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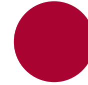

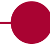

Bodies of Partition

Of Widows, Residue, and Other Historical Waste

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Chapter 2

Bodies of Partition: Of Widows, Residue, and Other Historical Waste

Ravinder Kaur

The Wall—2001
Two and a half meters high surface painted in bright yellow paint—a color often associated with government buildings—peeling off at some places and spotted randomly with green fungus at others. The signs of disrepair, damage and neglect are apparent. A blue painted gate made of iron bars breaks the monotony of the yellow wall. A chipped board affixed besides the gate identifies the place as Kasturba Niketan—the official name of what is popularly known as "widow colony" in the neighborhood—where the widows of India's 1947 Partition violence were "rehabilitated" by the Indian state. The wall continues to fulfill its original function as intended by the state—a protective boundary within which young widows and their children were to live their everyday lives under its watchful eyes. It is also symbolic of exceptions that constitute everyday life in the colony—of widows, their now adult children and grandchildren—separating it from the "normal" world outside.
The Wall—2010
Broken bricks, concrete slabs, dust, shreds of green plastic sheets, empty bottles, and rubble outline the area once occupied by the wall. The surface was probably hammered by heavy machinery to speed up the process of demolition, or perhaps it was manually disassembled by the laborers deployed by the municipal contractors. The details are lost, or more likely, they don't matter. The colony is finally leveled with the "normal" world, open to the gaze from the outside.

> Residue: Something that remains after the main part has gone or been taken or used.
>
> Oxford Dictionary, 1999

Introduction

A "historical wound," it has been noted, is a sign of misrecognition of injury that locates the past as the site of the original slight and its redress in the present as a condition for rearrangement of the social compact (Attwood, Chakrabarty, and Lomnitz 2008). Dipesh Chakrabarty further suggests that to publicize the wound, or to speak in its name, is "to be already on the path of recovery" (Chakrabarty 2007: 77). A somewhat less explored aspect of the relationship between publicity and recovery of the wound concerns the *historical residue as waste*—residual matter, a leftover of the wound, in a constant state of decay that neither regenerates nor disappears—that remains essential to the public spectacle of woundedness even as it is deemed *irrecoverable* in the present. The historical residue suggests a suspended condition where victims sometimes fail to recover and do not become "survivors" who "get over" and "move on" with their lives as expected. Their utter destruction and failure remain in full public glare—as symbols of collective woundedness and, therefore, valued as such—with little prospect of recovery. It is the double-edged nature of organic residue—healing and renewed residual production—that this chapter sets out to explore. Echoing the introduction to this volume, I will explore transformations of the victimhood assemblage to illustrate how it is produced through struggles, historical mutations, and governmental categories. I use the concept of "wound" to stress the organic and embodied aspects of Partition victimhood.

To the extent that territorial division and mass population displacement can be read under the sign of historical wound, India's Partition in 1947 signifies in the popular domain a grievous injury to the nation's body—an injury transposed to, and to be witnessed upon, the actual bodies of victims of mass violence, rape, and forced displacement. The recovery of these wounded bodies to rehabilitate a wounded nation became the prime task of the postcolonial Indian state. The dispersed groups and individuals were assembled together by the Indian state in the mid-1960s under the bureaucratic category of "residue"—organic matter considered beyond the scope of recovery and rehabilitation within the social order.[1] This chapter asks what *recovery* means

for subjects of suffering who are classified as beyond repair by the state and who live their life in a *permanent* condition of adjournment. Veena Das suggests looking for signs of recovery not in grand gestures but in the register of the ordinary—acts, objects, relations that constitute the everyday—rooted intimately within the recesses of the event (Das 2007: 7–8). A part of the inquiry, then, is to ask how the ordinary might look like within the world inhabited by the irrecoverable, as well as within the world of bureaucratic fantasies that made such a classification possible.

In what follows, I offer an ethnographic account of the everyday from one such residual site of history—a "widow colony" in Delhi established in late 1947 to house young women with dependent children who had been widowed in the Partition violence. These women were often those who had been denied space within their extended families and whom the state considered incapable of living an independent life like the rest of the refugee population. In this chapter, I locate widow colonies as exclusive territories within the landscape of displacement, where the human mass that could not be absorbed within the social fabric was discarded, abandoned, and isolated from public view. The notion of "residual" material—which has outlived its usefulness and is left in isolation to decay and degenerate—allows us to rethink the history of Partition for two reasons. First, thinking through residue opens an alternate historical trajectory that, instead of routing us through the familiar and stable path of *becoming* (from refugees to citizens), enables us to see the fractious processes of *unbecoming* (from refugees to residue). And, second, residue dramatically accentuates the calamitous, catastrophic, and ruinous nature of the event through unbecoming material—an organic memorial to the "tragedy" of Partition. The popular narrative of the event rests upon the imagery of such human residue—actual lives that were wrecked in the upheavals of history, irreparably and beyond recovery by the state agency—that constantly labors to highlight the negative outcome of territorial and communal divisions. I argue that "historical residue" is central to our understanding of the wound and its public life: a profoundly unsettling signifier of terminal injury. The value of the residue lies precisely in its negative expendability and wastefulness and its ultimate destruction through history as a living sign of collective loss.

In this chapter, I follow three interwoven meanings of residue in Partition's aftermath that become legible within the recesses of the ordinary: impurity, fragment, waste. These three meanings designate a process where the residue of Partition begins as the impurity of a gendered world (the widow),

then becomes fragmented as some are evacuated from the category of impurity (their sons), finally to being designated as irrecoverable waste (the part of the widows' families that cannot be inscribed in the social order of things). Through ethnography of everyday life in the widow colony, I seek to describe the continuous sifting of the human mass that separates the coarse from the refined and the recoverable from the irrecoverable. These processes become spectacularly apparent when viewed through a long-standing conflict the residents had with the municipality from 1950 to 2010. The struggle to gain ownership rights, and a status similar to that of other refugee localities in Delhi, escalated in 2007 and, in its course, somehow also revealed the internal sifting taking place. While emotive arguments about historical woundedness were used liberally to secure property rights, the very argumentation also determined the *proper* subjects of recovery. A new hierarchy of victimhood was disclosed when the irrecoverable subjects were eventually ejected from negotiations with the municipality. In the following pages, I trace these various stages of unbecoming, possibilities of regeneration, and ultimate destruction of the residue.

Widows of Partition

The visitors to the Central Market, a crowded marketplace in the Lajpat Nagar area of south Delhi, often pass by a derelict area—occupied by low mounds of rubble, hawkers selling their wares in the shade of a solitary tree, and laborers taking a break from their work. It is the kind of place that appears as an urban eyesore—an empty spot in an unbecoming state—amid a row of shiny new houses and shops selling coffee and Internet access to youthful customers. The visitors often remark on the vast length of the "empty" space in middle of the city and how its potential is regrettably wasted by the municipality. In a city where real estate is a precious commodity and out of reach for many, a space such as this elicits a mix of envy and disgust. Local residents, however, have a more utilitarian view of the place the neighborhood knows as the "widow colony." The semi-open ground serves alternately as a convenient dumping spot for rubbish, a parking lot for private cars, a storage space for local traders, and even a site for brisk roadside business. This space is also home to many displaced families of the Partition who have lived there for more than six decades.

I became acquainted with this place in 2002 while working on an

ethnographic history of Partition refugees in the resettlement colonies located in south Delhi. The houses in these colonies had long been transformed into four-storey modern constructions, far removed from their original design of one room, a kitchen and open verandah in a small 100 square yard plot allotment. As I wondered aloud during an interview how the colony might have looked at the moment of its inception, my interlocutors immediately suggested that I visit the widow colony that lay a mere few minutes' walk away. It was described to me as the "original" colony from 1947 with houses and layout intact in its pristine form and inhabited still by its primary occupants. Here, I was told, I could encounter the aftermath of Partition more or less in a state of museum-like preservation.

Two characteristics separated this space from other refugee resettlement colonies across the city. First, all its senior residents were widows of Partition violence who had turned to the state for shelter and support. And, second, the colony had, to a large extent, retained its originality, unlike other refugee settlements that had been transformed beyond recognition into shiny blocks of houses since the 1960s. It was a residual space of Partition's violence and displacement in its natural state of decay that could be neither wholly obliterated nor altered: a distorted mirror of historical trauma.

The description of the colony as "original" in a wider context of dramatic urban and social transition is telling. "Original," here, suggests the material remains of the aftermath in a condition of *unchange*—the leftover substance resistant to or unfit for transformation. Its popular depiction in the neighborhood as a "museum" simultaneously isolates the colony and its residues from the ordinary life surrounding it, while marking it as an exceptional space located within another temporality. At first glance, the notion of a museum almost seems apt here, with its allusion to an authentic vision of the past rendered impossible elsewhere in the city. The derelict boundary wall, houses in slight disrepair, and undisturbed vast open grounds reorder time and space to reveal objects and structures that no longer belong to the present. Yet what is on display is not merely unaltered buildings and layouts. The unassimilated human mass of Partition upheaval—of those who failed to become productive citizens—is also disclosed in the process. Within Partition historiography, these surplus bodies encountered in the processes of unbecoming pose an unresolved conceptual challenge, as they defy the usual progression anticipated and hoped for in postconflict situations. The very narrative of displacement is predicated upon the presumption that victims of violence and displacement possess an innate capacity to "overcome" seemingly insur-

mountable adversities. There is little space left, if at all, for the possibilities of human failings, deficiencies, and decay.

In this universe of residue, the marginalized figure of the widow is a particularly complicated one, as it inhabits both the material and the moral domains. The construction of this figure was revealed in the nineteenth-century social reform debates in colonial India around the question of *sati*, or widow burning. The widow in these debates appeared as a discarded subject—of social exclusion, of Hindu tradition, of the sympathy of reformers, and of a maze of colonial legislation. A singular event—the death of one's husband—was potentially powerful enough to displace the woman to social margins. The reformers framed widow burning as one of the "social evils" plaguing Indian society—bringing together the problems of propriety and property simultaneously. While the colonial and native reformers sourced religious-moral arguments from Vedic scriptures to oppose *sati*, they imputed its continued practice to the more material motives of relatives unwilling to bear the expense of maintaining the widow, as well as wanting to ward off her legal rights to property.[2] The orthodox supporters of *sati* argued against its ban not only because it contravened Hindu traditions (derived mainly from scriptures) but because ritualized death on the whole was found to be a better option than the life of a widow. The idealized life of a widow, or ascetic widowhood, was said to be a lifelong labor under austere conditions, whereas *sati*, in comparison, involved only "short-term suffering" that would earn the widow "heavenly blessings."[3] A widow's life, in this worldview, meant a life shorn of all marks of active married life—colorful clothes, jewelry, bodily adornments, and participation in auspicious occasions—in order to guide her away from worldly temptations and toward a virtuous and chaste life. Many nineteenth-century widows in Bengal were known to have committed *sati*—described as "ritual suicide"—decades after their husbands' deaths to escape their economic and social circumstances in what was viewed as the "final and the lowest stage in the life of a woman" (Yang 1989: 26–27). Though the widow was legally entitled to succeed to her husband's estate, her succession was conditional on the chastity and purity in which she held her husband's memory.[4] The right to succession, in fact, seemed less an affirmation of the widow's subjectivity as active agent in her own right than her designation as a guardian of her late husband's legacy, to be passed on to their children. The provision of remarriage was offered as a way out by the reformers, but that also meant ceding any claim to the previous husband's property. The condition of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century widowhood was,

therefore, to a large extent a condition of "social immobility" brought about by decline in social status and a decrease in conspicuous material consumption following a husband's death.[5]

The fact that, in the aftermath of Partition violence, the figure of the widow was placed within the bureaucratic category of "residue" by the Indian state is hardly a coincidence. The English word *residue* began appearing in official documents relating to refugee resettlement in mid-1960s when the government of India began an assessment of the status of Partition refugees. The assessments were recorded in annual reports and compiled as an official narrative in 1965 when the resettlement work was deemed overall to be completed successfully (see Rao 1967). The success of the state's program was predicated on large-scale provision of permanent housing in urban areas, distribution of agricultural land to peasants, professional training schemes, easy availability of business loans, and reservation of jobs, among other interventions. The ideal subject of recovery, in this view, was not dependant on the state for financial support but had shown personal courage and enterprise to earn his living and dignity (Kaur 2009). Barring Bengal, where the flow of migration was far from stabilized, most of India, particularly Punjab and Delhi, was classified as a resounding success on these terms of resettlement. The effective recovery of Punjabi refugees in official accounts was even poetically compared to the rise of the mythical phoenix out of the ashes.[6] This celebratory account was marred only by the fact that some groups could not be "weaned" off the state support despite all efforts (Saxena n.d.). These state-dependent groups—widows, "rescued" women, orphans, and the physically disabled—formed the "residue" of Partition in bureaucratic parlance: in other words, the human remains of mass violence and of well-intended state interventions, whose lives bore little resemblance to the Partition history—a history that is primarily an account of becoming.

The seemingly disparate bureaucratic category of the residue and the figure of the widow are, in fact, bound up in a shared ontology. Residue in the Hindi language translates to at least two overlapping meanings: *joothan*, or what is left over, half eaten, and therefore rendered impure; and *adhura*, or incomplete. The partial sense of being visible in these descriptions of the residue mimics the being of the widow—the leftover of history traced in the leftover of man. It is to this dual sense of impurity and incompleteness that I now turn by exploring everyday life in the widow colony.

Impurity

Not every woman is a Savitri who can bring her dead husband back. I must have committed some "paap" or evil in my last birth; otherwise, why would God punish me like this?

The widow colony is in many ways a remarkable example of the Indian state's attempts to isolate, discriminate by gender, and relocate the human matter displaced during Partition. First, the inhabitants of the widow colony belonged to a broader category called "unattached women"—usually in the reproductive age group—who had been ejected out of the family system in the aftermath of violence. A common feature defining this category was that the women were known to have been sexually active, whether in lawful marriages, unrecognized interreligious marriages, or coercively through rape and abduction. In other words, they had been "attached" to a man either lawfully or unlawfully, and the knowledge of this fact had made them impure and unfit for another man. While the unmarried women among them were encouraged to marry and "settle down," the widows, on the other hand, did not always have this option, especially if they had dependent children along with their inauspicious histories. These young widows were grouped together and placed in the specifically demarcated colony. Second, the architecture of the colony was designed to isolate the women from ordinary social interaction and keep them beyond the public gaze. The colony was marked by high security walls with barbed wire tracing the circumference of the housing complex, while the movement of people and goods through the small entrance was controlled by security guards. This isolation had two intertwined purposes—to keep control over any possibility of undesired sexual activity outside the marital union, which would further defile the dead husband's memory, and to limit the contaminating effect inherent in the misfortune of widowhood. The unpropitious condition of widowhood is often seen as an outcome of one's own bad karma, or fateful actions, and therefore the accruing misfortune is the responsibility of the widow herself. In short, the widow colony was the end point for gendered deposits of leftover human matter that could no longer be utilized within the social order. The following is a strand of the life story of Rajrani—one of the first inhabitants of the colony—where she recounts the process of ejection from her joint family and then the life of isolation in the widow colony. Her narrative is also a narrative of how residues as impurities are produced and negotiated in everyday life.

Rajrani had been displaced from Lahore, where she lived with her husband

and two young daughters, after the mass violence began in May 1947. Her husband had died that summer due to causes unrelated to Partition violence. However, the ongoing violence meant she had to leave together with her children and extended family, as their lives in the city became increasingly threatened. They arrived in Delhi via Amritsar in the care of her *mama*, her mother's brother, as her husband's family had distanced itself from her. They soon took refuge in a government-allocated evacuee property in Delhi city, where Rajrani found space in the extended family setup. She was grateful to have shelter and the support her *mama*'s family provided and spent her days trying to be as helpful in household chores as possible. She barely had any financial resources of her own, and the only way to be valuable to her benefactors was by doing physical labor. She described her life as one of willfully chosen invisibility: "sir sut ke," or to lower one's head and work quietly. Yet that invisible life was not enough to secure her from barbed comments from her *mama*'s wife and other family members—about there being too many mouths to feed, conflicts over sharing household chores, and the burden placed on her *mama* to protect the honor of young women in his care. The fact that her uncle had daughters of marriageable age only added to the tension, as Rajrani increasingly felt isolated from the ongoing marriage negotiations for her nieces. Her status as a recent widow meant that her participation in auspicious events was not always invited, lest she cast the dark shadow of her misfortune on the happy moment.

After a few months, the situation had become unbearable, as the wife of her *mama* beseeched him constantly to do something about Rajrani and her daughters. This often meant suggesting that he arrange a second marriage and thereby a respectful departure for Rajrani, a prospect she knew was not viable as that would mean leaving her daughters behind. She understood well enough that a widow seeking remarriage was already a bad proposition, and a widow with two daughters was an even greater liability. Her prospects were, therefore, minimal. Rajrani remembered her state in her *mama*'s home as that of *lachari*, or helplessness, where she had neither voice nor autonomy over her life any more. Her husband's sudden death, together with Partition violence and displacement, had created a double tragedy for her. Not only had she become a widow but the traditional structures of family support had been uprooted and weakened, too. She sympathized, she said, with the extraordinary situation that her *mama* was in at that time—with little financial or practical support in a new place. In such circumstances, the space offered by the widow colony seemed like the only viable solution to her. She vividly remembered the original design of the colony:

> It was like an ashram with a main building that had a common kitchen, school for children, workshop, and the office. The houses you see today were built around it. Widows with fewer than five children got one room accommodation, while those with more than five got two rooms. We were not allowed to cook separately—three times a day, a bell would ring to announce meals and we would all run and queue up in the kitchen. We took turns in cooking and serving on a weekly basis. In the morning, children were sent to school while the mothers would go to the workshop to learn knitting, stitching, and other handicrafts.

Rajrani's choice of words to describe the camp as "ashram" is quite remarkable, as refugee settlements were rarely described as such during my conversations in other settlements. They were more likely to be remembered as chaotic places where life had turned into a long unsettling pause. *Ashram* literally means a home where one may seek refuge from *maya* or material desires, a place sought by ascetics seeking an austere life, denying themselves material comforts and desires in search of ultimate transcendence—and limiting consumption to what is barely necessary to keep the body alive. An ashram, thus, is a tranquil oasis where one may resign from the seductions and passions that make up everyday life. While a life of austerity and self-denial is usually a voluntarily chosen practice, in this case, the state had decided on behalf of its subjects the ways in which they should lead their lives. The invocation by Rajrani of "ashram" as a natural description of the place suggests the disciplines—social, moral, and corporeal—that framed the residents' lives in the colony. The prescription of frugality and abstinence for the widows seemed like a natural state that had remained largely uncontested.

In this setting, the denial of individual cooking facilities to the residents is critical to the ways in which agency and gendered subjectivity were produced in the colony. Within Indian joint families, the right to a separate kitchen, or *rasoi*, is often seen as a step toward autonomy and control over one's economic and social being. The fragmentation of the joint family is marked in the emergence of separate kitchens, even within the same premises, that ultimately pave the way for independent family units. The act of creating one's own kitchen and organizing one's nuclear family around it is, thus, an act of separation from the family patriarch—an essential severing that needs to be experienced to become a sovereign being. Though widely practiced by most refugee families, this option was denied to widows, as they were not

recognized as "household heads" by the state. The families in ordinary refugee camps were given weekly rations of lentils, rice, flour, oil, and milk for children that could be cooked in the camp homes—widows, however, were offered cooked and ready food. The practice of lining up three times a day to receive food was hardly seen as an exceptional act for adult women to perform.

The protocols of abstinence and denial framed not only the resident's movements inside the colony but also their interactions with the outside world.

> We could not go out of the colony without permission of the *Behenjis* (female social workers). The whole compound was barricaded with high walls and barbed wires for the protection of women. No men were allowed in. The male visitors could only be received in the visiting room at the entrance where a guard and *Behenji* would watch over. A food and cloth ration shop was established within the colony so that we didn't have to go out.

For Rajrani, the high walls and barbed wires appear as a much-needed protective measure that the state was helpfully providing. It was not particularly interpreted as a restrictive condition confining the widows' mobility and their opportunities of gaining education and employment outside the colony. The world outside was only experienced through the filters of a state apparatus—the social workers, the guards, and a regulated regime that constituted such interaction. The restrained conditions under which they could meet visitors were another measure of control over female sexuality and any reproductive activity. A large number of the residents were young women of child-bearing age and therefore represented a danger to a social order predicated on widow celibacy. Female desires were to be fulfilled within marital limits alone, and marital lapse through death or separation foreclosed any other possibilities. The meetings were, therefore, supervised clearly to discourage expressions of intimacy or any other bonds that might develop with the opposite sex. The young widows under the wardenship of the state were probably even more secluded than what was possible within a joint family system—the state as patriarch had constructed not only physical barriers, such as walls and barbed wire, but also surveillance mechanisms that kept their interaction with the outside world to the minimum. The isolation was effected by bringing the outside—for example, shops selling everyday necessities—to the inside for

the "convenience" of the residents so that they did not have to leave the boundaries for anything.

Rajrani narrated these protocols of abstinence as simple "facts" that governed the lives of those within the compound for several decades following Partition. She was not particularly bitter or angry at the way her life had unfolded. The fault lay with her, as she often noted in our conversations, as she was not *bhagyavan*, or the fortunate one. She had been unable to keep her husband from the hands of death, unlike Savitri, a central character from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, who had taken up a successful struggle with Yama, the god of death, to save her husband's life. "Every woman is not a Savitri," she would sometimes remark to contrast her own fate.

The story of Savitri is well known and serves as an ideal for Hindu women to emulate. Savitri, a young woman about to marry Satyavan, is told by the gods that he is fated to die within a year of their marriage. This prediction does not deter her from marrying him and only strengthens her devotion and obedience toward her husband and her resolve to keep him alive. When the predicted day of his death arrives, she accompanies her husband to the forest and keeps watch over him. Unaware of the unfolding circumstances, Satyavan begins chopping wood and while doing so becomes unconscious. Savitri realizes that the moment of confrontation has arrived when the sound of chopping wood dies away. She rushes to her husband and places his head in her lap while praying to Lord Yama. He arrives as destiny had planned to take Satyavan away to the netherworld, but Savitri persuades him to listen to her prayers. Impressed by her devotion, a reluctant Yama grants Savitri a boon that could be anything but the life of her husband. Savitri displays not only deep devotion but also the quick presence of mind to ask for Yama's blessing so that she can become the mother of a hundred sons. Yama grants this wish. Its only when Savitri thanks him and then asks him to revive her dying husband's body that he realizes the web of words in which he has been trapped. Savitri explains the paradox—how could she even dream of begetting a hundred sons in the absence of her husband? Yama is bound by his own words and is thus compelled to infuse life back into Satyavan's lifeless body. Through devotion and purity, Savitri thus brings her husband back from the mouth of death.

In this story, the life of a man is connected to the devotion, purity, and chastity of his wife. The moral prowess to infuse life into a dead man is invested in the wife's virtuous conduct. Conversely, this means that the fate of a widow is her own doing—something she could have averted had she been

more vigilant. In the very power invested in the woman lies her powerlessness: her misfortune and stigma as a widow become matters of her own choosing. Moreover, Savitri's framing of her wish as a desire to have children makes her husband's life an essential precondition to having her worldly desires fulfilled. The death of her husband also becomes a foreclosure, then, of all the worldly pleasures one gains from family and children. In other words, the widow is an embodiment of impurity—signifying the *lack* of devotion, character, and will—that bears neither functional nor symbolic value to society anymore. This impure matter is best amputated from the society and kept in isolation as far as possible so as not to cast its ill-fated shadow on others. The widow colony thus appears as a space where the unwanted human matter of Partition was lodged and, for a long while, forgotten—until it began resurfacing in a local conflict over the contested ownership of widow homes, fragmenting victimhood yet again.

Fragment

A consistent feature of Rajrani's narrative was a matter-of-fact acquiescence to what she alternately called her *kismet*, her fate, and her *phoote karam*, or actions destined to fail. It was never laden with bitterness or regret that her life had largely been shaped through social norms and state interventions. Yet this seamless narrative was disrupted once she began speaking about the children of the widows who had grown up in the colony:

> When the children had grown up and boys had become men, the rules in the colony for male visitors had to be changed. We could not have thrown out our grown-up sons. And if they could live here, then how could they stop our male relatives from visiting? The rules had to be changed. Now we were allowed to cook and go out on our own.

As the children began attaining adulthood, the established order and protocols governing the everyday life of the colony were slowly breached. The becoming of boys into men is an important milestone for Rajrani in the history of the camp—the young men assumed the role of mediators between the two worlds on either side of the boundary wall. Their very being and presence were read as signs of normality in this exceptional place, on the one hand, but, on the other, as a signifier of disruption to what had always been deemed

normal in the camp. The guards and the social workers could no longer control these transgressions from within and, in due time, stopped enforcing the rules altogether. For Rajrani, this is not a moment of triumph to be relished after a long struggle, but an expected reassertion of a kind of natural order after a long pause. The male bodies are seen as bearers of sovereignty and authority—an attribute that had been lacking within the colony—and their presence had somehow broken the exceptionality of the colony. In the official scheme of things, male bodies figured the contours of a family encompassing women and children within. The widows had never been deemed heads of households and, therefore, could not bring up their families in "normal" refugee settlements. Once their young sons attained adulthood, the headship of the family passed directly to them, bypassing the mothers. The families headed by young sons, it seemed, were ready to settle down in the ordinary world. At this moment, we witness two simultaneous processes inherent in the production of residue that become visible in this generational shift. First, there is the process of regeneration, where residue feeds into the production of valuable matter, in this case, the young men who now appear ready to break the exceptionality of the widow colony. And, second, in this process of fragmentation, grown-up sons bypass their widowed mothers to assume leadership of the family, thereby leaving their mothers precisely in a state of stagnation as before. The regenerative value of residue is once again extracted from it, leaving the unusable waste behind.

Though the appearance of young men in the colony was seen as a sign of normality, it revealed other problems connected with the exceptional character of the widow colony. The "curse" of widowhood, as the condition of being without a husband was sometimes ruefully described, reappeared when Yashwanti, a neighbor of Rajrani, tried to arrange a marriage for her twenty-five-year-old son Sunil. Her efforts were met with an unexpected difficulty. There were hardly any families that were ready to send their daughters to live in a place known as a widow colony. Yashwanti understood their dilemma well: "How could the parents willingly send their daughters to live in the shadow of widows?"

Here, the condition of widowhood was not only that of social disgrace but also fears of facing a similar fate. Newlywed Punjabi brides are often kept away from the *parcchanwa* of widows—literally, their shadow or effects—to avoid the same misfortune the widows embody. At marriage ceremonies, widowed relatives are tactfully made to keep their distance from the bride when she is being blessed and felicitated. Sometimes, widowed mothers even

step back from their daughters and daughters-in-law so as not to curse them with their shadow or touch at auspicious moments. Invisible boundaries maintain the isolation of widows from all that embodies worldly pleasures and comforts. Yashwanti understood these worries and, therefore, did not contest them. Sunil was eventually engaged to a girl from a similar refugee family but on condition that they would move out before the wedding took place. In 1967, the newly built two-room apartments for refugees were still available for allotment in a limited scheme offered by the state to those with grown-up sons. Sunil's mother readily accepted a small apartment in lieu of their accommodation in the widow colony—and paved the way for her son's marriage. A number of families whose paperwork was in order moved out of the colony around this time to escape associations with widowhood. The ones left behind were mostly the less resourceful, who now had to seek alternate ways out of the colony's exceptionality; they constituted the waste where no recovery was possible.

Waste

In the 1970s, the city of Delhi was witnessing massive construction activity, with the urban limits expanding far beyond their pre-Partition contours. This was also the time when the temporary resettlement colonies housing Partition refugees were being reconstructed en masse. Temporary structures such as military barracks or hurriedly assembled shelters were being demolished to make way for modern concrete houses. In many cases, the concrete flats and one-room houses built immediately after Partition were being redesigned to provide individual bathrooms and flush toilets, instead of the communal facilities. The single-story structures were being expanded vertically to create smart three-story townhouses. The entire city, it seemed, was undergoing a facelift.

To the residents of the widow colony, this seemed an apt moment to rebuild their own dilapidated one-room homes. The residents formed a committee and filed a collective petition to the municipal corporation for permission to rebuild. The petition was refused as the "widow colony" was deemed an exceptional case—the residents did not have any claim to ownership of their homes as in other refugee resettlement colonies. The widows had never been given any rights to ownership as the male refugees had been but had merely been allowed to inhabit the colony on a temporary basis. The

municipality, therefore, could not allow the occupants to make any changes to the state-owned houses. This refusal became the beginning of a long conflict between the descendants of Partition widows and the municipal corporation. While the residents emotively invoked their history of loss, and the wound of Partition and then discrimination at the hands of the state in relation to other refugees, the municipality remained firm on the decisions made decades ago.

The conflict continued for many years without success, until the mid-2000s when the municipality suddenly seemed keen on a resolution. The reasons, as it turned out, had less to do with newfound empathy than with a realization that "the large ground occupied by the widow colony was far too valuable to be kept *khali*, or empty," as one resident reported. The description of the colony as *khali* is instructive, as it suggests both physical emptiness and lack of any value: a wasteland. The fact that many families inhabited the place and lived their everyday lives in it counted for little in this view. Several residents were of the opinion that the influential builder lobby in the city was eyeing the colony to build private luxury apartments and shopping malls. Otherwise, it was widely speculated, it was hard to explain why the municipality had become more responsive to the residents' wishes to rebuild their homes after all these years. Significantly, the municipality's proposal was not to allow reconstruction of the existing free-standing houses with open spaces, but instead to allot plots measuring forty square yards, 60 percent less than what the residents currently possessed. Moreover, the cost of reconstruction had to be borne by the residents themselves through loans offered by the municipality or banks. The residents' committee, led mainly by male members—sons of widows and now parents of grown children themselves—accepted this offer, as this represented a real chance to own property, even if a smaller piece of land than what they had. The municipality asked the committee to reidentify and help draw up a list of original claimants who would be offered new accommodations. In this process of identification—of verifying original claims of victimhood—we witness the process of filtering where regenerative waste is systematically separated from unproductive residue.

I met Shashi, a woman in her early forties, in unusual circumstances in late 2010. She was standing outside the remains of what used to be a home for a large joint family. The boundary separating it from the neighbors' home had been bulldozed and the outer walls had been razed, exposing the kitchen and the eating area to the passersby. The bedroom that used to open onto the dirt-layered courtyard now opened directly onto the street. But then, privacy was

probably not the most important consideration for Shashi at this point. Her house stood alone amid dozens of broken houses—there were no peering neighbors, and not many passed by the street anymore. The entire area of what used to be the widow colony was dotted with partially destroyed homes like Shashi's within a vast expanse of bulldozed and empty houses. The light bulbs twinkling in a stretch of rubble and overgrown bushes indicated those families that had been left behind. Many residents of the colony had moved to the smaller homes that the municipality had offered three years before. The new smartly constructed homes were gathered in one corner of the widow colony, and a boundary wall signified the truncation of whatever connection there was between the old and new areas. From the vantage point of the new colony, the old area looked precisely as it had been described by the municipality—*khali*, an empty wasteland that had been piled with rubble and all kind of refuse.

I asked Shashi why she had not chosen to move to the new colony. It was not a matter of choice for her, she said. The choice had been made for her through the long bureaucratic process of verifying the true inheritance of victimhood. The original claimant to this home had been her husband's widowed grandmother, Kartar Kaur, who had moved to the colony in 1947 with a young daughter. The daughter grew up to marry a young man who was of a similar refugee background. They began their life moving from place to place, wherever the man could find work as a manual farm laborer. Their children often lived with their maternal grandmother in the widow colony while the parents were on the move. In the 2000s the family returned to live permanently with the grandmother, as she could no longer look after herself. Around this time, the residents' plea had begun gathering momentum. The family became hopeful that they too would have an inherited home in their advancing age. What they did not know was that their right to inheritance had been taken away in their absence during the verification drives initiated by the municipal officials, aided by resident committee representatives.

Influential committee members had informed the municipality that Kartar Kaur was *lawaris*. The expression *lawaris* describes objects and people who are without an identifiable owner or guardian to protect them. This expression is usually reserved for children who have been orphaned or sometimes even for vagrants who have nowhere to go. However, in this case, the word was used to describe an adult woman who lived independently in her own home and was not only a mother but also a grandmother of several children. How could she be termed *lawaris*? And to what purpose? The bureaucratic implication of this usage was that Kartar Kaur was registered as

someone who not only lacked a guardian, but also had no successors. *Lawaris*, here, denoted both an empty past and an empty future—her person had been bureaucratically amputated from her children and grandchildren and whatever regenerative possibilities she might have signified. As it turned out, her fate had been no different from that of many other widows who had only produced daughters. The ones seen as true inheritors of their parent's legacy were the sons and the grandsons. The human leftover in the rubble of the old colony, then, was a curious mix of "unfit" subjects of recovery who had failed to show their value in one way or another. They were either the female successors of widows or the very old or frail who could not undertake the burden of reconstruction and move into a new home. In some cases, the occupants were physically handicapped and could not possibly move their wheelchairs in the space provided in the new accommodations designed as matchbox duplex houses. In short, able male bodies and other matter of value had moved to the new colony, leaving the waste behind.

Conclusion

In this chapter, life stories emanating from the widow colony narrate the journey of the residue manufactured by the Indian state—from impurity, to fragment, and, finally, to waste. These personal histories are of a kind that activists and social scientists looking for signs of recovery find difficult to resolve. Individually and collectively, the various voices represent loss and failure at several levels without much redemption to counterbalance the hopelessness. And the narrative we hear is that of an *unbecoming* where the condition of temporariness is never really overcome—the refugees do not become valuable, self-reliant citizens, as expected by the Indian state. What we are confronted with, in fact, is the historical "other" of value—waste—that surfaces as the organic form of collateral damage in the histories of violent rupture in societies. This is an aspect of the afterlife of victims and victimhood that is yet to be explored fully. The account of the everyday life of the irrecoverable in the widow colony shows the ways in which historical waste is produced and regenerated, its value extracted and then discarded once again.

What function does this *wasteland of unbecoming* perform in the history of violence and victimhood? Or, put differently, how do societies deal with excess, superfluity, and stubborn remnants that refuse or are refused a way to transform into extractable value even after repeated interventions? In this

study, widows emerge as organic waste with a specific function—their bodies and biographies serve as living reminders of the extent of loss and destruction the violent upheaval of Partition effected. This corporeal manifestation of collective loss is at once sacred to the narrative of the nation's origins and thus cannot be fully violated or destroyed, while at the same time it is not deemed to be central to the functioning of the society. Shades of Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* here: the one who is removed from the continuum of social life but cannot be killed. The victims, thus, are often dismissed or even despised for failing to recover from their woundedness, and precisely this destructive quality is what makes them valuable as symbols of the collective loss experienced by the society.

This exceptional state of the victims of momentous historical events also asks us to rethink the relationship between publicity and recovery. In this case, it is clear that the plight of the victims has been a matter of much publicity through the decades, yet their lives have failed to trace the expected path of becoming. The wound of Partition, which is central to the making of modern India and its imaginary, is widely recognized even as that recognition has not always translated into recovery for the victims. These histories of irrecoverability amid the glare of publicity need to be confronted.

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Notes

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1. The word "residue" had begun appearing within the official documents in mid-1960s when the rehabilitation work was deemed to have been largely fulfilled. The bureaucratic category of residue was used to classify all that could not be successfully rehabilitated by the state.

2. The ambivalence of the colonial discourse on *sati* is well described in Mani 1987.

3. "The Petition of the Orthodox Community Against the Suttee Regulation," January 14, 1830, quoted in Mani 1987: 142.

4. For detailed discussion on various legislations, deliberations, and conflicts around the rights of Hindu widows, see Caroll 1983. The conflict at the heart of colonial lawmaking was the acceptance of what was taken as "Hindu Law" where the Hindu wife was seen as the "half of body" (the other half being the husband). While the trope of half body was interpreted as reason for granting succession rights of husband's property to his widow, it also posed a problem as that right could only be enjoyed on the condition that the widow (the living half) remain faithful to her husband's memory. Any remarriage would make the woman half of another man, and thereby she would forfeit any rights to property of her previous husband.

5. Shades of Gayatri Spivak's aptly described condition of subalternity here: "where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of recognizable basis of action." See Spivak 2005: 476

6. For example, see Randhawa 1954.