

# The Refugee Women in West Bengal and its Influence on Bengali Culture

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**Abstract:** The subaltern studies have spoken about the subaltern status of women this has been quite vividly reflected in the way the Bengali society had reacted to them. The refugees when they arrived in Bengal were regarded as subalterns irrespective of class, caste and gender. They were identified as a 'problem', as the 'other' - who were asking for something that wasn't theirs to have - that is the basic amenities for food, clothing, shelter and jobs and as a status of citizen. Though the partition was a political decision and the management of the influx was the governments' responsibility their wellbeing was not taken up seriously by the governments. It is often believed that the privileged always influenced the under privileged. But when it came to the refugee women in West Bengal the situation had completely reversed. These refugee women for the need of jobs were going out of their homes to the various places to work to earn a living. Directly and indirectly they were taking part in the economy of the country and continued to influence the upper/middle class women of West Bengal. The visibility of women in the public spaces began to inspire a lot of women and they too were becoming visible in this new space. This has been depicted in the most acclaimed work of Ritwik Ghatak. Thus in this paper I will address how the refugee women in Bengal began to influence the women in Bengal.

**Keywords:** Bengal, economy, partition, refugee, Ritwik Ghatak, subaltern, women.

## 1. Introduction

Partition of India in the year 1947 gave birth to two new nations India and Pakistan. This Partition devastated the lives of people on both sides of the border the West and the East. On the Eastern side was Bengal and its division into East Pakistan and West Bengal ruined the lives of the people who became refugees and migrants, who had to travel all the way leaving their home and families to a completely new and alien land. The process of refugee influx as we know from the works of various scholars were not as immediate as in the case of Western India, the refugees on the East were trickling down every month and hence its numbers fluctuated and became difficult to manage the violence that it accompanied. This movement was happening because of the already known violence that took place in Punjab, which has been defined by scholars as fear psychosis, which began to influence on the eastern border.

The refugees and the state government had to face in West Bengal was shocking. The women suffered a lot in terms of the 'new' spaces that they occupied before to what state they were in now. But the refugee women in Bengal surprisingly altered

the scenario of domestic women to women who earned a living for themselves and their families which motivated the women of West Bengal.

The focus when discussing women had only been on oppression and victimhood and not on other relevant experiences the most important being how these women reacted to the challenge and remade their lives in a completely different situation evolving into a new women's movement. They shaped and radically reoriented the social lives of Bengali women.

## 2. Participation and Transition

The 1950 Barisal riots East Bengalees finally accepted the truth of leaving forever but the Liaquat Ali-Nehru Pact forced them to stay on in their respective places and the continued violence confused the refugees. But eventually when they began to pour in the women's struggles in post partition Bengal showed a familiar picture like the famine of 1943 with the destitute women suffering and coming to the railway station. The left oriented women who worked in East Bengal at grass root levels landed as refugees in various camps and colonies they parallelly started a refugee movement along with the women's movement no pre partition ties came between 1946-1950 and were called 'refugee women'.

The Communist party got banned because it was the opposition party and MARS (Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti) too became illegal. There were also protests from the MARS members as they claimed not be a politically supported. The mothers of these women formed 'The Mothers Committee' in protest- elderly women also came out in protest-these protests also saw a lot of deaths 27th April 1949. These protests gave them a lot of courage. The Activists of MARS worked in Sealdah station, AISFs women's faction known as Chatri Sangha looked at camps in Sealdah and others got food and other necessities. The women's organisations faced the worst problems when it came to the abducted and unattached women and the twenty one women organisations memorandum showed the scale of abduction and torture in East Bengal and asked the government to consider the problem of evacuation and rehabilitation as it was a country wide issue later homes of dispossessed women were set up Nari Seva Sangha, Udai Villa Women's Cooperative Industrial Home, Ananda Ashram and All Bengals Women's Union were some of the formed institutions. The situation also became complex when women

were made to return back to their old families even after they were married to their perpetrators and were settled as it was seen in a Women's Conference sponsored by the Communist Party requested the government not to rescue the abducted women. The role of women doctors became essential- medical centres were opened in Syed Amir Ali Avenue, Park Circus maidan to treat the rape victims-doctors performed a lot of abortions- raped women were boycotted by their own families as they couldn't get their other daughters married- in such situations violated women poisoned themselves but the Muslim asked to be sent back to their homes as depicted in the work *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* novel by Jyotirmoyee Devi. To understand women's movement it becomes necessary to understand the Communist Party of India because B.T Ranadive who became the General Secretary took up the path of armed struggle which led to its ban and jail of lot of these activists. The East Pakistan communists began working among the refugees quietly and later when other communists joined they reappeared and learnt about the importance of camp committees for organisational work. Both the East Pakistani and West Bengali communists together tried to help the refugees in the colonies.

The leftist women were identified among migrants in the colonies who had earlier been part of left movement and when the Communist ban was lifted the refugee issue helped them with a platform for mass organisations to consolidate their future electoral base.

The refugee demands for home meant regularisation of colonies or else agitation for water, drains, roads and electricity was useless. The United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), then organised a signature campaign for demand of voting rights therefore from 26th to 31st January 1951 Colony Recognition week was observed and procession were sent to the Assembly house with women as heads of the procession but it did not become the political will of CPIM.

The government initially did not accept the refugee problem and the refugees now began to stay in Sealdah station on minimum doles and were later shifted to the relief camps. [1] Vacant military barracks were used as relief camps especially in Calcutta and the adjoining districts. [2] The women who were disowned by their own families in East Pakistan travelling a long way in overcrowded trains, custom checks and harassment by Ansars. Most women had traumatic experiences as there were no proper arrangements in the railway station. Organisations like Kasi Viswanath Seva Samity, Ramkrishna Mission, the Bharat Ashram and the Hindu Mahasabha along with women and students groups worked at different levels.[3] These activities affiliated to the East Bengal Relief Committee and the Women's Coordination Committee.[4] The woman used the corners of the station platform as kitchen. Often waited in the station for next destination and it was not a safe environment for women there. There were false relief organisations which procured refugee women to sell them to woman traffickers.[5] The police were aware of such

happenings. Reports too showed how about 90 men were loitering for criminal intent.[6] The daily life of migrant women and their sufferings were reported in a Bengali women's magazine *Ghare Baire* where women worked as labourers to build roads, they protested were put in jail later begged for money and went in search of leftover food- want of food made people mad, there were women from educated families married to men but they were without food. Not just in Sealdah but Eden Gardens in Calcutta too had many refugees and they had a very difficult time lives of women and children were lost. [7]

Women were shifted from a number of camps and it included unattached women which included both educated and illiterate rustic women- accommodation was a problem and floating barges were used for shelter. Reports showing 2100 women along with 1603 minors below 12 were in Titagarh Camp No 1, 1032 including 444 minors in Camp No 2, 216 women in Belur Camp, 155 women and 70 minors in Jhoutala Camp. These were government centres there were many in unofficial ones in the mid-50s.[8] the conditions in the refugee camps were not great 1000 women 300 children starved for days as doles did not arrive as a result a number of children died, they were also kept in ordinary tents in open spaces like in Midnapore Salva Camp and it was undoubtedly became grounds of malnutrition, malaria, dysentery, snake bites leading to weakly deaths.[9] There are instances where we see women tired of government incapability went directly to the presiding officers for help but were always refused to help their voice of protest were so strong that eventually the Police was called in by the authorities can such trouble makers which made the other camp dwellers hesitant to approach them anymore.[10] As reports clearly showed women were assaulted physically by the authorities and by the police.[11] Instances were in October 1954 women in Bhadrakali Refugee Camp in Hoogly were terribly injured and were hospitalised which led to the UCRC organise a protest rally at Wellington Square near the then chief Minister B.C. Roy's residence.[12] Women angry over such physical assaults organised themselves for self-defence. Women also protested for their own plots of land, doles etc. for example the Bansdroni Government Refugee Colony was because of the women's struggles.[13]

The struggle to build a colony which began in 1949, continued for a year. The poor refugees wanted to grab land and turn them into their own legal property [14] as was seen 149 colonies were set up by grabbing by the end of December 1950.[15] There were attacks from the goondas and refugees were shot which included women. Though the government passed out notifications in a Gazette notification in 1950 for the refugees to vacate these lands it was believed to have been passed only to appease the landlords and it found it difficult to even destroy these colonies which were spread over 23,90,049 acres.[16] The matter of eviction was taken to the court which passed that only civil suit could be made and not a criminal one if an unauthorised land was occupied for more than three months at a stretch and police intervention was prevented. This

went against the landlords as civil suit meant high expenditure.[17]

Women after UCRC formed their own samitis in their colonies and both the government and the private lands was grabbed which forced the government to introduce the Eviction Bill. Which saw immediate opposition from the UCRC especially women. In a procession of 10000, 1200 were women with babies in their arms which made the struggle strong as compared to other mass movements.[18] On 24 December 1950 Section 144 was applied which meant that the houses in Jadabgarh area be demolished the people wanted an alternative arrangement before destruction which wasn't provided. The police too who stayed there at night left seeing protest the next when they still refused women were lathi charged which caused the death of a pregnant woman Binapani Mitra, who is the first woman martyr in the history of the refugee movement in Bengal.[19] The women were ready to give up their lives for their houses.[20] The women working in the samitis worked towards distribution of food, removal of the Eviction Bill and regularising colonies.

MARS as an organisation was active before Partition where the main units were in East Pakistan and now too these women came in as refugees and they set up their own units. [21] Women were now more than ready to question the establishment as they had to give food to their hungry children, borrow money when the men were incapable.[22] When it was difficult for the communist men it was the MARS which acted as Trojan horse for the enemies of the refugees needs.[23] MARS soon organised vocational training and camps in the colonies for employment of women. They also began to demand for electricity and waterlines. These refugee women now began to participate in various conferences and became its main speakers. The entrance gates of these conferences were named after the martyrs of the refugee movement. Ordinary housewives too joined the conferences meeting were held against the police atrocities. These women rose in protest when their husbands and sons were killed in cold blood. Peace was only possible when this suffering was shared.[24] Other politically active women demanded immediate release of the refugees held without trial- women joined movement spontaneously.[25] Women held meeting mainly in the afternoon as they were free then.[26] Women working in the grassroots levels now became leaders and influenced other women to join them as well. These leaders include Juthika Roy, Shila De, Renu Ganguly (Nehru colony), Hasi Guha, Ila Bose and several others.[27] Anupama Ghosh collected signatures to fulfil the demands of refugees in Lake Camp No. 3, Bina Sengupta at Ballygunge Maidan Refugee Camp saw to the problems in these camps[28] refugee women being of a sizeable proportion of various central rallies preparations of such would take place in all such colonies. Plans were chalked out in these meetings and the woman leaders also influenced women from other colonies to join them. There were instances where women did not develop the anti-Muslim feeling and were secular even

though they suffered, understood the politics of communal riots. Many other woman's organisations were formed during this period though they were never under Paschim Banga Mahila Samiti (MARS new name) but were highly influenced by it fighting for peace and the Hindu Code Bill. Women were drawn a lot to the peace movement. Women were not in favour of war as opposed to S.P. Mookherjee and believed it would only fulfil capitalist interests which would increase the miseries of the common people.[29] This made the woman's organisation broaden its horizon include women from different backgrounds discussing not only their interests but also to the need of the times. MARS women soon joined the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and started their own by the end of 1952. [30] Congress woman stayed aloof from this group as it was pro-Soviet Union but some liberal women still joined and by 1954 the National Federation of Indian women was established who membership only rose higher. Special Marriage Bill and the Hindu Code Bill also required women collecting 45000 and 22160 signatures. He bills extended the marriageable age of girls, banned child marriages polygamy and allowed inter caste marriages among Hindus and also gave her right to divorce and her right to equal share in ancestral property. [31] The Hindu Mahasabha opposed to such provisions fearing factionalism and disruption in the Hindu family system.[32] This bill could now question violence enacted on women's bodies by the patriarchy. [33] Women also demonstrated for their own demands for employment as there were processions to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly and signature campaigns as well and believed employment of housewives were essential.[34] Middle class and peasant women were ready to take up jobs but they were no provisions in the employment sector and hence began to appeal for government offices to be opened for them in both the towns and villages and around 14,012 signatures were collected by end February 1955 for demand for women's employment.[35] Later the NFIW passed a resolution that married women could get administrative employment in administrative Departments[36] The women in Bengal took up the issue even before the national body when called for a Unemployed Women's Day on 27th September 1953 for their right to work, choice of profession and their right to education and training and along with this the economic needs of the refugee women also added to the demands of employments of women for which a memorandum was signed by 30000 women.[37]

Women were now part of committees and the refugee awakening became the political base of the Left but there was also a change in the sociological pattern of middle class and peasant families. Orthodox men and families now had to accept women being part of organisations and earning money at the same time. The refugee women though they broke this public private divide the divide between the ideology of equality quotidian experiences and did not protest against the mental and physical torture by their husbands- never went against the familial obligation. Their main objective was to get food,

clothing and shelter for their families and never really questioned the patriarchal structure. Though they took part in processions when it came to decision making they were always neglected. For example, only Charushila Banerjee was the Vice President of the UCRC as a leader. This time was a milestone in the Women's movement of Bengal.

It was the end of 'andarmahal' culture of sorts as women were able to find new avenues or spaces to inhabit- their activities and participation changed the social milieu of Bengal. Life in the refugee colonies were difficult for women as the facilities provided were limited, for general use. 'Public' ponds were used for bathing and washing. The joint family system which was the characteristic feature of the joint family in the Eastern Bengal as have been gathered from various interviews of the refugee was broken but were also used as a 'coping mechanism' under such painful conditions. As Gargi Chakrabarty mentions, 'This was a silent metamorphosis of women's lives. Share economic burden daughters began to share burden. In the various offices as clerk's women were mainly from East Bengal.' [38] there was a commendable resistance from family but they accepted her teaching profession. Women were stopped from taking bank jobs but were forced to ignore this stigma as they had to work to live, to provide for their family. They began to get degrees to get jobs as stenographers, sales girls and as typists and not just to get married. Sarojini Naidu College in Dumdum saw lot of refugee women taking admission which influenced a lot of women in West Bengal to do the same. There were women working in telephone exchanges, insurance offices, food departments and also in the police as can be gathered from the various newspapers, like the Statesman etc. Unattached women in the camps were recruited in the police when dealing with kidnapping, abduction, rape and others. [39] Women working as sales girls selling things door to door was unthinkable at that time was getting visibility. Women were also trained as midwives and hospital aids and some became pioneers in nursing. Various government documents provide evidence to this and also discussing their needs in the hospital at a later stage. Chakrabarty mentions Nari Seva sangha for example was giving training to women in tailoring, book binding, lock printing, batik which enabled them to earn a living. Udai Villa Women's Cooperative rehabilitated only unattached women. Fast food centres too were started. Home were also made for rape survivors and to become self-reliant [40] Uneducated women worked in peoples' homes, supplied office tiffin, sell flowers, fruits, vegetables, savouries and made paper bags. Some also worked as cooks, nurse and attendants in the towns. Confrontations with the West Bengali workers as East Bengali workers took less salary were visible. The East Bengali women who did these jobs do not wish to recall the past as they lived a better life in East Bengal as compared to now in this alien land. This forceful imposition of ignorance of 'these' women of their present state affected their mental health but they were also consciously improving on their own idea of independence and

liberation. Till 1952, 2320 women registered for employment of which 221 got jobs and 2633 recruited in relief and rehabilitation department of which three were upper division Assistants and 110 lower division Assistants. Displaced women got training under urban scheme till 1952 was 456 and training in non-official women employed were 784. Educating women only for marriage partially disappeared. It was also that the basic amenities were not fulfilled to even think of marriage was not possible as a result we see a lot of unmarried girls in West Bengal. Economic responsibility prevented them from getting married. [41] Partition made women self-reliant and independent. They began to be looked upon as sons. The women would go to schools in East Bengal and hence it became necessary to establish schools in the colonies. From 340 schools in 1949-50 it rose to 1385 in 1960-61. [42]

Ritwik Ghatak through his trilogy on partition and its impact on women and on the other was a revelation to the general public of all her sacrifices, who were used as objects or sources of income for an unemployed male member of the household. They cine goers or the public in general began to sympathise with these women who were seen as a giver which brutally misused. All the women characters in his works shows that the worst affected were its women. This remains one of the most important characteristic of his work or rather the most potent difference between the east and the west migration. Violence cannot be defined only when its cold blood murder, rape, mental abuse it was the abuse of her powers, her rights and her choices which were equally violent.

### 3. Conclusion

The refugee women in Bengal were successful in changing rather drastically altering the lives of women in West Bengal after partition who earlier could never dream of living independently. The society changed its attitude towards women in general and women working in government offices no longer remained a surprising act and through these daily acts which became habits influenced the Bengali society.

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