Golz Summer Research Final Report

This summer I studied the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan, which resulted in the displacement of 15 million people and death of another 200,000 to 500,000. More specifically, I was researching gender-based violence and concentrating on the particularly gruesome sexual violence of partition that has set it apart from other instances of communal riots in South Asia.

Though it is recognized that communal riots were accompanied by mass rape, mutilation, abduction and other sexual violations against women of the “other” community, I was curious about the role of women beyond that of passive victims. Despite the silence that surrounds this subject, some scholars have identified instances in which women took a more active role in their fate. Many women committed suicide or chose to be “martyred” by men of their own families and communities so as to “preserve their honor.” In the rare instances that this matter is addressed at all, these women are applauded for their choice of death over dishonor. Such incidents raise the question of how we define violence when there is an element of the victim’s choice involved. Can we see such women merely as victims? Were they acting on their own behalf, saving themselves from assured abduction and rape, or in order to preserve the sanctity and purity of their community? If these women were, and still are, applauded as “heroic” martyrs of their religion, why were later instances of women showing agency- by refusing forced state sponsored relocations of abducted women in the post partition years- censored by society and the state? Why was the choice made by some women to remain in the communities into which they had been forcibly integrated during Partition deemed unacceptable by the state governments? These are the questions that have been largely overlooked, and that I wished to explore.

I used several forms of primary sources, including interviews conducted and recorded by partition scholars, oral testimonies of several partition survivors, government reports (both legislative and constituent assembly debate records), social worker accounts and memoirs. I also included the memoirs and interviews of some of the women who lead the Rescue and Rehabilitation initiative, as they offer a unique, female insight into the motives of the government, as well as serving as first-hand witnesses of the women and girls who were abducted and rescued.

Part of my fellowship grant stipulated that I utilize “new and innovative technologies” in my research process. Because it is modern history, there remains numerous witnesses to the tragedy of Partition. I was able to use pictures, film, and video interviews (oral testimonies) in my study. In keeping with this trend, I decided to present my findings on an interactive website using the extensive literary, thematic and visual works pertaining to Partition to present these sources and my argument in such a way that will capture the attention of those less inclined to empathize or identify with textual works such as a research paper. This website can be accessed at http://courses.bowdoin.edu/golz-2014-women-partition-india-pakistan/.

On this website, I venture several plausible explanations to the various types, and responses to, female agency. Though it would be impossible to detail my findings here, it is important to understand how a long tradition of viewing women as symbols of country and community did not simply end with the dawn of “modernity.” One might argue that the mass suicides occurred in a more “traditional” setting, whereas the government-sponsored restoration of abducted women to their “rightful” state occurred in the newly “modern” state. Yet in both instances, women’s choice is subordinated to the particular needs of their male relatives and the patriarchal state, respectively. I am hoping to expand this study to other instances of communal violence (such as the more modern examples of the Bosnian war and the civil unrest in Egypt’s 2011 revolution, both of which were instances of exceptional sexual violence) to build upon the
idea that such instances of violence—whether they be designated as traditional or modern—are merely part of a continuum of violence against women that prevails in the patriarchy of many states. It is a system that defines belonging or citizenship through women, and yet denies them the basic rights of these designations.