



Political Activism Amidst the Struggles of Refugee Women in Post-Partition Bengal

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The challenges encountered by both refugees and the state government in West Bengal were astonishing. Women, in particular, experienced significant hardships as they transitioned from their previous living conditions to their current state. However, the refugee women in Bengal managed to transform the narrative, shifting from domestic roles to becoming providers for themselves and their families. This transformation served as a source of inspiration for women throughout West Bengal.

The 1950 Barisal riots compelled East Bengalis to confront the reality of permanent displacement. Despite this, the Liaquat Ali-Nehru Pact obligated them to remain in their current locations, causing confusion amid the ongoing violence. As the refugees continued to arrive, the post-partition struggles of women in Bengal mirrored the familiar scenes from the 1943 famine, with impoverished women enduring hardships and converging at railway stations. Left-oriented women, previously engaged in grassroots work in East Bengal, found themselves as refugees in various camps and colonies. Simultaneously, they initiated a refugee movement, aligning it with the broader women's movement. During the period from 1946 to 1950, these women, devoid of pre-partition affiliations, were collectively known as "refugee women."

The Communist Party faced a ban as the opposition, and Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS) also became illegal. MARS members, disassociating from any political ties, protested the ban. In response, the mothers of these women formed 'The Mothers Committee,' joined by elderly women, leading to protests and unfortunate deaths on April 27, 1949. These demonstrations infused courage among the activists.

MARS activists worked at Sealdah station, and AISF's women's faction, Chatri Sangha, focused on camps in Sealdah, ensuring supplies for the refugees. Women's organizations faced challenges with abducted and unattached women. A memorandum from 21 women's organizations highlighted the scale of abduction and torture in East Bengal, urging the government to address the evacuation and rehabilitation issue on a national scale. Institutions like Nari Seva Sangha, Udai Villa Women's Cooperative Industrial Home, Ananda Ashram, and All Bengal's Women's Union were established.

The complexity heightened when abducted women were forced back to their original families, even if they were married to their perpetrators. At a Women's Conference sponsored by the Communist Party, the government was requested not to rescue abducted women. Women doctors played a crucial role, establishing medical centers to treat rape victims and performing abortions. Violated women faced family boycotts, leading some to resort to poisoning themselves. Muslim women, depicted in Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel "Epar Ganga Opar Ganga," requested to return home.

Understanding the women's movement requires delving into the Communist Party of India, led by B.T Ranadive, whose armed struggle led to the party's ban and imprisonment of many activists. East Pakistan communists quietly worked among refugees, and when joined by others, they aided refugees in colonies. Leftist women, identified among migrants, found a platform for mass organizations when the Communist ban was lifted, contributing to their future electoral base.

Refugees demanded home regularizations, making the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) organize a signature campaign for voting rights. Colony Recognition week observed from January 26 to 31, 1951, included processions to the Assembly house with women leading, but it lacked political support from CPIM. Initially, the government ignored the refugee problem, prompting refugees to stay in Sealdah station on minimal aid before being relocated to relief camps.

Vacant military barracks in Calcutta and surrounding areas were repurposed as relief camps, hosting women who had been disowned by their families in East Pakistan. The journey involved overcrowded trains, customs checks, and harassment by Ansars, leaving many women with traumatic experiences due to the lack of proper arrangements at railway stations. Organizations like Kasi Viswanath Seva Samity, Ramkrishna Mission, Bharat Ashram, and Hindu Mahasabha, alongside women and student groups, operated at various levels. These activities were affiliated with the East Bengal Relief Committee and the Women's Coordination Committee.

Women at the railway stations improvised kitchens in the corners of the platforms, often waiting for their next destination in an unsafe environment. False relief organizations exploited refugee women, selling them to traffickers, with the police being aware of such activities. Reports indicated the presence of around 90 men with criminal intent. Bengali women's magazine Ghare Baire documented the daily lives and struggles of migrant women, depicting their labor on road construction, protests leading to imprisonment, and their desperate search for leftover food.

Eden Gardens in Calcutta also housed numerous refugees, with women and children enduring difficult lives, and some lives lost. Women, including both educated and illiterate, from different camps faced accommodation challenges, and floating barges were repurposed as shelters. Government reports revealed that Titagarh Camp No 1 accommodated 2100 women and 1603 minors below 12, Camp No 2 hosted 1032 individuals, including 444 minors, Belur Camp housed 216 women, and Jhotala Camp had 155 women and 70 minors. Additionally, there were numerous unofficial centers in the mid-50s.

Conditions in the refugee camps were dire, with 1000 women and 300 children enduring days of starvation due to delayed dole deliveries. Tragically, some children died as a result. In places like the Midnapore Salva Camp, occupants were housed in ordinary tents in open spaces, leading to rampant issues such as malnutrition, malaria, dysentery, and snake bites, resulting in numerous deaths.

Instances emerged where women, frustrated by government inefficiency, directly sought help from presiding officers, only to be consistently refused. Their strong voices of protest prompted authorities to call in the police to handle these perceived troublemakers, discouraging other camp dwellers from approaching them. Reports revealed instances of physical assault by authorities and the police on protesting women. In October 1954, women in the Bhadrakali Refugee Camp in Hoogly were severely injured, leading the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) to organize a protest rally near Chief Minister B.C. Roy's residence.

Incensed by physical assaults, women organized themselves for self-defense and protested for their own plots of land and doles. The Bansdroni Government Refugee Colony, born out of women's struggles, saw a year-long effort starting in 1949. Poor refugees sought to claim land as their legal property, resulting in the establishment of 149 colonies by the end of December 1950. Goondas (hired thugs) launched attacks, leading to shootings, even involving women. Although the government issued notifications in a 1950 Gazette urging refugees to vacate these lands, it was widely believed to be a gesture to appease landlords, and the authorities struggled to dismantle these colonies, covering vast expanses totaling 23,90,049 acres.

The matter of eviction, as it progressed through legal channels, saw a significant court ruling allowing only civil suits, not criminal ones, for the occupation of unauthorized land lasting more than three consecutive months, and police intervention was prohibited. This legal development worked against landlords, as civil suits entailed higher costs. Responding to this legal intricacy, women organized under the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) formed samitis in their colonies, actively occupying both government and private lands. This assertive action compelled the government to introduce the Eviction Bill, but it faced vehement opposition, particularly from women who played a crucial role in a procession of 10,000, with 1,200 women carrying babies. This collective effort made the struggle notably more robust compared to other mass movements during that period. As the tension escalated, Section 144 was imposed on December 24, 1950, leading to the demolition of houses in the Jadabgarh area without providing any alternative arrangements. Tragically, this resulted in a pregnant woman, Binapani Mitra, becoming the first woman martyr in the history of the refugee movement in Bengal due to a police lathi charge.

The resilient women, determined to defend their homes, actively engaged in distributing food, resisting the Eviction Bill, and advocating for the regularization of colonies. The Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS), which was active even before Partition, continued its work post-migration and set up new units. Women, facing economic hardships and societal challenges, took up leadership roles, demanding basic amenities like electricity and waterlines. They actively participated in various conferences, with the entrance gates named after martyrs of the refugee movement. Inspired by MARS, women's organizations emerged, fighting not only for peace but also for the enactment of the Hindu Code Bill, challenging patriarchal structures within the legal framework. Despite facing anti-Soviet sentiments, liberal women joined the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), and by 1954, the National Federation of Indian Women was established, witnessing a rise in membership.

Women continued to be at the forefront, actively engaging in societal changes and advocating for legislative reforms. The Special Marriage Bill and the Hindu Code Bill were pivotal in challenging existing norms, with women collecting thousands of signatures to support these legislative endeavors. Employment for women was a central focus, with demands for administrative employment for married women gaining prominence. The NFIW passed a resolution advocating for administrative employment for married women in various departments.

The period also witnessed the observance of Unemployed Women's Day on September 27, 1953, where women demanded their right to work, choose professions, receive education and training, and address their economic needs. The significant involvement of women in committees and the refugee awakening became a crucial political base for the Left during this transformative period.

The impact of this period extended beyond political and legal spheres, influencing societal changes. The 'andarmahal' culture witnessed a silent metamorphosis as women found new spaces and avenues to inhabit. Life in refugee colonies presented numerous challenges, and women actively participated in breaking traditional norms. The joint family system, characteristic of Eastern Bengal, underwent significant changes but also served as a 'coping mechanism' under the challenging conditions.

As Gargi Chakrabarty mentions, this was a silent metamorphosis in women's lives. The economic burden was shared, and daughters began to actively contribute. Despite commendable resistance from families, societal acceptance of women's roles in organizations and earning income began to emerge. Although women were initially discouraged from taking certain jobs, the pressing need to work and provide for their families led them to challenge societal stigmas. They pursued degrees not just for marriage but to secure jobs as stenographers, salesgirls, and typists. Educational institutions, like Sarojini Naidu College in Dum Dum, witnessed an influx of refugee women, influencing others in West Bengal to follow suit.

Women took on diverse roles in various sectors, working in telephone exchanges, insurance offices, food departments, and even the police force. The visibility of women as salesgirls, selling items door to door, became a notable shift in societal norms. Training programs were initiated for women in

vocations such as midwifery and hospital aids, with some becoming pioneers in nursing. Government documents provide evidence of these initiatives and the discussion of women's needs in hospitals at later stages.

Chakrabarty mentions organizations like Nari Seva Sangha, which provided training in tailoring, bookbinding, lock printing, and batik, enabling women to earn a livelihood. Udai Villa Women's Cooperative focused on rehabilitating unattached women, and fast-food centers were established. Homes for rape survivors aimed at fostering self-reliance. Uneducated women found employment in various capacities, working in people's homes, supplying office tiffin, selling flowers, fruits, vegetables, and making paper bags. They worked as cooks, nurses, and attendants in towns, challenging stereotypes associated with these roles. Notably, confrontations arose between West Bengali and East Bengali workers regarding salary disparities.

The period also marked a change in the sociological pattern of middle-class and peasant families. Orthodox norms that discouraged women from participating in organizations and earning income began to give way. The refugee women, despite breaking the public-private divide, did not overtly protest against the mental and physical torture inflicted by their husbands, preserving familial obligations. Their primary objective was to secure food, clothing, and shelter for their families, and questioning the patriarchal structure took a back seat. Despite active participation in protests and processions, women were often neglected in decision-making processes. For instance, only Charushila Banerjee held the position of Vice President in the UCRC leadership.

This transformative period became a milestone in the women's movement in Bengal. It marked the end of the 'andarmahal' culture, allowing women to find new avenues and spaces. While life in refugee colonies remained challenging, women's active participation brought about societal changes that reverberated beyond the political and legal realms. The impact of women's involvement in this period was instrumental in shaping a new social milieu in Bengal.

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