Appendix - A

Map of India before and after Partition

Appendix – B

Map of Bangladesh

Appendix - C

Pictures of two refugee families

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL
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Note from the Editor-in-Chief

On behalf of the Department of History, University of North Bengal It is my privilege to present to the readers the Volume 10 (2017) of the Karatoya: North Bengal University Journal of History. The journal has incorporated the research papers from ancient Indian History, Medieval Indian History and Modern Indian History and contemporary as well. The Volume 10 is being published after all the articles having been refereed and peer reviewed and with the ISSN 2229-4880. The Karatoya: North Bengal University Journal of History is a UGC Approved Journal of Arts and Humanities with Serial No. 42512

The editor of the journal do not judge for the facts stated, opinions expressed and conclusions reached, it is entirely that of the authors concern and the editor of the journal accepts no responsibility for the same.

It is my solemn duty to express my gratitude to our Honurable Vice Chancellor, Registrar, Finance Officer for their generous concern on Academic Endeavour. I am thankful to my colleagues of the Department of History for their warm encouragement and necessary cooperation for publishing this journal. Mr Varun Kr. Roy, associate editor of this volume deserved huge appreciation for his constant help in publishing this volume.

I am also grateful to all the contributors for providing valuable research papers. Last but not least, the Officials and the Staffs of the North Bengal University Press deserved heartiest thanks for their cooperation in printing the journal within limited span of time.

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PARTITION AND THE SAGA OF UPROOTED WOMEN IN WEST BENGAL: A REVIEW

Madhuparna Mitra Guha[1]

Abstract:

The partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947 was a shaping event which caused one of the greatest human convulsions of history. The partition of British India and subsequent creation of two antagonist countries was not just a surgical allegory or an operation; it was a line of division inside our heads and hearts too. The dark legacies of partition have thrown a long shadow on the lives of the people of India and Pakistan. If an elaborate analysis of Partition of India is made then it can safely be concluded that the miserable plight of women centering round the event of partition had long been neglected and ignored, though they were the worst victims of the Partition.

Keywords: *Bangladesh, Noakhali, Annapurna, honour, Bhadralok*

The womenfolk remained a closed chapter, with the 'high-politics' of Partition dominating all administrative and scholarly imagination. Recent historiography emphasized on the 'human' dimension of this tragedy, the women have finally found their rightful place in Partition historiography[1]. The impact of the partition on the women from East Bengal was excessive and they unfortunately became the refugees in their own state which was united just before August, 1947. 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, as well as the lives of their beloved children too. The victimized women hailing from

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East Pakistan were exploited and assaulted in every possible way. Almost 12 million people were displaced; a million died; 75 thousand women were abducted and raped.[2] But brushing aside all adversities they got courage to face the hard reality and subsequently marched forward acquiring self reliance.

Objective of the paper

The prime objectives of the paper are:

* To throw light on the migration of womenfolk to West Bengal especially after Partition of India.
* To unveil the sufferings and bitter experiences of the women refugees from East Pakistan who migrated to West Bengal.
* To describe the nature of hardship that the women confronted with and their ultimate success in coping with the new environment.

Methodology

For the preparation of the present dissertation materials from various sources have been procured. For the concrete paper both primary and secondary sources have been utilized. Oral sources have acted as an important source for preparing this paper. Data procured from valuable experiences of the refugee women as valuable sources. Memories and experiences of the most vulnerable section of the society like women got special attention of the historians since 1990s. The issue of women 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 Other Side of Silence', the path-breaking book of Urvashi Butalia, probably first documented the experiences of the women on Partition. The focus, therefore, was on

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the theme of women as victims of partition. The way of rebuilding their shattered lives and accommodating with the nascent nation-state is the main focal point of the recent scholar. Another remarkable book 'Borders and Boundaries' by Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin emphasized on the 'gender accent of Partition Narrative' confined its discussion within the region of West.[3] They tried to understand the experiences of women during partition in terms of gender and patriarchy. Patriarchy constructed women in a strange way - her sexuality was a threat to her; her respectability confirmed the degree to which she was able to retain her sexual purity, moreover her body was not her own. It was not only the question of her own honour and respect but also of her family and community[4]. Every woman represented her community and she was the repository of her community's honour. From the point of view of Bengali women in partition of India got touch of the trained historians only with beginning of 21st century. Historian Joya Chatterji in her a book 'Bengal divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition" related how a large and powerful section of Hindu society i.e. 'bhadralok' in Bengal insisted that their province by deciding to create a separate Hindu homeland.

The partition of India in 1947 is still considered as the largest human migration that the history has ever witnessed. 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 in the plea of search by the Pakistani customs officers and staffs. [5] Thousands of women of minority communities left their homes overnight to protect their honour and dignity. They were allowed to carry minimum requirements with them. In 1946,

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[6]. Figures showed that in the interim period between August 1946 and December 1947 several 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 partition of Bengal not only killed thousands of people, but also uprooted and displaced millions from their traditional homeland, their desh.[7] 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 abode. They realized that the natural surroundings, social customs and the daily rituals of the people were sometimes starkly different from their own. 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 embarrassment with elegant life style of the city.

The predicament of the exile in the hellhole of these transit rehabilitation camps reminds us of the terrible 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, the 'Gateway to Hell'. Kolkata became a suffering city for refugees who were afflicted with innumerable ordeals in their new abode[8]. Partition stories have become so poignant because of the direct or indirect violence associated with them". Violence lied not only in shooting or putting daggers through people or

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raping them, which was also found in the strict prescription of the people irrespective of their own feeling in the matter[9]. 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 the order of the day. In many cases incidents of abduction complaints could not be reported following sheer terror. Women had to watch the atrocious murder of their husbands.[10]. 'Vermilon marks' (Sindur) were forcibly erased from the foreheads of women and conch shell bangles broken.[11]In the leading news paper 'The Hindustan Standard' on November 5, 1946 published a report that 300 women were raped in Noakhali and about 400 cases of rape of defenseless women in another area were recorded[12].'The Noakhali violence marginalized women, who became victims of male chauvinism".[13] 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 where a large number of Hindus passengers including women and children were brutally killed or seriously injured[14]. 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[15].

The grim irony of fate was that there were two options remained 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'. During the discourse of partition victimhood of the Hindus of East Pakistan a sense of insecurity regarding dhon(wealth), pran (life)

maan (honour) reflected[16]: However, the experience of violence was not always explicit and direct. There were other forms of violence which were often missed 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 so far other places of India were concerned. A good number of women at the time chose to commit suicide in order to thwart the corporeal holocaust.[17]Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay, the then Rehabilitation Commissioner for West Bengal, narrated in his 'Udvastu' 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 Mussalman][18]. 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 outward situation.

The journey of displaced women towards the unknown destination was riddled with hurdles. Extensive looting, indiscriminate arson, horrible murders and abduction of women became the distinctive features of the riots during 1950 and onwards. The migrants' women travelled on overcrowded steamers, motor launches, trains etc. A huge number of refugees traversed a long way through jungle areas bare footed. They had no other alternative but to bring few clothing or a small trunk with them. The mass movement of the people on foot, by bus, train, and car left women, children, the aged and infirm, the disabled particularly vulnerable'.[19]During the 1947 partition of India, an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted by the

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members of other religious communities. Some of them were raped and murdered or sold into prostitution, or forced into marriage.[20]

The economist Ashok Mitra espoused in an article published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (Nov. 3, 1993) that initially in West Bengal "the widely publicized 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 the worst of both"[21]. The object of such heinous crime created a traumatic situation. After much maltreatment and distress, the refugees migrated over to West Bengal where there was none to entertain their settlement. 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 than 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[22]. The Women, who were accustomed to stay indoors, abruptly came out of their homes. It was beyond imagination on the part of the uprooted women of East Pakistan. During the period of anarchy following partition forced marriage became rampant and common feature. To accept and recognize the abductors as husbands were really unthinkable, painful and pathetic in the truest sense of 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.

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 be defined in two ways, firstly toning down the act of violence with a view to discourage migration and secondly there was 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.[23] 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. In this office the Dacca Transit Home was started by Mridula Sarabhai. She was very closely associated with the refugee relief operations in Delhi also used to get daily reports from Congress workers of Bengal. She came to Calcutta in March 1950 to oversee operations and report on the prevailing circumstances.[24]

It will not be out of place to mention in this connection that the recovery and restoration programme in the West where the State itself would take the decision of migration in respect of woman. 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 family 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 used to seek asylum in Dacca Transit Camp. The Government of India made frequent instructions and orders for immediate shut down the home. But

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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.'[25]

In post 1950 the Migration Certificate (MC), was the only legal means to enter India from East Pakistan, but to obtain these Migration Certificate (MC) was hard task. It was much easier for women in procuring the migration certificate because the State itself was in favour of certain categories of women. In certain cases priority was given in issuing Migration Certificates to the women considering the magnitude of the issue in question. 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. This facilities were not applicable to the others members of the family.

During the whole period of migration dual role played by the State, on the one hand the role of 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 those 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 encourage them to be self dependant. The Government of India became concerned with the

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issue of rehabilitation of refugees. In fact, the state government was quite watchful in its approach towards the issue of Homes or Infirmaries. 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.[26] Under this 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. In an exhibition at Jahangir Art Gallery of Bombay in 1959 articles of worth 5 Lakhs were sold in a single day that eventually increased the demand of artifacts of Uday Villa within short span of time. [27] 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. There were many women who did not find accommodations in these camps were forced to seek refuge in Kashi or Brindaban. Even after 29 years of the creation of Bangladesh there were 2910 Bengali women struggling for survival in Brindaban[28]

Many of the abducted women considered the recovery operation conducted by Governments as a second uprootment. Following Partition 30 lakhs refugee came over to West Bengal by 1960. In the 1970s the state witnessed another massive exodus from East Pakistan during the period of the formation of Bangladesh. At the

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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 regarding 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. Undoubtedly they had the potentially 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 life. 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', 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. In their daily life and activities, the struggle for survival and existence with their male members was just like their shadow companion. The pity of whole thing was that even the local women of their own sex looked down upon them. They were treated as untouchables irrespective of their caste and creed. The local people thought that the women East Bengal had been pulled by the Muslims. The refugee women were debarred from

collecting drinking water from the common water points. 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.

In the early hours focus was on the changing trends in presenting women's experiences, where emphasis was solely attached on the theme of women victimization. The time is ripe 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 present scholars concentrate more on the constructive role of the women in the process of rehabilitation. Common people in general and women in particular had made tremendous efforts for getting new identity. They had to traverse a long way riddled with hurdles. It is noticed with amazement that in spite of utter uncertainty, deep pain, irreparable wounds, and emotional strains 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 etc. Those who were educationally unsound engaged themselves in various domestic works; Most of them capitalized their training in household activities for commercial purpose.

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