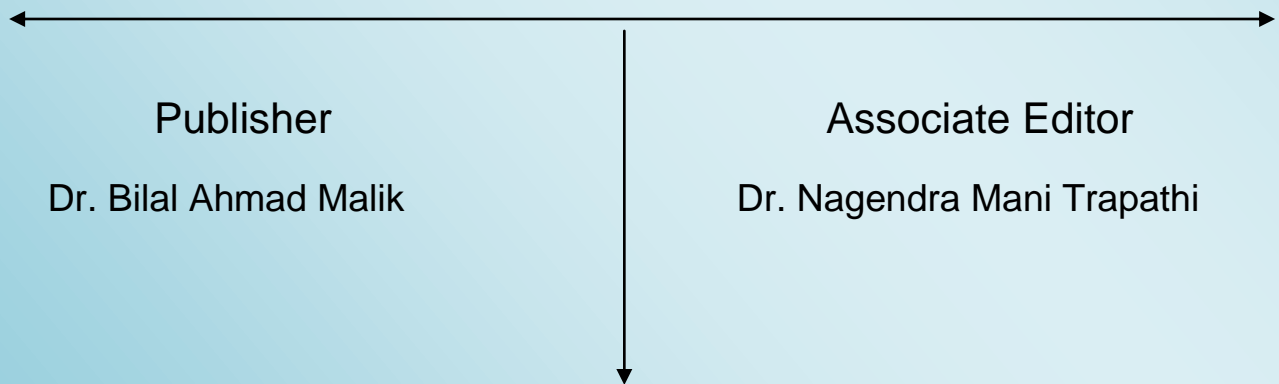


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THE POST PARTITION REFUGEE WOMEN OF BENGAL AND THEIR JOURNEY FROM DARK TO LIGHT

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ABSTRACT:

“The Partition of India in 1947 caused one of the great human convulsions of history”. Between the months from August and December 1947, millions of people shifted from India to Pakistan and simultaneously from Pakistan to India crossing both the western and eastern borders of India. The impact of this migration of a large number of people on the two countries and the refugee problem coming out of it has become an important area of study. Among the refugee population the women were the worse sufferers. Many of them were molested, raped, abducted, kidnapped, forcefully converted and killed. The post partition migration resulted in the end of andarmahal, the segregation of women from the outside world. This paper will focus on the diaspora women’s emergence in the public sphere, their urge for education, their search for jobs and their active participation in the activities of colony life which changed the social fabric of West Bengal.

Key words: partition, women, Bengal, refugee, struggle.

INTRODUCTION:

“The Partition of India in 1947 caused one of the great human convulsions of history” (Butalia, 2000). Between the months from August and December 1947, millions of people shifted from India to Pakistan and simultaneously from Pakistan to India crossing both the western and eastern borders of India. The impact of this migration of a large number of people on the two countries and the refugee problem coming out of it has become an important area of study. At present partition studies have shifted their focus to the consequences rather than the causes. The experiences of the people, the changing physical space of the migrants, their transformed family structures and most importantly the changing role and position of the women and their exposure to the outer world have gained interests among the historians.

OBJECTIVE:

Among the refugee population the women were the worse sufferers. (Guha, 2007). Many of them were molested, raped, abducted, kidnapped, forcefully converted and killed. The post partition migration resulted in the end of andarmahal, the segregation of women from the outside world. This paper will focus on the diaspora women's emergence in the public sphere, their urge for education, their search for jobs and their active participation in the activities of colony life which changed the social fabric of West Bengal. The paper will reflect on the changing refugee women in Bengal only and their society because much has been written about the refugee women of the Punjab.

COMING OF THE REFUGEES IN WEST BENGAL

During the pre- partition period the Hindus of affluent families of East Bengal left their ancestral homelands and took shelters in West Bengal. After partition the people who migrated to West Bengal mainly belonged to the farmers and artisans. At the end of February, 1950 the influx of refugees from East Bengal to West Bengal had taken the form of flood. (Bandyopadhyay, 1970) In 1950 more than 1.7 million people left East Bengal and marched towards West Bengal to search for a new life there. (Guha, 2007). The oppression towards the Hindus like murder, the looting of their assets and the repression and molestation of the Hindu women in East Bengal was a major cause for the long-term migration of refugees to India. (Roy, 2012) A significant feature of the migration of those people was the continuous attack on emigrant passengers on steamers, buses or trains. The people who could reach Calcutta or surrounding areas initially took shelters in station platforms, empty houses or in the houses of their relatives. Afterwards they were shifted to camps and later on colonies set up by the Government. (Chakraborty, 2013)

Life in East Pakistan:

The creation of refugee colonies led to the transition from the large space to a limited and confined areas. (Pakrashi, 1971) In East Pakistan the houses were set up in rural areas and in those houses joint families used to stay together. Most of the houses had andarmahal or separate quarters for women themselves. The andarmahal in several cases had separate kitchens for vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. There were also private ponds for bathing and washing kitchen utensils and clothes of women. Thus the andarmahal or the women's world was completely separate from the outside or men's world.

Life in Calcutta:

But when they shifted to Calcutta after partition, the refugees explored a completely new atmosphere there. They had limited space for themselves. Due to the scarcity of money and property they were not able to construct a separate andarmahal for the women. Most of them had not even the capacity to construct more than one room. As a result one of the physical barriers between public and private vanished totally. Women had to share their space with men. The shortage of space in the new atmosphere did change also the family structure of the migrant people. In their ancestral homeland they used to stay together with their extended family members. But after their arrival to India as a result of the problem of space the joint families started to break and nuclear families grew up.

LACK OF SPACE AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN:

As a result of lack of space some traditional rituals became obsolete. The rituals relating to purity and cleanliness, divisions in the kitchen among vegetarian and non-vegetarian food and restrictions imposed on the widows started to vanish. It was hardly possible to arrange separate kitchens for preparing vegetarian food for the widows. Thus the widows had no other alternative but to cook both the vegetarian and non-vegetarian food on the same earthen stove. It was a sharp departure from the orthodox traditional custom. Ultimately it widened the mindset and social attitudes of the widows. (Chakravartty, 2005) The breaking of the traditional social customs also made the caste system flexible to some extent. Consequently even the Brahmins and the purohitas started to take food cooked by non-Brahmins. Moreover inter - caste marriages were also got acceptance in the society.

Changed Food and Sleeping Habits:

The food habits of the migrant men and women also changed a lot. They generally used to eat rice three times in a day in their ancestral houses. But after coming to West Bengal they could not get sufficient rice. The quality of rice here was also much inferior to their original homeland. They also felt the paucity of adequate milk and fish. Thus they were forced to change their food habits. They began to take luchi (flour bread) or roti side by side with rice. (Chakravartty, 2005) Initially the middle class migrants experienced starvation also. Food crisis became a serious problem of Bengal. The prices of various food items were increased.

The migrant people came to India almost empty handed even without a bed. They had only madur (bamboo mat) and toshak (light mattress). They had to sleep on those in the mud floor. At night the bamboo mats and the light

mattresses were made dampen from the moisture of the mud floor. As a result many people especially the women died of fever in the initial years of their shifting to India.

Establishment of Schools:

With the establishment of the colonies there was also the urgent need of establishing schools for the migrants. It is worth noting in this context that female education was paid heed to in East Bengal. There in thirties or forties in remote village the girl student used to study at home due to dearth of girl schools there. As a matter of fact the migrant girls after coming to West Bengal could not continue study and they had to remain at home for long period. During that period under the able initiative of some enthusiastic persons some schools for young girls were set up with a view in mind to make their daughters self-reliant to face the hard reality. Colony schools were set up in mud houses with thatched roofs.

By 1951 almost half the refugee population was literate. This was two times higher than the literacy rate of the host population of West Bengal. By 1956 the proportion of literates both among the refugee men and women had risen by more than 25 percent. The following table shows the literacy rate both among the male and female members of the host population and the migrant people.

Table 1. Literacy among refugees and the host population in West Bengal, 1950-1955 (percentages)

	Migrants only (1950 survey)	Persons excluding migrants (1951 census)	Members of migrant families (1955 survey)
Male	68.6	36.3	78.3
Female	17.9	7.9	29.2
Total	41.8	22.7	52.9

Source: Rehabilitation of refugees. A statistical survey (1955), State Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal, Alipore, 1956, p. 3. (Chatterjee, 2007)

The enthusiastic and active women constructed girls' schools also. Priyabala Dutta took the total responsibility of establishing the Adarsha Balika Sikshyatan.(Chakravartty,2005)

It is interesting to observe the speedy growth of literacy amid the migrant women. By 1950 more than fifty percent refugee women became literate than the host women population of Bengal. Thus the brutal condition and worse situation inspired the migrant women to go forward towards education. Moreover due to the economic crisis in their families the migrants were enthusiastic for the education of the women members of their families. Because by educating themselves the women could get respectable jobs and could hold the responsibility of their families.

WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT:

The economic crisis was one of the important factors which prompted the refugee women to search for jobs and build their careers. The women started to share the burdens of the families with the male members. It was no doubt a significant phase in the arena of women's quest for identity in Bengal. At the beginning the women took the profession of teaching. But gradually they began to serve as clerks, typists, stenographers, sales girls etc. Middle class refugee girls joined in offices, telephone exchanges, administration, banks, insurance offices, food departments and in the police department. The uneducated women of the refugee families were also engaged as domestic helpers, cooks, office tiffin suppliers, flower, fruit and vegetable suppliers as well.

A number of refugee women remained unmarried as they were compelled to bear the family burden. So the number of unmarried women increased to a considerable level. The woman who was willing to marry had to wait for a long period until the family became economically self-sufficient.

Cultural Lives of the Women in Colonies:

In every refugee colony the clubs were set up for the amusement of the young boys. A large number of clubs had separate wings for women also. The women used to participate in the cultural programmes conducted by the clubs. Theatres were performed to refresh the minds of the refugee people. As there was dearth of fund the clubs could not collect female artists for the theatres from outside the colonies. Thus they prepared the girls of the colonies to act along with the men in their plays. In Chittaranjan Colony the first enactment of Digin Bandopadhyaya's Taranga was done. (De, 1999) The play was directed by Amitabh Ghosh. Large number of women came out of their houses to see the theatre. A good number of refugee women actively participated in the Group Theatre Movement firstly for developing their cultural talents and secondly for serving the economic needs of the families.

Thus the refugee women came out of their houses and joined theatres, clubs, jattras and cinemas. One among those refugee women, Sabitri Chattopadhyay, who used to struggle in the initial years, became the famous actress of the cinema world of Bengal later on. Another woman, Bina Dasgupta helped her family by joining jattras and operas. Jayashri Mukhopadhyay also took the profession of acting in jattras to save her family from financial distress. Though economic crisis was there in the refugee colonies, scarcity of accommodation, food and dress was also there, but education, music, poetry and the creative aspects of life encouraged the migrant women to march towards enlightenment.

Within the colonies various committees were created for the supervision of different kinds of activities like sanitation, water supply, drainage, construction of roads, educational institutions, medical units, markets and for sports and cultural activities also. For those activities funds were created and the different units were supervised by the residents of the colonies. The inmates including the women collected money from passersby and passengers in buses and trains from Gariahat, Esplanade, Dalhousie and other important roads of the city of Calcutta. (Dasgupta, 2009)

Women in Movement:

Numerous women committees (Mahila Samities) began to grow in the colonies. Supported by (Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti) MARS the women inmates of the colonies used to assimilate in one place and walked to rallies on issues like the Eviction Bill, the regularization of colonies, and the demand for food, education and employment. The women committees worked for the amelioration of the refugee women. The girls' wing of the All India Students' Federation, the Chhatri Sangha, started to work in refugee camps at Sealdah and many other areas. They distributed food like khichuri to the refugee women. But they faced difficulties to deal with the abducted women. The women organizations gave memorandum to the Prime Minister to consider the issue of those abducted refugee women. Consequently some homes or refuges like Nani Seva Sangha, Udai Villa Women's Cooperative Industrial Home, Ananda Ashram, All Bengal Women's Union etc were established for those women. (Chakravarty, 2005) The enthusiastic women participants in the refugee movement became successful to reduce some rigidities present in the minds of patriarchal men.

CONCLUSION:

Thus the social and cultural transformation after the partition transformed the image of a Bengali woman. The change marked the coming out of a new woman who had become self-confident, independent and had acquired

the courage to confront and defy the patriarchy. By dint of hard work and enterprise, the self-settled refugee women of West Bengal were able rapidly and successfully to reconstruct their lives in their new homeland. In the period after partition little by little the daughters were considered as sons. That was a new social aspect and was totally different from the age old thinking of the people.

But on the other side of the coin many refugee people both men and women had to spend difficult lives. Staying together in congested houses or in rural slums, the migrants from East Bengal had the same language, culture and religion like the host population. In spite of that they were not assimilated or rehabilitated in West Bengal completely and for years after years they remained on the margins of the society. So like Pratap's mother in Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Purba Paschim*, many refugee men and women could not accept the truth of their misfortune followed by partition. Many people wanted to go back to their ancestral homeland for the last time. Because their 'basa' in Kolkata could never become their 'bari'.

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