



In Conversation with Urvashi Butalia

Do you think women's issues are often trivialized in the context of various historical events? Could you elaborate on the above specific to the case of Partition on which you have extensively written?

Yes, women's issues are trivialized, you only have to watch historical serials on television to see this. During Partition this was very complicated. I don't think there was a trivialization, the State took very seriously the fact of women's abduction, the sexual violence they faced, but they did not see this as a violation of the women's rights as citizens, the state did not see its failure to ensure safety for women as a failure of its commitment to its citizens, rather it saw itself as a parent protecting its children, and sometimes taking decisions on their behalf which it believed the women were not capable of making – although when the women had the chance to make those decisions they showed themselves very capable of doing so. But in not allowing the women autonomy the State and women's families trivialized them. They infantilized them.

Isn't history what we choose to remember? How did you deal with this aspect of history while compiling the oral narratives of the victims of partition?

History is equally what we choose to write, what we choose to document, and what is then seen as immutable 'fact'. Just think of who writes history, who documents the happenings around us, what they choose to document and what they choose to leave out. Why has history for example always been about kings and rulers? Not because there was no one else around, but because it is their stories that got recorded and everyone else, the poor, the marginalized, women, the lower castes, got left out. So how reliable are the 'facts' of history? Similarly memory is selective, people choose to remember certain things and forget others, sometimes States wish to suppress the memory of certain things, such as lower caste uprisings, or the killing of minorities as in Nellie in Assam, so certain memories surface, others don't. The point is not whether memory is better than fact, just that the two inform each other, and enrich each other, and should be seen together not in antagonism to each other. I often recount the story of my experience in documenting the anti Muslim Pogrom in Bhagalpur in Bihar in 1989. When we were trying to get the figures of how many had been killed, we got three different sets of figures, one from the people, one from the police and the third from

state records. Who were we to believe? Which figure was the truth? And yet the point was not to arrive at a precise figure (although that is important) but to know that even one death was one death too many.

How do you interpret the term 'slavery' in the context of the 21st century?

This is a big question and not so easily answered. Slavery in the 21st century means many things, but basically it means that while there may be no such thing as formal slavery as we knew it in the past, there are instances all over the world of people being held in situations that are virtually like slavery, whether it is in factories, or in refugee enclaves or in other similar situations.

You have done an extensive work on Gender and Partition. In what ways do women become the signifiers of national boundaries?

They don't become signifiers, but are made to be. This happened during partition when they became the carriers of the so called 'honour' of the community (for example when Sikh men killed their women ostensibly in order to 'save' them from the 'dishonour' of being raped and impregnated by men of the other religion, or when Hindus and Muslims raped women in order to 'dishonour' the other community (the men of the other community to be more precise), and when the burden of retaining this honour was then placed on women's bodies. This is happening even today when women who step out of line, or who choose to marry outside their community or caste, are branded as loose and dishonourable women, and are often killed, sometimes by their own parents or by people who arrogate to themselves the right to be guardians of that honour.

Both the nations on either side of the barbed wires were (and still are, up to a considerable extent) primarily agrarian one's. How, in your opinion did the partition affect the feminization or otherwise of the workforce in these two nations, what was the spatial distribution of this phenomenon? Did it differ in respect to the context of culture?

Many things happened to change women's lives after Partition. People who were primarily agricultural workers, often moved into urban spaces – I am talking about India as that is what I know more. So for example when given the choice to get compensatory property, people in agriculture often asked for urban property as their families, their children, mainly their sons, did not want to remain in agriculture. This impacted women's work in the fields, and in livestock rearing etc. Then, for urban women, the field of social work opened up as an area to get into. For many middle and lower middle class women, whose lives were disrupted and who could not marry, certain kinds of jobs were opened up, such as clerical jobs, or working in stitching centres and other places, but by and large this is an area on which not much work has been done.

What kind of impact does a situation like being displaced or migration have on the degree of a women's economic independence?

Once again there's not much work on this but migration and the new uncertainties of being in a land you do not know and are not familiar with, was bound to cause certain anxieties and uncertainties. The widespread sexual violence that has recently taken place could not have helped and people must have felt insecure. The only thing was that sometimes when people settled as communities in the same place, so people from Rawalpindi settling in Jangpura say, they recreated the old structures of familiarity and that helped in creating some sense of security for the women.