

Torn Up By The Roots

Svati Joshi summarises Kamalaben's memoirs recounting her work among the women victims of the 1947 partition riots

"Mool Sota Ukhadela" by Kamalaben Patel, R.R. Sheth & Co.,
Bombay & Ahmedabad, 1985

THERE have been many accounts of the internal tortures inflicted on women during partition, but what distinguishes these memoirs written in Gujarati, is that they are by a woman who spent four years in riot torn areas of both India and Pakistan, working for the rehabilitation of thousands of lost and abducted women. If the sufferings of these women make intensely painful reading, the courage and conviction of women like Kamalaben help the reader come through with some faith in humanity.

Kamalaben says in the preface that she could not write this book for 30 years, because her experiences at that time had filled her with an anger and hatred for men that was too intense to be put on paper. It is only recently that friends prevailed on her to write these memoirs.

Born in Nadiad in 1912, Kamalaben was the eldest of four daughters and shouldered the responsibility of bringing up her sisters when her mother died in 1924. Her father joined Gandhiji's Ashram with his young daughters. Kamalaben was married at the age of 18 and widowed at the age of 19, with the responsibility of bringing up two small step-daughters. She put most of her time and energy into the freedom movement, and in 1947, joined women like Mridula Sarabhai, Rameswari Nehru and Sucheta Kripalani in working for the women victims of communal violence.

Kamalaben was sent to Lahore to reclaim Hindu and Sikh women. She was only 35 years old and was frightened to find herself alone in an unknown place in an atmosphere of suspicion. She was to stay in a refugee camp which was full of

cholera patients. There was no place for her to rest or even keep her luggage. That night, she could not sleep and began to think of returning to India. Next morning, however, she suddenly remembered a sentence Gandhiji had written: "If I were a woman I would rise in rebellion against any pretension on the part of man that a woman is born to be his plaything." And she decided to accept the opportunity of working for women, and be willing to incur any risk in the process. With this decision her fear was gone.

In Lahore, Kamalaben opened a camp for reclaimed women, started district transit camps in consultation with district collectors, led and trained women workers, and also sent the reclaimed women to Jalandhar. She had to be in constant touch with Pakistani officials as well as the Indian High Commission. Nobody had any experience of this kind of work. She had to depend on her own instincts to solve the new problems that cropped up every day.

Kamalaben came face to face with indescribable horrors. Once, in one week, about 600 women and children were collected from a camp in Gujarat district, and brought to Lahore. They looked like living corpses—covered with boils, wearing stinking clothes and with unkempt hair. From the last truck, a frail woman staggered out, carrying a dying child. As she entered the camp, the child breathed its last. She had lost three other children like this, it was learnt that these women had not eaten salt for six months. They bathed only once a fortnight, without any soap. Teenaged children had shrunk and looked like eight year olds. Most children were so sick that they could not eat normal food.

Even more distressing was the dazed and terrified state of the women. They suffered from a terrible fear that their families would not accept them. Often, they would refuse to identify their family. Once, a young woman said she was in love with the man she was living with in Pakistan and she should not be sent to India. By sheer chance, a young man who had come from India to look for his wife happened to be searching in the camp at the moment. This woman turned out to be his wife. They hugged each other and wept with joy. The woman then narrated how she had been abducted from her village during the riots. "They beat my husband badly and took me away. They told me my husband was dead. I was then sold for Rs 50. The man who bought me did not give me much trouble. Since my husband was dead, I was apprehensive about going to India, not knowing where or who would I go to. The man who kept me told me what to say before the tribunal in order to return to him. I thought perhaps this was good for me."

There were cases of women having been abandoned or even sold by their own families. Such women had developed a strong hatred for their families and refused to return to them. One girl, Veera, who had been forcibly brought to the camp from a subinspector's house where she was living, told her story. The subinspector's family and Veera's family were neighbours. During the riots, the subinspector told Veera's father that if he married his daughter to him, he would get them safely to the border. The father decided to save his family by sacrificing his daughter. She was married to the subinspector who already had a wife and children. He treated Veera well but his wife abused her in his absence. Veera agreed to return to India only when she was promised that she would not be sent back to her parents. Eventually, she married another man in India.

Many families, Hindu as well as Muslim, sought their security at the cost of their women. A prosperous family of Rawalpindi managed to reach India, leaving their widowed daughter-in-law

behind. This woman, Prema, was left alone in the family house and faced constant harassment from the neighbours. She then developed a friendship with a Pakistani army captain. Suddenly, one day, Pakistani police, who had refused her protection earlier, brought her to the reclamation camp. An influential official demanded that she be sent to India at once as she was bad charactered. Her friend, Captain Tufel, was transferred to Baluchistan, because the officers did not want him to marry a Hindu woman. Prema reached Jalandhar a completely broken woman. She became a volunteer in a refugee camp but could not settle down. One day she disappeared. Perhaps she had crossed the border and returned to Pakistan. Partition left many women like Prema in an area of darkness.

Kamalaben was deeply disturbed by the fact that the reclaimers often refused the reclaimed women the right to decide their own future. Even at tribunal meetings, decisions were often taken about a woman without consulting her. Women and children were treated as objects of exchange and bargaining counters. For instance, one young boy was entrusted by his Hindu mother who was leaving the village during riots, to the care of her neighbour, a childless Muslim woman. He was brought up with great love and care by her and, after her death, by her parents. He was forcibly sent to India just because he was identified as Hindu by birth. Sudarshan, who had of her own choice married a Muslim boy whom she had met in college, was taken away to India by her

father and brother who declared that she had been abducted. Similarly, Ismat, a young Muslim girl who had smuggled herself into India as a refugee in order to marry her Hindu friend Jitu, and who was accepted by his family as their daughter-in-law, was forcibly taken to Pakistan because she was a Muslim.

Indian and Pakistani officials constantly mistrusted each other and would send a certain number of women to the other country only if exactly the same number of were sent to them. Thus, women were manifestly treated as property to be exchanged and as a pretext for venting communal hatred.

Kamalaben noticed a peculiar ambivalence in the attitude of Hindu and Sikh men. While the men who went to



—Ira Roy

Lahore in search of their women, would praise the reclamation of Hindu women as a noble work, the same men in Amritsar would often refuse to surrender the Muslim women they had abducted, and would accuse the reclamation workers of breaking their homes by reclaiming these women. When forced to part with the Muslim women, some would go to the extent of asking for a reclaimed Hindu or Sikh woman from Pakistan in exchange. They would argue: "We were ruined in Pakistan. We have lost everything. Now you are taking our women from us. If you cannot give this woman, then give us at least one of the women who have come from Pakistan." She also noticed that Hindu and Sikh men who refused to accept Hindu and Sikh women of their own families, saying these women had been made impure by Muslim men, very conveniently purified Muslim women they had abducted, by sprinkling sacred water on them and tattooing religious sayings or symbols on their bodies.

Kamalaben was sometimes so demoralised by the rigid attitudes of the government officials and by the inhuman behaviour of men that she thought of giving up her work: "Why should I continue? The only purpose of this work is to help them settle down in life. Was this purpose being served?... We were not able to give them any real help." This led her to further disturbing questions: "Why were women in such a helpless condition? Who was responsible for all this? How long would a woman have to depend on a man to protect herself?"

Thus her work in a crisis situation brought her up against the basic problem of a disturbingly unequal social system in which women had little individuality and were treated as objects. Any meaningful change had to come from the people, not from army or police or government. It was this that Gandhiji stressed in his impassioned appeals to people to safely return victimised women to their families, and to the families to receive them with respect and love: "In Pakistan Muslims, and Hindus and Sikhs in India have committed this heinous crime. The same

people should return these women. Their own people should welcome them generously. These women have not committed any crime. They have been victims of bad men. To say that they have no right to live in society is wrong. That is absolute cruelty... I would keep such women with me and give them full respect. I would also accept the children of these women. ...If some rogue raped a woman and she became pregnant should I then reject her? No, I would take her in my lap as my own daughter."

Gandhiji pleaded that the children born out of wedlock during the riots should be allowed to stay with their mothers: "The child's religion will be her mother's. On becoming mature, she can decide on her religion." But this was a very sensitive issue in India. Pakistani authorities did not care whether or not the Muslim woman brought her child with her to Pakistan when she was reclaimed. But the Indian authorities felt that the child of a Hindu woman begotten by a Muslim father would never be accepted by her family in India. If the relatives of the woman refused to take her back because of the child, the Indian government would be left with the mothers and children on its hands. So, after a long debate, it was decided that before returning to India, the women should leave their children with their fathers in Pakistan which was the country of their birth.

Perhaps this was a practical solution but some women workers thought it was very cruel to force a woman to leave her child behind. Kamalaben took up the issue with the higher authorities. At last it was decided that the decision should be left to the mother. It was found that usually a married woman who was already a mother of two or three children in wedlock would, after much persuasion, agree to leave her child behind in Pakistan. But most unmarried mothers were not willing to part with their children. But once they reached the Jalandhar camp and met their relatives they would begin to feel ashamed of the child. They would not dare take the child into the presence of their fathers or brothers who visited the camp. They would plead with the volunteers not to disclose

to their parents that they had a child. They could not bear the thought of abandoning the child, but at the same time they could not take the child with them. As long as they were in the camp they would not leave the child alone for a moment, and on leaving the camp, would cry bitterly and request the volunteers to take good care of the child. The only ray of hope in this dismal scenario of women's utter helplessness is perhaps the dedication and fearlessness of women like Kamalaben. Their work can be seen as a sort of quiet resistance not only to the forces of communal hatred but also to power hungry state apparatuses. Today, when both are closing in on us and seem to threaten our lives in various ways, Kamalaben's narrative suggests what it may be possible for us to do.

Follow Up

In Manushi No. 32, 1986, Renu Dewan reported the case of Gouri Kumari a young maidservant who was raped by her employer Bipin Kumar Sinha and as a result had a son Bikas in May 1985. In No. 44, 1988, she reported that the rape case filed against sinha in the sessions court was successful, as it was proved that Gouri was a minor hence sexual relations with or without her consent amounted to rape. Sinha was sentenced to four years' rigorous imprisonment but managed to get bail from the high court and appealed the verdict. In January 1988, the Mahila Mukti Morcha filed another case for maintenance of Bikas. Renu Dewan now reports that the lower court has ordered Sinha to pay Rs 300 a month for Bikas' maintenance. This is an important precedent, and the Morcha is to be congratulated on having pursued the case so determinedly. Sinha has appealed to the high court against this judgement too.