

Violence and Gender Roles

In Colonial Northern India

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There has been a lot of study on violence against women in contemporary India as well as the horrific violence that occurred during the 1947 Partition, but there is yet to be any major study for the colonial period.

The early 1900s was an important time for women's movements in Colonial India.

I wish to look at how gender roles and expectations shaped the motives behind crimes and violence towards women.

Motives for crimes against women are strongly interwoven with gender roles.

Violence is used as a punishment for when a woman does not fulfil the role expected her; such as for disobedience to her husband or his family, adultery, rejection of men's sexual advances or an inability to perform duties such as housework.

Only extreme murder cases found their ways into reports. Cases of domestic violence were absent from Punjab's legal records; many women were socialised to accept violence as punishment.

I visited institutions in both Britain and India.

I looked at law records and Punjab native newspaper reports from Newcastle University's own Special Collections.

The publications of the Zenana Church of England Missionary Society in Birmingham's Cadbury Archive offered valuable insight. The Zenana and Church Missionary writings provided a view of violence hidden in the private sphere.

I had the chance to read through India's National Social Conference's annual reports and various private papers at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. I also read existing scholarship from Newcastle, Cardiff and Delhi.

Forms of social custom and oppression did not always explicitly lead to violence, but perpetuated a culture where violence could be tolerated.

Child marriage was a major obstacle against female education in colonial India. Dr. S Mhtulkashi Reddi's private papers detailed that early consummation was damaging psychologically, physically and lead to potentially dangerous and unhealthy births.

Female infanticide was a form of violence specifically in Northern India. While it had largely died out by the 1900s, Missionary writings argue it still existed.

Mistreatment and social restrictions were placed upon widows. 'Purdah' kept women hidden in closed spaces regardless of the toll on their physical and mental health

A missionary post card titled 'Kushi and her girls'. Missionaries' narratives filled in the gaps that official papers could not reach.



Eight-year-old child bride, Ranu with her husband Sahayram Bose, aged 20, Bengal, 1907

What we learn from studying the history of violence against women will shape our understanding of why gendered violence continues in the contemporary period.

As an outcome of this research I have written an index of the primary sources I have found.

I hope these findings will contribute to the larger research of violence and crime towards women in Colonial India.

'A Maharashtran widow at her hearth'. It was compulsory for widows to wear plain, drab clothing with no jewellery.



Photograph of a 1890 widow named Tara. Note the absence of a blouse and the tonsured (shaven) head. Tara would be rehabilitated in a home for widows.

