



Resurgence Amidst Ruins

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In the historical context of India, the year 1947 witnessed two momentous events, marking a transformative period on an unprecedented scale. Firstly, on August 15, 1947, India gained independence, signalling the end of British colonial rule. This monumental occasion not only saw the birth of India as a sovereign nation but also paved the way for the creation of two distinct nations. On one side, India emerged as a nation predominantly rooted in Hindu identity, while on the other, Pakistan came into existence as an Islamic nation (4).

However, the partition of India, despite marking a significant milestone in the quest for independence, unfolded as a deeply poignant and painful chapter for both nations. The human cost of this partition was staggering, leaving an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of the people. The birth of these nations, though symbolic of freedom, was accompanied by the harsh reality of communal strife and the displacement of millions, underscoring the complex and multifaceted nature of this pivotal moment in human history.

The reverberations of the Radcliffe Award, the delineation of borders that would carve out Pakistan from India, echoed across regions inhabited by approximately 100 million people. In the northwest, the state of Punjab was dissected, giving rise to West Pakistan, while on the eastern front, Bengal bore the impact, leading to the creation of East Pakistan. This historic partition not only redrew geopolitical boundaries but also irrevocably altered the destinies and lives of countless individuals, setting the stage for a profound transformation in the socio-political landscape of the subcontinent (1).

According to Menon and Bhasin, an estimated eight to ten million individuals traversed newly drawn borders, resulting in a staggering loss of 500,000 to 1,000,000 lives (3). However, Butalia, in her work "The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India", presents a higher figure, asserting that twelve million people undertook the arduous journey, with death tolls ranging from 200,000 to two million (2). Despite variations in these accounts, there is a consensus that the exodus exacted a devastating toll, with over a million lives tragically lost during this unprecedented upheaval.

In the backdrop of Bengal's tumultuous history, the plight of refugee women was marked by profound challenges, yet their resilience and determination carved a unique narrative. The haunting echoes of the 1943 famine, a dark chapter in Bengal's past, reverberated as impoverished and uprooted women from East Bengal sought solace in train stations. Amidst an ongoing epidemic, their struggles unfolded against the backdrop of despair. However, within this adversity, a compelling counter-narrative emerged. Not all refugee women succumbed to hopelessness; many actively engaged in various political movements and organizations, showcasing their strength in adversity. Women aligned with leftist ideologies fanned out into camps and colonies in East Bengal during the initial phases, later becoming pivotal figures in both the refugee and women's movements. In the midst of adversity, a new chapter unfolded, where resilience and empowerment stood as beacons of hope for a better future.

Gargi Chakravarty's exploration into the experiences of women in Bengal during the Partition provides a nuanced perspective, steering away from the predominant narrative of loss and victimhood. In her endeavour, Chakravarty sheds light on the resilience of uprooted women and their journey of rebuilding lives in unfamiliar conditions, eventually evolving into a new women's movement. Chakravarty's personal connection to the subject, growing up on the peripheries of a refugee settlement in Calcutta, adds a unique dimension to her research. While not a refugee herself, her parents hailed from East Bengal, and her childhood experiences in the 1950s informed her understanding of the challenges faced by those in the refugee settlements. Settled in Delhi as a college teacher, she revisited these 'colonies' in the late 1990s and early 2000s, collecting oral narratives and testimonies from survivors of the communal riots of 1946-47 and subsequent conflagrations in Bengal. Unlike the politicization of Punjabi refugees by the RSS in Punjab, Chakravarty notes a distinctive approach in West Bengal. The Left, primarily the communists, led the refugee movement, preventing the Hindu Mahasabha from communalizing refugee politics, despite the influential presence of leaders like Shyamaprasad Mukherjee. Chakravarty highlights the perspective of Sukumari Chowdhury, an East Bengali refugee who underwent the Noakhali riots. Sukumari, having received vocational training from a Left-run women's organization in West Bengal, joined the trade union movement and expressed no ill-feelings towards Muslims. Her experience reflects the success of the Left in fostering a sense of unity and understanding among the refugees. The immediate concerns of these uprooted women centered around rehabilitation, but their sensitivities gradually expanded to encompass broader economic and political issues. Engaging with Left-led agitations, they advocated for democratic and secular demands such as the right to employment, the campaign for the Hindu Code Bill, and participated in the peace movement advocating for a ban on nuclear weapons. The transition from immediate rehabilitation concerns to active involvement in larger socio-political issues marked a significant metamorphosis in their social and cultural thinking and behaviour. The transformation of these women extended beyond their immediate circumstances; it became a story of empowerment and participation in shaping the socio-political landscape. Emerging from the shadows of victimhood, they embraced open expression, took up jobs, joined demonstrations, and became instrumental in altering societal perceptions. Chakravarty's

work illuminates the journey of these women, highlighting their resilience, activism, and the profound impact they had on shaping the trajectory of Bengal's post-Partition society (5).

Bengali migrant women came out of the private domain of domesticity and child rearing to take up significant public duties. Their journey was not smooth, and they underwent conflicts that remain relatively untold. The position of the woman in traditional Bengali society allowed her to only tend to the home, while the man was the economic back bone of the family. The sociological and cultural conditioning of Bengali society impeded and undermined the migrant women's economic enterprise. The impact of Partition on the Bengali migrant women was complex but positive. However, the negative undertones in the context of new-found employment cannot be ignored. The *bhadramahila* was now a symbol of female emancipation and strove to provide for her family to the best of her ability. The inclination towards employment kept the family at its crux. The outlook was not towards self-liberation but towards supplementing financial provisions for the family. Self-liberation was arguably consequential in the process, although not instant. Liberation required the woman to shed her previously held beliefs and embrace the economic freedom that possibly would have brought with it social and political freedom. The beliefs were deep-rooted and often not immediately erasable. The women had to bear the brunt of discrimination based on their gender because they were made to believe that the economic domination of the male was a preordained state. Namita Roy Chowdhury, who was a victim of economic necessity after her father's death, says on the issue: "Yakhana āmarā bāṛi thikē bā'irē yā'i chilāma takhana āmādēra paribāra āmāra sansāra chila kintu bā'irē yābāra parē āmarā nijēra sansāra chila." (Translation- "When we went out to work initially, our family was our world but after we started working, we realised we were our own world.") The tryst with the taste of freedom was similar for most women. The nascent stages of public duty vis-à-vis domestic duty were fraught with conflicts of gender in particular that were overcome only after gradual exposure to the outside world. The conflict between the "outside" and "inside" worlds, however, in no way undermines the achievement of the women in the public sphere. We see the migrant women emerging as torch bearers of economic freedom, an ostensibly positive distinction with socio-cultural ramifications that were not necessarily positive themselves (6).

References

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