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Borne out of Partition: The Plights of Bengali Hindu Women as Minority in East Pakistan

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Abstract:

The aim of this research paper is not to make any discrimination among the women and their unfortunate encounters with the plethora of torture and suffering in terms of their religious beliefs, regions, and future choices for settlement, but to investigate a gap in the existing scholarship, which overlooked the pre-partition communal atmosphere in undivided Bengal and its effect on its Bengali Hindu minority women, and evoke empathy for them. Besides this, it also attempts to make an elaborative study of the politics beyond Delhi and Dhaka, which remained under the carpet for a long time and its undercurrents pushed the lives of the Hindu women into periphery. Centralizing Noakhali Riot as triggering point to a massive communal violence in the history of undivided India as well as in South-east Asia, this paper taps its nuances in three different stages, followed by the fatal consequences and the final human exodus.

Keywords: Partition, Violence, Discrimination, Minority, Journey, Malice.

"Virsa Singh claimed he had shot 50 women personally. First he shot his own wife because the Muslims came to get her. Once he had done this", notes eminent Indian social activist Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, "all the women in the neighborhood gathered around, saying 'Viran, pehle mannu maar, pehle mannu maar' (brother, kill me first). Some would push their daughters forward, saying, 'shoot her, put a bullet through her now'. He says he just kept shooting and shooting" (Borders 49). Such demoniac and inhuman episode, from the north Indian city of Amritsar, resonate the violence and exploitation of human resources, especially those which women had to encounter and experience, during the time of India's partition. However, unlike the Punjab province, which endured communal killings, exodus, and migration

at its best since the Midnight Declaration of Nehru, Independent India's first Prime Minister, the eastern border of Bengal remained relatively silent at the time of partition. In other words, the blood-soaked Bengal, which had previously undergone harrowing communal riots in Calcutta (August, 1946) and Noakhali (October, 1946), observed the partition numbly with tears. Still, the number of refugees, coming from East Pakistan to India, rose up to eleven lakh till June, 1948 (Prantik 18). If there were no violent activities between the two major religions in post-partition Bengal, as explored by historian Debjani Sengupta in her research-length book *The Partitiion of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities* (2015), why did people migrate silently? Does our understanding of the concept 'violence' fail to cover all geographies? This paper makes humble attempt to decode that 'silence'.

With partition, the power dynamics between the majority and minority community endorses an overnight shift in socio-political ecology of the border areas. Following this human holocaust, thousands of people from Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh community were butchered mercilessly by the (new) majority of their own locality. More so, several thousand others faced traumatic ordeals due to this sudden and disagreeable displacement. Although this is no less agonizing for men, women had to endear it from gender, religious, social, and community perspectives. Since then, researches and documentations of the traumatic experiences of women during partition have been undertaken on academic and non-academic level both. For instance, while critical partition books like Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries* (1998) and Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) penetrate the nuances of the partition and exodus of women in Punjab, historians and anthropologists like Jasodhara Bagchi, Joya Chatterji, Debjani Sengupta and few others bring out the distressing conditions of women in Bengal. However, an analytical survey of these documentations would reveal that most of these books, interviews, article, or monologues have either covered the women from Pakistan with Muslim majority and women from Indian with Hindu and Sikh majority in the western frontier, or tapped the voices of the majority of Bengali Hindu women as refugee in India, which were easily available. Further, substantial documentations are available on the plights of Muslim women in India and Pakistan both as minority and majority. Surprisingly though, only a few negligible accounts of Bengali Hindu Women as minority in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, is registered within the vast space of partition literature. In order to understand the socio-political and cultural enigmas of that time, I had to rely on the different reports, archives, oral chronicles,

books or articles as secondary sources. To my dismay, I found that the information and documentations on Bengali Hindu Women in East Pakistan, before they turned into refugees, are not only limited but also ambiguous and scattered. In other words, there is no single research paper, article, book, or chapter in records available, which fully devotes to the crisis in the lives of those Bengali Hindu women, living as minority in a Muslim dominated geopolitical space. Most of the documents either highlights the effects of partition and its aftermath on Bengali Hindu women, whereas only few pages in a single book or a few questions in an interview address the 'silence' of those women prior to partition. This is a serious gap in the partition literature of India that needs our attention.

Theorizing feminine status during partition, Sheila Rowbotham argues that historical chronicles, narrations, and documentations made by men do not justify women's trials and plights wholly as most of them are in 'hidden' nature. The reason behind their 'hidden' status is patriarchic society's (predominant) apprehension of women's experiences as 'sensitive', and revealing about rapes and abductions as 'taboo'. Therefore, I have undertaken different methodologies like collecting personal testimonies and monographs, interpretations of the oral histories from the mouth of the refugees, and other interviews. Nevertheless, such pointed documentations are meager in number. For the better understanding of historical chronicles and the gradual development of communal disharmony between Hindus and Muslims, we shall divide our discussion into three parts, using Noakhali carnage as a watershed, followed by the plights of women during the exodus.

Pre-Noakhali disturbances

School of Women's Studies (SWS) from Jadavpur University had taken an interview of late Nalini Mitra (1909-2002), who recalled her early days in Dhaka, where she lived till 1950. Her engaging dialogue encapsulates the relationship between Hindu and Muslims during 1920s and 1930s, which works as passive instigation to foreground the broader rubrics of communal tension during partition. As a student of Dhaka University, which was established primarily to materialize the divide and rule policy of the imperial government, she stipulates on the presence of (subtle) privileges for Muslim student. Although there were provisions of special stipends and scholarship for the Muslim, Hindus never objected to that (The Trauma 138). However, one

particular incident of 1926 at Dhaka University, which was otherwise a normal university grievance among students, indicates a gradual and calculative change within academic circle-

> The Hindu students during the annual functions used to decorate the dais with earthen pots. Suddenly, around the middle of 1920s, the Muslims started objecting to such decorative pieces. They said that such a display was indicative of Hindu hegemonic domination. It all started after that. (138)

The reason behind using the word 'calculative' earlier is that the above logic given by the Muslim students is peculiarly similar to Mohammad Ali Jinnah's criticism of National Congress's secular outlook. When communality erupt the educated minds, how does common folk leave behind? Subsequently, minor riots broke out in 1926 in urban Dhaka. Although, they had limited effects as people didn't carry deadly weapons, situation turned massively between 1926 and 1930. Nalini Mitra, in her interview, further claims-

> It became increasingly difficult for me to pass through a locality of Bihari Muslim on my way to college. My daughter was only four years old. For reasons of safety, I could not entrust her to the care of an ayah and leave for my work. My unusually prolonged absence prompted the principal of the college to drop by my home. I explained the whole situation to him. He offered a solution which astonished me. He asked me not to put sindur on the parting of my hair. This so-called simple solution, he felt, would save me from all future harassment. (140)

Decoding the idea of covert violence, Gyan Pandey argues- 'Violence lies not only in shooting or putting daggers through people or raping them. Violence may also be found in the strict prescription of particular places for particular people, irrespective of their own feelings in the matter ("Partition" 19). In the mentioned above reminiscence of Nalini, consciously or unconsciously, the Muslim principal gives an indirect indication to abandon her Hindu religious practices and rituals. At this juncture, whether the principal has a noble intension or not is a different issue, but such indirect suggestions to discard one's religious faith can be considered as psychological threat. In other words, they can also be observed as 'silent' violence.

The turbulent 1940s: Noakhali Carnage

Moving from the history of covert violence, the decade 1940s had witnessed open political disturbance and overt religious violence at its pick. For instance, the news of the Calcutta Killing spread rapidly in the Muslim dominated areas of Tippera and Noakhali in East Bengal, resulting in the inhuman butchery of Hindus and rapes, abductions, or mutilations of Hindu women. More so, the large scale abduction of minority women and no recovery of them for a long time not only problematizes the intension of the ruling Muslim League government, but deteriorates the communal harmony. Besides abductions and rapes, the instances of forceful marriages of Hindu women to Muslim boys and conversion to Islam subsequently were more than common phenomenon (Coming Out 7). While writing for the *Indian Annual Register*, British biographer and journalist Muriel Lester observes-

> …worst of all was the plight of the women. Several of them had to watch their husbands murdered and then be forcibly converted and married to those responsible for their deaths. Those women had a deadlock. It was not despair, nothing so active as that. It was blackness. (199)

In terms of statistics, she notes the registered number of rape cases on 5th of November, 1946 was 300 in Noakhali and about 400 in Tippera (196). Furthermore, Indian politician Sucheta Kriplani reported on her way back to Calcutta- 'Molestation of women, intimidation and encirclement are still continuing in the affected areas of Noakhali district' (196).

Such incidents marginalized women ever further within their own community. As a consequence, Hindu girls, mostly young and unmarried, were prohibited to go outside of their locality. In an interview with Gargi Chakravartty, Bithi Chakraborty (nee Roy) painfully recalls-

> I can recall how our elders got panic-stricken. They could feel the storm approaching. My personal domain was affected. I was a student of Sarishabari Girls' School, and at that point suddenly I was barred from going to school. I was not even allowed to step out of the confines of our main house (*Khasbari*). I was a young girl and so the elders became all the more careful and worried about me. The pressing fear was that Hindu girls would be abducted. (The Trauma 151)

Thus, women of the Hindu minorities became doubly marginalized due to their gendered orientation and religious beliefs. The Noakhali carnage affected the Hindus in such a way that in

faraway districts like Faridpur of East Bengal, Hindu girl-students used to carry *baghnakh*, a compass like sharp weapon for their safety. Moreover, others were sending their daughters to relatively safe places like Calcutta and Assam ("The Riddles" 67). Their anxiety was justified as those who continued their study or job, had to face discrimination, torture, or passive resistance in their institutions and workplaces. Nalini Mitra, the schoolteacher mentioned earlier, remembers the ordeals in her college-

> …gradually the trouble that was brewing outside, began to seep in and vitiated the atmosphere of our college. One day, as I was sitting in the common room, some obscene remarks were directed towards me. At that instant, I realized that it would no longer be possible to stay in my beloved motherland. (140-141)

The intensity of the Noakhali carnage problematizes the existence of Hindu women as minority in Muslim dominated East Bengal forever. Now let us briefly understand how this silent violence percolates inside the psyche of the Hindu women after the Noakhali incident, leading to their migration ultimately.

Post-Noakhali Terrorization

With the Mountbatten Plan being accepted by the National Congress, the division of Bengal province became inevitable. As the division was taking place with the approval of Muslim League and a new country was born out of their religious fervor, the decision of partition proved bloodless in Bengal for that moment. However, it is curious to note that most of the Hindus thought that this time the partition would be temporary too as Bengal faced a similar failure in division earlier in 1905. Sudip Bandyopadhyay notes the testimony of one Snehlata Biswas, who hoped to return to their motherland shortly- 'My husband assured me that we would return after some time. I therefore buried all the utentials in our courtyard' ("The Riddles" 65). Another migrant Sandhya Bhattacharya firmly believed- 'the country would be united again and we would go back' (Coming Out 10). At this juncture, many Hindus stayed in East Pakistan on 15th of August, 1947. These hopes could be visible in the words of Arish Mukherjee, a local of Munshigunj- 'Even after partition, we never thought that we would have to come away. We firmly believed we would stay on there' (9). Like many other Hindu women, Rani Mitra, an activist of Tebhaga Movement from Dinajpur district attended the flag hoisting ceremony too on

that day- 'Dinajpur had always been a centre of the national movement. So Hindu women were sad to see the hoisting of the green flag instead of the tri-color' (10). Therefore, the partition didn't follow disastrous number of migrants immediately. Critically speaking, one random thought survey would easily differentiate between the mentalities of both the communities at the awake of partition, whereas Muslims felt a sense of achievement and liberation from Hindu dominance, Hindus were hopeful to be reunited to their roots again. This sense of liberation of the Muslims of East Pakistan gradually translated into distorted nationalism. Such nationalistic zeal affected the communal harmony on socio-cultural level and implementation of minority policy on executive level both.

The second phase of infiltration of Hindu minorities as refugees began in 1950. Whereas the number of refugees was 10 lakh till March, 1948, the number surged up to 35 lakh in 1951. Joya Chatterji in her historical documentation *The Spoils of Partition* (2007) pinpoints certain kinds of 'discrimination' and 'malice' against the minority that forced them to live the country ultimately. Social harassment, economic pressure, or mental tortures are some of the effective methods of discrimination and malice. Prafulla K. Chakravarty rightly elaborates the conditions of East Pakistan even further-

> The organized killing of the Hindus, encroaching and looting their property, abducting Hindu girls from their fathers and husbands, mass killings and lootings by the Muslim majority people made people migrate like an avalanche. (Prantik 18, my trans.)

These (organized) crimes and killings were performed by *Ansars*, a kind of paramilitary forces who were originally accountable for the safety of the common people. However, at this juncture, it would not be wrong to comment that this empirical manifestation of 'armed patriarchy' and state sponsored violence broke the spine of Hindu families who dared to stay back in East Pakistan. In other words, Hindus became a second class citizen as equal constitutional rights were taken away. Further, these *ansars* played diabolic role in threatening Hindu women. It was they who were responsible for manipulating local lower-class Muslims against the Hindu houses and businesses. Furthermore, there were evidences that they used to abduct Hindu women often to show their prowess over the opposite religion. Among other survivors of partition horror, Bithi Chakravarty painfully refers to her childhood experiences

when young women used to get missing suddenly and came back after three or four days. With hesitation and chocking voice, she remembers one heart-wrenching incident-

> I still remember a specific case. The girl belonged to a well-off family and studies in my school. Yes…her name was Jyotsna. Her house was attacked, most of the family members were killed, and she herself was kidnapped and gang-raped. Later, she became a complete lunatic. (Coming Out 10-11)

Instead of all these discriminations and maltreatments Hindus could have stayed there, but the deliberate mental tortures and physical abuses to their womenfolk were unbearable to men. While stating this, our intension is to provoke the vulnerability of women and their 'honor' at the hands of men at such tried situations. During such time, the bodies of women do not remain just the bearer of their own honor, but become the safe keeper of the honor of their family, society, community, and religion. In other words, they carry forward the prestige and male ego of their community. Therefore, humiliating them in any form turns out to be the dishonor to the whole community. As a matter of fact, during communal tensions, women are specifically targeted and subjected to ethnic violence not for momentary pleasures or sexual appetite, but for 'cleansing' their community's honor. Let us understand the statement with a practical example. Prafulla Chakravarty quotes one incident from Hiranmay Bondyopadhyay's memoir *Udbastu*-

> A Hindu woman had got down to the pond for her bath. Immediately Muslims, gathered on one side of the pond, started singing the first line of a doggerel:
>
> Pak pak Pakistan
>
> Pat came the reply from the other side of the pond:
>
> Hindu's hubby Musalman
>
> The terrified Hindu girl stood stock-steel in the water. This added to the fun of the crowd. A middle-aged Muslim then came down the stairs of the bathing ghat and addressed the girl, 'oh darling (*bibijaan*)! It is getting late. Why are you tarrying? Why not get back to your home?'. This was followed by loud guffaws from the crowd. The situation became 'curiouser and curiouser' even as the girl stood frozen with terror in the water. The

> middle-age ruffian then added amidst cheers from the banks, 'your chachi's joints must have become stiff. She is finding it difficult to move. Take her hand and get her out of the water'. (The Marginal 6)

Foregrounding the socio-economic and political context of East Bengal (later became East Pakistan) now let us investigate the nuances of the journey that these Hindu women had undertaken unwillingly.

Exodus: The Final Episode

Leaving their settled households, business, and lives behind, when the Hindus took strenuous journey to West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura through trains or steamers, local Muslims left no stone unturned to make them suffer. For instance, sudden attacks and assaults were undertaken in order to create a traumatic memory in the minds of the migrants. Speaking critically, this was a state sponsored terrorism, conducted by the Pakistan military and *ansars*, who incited local Muslim goons and strongmen to carry out heinous acts on those migrants. For instance, one such incident happened in Kurmitala airport premises, where Hindu women and children were butchered mercilessly inside the airport, which was only a walking distance from a base camp of Pakistan's armed guards (Coming Out 19). Such was the fear that the migrants were keeping no hope of reaching the other side of the border harmlessly or alive.

At this juncture, one may remember the arrivals of ghostly trains carrying the dead bodies of the migrants in Khushwant Singh's partition fiction *Train to Pakistan*. Sadly speaking, such incidents were common in Chittagong Mail and Surma Mail during those days. It was reported that the largest number of gruesome murders took place on 11th and 12th of February, 1950, in those trains. The modus operandi of these (systematic) attacks was to stop the trains when they were crossing the Meghna Bridge near Bhairab Bazar and kill the passengers (19). Bithi Chakravarty recalls one such incident-

> Ghentu, my neighbor, used to work with my jethamashay (elder paternal uncle). His wife was travelling with his son to Calcutta in the Surma Mail. The son was butchered and the wife stabbed to death. The particular train shuttled back with the stabbed body of Ghuntu's wife. There were several such cases. (The Trauma 151)

Furhter, Saroj Chakraborty, in his book *With Dr. B. C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers: A Record Upto 1962*, writes about one evening, when Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, the first Chief Minister of West Bengal heard about one train in Sealdah station. The train, which entered through the Bongaon border, had a few empty compartments containing blood-soaked bodies of women, torn out clothes, broken bangles and other ornaments (154).

Leaving aside the train routes, even the water ways were not safe anymore. Gargi Chakravartty, in her book *Coming Out of Partition* (2005), registers the incident of the steamer *Ostrich* on her way to Calcutta. It contained almost one thousand passengers, mostly women and children. It was raided by the *ansars* near Rajkhara and the passengers were forcefully taken hostages- 'Nothing was ever heard about the ill-fated passengers' (19). Testimonies are there in which the whole vessels were drowned along with the passengers.

The newspaper reporters found it difficult to cover the visuals near the boarder- 'Streams of women with babies on one arm and a bundle of clothes in the other were seen walking down the rail tracks; tears were rolling down their cheeks. It was an arduous journey, made in mute silence' (20). Nevertheless, after crossing all these ordeals, their journey didn't end peacefully in the border. The border security forces and *ansars* literally robbed the migrants in name of custom checking. For example, ornaments and daily utensils were snatched from the women-

> When one lady refused to take off her jewellery, she pushed away into a room in which she was locked up. There she found a huge stack of ornaments in one corner and in another corner various types of utensils were piled up. (20)

Such testimonies lays bare the viciousness and hatred of the Pakistan government and the state agents against the Hindu minorities. On 3 March, 1950, two thousand passengers from the Barishal express were seized by the border police due to lack of passport and income tax clearance certificates (20). One of these migrant women bursts out into tears-

> Did my family or I ever think of such a plight coming upon us? We have left everything, furniture, utensils, and movable possessions in my Barishal house. At Benepole, even the brass pot in which I was carrying drinking water was taken away in spite of my request. (20)

Geographically, East Pakistan was covered by hundreds of small streams and rivers. This water-enclosure kept the people away from the rest of the world. However, the post-partition period witnessed the enclosure of hatred for the minority Hindus too. From making them eat beef forcefully to threatening them to give away their daughters in marriage, minorities had to endear all kinds of ethnic and religious violence, which made them leave the country. To conclude, contrary to these, there are instances when Muslim neighbors saved the lives of their Hindu friends at the cost of risking their own lives and property damage. There are stories of brave police officers, belonging to the majority community, who controlled blood-thirsty mobs holding Quran on one hand and pistol on other. However, communal disturbance and religious manipulations engulfed the voices of sanity easily. Still, the trauma and trials, that the minority women and children faced in the Muslim dominated land of East Pakistan, was no less critical and worth remembering in comparison to other human holocausts of this world.

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