His bungalow was quite high. Anyway in spite of my protests he took me up there, and put me down
in the veranda of his bungalow. And then he called out, behanji, behanji, I have a guest, for you behanji. Look we have a visitor. And, the door opened, and to my surprise, the woman who came out was my student!

My god, my god, behanji, what's happened to you, look at your condition! Kamla, it was Shakuntala, from Mahila Devi, the beautiful girl. She came and put her arms around me and cried and cried, saying look at your condition. I said are you Shakuntala? Yes ... yes ... Get away from me, I'm dirty, dirty ... That very instant, she ... she said this lady means more to me than my life. Every student loved her. And she got hot water, got me a set of clear and warm clothes, put on heaters, made up my bed, and gave me tea and put me into bed. I couldn't stop crying, and she kept saying behanji, why are you crying? You gave us the gift of knowledge ... I said, Shakuntala, I don't know what to do, where to go, I don't understand anything. I said please send me to Dharamsala, I'll be eternally grateful to you ... I have no money or anything. She said, don't make me ashamed ... and in this condition I'm going to send you nowhere, you rest first, become able to walk and become strong, and then ... this is your home, we're your children, this is my sister whose house it is. They kept me for ten or fifteen days and really looked after me, massages, doctors ... I was happy but I also kept feeling I'm taking hospitality from someone I don't know well, I had a sort of complex. Later, they sent me to Dharamsala ... there I went straight to the Deputy Commissioner.

I explained to him how I had run away, I've come from such and such a place ... I'm not asking anything of you except that you send me to Punjab somehow. I don't know where any of my relatives are except Dr Santokh Singh who is in Amritsar, so please send me there. He said, don't worry, we'll send you but first you come to my house. He called his driver and asked him to take me to his home. His wife was a patient of dama, asthma ... she kept me for nearly a month and really looked after me. He said, I can't send you because the river is in full spate now and all the roads are closed. The moment things are better I will. At the moment the roads are very slippery and the jeep could easily skid.

KAMLA: One minute. Did no one in the family bother? Did they not get worried? What about Premi auntie?

DAMYANTI: Kamla, what did they know, or I know? For all they knew I could still have been in Kotra or dead or something ... The time was such ... no one knew about the other, nor did anyone have any interest, so what did they know about me? They must have thought she'll manage ...

Part I

HIDDEN HISTORIES

I cannot now pinpoint exactly when I became aware of the histories of women. I say 'became aware' because the process was a sort of cumulative one, where stories began to seep into my consciousness until one day when it became clear that there was something I should be actively seeking.

Even as I say this, it sounds strange to me. As a feminist I have been only too aware, sometimes painfully so, of the need to fold back several layers of history (or of what we see as fact) before one can begin to arrive at a different, more complex 'truth'. Why then, I have often asked myself, should the 'discovery' of women have come as
such a surprise? But it did. Perhaps it was because the initial assumption I brought to my search was a simple one: the history of Partition, as I knew it, made no mention of women. As a woman, and a feminist, I would set out to ‘find’ women in Partition, and once I did, I would attempt to make them visible. That would, in a sense, ‘complete’ an incomplete picture.

There are, of course, no complete pictures. This I know now: everyone who makes one, draws it afresh. Each time, retrospectively, the picture changes: who you are, where you come from, who you’re talking to, when you talk to them, where you talk to them, what you listen to, what they choose to tell you … all of these affect the picture you draw. Listening to Rana’s story made me deeply aware of this.

I realized, for example, that if it had been so difficult for Rana’s mother to talk about her story, how much more difficult must it have been for women to do so. To whom would they have spoken? Who would have listened? I realized too that in my questioning, something I had not taken into account was that in order to be able to ‘hear’ women’s voices, I had to begin to pose different questions, to talk in different situations, and to be prepared to do that most important of things, to listen: to their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances. The men seldom spoke about women. Women almost never spoke about themselves, indeed they denied they had anything ‘worthwhile’ to say, a stance that was often corroborated by their men. Or, quite often, they simply weren’t there to speak to. And what right did I, a stranger, an outsider, now have to go around digging into their lives, forcing them to look back to a time that was perhaps better forgotten? Especially when I knew that the histories I wanted to know about were histories of violence, rape, murder.

For a while, then, I held back from speaking to women: there were so many layers of silence encoded into these histories, I told myself, that perhaps I could make my exploration by looking elsewhere — surely I would still be uncovering some of the silences. I turned therefore to some of the very ‘documents’ that I had so often found wanting. Newspaper accounts, a memoir, and other sources helped me to piece together a story: a story of love and of hate, a story of four lives and two nations, a story that brought me back to the histories of women: the story of Zainab and Buta Singh.

Zainab was a young Muslim girl who was said to have been abducted while her family was on the move to Pakistan in a kafila. No one knows who her abductors were, or how many hands she passed through, but eventually Zainab was sold to a Jat from Amritsar district, Buta Singh. Like many men who either abducted women themselves or bought them, Buta Singh, who wasn’t married at the time, performed the ‘chaddar’ ceremony and ‘married’ Zainab. The story goes that in time, the two came to love each other. They had a family, two young girls. Several years after Partition, a search party on the lookout for abducted women traced Zainab to Amritsar, where she was living with Buta Singh. It was suspected that Buta Singh’s brother — or his nephews — had informed the search party of Zainab’s whereabouts. Their concern was that Buta Singh’s children would deprive them of the family property, that their share would now be reduced. Like many women who were thus ‘rescued’, Zainab had no choice in the matter. She was forced to leave. Newspaper reports describe the scene as a poignant one: the entire village had assembled to see Zainab go. She came slowly out of her house, carrying her child, and clutching a small bundle of clothes. Her belongings were stowed in the jeep and as
Zainab boarded it she turned to Buta Singh and, pointing
to her elder daughter, is reported to have said: ‘Take care
of this girl, and don’t worry. I’ll be back soon.’

Not surprisingly, property figured in Zainab’s recovery
as well. Her own parents had been killed. But the family
had received grants of land in Lyallpur as compensation
for property they had left behind in Indian Punjab. Zainab
and her sister had received their father’s share, and an
uncle had been allotted the adjoining piece. Rumour had
it that it was the uncle who had been the moving spirit
behind Zainab’s rescue: he was keen the land remain in his
family, and he wanted that Zainab, when found, should
marry his son, which would then ensure the property would
remain with them. The son had no interest in marrying
Zainab, and as the story is told, part of his reluctance was
because she had lived for many years with a Sikh.

Discussion on this issue went on in the family for some time,
and Buta Singh occasionally received snippets of news from
neighbours and others who kept him informed.

Meanwhile, Buta Singh pleaded his case wherever
possible — but to no avail. He tried to go to Pakistan, but
this wasn’t easy at the time. One day he received a letter
from Pakistan — ostensibly from one of Zainab’s
neighbours, although no one quite knows — which asked
him to go there as soon as possible. Zainab’s family, it
seemed, was pressing her to marry. Buta Singh sold off
his land and put together some money, but he had not
bargained for the difficulties of travel between the two
countries. He needed a passport and a visa — for which
he travelled to Delhi. Here, he first took the step of
converting to Islam, thinking perhaps that it would be
easier to get to Pakistan as a Muslim. Buta Singh now
became Jamil Ahmed.

And he applied for a passport, and a nationality:
Pakistani. If that was what would get him to Zainab, that
was what he would do. But acquiring a new country,
especially in a situation of the kind that obtained at the
time, was not easy. The High Commission of Pakistan
accepted Buta Singh’s application for Pakistani
nationality, and fed it into the machinery. The question
was not a simple one of changing nationality — if such
questions can ever be simple. The two countries were
virtually at war; deep rooted suspicion of each other’s
motives was the order of the day; people could no longer
move freely across borders — how then could the appeal
of a man in love for nationality of the ‘other’ be accepted
at face value? After many months, the application was
rejected. (Interestingly, around the same time, according
to newspaper accounts, a high profile actress, Meena,
wished to become a Pakistani citizen and applied for
citizenship, which was immediately granted and her
‘defection’ made much of in the press.)

Buta Singh did not, however, give up that easily. He
applied for a short-term visa, and because people in the
Pakistan High Commission were familiar with him by
now, he was granted this. Now Buta Singh, alias Jamil
Ahmed, made his way to Pakistan. And arrived to find
that Zainab had already been married to her cousin. This
could well have been the end of the world for him but by
a strange quirk of circumstance, Buta Singh was given
another chance to fight for Zainab. In his rush to find out
about Zainab, he had forgotten to report his arrival to the
police — to this day, Indians and Pakistanis are required
to report their arrival in the other’s country within twenty
four hours of actually reaching the place. For this
oversight Buta Singh was asked to appear before a
magistrate, and apparently he told the magistrate that he
had been very distracted because of the history with
Zainab, which is why he had omitted to report his arrival. The magistrate then ordered Zainab to be produced before the court, where she was asked to give a statement. It was at this point that all Buta Singh's hopes were dashed. Closely guarded by a ring of relatives, Zainab rejected him, saying: 'I am a married woman. Now I have nothing to do with this man. He can take his second child whom I have brought from his house ...'

The next day Buta Singh put himself under a train and committed suicide. A suicide note in his pocket asked that he be buried in Zainab’s village. This wish, however, was to remain unfulfilled. When Buta Singh’s body was brought to Lahore for an autopsy, it is said that large crowds gathered outside; some people wept; a film maker announced he would make a film on the story. Later, a police party took his body to Zainab’s village but was stopped from burying it there by people of her community. They did not want a permanent reminder of this incident, and Buta Singh or Jamil Ahmed was brought back to Lahore and buried there.

In death Buta Singh became a hero. The subject of a legend, fittingly situated in the land of other star-crossed lovers: Heer and Ranjha, Sohni and Mahiwal. Zainab, meanwhile, continued to ‘live’, her silence surrounding her. Unable to grieve and mourn her lover, and, in all likelihood, unable to talk. She was one among thousands of such women.

Zainab and Buta Singh’s story stayed with me: it was a moving story, but more, I kept returning to it out of a nagging, persistent sense of dissatisfaction. As it was told, this was the story of a hero and a ‘victim’. We learnt something about the hero: his impulsive nature, his honesty and steadfastness, his willingness to give up everything for the woman he loved, the strength of his love. But nothing about the victim. Try as I might, I could not recover her voice. What had Zainab felt? Had she really cared for Buta Singh or was she indifferent to both the men in her life? How had the experience of abduction, almost certainly of rape, marked her? It was said that Zainab and Buta Singh were happy, that they were even in love. Yet, the man had actually bought her, purchased her like chattel: how then could she have loved him? I realized I had to go back to talking — if any women were still alive, this was perhaps the one way in which I could learn about their experiences, their feelings.

The decision wasn’t an easy one. There is a point at which research becomes an end in itself. The human subject you are researching becomes simply a provider of information, the ‘informant’, devoid of feelings of her own, but important for your work. I did not want to be in this kind of violative — and exploitative — position. I decided, as I had done with Ramamama, that I would impose my own silences on this search. I knew by now that the history of Partition was a history of deep violation — physical and mental — for women. I would then talk to only those who wanted to talk about it. And

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*I have pieced together this account from newspaper reports, books and an unpublished manuscript: Lahore: A Memoir by Som Anand. There are many different versions to the Buta Singh-Zainab story now, particularly as it has acquired the status of a legend, so details vary in each. I believe too that the film of this story, Kartav Singh, has recently been released on video in Pakistan.*
would continue to explore other sources to help me recover the histories of women. Prvcedentially — or so it seemed at the time, for I realize now that once there is an involvement in something, you begin to take notice of things that relate to that — the next step offered itself.

In 1988, a women's journal, Manushi, published a review of a Gujarati book, Mool Suta Ukhde (Torn from the Roots). The book was a sort of memoir and documentary account by a woman called Kamlaben Patel, of her work with abducted and raped women at Partition. The story Kamlaben told was shattering. Nearly 75,000 women, she recounted, had been raped and abducted on both sides of the border at Partition. This figure would probably have been higher if Kashmir had been taken into account — perhaps close to 100,000. Apart from the rapes, other specific kinds of violence had been visited on women. Many were paraded naked in the streets, several had their breasts cut off, their bodies were tattooed with marks of the 'other' religion; in a bid to defile the so-called 'purity' of the race, women were forced to have sex with men of the other religion, many were impregnated. They bore children, often only to have them taken away forcibly. Sometimes families traded in their women, in exchange for freedom, at other times the women simply disappeared, abducted from camps, or as caravans of people marched across the border on foot. But that hundreds, indeed thousands, of women had been subjected to rape, and abduction, was now clear.

Kamlaben had worked with other women to recover and rescue many of the abducted women she talked about in her book. But it had taken her several decades to write about her work and how she had felt about it. Why, I wondered? Why had she chosen the path of silence? And what was it that finally decided her to make things public? I went in search of her — and found her, a small, upright woman, living alone but for a sort of companion-helper-adopted daughter, in Bombay. 'You want to know why I didn't write about this?' she said, 'I'll tell you.'

The reason I did not write my book earlier was because I could not accept what I saw during that time. I found it difficult to believe that human beings could be like this. It was as if the demons had come down on earth ... it is when the demon gets into Shiviji that he dances the tandav nritya, the dance of death and destruction ... it was as if this spirit had got into everyone, men and women. Partition was like a tandav nritya ... I have seen such abnormal things, I kept asking myself, what is there to write, why should I write it ...

Kamlaben's silence was one thing. But what about the many families I had spoken to? Why had they made no mention of the rape and abduction of women? Were these deliberate erasures or could it be that I had asked the wrong questions? Or simply not listened to the nuance, the half-said things? I thought, perhaps I had missed out something, perhaps people had talked about this. So I went back over my interviews. And, suddenly, there it was, in the odd silence, the ambiguous phrase. Two brothers in Delhi, survivors from the Rawalpindi riots, whom I had spoken to, had said, of their family:

At home we were my grandmother, grandfather, father, mother, three brothers, three sisters [one of the sisters lived in East Punjab]. Our aunt lived in Delhi, she was with us with
her daughter, they were killed there. She had come to see us. In fact, all our family were killed. We two brothers were the only two who survived.

... some were killed in the gurudwara and some elsewhere. Our grandmother and grandfather were killed in the house, they were killed by Pathans. The others ... my mother, and younger brother were killed in the gurudwara. Our father managed to escape but was killed somewhere along the way ... we were only a few left, and only some survived.

Among those who were killed, then, were several family members. But they'd made no direct mention of their sisters, two of them, who had 'disappeared' at the time. Everyone around them knew this story, they'd been part of the same community, the same village, and they spoke about it, in whispers. 'Speak to them,' a neighbour told me, 'two of their sisters disappeared at the time.' The way he said it, it sounded as if this was something to be ashamed of. So I didn't ask. But it was when I went back over our conversation that it struck me that that awkward silence, that hesitant phrase was perhaps where the disappearance of the two sisters lay hidden: in a small crack, covered over by silence. I realized then that in this silence lay the many hidden histories of Partition, the histories that have always hovered at the edges of those that have been told, the histories that describe the dark side of freedom. As I began to search, slowly, inexorably, this history revealed itself.

Some months after I met Kamalben, Sudesh and I came across a book in a second-hand bookstore, a great big tome which proved to be a listing of thousands of women, Hindu and Sikh, who had been abducted, or were reported missing by their families after Partition. The book made up 1414 pages in a large size. It carried a

district by district listing of women and children who had been reported missing, some 21,809 names. Clearly an incomplete list, but a horrifying one nonetheless. The two missing sisters were in there, as were countless others ... young girls, older women, children. Often, they were picked up by people from their own village: one of the myths that historians of communal conflict have held dear, and that victims of such conflict often help to perpetrate, is that the aggressors are always 'outsiders'. This list, to me, was conclusive proof of the opposite: so many women had been picked up by men of the same village. So many older women had been abducted — women in their fifties and sixties. According to social workers, this wasn't uncommon: because abductors often knew the circumstances of the women they were picking up, they would take away older women, widows, or those whose husbands had been killed, for their property. They would then ask to become their 'sons' — a short-cut to quick acquisition of property. Here is a sample from this list:

### DISTRICT GUJRAT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>R. No.</th>
<th>Particulars of abducted person</th>
<th>Place and date of abduction</th>
<th>Particulars of abductors custodians etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>852</td>
<td>GRT/B/ U-97W</td>
<td>Parmeshwari Bai, 28 years, w/o Haridayal, Vill. Gandhi Khel, P.S. Tapuri, Teh. Takimwar, Dist. Banu</td>
<td>Gajrat 12-1-48</td>
<td>She is likely to be in or about Gajrat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

134

135
THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Particulars of abducted person</th>
<th>Place and date of abduction</th>
<th>Particulars of abductors custodians etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>853</td>
<td>Peeri Bai, 18 years, d/o Bhan Ram w/o Mool Chand, Vill. Hussokhail, P.S. Bannu, Tehsil Mirali, Distt. Bannu</td>
<td>Gujarat str. 10-1-48</td>
<td>She is likely to be in or about Gujarat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>855</td>
<td>Prakash Kaur, 22 yrs, w/o Pritam Singh, Vill. Dinga, Teh. Kharian, Distt. Gujrat</td>
<td>Dinga 18-4-47</td>
<td>She is likely to be found in or about Dinga Distt. Gujrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>856</td>
<td>Pash, 6 years, d/o Sardari Lal, Vill. Chakri, Chakri, Distt. Gujrat</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>She is likely to be found in or about Chakri Distt. Gujrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>857</td>
<td>Poorn, 75 years, d/o Sardar Singh, Vill. and P.O. Bhagawal, Teh. and Distt. Gujrat</td>
<td>Bhagawal, Aug. 47</td>
<td>Rahmat Khan and Ghulam Qadir, Bhagawal Distt. Gujrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>859</td>
<td>Prem Devi, 40 years, d/o Jaman Ram, w/o Bhagat Ram, Vill. Batala, Teh. Bhumar, Distt. Mirpur</td>
<td>Batala, Aug. 47</td>
<td>Bhola carpenter of the same village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>860</td>
<td>Prem Kaur, 34 years, w/o Ram Singh, Vill. Latheri, Teh. Kharian, Distt. Gujrat</td>
<td>Latheri, Aug. 47</td>
<td>Subedar Anayat Khan of the same village</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WOMEN

Published by A.J. Fletcher (Commissioner, Ambala and Jalandhar Divisions and High Powered Officer for Recovery of Abducted Women and Children, India), the book, entitled *List of Non Muslim Abducted Women and Children in Pakistan and Pakistan Side of the Cease-Fire Line in Jammu & Kashmir State*, was not released to the public 'out of deference' for the feelings of those whose relatives were listed there. In the Preface Fletcher says:

This volume is an up-to-date compilation, in alphabetical order, of the names and other particulars of Hindu and Sikh women and children abducted in West Punjab (Pakistan) during the disturbances of 1947. This information was transmitted, from time to time, to the Government of Pakistan through Basic and Supplementary List[s]. The record of these Lists has now grown so bulky and scattered that references to particular entries are not only tedious and difficult but, at times, confusing. The names have now been grouped according to the districts in which they are reported to be living at present. For purposes of verification, it may be necessary to make enquiries both at the original home of the abducted person and the place of alleged abduction.

2. The publication of this volume was not undertaken earlier out of deference to the feelings of the victims and their relations. The time has, however, come when the speedy recovery and restoration to relations of these unfortunate persons should be the paramount consideration and, whatever may be the feelings of abducted persons or their relations about the publication of the particulars contained in this volume, it is essential, for the early completion of this humanitarian work, that the necessary particulars of persons yet to be recovered should be readily available to the Governments of both countries. These particulars were reported by refugees from West Punjab, to the authorities in India, at the points of entry into this country or, subsequently, at the places where they temporarily settled.
Families had reported their women missing. They had filed complaints with the police. Once the scale of the problem became clear, the State had to step in and take some action. The first thing to do was to prepare lists of missing women. These would then form the basis of their search. This, however, was not easy: often, three or four members from the same family, scattered in different places, would register the name of a woman. There was no system, at the time, of sharing and collating this information, so no list could be totally relied upon. The task of preparing such lists was assigned to Edwina Mountbatten’s United Council for Relief and Welfare, who collated and sent names on to the local police in specific areas.

Nonetheless, the alarming growth in the size of the lists compelled both governments to act. As early as September 1947 the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan met at Lahore and took a decision on the question of the recovery of abducted women. It was at this meeting that they issued a joint declaration that specified that: ‘Both the Central Governments and the Governments of East and West Punjab wish to make it clear that forced conversions and marriages will not be recognised. Further, that women and girls who have been abducted must be restored to their families, and every effort must be made by the Governments and their officers concerned to trace and recover such women and girls.’ The assumption was that all those abducted would be forcibly converted to the other religion, and, because they were forced, such conversions were not acceptable. Later, on December 6 in the same year, when the division of pens and pencils and tables and other assets had barely been concluded, and when several thorny issues still remained to be sorted out, this initial agreement was given executive strength through an Inter Dominion Treaty. Interestingly, neither government denied that abductions had taken place — presumably they knew their men well — and both agreed to set up a machinery to rescue abducted women from each other’s territories. They agreed too that women living with men of the other religion had to be brought back, if necessary by force, to their ‘own’ homes — in other words, the place of their religion. It was a curious paradox — at least for the Indian State. India’s reluctance (although recent history has questioned this) to accept Partition was based on its self perception as a secular, rational nation, not one whose identity was defined by religion. Yet women, theoretically equal citizens of this nation, could only be defined in terms of their religious identity. Thus, the ‘proper’ home for Hindu and Sikh women who were presumed to have been abducted, was India, home of the Hindu and Sikh religion, and for Muslim women it was Pakistan, home of the Muslim religion, not the home that these women might actually have chosen to be in. Theoretically, at Partition, every citizen had a choice in the nation he/she wished to belong to. If a woman had had the misfortune of being abducted, however, she did not have such a choice.

The machinery that was set up to recover women was to be made up of police officers, and women — social workers or those, usually from well off families, who were willing to give their time to this work. Among such women were Mridula Sarabhai, Premvati Thapar, Kamlaben Patel and Damyanti Sahgal. In the long excerpt

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"U. Bhaskar Rao, The Story of Rehabilitation, Delhi, Department of Rehabilitation, 1967, p. 30."
below Damyanti Sahgal describes how she came to be involved in such work.

**DAMYANTI SAHGAL**

My nasi Premvati Thapar became a widow three months after her marriage. She had been taken out of school to be married, three months later her husband died and she went back into the school (the convent) as Miss Thapar. He was a mathematician, Devi Dayal. So there she did her FA, her BA, MA, double MA. Then she did her Tripos in Economics from Cambridge.

One day Mahatma Hans Raj, a well known Arya Samaji of Lahore came to meet my nana and said Thapar Sahib, we have come to ask you a major question. You know Arya Samajis never go anywhere without matlab and we have come to ask you for something. Whatever we ask for, you have to promise that you will give us. So Thapar Sahib asked, but at least give me some idea of what it is you’re asking for. They said, no but you must promise us that you will give it, what we have come for we will take with us. You know Arya Samajis are very persistent people. My nana said well, think carefully and ask so that what you ask for is something that can be given. They said, well your daughter who has just returned, we would like you to give her life to us. There is a DAV college for girls here but there is no school and we want to put her in charge of a school, and she will have to work in an honorary capacity. My bhaji said what are you talking about? I have spent so much on her education and she has had so many offers (suddenly there had been several job offers) and you’re asking that I give her away, honorary you say. What will she live off? Where will she eat from? They laughed and said, Rai Sahib, don’t speak like a child. You have three sons don’t you? If you had had a fourth what would you have done, thrown him away? Think of her as your son, give her her share of the property and she will live off that. My nana ... he wasn’t willing, so much I have spent he thought and now, to just give her away ... but Auntie Premi came out herself and said I have decided, I will do this, I will work for them. He kept saying Premi, don’t, try to understand, but she was adamant. After that, nasi, she used to work for a rupee a month ... we all worked under her ... a rupee a month ...

You see she was such a fine person, such a personality, she had been doing social work all her life and so many people had worked under her in Lahore. So later, when she went to Mrs Nehru and asked if there was any work, Mrs Nehru said well, Jawaharlal is working on something. An agreement is being made between the two governments, you know all those women of ours who have been abducted, they are really miserable. We have to rescue them from the hands of those villains. And here the Sikhs have done the same thing, so we plan to open a recovery organization and I want to give you some work there. Masi said now I don’t even have money, and I want very little ... I need accommodation, a car and a charpadi. Please get me this.

One day nasi said to me, Danti, it’s getting on for winter, and we have no money, no clothes ... you know, Auntie Premi loved clothes and things and she liked good clean living, she enjoyed life, and our almirs in Lahore were full of our things and we even knew which families had taken our houses. Those days convoys used to go to Lahore and so we decided to go. Masi said Danti, let’s go, we’ll go to the DAV college camp in Lahore—from there we’ll take government jeeps and go to our old homes and I’ll collect some dhotis and shawls. So we went. And we reached DAV college from where we got an escort jeep and went to masi’s house. They welcomed us, the bogums came out, we knew them, nasi said I have come with a purpose, I left my almirs locked here and I am freezing. I have come to collect some shawls and clothes. They said, what are you talking about? All that has gone in zait-ul-maniat, unclaimed property, and there’s nothing left. Masi and I were
shocked. They said, have tea, but we couldn't. They kept saying none of your things is here ...  

We came back to the camp and ate there. You see the camps would collect refugees and when there was a sizeable number, the convoys would leave and take them across the border. So we ate, dal and rotis, there used to be huge containers. And Mridula Sarabhai jumped on us. Masi used to know her, I didn't. I had heard stories about her. She said Miss Thapar, you are here. Masi said, yes, we came to get our clothes but were unable to get anything. She, Mridula Sarabhai, said but you know about this organization that is being started [the Central Recovery Organization to recover abducted women], they have decided that they're going to choose you as a director. And who is this, she asked, pointing to me. My niece, said my masi. Oh good, she'll come in handy for my work, she's just what I want. You see, Premi, when this organization starts, you will be the director there, and she will be the director here. I was sort of shy and of course the whole day I would do nothing but say my prayers and count my beads and roam about alone. I couldn't understand what was going on and I said, no, no, leave me out of this. But she said, no, I'll make her chief liaison officer and she said to my masi, don't take her back with you, she'll stay here and I'll soon get her an appointment letter. I asked what was going on and she said I'll make you director. I said director of what, she said recovery. I didn't know what recovery was or what director was. I couldn't put two and two together. She said no, no, it's done, it's done. I said I have no clothes ... she said the jeep is going, it will bring your clothes. I didn't know what was happening ... suddenly, masi had gone, I had no clothes ... so then, you see I have this habit, when I have a problem I speak to my god, my thakur. I don't know anything, I'm just an instrument of his will. So I said to him what is this game you're playing? Here I have become a director and I have a letter in my hand, even my father and

grandfather did not become directors, so now it's up to you to keep my pride.

Soon afterwards a message came that there was a young girl who had been abducted and she had been traced to somewhere close by, so what with one thing and another, we managed to rescue her. Refugees used to come there in huge numbers, they would collect there and once there was a large number the convoys would start off.

Part II

HISTORY IS A WOMAN’S BODY

Seized of the problem of the large numbers of abducted women, the Indian and Pakistani governments arrived at an agreement, the Inter-Dominion Treaty of December 6, 1947, to recover as many abducted women as could be found. The operation came to be known as the Central Recovery Operation, and one woman in particular, Mridula Sarabhai, is said to have campaigned for it. Sarabhai wielded considerable influence with Gandhi and Nehru — she came from a powerful industrial family of Ahmedabad — and had been closely involved with Congress politics. She had submitted a fourteen-page note to Nehru outlining the necessity of recovering abducted women and used her influence to get the government to agree to mounting a recovery operation. At the 1947 Inter-Dominion conference where this was agreed, the Indian government returned the responsibility for the recovery of women to Sarabhai, appointing her chief social worker. She was to be assisted by a team, mainly made up of the police.

Within a short while, the initial agreement arrived at between the two governments was given legislative
sanction: The Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance was transformed first into a Bill and later, in 1949, into an Act. ¹ By the terms of this Act, the government of India set up an implementation machinery and, importantly, arrived at a working definition of what was meant by the term ‘abducted person’.

This was essential because the affair was a complicated one: how to decide who had been abducted and who had not? What if a woman had gone of her own free will? These were things that took thought, that needed consideration. Much simpler, for an impersonal agency such as the State, to set times, dates, figures to decide these thorny problems. So a date was fixed. The violence in Punjab had begun early in March 1947. Thus any woman who was seen to be living with, in the company of, or in a relationship with a man of the other religion, after March 1, 1947 would be presumed to have been abducted, taken by force. After this date, all marriages or conversions that had taken place would be seen as forced, and would not be recognized by either of the two governments. No matter what the woman said, how much she protested, no matter that there was the odd ‘real’ relationship, the women had no choice in the matter. Many things were left unresolved by the fixing of this date: women who had children from mixed unions after the cut-off date — were they also to be considered abducted women? Or did the date relate to only those children who were conceived after March 1? The Act remained unclear on these issues.


In the work of rescue the chief social worker was to be assisted by a unit made up mostly of the police. The total unit comprised one Assistant Inspector General (ASI), two Deputy Sub-Inspectors of Police (DSPs), fifteen inspectors, ten sub-inspectors, and six Assistant Sub-Inspectors (ASIs). Together with women social workers, this force of police was empowered, in both countries, to travel into the other country in search of particular women, and then to carry out the ‘rescue’ or ‘recovery’ operation as best they saw fit. Social workers on both sides had to resort to all kinds of subterfuges to find abducted women. Often, the local police, meant to be accompanying and helping in the tracking down of women, would send ahead a warning and the women would be hidden away. Imaginative social workers countered this in a variety of ways: adopted disguises, used false names, acted secretly and on their own, or just stormed their way into homes where they suspected abducted women were being held. Here are two such accounts:

In the mornings we used to go to find girls from the rural area. In the evenings we used to come to the head office, to the camp and those women who had been rounded up from the area, they used to be brought to the camp where we would receive them. Then they used to be changed inter-dominion [i.e. between the two countries]. The only difference was that those workers were daring — they would go out and find women ...  

We’d go selling eggs. We’d go into the villages, and we’d ask people for lassi, saying amma, amma, we have come from very far, please give us some lassi. So we’d sell eggs and ask for lassi. Then we’d tell stories, we’d say we have come from Hindustan and you know, my younger brother, these bastard Sikhs have taken his young wife away, they’ve abducted ‘ier. He is bereft, and lonely. Do you know of any
daughter of kafirs in this area — if there is any such girl do
tell us, maybe we can buy her and the poor man, at least he
can set up home again. And the old women would know and
they would often tell us there’s a girl in such and such place ...
So there was all this about selling eggs and asking, amma,
give us some lassi.

Or amma, I am hungry, give me something, and we would
try to win their confidence and then we would ask them, or
tell them we wanted to buy a girl ... and we’d ask whether
the people who had the girl would part with her, and then
gently ask for the address ... that was our way of getting
information.*

Among the refugees who were leaving [from Delhi] there
was a young man who had been married only a year and a
half and whose young wife and two-month old child had
been lost. One day, someone told him that they had heard
that she was in the custody of a Jat in Bhogal [an area in
Delhi]. It was an old chamarin who gave the news. She had
felt sorry for the girl and had promised that she would take
her message across to her husband. The young man told me
that his wife had even asked for his photo which he had sent
her ... the chamarin said she remembered him very much
and Mithan, her abductor, made her work in the fields.

One day Sushila Nayyar had come to the camp. She said,
come on, I’ll come with you, where are these fields? Night
was falling as we reached Okhla. But Sushila was fearless
and unhesitatingly, she walked some twenty steps ahead of
me, pushing her way through the bushes and fields. We met
many other women but not the one we were seeking. Sushila

*Damyanti Sahgal: Personal interview.

walked into the house without a trace of fear and I followed
her. Aasaf, the husband, was calling out his wife’s name,
Jaan bi, Jaan bi, all the time. But there was no answer. And
Sushila was giving the people a talking to: if the girl is with
you, give her to us immediately. Tell me, where is she? At
the moment, only I have come and I will take the girl away,
no harm will come to you. But if the police come you will be
taken away to jail and punished. But there was no sign of the
girl ... and at nine at night we came back, dejected and
unsuccessful."

Later, it turned out that all the while Sushila Nayyar and
Anis Kidwai were searching for Jaan bi, she had been
bound and gagged and locked up in the hay loft of the
house she was in. Fearing that he would be found out, her
abductor now took her with him and ran away to UP. On
the way, however, Jaan bi managed to escape: she ran to
some Muslims reading the namaz, and told them her
story. She was then restored to her husband, although she
had lost her child. Not all tales ended so happily and
there were thousands of women who were successfully
spirited away, never to be found.

The fixing of dates and the enacting of legislation,
however, did not do away with the many imponderables
that had to be dealt with. Many women protested. They
refused to go back. Impossible as it may seem, there were
women who, like Zainab, had formed relationships with
their abductors or with the men who had bought them for
a price. At first, I found this difficult to believe: but there
is a kind of twisted truth in it. One might almost say that
for the majority of Indian women, marriage is like an
abduction anyway, a violation, an assault, usually by an

1Anis Kidwai: Azadi ki Chaam Mein (Hindi) Delhi, National Book Trust,
1990, p. 131.
unknown man. Why then should this assault be any different? Simply because the man belonged to a different religion? ‘Why should I return,’ said an abducted woman, ‘Why are you particular to take me to India? What is left in me now of religion or chastity?’ And another said: ‘I have lost my husband and have now gone in for another. You want me to go to India where I have got nobody and of course, you do not expect me to change husbands every day.’"

Mridula Sarabhai was instrumental in bringing many middle class women into social work. Most of these women worked with Hindu and Sikh abducted women. In Delhi, at the two Muslim camps in Purana Qila and Humayun’s tomb, there was another woman who took to social work on her own, and whose efforts related to Muslim women abducted by Hindus and Sikhs. Anis Kidwai’s husband, Shafi Ahmed Kidwai, was killed during the Partition riots in Mussoorie where he was working. Despite Kidwai’s entreaties, he had refused to leave his office and his employees (he was a government servant) saying he could not abandon them, or his job. His death devastated Kidwai and she went to see Gandhi, in search of some sort of solace. Gandhi advised her to stop mourning and to involve herself in something, and Kidwai turned to social work with Muslim refugees. In course of this work she had occasion to come across several cases of abducted Muslim women, and she writes movingly about their dilemmas. I quote from her at some length:

In all of this sometimes a girl would be killed or she would be wounded. The ‘good stuff’ would be shared among the police and army, the ‘second rate stuff’ would go to everyone else. And then these girls would go from one hand to another and then another and after several would turn up in hotels to grace their decor, or they would be handed over to police officers, in some places to please them.

And every single one of these girls, because she had been the victim of a trick, she would begin to look upon her ‘rescuer’ perforce as an angel of mercy who had, in this time of loot and killing, rescued her, fought for her, and brought her away. And when this man would cover her naked body — whose clothes had become the loot of another thief — with his own loin cloth or banyan, when he would put these on her, at that moment she would forget her mother’s slit throat, her father’s bloody body, her husband’s trembling corpse. She would forget all this and instead, thank the man who had saved her. And why should she not do this? Rescuing her from the horror, this good man has brought her to his home. He is giving her respect, he offers to marry her. How can she not become his slave for life?

And it is only much later that the realization dawns that among the looters this man alone could not have been the innocent, among the police just he could not have been the gentleman. But all were tarred with the same brush. Each one had played with life and death to save the honour of some young woman, and thousands of mothers and sisters must be cursing these supposedly ‘brave men’ who had abducted their daughters.

But by the time this realization came, it was too late. Now there was nowhere for her to go: by this time she is about to become a mother, or she has passed through several hands. After seeing so many men’s faces, this daughter of Hindustan, how will she ever look at the faces of her parents, her husband?’

Kirpal Singh: The Partition of the Punjab, Publications Bureau, Punjab University, Patiala, 1972, p. 171.

‘Anis Kidwai, Azadi ki Chum Mein, p. 142.'
Kidwai’s feelings for abducted women — ‘the reader will not understand how I, as a woman, felt on hearing these things,’ she says — mirrored those of many of the other social workers who took on the task of recovering abducted women. Acting as dutiful servants of the State, they nonetheless responded to the women as women, and often helped to subvert the State’s agenda, although much of the time they were also helpless and hampered by the fact that they had little choice but to carry out their assigned tasks. Kidwai describes her own feelings movingly:

... there were some women who had been born into poor homes and had not seen anything other than poverty. A half full stomach and rags on your body. And now they had fallen into the hands of men who bought them silken salwars and net dupattas, who taught them the pleasures of cold ice cream and hot coffee, who took them to the cinema. Why should they leave such men and go back to covering their bodies with rags and slaving in the hot sun in the fields? If she leaves this smart, uniformly man, she will probably end up with a peasant in rags, in the filth, with a danda on his shoulder. And so they are happy to forget the frightening past, or the equally uncertain and fearful future, and live only for the present.

They also had another fear. The people who wanted to take them away, whether they were friend or foe, how did they know that they would not sell them to others? After all, she has been sold many times, how many more times would it happen? The same police uniforms, it was these that had, time and again, taken her from here to there. What was there to reassure her that she could believe in the authority of the turban, that the person who wore it came from her relatives, and was not someone who had come yet again to buy and sell her. The stigma did not go away until she was dragged away and made to live with her relatives for a few days.

There remained religion, and what did these girls know about that after all? Men can at least read the namaz, the alvida, they can go to the mosque to read the namaz at id, and listen to the mullah. But the mullah has never allowed women to even stand there. The moment they see young women the blood rises in their eyes. Be off with you, go away, what work do you have here? As if they were dogs to be pushed out of every place. The culprit is within them, but it is the women who are made to go away. If they come to the masjid everyone’s namaz is ruined. If they come to listen to the sermon, everyone’s attention is distracted. If they go to the dargah they will get pushed around by men, and if they participate in a qawwali mehfil the sufis’ attention will be on worldly things rather than on God ...

And friend, the God of this religion has never kept her very comfortably. But the new man with whom she is is like God. Let everyone talk, she will never leave this man who has filled her world with colour.

Despite the women’s reluctance (and not all women were thus reluctant, many were happy to be recovered and restored to their families) to leave, considerable pressure, sometimes even force, was brought to bear on them to ‘convince’ them to do so.

DAMYANTI SAHGAL

Two young men reported to me that their sister, Satya, whose marriage they had been preparing, had been abducted. They suspected Pathans had picked her up and they said somehow you must find her. I had heard that — I’ve forgotten which chak it was — that badmash Pathans had captured the daughter of deen daras and had taught her to ride a horse and that she now carried a rifle ...

I learnt about Satya, that she was with dacoits and thieves and that she had become one better than them. They’d trained her and she even rode on horses. I told the SP that I
want to go to this place and he said it's a very dangerous place. I said dangerous be damned, I want to go. You see what they used to do, they'd take information from us and send a message on so the person could be removed. No sooner would they hear the news than they would run away. And our own movements were so restricted — we had to be very careful about where we went and how we went. I used to move a lot, other workers not so much. Anyway, on that day we had to go through farms and fields and the SP kept saying this was very dangerous and unsafe terrain. The poor woman who accompanied me! In the morning they sent a message on ahead that Satya should be spirited away. However, somehow or the other, after much running around we managed to get hold of the girl. When we had to bring her back to Gujrat, first we had to ask the SP to give us police protection for the girls. The Pathans followed us and appealed in court saying we're not ready to give up this woman, she's been a Muslim from the start. Even before Pakistan was formed she had actually taken on the Din religion and she was a Muslim. So the DC took the girl from me and let her go. Her brother kept shouting and protesting but he wasn't even allowed to meet her. I also said let her meet her brother at least but no. He refused to listen. I was upset — I had risked my own life, gone through a lot of danger and hardship to get this girl and the DC then acquitted her! Then I — the first prime minister of Pakistan, what was his name? Yes, Liaqat Ali. He was in Karachi at the time. [This is a mistake, the person Damyanti is talking about was not the Prime Minister but Raja Ghaznavi Ali Khan, the Minister for Refugees.] That was the time the Inter-Dominion Agreement had taken place about Indian women being returned to India and Muslim women being returned to Pakistan. I gave the reference of the treaty and sent a telegram to the Minister and said that with great difficulty I had caught this girl according to the Inter-Dominion Agreement but the DC has let her go. And I refuse to stay in Pakistan and continue to work there if there will be such frauds. He sent a wire that he was coming to Gujrat the next day and that Satya Devi should be brought to the railway platform to meet him. He said I'll see what I can do. So we were there waiting for the train. The Muslims got to know that our prime minister is coming and a Hindu woman has managed to call him. The news spread everywhere! And in this case ... they had also heard that I had got the woman away from the Pathans and she was in handcuffs. Her brothers were with me, everyone was there. It was a very frightening case. Because dacoits and people take revenge and she had also become like that. And you will not believe it, there was not one person who was not there at the station! The SP, the DC ... you name it, they were all there. They made me sit in a room. The military was also there. A captain. We were all waiting for the train. I thought how can I handle this? She's become a Muslim, the place is full of Muslims, I am alone. What will I say to him? What can I do? Then I asked for paper and a pencil saying I wanted to write two lines and I wrote 'Janab-e-all, you are a sensible man, you have the reins of Pakistan in your hands ...' I praised him, I said the very fact that you are holding the topmost position in Pakistan, that you are the prime minister, shows you are an intelligent man. I am a silly woman, I have no idea of things. I want to say just this: I have got hold of just one ordinary simple poor girl and the whole of Pakistan has come and collected here. I would like to ask you this — is this a way of helping in recovery? Is this what the Inter-Dominion agreement was about? And the people here, have they sunk so low that for one woman thousands of men have come out? Is such a powerful fire raging in their hearts? In such circumstances how can you expect me to work? I wrote this letter — a small letter — and when the train came, I went straight to it. People began saying the train has arrived, the train has arrived. And what a train — all white, and done up with Pakistan flags all over, it was a sight to
see! It stopped and the police took me there. What was his name? Liaquat Ali, he came out. He said, you are the person? I said, yes. You have a complaint? Yes. Please come into the train. I said I will come into the train Sahib, but you can judge the situation. So many people, for just one woman. What is this about? I can't understand what this is about. All I have done is to track one girl down and there's all this commotion and confusion. He got very angry. 'Where is the DC?' he shouted. 'Why are all these people here?' 'Sir, because of the girl.' 'Does it need so many people to protect one girl? Where is the girl? Have her brought here.' The police came with the girl, in handcuffs. I was standing here, he was there. The girl shouted: 'Who has come to take me? This bastard woman?' That was the saving grace. 'This woman has come to take me away? I will not go.' She had managed to get her shoe in her hand and was shaking it at me. Oh ho, he saw red. He said throw her in jail immediately and dismiss these policemen at once. These are orders. Transfer this SP immediately. Then he gave such a lecture there on the platform. He said I am proud of the Hindu workers. There is one girl representing India and your whole police force and officers felt the need to come out here. Look at this woman, how she's holding herself like a lion, and with no protection ... He said I am ashamed of you, what will become of you, how will you progress and reach anywhere? Instead of doing your job you are allowing her to raise her shoe at someone in front of me! Put her in chains and lock her in one compartment and the badmashes with her, lock them in the other compartment. He dismissed the policemen, transferred the SP, and also some others, then he patted me on the back, made me sit down next to him and said I am very very proud of you, not only of you but of India. He said this is amazing, you are facing this kind of thing, and what a frail person you are. Fifteen minutes we talked, then the train left, and I, all the people ... they were surprised ...

Child, I had to stay. He gave them so many abuses, the

WOMEN

SP, DC and others. I was so ashamed, I could hardly look up. He kept saying look at you, transfer this one, he's a shame. When I came back, one of them came to me and said I hope you are satisfied now, you are calm, your heart is calm, but all those poor men whom you have had transferred, have you thought what will happen to their families, their children? What will they say to you? Think of you? Can you live with this? I thought this is a real problem, he's gone off and I'm stuck with this. And he said, 'In their houses today everything is silent and sorrowful, no food is being cooked there today, the children are hungry, and everyone is wondering who this woman from India is. Anyone who comes, she manages to prevail upon them, anyone who comes. For us she is like a monster.' I said, have they been dismissed? What else, he said, and what do you think will happen in those homes where no food has been cooked, there is no bread-earner any longer because his job has been taken away, you think they will bless you? Apart from curses what do they have to give you? I said but what have I done? He said you are the cause after all, you have made complaints and it is on those complaints that action has been taken. I then went to the SP. I said, why don't you do an enquiry ... oh, what is it called now? Yes, I said please suspend them, you don't have to dismiss them. He said I can't undo the orders of the minister. Then I went to the DC and wept before him, and said please don't, but he was doing his duty and he said Mrs Sahgal, you saw how the minister was, what can I do? And I said yes I did see him, but how can this be, I don't even feel like eating anything myself. Can you not somehow arrange for me to talk to him? He said, yes, that much I can do, I can get him on the telephone and if you speak to him, maybe something can be done, but you'll have to talk to him. Then he got him on the phone and I spoke to him and thanked him a great deal and then said there's only one thing I am sorry about and that is that — these dismissals, they are a bit unfortunate. He said but they
failed in their duty. I said, yes, Sahib, but you must think, the thing is that at this time everyone’s mind is in a state of confusion, they thought it is their duty to protect Pakistan in this way, I thought it’s my duty to get the girl, so I feel very bad. He said is this what you really want? I said yes, so he said all right. He then informed the SP that no action should be taken just yet. After that ... I don’t know where that girl went or what happened to her. But at the station I had said to her that her brothers were standing there, and she had cursed me and said you bastard woman what do I care and what business is this of yours?

At that time, the spectacle was amazing, you can imagine, if a young woman is brought along in handcuffs, and the police is on one side, and she is presented before authority ... the brothers were on one side. But she was directing all her venom at me ... this is the woman who caught me and brought me here, she is the one who has created all this.

No, I don’t even know what happened to her, what the minister did about her future. But they took her away from me. Whether they sent her back to India or anything I don’t know. In Gujrat I was told they had made camps. I was also told that there was a nawab in Gujrat who would sit on his throne 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.

Then I heard that two boys, whose parents had been killed, they had been kept also. I heard about this, and I went and asked them to return the boys. They said no we will not give these boys back. I said, why, you have a family of your own. The wife said yes, I have three boys of my own. Then why have you kept these? She said, there is a method behind this. We don’t just simply pick up anybody, we don’t just take the garbage. We choose who we take. Now these boys, they are studying alongside my boys, they have tuitions and both of them and my children they are all studying and then I will send them to England because I have money. These children are so intelligent that they will influence my boys, and when they marry, these two boys, their children will be very intelligent, and we have only one regret about the Hindus having gone away, that love has gone to the other side of the border, we want to bring that in here and multiply it. The children of these children ... they are being brought up as good Muslims ...

I didn’t have any idea of what was happening, night and day I was caught up in this business of rescuing girls, and looking after them when they were handed over to me. I was busy and contented ... But you know there is a place in Punj, there they had opened something where they had maulvis and they used to brainwash the girls that those girls who are leaving from here, Hindus and Sikhs will not accept them because they have lived with Muslims. Or, they used to tell them that your relatives will take you from here but they will kill you at the border. And they used to tell them things are so bad in India that you have to pay one rupee even to get a glass of water. Those who have gone are starving, and they used to do all kinds of dramas to scare them. Then they used to make them read the namaz to make them into proper converts. Then there was one who used to come and say that the father of such and such girl has come, and they would take the girl and show her some people standing down below from the roof, and would ask that she be released now that the relatives had come. So the girls would be set free, and then some ten days or so later the girl would come back, crying, weeping and saying that she had run away and come with great difficulty through the fields etc. saving herself from the Sikhs who were ready to kill her. And they would mix Musalmmani girls with the Hindu girls, after all if there are two hundred Hindu girls and a few Musalmans are mixed with them, it is difficult to tell, and these girls would
come and tell horror stories of how bad the Hindus and Sikhs had been — we had got them from all over the place, and we didn’t really know them, so who knew what was what. They used to get them released and then she would come back, and tell these stories. Then the others would tremble. When they actually caught them, they would separate the men and the women and I don’t know what they did with the men but they probably killed them. The girls they would take away, and oh yes, the old women, they’d keep them aside too. Women like me, what did they want with them? But they knew, you see, they would keep these old women, kill off their sons and make themselves their sons, they’d say amma take me as your son, and then they’d get their property. If they’d let these old women get away they or their families would get compensation in India and their property here would have to be confiscated, so they would keep them back. So it was a well thought out and well worked out thing. They had real courage and strength, they did. And the Hindus, you show them a piece of red cloth, or if there is blood on the road, cut of fear they will leave the road and run away. They’ll say we don’t know who has been killed or who has killed. We are intelligent, brainy, and they are physically strong. Musalmaans are mutton headed, we are fish headed.

I don’t know how many women I recovered, must be hundreds, maybe more. There was not one case I didn’t catch myself. I don’t think any worker can say that she got even one case. I caught them all myself and apart from this there were the ones who were brought to us, we had to accept them and give them receipts for these girls. They used to bring them and we used to have to give receipts. These were some fifteen-twenty cases and I used to move about so I knew about the cases.

‘I have got nobody’. There was perhaps more truth in this phrase than many women realized: for several of those who did allow themselves to be ‘rescued’ or who were forcibly ‘recovered’, there was another trauma to face. Their families, who had earlier filed reports and urged the government to recover their women, were now no longer willing to take them back. In early 1948, at the sixteenth meeting of the Partition Council, it was decided that both dominions should take charge of refugees in their areas and that no refugees should be forced to return to their own areas until it was clear that complete security had been restored and the State was ready to resume responsibility for them. But for women they said:

The Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation has set up a Fact Finding Branch in consultation with the Red Cross, an enquiry and search committee with the special objective of tracing abducted women. Already, 23,000 names have been given to Pakistan. For the recovery of abducted women, the government depends at present on the active assistance of workers and prominent persons. On December 6, a conference of both Dominions was held at Lahore and it was decided that both Dominions should make special efforts to recover these women. More than 25,000 enquiries about abducted women who are in Pakistan have been received by the Women’s Section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation ... nearly 2500 have already been rescued ... the main obstruction facing our rescue parties today is the fear harboured by the majority of abducted Hindu women that they may not be received again into the fold of their society, and the Muslims being aware of this misgiving, have played upon the minds of these unfortunate women to such an extent that many of them are reluctant to come away from their captors back to India. It has been mutually agreed between
Forcible evacuation was one thing. The women's acceptance into their families was another. Such was the reluctance of families to take these women back, that Gandhi and Nehru had to issue repeated appeals to people assuring them that abducted women still remained 'pure'. 'I hear,' Gandhi said, 'women have this objection that the Hindus are not willing to accept back the recovered women because they say that they have become impure. I feel that this is a matter of great shame. These women are as pure as the girls who are sitting by my side. And if any one of those recovered women should come to me, then I will give them as much respect and honour as I accord to these young maidens.' Later, in early 1948, Nehru made an appeal to the public. He said:

I am told that there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept these girls and women back in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls and women require our tender and loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back and give them every help.

A number of pamphlets were published which used the story of Sita's abduction by Ravana, showing how she remained pure despite her time away from her husband.

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1Sixteenth Meeting of the Partition Council, 1948.
1Quoted in G.D. Khosla, Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1949, rpt 1989, p. 75.
girls there, we’d get a number of marriage proposals. We used to also find them jobs, get them to their relatives...

Where there were girls who were carrying children from Musalmaan men, their families were very reluctant to take them back. For the woman, once the child is in her womb it is very difficult to leave it ... but many women were forced to leave their children for the moment people knew this was a Musalmaan child, you know what society is like. That child would have had no future. Most of the women were recovered within a year or so, and families did take women back. But women who were pregnant, you know this Dr Kapur’s clinic, they used to get abortions done there, and others would give birth and then hand their children over to the home in Allahabad. With children it was very difficult. And when the women left their children in Allahabad, they used to want to visit them, to meet them. They were given a choice — they could keep their children with them — if, that is, their relatives would be willing to let them do so, if they would be willing to let the child live with dignity, if they would even look with respect on that child. Otherwise they had to give them up. It was a real problem. Each case was different. The mothers used to go to Allahabad ... they would take time off from us and go there, what they did there we don’t know, how they felt ... we would give them a ticket and tell them go ahead and meet your children. What kind of future those children had ... who knows?

Ashrams were set up in north Indian cities to house abducted women: in Jalandhar, Amritsar, Karnal, Delhi. Some of these were meant to hold women in transit until their families took them back. Often, families didn’t: the women were now soiled. The family had made its adjustments to their absence, why should they now have to readjust, make new space, and take in a person who had become ‘polluted’? So the ashrams became permanent homes for the women; there they lived out their lives, with their memories, some unspeakable, some which they were able to share with a similar community of women. And there, many of them died, the only people who had suffered a double dislocation as a result of Partition. As late as 1997 some women still remained in the ashram in Karnal; until today there are women in the Gandhi Vanita Ashram in Jalandhar. Many whose histories will forever remain hidden; others who don’t even know their own histories. In Jalandhar there is a woman who is said to have been brought into the ashram when she was only a few months old. No one knows to which community she belongs; there is no idea of who her parents were. A child of history, without a history. The Gandhi Vanita Ashram at Jalandhar is today a home for destitute women and widows. ‘When we set up the ashram,’ one of the social workers told me, ‘we looked all over for an appropriate space. And finally this spot was identified. It was actually a graveyard, a kahristan for Muslims, and on the bodies of the dead, we built the lives of women.’ It was perhaps only because Partition was a time of dislocation and upheaval, that it became possible for the Indian State to lay claim to a graveyard. And it was clearly because everyone was running for their lives that no one had the time to question this. But what sort of lives were actually built for the many women who lived on in ashrams, or were rejected by their families, is something we are not likely to ever know.

The recovery operation for abducted women continued for nine years after Partition, though recoveries began to drop off after the initial few years. In all, some 30,000 women were recovered, about 22,000 Muslim women from India, and about 8,000 Hindu and Sikh women from Pakistan. Many of these were, apparently, not listed in the...
reported cases with the governments. As time went on, the process of recovery became more and more difficult: apparently, the greatest hurdle in the way of forcible recovery was the women’s reluctance to leave their children. Over time, differences developed between the key social workers in this programme. Rameshwari Nehru, for example, wanted the programme to be stopped, while Mridula Sarabhai was all for it continuing. In 1954, a special conference was held at which it was decided that some way should be found to ensure that abducted persons were not forced to go to the other country against their will. Special homes were then set up where unwilling persons could be housed and given time to make up their minds ‘without fear or pressure’. How much of a free choice this actually gave women is another question.

**DAMYANTI SAHGAL**

After a year [in Jalandhar], I went to the Hoshiarpur camp. It was a big camp, some 1500 women, who had managed to get away or whom we had rescued, whose families had tried to kill them ... we had some forty five staff, and I got very caught up there. We had to rehabilitate these women, that was a rehabilitation camp, we had to do mental, physical and financial rehabilitation. This is what we were supposed to do, how many of us actually did it is another story.

The government had opened these camps, the women who had become orphans, or who were alone, they were put into camps. Hoshiarpur was a big camp and then there was Jalandhar. Then there was one in Karnal and many others. These were opened, and women like me were put in charge of camps, and how we did our work really depended on the individual. None of us was really qualified for this work, many of us were not educated. The government wanted to rehabilitate these women in every sense — our job was to make them forget their sorrow, to put new life into their veins, and to give them the means to be economically independent. This was a huge liability, and the mental adjustment used to take the longest; economically it was much easier. The government had given us industrial centres, like hosiery, tailoring, basket making, embroidery, weaving and spinning, we had all these things. For me, when I came back from Pakistan and before I went to Hoshiarpur camp, I had decided I had had enough. I don’t want to do any more, I thought.

But Mrs Nehru was very taken with my work, and she insisted with Auntie Premi that I should be made to work. Earlier we had made recoveries, now the next step was rehabilitation, rehabilitation of the women who were recovered. She told me that they had opened a camp in Hoshiarpur, and the camp commandant was not very good there, and she had been getting bad reports — so she wanted me to be in charge there. I kept saying I don’t want to do anything, but masi would not let me do this. Then one day Lady Mountbatten came and she had to be taken to the Hoshiarpur camp, so I thought I’d go — because I was getting a free ride. I went. They had made a lot of arrangements for the visitor. She first looked at the women who were spinning. To visitors they said these women earn quite a lot, some ten rupees a day, and then we went to the tailoring people and they said the same, the needlework girls said the same ... and I began to wonder, spinning does not get so much money. If it is ten for spinning, it would mean three hundred for the month. I thought, I came back and told my aunt, and she said you are foolish, you should go there. She was a strong woman, full of life, strong, what a personality. She said, it’s no use telling me. So they insisted that I go there, and Auntie Premi told me to come along with her, because she had to go there for an inspection. Once she was there, she said to me, why don’t you stay and I’ll come
THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

back tomorrow to get you. She just left me behind and said I'll come back in a few days and fetch you.

She told the people there, give her a bed and keep her here. So from that day I was appointed to that job. And then with me, it's like this that whatever work I get into, I put everything into it, and my god helps me to get success in it. After about a month, when the bills had to be made for all the income we had got, they brought the bills to me for the work jobs, and I said what is this? They said once you sign this, the individual workers will get paid, and it was when I saw these documents that I discovered that some women were earning five rupees, some ten for the whole month. At first I thought this was a daily document. Then I realized — the spinning women had just ten or twelve, basket workers — no one had earned more than forty for the whole month. I asked about this every day's earning? They said no this is for the whole month. So I asked what was the story? They said, this was for the inspection? They said, that was for the visitors. Do you really think they can earn that much? I was shocked: I said to them that you lied so much. They said, no it wasn't really lies, what we meant was that if a person worked day and night, she could earn so much. Twenty-four hours. So it was all show.

The other thing I noticed was that if we were given a tailoring assignment from outside, it would be the technicians who would cut the clothes. They were the ones who were responsible. Independently the women could not do anything. If you bought a lot of fabric and placed it in front of the women, they would not be able to do anything! So I said, do you think the technicians will run around with these women wherever they go? Even in the hosiery department, it was the technicians who were responsible. The whole thing was heavy on show, wonderful show, but the reality was different. If there was a technician, there was a machine, and if the technicians were thrown out, the whole thing would come to a standstill. What kind of economic rehabilitation was this? As long as they were in the camp, they would get rations and they could earn a little, some ten rupees or so, but once they went out ... they have no experience, they can't do hosiery, they have no machines, even if one of them buys a machine, then without the technician how will she work? If she puts a spinning wheel or a loom at home, what will she do? Here, the moment a thread snaps, the technician is there to help her but elsewhere ... that means no future, nothing. The government wanted that after three years these women should learn to stand on their own feet. And what could we do with this kind of setup? I used to be very concerned at this. I couldn't sleep for many days, wondering what I could do. And because basically I am a religious person, I could not rid myself of the feeling that I was committing a sin, a sin. I thought, here I am, I've got an important post, I have become camp commandant, people are around to do salams to me, I have servants and helpers but ... what am I doing about the real issue here? Then I prayed, and asked God what I should do. And it was at this time that I began to think of adult education.

From 1947 to 1948 I was in Pakistan, and then in '48 I took over in Hoshiarpur, and then I collected my staff, and we went in for adult education. I told the staff to make lists of all the widows who were below thirty-five, or thirty, I can't remember. I said leave the ones who are above this age. We got the lists, and there were some hundred and fifty or so who came within this age bracket. I then asked for a list of staff members, with their qualifications. Then I said, those who have failed matric, still, even if you have failed, there has to be one subject in which you are strong, so we had a column where they could put down the subject in which they were strong. And in this way I had a list in which I could see how many of my staff were strong in Hindi, how many in this subject and how many in that ... so I then said, here we are working eight hours, but actually we aren't doing a
lot. We do pray in the morning, but the country is in great
difficulty, and yet we can’t, for example, give any daan, any
donation for we have nothing. But what we can give is our
time, this we can do. We are not asking anyone for money,
but I am asking you for a bit of time. For eight hours you
give your time to the government, over and above that I’m
asking that you give a bit of time to this work. So the list
came, and on top was my name, and against it first of all I
put a half hour, I was willing to give a half hour of my time
... Then someone wrote half an hour, someone wrote a full
hour and what with those forty or so staff members, we
managed to get a lot of time donated. Then we looked at
the list of women, and we divided up the staff, and we found
that there were usually five women to a staff member. So that
work could now begin. Then another problem came up: we
needed pencils and notebooks. The government used to give
an allowance of ten rupees a month to these women, how
could they manage anything from this amount? They had to
eat. So then I said, all right, whatever stationery you need
you take from me. We couldn’t take it from the women, they
had no money. And we couldn’t ask the government for they
did not recognize our effort, so I said, never mind, just take
it from me. And then I prayed, I asked the women to pray
too, that our effort would be successful, that they would not
have to wash dishes or do domestic labour and that they
would be able to lead lives of dignity ... then my director got
to know. In the evening, Miss Thapar got to know that I was
planning to start adult education classes. She said, whatever
such scheme there is, I know you will be the one to start it.
The news spread, the staff and the women were there. A
message came from Jalandhar. It said, I’ve heard you plan to
start adult education classes. You do not realize that you are
a government functionary, you cannot act of your own
accord, you will have to take permission if you are to start
anything like this. I thought to myself, what can they do? All
they can do is to talk, they can’t kill me after all, so I said to

the women, tomorrow your classes will start. But then there
was the problem: where would we hold these classes? And I
decided they would be held under the mango trees ..., so
that’s what I told the women. Some of them had a little bit
of Hindi and Punjabi while there were others, when they
received their money they would put a thumb print, while
others would be able to sign. I offered rewards to those staff
members who would teach the women the fastest ... this
whole enterprise did so well, it was so successful, the
government had set up so many industries, but everywhere
there were these technicians who would earn a lot of money.
The women could not go anywhere. But with a little
education, and many of the women made a noise about the
technicians once they were a bit educated. Then the
technicians got worried about losing their jobs. If they didn’t
show any work, they’d be out. And again I got shouted at
for doing something that might put them out of work.
Anyway ... the first set of women, some eighty women, the
first year, some of them were old enough to be
grandmothers! Some had studied up to one point, some to
another, many were ready for the ‘middle’, some had studied
in the vernacular. And then another question came up: that
of their ages. Most jobs had an age limit, and these women
... so we had to get together new affidavits. They had to fill
in their educational qualifications, but we needed an age
certificate first. I told the staff that there is a government rule
that anyone over the age of twenty-eight can’t get a job. I
don’t know what the logic was, but that was the rule. So we
did some rough calculations — we took off some time for the
educational opportunities some of the women had lost, and
then a year for something else, and a few months for job
searching, and then tried to see how many women fitted the
bill. But my workers said, behanji, these lists have now
become very small. I said how — how will we find them
jobs? Make the lists bigger. They said, but how? I said just
do it, orders are orders. They all looked at me, thinking
behanganj has gone mad. Then we had to get the affidavits done. I went to the magistrate, to the Assistant Deputy Commissioner, what was he called — I forget now. Oh yes, Mr Puri. I telephoned him and said I need to come and see you and he said, yes please do come, what is it you need. I told him I needed to get some affidavits signed. He said, what sort of affidavits. So I told him that these women had to take the exam for the eighth standard, and this was their first entry so we needed an age certificate. He said, these women's age? Where are they? Bring them here. The women were outside. I said, why do you need to see the women? He said, if I am signing the affidavit, I need to see them. I tried to dissuade him. He said don't be funny, I have to see the women. I said, for what? He said, am I being funny or are you? I said you want to see the women? You have to sign the affidavit, that's all. He said, Miss Sahgal, you are a strange person, at least bring the women in. I said all right, if you insist. So we brought the women in. [Laughing] Poor man, we had written down their ages as twelve, eighteen, fourteen ... he looked at them and said, these are the women? They are these ages? I said you sign the paper, why are you wasting your time and mine, what does it matter. He said Miss Sahgal, look at that woman, her hair is white. I said, congratulations, well done. Don't you know that people's hair goes white even at a young age? Today, even twelve-year olds have grey hair — haven't you seen any? I can show you lots! Today, one can't rely on hair at all, you never know when hair might go grey! Even at age twelve. Look at that one, he said, she has no teeth. Oh ho, I said, you have such sharp eyes, for a man. I said to her, bibi, you fell down from the roof did you not, the other day?

She said, yes, yes behanganj. Yes I did and my teeth broke, what could I do? He said, Miss Sahgal, you are trying to make a fool of me. I said, Puri sahib, the girls are in front of you, you can see the truth for yourself, why should I fool you. He said, they have wrinkles on their faces. I said to him, how observant you are, you notice so many things. I said, look Puri sahib, tell me what you ate at home this morning. He said, so now you are trying to turn the tables on me. I said, no, I genuinely want to know what you had for breakfast this morning. You must have had milk, fruit, toast, butter on it, egg — all this at least your wife must have given you. This much I can tell you, more I don't know. And me too, I have had plenty. But look at these poor women, they get nothing. The government gives them ten rupees. What can they eat with this? They have to starve, that's why their faces are so wrinkled. Once they get enough to eat they will be all right. He said, you are a real Jatti. Look at these women, one has no teeth, another has grey hair, a third is wrinkled ... I said, oh ho, Puri sahib, what is it you want? He said, tell me the correct age of these women. I said, okay, you write what you want, and I'll accept what you write. How, he said. Why not, I said. Use your pen, and take an oath and write when they were born and I'll believe you. He said, how do I know? So I said, if you don't know, how do I? You will also put down an estimate, and so will I. I said have you seen their faces? They come from the village. Do you think even one of them will know her birth date? What do they know, these women? They will tell you lies, I am also lying, you have to give a false signature, since we are all liars together, none of us will speak. Do you think these women can say when they were born? Neither can I, I was not there, nor can you. So what can we do? For forty-five minutes we argued and argued. He said what should I do? I said I know nothing. I am doing this in God's name, and why don't you do the same? I told him if you can swear when they were born, which hour, which day, I'll take your word for it and countersign it, but you don't know, neither do I. If you can't, I can't.

Anyway, he signed! And with these women then we got a cent per cent result.