The Partition of India: Through the Experience of Bengali Refugee Women

Kirankumar Nittali
Research Scholar
Centre for English Studies
Central University of Jharkhand
Brambe, Ranchi – 835205.

The effects of 1947 partition of India, is still considered as the largest human migration that the society has seen witnessed in the history. The impact of the partition was the highest only on the people from East Bengal, especially women who unfortunately became the refugees within their own state which was previously united. When thousands of refugees were coming out from East Bengal every day after the February Riot in 1950, the East Bengali woman had to pay the cost of independence by their chastity, lives of their husbands, their own life as well as the lives of their beloved children. Women were the most common targets of attack especially at that time. Forced marriage, rape and abduction of women on a large scale were very common ways of attacks upon the minorities. The refugee women were humiliated and badly tortured on their way to West Bengal in the form of search by the Pakistani customs officers and staff. The impact of those incidents still lasts in the society. This research paper intends investigate the sufferings underwent by refugee women from East Bengal at the time of partition of India.

Introduction

In July 1905 it was announced by the viceroy of India the first partition of Bengal would be executed. It took effect in October 1905 and separated the highly populated Muslim Eastern areas from the highly populated Hindu Western areas. But, in 1911 Bengal was reunited in an effort to appease the Bengali sentiment. Bengali Muslims were greatly benefited from the partition. However, the Bengali Hindus continued to fight and the resentment lasted until the end of British rule which ended in 1947 with the second partition of Bengal. Bengal was partitioned for the second time, solely on religious grounds, as part of the partition of India following the formation of nations India and Pakistan. East Bengal became East Pakistan and in 1971 became the independent state of Bangladesh after a successful war of independence with West Pakistan.

The name Bangladesh means “country of Bengal” in Bengali language. It is bordered by India on the north, west and east and it faces Bay of Bengal to its South. Due to political exclusion and linguistic discrimination by the politically dominant western wing an agitation grew. Total economic neglect was also another reason. The agitation gave rise to a secular, cultural, nationalist movement. These causes led to the declaration of Independence and Bangladesh liberation war in 1971. The result of war new state endured poverty, famous military coups and political turmoil.

The country faced a number of major challenges, including over population, corruption and vulnerability to climate change. But gradually the country increased life expectancy and achieved gender purity in education. It reduced the growth of the population and improved maternal and child health. Dhaka and Chittagong are the country’s two largest cities and they have been the driving force behind much of the recent growth.
Cruzan’s partition of Bengal in 1905 is one of the legends of freedom movement. Legends and myths arouse protective emotions that shield people from scrutiny. A Bengali writer Mitra posed the question in the magazine called Telegraph, “if the partition of 1905 were allowed to stand”. The crisp answer was that eastern Bengal might not have followed Mohammed Ali Jinnah’s line. Curzon’s original decision, whatever its motive had offered hope of rapid economic and social progress to Muslim masses in Bengal. They bore the brunt of under development of agriculture and the economy in general, under British colonial rule, besides the suffering of the repression and oppression let loose by the Hindu zamindars. Had the decision to partition Bengal been allowed to stand, the spread of education amongst the Muslims would have led to the quick emergence of a sensitive Muslim intelligentsia with a heightened and social consciousness. Perhaps from within this category there would have sprung an exciting crop of thinkers and ideologues which would be inclined to define objective reality in terms of class and not divide on the basis of the religion. Had all these things happened the Muslim league would have become cropper even as the bigoted Hindu oligarchies were stopped in their track? To sum up if the partition of 1905 was allowed to stand there would have been no partition of either Bengal or India in 1947. For that matter Calcutta might well have continued as the country’s capital. The most affected ones as a result of partition were none other than women.

Experiences of the East Bengali refugee women during the partition

Many women Bengali and English writers and novelists narrated in their works about the bad experiences of Bengali women. The book ‘Bengal divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition” (2002) relates how a large and powerful section of Hindu society in Bengal insisted that their province by deciding to create a separate Hindu homeland. The picture which emerges in one of a fragmented society moving away from the main structure of Indian nationalism and increasingly pre occupied with more parochial concerns. The distinguished scholar named Joya Chatterji is a lecturer in history at Cambridge has written a book “Bengal divided”. She belongs to a very small band of scholars in south Asia whose commitment to the truth is not overcome by false notions of “patriotism” or by communal bias. She clearly explains the rationale behind the partition of India and in particular of Bengal and its consequences. Concentration on the partition of Punjab led to the neglect of the fate of Bengal, as with the partition of India, the advocate of Bengal’s partition lived to face the consequences of their miscalculations. She has written with verve and revealed the truth beautifully. In an article on the boundary award Joya Chatterji exposed the follies and worse of two commissions over which Cyril Redcliff presided to demarcate the boundaries of the divided provinces of Bengal and Punjab.

The experience of women has been explained by RituMenon in her work, “Borders and Boundaries” (1998). Another writer Jill Didur writes about Bengali women law and the importance of citizenship in her work. The other two important writers are Bashabi Fraser and Ayesha Jalal who have given a clear picture 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 deal of scholars showed 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 constructs women in a strange way - her sexuality is a threat to her; her respectability to confirmed to the degree to which she is able to retain her sexual purity, moreover 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 were accompanied with large scale, abduction and forced marriage. It was on the bodies of women that the new national border was marked out; the edifices of the two nation states in South Asia were constructed.

After much harassment and suffering, the refugees came to West Bengal where nobody was there to welcome them. But they faced a different set of problems every time. A large number of them came to Sealdah station where they had to spend a couple of days or a week, some times more than a month. The refugees were asked to stay at open station compound. Women, who were used to live behind closed doors, were suddenly made to come out of their homes. Certainly, it bewildered them at least for sometimes. In Sealdah station, in camps and everywhere the refugee girls were exploited and their innocence was misused by men. They were misguided and were put in helpless condition. Forced marriage was a very common feature of these troubled times. The suffering of those women who had to accept their abductors as husbands was tremendous indeed. Both the governments took some initiative to recover those affected women and to send them back to their parents. But it was a difficult job. The governmental initiatives failed to solve the problem and rather added a new dimension to it.

Many of the abducted women, the official recovery operation meant a second uprootment. Many of them openly protested against the recovery operation and refused to return to their parents or relations. They obviously knew what was waiting for them. They were reluctant to go there as they knew that their family and society were not enough to accept them heartily. Sometimes they were forced to come back leaving their babies behind. The eternal question of motherhood was left unanswered by the male protagonists of recovery operations. Instead of protecting the abducted women, the recovery measures increase their agony and suffering. The women who could avoid abduction during the time of riot or on the way to West Bengal were certainly fortunate. But in a different manner, they also suffered extremely however. Those who had lost their male guardians were abused in camps and colonies also. But they had the full potential to live a normal life if they were provided with the opportunity. But a lot of recovered women were sent to Ashrams (homes) as they were not accepted by their families. Very few of them got opportunity to have a family life which they desired most. Sometimes in private homes, the refugee women were forced to marry unknown persons from other provinces.

Thus the refugee women had to bear the main burden of displacement even when they are attached to the families. In the Bengali tradition it is expected that women would serve food to their family members. It is related to the imagery of Annapurna (Home-maker). This led to a tremendous psychological pressure on refugee women in a situation of scarcity. Women frequently affected were committed suicide for not being able to perform their expected duty properly. The women with their male counterparts were struggling hard for their day today existence. They were in general looked down upon even by the women folk of the local population. They were treated as untouchables, irrespective of their cost.

The local people thought that the East Bengali women had been pulled by the Muslims (as if all were raped by the Muslims). The local people did not even let the refugee women to collect drinking water from the common water points. Gradually the refugee women moved far beyond the sense of victim hood to triumph hood. They developed a sense of confidence and ability to survive and attained success in the face of stiff hurdles. The coming out of the
women from the private domain to the public is one of the most remarkable developments in post-partition of West Bengal.

When the situation demanded the refugee women came out of their homes. So the struggle of the refugee women was not confined within four walls. Educated women went in search of jobs in educational institutions, private forms, and government and semi-government offices. Those who lacked education did not give up and fought the battle with much more vigor. Most of them capitalized on their training in household activities for commercial purpose. They prepared pickles, papad varieties of food items and other culinary articles. A large number of them were engaged in preparing paper packets and rolling bedis (a type of cigarette). Some took up a more challenging and unconventional job as hawkers. Some became wardens is the female wards of the jails in West Bengal.

Refugee girls from lower middle and middle class took up the 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. Some of the famous Bengali heroines who were refugees were Sabitiri and Madhabi.

The upheaval caused by the partition threw the uprooted woman into a situation where her dignity and integrity faced severe challenges. This has been reflected extensively in the existing Bengali literature newspapers, films and dramas of the period. The challenge was so acute that the refugee women had to undergo a process of fundamental change in their behaviour pattern, attitude and the mode of their thinking. Their urge for education, employment and self-dependence encouraged others in this respect. The middle class Bengali families were generally unwilling to allow their educated girls to take up jobs although they were in economic distress. The mentality of the middle class Bengali family got a severe blow from the new comers and ultimately it brought about a major change in the mentality of the Bengali people as a whole. The outcome was the emergence of a new class in the Bengali society (example) working women. The refugee women driven by the circumstances opened up the door to many new opportunities for many other middle class Bengali women.

Thus though the East Bengali Hindu refugee women, suffered tremendously due to the upheaval caused by the partition, it was not end of the story. The most significant part of the story was that they waged a remarkable struggle for existence that has no parallel in the contemporary history of West Bengal. The coming out of refugee women from private to public space brought about a fundamental change in the thinking and attitude of the Bengali women as a whole and added a new dimension to their self-consciousness. Many refugee women returned to the domestic world as soon as their families were comfortably situated, financially and physically. They also felt that their new responsibilities are to defend their homes. Many of the second generation daughters do not work outside the home because they do not need to now.

In conclusion, Partition and East Bengali Migrant Women displaced millions who left their homes in search of their religious identity, a traversed a course that marked the less idealistic reality of hardship and alienation. Whether Hindu or Muslim each one bear the burden of adjustment, partition brought with it. Unfortunately for Bengal, its trust with fragmented lands and lives did not officially end until 1971 when Bangladesh was born. Throughout this period the weaker sections suffered a lot.
Works Cited: