

Bless in Anathema: Partition as Playing a Positive Role in Women Empowerment in Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal

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***Abstract:** The partition of India and Pakistan, and in later, the liberation of Bangladesh, were actually effected the female gender of the society more psychologically than physically. It is considered as demonic and dehumanized phase of people history, that was amalgamated with sorrow, widowhood, sufferings and pains in respect of women. But the women were strong enough and ultimately turned their traumas into their strength, and converted their anathema into bless, by stepping out from their houses to participate in the active public life and becoming the earner of the family. The economic independence in later period, helped them to emancipate from the orthodox traditional barriers and secure the equal status as the male members in the family as well as in the society, that was seemed almost impossible to them before partition. Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, being adjacent to East Pakistan, witnessed this whole process of transformation and contains a unique history of its own.*

***Keywords:** Jalpaiguri, Partition, Refugees, Women, Economic Independence.*

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Introduction

Besides its several other geographical, social, economic and cultural connections, the event of 'Partition' has an emotional connection with the history of three Asian countries viz., India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. As an inevitable result of British policy of 'Divide and Rule', these three nations had to experience the tragedy of partition in two different phases: one in 1947, with the division of India and Pakistan and secondly, in 1971, with the liberation of Bangladesh. Being adjacent to East Pakistan, Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal (India), also experienced the effects of partition. During partitioning the territories, the Radcliff line also divided Jalpaiguri district. The Southern part and Western part of Jalpaiguri became an integral part of Pakistan. Being situated near the border areas a large number of refugees migrated here. From 1946-1951, total 53,264 people migrated from different districts of Pakistan to Jalpaiguri.¹ The migration process continued year after year. During the 'War of Liberation' the amount of refugee exodus increased, that resulted, in the decades between 1961-1971, the population of the district had increased by 28.75 per cent.²

The event of partition has given a completely new aspect to people's life, particularly in matter of female gender of the society. The partition converted the women of yesterday into the uprooted refugees today. It left a deep scar on their whole psyche. Before the turbulence, the female members of their families used to live in a private space, the *andarmahals* (inside the houses) of their respective houses, behind the veils. Situations brought them out of their *andarmahals*. When the patriarchs themselves were at risk, these women started to perceive themselves as insecure. Newer insecurities and uncertainties engulfed their lives when some of them got detached from the male members of their family. The self proclaimed guardians were no more there to play the role of protector. Thus they had to become self sufficient to protect their own. The trauma and agony faced by the refugee women indirectly bestowed a positive energy to them for their overall development in later period. Despite numerous obstacles blocking their way, they have had the courage to face the adverse situation with courage, bravery, flexibility, conservancy and bluffly ambition.

Economic Empowerment of Women after Partition

To women, the reconstruction of lives inside the alien land after displacement means reorganization of area in addition to the alteration of the emotional affiliations with their house. As nation, religious groups reconstruct themselves, there may be certain to be an alternate withinside the manner girls are perceived, signified and deployed to sever new functions and agendas. Bimala Das, one of the refugee women of 75 years of age commented that, "*it was a sheer economic necessity that brought us out of our homes in those turbulent years. We had to feed our children and family. As no woman was allowed to go and work in the adjoining city or village even if she was willing, we were engaged in bidi or paper-bag making secretly. We were afraid of our doles getting cut*".³ Like Bimala Das,

there had been lots of other women, whose role inside and outside their house changed to accommodate these new obligations in post-partitioned West Bengal.

Women as Wage Labourers

The droves of women joined in the wage labour force in 1950s, women who never worked outside the home before and who in East Pakistan had never intended to. As a result, they became teachers, office employees, tutors, tailors and small shop managers. The refugee women paved the way for the generations of Bengali working women. As the refugee women swiftly and swiftly grow to be greater literate, and as a lot of them joined the service sectors, the working *bhadramahila* became a brand new phenomenon in the cities of West Bengal. Women camp-dwellers, mostly from lower caste communities residing inside the camps, located at the rural and semi-rural areas, joined as domestic helpers and also as unskilled labours. But there was discrimination in the wages system. In many instances no matter of their developing contribution to the family's domestic economy, their control over their lives was by no means secured.

The women who lost their husbands during agitation or before due to any reason, had no other available option but to go outside and engage themselves in various activities for the maintenance of their children and for the betterment of their future survival. The Less educated and illiterate women, large in number, who had no earning male member in the family, were choose to work as domestic helpers in wealthy families. They were engaged to look after the diseased members in well to do families. Some were also engaged in taking care of the kids. Many of them served as female *bidi* workers after 1971 and onwards.⁴

Engagement of Women in Small and Large Scale Industries

Cottage industries developed a lot during this time. Many female workers were engaged in preparing different types of baskets made of bamboo trees, which were specially used for carrying tea leaves in the gardens of North Bengal districts. Besides, baskets were also used in Bazaars for carrying various commodities from one place to another. Another thing was noticed that, the women who had agricultural land property, engaged themselves in agricultural work. The economic independence, was a new responsibility which the middle-class and elite women had no experience of.

The women were also engaged in preparing different types of jute handicrafts. Monika 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.⁵ In this respect, the Government had made suitable arrangement for the women in different training schools. It may also be cited that an individual named 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 neighboring states, she had made the cane industry a popular and acceptable industry.⁶

Some creations like stories, memoirs have depicted the massacre during the refugee migration, while others concentrated more on the aftermath of the partition in terms of troubles faced by the refugees in both side of the border. Even now, after many years of partition, works on fiction as well as films are being made. In films, Satyajit Ray's '*Mahanagar*' stars Madhabi Mukherjee, a refugee woman who went on to become a leading Bengali actress, in the 1950s when women in Bengal were gradually entering the public sphere as breadwinners of their families. '*Meghe Dhaka Tara*', based on the novel of the same name by *Shaktipada Rajguru*, details the effects of partition on the lives of refugees. It forms the part of a trilogy with other two movies being *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*.

Hena Chaudhuri notes that, this was a direct result of the displacement on account of partition—*"Girls became the bread earners in many families. They became the shock absorber, sheltering the younger siblings from the harsh realities of life. As a result, they often decided not to marry and have a family of their own... My father... would often tell my elder sister... "Now you are my eldest son"..."*⁷. In conclusion, she agrees that Partition had created a grave disruption in the lives of the people in general, and women in particular. It changed the position of women vis-à-vis society and family. Manikuntala Sen writes, *'I noticed a positive awakening particularly amongst women. Had they not been uprooted, this change might not have occurred so quickly.'* She notes further, *'I was often on tour and whenever I boarded a train, I used to run into these women who travel up and down, crowding the compartments meant for women, and for men too... I learnt that some were at school, some at college, while others were teaching.'*⁸

Hema Rani Das, a migrant from Bangladesh in 1971 to Alipurduar, mentioned her struggle in a new country India during an interview. Only six members of her family could cross the border safely. They took shelter in the relief camps with limited food to eat, limited arrangement to live. Male and female members were given same places to stay, which was a unthinkable in the concerned period. More than 4-5 days they spent eating only jackfruit seeds. Having three minor kids and old mother-in law she and her husband had to go for work together. They started to make idols with clay and used to sell it to the market. And according to her statement women were not safe in the market places in those horrible days.⁹ Another 88 years old refugee women of 1966, named Sudha Rani Sarkar from Anandonagar, Jalpaiguri, who was an employee in a school, mentioned her struggle to become economically independent.¹⁰

Role of The Government in the Economic Empowerment of Women

In most of the cases, the women had to rely on the training provided by the state in the vocational training centers to find suitable employment.¹¹ There were also other facilities provided to them as well. An Employment Bureau had been set up by the government, for the exclusive purpose of providing employment opportunities to the uprooted persons,

particularly for the refugee women as well. According to the statistical report, provided by the Directorate of National Employment Service, West Bengal, it was noticed that there had been an increasing demand for employment among women in the post-partition era.¹² This survey, while commenting upon the trends in female employment, side by side also showed a negative picture, that as soon as the family was in a relatively better position the traditional orthodox norms came back into existence and women were withdrawn from their work. Although, the survey also shows a positive side, that a few number of more educated women were to be found in higher income groups. Those women were employed in schools and offices (as clerks and typists).¹³ A major portion of the married women were seen to continue as the lower income groups as assisting their husbands in agricultural work or as employed in domestic services. There were 6,028 domestic servants in Jalpaiguri district in 1961.¹⁴

The economic independence gave a new flavor to women attitude. It paved the way for women to take decision in social and political matters and this invested a source of confidence within them. For some people economic independence was a need and this need became obstacle to their acquisition of higher knowledge. A good number of girls removed their names from schools and joined jobs. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the women are found to say, “*I couldn’t go on studying. I work now*”.¹⁵

Economic Engagement of the New Migrants After the War of Liberation

Following the migration of refugees towards North Bengal after the War of Liberation of Bangladesh, a new dimension was opened. The new political and social scenario affected the attitude of the new migrants to a greater extent. Most of the migrants in that phase belonged to poor section of society, who had no personal asset in their own motherland. Basically they belonged to daily wage earners category. A large number of people were masons, carpenters, potter, tailors, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, gardeners, *rickshaw* pullers, bullock cart drivers, horse cart pullers etc.¹⁶ These uprooted persons from East gradually began to act as per their profession for survival. After 1947, the districts of North Bengal did not experienced the scarcity of employment to that extent, but the Bangladesh War of Liberation totally changed the scenario, which was more alarming than ever before. Although the condition of 1947 refugee women were far better in 1971, but the new comers were at the same stage as they were left almost before 23 years. So it was difficult for them to float with the flow. But still the female refugees took a bold step. Putting at bay all sorts of social hurdles and conservative outlook they came forward with courage and ambition to make themselves financially sound. And subsequently they marched forward acquiring self reliance and came out as flying birds.

The same women uprooted and raising new shelters, refused to sink to the command of fate. Both Punjab and Bengal they showed exemplary endurance, fortitude, deliberation and strength to get victory against the combined nightmares of attacks, abduction, harassment, displacement, exodus, and broken psyche. They carried these experiences to their new destination and ventured out to acquire skills and earn. Manikuntala Sen noticed

a 'miraculous enlightenment' among the refugee women who entered in the ground of battle for livelihood.¹⁷ To save their own life and their family a group of women like Nita of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* joined the educational and economic sectors. Narendranath Mitra's novel "*Abataranika*", on which Satyajit Roy's film *Mahanogor* is based, depicted an uprooted refugee house wife from East Bengal, who took job for the well being of her family. In Narendranath's another novel a girl of an elite family from Barishal took a job of front desk clerk at a company. When these girls came out from the doors of their houses and became economically independent, then their mentality also crossed the previous bindings.

Unfortunate Women and Their Struggle to Become Economically Independent

Some exceptional cases were also available, where the women after getting job were not allowed to join or after working few months were withdrawn by the wish of the male members of the families. Tripti sarkar, who have come to Jalpaiguri district from Faridpur, Dacca, and now is a resident of Guwahati, Assam, during an interview expressed her regrets due to her unfulfilled wish to join job. According to her, she got a job at a school, but her elder brother refused to let her go outside by saying "*Meya manush..., abar chakri korbe baire giya!*" (Being women, you will go outside to join job!). In spite of her several kind of requests, she was unable to get the permission from his elder brother. She further added that, being fortunate to be a daughter of a doctor, she enjoyed the opportunity to be a graduate in the stream of B.Sc. But at the same time, was also unlucky that, in spite of her degree, she could not utilize it further.¹⁸

But all the girls were not lucky to have a job, their struggle became more complicated. Monomohini Devi, a migrant from East Pakistan in the year 1968, shared her story during an interview. Her father was a businessman. They had a huge amount of land, where they used to grow banana and sell. There they never faced any scarcity of food or any other things. But due to the raising threats to the Hindu families, they came to India by changing their property with a Muslim family. But when they arrived at Rajganj in Jalpaiguri, they found that all the houses were already occupied. Having no proper documents of the land they failed to make a proper claim. Being the elder daughter of her family and having no brothers she got the decision to help her father financially after completing Matric examination (10th class). But getting job was a very difficult job for a new comer at that situation. Being unable to arrange any job and due to increasing pressure on the family, she with her mother started to sell tea near local market. Being a girl of a well to do family, it was very difficult for her to adjust in that atmosphere.¹⁹

In Samaresh Basu's "*Pasharini*" the girl named Puspa, of a teacher Nirapada, is shown to make dolls and start selling dolls in trains. She got a name '*Putuler ma*'.²⁰ This story shows that how the dream of independence suppressed the dream of a happy and sweet house of Bengali women. In a short story of Dipankar Das titled "*Rrin*", Renuka fails to manage any suitable job for herself. Her father was depressed and was completely unable to forget his old place. So, frantically he went to his deserted place in East Pakistan in quest

of his lost abode. So, it was Renuka, who does not have any option but to shoulder the heavy responsibility of her whole depressed family with the act of preparing *Thonga* (paper made container). She struggled relentlessly with ups and downs, and atlast being failed to solve her problems she killed herself. Here Renuka is just a symbol and through her tragic incident, the author here tried to represent the whole woman community who were victimized of such tragic deaths in millions, without leaving behind no reliable history and evidences.²¹

For some women campmates, the monetary uncertainty related them to a lifestyle nearly starting from the scratch, spelt disaster, as they confronted one-of-a-kind varieties of atrocities – atrocities that commonly the women only face. Some instances came about inside the camps, where women were forced to work as sex workers. Their unfamiliarity with the outdoor world also made their life quit vulnerable in the camps.²²

Conclusion

It was the women, who had to pay the highest cost of freedom by loosing their friends, and families, chastity and honour. To save their live they migrated with a feeling that, now their life would change. But adjustment to a new situation was also very difficult for them. Here they faced new challenges. Though in the beginning, some of them were holding the thoughts that, when the situation would become normal, they will go back to their ancestral places. But in later, when it seemed almost impossible for them to get back their lost livelihood in their motherland, they adjusted themselves in the new atmosphere, which was not so easy. Despite several obstacles, the women were not stopped. By converting their weakness into their strength and defeating all the hurdles blocking their ways, they came out as flying birds and added new aspects to the history of partition.

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