

November 9, 2009

Steel magnolias

Partition: an arid term for an event so drenched in blood and mass tragedy. Sixty-two years later, an assortment of disgruntled people from Kashmir and the North East make the same demands with bus bombs and ambushes. In such situations of conflict, women's bodies become the terrains that wars are fought on. Their stories form a mosaic of lives uprooted, families split and existences made suddenly tenuous in ghettos. We spoke to activists who document their stories, rehabilitate them, and lend memory and meaning to women who are victims of conflict.

Voices from the past

The Other Side of Silence which documents the voices of partition survivors was intended for the public sphere and stemmed from a personal passion to document their fast-fading voices. It was also the religious polarisation in society that drove me to listen to them. India has little or virtually no history of documenting the angst of victims of conflict because, we have a reluctance to confront the violence in our society, for it often means looking at our own complicity. And, I think that's a real tragedy, for not only do we need to listen to people who have been through such violence, but we also need to learn from their fortitude, their compassion and, indeed, their secularism. The mistake we make is to take into account the experiences of only the directly affected; actually, these things have a much deeper and wider impact. This means looking at the stories of women, children, ordinary people, minorities...



URVASHI BUTALIA

Director Zubaan, New Delhi

Build bridges

Our conflicts continue to simmer because of a near-total absence of a conflict resolution mechanism. Every single post-Independence riot has been politically engineered, be it 1984 or 2002. Having more women in Parliament has not lessened its frequency or the madness because every woman politician has always toed the party line. When violence and bloodshed take over

the public sphere, women tend to get marginalised. Their first instinct is to safeguard their families and property. Also, family culture decides how women react in times of conflict — the prejudices they have grown up with surface at this time. It is imperative to build bridges as soon as possible in the way scores of Hindus did with Sikhs after 1984. We owe it our own conscience — none of us is safe till all of us is safe.



MADHU PURNIMA KISHWAR

Senior Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Founder-Editor, Manushi, New Delhi

The healing touch

Athwaas, an alliance of women from Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, engages with women at the grassroots to help them make a shift from victims to survivors and change-makers. Since 2002, Athwaas has initiated safe spaces called Samanbals in all the three regions, including the Kashmiri Pandit migrant camps, for women to come together for economic activities, to share and listen, heal and choose. The workshops organised for members help build confidence. Samanbal members share their experiences of violence within private spheres, and often link it to political violence or displacement. Some of the community leaders have now been trained as facilitators for organising discussions and awareness among their respective communities. Athwaas feels Samanbals should be an agency for change and reconciliation, and the model be replicated all over the State.



ASHIMA KAUL

Independent journalist and filmmaker and Consultant on Kashmir, WISCOMP, New Delhi

Guns and roses

Each year, an average 300 widows emerge from Manipur's bloodied soil. The idea for the Manipuri Women Gun Survivor Network (MWGSN) came from an incident on December 24, 2004, when 27-year-old Buddhi Moirangthem was gunned down. Days after the incident, MWGSN gave his wife a sewing machine. MWGSN helps women survivors of gun violence find ways to heal the scars caused by decades of living under the shadow of the gun. By supporting women economically and assisting them in small-scale entrepreneurial work, we build sustainable livelihood measures. Through our 'Solidarity Networks', young people who believe in controlling the use and spread of small arms, assist these women. We also need to work with Governments, the U.N. and the civil society at large to keep our work going. That is why we formed the Control Arms Foundation of India (CAFI). I believe youth and women have a powerful role to play in bringing about a more peaceful world that is free from conflict.



BINALAKSHMI NEPRAM

Founder, MWGSN and Secretary-General, CAFI, New Delhi

Keep the faith

Building interfaith relations is the major focus area of Henry Martyn Institute's (HMI) work. HMI's community development programme in the old city area of Hyderabad gives a common space for Hindus and Muslims to interact, learn different skills and develop better relationships. We run a primary school where children from different religions, castes and economic backgrounds are admitted. This helps us mould the thinking capacity, increase the interaction level among different faiths and offer proper education at the right age. Children come with the baggage of prejudiced parents, and harbour stereotypical views. One of the main visions is to see change in mindsets. Empowerment and sustainable development are the key processes for peace in a community divided on the lines of religion. We envision a society wherein victims of violence are empowered people who believe they can change the system.



JAHAN ARA BEGUM

Coordinator, Community Development — Praxis HMI: International Centre for Research, Interfaith Relations and Reconciliation, Hyderabad