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The Narratives of Displaced Women: Journey from Assam to Siliguri (1947-1991)

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Abstract: *Siliguri became the center of attraction for a bulk of Bengali immigrants from Assam to resettle in the new region. The extraordinary population-growth of the town especially during the second half of the twentieth century indicates the influx of the evacuees from Assam into the realm. After independence Siliguri Sub-division confronted with unusual pace in its development. Severe lucrative scope of secondary and tertiary sectors in the town favored the displaced people to get engaged in this new commercial field of the metropolis. The people commenced their new journey in a new way in the burg through their own initiatives. These massive number of people were mainly due to the East Bengali Hindu refugee Scheme of West Bengal in newly independent India. But unfortunately in reality they could not find any kind of facilities for their resettlement neither by the Central Government nor by the State Government. A voluminous number of evicted women had to go through many hazards and trauma in their lives. The words of these victimized women require special attention to reveal the truth about their struggle for existence in Siliguri after escaping from Bangladesh at first and then from Assam.*

Key Words: *1947 Partition, East-Bengali Hindu Refugee, Bongal Khedao Andolon, Displaced Women, Resettlement.*

Introduction:

The flaw of 'Partition' made a plenty number of East Bengali Hindus 'homeless' overnight. The repeated waves of the immigration of these Bengali Hindus shook the Assamese society again and again. It is to be noted that the Assamese population already had their grievances against the Bengali dwellers in Assam and these never-ending infiltrations of the East-Bengali refugees into the region gave momentum to it. The ignominious Asamiya-Bengali conflict took a new turn through the phases of language movement and the notorious Bongal Khedao Andolon (drive out the Bengalis from Assam). The Bengali community found themselves impotent to resist the unwanted blow as the situation was

degrading promptly and they were searching for a new place to survive. Bengali women living in post-colonial Assam live a life of tremendous miseries. They became the common targets for both the leaders of the above-said Andolan and Assamese criminals. At this phase an enormous number of these Bongal Khedao Andolon-displaced people found a new epicenter, Siliguri as their new hope of living. This forced-migration from Assam into Siliguri made rampant changes in the city's demographic profile. This essay intends to review the sorrow, the mental trauma, the hazards or hardships as the women faced displacement earlier from East Pakistan or Bangladesh and then from Assam into Siliguri through their words from the historical perspective.

Bengali Population Movement into Assam Prior to 1947 and after 1947 :

After taking the administrative responsibility of Assam in 1826 the colonial rulers of India immediately initiated to employ the Bengalis for their administrative purposes which led to a massive immigration of Bengali officials in colonial Assam, particularly from Sylhet district of present Bangladesh. In addition to this there was also continual inflow of "tea garden coolies" from vicinage Bengal from 1880 to 1930 (Dikshit, Jutta Dikshit, 1995, p.459). A bulk of Bengali peasants especially from Mymensingh district also resettled in Assam. "The sequential process was to establish their foothold somewhere, reclaim wasteland, cultivate and develop their own permanent settlements. These immigrants never returned and settled in Assam" (Dikshit, Jutta Dikshit, 1995, p.459). C.S Mullan, Census Superintendent of colonial-Assam commented on the migration from East Bengal to Assam as "the only thing I can compare it to be the mass movement of a large body of ants".¹ It can be said that Assam reformed into 'a kind of extended Bengali district to the western region to take advantage of the available lands' at the end of the 19th century (Ghoshal, 2021, p.122). The influx of the Bengali Hindus remained same as the Partition of India in 1947 tremendously affected the East Pakistani Hindu refugees and the several waves of refugees hit Assam thoroughly through many decades. Besides the infamous Noakhali massacre, a number of other obscure incidents like Soneswar and Habibganj in 1949, the persecution of the Hajongs in North Mymensingh²

¹ Report of the Deputy Commissioner, 1937, Nowgong on the Immigrant, Report of the Line System Committee: Question of that District, p.21.

² Baghaiwalla R.P., 1951, Census of India 1951, Part 1-A, Prefatory Note on Assam, Manipur and Tripura of Vol xii.

were enough to spread fear among the minority people from the-then East Pakistan or present Bangladesh. In 1964 as severe anti-Hindu Riots were conducted in East Pakistan these people pursued their only ray of hope in the immigration from Eastern Pakistan to Assam or West Bengal vis-a-vis India (Hazarika, 2000, p.191). In addition to this after the 1965 India-Pakistan War, the East Pakistan Government passed the Enemy Property (Land and Building) Administration and Disposal Order in 1966 which instigated the Bengali Hindus to emigrate from East Pakistan or Bangladesh (Trivedi, 2007, Part xiv). According to Professor Abul Barkhat of Dhaka University 5,000,000 Hindus lost 2,000,000 acres of land and nearly 40 percent of the Hindu families found themselves victimized by the Act³. After 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War hordes of East Bengalis immigrated into Assam to be relieved from the repression by the Pakistani military⁴. The flow of continuous immigration continued up to the 1980s which prompted an anti-immigration movement in Assam.

Mapping the Violence against the Bengalis in Post-Colonial Assam:

The continuous immigration of Bengalis not only brought significant changes in the demographic scenario of Assam but also changed the socio-cultural-political spheres of the state. As the Bengalis found themselves advantageous in the spheres of education, job-opportunity and business in the state through the colonial period the Assamese people got scared about their holdings in various realms of Assam. They had been going through an identity crisis which gradually turned into the form of resentment, hostility, uprisings during the post-colonial decades. Therefore, this time the Bengalis perceived themselves unsecured in the state and became bound to flee to neighboring Bengal.

The demographic profile of Assam had a predominant Bengali population against whom the host Assamese society had socio-cultural-economic rivalry continued for almost a century (Sharma,2011,p.Introduction). It is needless to say that the attitude of this Assamese society towards the voluminous number of refugees was entirely different than that of the other refugee-absorbing states like West Bengal and North-East India (Hussain, 1993, p.165). In all

³ Prothom Alo, 2004, Newspaper, November, 4, viewed on April 20, 2020 at <http://en.prothom-alo.com/>.

⁴ Upadhyay R., 2001, Work Permit to Infiltrators: need for caution, South Asia Analysis Group viewed on July 21, 2020 at <http://www.southasiananalysis.org/%5Cpap...er> 248.html.

respects the Bengali refugees were assumed as 'irritants' in Assam (Dutta, 2013, p.103).

The Assamese were eagerly waiting to get rid of the Bengali assimilation and they also felt a little relieved with the consequence of Sylhet Referendum in 1947⁵.

But the irony of history is that the Bengalis in camouflage of 'Refugees' again entered into Assam which provoked the hostility in a huge manner amongst the host-community⁶. The 'Bengali Conspiracy' theory became popular among the post-independence Assamese intelligentsia (Sharma,2011,p.290). The Assamese Bengali language politics took its utmost shape in the form of 'Medium of Instruction Movement' of 1972⁷. The rhetorical slogan of the insurrection was—"Bangladeshi, illegal immigrant, and foreigner" (Baruah,2020,p.64). The anti-foreigner insurgency took place for six years (1979-1985) in the state which can be identified as the definitive in the exodus of the Bengali Hindus from Assam (Bhaumik,2009,p.133).

Towards Siliguri, Search for a Second Home:

These displaced Bengali community eagerly felt to resettle in Siliguri as soon as possible as the importance of it as a commercial metropolis was perceived by them. Siliguri becomes exceptionally important from geographical aspect as well as the political and geographical scenario of post-colonial India. These displaced families heartily wanted a space where they would not have to face any social intolerance or rivalry again in their lives. The politically stable and calm atmosphere of Siliguri played as the pull factor for immigration of these people while the troublesome condition pushed them from Assam. The evacuees initiated their new-journey in the town and got assimilated themselves in the existing society of Darjeeling Terai.

Siliguri has often been considered as a migrant's town. The transfiguration from a tiny thorp to over-populated city becomes the striking feature of Siliguri of Darjeeling district. In the words of Samir Kumar Das, Siliguri is a "town in

⁵ 'Viceroy's Personal Report No. 13, dated 18th July, 1947', File No. L/PO/6/123, Pt-1, Neg 9850 (1-105), IOR.

⁶ File No. V/24/1033:1942-1947, IOR.

⁷ Weiner Myron, 1993, 'Rejected People and Unwanted Migrants in South Asia', Economic and Political Weekly 28(34), p.1742.

transit with the implication that it is the city that moves with its moving population and loses fast its potential of becoming anyone's home conventionally understood as the relatively stable abode where the family lives like what Hegel calls "an individual" (Das,2011,p.80). "The transit nature of this migrant city – in the dual sense of being transitional and transitory- is not an effect merely of its fugacious daytime workforce. It is an effect produced by the historical fact that waves of migrants have over the decades found a home in Siliguri, be it the Marwari settlers, old and new, the plantation workers of the nineteenth century, the partition refugees of mid-twentieth century or the recent flows of "multi-collared" labour drawn by the lure of neoliberal lucre" (Ghosh, 2016,p.8). Prof. Das also recognizes that "According to a sample survey conducted in 1990," "amongst the immigrants, 60 per cent come from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh, while 17 per cent come from Bihar and 8 per cent happen to be Marwaris mainly controlling the wholesale trade. The rest 15 per cent come from South Bengal or Assam" (Das,2011,p.80). It is also to be noted that Siliguri not only got enlarged itself but also it gives birth to multiple number of suburbs around the town- "There were 500 neighboring villages and local hamlets around the vicinity of Siliguri town that were dependent on it for economic and various other reasons. The continuous urban flourishing of this town was not only concentrated within the area of Siliguri Municipal Corporation, rather the areas upto 10 miles radius like Matigara, Shivmandir and Bagdogra had been included under the greater urban agglomeration of the Siliguri town" (Bhattacharjee, 2014, p.43).

The population profile of Siliguri was not such highly expanded in the pre independence period but in post-independence era Siliguri has been identified with amazing population-growth due to non-stop inflow of immigrants. Although majority of these evacuees had to immigrate directly from East Pakistan or Bangladesh to Assam due to its vicinity with East Pakistan or Bangladesh at the first phase and then they again had to leave Assam because of the disturbances within it and decided to immigrate into Siliguri. A voluminous number of this massive influx was Bongal Khedao Andolon-displaced Bengali families of Assam. Due to the miseries, fear arose in the minds of the Bengali denizens of Assam a bulk of them found their new settlement in the Siliguri Sub-division. Naturally a question appears why did those evacuees select Siliguri or why did they choose to re-settle here? To answer this question it can be said that several pull factors acted crucial role in this context. These pull factors may be identified as the geo-strategic location of Siliguri, the

job-opportunities, the commercial importance of it. It is true that the definite number of these displaced-peoples could not be counted but it is beyond doubt that the bulk of these immigrants from Assam since the 1960s took their new shelter in Siliguri (Saha, 2004,p.33). The Bongal Khedao Andolon caused a number of continuous waves of immigration into the city which changed the town's demographic profile several times. With this massive influx the town enlarged itself by leaps and bounds.

Women and Bongal Khedao Andolan: A Narrative of Displacement:

The forced-migration of Bengalis from Assam into Siliguri makes drastic changes in the town which helps it to gain in importance in the socio-economic-political panorama of West Bengal. The Bengalis from Assam tried utmost to be assimilated in the prevailing society of Siliguri. To protect themselves from unwarranted arrests, looting, rape, hazards, turbulence and other forms of physical and mental hardships, and organized killing, huge numbers of Bengalis had to leave Assam and migrated for their survival in a new town, new society. It is to be noted that the Bengalis of Darjeeling Terai also showed their agitation against the Bongal Khedao Andolon. The people protested while Mr. Hareshwar Goswami, the Minister of the-then Assam arrived at Siliguri Junction on 9th July 1960 (Chattopadhyay,2000,p.42). On that day the agitators set fire to an ambassador car, death of five people in firing took place leading to an injury of 10-12 people that made the calm Siliguri town agitated. People observed 'Bangla Hartal' in the town on 16th July to show their protest against the repulsion of Bengalis from Assam (Chattopadhyay, 2000, p.40). The Bengali evacuees after leaving Assam rebuilt their new residence in the different corners of Darjeeling Terai like–Dabgram Unnayan (1,2), Deshbandhu Para, Baghajatin Colony, Subhash Nagar, BBD Colony, Adarsho Nagar Colony, Notun Para, Jyoti Nagar(2), Pati Colony, Sukanto Pally, Swami Nagar Colony, Panchanoi Colony, Lichubagan Colony, Santoshi Nagar Colony, Prantik Pally (Chakraborty,2015,p.231). An interview with them brought to the light the words of these people and revealed that they were both the victims of Partition of India and Bongal Khedao Movement.

As being from a Bengali Hindu family in newly created East Pakistan Dipali Das (Personally Interviewed at Hakim Para, Siliguri on 08/11/2020) had to first leave her own primitive birthplace and then her family took refuge in adjoining state

of India, Assam initially. Her father Dr. Nagendra Chandra Das also spent his childhood at Bajrajogini village in Birkampur District, Dacca of East Pakistan. After 1947 they had to take shelter in India. She recalls that her father had to join Hatibari Tea-Estate Hospital, Rangapara, Assam in 1952 in newly independent India as a Doctor. In 1953 he opened Nowgong Pharmacy at Nowgong. But their apparently peaceful life suddenly began to be ill effected by the political insurgencies in Assam during 1960s. During the Official Language Movement in 1960 unfortunately her father was attacked by a 'Chaku' (pen knife) on his chest. Her family along with herself also witnessed the killing of a renowned Bengali reporter in front of them. She describes that in 1972 her father was invited to join a meeting supporting the favor of Assamese language. She narrates that there was also a demand in the Nowgong Bengali Girls' High School that the girls from class vii would wear the traditional dress of Assam i.e. 'Mekhla' instead of Saree. Her father was also threatened that if he did not join the meeting the Nowgong Bengali society would be burnt. Her father promptly decided to leave Assam **at last** to protect the future of his family. Dipali Das also says that she along with her sister used to hide themselves at 'Goyal ghar '(cattle shed) at night for a number of days. Her family fled to take asylum at 'Bangali Para' (The Colony of the Bengali dwellers). She yelled out to say that they used to hear from the Bengali rescuers of the colony—"aschhe, aschhe" (coming, they are coming). In the meantime her father had to sell his house, clinic, car at nominal value to Dr. Barkakoti. She describes with grief that the Nowgong Pharmacy was transformed into Barkakoti Clinic within a few days in front of them and Dr. N. C. Das's house was transformed into Barkakoti Nursing Home. To remain alive they immigrated to Siliguri in the year 1971 and her father set up 'Das Medical Hall' at Bidhan Road, Siliguri. Unfortunately her family had to go through the tyranny of majority Hindu - Muslims problem in East Pakistan at the first phase and then they again confronted with the Assamese-Bengali rivalry in Assam.

A lady compared her situation with the Hindu refugees of East Pakistan as her family had to leave their home in Assam for getting rid of socio-political tensions. She felt sorry as she perceived "Ami amar pranta Nowgong-te fele chole esechhi" (I left my heart and soul in Nowgong).

Mitra Das (Personally Interviewed at Church Road, Siliguri on 07/11/2020) remembered the black days of Assam disturbances. She saw that how the Assamese agitation made the apparently calm city to an untamed one.

During the chaos of Language Movement the slogans like “Bangali hathao” (Drive out the Bengalis), “Ahomiya Bahako Mul Baha Koriba Lagibo” (Asamiya language should be the main language of the state) tempted the atmosphere of the city. She remembered that the agitators threw big boulders aiming at the window-glass of their house. The anarchy in 1972 made her family bound to leave Assam. She discusses that her elder sister had to stop her study due to her mother’s sickness who became traumatized during Assam disturbances. She remembered that she started her education life again from Siliguri Girls’ High School where she was admitted in the mid of the session in 1973 and initially was very shy and lonesome as she was teased by her classmates because she could not pronounce ‘A’ properly. As a result of earlier living in Assam her pronunciation of ‘A’ was like ‘O’ and her language was seemed like “Bangal” (the language of the primitive Bengali people of East Pakistan). She used to be scolded by her teachers in school for this reason and she gradually rectified herself. She tells while giving her interview that though the city remained to her as a “Praner Shohor” (the city very close to her heart), but still today she becomes scary to remember the Nowgong-days. She has suffered a lot from trauma and depression due to the displacement.

Another women-evacuee Shampa Roy (Personally interviewed at Sevoke Road, Siliguri on 10/11/2020) expresses her sorrow that how partition did not only make sections of undivided India, the Hindu-Muslim division but it also divided innumerable Hindu families. At first her in-law’s family went Assam but they could not reside there forever and became a Bongal Khedao Andolon displaced family. She tells that her husband is a rich businessman of Siliguri, he belongs to Assam whereas his forefathers immigrated into Assam from Satgaon, Bikrampur, Dacca after the Partition. Through the linkage with their relatives they resettled at Golaghat, Upper Assam first. But due to the notorious Assam disturbances in 1971 her family had to move for Siliguri. She describes that how they had been financially annoyed by the ULFA and her elder brother-in-law Dasmohun Roy, was kidnapped by ULFA. Only after providing the demand-money they could leave Assam and they readily immigrated into Siliguri in 1989. In Siliguri her family had to struggle a lot to start hardware business at Sevoke Road before settling peacefully here.

Chhanda Mukherjee (Personally Interviewed at Milan Pally, Siliguri on 14/11/2020) came into Siliguri for resettlement in 1982. One biased incident also needs to be mentioned in this regard that only for being a non-Assamese a

Bengali's name was cut from the job-list in Assam (as reported) though the Bengali person ranked first in the examination. Her elder brother Samiran Mukherjee faced such discriminations during their days in Assam. She resided in Jamunamukh of Nowgong district, Assam, for nearly 35 years and directly experienced the violence conducted by the Assamese anti-Bengali groups. Their house was burnt. She with her entire family had to pass seven days beside the railway-lines. For a week they used to eat only boiled arum. All of her sisters had to hide themselves behind cattle-shed. Her family came to Siliguri to get relief from such turmoil in Assam and her father joined as the Supervisor of a tea estate nearby Siliguri.

As many of these displaced people left Assam without any of their possessions these families had to pass through long hardship in their resettlement in this new town. They shared their experience about the Assamese annoyance against the Bengalis.

Nanibala Majumdar (Personally Interviewed at Mahananda Para, Siliguri on 04/11/2020) originally belonged to Noakhali District of East Pakistan, immigrated into Assam in 1968. She stayed in Assam for 20 years and her father used to work as an Assistant Manager at Kulikuchi Tea Estate in Nowgong suburbs. Unfortunately, the Assam agitation compelled them to migrate again. The Assamese threatened to burn their abode and they took shelter behind the Kulikuchi hummock for three days. Fortunately, the Assam Military Force rescued them and they got the chance to migrate into Siliguri. Here her father joined as the Manager in Saraswatipur Tea Estate near Salugara.

It is known through the interviews that the cordial connection among the relatives or the neighbors earlier residing in the same locality in East Pakistan played crucial role in the migration in both cases of Assam and Siliguri. In this context Prabha Aich (Personally Interviewed at Raja Rammohun Roy Road, Siliguri on 05/11/2020) an evacuee from East Pakistan to Assam was largely helped by her elder brother-in-law Late Jogesh Chandra Aich to resettle in Siliguri. After partition she along with her husband settled at Landing of Nowgong district of Brahmaputra valley in Assam. But there the Assam disturbances in 1960s had already begun. In 1962 she with her husband, Balaram Aich came to Siliguri and gradually her husband started 'New Variety Stores' at Hill Cart Road at only 30 Rupees rent per month.

People facing hazards by the different anti-foreigner parties of Assam were compelled to leave Assam. Shilpi Das (Personally Interviewed at Deshbandhu Para, Siliguri on 17/11/2020) recollect her childhood memory at the time of giving her interview. Earlier her father Mr. Gauranga Das established his own sweet-store 'Mamata Sweet Centre' after the name of his mother and also initiated his clothing business 'Shilpi Dresses' after the name of his daughter. 'Shilpi Dresses' was set up at Dhemaji in Upper Assam in 1979. But Shilpi says that the business of her father was extremely hampered by the ongoing Bongal Khedao Movement in Assam. Many local leaders of ULFA became perilous for their family and her father's business as they paid nothing after having food and buying cloths from his shop. Her father readily decided to resettle in Siliguri for the sake of his family and started a new business with his lump sum amount. But here he failed to continue his merchandise activities. Shilpi describes that she and her brother, Dipankar Das went through extreme difficulties in their study in the Bengali-medium schools of Siliguri as they had earlier studied in Assamiya-medium school of Assam. Thus they spent their childhood days in extreme harassment due to the Assam disturbances.

The Sylhet Referendum drastically changed the lives of the Hindus of the district. Many Hindu 'Sylhetti' families had faced dacoities which were mainly conducted by the Muslim groups and they were also beaten and threatened to leave their abode. They had no chance to live furthermore in East Pakistan and being compelled they left their home, agricultural land and their possessions. Mrs. Usha Paul (Personally Interviewed at Hill Cart Road, Siliguri on 29/11/2020) a 'Sylhetti' lady spent her childhood in East Pakistan. Her family also could not remain untouched by the aftermaths of Partition. She with her husband migrated to Guwahati in 1962. One by one all of her family members could immigrate to Cachhar district of Barak valley of Assam as it was adjacent to their earlier residence at Dawpara village, Habiganj Thana of Sylhet district. However, her husband, Late Bires Chandra Paul was offered to move forward for Siliguri where the construction of Indian Oil Pipeline was going on. Gradually in the 1960s 'Mahananda Stores' at Airview More, Hill Cart Road was established by him. Mrs. Paul thoroughly narrates their hardships in their twice displacement.

Conclusion:

The forced-migration of these women reveals one truth that they bear the scars both of Partition of India at the first phase and the Bongal Khedao Andolon in the second phase. These women were in a double bind. Firstly, they always became the soft targets of the criminals as the minorities in East Pakistan or Bangladesh from the religious perspective and in addition to this the other reason of their harassment was of their female existence. These women shared their painful experiences which brought out their tremendous trauma and stinging of sufferings. Many of these women also could not complete their nominal study. It is woeful that till now they cannot forget the violence against them. Besides this, it is also true that they also cannot forget their childhood sweet memories of their primitive abode which was in present Bangladesh. Even whenever they meet any of the Partition-displaced Bengalis belonging from their primitive residential area now Bangladesh they spontaneously start to speak in their indigenous 'Bungal' language. These women heartily try to follow their intrinsic customs and rituals in any of their social occasions which show their core respect and love for their traditions. But with this it is to be noted that the next generation of these displaced-Bengali families are not equally respectful towards their language, customs and rituals as their elder generation. Thus it can be known that the women of the Partition-refugee families had to go through sufferings that was both mental and physical.

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