CHAPTER V

Psychological convulsion over migration: violence, hardship and trauma of women in West Bengal as well as in North Bengal

Women have a dual relationship with history as they are simultaneously present and absent in the historical accounts that have come down to us. For a long period they had been considered as supplementary to male action. From feminist standpoint women are invisible in history but they are relatively visible from nationalistic point of view. Thus the task of the feminist historian today is doubly difficult. Unlike many other parts of the world where women have had to be inserted into history, here history has, in a sense, to be rewritten. Historians in the last few decades have shifted their focus on the neglected segments of our society broadening its ambit. Under the new focus, a gender sensitive history has now begun. But if we take into account and make an elaborate analysis of Partition of Indian subcontinent, we can safely conclude that the miserable plight of women centering round the event of partition has long been neglected and ignored though they are the worst victims of the Partition of the Indian. “If we were to look for a de-nationalised, people’s perspective on that epochal event, we would find it elusive and patchy, mostly fictional, mostly male.”1 Women have remained a closed chapter with the ‘high-politics’ of Partition dominating all administrative and scholarly imagination. Recent historiography emphasizes on the ‘human’ dimension of this tragedy and the women have finally found their rightful place in Partition historiography.2 Previously focus was on the changing trends in presenting women’s experiences where emphasis was solely attached on the theme of women victimization. But at present scholars concentrate more on the constructive role of the women in the process of rehabilitation.

‘The Other Side of Silence’, the path-breaking book of Urvashi Butalia, probably is the first to have documented the experiences of the women on Partition. The author confesses herself that it has covered only the experiences of the Hindu and Sikh women coming from West Pakistan. Butalia mentions in an issue of the ‘Seminar’ in August 1994 “A serious gap is the omission of experiences in Bengal and East Pakistan (Bangladesh). But these require detailed attention of their own: better not to pay lip service by including an interview or two”. The focus, therefore, is on the
theme of women as victims of partition. It is essential to look on women not from the point of victimization due to the ‘greatest human tragedy’, but also to represent 1947 as a period much beyond that. The way of rebuilding their shattered lives and accommodating with the nascent nation-state is the main focal point of the recent scholars. Another remarkable book ‘Borders and Boundaries’ by Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin emphasizes on the gender accent of Partition Narrative but confined its discussion within the provinces of West.

Memories and experience of the most vulnerable section of the society like women got special attention from the historians since 1990s. The issue of womenfolk related to the partition of India began to be highlighted with the publication of the articles and book by Urvashi Bhutalia, Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin on Punjab. The experience of women has been explained by Ritu Menon in her work, ‘Borders and Boundaries’ (1998). The other two important writers are Bashabi Fraser and Ayesha Jalal who have given a clear depiction of sufferings of women and children. Women’s experience of the partition was marked by large scale rape, forced marriage and abduction. Particularly in 1990s, a good number of scholars depicted their interest in bringing out these horrors to the society. It has received special attention of many scholars for the last few years. They have tried to understand the experiences of women during partition in terms of gender and patriarchy. Patriarchy has constructed women in a strange way - her sexuality is a threat to her; her respectability is determined in coherence with her chastity and her body is not her own. It is not only the question of her own honour and respect but also of her family and community. Every woman represents her community and she is the repository of her community’s honour. Therefore in a situation of conflict, rape becomes a symbolic form of dishonouring the community. This act very often happened at the time of partition too. Rapes are accompanied with large scale abduction and forced marriage. It is on the bodies of women that the new national border is marked out; the edifices of the two nation states in South Asia are constructed. There was a compelling similarity between the experiences in Punjab and Bengal that in both states the women became the target and prime object of persecution.

It was only with the beginning of 21st century that trained historians started investigating into the historical aftermath of partition and its consistent effect on Bengali women. Historian Joya Chatterji in her book ‘Bengal divided: Hindu
Communalism and Partition’ (2002) investigates the political vision that the large and powerful section of Hindu society i.e. ‘bhadralok’ in Bengal insisted that for forming and creating a separate Hindu homeland. The book clearly explains the motivation behind the partition of India and in particular of Bengal and its consequences Bengal’s partition lived to face the consequences, which was largely an outcome of their miscalculations. Chatterjee has written with verve and revealed the truth intriguingly. In an article on the boundary award Joya Chatterji exposes the follies and worse of two commissions over which Cyril Redcliff presided over to demarcate the boundaries of the divided provinces of Bengal and Punjab. Another famous journal named ‘Seminar’, which was published from Delhi interrogated the historical reality of partition of Bengal in from the perspective of gender. Later on, articles of the issue was published as an edited volume named ‘The Trauma and Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India’ in the year 2003. The book focuses on the experiences of women who experienced the tragedy of partition. Gargi Chakravorty’s ‘Coming out of partition: Refugee women of West Bengal’ emphasizes on the ‘refugee women’ and their struggle for survival during that period of disorder. The book also stressed on the adversity experienced by the women in the aftermath of the partition. Jill Didur is yet another writer who wrote about Bengali women law and the importance of citizenship in her work.

Violence, the women experienced in 1947 and in 1971:

The partition of India in 1947 is still considered as the largest human migration that history has ever witnessed.“Violence was inextricably linked to the Partition…Partition stories have become so poignant because of the direct or indirect violence associated with them”. The impact of partition on the people from East Bengal is maximum, especially the womenfolk who unfortunately have become the refugees in their own state which was previously united. The story of Partition and displacement was accompanied by the story of rape, abduction and widowhood of large number of women in both sides of the borders. When thousands of refugees flocked towards Indian Territory from East Bengal every day after the February Riot in 1950, the women of East Bengal had to pay the cost of independence by their chastity, through the sacrifices of lives of their husbands and their beloved children. During the turmoil concerning the partition of India Women became the most
common targets of attack. Forced marriage, intimidation, rape and abduction of women became the order of the period. Those maltreatments on a large scale were very common ways of attacks upon the Hindu minority women. The refugee women were humiliated and inhumanly tortured on their way to West Bengal under the facade of search by the Pakistani customs officers and staff. The impact of those untoward occurrences is still in vogue in today’s society. This research paper intends to investigate and analyze the sufferings underwent by refugee women settled in North Bengal from East Bengal at the time of partition of India.

To protect their honour and dignity the thousands of women of minority communities left their homes overnight. Contemporary news papers like the Amrita Bazar Patrika recorded the arduous journey of women across the borders. Streams of women clutching their babies on one arm and their small belongings on the other were seen walking down the rail tracks. Many died on the way. Figures show that in the interim period between August 1946 and December 1947 millions of Hindus poured in prolific numbers in eastern India alone in to the states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura, altering the lives of the people and socio-economic profile of the states forever. The refugees who were ousted from their ‘Bhita’ (homeland) and expatriated to a different land following the exchange of population after the partition indeed faced a ‘grave misfortune’ in their new country. They realised that the natural surroundings, social customs and the daily rituals of the people were sometimes starkly different from their own. Sometimes, even their dialect and intonations of speech became an object of ridicule, often mimicked to evoke slapstick humour. For instance, the arrival of the migrants from the villages of East Pakistan to a big city like Calcutta gave birth to several jokes, which were mostly variations of the clinched encounter between a country bumpkin and a sophisticated urbanite or a village simpleton’s awkwardness with stylish standard of living of the city.

An eminent economist Dr. Asoke Mitra espouses in an article in Economic and Political Weekly that initially in West Bengal “The widely publicised make-belief was that it was all a temporary upheaval and the refugees would soon return home. A life of alternating insecurity and hope prompted a large section of the refugees to shuttle back and forth between East and West Bengal, wanting to make the best of both worlds but ending up with worst of both”. The predicament of the exile in the
hellhole of these transit rehabilitation camps almost reminds us of the abysmal life-in—death situation of the concentration camps in Europe. Yet those people were better off than those who were thrown in the shelter of railway platform. The Amrita Bazar Patrika described Sealdah station, swarming with flood of refugees as  the ‘Gateway to Hell’. Kolkata became a suffering city for refugees who were afflicted with innumerable ordeals in their new abode.\textsuperscript{11}

Noakhali was the epicentre or breeding place of communal violence. The Noakhali experience was shocking for both men and women alike. A large number of cases regarding forced marriage between the Hindu girls and Muslim boys, forced abduction of Hindu women, and conversion to Islam became a regular feature. In many cases incidents of abduction complaints could not be reported following sheer terror. Women had to watch the atrocious murder of their husbands.\textsuperscript{12} ‘Vermilon marks’ (Sindur) were forcibly erased from the foreheads of women and conch shell bangles broken. The leading news paper ‘The Hindustan Standard’ on November 5, 1946 published a report stating that 300 women were raped in Noakhali and further intimated its readers about 400 rape cases of defenseless women in another area.\textsuperscript{13} ‘The Noakhali violence marginalized women, who became victims of male chauvinism.\textsuperscript{14} On 15 November 1946, Sucheta Kripalani on her return tour to Calcutta from Noakhali reported that: “Molestation of women, intimidation and encirclement are still continuing in the affected areas of Noakhali districts”.\textsuperscript{15}

The paramilitary forces like Ansars incited Muslim hooligans in this disgraceful act. In Kurmitala air port, which was situated near the military head quarters of Dhaka, a large number of Hindu passengers including women and children were brutally killed or seriously injured.\textsuperscript{16} On 11 and 12 February 1950, a large number of murders took place on Chittagong Mail and the Surma Mail. Reports showed the systematic attacks of trains in Bhairab bazaar. The train was stopped over the Meghna Bridge and passengers were attacked.\textsuperscript{17} The steamer ‘Ostrich’ was attacked on its way to Calcutta where thousands of refugee passengers mostly women and children were forcibly taken down at Rajkhara. No information was available about the ill fated passengers of the steamer\textsuperscript{18}. At Darshana station 500 Ansar troops looted the belongings of the migrants on the pretext of custom checking and at the same time they robbed the women’s ornaments. When one lady refused to offer her ornaments she was made
captive in a locked room. In this connection it may be mentioned that when the Barishal Express reached Shealdah station on 3rd March, 1950, it was found that the train was empty.¹⁹

Women’s organizations of East Bengal staged demonstration in protest against the humiliation on women. The Chittagong branch of the AIWC under the chairmanship of Mrs. Nellie Sengupta, arranged a meeting on 21 October 1946 and constituted a nine member sub-committee to rescue and protect the abducted women. In the event of Noakhali riots, thousands of refugees began to move out. 12000 moved to Chandpur and Comilla; 3000 to Ranigunj and 1000 shifted to Calcutta. The Noakhali riot created massive reactions in the remote villages of East Bengal. The places like Rajpur, Ramganj, Lakshmipur and Bebumganj in Noakhali and Faridganj, Chandpur, Hajiganj Laksham and Choudagram in Tippra were most affected.²⁰ It was clearly revealed from different interviews that school going girls were lifted from their institution during this period of turmoil. Even the girls of Faridpur district would go to their institution armed with a compass like weapon which they used to call ‘Baghnakh’.²¹ Those incidents prepared the ground for the truncated settlement because only after seven weeks the wave of Partition riot began.

The grim irony of fate was that there were only two options open before the women; one was to embrace glorious death in the hands of their kin which was considered to be the act of martyrdom and the second option was violation of their honour at the hands of the ‘other’. However, the experience of violence was not always so explicit and direct. There were other forms of violence which were often dismissed as mere ‘psychological fear’. Such instances of violence were vivid through many of the later day narratives and memoirs of the refugees who flocked from East Bengal. To honour their chastity and womanhood the Hindu refugees from East Pakistan were determined to shift themselves to safer and secured abode in West Bengal. A good number of women at the time chose to commit suicide in order to thwart the corporeal holocaust.²² Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay, the then Rehabilitation Commissioner for West Bengal, narrates in his Udvashti that often when the women went to take a bath in the pond, some Muslim men would remark, ‘Pak Pak Pakistan, Hindur Bhatar Mussolman’ [This is Pakistan, the husband of a Hindu will be a Musalman]. The author cited another example in this connection that Muslims teased the ladies even in sanctified private spatial paradigms such as the bathing places ‘E bibi, byala je bede
chole. Aar deri kyano? Ebar ghore cholo.” [Oh Bibi, its evening now, why delay any further, lets go home.] Bandopadhyay arrives to the conclusion that one of the main reasons for migration was psychological fear—‘manoshik nipiron’. It became obvious from that period onwards that it would no longer be possible to stay in the beloved motherland in such a filthy environment and untoward situation. Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin are of the view that “…all of them treat women’s bodies as territory to be conquered, claimed or marked by the assailant.”

Social activist Mrs. Asoka Gupta and her husband Saibal Gupta collected documentary evidences on many East Bengal refugees for submission of the report to the Enquiry Commission. In those testimonies, the narratives of refugee women were also included. Most of the women who were interviewed had their origins in farmer’s families. They spoke of their horrible experiences of the gruesome violence which prevailed during that period of turmoil. They presented the vivid description of various factors that compelled them to quit their motherland. The regular abduction of women, ‘pollution’ of temples, destruction of idols, washing beef in their wells, throwing the carcasses of pig in the courtyard were few of the many xenophobic malpractices that tended to threaten the Hindu minority in the newly conceived Islamic Pakistan. Those accounts revealed the extent of insecurity of the Hindus in East Pakistan, and yet, their real fears were dismissed as a mere psychological construction. As pointed out by Nehru, that Honourable Members have said that people in East Bengal had not been led to come away because of newspaper articles or by public speeches, that there were other causes. Of course there were other causes. Who said any newspaper speech or an article could make a million people come away? “… but when there is this huge upset in people’s minds and people are frightened and are full of fear, then every little thing counts… we are dealing with not only an economic upset or social upset but a psychological problem of the greatest magnitude.”

Countless evacuees leaving behind their motherland proceeded towards West Bengal and to the districts of North Bengal again during the political turmoil of 1971. The horrible picture of oppression upon the fair sex of the Hindu minorities had been published through the different Medias of the period. Though the inflow of people was equal in all districts of North Bengal, yet West Dinajpur surpassed all the
districts. The voiceless innocent teenagers, newly wedded women, mothers and senior women citizen were equally assaulted and raped by the miscreants. The most alarming incident is recorded to have happened in Hilly railways where two railway compartments were packed naked physically abused and mentally tortured women. Such brutal display of an organized violence was unprecedented in the annals of recent history. The people of Dinajpur witnessed the atrocities of the militants and miscreants where they were nothing but mute spectators. Only tears and lamentations were their silent protests.27

The State recognized mass abductions, sexual violation and forcible conversion as ‘real violence’. Only those women who were exposed to such violence became the immediate responsibility of the State. They would be the first beneficiaries of State ‘benevolence’. Thus, women coming from East Pakistan would have to face more hardships for they were not always seen as victims of such ghastly violence. During the period of disturbances, the oppression on women in Rongpur reached to an alarming extent. The Rongpur cantonment and the Arts council building became the centres of women captives. They were ruthlessly tortured by the Pak militants. Sayedpur High School of Nilphamari and Darul Ulum Madrasah were converted to be the cells of women oppression.28

**Journey towards unknown destination:**

The passage of uprooted women towards the unknown destination was not a passage founded on roses. It was riddled with thorns and hurdles. Rampant looting, indiscriminate arson, atrocious murders and abduction of women became the distinctive characteristics of the riots during 1950 and onwards. The migrant women travelled on overcrowded steamers, motor launches, trains etc. A huge number of refugees walked a long way through jungle bare footed. Most of their properties were left back in their homeland to which they would never return in future. They could only bring few clothing or a small trunk with them.

After much maltreatment and distress, the refugees migrated over to West Bengal where there was none to entertain their settlement. They had to face various problems every now and then. A large number of uprooted persons of East Bengal had to stay at
Sealdah railway station where they would spend days, weeks, even more than a month. The refugees were asked to stay in open station compound. A huge number of refugees rushed to North Bengal through different borders adjacent to their place of residence. As a matter of fact the West Bengal Government was not prepared for such a massive exodus of people. At first the uprooted persons were inoculated and then they were asked to present themselves as a ‘family grouping’ to an officer from the Relief and Rehabilitation Department. The idea of ‘family grouping’ perplexed the migrants. They actually belonged to the joint families and it was beyond their imagination to be grouped as smaller and nuclear units according to the order of the officer. This ultimately broke the joint families into male headed groupings.

Women, who were accustomed to stay indoors, were now driven to the discomforting, unfamiliar outside which laid beyond the purview of their safe homes. It was beyond the dream on the part of the uprooted women. They were exploited, maltreated, humiliated, physically and mentally assaulted in different places including Sealdah station itself. Their innocence, ignorance, simplicity and helplessness were sometimes capitalized by some interested persons. During the period of disorder following partition, forced marriage became rampant and common feature. To accept and recognize the abductors as husbands were unthinkable, painful and pathetic in the truest sense of the term. The central and state government had launched ventures to bring back those affected unfortunate women and to send them back to their parents. But it was not an easy task. The initiatives rendered by the Government to rescue the affected women failed miserably.

But if we discuss about the migration of refugees to the districts of North Bengal we find that they marched through the Gitaldaha border, Hili border, Mohendraganj border of Meghalaya, Murshidabad border etc. There is no doubt that mainstream refugee exodus took place through Sealdah station. A huge number of migrants who could not find their shelter in and around Calcutta and suburban areas flocked towards the districts of North Bengal. They mainly took refuge in various camps meant for the refugees. A sizable number of uprooted persons from East Pakistan took shelter in the residence of near and dear ones and also in houses of distant relatives. In some cases inhabitants of a particular area instead of knowing the refugees personally made necessary arrangement for their habitation. From different interviews it was clear that local people in different districts of North Bengal also gave land to the displaced
persons for cultivation. People of Rajbansi community helped these uprooted people through monetary assistance. During this period women refugees became compelled to involve themselves in agriculture and agriculture related professions.

Refugee families came to North Bengal from Khulna, Chattagram, Mymensingh, Rongpur, Faridpur, Dhaka, Barishal, Rajshahi, Pabna districts of East Pakistan. The migrant women from East Pakistan to Malda, Jalpaiguri, West Dinajpur, Siliguri and Cooch Behar who have been interviewed in different times reacted with bitterness. All of them, though hailing from different districts, different social and family background, are of the same opinion unanimously that the places they left are not places worth living in. When the migrants in the districts of West Bengal were asked the reason for migration, there has been a universal admittance of the fact that East Pakistan had become a heaven for the people Islam by religion. The main concerns for women and children were perhaps best reflected in Rameshwari Nehru’s analysis of the situation “… these women and children were the victims of partition and its subsequent upheaval, it is, in the opinion of all right thinking people, obligatory on the part of the Government to provide for their maintenance and care.” In its declaration of policy, the Government has acknowledged this responsibility, and the Prime Minister also has given repeated assurances to the people, that unattached destitute women and children would be fully looked after by the State. In fact she felt that such women should be dealt with as one would deal with victims of war and hence suggested that they should be categorized as ‘war-widows’ and ‘war orphans’.

Rehabilitation of refugee women:

The act of recovery and the scheme of restoration of abducted women in the East were not as adequately planned like that of West. It was the misconception of leaders that the women in the East were not real victims of ‘direct’ violence. Such a projection could have possibly had two latent motives, firstly toning down the act of violence with a view to discourage migration and secondly, a general apathy of the State towards the plight of the minorities in the East, which in turn was governed by the economics of rehabilitation. For the restoration of confidence among the minorities on both sides the Delhi Pact was inked by the two Governments. Following
this pact the Search Service Bureau in Calcutta was set up. Along with it a Search Service Section/ Liaison Office attached to the Deputy High Commission in Dacca was set up. It is here that the Dacca Transit Home was started by Mridula Sarabhai. The main object of the office was to provide shelter to the unattached and other women of the minority community. The Home was set up with the exclusive purpose of providing a secured home for the women who felt threatened. ‘No definite information was available about the number of women abducted in East Bengal or the number of women converted to Islam. In this regard The West Bengal Search Service Bureau registered 78 cases of abduction and 172 cases of missing women in East Bengal. Apart from these, 7 cases of missing and abducted women were reported to the East Bengal Government by the Deputy High Commissioner for India at Dacca. The East Bengal Government sent to the West Bengal Government the 12 cases of missing women. In a press conference the East Bengal Relief Commissioner claimed that 23 women had been recovered except one who was then in prison custody. In this regard 75 cases had been carefully examined, where it was subsequently found that 56 women who were missing or abducted were found living with their kin. One woman died a year ago, 5 were killed in the disturbances, the identity of 9 remained unestablished.32

It will not be out of place to mention in this connection the recovery and restoration programme in the West where the State itself would take the decision in context of women migration. The women had no option of their own to take decision to migrate or not. The abducted women were not allowed to stay long in a particular place of a state with the apprehension that the abductor’s family members would try to influence either the officials in getting her back, or the mere presence of the woman in the same state could influence her decision in favour of staying back. Hence, almost as soon as they were recovered, these women were quickly shifted to the Transit camp, and thereafter, restored to their families. As observed in the records, very few women would seek refuge in Dacca Transit Camp. The Government of India made frequent instructions and orders for immediate shut down of the home. But the Deputy High Commissioner summarily rejected the proposal on the plea that the closure of this Home would create repercussion and would leave ‘a demoralizing effect not only in the minority community in East Pakistan but it would also become the object of criticism of the public in India.’33
In post 1950 the Migration Certificate (MC), was the only legal means to enter India from East Pakistan, but obtaining these Migration Certificates (MC) was difficult. It was much easier for women in procuring the migration certificate because the State itself was in favour of certain categories of women. As a matter of fact, both the Central and State governments discouraged migration across Eastern borders. Both the Governments simultaneously agreed that the minorities did not confront any real threat in East Bengal. Therefore few restrictions like passports, migration certificates, doles etc. were imposed upon them. But the bona fied refugee women were treated differently from their male counterparts. In certain cases priority was given in issuing Migration Certificates to the women considering the magnitude of the issue in question.\(^ {34}\) The following categories of women were given priorities: Unattached women and widows with no livelihood in East Pakistan; Wives joining husbands in India; Families living in areas considered unsafe, for example, in isolated pockets or where there is apprehension about abduction of girls and elopement under influence; Adult girls going to India for marriage. These facilities were not applicable to the others members of the family.\(^ {35}\) The refugee women worked day in and day out with their male counterpart in their relentless effort for proper rehabilitation. As a consequence, after a long run, those women became the protagonists of professional independent women. Many refugee women played vital role in setting up various refugee colonies working hand in hand with the male folk. Manikuntala Sen opines that the refugee womenfolk form the majority of the working women of West Bengal. They are now engaged in different jobs according to their efficiency. It is a glaring example of the struggle of uprooted women who once had lost everything.\(^ {36}\)

**State-sponsored Rehabilitation Programme:**

During the whole period of migration a dual role was played by the State, serving on the one hand as a protector and on the other a benevolent patriarch. As the protector, the State recovered the women from the ‘enemy’ territory, and also restored the ‘other’ women. In its role as that of the benevolent patriarch, the State took the responsibility of rehabilitating the single or unattached women in the special homes. Some production-cum-training centres were set up for the recovered women. Kasturba Niketan in Delhi and Uday Villa in Kolkata became the most prominent of such Homes for women. The main purposes of those homes were to enable the women to come out of the trauma of partition and victimhood, and also to encourage
them to be self dependent. Initially, those homes were meant for destitute, single refugee women, but ultimately other refugees were also entitled to join those training centres.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, the State shouldered the heavy responsibility of rehabilitating the refugee women through various promising social-welfare schemes. It was decided by the Honourable Minister in the conference on 9.5.1955 that every effort should be made to rehabilitate those young girls through marriage.\textsuperscript{38} Once settled in this manner, they would no longer be the responsibility of the State unless, they were the inmates of the Permanent Liability camps.

**The Women’s Home in the East:**

The Government of India became concerned with the issue of rehabilitation of refugees coming from East Pakistan in the post-1950s. Simultaneously for the improvement of the pecuniary stability and honorable settlement of the refugee women, the state government took an active initiative. In fact the state government was quite watchful in its approach towards the issue of Homes or Infirmaries. The State Government was well conversant with the fact that in case of a wrong move the whole responsibility of maintaining these refugees would be rested upon the Government. Hence, in a meetings of the Central Advisory Committee for Homes and Infirmaries in the eastern region, a proposal was placed urging to omit the term ‘Permanent Liability’ used to describe such Homes and such refugees; instead insertion of the phrase ‘Camps for unattached displaced women or old and infirm displaced persons’ was advocated. But this was not approved as it would have been hardly possible for the state government to claim reimbursement of expenditure incurred on the maintenance of the refugee women without specific sanction from the Government of India.\textsuperscript{39}

Abala Basu was the main motivating force behind the home ‘Uday Villa’. This project for displaced persons began with ten resident women members. Abala Basu’s aim was not only to provide vocational training but also to open a production centre.\textsuperscript{40} Another point to note here is that two rehabilitation schemes for displaced women were also sanctioned both by the West Bengal Government and the Government of India at that period. Under that scheme Uday Villa obtained financial assistance for the adult women worker. The Art Department of Uday Villa was inaugurated in 1954.
Arrangements were made for providing training to the women who had natural talent for artistic cottage crafting. Attempts were also made to revive the folk-motifs. Under the active initiative of Dr. B.C. Roy and Renuka Roy, the Rehabilitation Department of Government of West Bengal arranged a stall at the Kalyani Congress Exhibition in 1954 where handicraft produced in Uday Villa were exhibited. From then onwards Uday Villa received regular orders from Khadi Gramodyog Bhaban as well as from the Cottage Industry. In an exhibition at Jahangir Art Gallery of Bombay in 1959, articles worth 5 Lac were sold in a single day that eventually increased the demand of artifacts of Uday Villa within short span of time.\(^{41}\) In the districts of North Bengal a number of refugees were interviewed, could not tell about the existence of any recognized home with certitude.

The advisory committee regarding the unattached women formulated some programme with a view to make the displaced women hailing from East Pakistan self-dependent in various ways. This committee also stressed on imparting vocational, professional and practical training. Initially almost 900 women were given training on child education, social works in rural sectors, cooking, domestic works, making toys and also rehabilitating the young girls through marriage. The report stated that the above mentioned policies for the purpose of rehabilitating such women and families became successful in reducing the number of dependent families.\(^{42}\) According to their age and ability to work women were grouped at first and only then they were granted rehabilitation assistance. The Homes for women were set up in a hurry in the available military barracks which were in appalling condition. Also, the water and electric supplies in the Homes were inconsistent. The report highlighted the inequitable scales of financial assistance provided to the homes in the East through statistical data. There was no shadow of doubt that rehabilitation was the only possible normal desired way to get rid of the camp-life and subsequently merge oneself with the general stream of the society.\(^{43}\)

In the eastern region, however, it was seen that rehabilitation and other facilities were difficult to get for the trained, able bodied sons, where as in Western region the able bodied sons of women were entitled to get financial assistance. In East even women with sons were forced to live in those dilapidated Homes, while in the West the sons of the rehabilitated women, immediately after getting assistance, left the Homes for
constructing their own abodes. However women in West who had daughters were denied of such financial opportunities. For now, it would suffice to say that the Homes in the western region were much better equipped to handle the issue of permanent rehabilitation of the permanent liability category. In North Bengal, there are scarcity of records which can validate the existence of such Home for women. It can be said with certitude that the women who migrated over here were not in such a helpless condition like that of the other districts of West Bengal. As the refugees from affluent families settled in the districts of North Bengal, they did not confront severe problems like their refugee compatriots in West Bengal.

**Other Aid Given to Women:**

Apart from opening vocational training centres for the women, there were other facilities provided to them as well. The Employment Bureau, which had been set up for the exclusive purpose of providing employment opportunities to the displaced persons, attempted to secure employment for the refugee women as well. According to the statistics provided by the Directorate of National Employment Service, West Bengal, it was observed, had witnessed increase in the demand for employment among women in the post-partition era. This survey, while commenting upon the trends in female employment, shows that as soon as the refugee family was in a relatively better position the traditional norms of the family came back into existence and women were withdrawn from the work scene. It also shows that the maximum number of women employed was unmarried, and post-marriage these women often left their jobs. For the development of women in all respects, an advisory committee was formed with the female members so that they could earn something with their own efforts. 900 women were deployed in different technical and vocational institutions to get adequate training for nursery, social works, art of cooking, maintenance of cleanliness in various areas, ability to perform domestic works, engage them in cottage industry like handloom, toy making and cane industry. The period of training was fixed from six months to one year. Training for social awareness was also imparted. Ideal centres for the training of refugee women were created with the purpose of enabling them to be self sufficient. 13 centres were built in this connection. The trained women were recruited from Dhubulia, Bagmari and Ranaghat refugee colonies. Majority of them hailed from Dacca. Mymensing,
Faridpur and Jessore. Trained students were awarded stipend of Rs. 25 per month for their food and lodging.47

During 1954-55, for the rehabilitation of refugees in West Bengal, the central Government sanctioned Rs. 1 crore and 18 Lac loan for each district. Rs. 28 Lac 4 thousand was granted to the refugees of Government colonies and Rs. 90 Lac were granted to the refugees who were outsiders and not the inmate of the camp colonies. For the training of the refugee women through private organizations an amount of 10 Lac 4 thousand was awarded to 250 refugee women. 1 Lac 10 thousand was granted to Belur women Home. 95 thousand was spent for the technical training of the women in Assam.48 A report was available from the esteemed newspaper Jugantar that in the urban areas of West Bengal, about 21500 refugees were put up at Government colonies. Those colonies which were situated near urban localities got more facilities. In the year 1952, 70,500 refugees were sanctioned trade loans. An amount of 91 lakhs and 34 thousand were granted for the purpose. More so loans were also allotted to lawyers, doctors, Ayurveda practitioners etc. In this connection 1,047 families were benefited. ‘Uday villa’, a training centre for women played a vital role. Training camps for the women were established in Habra and Hooghly. 200 refugee women were trained per session. In Siliguri and in Bongaon new markets were set up.49

‘Coming out of Partition’:
In Asok Mitra’s ‘Take a Girl Like Her’……narrates the position of refugee women in the alien land. The woman who has to take up the burden of the rest of her family, she who must give up all marriage proposals till her family is in a position to fend for itself, she who is the one who has to sacrifice her wants and desires to ensure her family is not deprived of theirs—she is the typical refugee girl50. Mitra poignantly points out how such women just got entangled in the labyrinth of life and could not enjoy even a moment for their own sake. Their income was so essential to the dying family that for many,…‘Whoever takes on the load of responsibility for once gets stuck with it forever…. Everybody, mother included, took it for granted that the girl would go about earning the extra money’.51 Describing the tedious life of a refugee girl, Mitra writes—
… there is no variation in the theme from day-to-day. She has nothing to look forward to, she has nothing to plan for, except the short term arithmetic of how much to try to borrow from which neighbour or school colleague… [brothers would waste away the money earned by her in expensive restaurants, but she could not] for she was the *leading earner* in the family, and the entire salary she meticulously hands over to her mother. Nobody cares to ask how many saris she has…There is no question of marriage… you need a minimal glow of health even for *divertissements* like that. This Bengali girl is nobody’s desire… she has nothing to look forward to, spinsterdom, give or take a few years, is going to set in early…⁵² Such were the difficult circumstances of those times which demanded this sacrifice from the women. The similar view is reflected in many of the interviewees that the country’s independence has limited impact women. They actually have not got anything apart from the unalterable slide towards pauperization. Much more than any of the rest of the family, the female member of a family is the one who has suffered the most. Yet, there is certain inner courage in them, that has enable them to sail through the remorseless process of history much better than the rest of the household.

There persisted some internal class differences regarding the rehabilitation of urban and rural refugee women. It was observed that the main concern of the State was the suitable rehabilitation of the urban refugee women. All the production-cum-training centres were located in the towns and cities. The market for the goods prepared was also in the city itself. The idea of vocational training was in fact carefully thought out especially for these women. For the rural refugee women, neither education nor vocational training was thought out as an option for their rehabilitation. In North Bengal region, there were some training schools after 1971. Prior to this period perhaps, the said region lacked such facilities for the womenfolk. They were settled in the countryside to work on the fields or even if in the city, then they were employed more often as domestic help. The most visible change brought about by this disruption was the increased participation of the women in the public sphere. Even though under the aegis of Gandhi, women had come out in public and participated in the national movement, yet in the post-partition period coming out of the seclusion was not simply a matter of choice, but of survival. Often women chose to participate in the post-partition rehabilitation work because it was in such social work that they found some
means of succour for their lives which had been torn apart by the violence of partition.53

A report published by the Directorate of National Employment Service in 1958 reflects on the aspect of marriage taking a backseat in the life of these refugee women. Partition of India has struck a severe blow to the family life of several millions of Bengalis in East Pakistan who were compelled to migrate to India leaving behind their sources of income in land and properties. They had been landed in such a plight that joint efforts of male and female members were needed in most cases to retrieve their fallen fortunes. There were numerous families which, in the absence of male earners, had to depend entirely on one or more of their female members. All these factors had tended to progressively increase the number of women job-seekers.’ The report further mentions the increase in the number of women seeking employment—‘In 1953 the average number of monthly women registrants with the employment exchange of India was 4256 per month. While in 1957 it rose to 8563 per month, i.e. there was a 100% increase during the last five years.’ Thus, it is evident that the women began to take up this role earnestly out of the emergent compelling factors. But once this role was taken up then it became important to set aside the thought of marriage. This was the most important break from the past for the Bengali women.54

The refugee women from East Pakistan had much to struggle for. It was not a smooth passage for them as they were often ignored as victims of ‘genuine’ violence and thus were blamed for migrating to India without any ‘genuine’ reason. Refugee women from Punjab were treated to be the worst victims of violence and were consequently considered as the responsibility of the state. The State tried to do the most for these women. The responsibility to recover abducted women rested upon the officials of both India and Pakistan. Some women volunteers also shouldered the heavy responsibility to rescue and rehabilitate those abducted women. The young women from Delhi School of Social Work came forward.55 The rehabilitation strategies often forced these women to Indians by their penal transportation from homes in Pakistan to India. Though in the process there were some arbitrary decisions taken up as well, but the point of consolation was that the rehabilitation of refugees coming from Punjab was not a matter of struggle between the state and the refugees. Rather, here the two worked in tandem with each other and this healthy cooperation resulted
in the successful story of rehabilitation in the West. The Refugee women in West Bengal asserted their political rights with the same intensity and intent as their counterparts in the west. The fortnightly reports in the Police Records from Kolkata had a regular column on the activities of ‘refugees’, and also of ‘women’ and that highlighted how actively the fair sex participated in protests, marches and movements demanding for the provision of basic necessities in the camps—roofed accommodation, food, water, cash doles etc.\(^{56}\) The means used by the women were fasting, participation in mass rallies, demonstrations in front of the homes of politicians, and submission of memorandums were the means used by women. Women participated in such processions often of their own accord and in many occasions, as an expression of solidarity towards their male counterparts.

But what eased the way for the refugee women coming from West Pakistan to assert themselves was the fact that they were the valid citizens of this country. This was so because the principle of the exchange of population had been accepted for the western borders. The borders in the east were however maintained as soft borders, and the refugee influx was hence regulated strictly. Only a specific category of women were permitted entry from East Pakistan into Indian Territory. Women would be treated in much the same way as the other refugee families in the east were being treated, unless they were the victims of violence, or those who had lost the male guardian in their family. It was in such circumstances that one observes a greater participation of refugee women in rehabilitation politics in Bengal. Their role here was therefore, all-round—economic, political and social. That could be available in the varied personal memories of the refugees. In Punjab those refugee women sacrificed their lives to protect family, community and honour of the state were remembered and immortalized, where as in Bengal, migrants had a silent pride was noticed among the living folks as they spoke about their women who ably supported their families sacrificing their own personal desires. The ultimate proof of the lack of adequate State aid in the East was that the Homes existed for a long period and its inmates awaited rehabilitation assistance even after many years of partition, which was a stark reminder of the ‘incomplete’ job done in the East.
Experiences of the East Bengali refugee women during the partition:
Many of the abducted women considered the recovery operation conducted by Governments as a second uprootment. At the same time many of them lodged protest against the recovery operation and expressed their unwillingness to return to their parents or relations. They were quiet conscious about their destiny in the days to come. They were confident enough that their affectionate parents and sweet relations would not accord their returns cordially. In some cases they were forced to come back leaving behind their infants. The eternal question of motherhood was left unanswered by the male protagonists of recovery operations. Instead of protecting the abducted women, the recovery measures increased their agony and suffering. Those women were certainly fortunate who have had the opportunity to avoid abduction during the time of riot or on the way to West Bengal. They also suffered a lot in different manners. The women in question who had lost their male guardians were tortured and abused in their dwelling camps and colonies also. Undoubtedly they had the potential to live a normal life if they were provided with the opportunity. But by the grim irony of fate some rescued women were sent to Ashrams (homes) as they were not accepted by their families. A scanty number of women had the opportunity to lead a much desired family. Sometimes in private Homes, the refugee women were forced to marry unknown persons from other provinces.  

The women who were attached to their families had to shoulder the burden of displacement simultaneously with their male counterparts. In Bengal women were regarded as ‘Annapurna’, one entrusted with the task of providing food to all family members. It was nothing but a long standing tradition of Bengali womanhood. Due to acute scarcity of food the women community had to undergo tremendous psychological pressure. Many of them committed or attempted to commit suicide for not being able to perform their expected duty properly. The women in their daily life and activities and in their struggle for survival and existence with their male members were nothing but shadow companions of the men. To add to their misfortune, even the local women looked down upon them. They were treated as untouchables, irrespective of their caste and creed. The local people thought that the women of East Bengal had been exploited by the Muslims. The refugee women were denied collection of drinking of water from the public water supplies. The successive deprival of the displaced women gradually developed a sense of dignity, self-reliance and capability
among them. In the long run this helped the refugee women to attain success in the teeth of healthy oppositions and insurmountable hurdles.

**Effects of Partition on womenfolk:**

West Bengal was a place where the refugees were badly affected with countless ordeals in their new place of uncertainty. A sizable section of those refugee families who took refuge in station and camps were later cramped into shanties in extremely narrow space. Sealdah station of Calcutta and the adjoining areas got overcrowded with refugee exodus. Those refugees had to depend entirely on small doles, they were compelled to stay at station premises for months together till they were shifted to relief camps. As a consequence of this scarcity of space in the slums the strictness of several orthodox rituals, particularly those stringent customs relating to purity and cleanliness, became almost impossible to be observed. With the introduction of new amendments, the long standing belief and customs of the refugees underwent through a radical socio-economic changes. This gradually altered their personal outlooks and also brought about change in their mind set. The women could not maintain their privacy in a single-room apartment. Prior to the Partition, the women could enjoy and maintain their privacy in spacious rooms meant for them. But after migrating to West Bengal the scenario changed altogether due to overcrowded population of the colonies. Following scarcity of space the women had to share “their space with men, sleeping in the same room with their in-laws and brothers-in law” As the gulf between the “private” and the “public” narrowed down, the refugee women were able to expose themselves to the outer world of men. This gesture brought them into contact with new ideas, including the business and political issues what the men discussed. It also strengthened their bonding with the other women in the community and soon they provided assistance to each other in their struggle for existence. Generally, the gendered readings of Partition represent the images of rape, violence or trauma, but this transformation of women’s lives often remains unuttered in history. In spite of grim uncertainty, profound sufferings, irreparable wounds, psychological and emotional injuries; these women did learn to survive and adjust themselves with new environment in the new destination. Most of the women had no previous experience of going outside for work and when their professional journey actually started, they realized that it was not an easy task. And yet these new survival
strategies, which these women followed for sustenance, brought about significant socio-economic changes in their lives.\textsuperscript{61}

In the “post-Partition turmoil,” Gargi Chakravarty alludes to a new phenomenon: “daughters started to be gradually looked upon as sons. In those post partition days the fathers of many teenage daughters considered their daughters as their ‘eldest son’. Indeed, managing different avenues of earning with steadfast hands, the women not only uplifted “that impossible crowd” in the railway station to organize themselves “into a cultural and political entity, not merely a population to be brought under governance”\textsuperscript{62} They also contributed in some ways towards bolstering a collapsing. In this circumstances, many displaced women like kamala Dutta from Dhaka (now in Bangladesh), for instance, were forced to take up jobs in a small coal shop in West Bengal along with numerous works like making thonga, stitching kantha in leisure time to refurbish the appalling condition of their family. The emergence of a new class of working woman in schools and offices to small-scale industries such as pickle/jam making, tailoring or weaving was a new phenomenon altogether, as women were seen for the first time taking on the entire financial weight of the family on their shoulders and even actively participating in Labor Movements, demanding their rights. Matching shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts, refugee women participated whole-heartedly in the agitation. This was a great morale booster for their male colleagues. A new category ‘refugee womam’ that owed its birth to the partition. Now the women were forced into new public and political sphere.\textsuperscript{63}

**Traumatic memories of partition:**

The event of Partition has created a lively and vivid scar upon those who were the worst victims of the Partition. Memories, both horrifying and joyful, have been consequently handed over to the incoming generations. Partition has managed to survive in the after generations who had experienced Partition as an after history. The generations who were not originally or basically linked with East Pakistan, yet the episode in regard to Partition had a tremendous impact upon their minds also. The settlement of the migrants in question here in West Bengal more specifically in the district of North Bengal, was as old as the event of Partition itself. Their memories,
old bonding, sweet tales related to family and relations are still in vogue and automatically transmitted among the young generations. “As the nation state create and preserve its collective memory, the displaced and dislocated create a memory of their own, that survives in many different forms”.\textsuperscript{64} Partition accompanied by terror, violence and sufferings, left a shadow of torturing memory of life. Such memories of violence could not restrain themselves of the sweet memories of their deserted days of childhood of their village. The sweet memories of those days would often flash suddenly in their mind. The trauma of violence could not shatter their nostalgic feeling for their dearest motherland. Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty, the victim of Partition used the term ‘nostalgia for a paradise lost’ to describe the state of loss.\textsuperscript{65}

It is still possible to trace out those victims after the lapse of successive seventy years of the attainment of independence. The practical experiences and lived realities of the survivors of Partition have their impartial observations have elaborately been discussed and narrated through their oral testimonies and visual description of grim pictures of those turbulent days. Ranajit Guha, an eminent subaltern historiographer in an interview published on 15th August, 2007 in ‘The Anandabazar Patrika’ opined that ‘Memory’ itself is liar’. With the passage of time truth may be totally suppressed under the debris of lies. On the contrary Guha is of the opinion that ‘memory is an archive’. This archive of memory is documented with different observations, perceptions and outlook of different personalities. According to Guha memory is that unreliable present that cannot reach to an actual truth.\textsuperscript{66}

On the contrary, Ranabir Samaddar in his book ‘The Marginal Nation’ prioritizes the memories as an integral part of human experience. He also expresses his opinion that in case of Partition historiography while recollecting reminiscences of Partition the remembering subject often try to attach stress on their political views consciously or in a subconscious state of mind. It is quite natural and not unusual that memory follows oblivion. Again Samaddar is of the view that ‘Historicized memory kills pure memory and becomes another history’.\textsuperscript{67} While, Dipesh Chakraborty, an outstanding historiographer points out in one of his articles that it is more important to a person to decide what he wants to remember or what not to remember. Truly speaking, a person can face the bitterness and wounds of his mind in the midst of oblivion. Now a vital question arises among the historians that how to trace out the wounds of Partition from the depth of both memory and oblivion. In the midst of for and adverse criticism
regarding memory and oblivion, efforts are being made to draw a true picture of those uprooted destitute both men and women, and their sufferings during partition and post Partition period.

Discussing the partition victims of North Bengal so far as the women victims are concerned the thesis is enriched with stray interviews from the women of different walks of life. They have retold the narratives relating to Partition from different angles and different perspectives. A sizable number of women who happened to be victims of Partition were selected and chosen for interviews. In course of interviews the victimized women narrated their saga in such fashion that they were not speaking to the interviewer but was engaging in an introspective monologue with the self. Amidst the womenfolk a number of women in North Bengal, where such women victims are invisible who did not venture to retell their stories of exploitation, humiliation, intimidation and act of atrocities meted out to them through interviews. Each and every victimized woman had their own stories, but at the same time there were many women who had no such potentiality to be extraordinary, though they had their own stories. Their pang and pathos, agony and ecstasy, relentless struggle for existence, survival and empowerment were in no case less important. Their hard struggle in the new environment, in a new country as well as in the new abode got a new momentum when they settled. While interviewing they presented themselves in different moods. Sometimes their silence and stillness indicated a clear manifestation of their long cherished grievances. While narrating the violence of the time they sometimes became impatient, irritated as well as excited too. In many cases during the course of conversation they were found cheerful while expressing their stories of triumph after a long battle for dignified existence in the alien country.

Reminiscences of few refugee women during partition and during Bangladesh war of liberation:

The thrilling stories and tales narrated by Amiya Guha relating to the Partition of India and subsequent atrocities that broke out during the period upon the Hindu minorities by the Muslims of the then East Pakistan, those memories are yet fresh and vivid in the mind’s eye of the researcher. Her husband was a Zaminder in the village of Belta popularly known as Guha Belta, situated within a stone’s throw distance from the palace of the Maharaja of Santosh of Mymensingh district. The abolition of
Zamindari system and the Partition brought about a tremendous catastrophe in the family. She narrated her practical experiences of the violence of the majority Muslims of East Pakistan upon the innocent and helpless Hindu communities. According to the statement of Amiya Guha her family had possessed three big ponds, two in front and one at the backside of the house. According to her, taking the advantage of the insecure position and helpless condition of the family members some Muslim hooligans who were once the loyal subjects of the zamindars, raided the residence in broad daylight. They also netted fishes from the ponds without seeking any permission from the owner. She also narrated that there was an orchard from which local Muslim hooligans forcefully took away the fruits. The lady also told with a heavy heart that she had three houses in the life centre of Tangail town. Thereafter said houses were unlawfully occupied by the Muslims. Moreover, constant threats, intimidation, humiliation, disrespect towards women, forced elopements and marriage made the situation more complicated. Finding no other alternatives they decided to bid adieu. During the course of her narration she sometimes became indifferent, looked vacant and became speechless. Spontaneous droplets of tears began to roll down from her eyes. The very pathetic moment had a tremendous impact upon the researcher.

After coming over at Cooch Behar, a new struggle for survival started. One of the distant relations accommodated the distressed and displaced family in their residence for the time being. Her husband was a highly educated person but owing to grim irony of fate his merits and talents were not duly recognized. His vigorous endeavours for employment proved abortive. He began to coach students of different classes of different schools and she began to engage herself in the act of cooking for all the members of the family. The lady in question who was born and brought up in an affluent family and who had the financial capacity to engage cooks for her family but was herself compelled to take cooking to please the distant relation for giving her shelter. When the distant relation expressed his inability to accommodate the members of her family in their residence, she arrived to a decision to shift their residence in a rented house. The researcher have had the opportunity to unveil the struggle which remained unrevealed, unuttered and untold.

An interview was recorded of Mrs. Jayanti Ghosh, wife of Shri Santosh Kumar Dey, now a retired teacher of Bengali language and literature of New Town Girls Higher
Secondary school of Cooch Behar town. She originally hailed from erstwhile East Pakistan. She passed her childhood days in her motherland in Chittogong. Her father was a renowned professor of Mymensing and her Mother Snehalata Ghosh was a gifted lady. She had played a pioneering role to shift her minor children in quest for security and safety to India. It was stated by Jayanti Ghosh that they left East Pakistan at dead of night when the locality was in the grip of silence and the people were in deep slumber. As her father was a teacher of repute he was equally loved and respected both by the Hindu and Muslim student alike. The Muslim students came forward with their helping hands to enable their teacher and his family escape the borders. It was also stated by Jayanti that her elder sister also accompanied them in their journey to India. According to the statement by Jayanti, the political instability of Pakistan, hatred towards Hindu minorities, inhuman oppression on men and women, sexual abuse, fear of outraging chastity of women compelled them to quit Pakistan in no time. She recollected the experiences she gathered on the way of her journey on boats. Her brothers and sisters passed their days in half starved condition. Some sympathetic people helped them on their way to India.69

Renuka Ghosh of Berabochna village of Tangail district of East Pakistan migrated to Cooch Behar in 1950. Coming over here at Cooch Behar, she along with her minor children took shelter in a relative’s house. It was revealed from her statement, that most of the uprooted persons of that period who migrated here belonged to upper castes and they felt no necessity to take shelter in refugee camps because their relatives and distant relatives provided them with accommodation. The moderate educated uprooted people could easily be provided in different jobs according to their ability. But subsequently with the incessant flow of refugees the entire complexion of Cooch Behar changed drastically. In course of conversation she asserted that from her very childhood she was inclined towards reading the novels of eminent novelists and poets which created a tremendous impact upon her tender mind. She had the habit of writing poems and stories from her adolescence period and some of her writings were also published. After settling in Cooch Behar she could not resist the temptation of writing poems and stories. The paucity of fund, acute poverty and other hurdles could not stop her to fulfill her mission. Sitting on the floor of a mud house when her children and other family members were asleep, she began to write in the light of lantern. Some of her compositions were published in the local magazines named
‘Meyeder Kotha’. Pathos of refugee life could not damp the ardour of her creative mind set, on the contrary it had enriched her poetic fervour.\textsuperscript{70}

‘We first came here as refugees in 1947,’ says the octogenarian Abha Das, tears were rolling profusely from her eyes due to smoke that emitted from fire of cowdung which clouded her bamboo-mud room. She recollects that cow dung was used as fuel in her girlhood days and the same practice is still in vague even after coming over to India, admitting that nothing has really changed for them. When her family fled from East Bengal to the district of Cooch Behar in North Bengal 70 years ago she along with others was allotted temporary tents near Cooch Behar station. For the past 60 years, she lived in her own house amidst various adverse situations. According to her, most of the displaced persons who came over to Cooch Behar were allotted lands for habitation and for cultivation. During the period, women refugees who came to Cooch Behar did not engage them in any other outside activities excepting domestic and agricultural works. There might be some exceptions with which she was not acquainted. She also admitted that the refugee women who came towards North Bengal after the creation of Bangladesh were more self sufficient. They engaged them in various works through which they could earn something for maintaining the livelihood of their families.\textsuperscript{71}

For the first time the researcher met Kamalabasini Ghosh in 2000 when she was 79 years old. She was reluctant to talk on partition. She did not show any enthusiasm over sharing the experiences of the catastrophe of partition. But due to the keenness of the researcher for knowing her experiences of the turbulent period she eventually shared her experiences. She hailed from Khulna district of East Pakistan. She was the eye witness of Muslim atrocities right from 1946. She was of the view that in the immediate aftermath of partition, the attitude of the Muslims changed drastically. They often taunted the girls and young women, sometimes proposing marriages to them, they reminded their Hindu neighbours that it was their country where minority Hindus had no alternative but to accept their supremacy. In the context of the anarchical situation, her family took decision to shift to India. As her near relatives were in service in Siliguri sub division from pre partition days they moved towards Siliguri with their small belongings. Their journey towards unknown destination was
riddled with obstructions. They fled with other villager who accompanied her family in their way of uncertainty.

Mrs. Sujata Dutta was interviewed a long before. She was also a partition victim and shifted to Jalpaiguri district from Pabna after couple of years of partition. Her statement clearly reveals the inhuman torture as experienced by the Hindu women and girls in East Pakistan by the Muslim hooligans. The narrator also narrated vividly the horrible picture of miscreants’ attack on the houses of the Hindu dwellers and the subsequent jumping of young women into the ponds to protect their dignity.

Apprehending the attacks of the Muslim miscreants for looting their valuables, the inmates of the house threw their ornaments, utensils and other essential commodities into the ponds. Such successive tragic incidents had paralysed the physical and mental strength of the minority Hindu communities, following which they were compelled to adopt unanimous decision to leave East Pakistan at any cost. Sujata Dutta with her kith and kin through Lalmonihat, crossing the border of Gitaldaha, reached Dinhata subdivision of Cooch Behar district and registered their names in the refugee camps. After few days, they abruptly changed their mind and proceeded towards Jalpaiguri town to honour the request of their relatives. From there a new chapter of struggle began in their new abode in a new country, where Sujata had to sacrifice a lot for the wellbeing of the family. After coming over as refugee due to acute monetary stringency, she sometimes kept herself hungry for the sake of her children.

A number of interviews taken from the uprooted women who came over to North Bengal during partition and post partition era expressed identical statement that a sizable number of migrants took shelter in relative’s houses or in the houses of acquainted persons of their own. They initially stayed in the camps purely on temporary basis. Reports of untoward incidents and harassments in the refugee camps of North Bengal were not available from those women interviewed in course of the study. The Hindu refugee women who belonged to educated, elite and economically sound families did not like to engage themselves in outside activities. Most of them remained at home in spite of monetary stringency. The women refugees could not wipe out the age long tradition of remaining indoors but afterwards this attitude had changed altogether. An important point to be mentioned in this context is that most of the refugees who migrated immediately after partition to the districts of North Bengal,
engaged themselves in various jobs with Government assistance. They also built their
dwelling houses with their own efforts and initiative. There was another section of
women who had lost their husband in the early age, or who had no male guardian and
were not economically well-off. Sometimes they were compelled to engage
themselves as domestic help. Some of the refugee women used to stitch *kantha* (a
type of wrapper) and also engaged themselves in making *thonga* after the completion
of their household works. Sabita Pal, a widow with five children, moved towards
Siliguri at a very tender age. She used to make clay pots and supplied to the sweet
shops as container. Beside this, she made essential domestic articles, clay models and
show pieces with varied ornamentation for commercial purposes. Through adverse
circumstances she reared her children. In the later phase of her life she with her own
initiative started a small pottery industry in her locality. In some refugee families, in
absence of any capable male member, the eldest daughter had to shoulder the
responsibility of a son. 

But a gulf of difference was noticed while interviewing the uprooted women who
came to North Bengal before and after the Bangladesh War of Liberation. During the
afore said period, due to scarcity of land the new migrants in most of the cases were
compelled to stay in camps and afterwards they started living in colonies, both
Government sponsored colonies and forcefully occupied colonies. Minati Roy came
to Cooch Behar in 1971. She once came to Alipurduar in 1950s and returned back to
her village in Jamalpur of East Pakistan with a fair expectation to pass her days
peacefully. But her desired peace was short lived. She was the silent witness of the
brutality of the Pakistani hooligans. She vividly narrated the violence of the period.
In course of dialogue with Minati Roy it was stated *Musulmanra lathi sota niya amago
gyrame paray paray bari chhrar jonya humki dito. Taratari na chhairle lash phyalaner bhoy dekhai.* Emonki maiya gulare nika korar humki dito. *Ora tuila niya jaite pare ei bhoye maiyara ghorer baire jhabar sahas paito na* (The Muslims
accompanied by lethal weapons cautioned the Hindu inmates of the locality to leave
the country immediately, if not they were threatened to be murdered. Moreover they
dared to place marriage proposal for Hindu teen age girls. The teenage girls did not
venture to go outside the houses out of fear of elopement.)
Mrs. Ilarani Tarafder of Raigunj of West Dinajpur fled from Mymensing after the *Mukti Yudhdha*. When her interview was taken in 2013 she was 66 years old. She briefly apprised about the then political and social scenario of East Pakistan before and after the creation of Bangladesh. She highlighted that though the Muslims were not in favour of Hindu community but for their own interests they made the Doctors captive so that they could not leave the country. As most of the doctors were Hindus the local Muslims and other citizens were completely dependent upon those doctors. After her coming over here at Raigunj, she asserted, that though she had no experience about the colony life, still she had maintained a close association with the female members of the colony. The inmates of the camps out of poverty would sell their ornaments, utensils and other domestic articles among the well to do businessmen, gold smiths and other wealthy families of the localities at a cheap price. The authenticity of this occurrence was also available in a book authored by Paresh chandra Das of Cooch Behar. He expressed his experience of displacement and rehabilitation which followed the Bangladesh war of independence when he along with his family members came over to Balarampur, in Tufangunj subdivision of Cooch Behar and they were accommodated in a relief camp in Balarampur. He has shared identical experiences with that of the experiences of Mrs. Tarafdar.\(^{76}\)

Late Prafulla Bala Chanda of Chorkhaoria village of Bakshiganj in Jamalpur subdivision of Mymensingh district settled in Cooch Behar after 1971. Decades ago she shared her experience and stored memories of both partition of India and its successive eventualities with the researcher. From her version, it was revealed that following partition, she with her family members had made a brief stay in the house of her relatives at Cooch Behar. But ultimately she returned back to her ancestral residence. During the course of her conversation she in her own Bangladeshi dialect presented before the researcher a vivid and living description of the atrocities, oppression, humiliation and constant threatening to the minority Hindu communities to leave their country and also forced them to dispose of their properties to the Muslims at a cheap rate, if not their lives would be at stake. Defying constant intimidation they had to stay. But when the oppression and threatening reached to its peak, her family members took an immediate decision over night to leave the motherland. With the help and cooperation of some of the Muslim neighbours who were loyal to them and who hired some boats to cross the turbulent river
Brahmaputra, the family escaped through Mahendraganj towards the state of Meghalayas. In the state of Meghalaya, Tura was a district where her close relatives used to reside. From there on her way to Cooch Behar she stayed for sometime at Dhubri. The lady spent the major portion of her life in domestic works. The word partition and refugee was quiet new to her. She was quite ignorant of the social and political turmoil and the saga of victimization through partition and subsequently by the Bangladesh war of Liberation. The journey of her new life was not a smooth one. She was compelled to stay in tents with her children. As she lost her husband in East Pakistan, she had to shoulder the heavy responsibilities of the entire family. Almost two decades later of her coming over here at Cooch Behar she lamented with tearful eyes and vacant look about her golden days which remained dormant and silent. Sweet memories and saga of her motherland were carefully treasured in her neglected solitary apartment of life which clearly unveiled and manifested during the interview.77

In course of study, the researcher had to come in contact with female refugee individuals who settled in and around Malda district. Most of the individuals expressed their personal experiences of violence and ferocity of the majority of the Muslims of East Pakistan upon the innocent, helpless and unarmed Hindu population. Moreover they made it clear that under the pressure of political turmoil and social instability that prevailed during the period of partition they were forced to migrate. The Hindu community took it to be a settled fact that they would never be able to stay in their original homesteads. Some of them opined in different perspectives. Mrs. shubhra Sarkar of Malda referred that fear and apprehension of impending calamity forced them to shift from Bagura to Malda. She started her new journey from a refugee camp in Malda. In her narration, she elaborately stated that initially the displaced persons were accommodated on a vast vacant land where tents were not available, supply food was inadequate and scarcity of drinking water became the regular feature. The local people were deeply moved viewing the pathetic condition of those displaced persons and out of sympathy and compassion they voluntarily extended their assistance in all possible ways.78

A good number of migrated female migrants were almost illiterate and had to work as domestic help. They were also engaged to look after the ailing persons in well to do
families. Some were also engaged for taking care of the kids of the wealthy. Many of the interviewees served as female *bidi* workers after 1971 and onwards. Many female workers were engaged in cottage industries to prepare different types of baskets made of bamboo which were specially used for carrying and containing tea leaves in the tea plantation areas of North Bengal districts. More so, baskets were also used for carrying vegetables and other commodities from one place to another. The *Sital pati* (cool mat) of Cooch Behar is still a well known and reputed industry in West Bengal and India. Dipali Das of Ghughumari, Cooch Behar interviewed in her residence, informed that a huge number of women who migrated from Bangladesh have engaged themselves in the cottage industry of *sital pati*. Those mats are exported to foreign countries. A huge number of women migrants helped their male members in preparing the mats. The women also prepared different types of handicrafts with jute. Sadhana Dutta of Jalpaiguri, a migrant from Bangladesh, took up the profession of making different types of articles with jute and within a short period she became an artisan and was the source of inspiration to other women. In this respect, the Government had made suitable arrangement for the women in different training school. It may also be cited that an individual Mrs. Binata Das of Jalpaiguri, had proved her worth as a cane artisan. Through her exhibitions in different festivals and fairs in West Bengal and other neighbouring states, she had made the cane industry a popular and acceptable industry. Last but not the least, there was another section who were called the vagabonds. They were not interested to involve themselves in any activity. They preferred to beg from door to door for alms. Latika Das and Jyotna Roy, two beggars came of Cooch Behar after 1971, approved the authenticity of the above noted statement.

There were some fundamental differences between the partition refugees and the refugees after the Liberation of Bangladesh. The attitude of the migrants who settled over to the districts of North Bengal after 1947 was sharply different from the compatriot refugee brothers and sisters who came after 1970. After 1947, a good number of uprooted persons who set out for safety and security in Indian Territory, belonged to elite class. But due to changing circumstances, they became habituated to cope with the new environment. The female refugees at that period of crisis did not venture to go outside in search of employment or to involve themselves with other activities. They preferred to remain indoors. They were conservative in nature and
could not get rid of the long standing traditional mind set of women folk. It cannot be
denied that the refugees specially the female members of the refugee camps, brought
about a magical change in their outlook and consequently their conservative
viewpoint was on the way of gradual decay. As a matter of fact, they could realise the
grim reality of life. Still they could not wholly or fully isolate themselves from the age
long tradition of their predecessor. A number of exceptional cases were also
prevalent. The women who lost their husbands in early age had no other alternatives
but to engage them in various activities outside their houses for the maintenance of
their children who were mostly minors and for the betterment of their future
establishment. Less educated and illiterate women who had no earning male member
in the family or any other sources of income were forced to work as domestic help in
affluent families. Sometimes, the women possessing agricultural lands engaged
themselves in the activities related to agriculture.

A new dimension was opened following the migration of refugees towards North
Bengal for settlement after the War of Liberation of Bangladesh. Due to frequent
political and social changes the attitude of the new migrants also changed drastically.
Most of the migrants in that phase belonged to lower caste strata society. In their own
motherland they had practically no asset of their own. Most of the people were daily
wage earners. A significant number of people were carpenters, gardeners, potter,
masons, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, tailors, rickshaw pullers, bullock cart drivers, horse
cart pullers, farmers etc. These uprooted persons from East began to act as per their
professions for survival. The female members of the family did not seat idly like that
of the women refugee who came previously. In the districts of North Bengal the
scarcity of employment was not so acute after partition but with the incessant exodus
the scenario changed altogether and complexities became more alarming. The female
members, putting at bay all sorts of social hurdles and conservative outlook came
forward with undaunted courage and conviction to make themselves financially
sound.

During the period of 1970s, with the political horizon of East Pakistan was clouded
with troubles, the minority Hindus prepared themselves to move towards the
neighbouring state of India i.e. West Bengal, following the footsteps of the refugees
of 1947. Taking the advantage of political uncertainty, instability and turmoil
following the creation of a new state named Bangladesh; West Bengal had to encounter a fresh burden of new migrants. Different political parties, taking into account the helplessness of the new migrants came forward to help them in all respects. They tried to be their friends, philosophers and guides. Different political parties specially the Left viz. The CPI, CPI (M), Forward Bloc, RSP etc. assured the displaced persons assistance in fulfilling their demands to the Government. They also emphasised and requested both State and Central Government to allot suitable lands for habitation and agricultural land for cultivation. More so the political parties also appealed to the Government for granting relief with cash and kind for maintaining the livelihood of the uprooted distressed persons. At the same time the political parties tried their best to involve the womenfolk in the struggle for legitimate right of the women. They also tried to make the women politically and socially conscious regarding their rights and responsibilities. Under the banner of CPI(M), branches of the Ganatantrik Mohila Samiti were established almost in all the corners of Bengal. They wanted to bring refugee and other women of the society under the umbrella of Left parties specially the CPI (M).The Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti not only dealt with the problems of refugee women singularly but simultaneously they kept their eyes vigil for the all-round development of the neglected women of our society. The leaders of the Samiti took sacred vows to make them politically conscious, socially aware, economically sound and educationally vibrant as that of their male counterparts. In a word, the erudite leaders left no stone unturned to elevate the dignity and ability of womenfolk in all spheres of life.

Following the war of Liberation of East Pakistan a political uncertainty and catastrophe clouded the horizon of East Pakistan and as a consequence thousands of people from East Pakistan, irrespective of race, colour, caste, creed and religion preceded towards India for their survival. The people of Rongpur began to move towards the neighbouring districts of West Bengal like Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. A large number of evacuees were from rural background and most of them were illiterate. The Muslim evacuees of West Bengal who set their foot on East Pakistan were comparatively accomplished and educated where as the Hindu migrants and other communities were less accomplished and less educated. The educated Muslim migrants of India to Rongpur brought good fortune for the people of Rongpur. In the event of partition of India in 1947 a large number of educated Hindu women left
Rongpur. The Muslim migrants of West Bengal, specially the womenfolk, contributed a lot in the fields of female education in East Pakistan. In the meantime the consecutive movements of East Pakistan became more vibrant and more frequent. Through movements the people of East Pakistan with the active assistance of enthusiastic students’ communities tried to uphold the dignity of Bengali language and longed for replacing the ‘Bengali’ to be the state language of East Pakistan instead of ‘Urdu’. The Bengali Muslims who came over to West Bengal were Bengali speaking. They were not well conversant with Urdu. So, the movement for ‘Bengali language’ got new dimension with the arrival of East Pakistan Muslims.

The nature of migration in North Bengal in 1947 and again after the war of liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 was different in nature. The oppression, physical assault and gang rape upon women were regular features of partition of 1947, whereas, in 1971, during the war for separate state ‘Bangladesh’ the women of Hindu minority were treated brutally which they had already experienced in 1947. In the first phase of partition the migrants were from elite class societies. They came to India for the protection and safeguard of their dignity and social identity. But the struggle of the migrants from Bangladesh in and after 1971 was to some extent different. The migrated people from Bangladesh to the districts of North Bengal did not suffer so much like their predecessors.

It is noticed with amazement that the said women had to come out braving all sorts of obstacles. The most remarkable feature in post-partition of West Bengal was the coming out of the refugee women from the private domain to the public. Defying the confinement within four walls they ventured to come out in public domains. Educated women set out in quest of employment especially in educational institutions, private firms, government and semi-government offices. Those who were educationally unsound engaged themselves in various domestic works; Most of them capitalized upon their training in household activities for commercial purpose. They prepared pickles, papad, varieties of food items and other cooking articles. A large number of them were engaged in preparing paper packets and rolling bidis (a type of cigarette). Some took up a more challenging and unconventional job as hawkers. Some became wardens in the female wards of the jails in West Bengal. Refugee girls from lower middle and middle class took up a career in acting in Calcutta film industry and in commercial theatres. After much struggle against odds and uncertainties, a few of
them became successful heroines to come out of the trauma of partition. Thus, partition had some positive effect on Bengali migrant women in North Bengal. The breaking up of traditional structures might have possibly led to space of greater agency for women.

After the migration to West Bengal, the refugees became inclined towards left politics for their own uplift. Under the supervision of RSP and few local Hindu Mahasabha workers a meeting of about three hundred refugees were held on 7 June, 1950 where the refugees were exhort to be united for the fulfilment of their demand. After couple of day in 9th June almost three hundred refugees assembled near the Kotwali police station in Cooch Behar. They were accompanied by a good number of women along with children. They staged demonstration demanding the release of two RSP leaders who were arrested previously. They paraded on some of the streets of Cooch Behar town shouting slogan demanding their release. At the insistence of local RSP leaders about one hundred fifty refugees of Alipurduar organised a demonstration before DC on 30/9/50 to demand rice. A peaceful procession of 200 refugee women and children entered the Alipurduar court compound on 15/10/50 at 11.30 hrs and demanded release of Suresh Talukdar and Ganesh Mohanta arrested on 11.10,50 for staging an anti-famine agitation on 9.10.50. On October 9, 1961 a colossal conference was held at Andaran Phulbari of Tufangunj subdivision of Cooch Behar district where more than 700 women took part in. In that meeting Mrs. Renu Chakraborty delivered a speech emphasizing on the social problems of the women and regarding their empowerment. She also stressed upon the utility of creating women organizations and appealed to the women to come forward to face the problems and to solve the problems of their own. In the said meeting, a sizable number of women, specially the bidi workers were present. This meeting created a tremendous sensation in that very locality.

Food movement at Cooch Behar was recorded to be a heinous crime in the annals of food movements. Immediately after the attainments of independence on 15th August, 1947 and annexation of Cooch Behar, the erstwhile princely state with Indian union and the West Bengal state was the most eventful episode. Thenceforth Cooch Behar was treated to be a district instead of state since its merger. Traditionally, Cooch Behar was a surplus area in respect of food production. The then princely state joined
with India on 1 January, 1950. In the month of April 1951 rice was being sold at Rs 60-70 per mound (82 lbs). A mammoth demonstration of a hungry mob took out a procession and assembled before the Secretariat (Lansdown Hall) in the western side of the Sagardighi to voice their demands before the administration on April 21, 1951. The irate hungry crowd demanded that the district of Cooch Behar be brought under full rationing system. The police administration, finding no other means, fired indiscriminately upon the humble ‘hunger marchers’. Following the agitation people of all walks of life and the teenagers of both the sexes were brutally assassinated in broad day light and in full public view at the bank of Sagar dighi. Kabita Bose (18), Bakul Talukdar (7), Bandana Talukdar (16), Satish Debnath (23) and Badal Biswas (22) met heroic deaths and became martyrs. 35 people sustained serious injuries and were admitted to local M.J.N. Hospital in critical condition.

The news of such atrocious incident consequently spread like wild flames in the sub divisions of Dinhata and Mathabhanga. A martyr tomb was erected in the southern part of Sagar Dighi known as ‘Shahid Bagh’. Residents of Cooch Behar spontaneously protested against the brutal incident. Black flags were flown in every house, a formidable procession of almost a mile length heading towards Deputy Commissioners Office. Women participants took prominent roles in leading the procession. The most remarkable feature of this brutal incident was that out of five martyrs two were teen aged girls and one girl. This food movement clearly indicated a monumental valour in social and political consciousness of the people, specially the women. This was owing to the migrants of East Pakistan developed to a large extent and it was evident through the food movement. Through the struggle for existence and survival at Cooch Behar, people silently nourished their social and political consciousness which were manifested through this movement.

Notes:


4. Ibid, p.3.


22. Josodhara Bagchi and Subharanjan Dasgupta (eds.), *The Trauma and the Triumph Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, p.3.


25. ‘Asoka Gupta Archives’, School of Women Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.


34. Interview with Tapan Sen, 12 March, Kolkata.


38. Letter dated 23rd May, 1955, From Deputy Director (Women’s Resettlement) to Smt Asoka Gupta, regarding the ‘Formation of an Advisory Board for Work’. This board, as suggested by the minister, would comprise— Ramola Sinha, Asoka Gupta, Seeta Chowdhury, Planning Advisor (R&R Department), Director (Women’s Resettlement) and Deputy Director (Women’s Resettlement); Asoka Gupta Collection, Schools of Women Studies (SWS), Jadavpur University, Kolkata.
39. Earlier the Homes and Infirmaries were directly under the Ministry of Rehabilitation till 1958. But when talks of winding up the Ministry started doing the rounds, it was decided to shift the responsibility of these Homes and Infirmaries to the Ministry of Home Affairs (1958 onwards), and later to the Ministry of Education (1960). Finally, it was brought under the Department of Social Welfare from 1964 onwards.


41. Ibid., pp.100-101.

42. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, November 14, 1949 (speech of Renuka Roy)

43. Reports of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, 1989.

44. Report Submitted by Asoka Gupta and her team after visiting homes in Eastern and Western region.


46. Ibid.


51. Ibid., p.17.

52. Ibid., p.19.

53. Information collected from Professor Ananda Gopal Ghosh in course of conversation, Jalpaiguri, 5 September, 2017.


56. Reports collected from IB Department, West Bengal State Archive.

57. Information derived from Prof. Ananda Gopal Ghosh in course of conversation.


60. Ibid., p.71.


64. ibid, p.12.


68. Written from the stored memory of conversation with Amiya Guha, Cooch Behar, (long years back)


70. Interview – Renuka Ghosh, Cooch Behar, 5 September, 2010

71. Interview – Abha Das, Cooch Behar, 22 December, 2015


73. Interview – Sujata Dutta, Jalpaiguri. 11 December, 2013

74. Interview – Sabita Pal, Siliguri. 1 January, 2018

75. Interview – Minati Roy, Cooch Behar, 17 August, 2016

76. Interview – Ilarani Tarafdar, Raiganj. 2 March, 2015

77. Interview – Prafulla Bala Chanda, Cooch Behar, 1 April, 2013.

78. Interview – Shubhra Sarkar, Malda, 23 July, 2017

79. Interview – Dipali Das, Ghugumari, Cooch Behar. 30 July, 2018

80. Interview – Sadhana Dutta, Jalpaiguri. 22 October, 2017

81. Interview – Binata Das, Jalpaiguri. 22 October, 2017

82. Interview – Latika Das and Jyotna Roy, Cooch Behar. 13 June, 2018

83. Reports collected from IB Department, West Bengal State Archive, Reports on political activities of refugees on Cooch Behar, dtd. 25.6.50.

84. file no, 397/39 ang file no, 1088/G (1), p.1821