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SPINSTER, PROSTITUTE OR PIONEER? IMAGES OF  
REFUGEE WOMEN IN POST-PARTITION CALCUTTA

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MAX WEBER PROGRAMME

*Spinster, Prostitute or Pioneer?*  
*Images of Refugee Women in Post-Partition Calcutta*

UDITI SEN

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the various images or stereotypes regarding Bengali middle-class refugee women that circulated in post-partition West Bengal. It identifies four main discursive images or constructions of refugee women: as bodies vulnerable to rape and dishonour; as economically and socially marginal members of society who could by definition, not be rehabilitated; as unequal participants in the refugee movement whose contributions were seen as 'inspirational' and symbolic, rather than substantive; and last, but not the least, as bread-winners who transgressed the proper role of women as home-makers. Polite society in Calcutta most frequently lamented the fate of refugee women who worked either by highlighting their deprivation of being a spinster, or their ignominy of 'sinking' to prostitution. Juxtaposing the ubiquity of these images against census records which show no statistically significant changes in livelihood patterns of middle-class women in Calcutta, this paper argues that these images had little to do with the choices faced and lives negotiated by refugee women. Instead, they reflected the anxiety of Bengali refugees regarding their social status, ideals and traditions in the context of the displacement and social dislocation wrought by partition. This anxiety was inevitably displaced to the bodies of women, whose imagined or real transgressions of ideal social roles were actively lamented, and thus devalued. This paper critiques historical scholarship that reads these images of women earning wages as evidence of reconfiguration of gender roles. It cautions against celebrating partition and its dislocation as a harbinger of women's emancipation in West Bengal.

## **Keywords**

Women, Partition, Bengal, Refugee, Prostitute.

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This paper tells the story of the women of East Bengal who lived through the dislocation of the partition of 1947 and the subsequent trauma of a refugee existence on the fringes of a society that looked upon the huge influx from East Pakistan as an unwelcome problem. The endeavour to write the presence, experience and role of refugee women into the history of the partition of Bengal becomes, in many ways, a project of recovery and re-construction. This is largely because the figure of the Bengali refugee woman is doubly marginalised within partition historiography. The earliest historical narratives of the partition of India focused on an obsessive search for the root cause or genesis of partition. In these, partition was defined as an entirely political exercise and understood in terms of its constitutional history, inter-governmental debates, the agreements and disagreements between Nehru, Gandhi and Jinnah, the growing divide between the Congress and the Muslim League and so on. As a result, the experiences of the ordinary people on both sides of the newly drawn borders were ignored. In the 1990s, there was a historiographical shift towards a subaltern perspective with attempts to recover, largely through oral history interviews and analysis of partition's fiction, the lived experience of partition for millions of people who became refugees overnight. However, even a history of ordinary people tends to become a socio-economic and political history of ordinary men, where the voices of women are totally marginalised. A powerful example of this is Prafulla K. Chakrabarti's *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*. A seminal work which explores the link between the struggle for survival and rights waged by the refugees from East Pakistan and the rise of left political power in West Bengal, it has very little to say about the role played by refugee women. The absence is significant, as any exploration of the creation of a refugee subjectivity, even when it is articulated in specific political forms, is invariably intertwined with the formations of a community identity amongst refugees. Historians of gender have demonstrated how the cultural values and mores of a community are more often than not inscribed upon the bodies and lives of women.<sup>1</sup> The genocidal violence which accompanied the partition of India was deeply gendered, with women's bodies being routinely treated as rival territory and as embodiments of community honour, which could be marked and conquered. It can be reasonably surmised that when it came to rebuilding lives, the figure of the refugee woman, the terms in which she was imagined and the values and capabilities that were embodied in her were vital to the process of formation and articulation of a community identity amongst refugees. Moreover, in the actual rebuilding of lives and homes, the part played by the woman within her traditional role as the homemaker was crucial. Thus, the absence of the experiences of the refugee woman, both in historical narratives of partition and in the archival traces upon which such narratives are based, is more the result of the gender politics of a patriarchal society rather than a natural reflection of any actual lack of contribution on the part of refugee women. The attempt to recover the agency and experience of East Pakistani refugee women is thus not meant to be a mere accretion onto a growing field of historical inquiry. It exposes the gendered nature of partition history and can lead towards a more holistic understanding of the dislocation and trauma suffered by refugee families from East Bengal and their struggles to rebuild lives and reproduce communities.

An attempt to recover the experiences of refugee women immediately runs into the obstacle posed by the paucity of archival sources. Here, a distinction needs to be made between women who suffered the dislocation and violence of partition in Punjab and the Bengali refugee woman. Extensive work done by Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin on gender and partition has focussed on the experience of women in the Punjab<sup>2</sup>. The trope of victimhood and systematic violence on the body

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<sup>1</sup> Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*, Permanent Black, 2001

<sup>2</sup> See Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, 'Abducted women, the state and questions of honour', and Urvashi Butalia, 'Community state and gender: On women's agency during partition' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 'Review of Women's

of the woman, either in terms of violation/invasion or possession, along with a much more nuanced understanding of the possible agency and participation of women in sectarian violence that emerges in these works cannot be generalised into the standard experience of all refugee women. In reviewing her own work, Urvashi Butalia admits that 'A serious gap is the omission of experiences in Bengal and East Pakistan. But these require detailed attention of their own: better not to pay lip service by including an interview or two'.<sup>3</sup> Even as scholars have acknowledged the specificity of Bengal's partition experience, this distinctiveness has usually been expressed in terms of difference or deviation from the Punjab experience, which has dominated the national imagination. Thus, the human history of the 1947 partition of Bengal is yet to be written in its own terms.

Two noted exceptions which address this 'serious gap' are Gargi Chakravartty's monograph on the refugee women of Bengal<sup>4</sup> and an edited volume which explicitly focuses on 'the human dimension of the second partition of Bengal (1947) with a clear emphasis on the gender perspective'.<sup>5</sup> Despite this assertion by its editors, this collection of essays ultimately fails to break free of the overarching paradigm of the experiences of women during partition that has emerged out of research focused upon Punjab. After an enumeration of the differences between the nature of the refugee crisis in Punjab and Bengal, the editors emphasise the one 'compelling similarity between the experiences in Punjab and Bengal. In both these divided states, women (minors included) were targeted as the prime object of persecution. Along with the loss of home, native land and dear ones, the women in particular, were subjected to defilement (rape) before death, or defilement and abandonment, or defilement and compulsion that followed to raise a new home with a new man belonging to the oppressor-community.'<sup>6</sup> This repeated stress on the 'defilement' of women during the Bengal partition of 1947, while important in fracturing the silence regarding sexual violence on women, both simplifies and misrepresents the experiences of the Bengali Hindu refugee woman. While it is neither possible nor useful to calculate the extent of trauma through the number of women raped or abducted, it nevertheless remains true that for a vast majority of refugee women from East Bengal sexual violence was central to their fears and marginal in their lived experience of dislocation. Chakravartty's study makes an important beginning towards challenging gendered perspectives born of the specific experience of violence and dislocation in Punjab. Using a range of sources, including secret police reports and refugee reminiscences, she maps the distinctive features of the experiences of women displaced by the partition of Bengal. She highlights their active participation in left politics, the public role played by women in fighting off drives to evict refugees from their illegal squats and the novelty of large number of middle-class women amongst refugees joining the work-force, at times as the main breadwinner. Though it offers an important corrective to the dominance of the Punjab narrative within partition studies, Chakravartty's research nevertheless fails to interrogate the social significance of these patterns. Instead, she frequently reads her sources as exact reflections of ground realities. For example, police speculation regarding women's educational circles being a front for Marxist indoctrination is read as proof of the positive role played by refugee women in the rising popularity of Marxism amongst refugees.<sup>7</sup> The very presence of women in the workplace is celebrated, without any attempt to understand the terms in which their participation was allowed.<sup>8</sup> Her central hypothesis, which she attempts to substantiate throughout the monograph is that that partition led to a fundamental

(Contd.) \_\_\_\_\_

Studies', 24 April 1993, 2-11 and 12-21; Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and boundaries: Women in India's partition*, New Delhi, 1998 and Urvashi Butalia, *The other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India*, New Delhi, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Urvashi Butalia, 'The Problem', *Seminar 420: Memories of partition: a symposium on the human suffering over the division of the subcontinent*, August 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming out of partition: Refugee women of Bengal*, New Delhi, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Jashodhara Bagchi and Shubhoranjan Dasgupta, (eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Stree, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming out of partition*, New Delhi, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Tanika Sarkar, 'Politics and women in Bengal- the conditions and meaning of participation', *Indian Economic Social History Review*, March 1984, Vol. 2, No. 1, 91-101.



rupture in social orthodoxies, which created space for the emergence of a new image of the Bengali woman, 'self-reliant, independent... who could challenge the rigidity of patriarchal domination'<sup>9</sup>. This paper argues that representations of women are inevitably cultural constructs and not mimetic sources of their social realities. It critically explores the various images and stereotypes regarding refugee women that circulated in post-partition West Bengal, but not as direct proof of actual attributes and social realities but rather as images which offer insights into contemporary perceptions and socio-cultural mores regarding gender. It attempts to understand why and how these images were produced, what was the role played by refugee women in their production and what these cultural constructs can tell us about contemporary gender roles.

Before investigating the dominant images of the Bengali Hindu refugee woman, a few further qualifications are necessary regarding the scope of the study. The Bengali Hindu refugee woman is not a homogenous category. Besides differences in class and background, the refugees who crowded into West Bengal in the wake of its partition can also be differentiated on the basis of the time of their arrival, which played a determining role in the kind of rehabilitation policies and state assistance that was available to them. In terms of status vis-à-vis the government's regime of rehabilitation, the refugees were classified into 'old' and 'new' migrants. The 'old migrants' were the 41.17 lakh<sup>10</sup> people who escaped to India from former East Pakistan between October 1946 and March 1958 in different waves. Irrespective of the efficacy or nature of government relief and rehabilitation during this period, at least the legitimacy of the need for rehabilitation of the old migrants was not questioned. January 1964 and March 1971 bracket the period of 'new migrants' when relief and rehabilitation benefits were extended by the central government to only those refugees who agreed to be resettled outside West Bengal. Those who arrived between April 1958 and December 1963 were not considered eligible for government help and therefore neither acknowledged as migrants nor as refugees in the official discourse.<sup>11</sup> This paper concentrates on a section of the 'old migrants'.

Amongst the 'old migrants' three separate waves of influx can be distinguished, differing not only in their immediate causes of displacement but also by the dominant class and caste character of the refugees and the strategies of resettlement adopted. The first wave of refugee influx into West Bengal started well before the partition, in 1946 and continued till 1949 with varying intensity. The earliest displacements were in October 1946, following widespread communal riots in Tipperah and Noakhali Districts in eastern Bengal. After a brief lull following Gandhi's mission of peace in these regions, the flow of refugees into West Bengal started in earnest from about the end of 1947 and continued unabated until 1949, when it petered out briefly and created an illusion of the crisis having passed. According to a special census taken by the Government of West Bengal, the total number of refugees who came up to December 1949 was 931,249. The population in the government refugee camps had risen to 70,000.<sup>12</sup> This first wave of refugee influx into West Bengal was overwhelmingly middle class. Of the 1.1 million refugees who had come into West Bengal by June 1948, 350,000 belonged to the urban middle classes, 550,000 to the rural middle classes, and a little over 100,000 were agriculturists and a little less than 100,000 artisans.<sup>13</sup> The concentration of refugees varied from district to district, but this first influx was predominantly centered upon Calcutta. On 1 March 1951, Calcutta proper contained 433,228 displaced persons from East Pakistan. But the refugee population returned from what has been called the well-knit Calcutta area, i.e. Calcutta along with its suburbs<sup>14</sup> which were within half an hour's bus ride to any city terminus, is much higher – 624,164. This was

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<sup>9</sup> Chakravartty, Gargi, *Coming out of partition*, New Delhi, 2005, p 91.

<sup>10</sup> One lakh is equal to 100,000.

<sup>11</sup> The figures are taken from Nilanjana Chatterjee's 'The East Bengal Refugees, A Lesson In Survival' in, Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City, Vol II: The Present and the Future*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> The figures are taken from *They Live Again: Millions Come from East Pakistan*, Government of West Bengal, 1953.

<sup>13</sup> The figures are taken from Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Many of these suburbs, such as Garden Reach, Tollyganj, Behala etc eventually became an intrinsic part of a much expanded city of Calcutta, called Greater Calcutta.

roughly equal to one-third of the entire displaced population of West Bengal in 1951.<sup>15</sup> More important than the actual numerical concentration was the fact that Calcutta was also the site of contestation and conflict of the refugees with the establishment for their rights, and the site of production of the refugee identity. This paper focuses on the middle-class refugee woman, located within the various squatters' colonies that sprang up in Calcutta roughly between 1948 and 1950.<sup>16</sup>

### **'Our Women' in Danger**

The earliest image of the refugee woman which circulated in post-partition West Bengal was located firmly in the ancestral homeland of the East Bengali Hindu *bhadralok*.<sup>17</sup> This was the recurrent theme of the threat to the chastity of the respectable Hindu woman from the leering Muslim man. Though it was born in the context of a refugee existence in an unfamiliar land, it evoked the immediate past of displacement and coerced migration from East Bengal. The stories narrated by refugee men were not of actual violence on the wives, daughters and sisters of the Hindu minority, but regarding the mounting fear and insecurity regarding the security of 'their' women. Thus, the need to protect Hindu women from the aggressive designs of Muslim men became a major, even deciding factor, which tipped the scales in favour of migration to India. However, what was really at stake was not the personal safety of the women. Neelanjana Chatterjee has rightly pointed out that the 'chastity' of married and unmarried Hindu women symbolised most potently the honour, exclusivity and continuity of the community; thus also representing its site of transgression. Violence against women featured widely in the Hindu minority's complaints of ill-treatment in Pakistan and as a matter of concern in West Bengal – the sexual possession of Hindu women by Muslim men being seen to stand for Muslim domination, 'miscegenation', the loss and humiliation of the (male) Hindu self. Such acts compromised the 'purity' of the community, contravening prescriptions enjoining endogamy.'<sup>18</sup> Thus, the displaced Hindu woman of East Pakistan was represented in an overwhelmingly male discourse as the embodiment of the cultural sanctity and honour of the *bhadralok* community of East Bengal, which had to be protected at any cost. The threat of violence on the women amounted to the threat of imminent annihilation of a specific socio-cultural identity of the community and was reason enough for migration.

However, the danger of violation of their women was not the only form in which the East Bengali refugees expressed their growing insecurity. Fear of loss of life, the actual loss of property and livelihood due to discrimination on communal grounds, the loss of faith in the state of Pakistan which was seen to be acting in an openly partisan manner also emerge repeatedly in refugee narratives. However, the East Bengali refugees, unlike the refugees from Punjab, had the onus of proving that they were the victims of coerced migration, as opposed to being mere economic migrants. It was only by being 'genuine' refugees that they could lay a claim to relief and rehabilitation from the state. This situation was the result of the dominance of the Punjab experience in shaping both the national imagination and the priorities of national leaders, particularly Nehru, in Delhi. In the aftermath of the genocidal violence in Punjab, coerced migration came to be defined in terms of actual experience of communal riots or violence. In the situation of relative lack of actual violence in East Bengal between 1947 and 1949, the trope of women under threat proved to be particularly useful in the construction of

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<sup>15</sup> Figures taken from the *Census of India, 1951*, Volume VI, Part 3, *Calcutta City*.

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed study of the government policy towards refugee women and an analysis of the experiences of poorer refugees who entered the government camps, see Chapter 5 of my doctoral dissertation, 'Unattached Women: State, Social Workers and the Constraints of Gendered Rehabilitation', in *Refugees and the Politics of Nation-Building, 1947-71*, University of Cambridge, 2009, pp. 236-280.

<sup>17</sup> The Bengali word *bhadralok* means a respectable person of middle-class background: landowners or professionals, usually but not exclusively upper caste, and distinguished socially by education, non-manual labour and a refined lifestyle.

<sup>18</sup> Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali Refugee Narratives of Communal Violence', Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, n.d.

<[www.swadhinata.org.uk/misc/chatterjeeEastBengal%20Refugee.pdf](http://www.swadhinata.org.uk/misc/chatterjeeEastBengal%20Refugee.pdf)>, last accessed 18 July 2009.

a self-image as victims of communal violence and ‘mental torture’<sup>19</sup> among the first wave of East Bengali refugees. The classic example of this is found in *Udbastu*, a semi-autobiographical account by Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay.<sup>20</sup>

Bandyopadhyay was the Commissioner of the Refugee Rehabilitation Department of the Government of West Bengal headed by Dr. B.C. Roy. Despite spending the majority of his working life in eastern Bengal, in 1947 Bandyopadhyay ‘opted’ for the Indian Civil Service and joined the ranks of Hindu administrative officers leaving East Pakistan. His work in the Department of Rehabilitation led him to witness, first hand, the dismal conditions in refugee camps and the misery of refugees in general. He wondered why people would choose to leave their ancestral land and suffer such depredations given that post-partition East Bengal was yet to witness the large-scale murders, loot, arson and rape that had driven out minorities from West Punjab. The answer he received, when he put the question to the refugees of a relief camp in Jalpaiguri, in 1948, is extremely illuminating. One of the refugees pulled him aside to ask ‘In Pakistan it is no longer possible for Hindu women to bathe in the ponds. Are you aware of that?’<sup>21</sup> He went on to elaborate, in graphic detail, the insecurity faced by Hindu women. According to him, when Hindu women go down to bathe in a pond, Muslim men of all ages gather on the banks and start singing offensive rhymes. The men on one side of the pond sing out the first line – ‘Pak Pak Pakistan’<sup>22</sup> – and pat comes the reply from the other side ‘*Hindur Bhatar Musalman*’<sup>23</sup>, literally meaning Hindu’s hubby (is) Musalman. This is followed by advice to go home as it is getting late and offers to help her out of the pond by taking her hand, which is a clear transgression of social etiquette. All this takes place amidst much laughter at the expense of increasing discomfiture and fear of the woman involved. At the end of this story its narrator, a refugee, declares ‘Given this how can one continue to stay in that land. We ran away. But it is true, *the riots have not started as yet.*’<sup>24</sup>

What is significant in this account is the self-explanatory mode in which the incident is narrated. Given a situation where the chastity and safety of the women of the community are threatened, no further justification for flight is deemed to be necessary. Moreover, there was a clear conviction that in time, the verbal harassment and threats would inevitably take the form of actual violence. A similar conviction is reflected in the appraisal given to Congress workers in West Bengal by Suresh Chandra Banerjee, President of the West Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, regarding the condition of Hindus in East Bengal. He claimed that as an East Bengali himself, albeit one who had been living in Calcutta for twenty years, he could vouch for the fact that the middle-class Hindus were leaving because they ‘prized their self-respect and the honour of their women above everything else.’<sup>25</sup> It is not within the scope of this paper to try and analyse how far these fears were justified or whether the incident related above was representative of the post-partition reality in East Pakistan. What is more important, in this context, is the absolute conviction of the refugee men that their women were in danger. There is some indication that the women shared this fear psychosis too. However, it is likely that the fear in the case of women was felt less in terms of the violation of community identity and more in terms of a much more direct threat on their person and on their lives. After the 1964 riots in Dhaka and Narayanganj, Maitreyi Debi, a renowned Bengali author, visited the refugee resettlement site at Dandakaranya in central India in search of people who had been ‘directly involved’ in a riot. She reported a ‘typical’ exchange in which an elderly refugee woman answered her question ‘why did you come to India?’ by saying, ‘for fear of the *mian* (Muslim men), what else?’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A theme developed at length by Prafulla Chakraborti in his justification of the migration of East Bengali refugees as coerced and unavoidable.

<sup>20</sup> Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu*, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1970.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15, translation mine.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16, translation and italics mine.

<sup>25</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 October 1948.

<sup>26</sup> Maitreyi Devi, *Exodus*, Calcutta, Nabajatak Printers, n.d.

This overarching fear of Muslim men's intentions towards Hindu women is not surprising since the intimidation of Hindu minorities in East Pakistan often took the form of threats to abduct or violate 'their' wives, daughters and sisters. For example, we can take the text of an anonymous letter sent to the residents of Newa village from Bare Bara-Id, both in the Narayanganj subdivision of Dacca.<sup>27</sup> It urged the Hindus to become Musalman and perform *namaz*.

There are many educated Musalman amongst us who wish to marry your girls. Become Musalman and eat beef. It is very tasty. Let us know whether you will vacate your houses soon. If you do not, come to our League office to accept the faith of Islam and eat beef. We will take your women, you may have ours. We will visit your houses, you will come to ours. Signed – your well-wishers.<sup>28</sup>

In the period under consideration, i.e. 1947 to 1949, the near-total discursive silence regarding the actual violence on women when compared to the repeated threats of gendered violence is significant. The sudden outburst of widespread communal riots in the 1950s radically altered this picture of relative calm in divided Bengal. Henceforth, periods of lull were interspersed by escalations of local riots into widespread communal violence, such as in 1955 and 1960; the widespread killings of minorities in Rajshahi and Pabna districts in 1962 and in Dacca and other areas in 1964-65; and finally the organised victimisation of Hindus during the 1971 war leading up to the birth of Bangladesh. Unsurprisingly, in the reminiscences of refugees fleeing East Pakistan in the later period, narratives of rape, abduction, mutilation and murder of women came to the fore. The earlier absence of such narratives could partly be the reflection of the actual lack of communal violence in East Pakistan during this period. However, during the period under study, sectarian violence in general and violation of women in particular, though marginal, was far from absent. The riots at Noakhali and Tipperah in 1946 were organized as revenge for Muslims killed in 'the Great Calcutta Killings' and led not only to extensive displacement of Hindus and organised arson, lootings and conversions, but also to abductions and rape of women. Though refugee narratives of sectarian violence, arson and conversions were largely accepted by the government, there was a clear reluctance to believe the reports of rape or abduction. The suffering of women was dismissed on the grounds of inadequate proof. Ashoka Gupta, a prominent social worker who had accompanied Gandhi to Noakhali, despaired at finding such 'proof', aptly pointing out that the nature of gendered violence was such that it seldom gave its victims the ability to highlight, let alone prove, their own violation.<sup>29</sup> Official incredulity regarding 'rumours' of rape and abduction reflected contemporary blindness regarding the gendered nature of partition violence as well as the routine marginalisation of the experiences of women. In this context, it is important to note that neither the repeated assertions of the threat posed to the Hindu women by the Muslim *mis*, nor the later narratives of atrocities perpetuated on women can be read as an inclusion of women's voices in narratives of displacement. In both cases, the narrators were invariably male. The shift in the imagery of the refugee woman, from a threatened body to a violated one, reflected an important shift in the terms in which the East Bengali refugee community articulated its victimhood. Before 1950, the Hindu minorities of East Bengal portrayed themselves as a community under the threat of imminent annihilation, cultural as well as physical. After 1950, they were portrayed as a community under actual attack. In both the imageries, the figure of the refugee woman remains the embodiment of the honour and sanctity of the East Bengali Hindu community, nothing more.

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<sup>27</sup> This letter was published in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 4 January 1948 at the urging of the Dacca District Minority Association.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> See Ashoka Gupta (translated by Sipra Bhattacharya with Ranjana Dasgupta), *In the path of service: Memories of a changing century*, Stree, 2005, pp. 103-111.

### **A Permanent Liability: Refugee women in official policy**

In post-partition Calcutta, multiple images of the fate of the Hindu middle-class refugee woman dominated popular portrayals of the suffering of partition. However, unlike the 'chief sufferers' of Punjab's orgy of gendered violence, the Bengali refugee woman was not seen primarily as a victim of sexual violence. The images of her victimhood were produced in the context of the Bengali refugees' struggle to rebuild their lives in West Bengal in general and Calcutta and its immediate environs in particular, and had a more mundane texture. The artist Jogen Choudhuri's portrayal of the displaced woman with a child at the Sealdah station, the powerful political image of a haggard refugee woman marching in the streets of Calcutta with a baby on her hip, the self-sacrificing refugee woman who spurns marriage and works tirelessly to support her family, immortalised in Ritwik Ghatak's critically acclaimed movie *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, migrant women being tricked into or forced into the flesh trade by economic compulsions: these are the images of refugee women imprinted in the popular memory of Calcutta. These representations have become a part of a common understanding and recur not only in fiction, films and cultural mores, but through these, have been reproduced in historical scholarship. What is curious about these images is that all of them locate the refugee woman in the public sphere. A serious investigation of these images invariably becomes intertwined with the general assertion that the trauma and dislocation of partition provided an opportunity for the East Bengali middle-class women to come out of the confines of the household. Thus a study of these public images of the refugee woman also invariably becomes an investigation of this hypothesis. In this context, the terms in which the refugee woman was constructed in the official policy of relief and rehabilitation also becomes important. Though this is not a representation that ever found place in the popular memory, it is nevertheless extremely important. It is indicative both of the actual extent of access to relief and rehabilitation which the refugee woman had and the prevalent social norms which invariably inform official policy.

Government response towards refugees in West Bengal has been aptly summarized by Joya Chatterji as a policy of 'denial' and 'dispersal'.<sup>30</sup> Till 1949, the Union government persistently refused to acknowledge the gravity of the crisis in Bengal. As a result, this period is characterised mostly by an absence of any coherent policy of rehabilitation. The riots of 1950 finally forced the authorities to acknowledge the existence of a refugee crisis in the eastern region. But unlike Punjab, where the decision to implement a full-fledged exchange of minority populations promised compensation to refugees for loss of land and livelihood, in divided Bengal, the authorities remained stubbornly committed to encouraging minorities to stay put and migrants to return. Until 1956, no comprehensive policy of rehabilitation and economic re-integration was devised for the East Bengali refugees. The Central Government gave mindless ad hoc assistance to the East Pakistan refugees in the shape of loans, which the government of West Bengal mostly spent on paltry relief and grossly inadequate and ill-planned rehabilitation schemes, designed primarily to disperse refugees from the camps. The unwillingness of the authorities to provide rehabilitation grew in West Bengal with the growing number of refugees. Finally, in 1956, it became official policy to make rehabilitation conditional upon resettlement outside West Bengal in 'empty' lands, which were generally remote and marginal lands ill-suited to rehabilitation. Within this apathetic regime of rehabilitation, refugee women were more often than not rendered invisible by the practice of treating the refugee family or household as the unit of rehabilitation. In the official discourse the unit of rehabilitation was the family and the refugees were divided into agricultural and non-agricultural families and accordingly issued what was considered to be the suitable variant of assistance. Naturally, in such a discourse there is no separate mention of the refugee woman who is subsumed within the structure of the patriarchal family. Despite this marginalization, this paper attempts to recover the terms in which the refugee woman was constructed at the level of policy by reading between the lines of official policy.

In 1958, faced with the determination of the authorities to disperse East Bengali refugees outside West Bengal, the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), a grassroots refugee organization that had emerged out of the various illegal squatters' colonies of Calcutta, came up with an alternative

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<sup>30</sup> See Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition: Bengal and India, 1947-67*, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 127-50.

'Proposal for Refugee Rehabilitation'.<sup>31</sup> In this proposal, which was presented as a memorandum to the West Bengal Government, a curious phrase can be noticed. While making a case for the rehabilitation of a larger number of refugee families within the borders of West Bengal, the UCRC took several families off the list of those requiring land allotments on the grounds that these families were not rehabilitable.<sup>32</sup> On closer scrutiny, these are revealed to be families which had no able bodied male members of what was considered to be the economically productive age group.<sup>33</sup> The mainstream identity of the Bengali refugees was thus articulated in an overtly masculine form. This led to the marginalisation of not only older men and children, but also of women in general. The refugee woman, irrespective of her marital status, age and class was thus considered to be economically dependent. This is the underlying assumption that enabled the dismissal of certain refugee families as unrehabilitable. This characterisation of the refugee woman as economically unproductive was not merely an act of marginalisation happening within the refugee community settled in the squatter colonies of Calcutta whose central organising body was the United Central Refugee Council. It was echoed in the state's formulation of rehabilitation policies. According to an official statement issued by the Government of West Bengal in December 1957, there were in existence at that time 172 camps and homes of different types. These were the Transit camps, Rehabilitation camps, and Homes and Infirmaries where the people who are a permanent liability to the state reside.<sup>34</sup> The last were popularly known as the PL camps, short for Permanent Liability camps, and the 'people' who resided in it were overwhelmingly women and children. Another notable fact is that the daily expenses of the inmates of the PL camps were met by the Union Government, and not by the West Bengal government. As early as 1949 the newspapers reported that:

It was the charge of the Central Government to bear the expenses of the maintenance of unattended women and children... In Delhi they were going to have a woman's colony very soon for 2000 unattached women and children. West Bengal would have a similar colony for 1,300 women. We propose to have in every province at least one such place where unattached women and children may be looked after and given education.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the state stepped in to fulfil a paternalistic role that re-affirmed the patriarchal notions of economic rehabilitation and independence, which excluded women. At the level of official discourse and negotiations, the refugee woman was denied economic independence or productivity. She is a liability, either of the male members of her family and, in their absence, of the state. Thus in official discourse, the refugee woman was essentialised an individual who is economically unrehabilitable.<sup>36</sup>

This marginalization of refugee women within the regime of rehabilitation did not go entirely unnoticed or unchallenged. In her autobiography, Renuka Roy expresses her clear disaffection for the term Permanent Liability, 'a curious name that was dubbed to the women and children without male

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<sup>31</sup> Cited in Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1990.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Sudeshna Banerjee has argued for the marginalisation of aged male members in the squatter colonies that sprang up in Calcutta in the late 1940s and early 1950s in 'Displacement within Displacement: The Crisis of Old Age in the Refugee Colonies of Calcutta' in *Studies in History*, Vol 19, Part 2, 2003. She traces the origins of this marginalisation in both the changed economic and socio-cultural context in which thousands of middle-class Bengali refugee families found themselves. This gave rise to a mainstream colony community ethos around the notion of an ever-active, ever-struggling, enterprising militant masculinity which only the young and the middle-aged men were regarded as capable of.

<sup>34</sup> *Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal*, Statement Issued by the Government of West Bengal, December 11, 1957

<sup>35</sup> *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 24 December, 1949.

<sup>36</sup> This portrayal of refugee women as unrehabilitable liabilities cut across regional variations in policies of rehabilitation, as well as variations in class background amongst the women themselves. The peculiar rationale of governance which informed the construction of this category of 'permanent liabilities' is explored in detail in my thesis *Refugees and the Politics of Nation-Building in India, 1947-71*, (Cambridge University, 2009), which argues for a gendered regime of rehabilitation.

guardians to protect them'.<sup>37</sup> In her capacity as the Minister for Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation of the Government of West Bengal, she managed to convince Ajit Prasad Jain, the Union Minister for Rehabilitation, to allow her to set up training and production centres for the women through which they ultimately would be able to fend for themselves. Permission was granted, 'although he was doubtful.'<sup>38</sup> Clearly, the state found its role as the provider of hapless women more justifiable than any active intervention that could enable women to earn a living. In this sphere, various women's organisations such as the All-India Women's Conference, the All-Bengal Women's Union, the *Nari Seva Sangha*, etc. played a much more active role and undertook the training of a large number of women residing in the PL camps. This is in stark contrast to the active involvement of West Bengal Government in providing education to the children of displaced people. Renuka Roy took considerable pride in reporting this aspect of rehabilitation.

in this state, the most successful feature is the facilities that have been provided for the education of the displaced children. The statistics contained here show that 127,099 children are in special refugee primary schools, 21,216 in secondary schools, 9,406 in colleges and 3,229 being trained in technical and vocational training centres.<sup>39</sup>

There was no comparable investment in the rehabilitation of women. Whatever help was provided towards economically rehabilitating women located outside the framework of the patriarchal family remained in the nature of isolated interventions by individuals or groups involved in charitable and welfare work. It was never accorded the status of state policy.

### **Women in the Refugee Movement: Unequal participants**

While the eternally dependent refugee woman was a clear construct of official policy, the multiple representations of refugee women in popular memory shared in common the broad context of the struggle for survival waged by the refugees in the 'squatters' colonies' which sprang up in and around Calcutta. These squatters' or '*jabar-dakhal*'<sup>40</sup> colonies had a distinctive history and character which needs to be briefly mentioned in order to contextualise the various imageries of the refugee woman. In the immediate aftermath of partition in West Bengal, the refugee families who took shelter in the government camps were a mere fraction, to be precise 70,000, of the total number of refugees, which was enumerated at 931,249 by December 1949.<sup>41</sup> These families were characterised by Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay<sup>42</sup> as the poorer section of the displaced population who were totally dependent on state aid and had neither the resources nor the energy to rehabilitate themselves. The population outside the government camps was divided by him into two kinds of people. One was the relatively affluent section of the migrants who had prior contacts with Calcutta and possessed both the resources and the energy for self-rehabilitation. But a much larger group consisted of refugees who lacked the resources, but not the will to rebuild their lives. This division of refugees into psychological types was a curious way of paring down the extent of government responsibility. The reality was that the so-called self-rehabilitating refugee was often driven to a strategy of self-help by governmental apathy and the interminably long wait at Sealdah station for removal to government camps, in inhuman conditions. This self-help first took the form of occupying large empty buildings and deserted army barracks. Early in 1948, a large number of refugees, disgusted with their miserable existence at the Sealdah station, occupied the Lake military barracks, Jodhpur military barracks, the Mysore house and

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<sup>37</sup> From the chapter 'And Still They Come' of Renuka Roy's *My Reminiscences*, reproduced in Bagchi, Jashodhara and Dasgupta, Shubhoranjan (eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Stree, 2003.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p 95.

<sup>39</sup> Introduction by Renuka Roy to *They Live Again: Millions Come from East Pakistan*, Government Of West Bengal, 1953, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Literally meaning forced seizure the term became a generic description of illegal refugee colonies.

<sup>41</sup> Figures quoted from *They Live Again: Millions Come from East Pakistan*, Government Of West Bengal, 1953

<sup>42</sup> Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu*, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1970

other large unoccupied houses at and military barracks at Shahpur, Durgapur, Ballygunge Circular Road and Dharmatala. By 1949 this had taken the form of an organised movement of land-grabbing and setting up of colonies.<sup>43</sup> The first such squatter colony formed was Bijoygarh at the deserted military barracks constructed near Jadavpur. The leadership was provided by Santosh Dutta, a veteran freedom fighter and Dhinendranath Roy Chowdhury. It is rumoured that the initiative, though illegal, had obtained verbal consent of the Government. Despite its distinctive history, Bijoygarh, became an example to be emulated by other refugees. On the one hand, groups of refugees came together spontaneously to mimic the success of Bijoygarh, and on the other, the communist party workers, who were working incognito amongst the refugees, organised refugees for land-grabbing.

The lead in the land-grabbing movement was given by *Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishad* (All Bengal Refugee Council of Action) that had been formed in September 1948. In April 1949, the executive committee of the NVBKP adopted Bijoy Mazumdar's proposal for the unauthorised occupation of fallow and wasteland in the environs of Calcutta. Soon, Deshabandhu squatters' colony was founded in a fallow strip of land at Sodepur through the initiative of NVBKP. On the Lakshmi Puja day in 1949, the second and biggest squatters' colony was established at Naihati and it was named Bijoynagar. The next squatter's colony was the Shahidnagar colony of Kanchrapara. Within the next few days a spontaneous movement for development of squatters' colonies evolved. These were established in a line extending from Dumdum to Kanchrapara in the North. The land grabbing movement having succeeded in the north, the NVBKP leadership now shifted operations to the south. Their first attempt at occupying a strip of land belonging to the Government of India behind the New Alipore mint failed. However, on 28 January 1950, the Poddarnagar Colony was founded under the leadership of the NVBKP. This started a chain-reaction of land-grabbing between January and May 1950. Most of the squatters' colonies were the result of local initiatives of self-help rather than any centralised movement organised by the left. Within twelve months, i.e. October 1949 to October 1950, the geography of Calcutta was altered drastically and permanently with a series of thatched huts running from Kanchrapara in the north to Jadavpur in the south. The trend of setting up squatters' colonies also spread beyond the boundaries of Calcutta and by the end of 1950, there were in West Bengal 149 such colonies with 1,49,280 people (29856 families), occupying 2390049 acres of land.<sup>44</sup>

Holding on to their illegally acquired homes and lands in the face of government determination to evict squatters and frequent raids by hired goons of landlords became the main challenge faced by the largely middle-class inhabitants of the squatters' colonies. The struggle against eviction became synonymous with the refugee agitation to wrest rehabilitation from unwilling authorities in West Bengal. Under the leadership of the left parties in general and the Communist Party in particular, the political agitation of the refugees took the form of organised resistance against the attempts at eviction by landlords on one hand, and rallies and demonstrations protesting various government policies of rehabilitation on the other. It is in this context that the image of the refugee woman as a political agitator is produced. Police reports of refugee meetings and processions routinely counted the number of women participants. Newspaper reports and anecdotal evidence also highlighted the participation of women in political rallies, as well as their crucial role in land-grabbing and the eventual struggle against eviction. The participation of the refugee women in mass rallies and politics was not the first instance of middle-class Bengali women participating in political agitation. In Calcutta, this had a long, though intermittent history stretching back to the days of Gandhian mass mobilisation. But in post-partition Calcutta, women's participation in the agitation of the refugees was represented as unprecedented, both in terms of its scale, and in terms of the role played by refugee women.

The first recorded instance of extensive women's initiative in the *jabardakhal* movement is the failed attempt by the refugees from Durgapur to occupy a strip of land belonging to government of India behind the New Alipore mint. According to Chakrabarti, the refugees could not resist the assault

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<sup>43</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1990, p 33.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.



of police 'although the women refugees continued a bitter struggle against the police for about four days.'<sup>45</sup> Though a failed attempt, reports of the protracted fight put up by refugee women turned it into an inspiration for radical and direct action amongst refugees. It 'gave a new impetus to the founding of colonies with greater determination and planning.'<sup>46</sup> In fact, in the following years, the involvement of women in resisting eviction acquired special strategic value. It became part of effective strategy in repelling attacks of police and hoodlums. This is aptly illustrated in the case of the struggle put up by the inhabitants of the refugee colony of Mahesh in Hooghly district where the landlord and local police doggedly pursued their initial intent to evict the refugees for three and half months. Here the squatters, under the direction of a young CPI student, Arun Sen, evolved a model of organised resistance against persistent police raids. Separate volunteer forces were created for men and women. The women volunteers stood in the vanguard against the assault of the police. Behind them stood the male volunteers, and the children brought up the rear. The logic behind the expected efficacy of this model is obvious. It sought to exploit the Bengali urban middle-class cultural ethos shared by both the refugees and the government. In this shared value system, women were seen as the weaker sex requiring male protection and therefore enjoying a certain immunity from physical attacks by men in public. The refugees in their strategic use of women as shields invoked the gender politics inherent in the construction of social norms. What is often ignored in such representations is the very real danger courted by refugee women in such situations, as the ideal norms of a society are often forgotten in situations of conflict. However, in the context of the refugee agitations, the ploy worked more often than not. The government, in trying to control demonstrations by refugees, was often forced to engage with and manipulate the same value system. This is clearly reflected in a newspaper report describing the clash between the police and a refugee procession headed towards the assembly house to protest the introduction of the Eviction Bill.<sup>47</sup>

The second lathi-charge took place at 5:15 p.m. Police set up rows of cordons inbetween the processionists and themselves. In the front was the woman police force trying to segregate the woman demonstrators many of whom had babies in their arms.<sup>48</sup>

Paradoxically, the real utility of the participation of the refugee women in mass violent rallies and clashes with the police was seen to derive from the very fact that she was ideally not supposed to be involved in such activities. The logic of placing women in the vanguard of violent agitation presupposed the extreme discomfiture caused to a socio-political structure which could not conceptualise the woman as an effective participant in violent political agitation. The contribution of refugee women to the *jabardakhal* movements and in the rallies was reduced to merely strategic terms.

Prafulla Chakrabarti's work aptly reflects this reductionist attitude towards the participation of refugee women in politics and is worth quoting at some length.

The UCRC's strength depended on the maximum utilisation of the human resources at its disposal. It demanded and obtained the near-total participation of its flock, both men and women, in its rallies. This nearly doubled the strength of the refugees vis-à-vis other groups with a comparable human mass who kept their womenfolk at home.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1990, page 65

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> The Eviction Bill was drafted by the Government of West Bengal as a means of clearing the illegal refugee colonies after a High Court ruling in favour of the refugees which declared that only civil proceedings could be initiated against an illegal occupant who had continuously resided in the same premise for 3 months. The Eviction Bill envisaged that any landlord on payment of a court fee of 50 paise would be able to file a petition in the court of the Competent Authority for the eviction of unauthorised occupiers of land.

<sup>48</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, March 29, 1951.

<sup>49</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*, Calcutta, 1990, p. 95.

Here, the participation of women is cited merely as proof of the organizational skills and strategic sagacity of the UCRC. Women are either 'kept' at home or conversely brought out into the public sphere. Any conception of a woman's agency, in terms of adherence to any political beliefs or genuine commitment to a struggle is absent from this rhetoric. Nevertheless, in terms of sheer visual impact, the significance of the sustained and regular involvement of refugee women in large numbers in rallies and processions organised by the UCRC cannot be denied. It did mark an unprecedented participation of women in the sphere of political agitation on the streets of Calcutta. Thus in a literal sense, it did amount to a coming out of women in much larger numbers into the public sphere of politics. It can be argued that this constituted a step forward in the visibility of women in the public sphere and the gradual acceptance of the presence of middle-class women in the streets and public transport of Calcutta. However, the terms in which the refugee women's participation in politics was represented left her with little agency and the rationalization of a rising number of women in the workplace was accompanied with stereotypical representations which had little room for personal choice or dignity. It is to these images of refugee women that we turn now.

### **Refugee women as breadwinners: victims or precursors?**

Amidst this plethora of images of the refugee woman, two stand out for the powerful hold they had on the contemporary popular imagination. One dominant stereotype regarding the young women of the squatter's colonies of Calcutta has been that of the refugee girl who turns into a prostitute. Sudeshna Banerjee's interviews with refugees who had been young men during the 1950s were peppered with references to young refugee women who 'disgraced the colony' by 'sinking into' prostitution.<sup>50</sup> A vivid picture of social paranoia around this stereotype is also found in Prafulla Chakrabarti's *Marginal Men*.

In the case of young women of the squatter colonies, burdened with the family of sick or old parents and young brothers and sisters, paranoia and aggressive drives find expression in a different direction. These young women of the colonies travel to Calcutta during office hours. Usually people take them for college students or working girls. Actually they walk the streets of Calcutta and earn between Rs. 600 and Rs. 3000 a month...What is most disturbing is that their way of life is finding acceptance among young men and women of the conformist, traditional society of West Bengal. The abysmal poverty of the refugee is pulling down the entire existing social order...<sup>51</sup>

The refugee woman who turns into a prostitute is always seen as a victim of economic compulsions. Her immorality on the one hand sustains the family and on the other hand violates the honour of the entire community and has a corrosive effect on social values. In the *jabardakhal* colonies of Calcutta a colloquialism developed to refer to such women. They were the girls who had indulged in *patal probesh*, literally meaning descended into hell.

The other dominant stereotype regarding the middle-class refugee woman is that of the self-sacrificing unmarried educated girl who takes on the role of the chief breadwinner of the family and is thus 'doomed' to remain a spinster. In a moving portrayal of the social injustice inflicted upon such girls, Asok Mitra gives a detailed description of the daily monotony and exhaustion they suffered.<sup>52</sup> They were denied the authority of the earner in larger society or community as well as the consideration traditionally reserved for the well-being and health of the male breadwinner. In fact, caught between the pressures of entering the job market and the social and familial norms where the burden of a woman's domestic duties remained unchanged, she was forced to accept a 'double-day' workload. While Asok Mitra protested against the social norms which forced women into these

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<sup>50</sup> Sudeshna Banerjee, 'Displacement within Displacement: The Crisis of Old Age in the Refugee Colonies of Calcutta', in *Studies in History*, Vol. 19, Part 2, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*, Calcutta, 1990, p. 433.

<sup>52</sup> Ashok Mitra, 'Take A Girl Like Her', *Calcutta Diary*, 1968.

destructive patterns and roles, he failed to imagine any alternative lived reality for refugee women who were forced to earn a living.<sup>53</sup>

Apparently, these two stereotypes regarding the refugee woman have nothing in common. But a closer look reveals interesting structural similarities. Both the images are that of a working woman. Moreover, both as a prostitute and as the chief breadwinner, the working refugee woman destabilises the orthodox and patriarchal Bengali middle-class value system. The challenge posed by this figure is contained within a discourse of immorality in the first instance and within a discourse of a social tragedy in the second instance. These two images are in a sense the flip side of the construction of the refugee woman in official discourse as economically unproductive and therefore unrehabilitable. This paradox can perhaps be explained in terms of the contradiction between the social ideal and the social reality in post-partition Calcutta. The ideal place of the woman in Bengali middle-class ethos was undoubtedly within the family, in the sphere of domesticity. A reaffirmation of this social ideal is at the root of the denial of economic productivity to the refugee woman in official discourse. The same value-system is challenged in the image of the refugee woman as a working woman. In fact, the hold of the two latter images on the popular imagination can only be explained in terms of the deep insecurity it caused to existing socio-cultural norms and values. This naturally raises the question of how far the image of the breadwinning refugee woman was representative of the social reality of the majority of the East Bengali migrants.

There is a tendency among historians and social scientists, writing on various aspects of the partition of Bengal and its impact on the society of West Bengal, to make uncritical and largely unsubstantiated assertions regarding the Bengali middle-class refugee woman 'coming out' of the domestic sphere into the public arena of work and politics in post-partition Calcutta. Several such instances can be cited. For example, Nilanjana Chatterjee declares unequivocally that 'the refugees responded to the inadequate relief and rehabilitation resources with enterprise and flexibility. In the process of self-settlement, caste rules were bent, traditional occupations were abandoned in the search for employment, families became more nuclear and women came out of the home to work.'<sup>54</sup> Sudeshna Chakraborty goes even further to claim that being thrown into the job of breadwinners led Bengali refugee women to alter the entire socio-economic scenario of West Bengal. 'For one, as an earning member, she changed the woman's role in the family, albeit not without inherent tensions.'<sup>55</sup> Jasodhara Bagchi ascribes a causal role to the partition of Bengal in furthering the social emancipation of Bengali middle-class women.

1947 saw an unprecedented acceleration of earlier trends. The purdah that had confined the Bengali *bhadramahila* to her *antahpur* (private quarters) had already been shaken in the first four decades of this century. It was nearly swept away, not so much by political independence, as through its bitter gift of Partition, which divided Bengal along communal lines ... ....The same stroke that brought this flood of uprooted marginalised women to Calcutta also opened the door to many new opportunities for Bengali middle-class Hindu women. They came out of the private domain of domesticity and child rearing to take up public duties.<sup>56</sup>

All these statements are based upon an uncritical acceptance of the stereotype of the East Bengali middle-class woman being forced to come out and work in the context of the refugee crisis in Calcutta. This merely re-affirms the hold of a stereotype on the popular imagination, but does not bring us any closer to discovering whether there was a substantial change in the status of East Bengali middle-class

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'The East Bengali Refugees: A Lesson in Survival', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta, The Living City, Vol II*, New Delhi, 1990.

<sup>55</sup> Sudeshna Chakravarty, *The Impact of the Flow of Refugees from East Bengal on West Bengal: Political Economic and Social Aspect*, n.d.

<sup>56</sup> Jasodhara Bagchi, 'Women in Calcutta: After Independence', in Sukanta Chaudhuri, Sukanta, (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City, Vol II: The Present and the Future*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1990.

women in the post-partition decades in Calcutta. It also leaves the question of a possible causal link between partition and the coming out of middle-class refugee women unanswered.

A study of the Census report of 1951 reveals that the huge influx of refugees into Calcutta did alter the gender dynamics of the city. The pre-dominance of men in the population of Calcutta had for long been a characteristic feature of the city due to the patterns of migrant labour. This imbalance was corrected to some extent by the sudden influx of refugee families. Unlike the resident population of Calcutta in 1951, the refugee population had a much more balanced gender composition. In 1951, in a systematic sample of 211,102 persons from a population of 2,115,449 (exclusive of the displaced population of 433,228), the ratio of unmarried men to unmarried women was 1.8:1 and the ratio of married men to married women was 2.4:1. However, amongst the 433,228 displaced people sampled, the ratio of unmarried men to unmarried women was 1.6:1 and the ratio of married males to married females was 1.05:1.<sup>57</sup> Thus, there was an absolute increase in the number of women in the population of the city. However, this does not necessarily translate into a larger visibility of women in the public sphere or a greater participation of women in the work force. Between 1951 and 1961, there was a significant increase in the number of working women in the city of Calcutta, from roughly 3% to 5.72%. The figures however do not enumerate employment patterns among refugee women separately, leaving us with no way of discovering how far, if at all, this change can be attributed to refugee women. However, the ward by ward classification of workers and non-workers by sex in the 1961 census,<sup>58</sup> when combined with the results of a ward by ward social survey of Calcutta carried out in 1964,<sup>59</sup> creates a possibility of comparing the number of working women amongst the refugees with the number of working women amidst the rest of the population.

The number of wards in Calcutta and their boundaries did not change between 1961 and 1964. It can also be assumed that the number of people in each ward and the composition of the population, i.e. the dominant ethnic, class or caste character did not undergo any drastic change over a period of three years. Thus, the ethnic and professional characteristic of the population of each ward that emerges in the social survey carried out in 1964, can be legitimately pushed back and applied to the figures derived in 1961. In the social survey of 1964, 'refugee' is used as a distinct socio-economic and cultural category in its own right. It features as a separate category both within the Bengali community and in the mapping of concentrations of different ethnic communities onto the spatial geography of Calcutta. Based on this, the wards of Calcutta having a refugee presence can be isolated from the wards devoid of the same. The extent of the demographic impact of the in-migration of East Bengalis into Calcutta is indicated by the fact that as many as 31 of the total 80 wards are shown to have substantial populations of refugees. Some wards, especially the ones located in the extreme south of Calcutta, emerge as overwhelmingly refugee in character. However, in most of the wards the refugees were part of a mixed and composite population which included other categories of people like labourers from Bihar, UP and Orissa, Marwaris and also earlier Bengali residents of Calcutta who were basically from West Bengal. One weakness of this method is that the relative strengths of these different sections of the population in the various wards cannot be ascertained. Nevertheless, through a comparison of the participation of women in the workforce of refugee wards with that of non-refugee wards does provide a way of enumerating whether there was a significantly higher level of employment amongst refugee women.

Three types of figures have been used to try and compare the economic condition of refugee women of Calcutta with that of non-refugee women. These are the number of working women in the total population of women, the number of working women in the total working population and the proportion of women within those employed in miscellaneous services. In each case the unit of analysis is the individual ward. A comparison of the refugee wards with the non-refugee wards reveals that in the non-refugee wards 7.23% of the women were employed gainfully as compared to 4.88% in the refugee wards. The proportion of working women in the total population of workers was 6.22% in

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<sup>57</sup> Figures taken from *Census of India, 1951*, Volume VI, Part 3, *Calcutta City*.

<sup>58</sup> *Census of India, 1961, Calcutta City*, Table B-I and B-II, Workers and Non-Workers Classified by Sex and Broad Age Groups.

<sup>59</sup> Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Calcutta: 1964, A Social Survey*, Lavani Publishing House, Bombay, 1968.

the non-refugee wards and 5.48% in the refugee wards. Thus, at first glance the figures seem to belie the stereotype of larger numbers of refugee women being forced to 'come out' and work due to economic compulsions. But it has to be kept in mind that the image being investigated refers only to the middle-class East Bengali woman engaged in professional service while the figures here include all classes of women engaged in all sorts of work, including menial labour. In trying to isolate the middle-class woman, I have looked at the industrial category of 'other services' used in the Census of 1961. This would exclude women engaged in cultivation, agricultural labour, mining, quarrying, livestock, forestry and allied activities, household industry, manufacturing other than household industry, construction, trade and commerce and in transport storage and communication. Thus, through exclusion, the category of other services can be characterised as one consisting of the typical professions aspired to or considered respectable by the middle classes. This would include, besides the self-employed professionals such as doctors and lawyers, all the white-collar professionals such as teachers, clerks, secretaries in offices etc. In the refugee wards, 13.86% of the total population engaged in other services are found to be women, while the figure for the non-refugee wards is 13.25%. In other words, the scant data available provides no conclusive evidence. While it is clear that there were working women amongst refugees, there is no evidence to suggest that a woman turning to professional work was a trend exclusive to or dominant within refugee families in post-partition West Bengal.

### **Conclusion**

Given that available data indicates that roughly a decade after partition, there was little difference in the extent of participation of refugee and non-refugee women within the workforce, how should we read the multiple images of refugee women related to her role as a breadwinner? There is little reason to doubt reminiscences of refugee women who speak of being forced to look for work due to the grinding poverty within their families. However, given that their numbers were not statistically significant, can their 'coming out' be fitted into a telos of women's emancipation in Bengal? In other words, did the role of a breadwinner, taken up by middle-class refugee woman have a transformative impact on social mores and family norms? Rachel Weber, based on her interviews with the middle-class women of Bijoygarh, concludes that the larger visibility of refugee women in the public sphere of politics and work did not amount to an actual coming out of the women. She questions the watertight division of the public and the private as domains which excluded and included domesticity respectively. She argues that instead of refugee women crossing over into the public sphere, post-partition Calcutta saw the domestic realm expand 'to include their participation in political, community and economic affairs.'<sup>60</sup> This is largely borne out by the above discussion where an attempt has been made to etch out the terms in which the refugee woman's presence in the public sphere was conceptualised in society. Especially, when it came to her participation in politics, even as she marched on the streets of Calcutta, she remained trapped in her traditional role as the mother and nurturer. Though the participation of the refugee woman in political agitation took varied forms, the dominant image that emerged was that of a mother being forced into politics even as she carried a baby in her arms.

The refugee agitation was essentially a fight against the renewed threat of eviction and homelessness posed by the Eviction Bill. The home was the domain of the woman. Thus, it was only natural that she would fight to preserve it. This attitude is reflected in the tactics of mobilising refugees adopted by Bijoy Mazumdar during the time when the Communist Party was banned, forcing its members to adopt clandestine tactics of mobilization. According to him, the *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti* (Women's Self-defence League) could become an effective means to penetrate refugee settlements precisely because they worked primarily amongst refugee women.

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<sup>60</sup> Rachel Weber, 'Re(Creating) the Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta in Jashodhara Bagchi and Shubhoranjan Dasgupta, (eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Stree, 2003.

It was easy for them to penetrate into every makeshift refugee household. Unlike the menfolk, the refugee women were more susceptible and more willing to talk against the establishment with persons who soothed them with their womanly sympathy and brought them succour. They had to face the tantrums of the children when they were hungry. They had to go about food gathering or borrowing money when the menfolk returned home empty-handed, and most of the time they had very little to subsist on after feeding the others. What did they care if somebody was a Congressman or a Communist?... They were willing to listen and talk, although the menfolk, more conscious of the bleak future that awaited them, were cautious and ostentatiously aggressive against the Communists for currying favour with the government.<sup>61</sup>

The problem with such representations is that it undervalues refugee women's contribution to politics. As she remained essentially the homemaker even in the realm of politics, any genuine political affiliation based on ideological convictions was denied to her. Her participation in politics was seen to be an extension of her domestic obligations and therefore instinctive or natural, rather than a rationally thought out choice. However, it is much more difficult to fit the refugee woman taking on the role of the breadwinner within this framework of the expansion of the domestic sphere.

The Bengali middle-class family norms had no space for women as breadwinners. By taking on the role of breadwinners, refugee women posed a potentially destabilising challenge to the Bengali middle-class value system. This is not to suggest that middle-class women coming out to work was a novelty first seen in post-partition Calcutta. There are instances of women achievers with highly successful careers dating back to the pre-independence era. However, within the ambit of middle-class families, working women were seen as achievers, and not earners. There was (and continues to be) a notion of sexual division of labour within the professions that created a legitimate space for the woman in some professions, specially teaching. This merely grafted the role of the woman as the nurturer into the wider scenario of nation building. Even the notional presence of the woman as the breadwinner of the family was totally absent. The economic dislocation suffered by the refugee families exposed a large number of middle-class women, for the first time, to a *need* to earn. Among the middle classes, working women were no longer merely those who chose to work. In the refugee families, she increasingly emerged as one who was compelled to work. The notion of the woman's earnings being essential to the perpetuation of family life thus marked a very important shift in the space allowed to a working woman within a patriarchal society. The pre-dominance of the image of the refugee woman as a working woman was largely a reflection of the deeply disturbing and destabilising effect it had on prevalent norms and structures of power within the middle-class family.

The experiences of the Bengali middle-class refugee woman do not fit very comfortably within the framework of the emancipation of Bengali women. There is a very high degree of romanticisation of the role played by refugee women in the public sphere. Once the terms on which the 'coming out' of women was represented and accepted are delineated, the picture becomes extremely complicated. It is clear that the coming out of women in the public sphere of politics and professional work did not lead to a transformation of social norms or any substantive change in the woman's ideal role within the bounds of the family. Moreover, in the absence of any accounts of how the refugee women perceived their own actions it is difficult to come to a conclusion one way or the other. Rachel Weber's interviewees seem to suggest that many refugee women viewed the new roles thrust upon them as temporary and situational aberrations. According to her, for many refugee women it had been an embarrassing experience to search for employment and to do domestic work without the help of servants. They neither appreciated, nor felt entitled to their public exposure. To many it seemed an added burden to their domestic duties and they returned to the world of the home the moment their families were comfortably settled. Even if driven by compulsion to a temporary and unwanted participation in Calcutta's workforce, refugee women did constitute a new and vital presence on the roads of rush-hour Calcutta. Forced to join hundreds of men in the buses, trams and trains of Calcutta in the daily commute to work, refugee women were instrumental in carving out greater visibility and space for women in traditionally male spheres of city life. Once this space was created, the terms on which larger society perceived or accepted it could be thrown open to

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<sup>61</sup> Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*, Calcutta, 1990, p. 49.

contestation. In this limited sense, the economic and political struggles waged by refugee women did pave the way for future generations of Bengali women who chose to enter the public sphere. However, the last word on this issue cannot be stated until and unless the refugee women's self-perception of their actions are correlated with the stereotypes imposed on her. The few stray interviews, which have been recorded, do not create a basis for such a correlation. There is a need for an extensive ethnographic survey among the East Bengali middle-class refugee women who survived the turbulent post-partition years in Calcutta. Such a project can be the only means of recovering the voice of the refugee woman which is otherwise largely silent – even in the process of production and circulation of the images of the refugee woman.

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