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Missing since 1947

70 years of Partition: It took me many years to understand why my mother had been crying that night in 1971. She had heard stories of killings and kidnappings in the former East Pakistan, which had triggered that awful memory she had tried to repress ever since she was a child

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Updated: August 14, 2017 11:04:17 am



Ghulam Fatima, the author's grandmother, who went missing in the violence that convulsed India-Pakistan in 1947

I never saw or met Ghulam Fatima in my whole life, but for me she is a symbol of independence. I heard about her for the first time in 1971 when I was only five years old. I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of someone whimpering and realized it was my mother. My father was in Dhaka on a goodwill mission between former East Pakistan and present West Pakistan. Perhaps my mother was missing my father, I thought, so I jumped into her bed and embraced her in my small arms. My cheeks were wet with her tears. I asked her why she was crying. She kissed my cheek and gently said, go back to sleep. But when I repeated my question, she broke down in tears again and said, “1947 khatam hi nahi hota, yeh khoon kharaba kab rukey ga? (There is no end to 1947, when will this bloodshed stop?)”

I was baffled. I asked her, “Ammi ji what is 1947?” It was the year Pakistan became independent, she replied, when a lot of people were also killed and kidnapped. So when I asked, “what is a kidnapping,” it was as if a dam burst in my mother’s body. She started to wail and sob loudly, pressing her hand down on her mouth to control her grief. By now I was in a state of utter bewilderment and terror.

After a while when the sobs subsided, my mother found the courage to tell me the story of Ghulam Fatima. She was her mother, my grandmother. In the madness that convulsed the Punjab in the weeks before August 1947, she and her family uprooted themselves from their family home in Jammu and took the bus to Sialkot, not far across what would become the international border. Nani’s father could not accompany them because he was helping organize the movement of other relatives to our new nation, Pakistan.

But as my grandmother’s bus drove out of Jammu city, it was stopped by a gang of armed Hindus and Sikhs. They ruthlessly killed all the males in front of the women and children. My mother was a small girl. When the attackers asked the women to come out from the buses, my grandmother Ghulam Fatima told my mother, Mumtaz, to hide under the dead bodies. She pushed her two smaller daughters, Jamila and Shamim, also under the bodies. A baby son was crying in her lap. He was too small to hide, so she ran with him into the nearby jungle. My mother, on the other hand, was able to conceal herself and her younger sisters amid the pools of congealing blood. They survived.

As for Ghulam Fatima and her baby son, my sobbing mother recounted what a relative had said, later. How Ghulam Fatima was last seen defending herself with a stick in her right hand and her little son in her left hand, but she was overpowered easily and dragged away by her attackers.

I couldn't get my grandmother's story out of my mind. A few years later I found out that my mother and her sisters had been rescued by the Baloch Regiment in November 1947 from a road near Kathua full of dead bodies. They were sent to a refugee camp, where my grandfather found them after a few weeks. He searched for his wife for many years. At some point my grandfather even organized the exchange of a few kidnapped Hindu women with kidnapped Muslim women, but Ghulam Fatima never returned.

It took me many years to understand why my mother had been crying so hard that night in 1971. She had heard stories of killings and kidnappings in former East Pakistan during a military operation, which had triggered that awful memory she had tried to repress ever since she was a child. I was very close to my mother. I used to accompany her to the many Sufi shrines where she devotedly prayed for the return of her missing mother and brother. I inherited the pain for missing persons from her.

When Benazir Bhutto became prime minister of Pakistan in 1988 my mother asked me, "Can she do something that will help find my mother and brother?" She never lost hope. Once she told me, "Hindus and Sikhs kidnapped Muslim women and Muslims kidnapped Hindu and Sikh women in 1947... There were bad people on both sides, but also good people." Every year on Independence Day, my mother distributed food and money to the poor. Independence was supposed to mean peace and harmony, but for my mother the pain was never far away.

She died in 1993. We found a black-and-white picture of Ghulam Fatima in her papers. Now that picture, missing since 1947, is saved in my mobile phone and also hangs on a wall in my heart. A few years ago I read a book, "Silence Revealed: Women's Experiences during Partition of India" by Nina Ellis Frischmann and Christopher Hill. This book told me why my mother had made me promise not to tell her mother's story to anyone. She didn't want to dishonor her mother. In fact,

many female victims of Partition have never discussed the horrors they lived through. Most of those who were abducted were also abandoned. Their families simply didn't want them back because their "dishonoured" presence was a source of shame. The governments of India and Pakistan came to an agreement in 1949 that abducted persons should be recovered but this agreement was hardly implemented.

Another book, "Partition and Locality" by Ilyas Chattha, is a moving account of the rape and murder of both Muslim and non-Muslim women in Punjab. I read horrifying details of a train carnage in Kamonke (near Lahore) and the abduction of Hindu women. I belong to a generation of Pakistanis brought up by a parent who witnessed the trauma of partition first hand. I simply cannot forget my mother's tears, for her own missing mother. To me, independence is a reminder of the sacrifices made by my grandmother Ghulam Fatima and thousands of other women like her.

All these women wanted was to live in peace, but the brutal truth is that their successive generations are still searching for that elusive feeling. The people of the subcontinent certainly got freedom from British imperialism, but they remain slaves to their biases and to the hatred they spawned for each other all those decades ago. Today they are no more slaves of foreign invaders, but are slaves of this consuming hatred for each other.

In fact, they fear each other; they fear that they may, perhaps, find it in themselves to like each other despite this hatred. These people of the subcontinent – us — are worse in our behavior towards each other than the British who ruled for nearly three centuries.

As we celebrate the 70th year of independence, truth is that this independence never empowered us and enabled us to speak our minds. Our ruling classes used independence to seize power and snatch the freedom of the weak and underprivileged. Whenever Independence day comes around, I think about Ghulam Fatima who was kidnapped in 1947. I want to ask, who are these rulers who have kidnapped my independence and turned it into a shell? Of course, becoming independent is a major achievement, but we have used this power to make nuclear bombs that we point against each other. Independence has hardly

meant the development and growth and wiping the tear from every eye that we were promised in 1947.

Much of this independence is limited to the elite. A large majority is still a slave of poverty and disease. Millions of Ghulam Fatimas cannot speak their minds freely even today. We talk about Gandhi and Jinnah on Independence Day. They wanted us to live with tolerance towards the other, but the truth is that we are becoming intolerant day by day.

Let us talk about thousands of Ghulam Fatimas who were kidnapped, killed and raped in 1947, on both sides. Let us make monuments to these ordinary people who suffered and paid with their lives. Let us come to terms with the trauma of partition. Let us understand that we have to continue to live together as neighbours. Let us ask why there is no end to the bloodshed started in 1947. Why we are destined to keep repeating the cycle of violence and grief, why peace is missing since 1947.

Real independence will come only when we will get answers to these questions.



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