

Forcible Dislocation: East Bengali Women's Account on Partition

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Abstract

Partition of Indian Subcontinent (1947) on communal ground forced the East Bengali Hindu folk to suffer conflict-induced displacement, a sub-category under forced migration. Forced migration accompanies a kind of 'dislocation' of the migrants from the place, where they lived through generations. The term "location" stands for a notion of place mingled with a particular sense of socio-economic status (occupation/ way of earning livelihood, education, social status, tradition; household, property; socio-political position- power, authority; and a sense of belongingness with all the above) for an individual in that locality, i.e., the entire way of living of human beings in a social setting. On the basis of qualitative interviews with some of the women who had suffered through partition and who with their families have been living in one of the oldest squatters' colonies in West Bengal, India, this article intends to explore, understand and analyze how these East Bengali women suffered dislocation even before their physical dislocation from the homeland. It suggests how the entanglement of history and memory sheds light on the crucial role that gender played in shaping dislocation. It also explores how and to what extent this perception of dislocation was gender specific and bound with pre-modern notion of family and kinship ties. (Word count: 205)

Key Words: forced migration, dislocation, gender, sexuality, sexism, patriarchy, self/identity

Introduction

Partition of Indian Subcontinent with overwhelming communal violence and the greatest record of mass-migration across borders has been interesting topic of research for the scholars of social science for a long time. As a consequence of scholarly efforts we have many histories of partition; but the accounts of those who had to leave their homes involuntarily and suffered forced migration during and after the partition, have been appallingly small. There are obviously some scholarly attempts and literary works to develop refugee narratives in which the refugees are depicted principally as victims which they were; but the narratives of victimhood fails to portray another side of the refugees- the active side- the agency of the refugees, who at least by the act of perception, interpretation and understanding of the surrounding scenario and thereby deciding how to act obviously reflected their agency to fight for survival. Recent social science studies have started focusing on the cultural dimension of refugeehood. Emphasizing the fact that the experience of refugees was deeply cultural, Bose (2000, p. 2) [3] argued that the disjunction that refugees had to face between their familiar way-of-being¹ and a new reality obliged them to resolve the problem of meaning and construe

¹ Way-of-being is a common phrase used in social science writings. It means the way in which a person understands his existence in the world around him- how he or she interprets the world and his or her relationship with others in it, how he or

their experience continuously. In case of forced migration an individual finds such disjunction even before his or her physical dislocation from the homeland. Anthropologists working with refugees have found that refugee's self-identity is often anchored in one's past, what he or she was, than what he or she has become (ibid). The dislocation of individual in his or her homeland involves the disruption in his or her way- of- being in his or her habitual place of living.

The term "location" stands for a notion of place mingled with a particular sense of socio-economic status (occupation/ way of earning livelihood, education, social status, tradition; household, property; socio-political position- power, authority; and a sense of belongingness with all the above) for an individual in that locality. Hence 'location' does not merely refer to place; it stands for 'the way of living'/ culture/ social location' of mankind. In this article, I intend to explore some of the experiences of dislocation as narrated by some East Bengali women², who had lived through partition, and are now spending days in Deshapriyanagar Colony, one of the oldest squatters' colonies of north 24 Parganas in West Bengal, and who were kind enough to spend time- long and repeated slots of qualitative interview sessions- with me talking about their experiences. My aim, here, is to understand the 'loss' and the 'trauma' that are embedded within the oral accounts and memories. I want to analyze how this sense of loss, the fear and anxiety, individual desires and collective fantasies (Sarkar 2009, p. 10) [23], all together in their assorted verbal and corporeal vocabulary, constitute a sort of psycho-social milieu- a structure of attitudes and sentiments; which mark the affective ground of partition discourse as a critical and constitutive element of history. Nowadays, researchers have turned their focus on memory, thus bringing within historiography the localized, subjective dimensions of the experience. Studies and anthologies on partition of the Indian subcontinent are showing increasing interest on oral and written testimonies, stressing differential factors such as gender, religion, and region in the cultural construction of memory (Butalia 1998 [4]; Kaul 2002 [16] Menon and Bhasin 1997 [19]; Samaddar 1997 [22]). Chakrabarty (1995, p. 110) [7] examines reminiscences of people who lived through partition to discover "the structure of sentiments" that may be used as a frame or "grid" for reading "the irrevocable fact of Hindu-Muslim separation in Bengali history and the trauma, surrounding the event" (ibid.). My purpose in this article, with its focus on the everyday experience of dislocation, has a certain affinity with such historiography in understanding the entanglement of history and memory. In this connection, I will try to analyze how gender as a crucial aspect of social structure played its role in shaping dislocation. I will also analyse how and to what extent this perception of dislocation is gender specific and bound with pre-modern notion of family and kinship ties.

The experience and feeling of dislocation in the native land was unique for the women folk in East Bengal. From the dawn of Bengal's partition during 1947 to the eve of the celebration of the birth of Bangladesh in 1970s, Bengal (both east and west) witnessed mass migration due to the wake of communal violence which was particularly marked by horrific atrocities (loot, abduction and rape) of women of the other community (Basu 2002 [2]; Dutta 1999 [13]). The patriarchal mingling of women's sexuality and honour of the community made women's position pitiable. Coomaraswami (2000) [9] suggests that in case of forced migration violence starts even before the practical process of eviction starts. The stress that the premonition of eviction creates on the prospective victims can result in destabilized atmosphere in the family.

she interacts according to that interpretation in his or her everyday life and in so doing, how he or she creates his or her identity.

² All the names of the respondents are fictitious to stand by the ethics of confidentiality.

Now, turning my attention towards the Hindu East Bengali women, who had become refugees as a result of partition, the questions that haunt me are: Were their experiences of dislocation as same as that of the men? Did the women differ among themselves in their experiences of dislocation? What type of violence did they face during the eviction process? The starting point for the research was the common belief or understanding that women do experience violence during evictions. For the present purpose, I intend to use a holistic definition of violence, one that understands violence in its totality with all the physical, psychological and structural dimensions. I consider violence as an act or commission that may extend to the damage done to a woman's livelihood, the destruction of her relationships and social support mechanisms, the emotional strain and stress imposed directly on her and within her family, the disruption of her interaction with her community, and the harm to her identity (Farha, Thompson 2002, p. 12) [14]. I find Oloka-Onyango (1996, pp. 382-3)[21] to be justified in suggesting that the term "violence" should include not only a series of commissions, but also omissions, which leads to a failure to recognize the existence of fundamental human rights of women. The structural violence (extending from poor nutrition, inadequate health care to limited access to education and other resources), as opposed to physical violence, can produce several different effects on women and thus on the exercise or realizations of their human rights. While all of these are problems common to a situation of stability, they are at their extremes at times of conflict situation that leads people to flee.

Under the veil of silence: Violent sexism as weapon to control the 'other'

History of Partition is eloquent about the violence that took place during Noakhali outrage, months before partition, and is unhesitant to mark it particularly by the horror of abduction of and sexual assaults on Hindu women; and this legacy continues to taint the history of post-partition scenario in Bengal. Women were used as an object of hate campaign against the other community (Bandyopadhyay 1997, p. 6) [1]. All of the respondents in the present study invariably spoke about the sexual torture on women- rape, abduction, mutilation of sex organs and such like, during the periodic communal violence that occurred in East Bengal from 1945 to the 1970s. But no one mentioned any women of his/her own family, who had gone through that experience. Some said that they had heard about it, but never witnessed such events; the others said that women of other families in their locality had been abducted, lost, or tortured by the Muslims; but somehow they or the women of their own family escaped such ravishment. Here, I must confess my inability to penetrate the deep-rooted secret, if there remained any. Therefore there was no way for me to validate whether anybody was hiding the traumatic truth under the veil of ignorance. Sexual purity of women has been mingled with the honour of the community and family under patriarchy in such a way that till now, a victim of sexual crime and her family can neither speak of it openly, nor can swallow it, nor can wipe away the mark of rupture completely. Rather they maintain a continued silence to hide the fact and at last end into constructing a seemingly satisfying world where the victim and the crime both are deliberately drowned in the lost part of memory. It seemed, as Summerfield (1999, p.119) [24] remarked while writing about Latin American experience of forced migration, that "terror was intended to be felt but not named", and "people were forced to deny their own reality, to swallow their own words". For the present analysis, I will now try to put forward the voice of one of my respondents, who at least admitted that she had been the witness to such a case.

Niharbala Sarkar, even at seventy, could remember in vivid details the events of the night when their village was attacked by the Muslim rioters. She was born at Chingrikhali village in Khulna. The year was 1950, and she was about ten years old when she experienced the horrific communal violence. In her own words:

The day started so nicely. Our neighbour *Beladidi*, who was like my own elder sister, gave birth to a lovely baby, a boy. Everyone was so happy. But the night came with destruction. The Muslims attacked our village. There was no premonition of such an attack in our locality. People ran helpless to escape death. We all ran towards the paddy field to hide in the dark. My mother spread a lot of mud on my face and body in the field. I felt the urge of violent ejection, out of sheer panic and utter stinking. Now, I can understand why she had done this. It was to hide my flesh from those goons. We saw our house burning. We could hear screaming of men and women. My mother pressed my mouth so tightly that I almost fainted in suffocation. The next morning we found *Beladidi's* (a Bengali word meaning the elder sister) house completely burnt. All had run to escape death forgetting about the weak woman and her innocent child. They were stirring the ashes desperately in apprehension of finding the burnt bodies. Suddenly someone yelled from the field just opposite the house and we rushed there to find the mutilated corpse of the poor girl- clothes torn and wet with blood, as if attacked by some beasts. There was another body, or a bundle of flesh! – It was the body of the infant who had taken birth just the previous day. There were wailings from other houses also. Some lost their sons, some lost daughters, some lost wives, and some lost their husbands. A complete rupture of life!

The old woman was desperate to control her tears rolling down her wrinkled cheeks.

The above narrative portrays a horrible account of human brutality, where any one- a child, a new mother in labour room, a new born baby- can be the prey of masculine brutality, simply because they are women, or the objects manifesting the feminine bliss and are in possession of the rival community. The ruptured, blood-soaked body of the dead woman and the corpse of the infant symbolize the demise of all human sensibilities.

Parimal Pain, one of my refugee respondents, recalled that she was pregnant when her house in Barishal was attacked by Muslim fanatics. Her husband had gone to seek police help as soon as he heard that his house would be the target of the rioters that night. Parimal Pain said:

I was pregnant then. I could not say anything, just sat down on the staircase, placed my back on the wall, closed my eyes and started praying to God. The whole day had passed. My husband did not come back. ...(in the evening) The rest of the family fled to a nearby village with me. ... Later I heard that he left for India with the help of some Muslim friends on the very day of the attack. I was expecting my first child at that time. So my in-laws decided that I should leave the place as soon as possible with my own brothers and start for India. Then the rumours were that the rioters were slitting open the wombs of the pregnant Hindu women to kill the babies and the mothers at once.

A pregnant woman was thrown out from her safe haven, and floated in the ocean of uncertainty without the least knowledge on the whereabouts of her husband, the father of the child she was expecting. Further she was to flee her homeland with her brothers in order to protect the baby in her womb. What an unimaginable trauma the expecting woman had to suffer! She was to travel day and night on road, without any woman companion to support her in case any physical crises would occur; and that too amidst sheer tension. War, battle and riot wipe out all sensibilities, everything humane from the warring human races; and women and children happen to be the most susceptible prey of such fatal insensibilities that tend to structure a permanent part of the victim's psyche. Women and children were never part of partition-decision, but the patriarchs- communal fanatics- did find in them the embodiment of the honour, exclusivity and continuity of the rival community (Chatterjee 2002, p. 18) [8]. Therefore, they ordained for women and children merciless annihilation through rape, death and mutilation- the incontestably powerful weapons of patriarchal

domination. In Niharbala Sarkar's account, we find that a girl child of only ten years of age was viewed as an embodiment of female sexuality, and her mother covered her body with mud in order to hide and protect it from violation. As Nikolic- Ristanovic (2000, p. 48) [20] suggests, in war-time or period of ethnic cleansing the brutality of rape is escalated by the fact that "in the eyes of the rapist, the woman is the enemy", and the act of rape is a way to devalue the opponent's manhood because they were unable to protect "their women". Rape and sexual assault are widely used to symbolize intrusion into and establish hegemony over the 'body politic' of the enemy. As several feminist scholars argue, rape is "an attack on the body politic, and not just the physical body" (Crawley 2000, p. 95) [12]. Under these circumstances, rape takes the proportion of a political act performed in the name of one ethnic/political group and sexual violence represents a form of persecution. In the extremist fundamentalist/dictatorial/military regimes, rape besides being a weapon of war and a vehicle of sexual terrorism, is also a way to reinforce the male hegemony. Ultimately, the scope of the act of rape resides in perpetuating patriarchal dichotomies: male-female, machismo-marianismo, war (masculine)-peace (feminine), violent-passive, aggressive-submissive, dominator-subordinated, superior-inferior, strong-weak, oppressor-oppressed, perpetrator-victim (Giroin et.al. 2005, pp. 18-9) [15]. In the context of partition of the Indian subcontinent, it was as if "national (communal) identity.....was on a grand scale, constructed over woman's body" (Kesic 2001, p. 36) [17]. Hence, gender could be recognized as a "category of persecution" during the period of communal violence caused by partition of the subcontinent; and rape, which stemmed from a sexist mentality (Copelon, 1999, pp. 337-9) [11], was a tool of torture purposefully used against women in order to maintain male supremacy, power and control (Copelon 1995, p. 206) [10].

The life and position of women had gone through a drastic change as a fall out of partition. The Hindu women had internalized the idea that they could give fulfilment to their womanhood only by successful reproduction of familial lives, which since antiquity they had socially been charged with. Women had no part in determining their role in society in the earlier days, quite usual in a patriarchy. Now also they had no role to play except coping with the changed situation while bearing all its great pathos silently. Minati Das, a colony settler, narrated her experience as follows:

I was only six or seven years old then. I did not realize anything to be afraid of. We were three sisters. I was the youngest of all. I saw my parents in constant panic. They stopped us from going to school. My elder sisters were not allowed to step outside the house. In the evenings the situation turned to be worse. My father ordered to put out all the lamps as to pretend that no one lived in the house. We were not even allowed to speak at night. My father was waiting for passport. It was almost a captive life. I never saw my mother behaving as rudely as she did in those days, especially with my elder sisters, as if they had committed some offence. I saw my eldest sister weeping silently at night, pressing her face against the pillow. My mother's irritation increased particularly whenever my father had to go outside. Actually sheer panic changed our lives.

Minati Das's account reveals that dislocation before flight from the homeland occurred not only due to direct use of physical violence from the other community, but the Bengali Hindu women experienced violence and thereby dislocation, in a much wider sense. Women lost their freedom of movement even within the household and nearby locality, and had to live a captive life within the four walls in order to hide their existence from the eyes of the Muslim fanatics. This transition also caused women to lose their "living space," the social, material, and psychological centre of their day-to-day lives, and this loss directly had a bearing on their emotional and mental health. The evictions also caused a deterioration of the position of young women within the household and society, and consequently lowered the self-esteem of

many of the women (Farha and Thompson 2002, p. 15) [14]. The mother's behaviour in the above account seems to reveal a trauma-syndrome arising out of a 'limit-situation' (Martín-Baro 1994, p. 109) [18], which refers to those politically repressive events when the individual faces life-threatening situations. The mother's panic for her daughters' sexuality, which was constantly in trap of 'body politic', and could invite destruction for the whole family, generated the abnormal irritation and harshness in her behaviour towards her daughters. We find, following Martín-Baro (1994,p.109) [18] that mental health represents "a matter of the basic character of human relations", and mental disorders penetrated not only the psyche of the individual but also her relationships with the others, thus contaminating the entire community (Giron et.al. 2005, p. 15-6) [15]. Minati-debi's account reveals that she along with her sisters experienced dislocation not directly from the violence commissioned by the Muslims, but through the everyday interactions with their parents (mother).

Dislocation: perceived or imposed?

The perception of dislocation was not homogeneous in the case of the women folk. Some faced riot along with the men folk, some underwent physical/sexual/ psychological torture; but there were still a large group of women who were bereft of any connection with the external world and for whom 'independence', 'partition' etc. were just some words often spoken by their men folk among themselves. They hardly felt any dislocation first hand. It was the men folk who apprehended threat from news and rumours of communal riots, abduction, rape etc. They imposed their own feeling of dislocation on the women of their family. Otherwise, the world, i.e. the domestic world, the *andarmahal* (in-house), for this category of women was quite impervious. Interview with Mongala Das, a refugee settler of nearly eighty years of age, provided me with the concept of such 'imposed dislocation' by the men of the household. Mongala was an innocent housewife in a village called Daser Jangol, in Faridpur. There was no space for events like independence of India or the partition in her life world. Her world comprised of her village and her household. According to Mongala, her husband, who used to work in the western part of undivided Bengal, returned to her home all on a sudden and discussed with her brother-in-laws about partition, distracted riots in East Bengal and therefore whether they were to leave the village and try to settle somewhere near his work-place. Mongala's husband talked loudly so as his words might reach Mongala. Though her brother-in-laws admitted that they also came about such rumours in village *adda* (a Bengali word referring to casual chats and gossip among friends) they were hardly prepared to leave the village as they could think of nothing but cultivating their own land for earning livelihood and they hardly grasp any premonition of riot in their small village. But the situation changed for the worse within a few days. Mongala's maternal uncles, who had a good relation with and a kind of authority over her husband's family, insisted them to leave for India. After a furious debate between the male members of the two families it was decided that Mongala would leave for India with her maternal uncles' family leaving past all the members of her husband's family including her husband who decided to stay by his brothers.

Mongala never sensed any change in her daily living in East Bengal. It was the men folk of her family and her relatives, who imposed a kind of dislocation in her everyday life. She was happy with her household, which she had to leave as the men folk were concerned about her security. She departed not only from her own village, but from her household, her family, her relations and even from her husband. No one asked her how she felt. As in the case of Mongala, Minati Das's dislocation also was not the direct result of violence perpetrated by the 'other' community. Rather she and her sisters found their own parents to be harsh with them, depriving them in the process their habitual way of living in the name of security and

protection. Mongala Das's case was not unique regarding the issue of taking decision about migration. It is worth stating here that the majority of my respondents admitted that the decision regarding whether, how and when to leave the homeland was under the purview of the men of their households.

Ruptured household: loss of self

Another aspect of dislocation relates to the part of leaving the ancestral/ native household and the subsequent journey towards the land of destination. A 'household' does not stand merely for a building that provides shelter. It is a place which a person identifies himself or herself with. A household, with all kith- kin and neighbours, the web of multifarious relationships formed thereby, the everyday activities, the places where these activities are performed, the regular usable goods and materials and places- the field, the gardens, the ponds, rivers and the *ghats* (Some specific parts of the banks of water-bodies, which are used for bathing, washing and other regular activities) nearby- all these playing an inter-connected and inter-dependent role-relationship; helps structuring a particular person's concept of what he/she is. Hence leaving household for ever means the destruction of the so-long created conception of identity of a person. The Hindu women, who had their world within the four walls of the households, had their self image shaped by, and intertwined with it. The age-old institutions of patriarchy taught them to achieve self fulfilment, self realization and actualization within the confinement of the household as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers and as procreators of livelihood within the household. Hence, for these women leaving the household was nothing less than tearing themselves apart from their long- built self. Many of these uprooted women were found later to live not only with their past, but to live in their past (Butalia 2006, p. 161) [6].

The majority of the East Bengali Hindu families were joint or extended in structure. Many of these families had to leave their households and flee towards India in small groups, because of threat of violence and fear of attack. These attributed to the rupture of traditional family structure. Probha Dutta, a sixty-five year old refugee respondent, expressed how she, then a five year old child, was separated from her mother, as she was sent to India with her uncle's family.

Our ancestral house was at Bikrampur in Dhaka district. I could remember that our ancestral house had to face recurrent robberies, one of which caused the death of my father. ...After the fourth incident of such robbery in the house, my uncles decided that the children and young women should leave for India with my *sejokaka* (the second brother of the respondent's father) and his wife. But my mother would stay there with my grandmother and my eldest uncle, who was a doctor and was unwilling to leave the homeland. Hence in 1950 we fled to India. The night before I had left, I still remember my mother lying beside me. I held on to her tightly. My mother was staring at me for a long time. Now I understand she wanted to keep me in her eyes. I was the only one that she had for herself. For my safety she accepted this separation silently. As far as I know she was never asked whether she wanted to go with me, or whether she wanted me to go.

Fleeing the land in small groups in order to ensure that a few of the family would remain alive even if the other groups could not escape violence on road, created another dislocation for the women for whom the world was their household complete with all the members of the family. Mothers were separated from children; sisters were separated from brothers; wives were separated from their husbands. The trauma of separation for women were never less painful than cutting up body parts, which quite well resembles the picture that shows mother

India (a woman) with chopped up hands- a picture quite popular to express the agony of partition of the subcontinent.

Gouri De, another refugee respondent, told me about her mother-in-law, Bidhumati-*debi*'s experience which she heard from her on many occasions.

She (Bidhumati) remembered how her husband was shocked when he had come to know about partition. At night, he told her about the communal riots in Calcutta, Noakhali etc. He was afraid that they might also have to leave the land, because there would be an outbreak of riot in their place any day. The other women of her family heard nothing about these, and they laughed at her when she told them what her husband told her. Even one of her sisters-in-law (husband's widowed sister) commented sternly, "it seems that *Mejabau* (wife of the second brother) was planning for separation." ... But the situation changed within a few months. News of communal riots here and there in East Pakistan spread rapidly. Men from different Hindu families of their village often met at their *baithakkhana*, and discussed about the situation and their future in East Bengal. Inherent tension in their discussion could not be hidden from the women of the family. But no women seemed to really believe that they would leave the land for ever.

Being separated from a joint/extended family was thought to be a curse, a deviance on the part of the departed one. The East Bengali middle class *bhadralok*³ families used to boast of their familial bond and if any gap in this was found the housewives were mostly accused of creating the crevice. Some women like Bidhumati's widowed sister-in-law, exercised control over and enjoyed absolute authority in this in-house space. But patriarchy penetrated naively there through these women agents who created and controlled women's world, austere different from the world of men, within the in-house. Forced migration broke the household which was the life-world for those women.

All the above refugee narratives show that it was the household that became the primary target of the 'other community'. A household was considered to be the primary place of dwelling of the women, who not only happened to be the socially subjugated group everywhere in human civilization, but they also were fated to be ruptured in every war, battle and tension between men in existing patriarchal social structure. Niharbala Sarkar, an old woman colony-settler, saw her house burning. Probha Dutta narrated about robbery in their household. Thus the households which constituted the productive and reproductive space of women, i.e. the essence of women's world, were torn apart. Therefore, we find Farha and Thompson (2002, p. 8) [14] to be justified in their comment:

"Needless to say, the people most vulnerable to forced eviction are those with the least economic and political power in society, those whose rights are commonly violated: i.e. women; ...and others lacking security of tenure. Since women in many cultures have a particular and close association with housing and the home, it can be further surmised that forced eviction has a disproportionate adverse impact on women." (Farha and Thompson 2002, p. 8) [14]

Coming to the end of this article I can't help uttering:

"Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greater impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed, whose children and husbands are sacrificed in the name of national integrity and unity. And for every fire that is lit, it is women whose job is to painfully build the future from the ashes..."

---An activist pamphlet brought out by Women against Fundamentalism in Delhi (Cited by Butalia. 2000, p. 181) [5]

³ The Bengali word *bhadralok* means a respectable person of middleclass background-- landowners or professionals usually, but not exclusively upper caste, and distinguished socially by education, non-manual labour and a refined lifestyle.

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