ISSN 2581-9917

IMPACT OF PARTITION AND DISPLACEMENT ON REFUGE WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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The Indian subcontinent was witness to the largest mass migration on account of the partition of the country in 1947. For the leaders of the Muslim League, the creation of Pakistan was a long held dream come true while for the leaders of the Indian National Congress it was a heavy price paid for the independence from colonial rule (exceptions to such feelings, notwithstanding in both parties). In the main, however, both parties were convinced that partition was the final solution to all the evils of communitarian strife in the country and that once it was done through all problems would be resolved magically. This was a naïve thought, partition itself brought many problems, too much to handle for the nascent nation states, and then there was the spectre of partition as well as the reality of the 'long partition' which continues to haunt to this day the entire subcontinent.

This paper does not address the question of why the country was partitioned. Rather the attempt here is to look at the question of the impact of partition on the most vulnerable population: women and children. There has been a growing research on the theme of experiences of women and children in situations of such mass conflict. The works of Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin were pioneering efforts in bringing to light the violence women faced and thereafter how they emerged out of it. Likewise, a more recent phase in the historiography of women in partition studies also focussed on the image of the woman who survived it all and was not just a victim. The works of Gargi Chakravartty, Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, Anjali Bharadwaj Datta, Uditi Sen among others bring to light this aspect.[1] The focus on children's experiences has been very few due to lack of adequate sources.[2] This article looks attempts to bring to light the impact of such migration on women and children with focus on the partition in the East— the Bengal side of story. Using archival records as well as oral testimonies and evidences from literary works, the idea is to show the varied experiences of women and children during this episode of unprecedented violence and mass displacement from home.

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The Violence

Undoubtedly, the violence experienced on account of the partition of the country was unparalleled in its nature: it was not just 'us' against 'them' or one community against the other rather as pointed out by Urvashi Butalia, it was a violence observed in the family as well in the name of protecting the honour of the 'family, community, and nation.'[3] The violence was also not just 'real' and 'direct' but also subtle and discreet especially in Bengal where the calming presence of Gandhi had successfully prevented the bloodshed witnessed in Punjab. Such violence often was also 'routine' or 'everyday' and hence often ignored by the powers that be but difficult to ignore for the victims of the same.[4] Then there was the other form of 'bureaucratic violence' in the zealous guarding of the borders through the regulation of mandatory identity cards: permits, passports, and migration certificates for movement across the once united country.[5]

Women were the worst victims of these multiple of forms of violence. They were victims at the hands of the 'other' as sexual violence against women was most rampant in such times of conflict and used as a means to question the masculinity of the community in their inability to defend their women. But women were also 'martyred' (i.e. killed or compelled to take their own lives by their own fathers, brothers and other males of the family) under this much skewed notion of defending the honour of the 'family, community, and nation'. The state committed its own violence against women through an Act which seemed was introduced to protect them but ground work shows that it did more harm than benefit to these women.[6] The Act was the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act, 1949 which continued till 1954, and through this Act all women (and male children upto 16 years of age) who were abducted by the other community or forcibly converted were to be searched, recovered and restored back to the original community through the efforts of the State. Further, all the inter-communal/faith marriages/unions post 1st March 1947 too were declared null and void and all such women were to be 'recovered' and 'restored' back to the home of their original community to which they belonged. This was actually dual displacement for the women. Notions of purity and impurity were deeply ingrained in the psyche of the Hindu/Sikh household. A women touched by the Muslim would never be accepted wholeheartedly by these families was a fear these recovered women often had, and if with child born out of such a union (as the act continued till 1954) then it would be even more difficult to get back to family, definitely the child would not be taken in. Thus, such violence spelt doom for the women and the children. In such situations, women refused to be recovered and this too brought further wrath from the families. Citing an example from Anis Kidwai's experiences of working with these women:

Muslims seethed at these refusals, young men flushing at this ignominious disgrace of their community's honour. Fathers would rant, 'Shame on such daughters! This is why a father prays so hard for a son. At least a son will be a support to his father in his lifetime, and after his father's death, guard the family honour!' As for the sons, the one sentiment that moved them was a desire for revenge and anger at their sisters. How could the immoral wantons want to live with those who had murdered their relatives![7]

For children again a myriad of experience can be observed. There were the children born to such recovered women and then there were children who were part of the refuge families, who had seen death and murder, loot and arson, and who too had to leave their homes behind and migrate to a different land with their parents and families.

What could one do about the children born (or to be born) to the recovered women out of such unions? These children faced a hopeless future and their case was hotly debated in political and social circles. Gandhi's view on such children was absolute—they belonged to the mother and when they grew up, they could choose their own religion:

If a girl is a Sikh, in my eyes she remains a Sikh, if a Hindu, she remains a Hindu. If my daughter has been violated by a rascal and made pregnant, must I cast her and her child away? Nor can I take the position that the child so born is Muslim by faith. Its faith can only be the faith of the mother who bore it. After the child grows up he or she will be free to take up any religion.[8]

In the debate on this subject, suggestions were made that such children should be treated as 'war babies' and left behind in the country in which they were born, a view expressed by Y.D. Gundevia and hotly contested by N. Gopalaswamy Ayyangar. Ayyangar, like Gandhi, believed that such a child should stay with the mother.

The final decision reached, upon the intervention of Mridula Sarabhai (a leading advocate for the recovery and restoration of such women), was that the women would be allowed to take their children with them to the transit camp in Jullundur and stay there for fifteen days, after which they would have to decide whether they wanted to keep them or not. On the ground, field workers like Kamlabehn Patel agreed with the view that the mother should not be separated from the child, and in fact she cites the many cases where it was really difficult to do so. She noted in her reminiscences that women in the age group 30 to 31 willingly left behind these children in the state from where they were being 'recovered' as they felt 'ashamed' to reunite with their families with these children; on the other hand, the first-time mothers offered much resistance at such a separation but in the end had to let go for the sake of 'acceptability' back home.[9] Patel narrates how, then, such children were flown from the camp

in Jullunder to Allahabad where they would be housed in the Kasturba Bal Niketan Children's Home. Here as well, it was not as if their future was really bright: some of them were adopted (male children were gladly taken up by Sikh families) but female children, unfortunately, often ended up trafficked or as domestic helps. A large number of them also ended up on the streets.

The condition of unborn children was far worse—they were denied the right to live as illegal abortions took place in the transit camps or in the women's homes. The State, discreetly giving in to the sensibilities of the receiving family, arranged for the 'cleansing' (or 'safaya') of such women in the camps itself. Talking about it, the Camp Commandant of a Women's Home in Karnal, Damyanti Sahgal:

points out that the process of getting rid of children in the womb—'safaya' she calls it (in Jullundur this was known as 'medical treatment') was taken up by the state, and specific hospitals were targeted (she names Kapur hospital in Delhi) which, according to her, made their fortune on such cleaning operations. And this out of a special budget put aside by the state, and at a time when abortion was not yet legal in India. Kamlaben Patel corroborated this. She said that pregnant women were taken to Jullundur where they were kept for periods of up to three or four months—enough time for an abortion—and given what she referred to as 'medical treatment'.[10]

Regarding the children who came alongwith the refugee families (male or female-headed families) as a result of the decision to migrate or having being pushed out of their homes upon the partition of the country, the evidence of nostalgia for a way of life lost, of friends left behind, of disruption in education/employment opportunities and of dreams shattered can be found in their recorded testimonies. There are also the stories of growing up too fast to fend for the family and thus a loss of childhood. To cite one example: Bani Bhattacharya (born on 5th January 1934 in Bogra district in present day Bangladesh) nostalgically recollects the school built by her grandfather for the education of the children of her village. She tells how she studied in that school with scholarship till class 4 and could have continued to study as well as pursue higher education had partition not disrupted their lives. She mentioned how the family had even celebrated every year the independence day of Pakistan (even though the heart belonged to Netaji and Gandhi ji). The family decided to migrate much late in 1950 (after the Bagerhat riots in East Pakistan) when they saw that staying on could not be an option anymore with hostility all around.

As she recollects her dreams of higher education, in the video as well as in her own words, we can see the eyes well up and she is in tears as she notes: 'deshbhager karo bhalo hoye ni' (no one benefited from the partition). She emphasises this point over and over again—I lost my land, my home, my education.[11]

The stories of children born to abducted women are simply untraceable. Where are these children? What are their stories? These are the known silences of this chapter in history.

Having thus discussed the various forms of violence women and children were witness to, let us look at what this most vulnerable category did for the sake of 'coming out of partition'.[12]

Coming out of Partition: the Women and Children Chapter

Refugee women and children ought to be a category exclusive of the refugee in general. The programme of rehabilitation of refugees across the world keeps only the refugee in general in mind. Only in those cases some special care is extended to refugee women and children where there is no adult male head as guardian for these refugee women and children. Male refugee children are taken care of only till a certain age (16/18 yrs of age) after which it is expected that they can take care of themselves and any female member of their family too is disenfranchised from the relief measures provided by the State. Thus, globally speaking as well as in the Indian context, the relief measures for refugees are centered around the male refugee and his family. It is only in the absence of this male head of the refugee family that the refugee women and children are visible to the protector State. This sort of patriarchal notion of refugee rehabilitation programme has often come under criticism by the relief workers, civil society and refugees themselves. However, this is how it continues. In such a scenario, the individual efforts of women and children for coming out of such catastrophic events are rarely documented in the official archive and it is here that alternate sources become primary for our research into these images of refugee women and children.

In the aftermath of partition and largescale displacement due to it, the State came up with exclusive camps for such women and children—Women's Homes as they were called or the other option was Permanent Liability Camps/Homes. Single or the 'unattached' refugee women (i.e. those without any male guardian) were sent to such Homes directly from the border or the temporary relief camps. It was expected that after imparting some training in domestic crafts like stitching, knitting, tailoring, basket-weaving etc, these women would be able to eke out a living for themselves through getting employed in small jobs or setting up their individual businesses. But those who could not earn enough or who were much older and/or incapacitated could continue to stay on in these homes as Permanent Liability for the State and survive on the doles handed out to them. But women who had male children would eventually have to leave these homes as it was expected that the son would get a job through training centres and such women would then be dependent upon the son and not the

State anymore. Practically speaking too, this is what happened as well: women with sons left these homes as soon as the sons turned major and got jobs but those with daughters could not go to live with married daughters and hence continued to be the recipient of doles from the State.

Life in such camps were of course not a bed of roses for these women and often they complained against the unsanitary conditions of living, the insufficient doles, the lack of opportunities to work, and the inadequate relief and rehabilitation aid offered here. Some women were also politicized in the process and speaking for Bengal, often participated in the refugee movement led by the Communist Party here. Alternately, the camps also became places where the women became easy prey to sexual predators outside or inside. We find Ashoka Gupta ruing the fact that this help was always inadequate and could never have fully stabilized the women or the family: 'We tried to rescue some of them. We organised vocational training, gave sewing lessons and other such training to give them a respectable means of earning their living. But the truth was how much money could something like sewing bring in? Especially when one's very sustenance, the medical treatment of one's whole family, depended on it?'[13] In all likelihood, she argues, it was quite natural that such women would then take to other forms of work (hinting, perhaps, at sex work).

Apart from the State sponsored aid, refugee women often showed individual initiative as well in the process of rehabilitation. Bengali cinema and literature is rich in such images of the working refugee woman—the teacher, the clerk, the sales representative and often the sex worker too.[14] Manikuntala Sen notes in her autobiography the impact upon of the refugee women from East Pakistan upon the employment scene in Bengal. In many ways she argues, it is the women of East Bengal who taught the women of West Bengal to come out and work. She remarks: 'I noticed a positive awakening particularly amongst women. Had they not been uprooted, this change might not have occurred so quickly.' She notes further: 'I was often on tour and whenever I boarded a train, I used to run into these women who travel up and down, crowding the compartments meant for women, and for men too. . . . I learnt that some were at school, some at college, while others were teaching.'[15] The women were also found to be equally comfortable speaking amongst themselves the rustic Bangal language in the railway compartments on their way to work or back from work as well as the more sophisticated Bengali language of the West Bengal dialect in their workplace in Kolkata.

This positive side of the great divide in the lives of the refugee women is noted in the official records too. According to a survey conducted by the Directorate of the National Employment Service, West Bengal, it was observed that there had been an increase in the demand for employment among women in the post-Partition era. This survey,

while commenting upon the trends in female employment, also stated that as soon as the family was in a relatively better position, the traditional norms of the family came back into existence and women withdrew from the work scene. It also shows that the maximum number of women who were employed were unmarried, and post-marriage these women often left their jobs. The survey also shows that the more educated women were to be found in higher income groups, although their numbers were few. These women were employed in schools and offices (as clerks and typists) and were mostly unmarried. The majority of the married women constituted the lower-income groups. They, possibly, were those who assisted their husbands in agricultural work or were employed in domestic services. In conclusion, the official survey maintained that women preferred clerical jobs and aspired to train for the same. The solution, thus, recommended to solve the issue of securing employment for women was that there should be more such training institutes which could impart training to women in office work.[16]

And very recently a statistical analysis of the impact of the refugee women in the field of domestic service has been carried out by Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty.[17] Through a very extensive research on the classifieds of the time as well as census data on employment, they are able to show that after the partition of Bengal, domestic services became one the largest recruiters of refugee women from East Bengal. Classifieds in widely circulated newspapers clearly indicate the high demand for refugee women as domestic help which in turn again reflects the 'feminization of labour' argument. Even more so as now it was these refugee women who were replacing the upcountry men (from Bihar) in their stronghold over this sector since colonial times. Using census data, they were further able to show that in most jobs (medical, health, education, and majorly domestic services), the displaced women greatly outnumbered the women from the host population. They also observed that domestic services had become one of the most 'acceptable' jobs for refugee women because it was seen as an extension of their domestic roles. The classifieds sometimes hint at this aspect: 'Wanted for a family of only husband and wife a female who would do household chores like a family member. Bed, board and pocket money offered.'[18] However what is also noted is that in several such classifieds (as cited above too), women's salary is mentioned as 'pocket money'. Hence, not only the State, but even the potential recruiters amongst the public considered women's earnings as mere supplementary.

Thus from the discussion above, two points about the general scene of employment of refugee women is clear: first, the refugee women took to jobs only in dire circumstances and also that once the family was settled it was the women who were the first to be withdrawn from the employment scene. Second, in many ways the question of too

many potential employees and little work in contrast as well as the notion that women get paid less compared to men allowed for the feminisation and casualisation of labour.[19] It cheapened the market rate (atleast in domestic services or other unorganised labour sector.)

The discussion above also clearly shows how the women were trying all they could do to steady the boat of the sinking family. So with no special privilege given exclusively to the refugee women (unless one was the 'unattached' refugee woman) the struggle of these doubly maginalised section (by way of gender and by way of being refugee in a new state) was even more noteworthy. Their struggles were simply unending—during and post-partition. Their children recollect not having seen their mothers who was otherwise omnipresent in their lives before partition but now forced to look for work outside the antahpur (inner quarters of the home). Such exposures saw these children also growing up before their age. Hena Chaudhuri's narrative points to one such example of a childhood sans the omnipresent figure of the mother. She refers to the earnings her mother sent from their home in East Bengal as crucial to their survival in West Bengal. Her mother had stayed back in East Bengal to take care of their home and land, the earnings from which she sent to their family residing in Chandmari Camp near Calcutta: 'Our financial condition turned from bad to worse. . . . Ma did her best to send as much cash as possible. . . . She wanted us to maintain the same high standards of living that we had before migrating. Alas, this remained a dream . . . Ma had to bear the entire burden, which she continued to do cheerfully.'[20]

These children were dealing with a disruption from the past, the example of disruption in education of Hindu child migrant (Bani Bhattacharya) has been cited above. But an interview of a Muslim male resident (one who did not leave Kolkata despite the riots) too is representative of such broken dreams. Such a feeling is poignantly pointed out by Mohammad Hafizur Rahman in his recollection of those days. Thus he tells that while he continued to live in his ancestral house in Kolkata, getting higher education and a government job was extremely difficult for him as time and again he was reminded that he was a Muslim who should go to Pakistan. He recollects his 'unpleasant childhood' wherein though meritorious he had to appear for exams as an external candidate and it was only because he was truly taented that the Principal of St Xaviers College gave him admission. He built onto this opportunity that he got further but regrets that despite all merit he could not get a government job. Very subtly and discreetly, according to him, he was singled out as a Muslim applicant.[21]

There are thus quite a few stories of such nostalgia for the lost homeland but also for the lost opportunities due to this massive disruption in the form of partition and migration. These were children who were dealing with multiple changes: of space, of

roles (their own as well as of people around them), of acquaintances etc. they had come to a new land. The loving mother, the care-giver who was present for all day and night was now becoming a fleeting presence in their lives in the quest to help the family survive. They themselves had to grow up faster than before to take up the 'burden' of the family.

Then speaking about the life in the camps, often it is painted as idle with nothing other than playing around, getting reprimanded by the elders, being ignored by the family. Schooling options were limited and only the most focussed among this group could make any use of them. Life was about survival and searching means for the same.

Refugee children in the male-headed families recollect their contribution towards that unique symbol of refugee assertion in Bengal—the squatter colonies of Kolkata. These were vacant plots of land forcibly occupied by desperate refugees (normally Bhadralok, i.e. upper caste/ middle class) and here they set up their temporary homes which today have become prime property in South Kolkata. Here is the story of zealously guarding day and night these makeshift homes from being bulldozed by the owners of these lands (State, private Hindu and/or Muslim) till finally it became an accepted colony in government records. The frontline of defence in all such clashes was the refugee women and children. The police too noted with a sense of helplesness that they had to go slow and with much control since women and children were invariably used as the first line of defence to be breached while removing the squatting refugees. But what this also shows is that children too were well aware of what their role was and hence one can understand the idea of loss of a regular stressfree childhood that these witnesses lament about in their recollections of those days.

Conclusion

Keeping these experiences in mind it can be said that the worst victims indeed were the women and children. And yet despite so many lessons from history till date there has been no major shift in the understanding of the refugee problem an within it of the refugee women and children's special needs. Asha Hans notes that the 'woman-child dyad has more specific needs than the general group of refugees'.[22] She argues that the government should be extremely mindful of their specific needs.

Taking a cue from this it can be seen that women and children form a special case and their requirements are also specific for which the State ought to be mindful about.

What is also evident is that using their individual agency women were able to come out of this event (while there might be many who could not). But that the scars remained is also evident from the testimonies of the children coming out of partition.

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