

## **Rethinking refugee women: A study of Partition induced forced-migration through the intersecting lenses of caste, labour, generation and region.**

### **Introduction: The tale and its re-telling**

A close reading of the available rich historiography on memories of Partition of British India makes available multiple mutually related stands of memorialization that marked the episode especially in post- independence West Bengal. While the 'statist' strand of Partition history blamed the refugees for their own dismal fate, the refugee narratives highlighted their heroic struggles emphasizing their victim status. This narrative emerging from the refugees themselves can be accessed through cultural texts, both fictional and non-fictional and have now been institutionalised through the multiple scholarly works on Partition that have sought to study the partition from below (Chakrabarty 1990). This narrative in fact be called the dominant memory of Partition and post Partition refugee-hood in West Bengal at the contemporary moment. The second decade of the twenty first century, however, saw the publication of Dalit refugee autobiographies that has seriously challenged these assumptions by narrating the story of refugee-hood through a wider lens, i.e., that of their entire lives. In these narratives deprivation and marginalization begins much before the moment of displacement thought it comes to significantly affect the same. One of these Dalit authors Monohar Mouli Biswas (2015) writes in his autobiography:

This autobiography is a document of growing up amidst deprivation. It is a document of almost losing in life; touching the margins and then again stepping back among humans... We were living epitome of a life extremely simple and abstemious, living on two handfuls of rice a day, a life of enjoying the beauty of nature while living, in its midst, learning to tolerate scarcities and complaints. This pattern was not of one life, but that of generations. It was living like a *prisnika* – a water hyacinth – living on the verge of death and dying on the verge of life!

Though this excerpt is about Dalit lives in a period preceding the Partition of British India and the forced migration that followed, it helps question certain fundamental common assumptions about refugee hood, one of them being the trope of the lost idyllic home. It points out to the possibility of a different meaning of home which was lost but the loss of which cannot be lamented within the dominant trope because of the material poverty of these homes as opposed to an image of bounty of upper caste homes. Next these Dalit refugee accounts point out to the differential experience of the moment of refugee-hood itself, mediated by caste. As Monohar Mouli Biswas (2015) rightly points out. "We were not like the aristocratic *rui* or *katla* fish who could cross over the borders immediately with the partition of the land and seek a living on the other side. We, like the common *chunoputi* fish, stayed back in our motherland, primarily because of sheer helplessness". The Dalit refugee accounts reveal that most of the lower caste refugees were the last to leave and as a result the more fortunate ones were able to reach the borders completely penniless and face the inhuman conditions of refugee camps while the less fortunate were never recognised by the government as refugees for reaching late and have been completely written out of memory.

The horrors of living in Sealdah station and later in a refugee camp have also featured frequently in Dalit refugee accounts and have been described in detail by Byapari (2014) and Jatimbala (2017). This experience had earlier largely formed the background for the success stories of upper caste refugees- as a horror that one escaped by one's constant striving- but never recounted in its own right. It must be noted here that the fact that camp life features in a major way in two of the four Dalit refugee narratives is not merely co-incidental but can be explained following Sen (2014) by virtue of the fact that most of the Dalit refugees also belonged to the lower classes of the society and hence lacked cultural and educational capital. Being agricultural labourers very few of them actually had relatives in Calcutta engaged in professional labour. Thus, they squarely lacked the specific properties on the basis of which they could hinge themselves on the outskirts of the city independently without seeking shelter in camps. The government was also keen to push them to the camps. After reaching the camps, them being agricultural labourers, they were not able to find suitable work in the camps and this accounts for their failure to establish themselves economically. Byapari's (2014) autobiography points out that when they were made to work for certain government projects when residing in worksite camps they were not allowed to partake in the benefits of the same. They were also not allowed to work outside on their own outside government supervision. Eventually when the camps were closed down they were offered the worst the most infertile tracts of land outside Bengal e.g., in Dandakaranya and Andaman.

Byapari (2014) also provides a detailed account of why the political agitations of the refugees failed to prevent the closing down of the camps or the plan to deport the refugees. He writes that in the very first day the police came out with all its force to break up the movement. Subsequently, the police would load the refugees in the police van and take them away to far off locations and leave them there and the half fed refugees had no strength to walk back home. In absence of much political support this was enough to break up the agitations. Through such accounts the differences between the success of the refugees from the squatter's colonies and failure of the camp refugees begins sharply emerge breaking down the idea that former was simply more enterprising and the other lazy.

Biswas' (2015) and Byapari's (2014) accounts, Banerjee (2017) further argues belies any easy identification with any category be it the educated upper /middle class West or East Bengalis, the Muslims or the other the other Dalits with whom they competed for land, employment or government doles. Byapari (2014) with his school education sophisticated Bengali prose goes on to challenge the binaries of *Bhadralok* and *Chotolok* to the extent that he and his narrative fails to seamlessly fit into any of these categories, though his attempt to be absorbed as a part of the *Bhadralok* is often threatened by his lack of physical and material means of survival. Unlike Biswas who she claims is more apologetic of his emulation of middle class *Bhadralok* ways, Byapari's writing to her on the other hand is a more confident assertion of the self as a *Chotolok*. Their narratives together she argues exposes starkly the divides between the refugee and non-refugee working class population- claiming that the lower caste , class refugees were a class apart who could not be even clubbed with beggars- their vulnerability being less perceptible immediately than the latter. Their narratives also seem to affirm that they were heavily ostracized by the native working class population of the slums for being trespassers who had come to stake claims over their means of livelihood.

Banerjee (2017) further argues that the vulnerability of Biswas (2015) and Byapari (2014) and their families is also evident from their constant shift from religious or political identity to the other. This lack of affiliation or strong adherence to any particular group she argues is a result of betrayal of the Dalit interests by each dominant formation at some point of time or the other. Whether its 'Hail Jesus' or Vande Mataram the slogans have very little resonance in the Dalit lives except for as means to fulfilment of some immediate needs by professing support. Once again against the grain of popular refugee narratives of extreme resilience and struggle in the face of extreme hardship and apathy, often translating in the figure of the revolutionary left activist the Dalit refugee narratives of Biswas (2015) and Byapari (2014) chart the story of dishonesty and corruption among Dalit compatriots in the face of an extreme mismatch between their precarious material status and the opulence of Calcutta and aspirations fuelled by the same. The Dalit left revolutionary figure as painted by Byapari (ibid) also seems to be less ideologically motivated and more compelled by immediate material needs in his political struggle. Moreover, more than material losses these stories highlight the loss of sense of self-worth and dignity exemplified in the tired figure of the Dalit patriarch. Be it Byapari's father, physically broken waiting to be bought in what he calls a pseudo slave market or Biswas; father reduced to insolvency and begging, his last bastion of power commanding respect from his family in the role of the bread winner is dissolved making him a 'covetous penniless *Chotolok*' ().

The Dalit narratives also present the stark opposite of the hyper masculine upper caste refugee figure fighting to the last. Often the protagonists of these narratives are battered bruised, physically manhandled by people in power. Byapari (2014) in his narrative in fact informs being raped multiple times in exchange of food and employment. This fractures a single narrative of violence or of refugee masculinity. Moreover, Biswas' narrative also confirms that such violence is not an abnormality but rather quite common in Dalit lives, given its ubiquitous presence even before Partition. Moreover, in the extreme rage and violence unleashed by Dalit party workers, rather than the valorised seasoned ideological position of the Left refugee activist yet another facet of masculinity is exposed.

The process of being inducted in to *Bhadralok* values in the city of Calcutta or in the refugee camps further leads to the dissolution of any stable narrative of the family. Byapari's family is split up in search of work. His inability to protect his mother and sister's scantily clad bodies from ravishing gazes further creates a crisis of masculinity. Both Byapari (2014) and Biswas (2014) helplessly witness the physical and mental decline of their fathers to the extent that Biswas (ibid) at one point confesses being embarrassed to publicly acknowledge his father. Compounded with this fact is the scattering of the family across two sides of the border and across the country owing to government efforts at dispersal of the refugees living on government aid.

Banerjee (2017) also interestingly points out that in most Dalit refugee narratives point out to the fact that while most younger generations of the Dalit families became integrated in to the middle class sections the older generations remained dependent on government aid making any identification of these families with a single class difficult. While for most middle class refugee families the lost home and its associated lifestyle formed a mythic core of

identification and a separate *Bangal* identity for the younger generations wiping out the traces of a deprived past in a distant land was the only way to integration in the middle class mores of Calcutta, leaving behind their subalternity and Banerjee (ibid) analyses this lack of confidence in one's past as a source of identity to any strong religious, social or political license.

### **Asansol and Partition induced forced migration: Bringing the two together**

It is then that by pointing out to these disjunctures that Dalit narratives seek to rupture the hegemonic frames of understanding post- Partition forced migration. The lower caste / out caste refugees in government camps, or those who crossed the borders after 1958 and even others who did not actively seek government help were dispersed throughout the country. While, the above mentioned Dalit refugee narratives have offered sharp critiques to the upper caste narratives they have remained mired in the Calcutta experience. Even Byapari's stories though with significant interludes located in Assam and Chattisgarh is ultimately a Calcutta-based narrative. Uditi Sen's (2017) work is then probably the only exception in the field that seeks to understand the after-life of rehabilitation with a focus on caste through ethnographic enquiries in a non- Calcutta setting and in doing so points out the differences that Andaman as a context introduced in the relationship between refugee-hood and caste. Though not specifically focused on caste studies by Joya Chatterji (2007) and William Van Schendel (2001) have also pointed out to the significance of the context on the aftermath of refugee rehabilitation. Taking a cue from these works I would thus like to locate the aftermath of refugee rehabilitation in a non – metropolitan city in West Bengal. Additionally, since the areas around the Bangladesh border have received some scholarly attention in relation to cross border migration I would like to locate the study in a city farthest side of the border namely Asansol, near Jharkhand- West Bengal state border. Understandably, the number of Partition- induced migrants are less than those in the border towns however, the city is home to one of the biggest and model refugee colonies in the state and have attracted many more migrants over time because of the economic opportunities it once provided as an expanding industrial city. In the immediate aftermath of the Partition a number of refugee camps were established in Asansol such as those in Gopalpur, Birudihah and Shibtala near Kanksa, Ratibati near Chanda, Bijoynagar near Jamuria, Salanpur and Surjanagar and the Bogra Women's Camp near J.K Nagar. Later, these refugees and refugees from other camps such as those in Ranghat, Bardhaman and so on were settled in the government sponsored refugee colonies. Some others settled on their own and further a host of non- camp refugees arrived in Asansol through various social networks who settled in both colony and non- colony areas.

The impending Bangladesh War in the late 1960s made it imperative for a large part of SC and OBC Hindu population in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to migrate to India who had stayed back in Bangladesh notwithstanding the risk of becoming minorities because their sustenance was deeply linked to landed and localized economies and did not have the horizontal mobility enjoyed by then educated upper castes employed often in the formal sector. These refugees, however were only admitted by the state on the condition that they would seek rehabilitation outside the state of West Bengal despite the fact that most of them had kinship networks and other support structures in the state to which they were most likely

to turn for support (Basu Guha Choudhury 2009). Hence, the refugees from this period who came to Asansol were not legally recognized or allotted any land for resettlement. They formed squatter's colonies around the government colonies, in most cases in areas which were even further from the main road and without any legal claims. It must be borne in mind that the refugees from these two time periods cannot be separated in water tight compartments because of the strong kinship networks which has further resulted in physical and social proximity and thus any study of migration in this context defies easy periodization. Further, one of the main aims of the paper is to understand the aftermath of Partition- induced forced migration in the long-duree given it has already been mentioned above that the caste based differences of Partition-induced forced migration became more pronounced in the subsequent generations of the migrant families. The paper is thus based on in-depth interviews conducted with first and second generation respondents from migrant families in refugee concentration areas of Asansol. Keeping in mind the vulnerable conditions of the respondents the findings however, have been presented in terms of a fictional government resettlement colony which is closely modelled after real localities in the city.

The documented histories of the government refugee colony and refugee rehabilitation in Asansol that have been written in the last three to four years and closely adhere to the established tenets of telling the refugee story in Bengal celebrates agency of self-settled refugees and the gradual gentrification of the colony. (Sarkar 2019, Samanta 2017). However, once we focus on the individual reminiscences the graininess, contradictions and dissonances in the popular history begins to emerge. The refugees came to the colonies from various camps came to be locally known as 'in refugees' settled in the areas farthest from these main roads where as the refugees locally known as the 'out-refugees' settled in the areas closest to the main roads. The first phase of camp refugees probably came here during 1951-52 and the phases continued till 1959 when the camps were officially winded up in West Bengal.<sup>1</sup> The allocation of plots in the colony were done starting from the area towards one of the main roadways moving gradually away from it. The first zone of settlement was marked as one, then two and the last zone was marked three. The refugees in zone 1 received 6 *cotthas* of land where as those in zone three were allocated only 4 *cotthas*. Understandably as more and more refugees came in land became scarce. Now the caste profile of the camp refugees here is mixed mainly because a number of camp refugees in this area came from the widow camp in Bogra Chati, which had a significant number of widowed upper caste refugees. It might be pertinent to mention here that while it has been pointed out that camp refugees were largely lower caste, ex residents of the Women's camp in Bogra Chati pointed out that there were a significant number of upper caste women headed families too. Once the men in such families crossed the age of 18 they were rehabilitated to the colony. Though the other camp refugees overwhelmingly stated that there were refugees from all castes in the camps the refugees I met during in my interviews from other camps were largely SC and OBC and despite assertions of random allotment of plots I found SC/OBC households concentrated in some pockets of the colony understandably these were also the poorer pockets. However, it is difficult to ascertain the caste profiles of a large number of respondents because as pointed out by one of the leaders of Ambedkerite organizations in the region, many of the refugees on

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<sup>1</sup>It must be mentioned here that refugees had to register themselves as from agricultural or non- agricultural backgrounds in camps and only those who registered themselves as the latter were sent to Asansol most probably to help in industrial expansion of the region by forming a part of the industrial workforce.

crossing over and coming to Asansol took upper caste surnames (by registering themselves as so in the new governmental records) understandably to avoid stigmatization.

On the other hand, the refugees known as ‘out refugees’ were, I was, told, doctors, engineers, teachers, professors and people involved in other kinds of white collar professions. They mainly obtained direct *pattas* from the government or purchased land. It can be surmised from the names and surnames mentioned that they were largely upper castes. It is likely that those who received ‘*pattas*’ had come to India before 1958 (because after that refugees who came and settled in West Bengal were not recognized by the government). Another caste group who have a significant in the region are the Sahas – a trading caste of erstwhile east Bengal occupying roughly a middle position in the caste hierarchy. They in fact have a locality named after them. I was told that initially there were only two or three families of the Sahas who came from the camps. Soon they were joined by the families and kins from other parts who squatted on the abandoned and vacant plots. Since they were traditionally a trading caste and were involved in multiple kinds of trading activities in their homeland they were able to establish themselves even here as a business class gradually and were able to attract more kin members consolidating their numerical strength. My focus in this paper will be the SC/OBC refugees in the colony the majority of whom came from the camps. The others ended up in Asansol through kinship networks either the having crossed the border after 1958 or from other rehabilitation sites often after multiple migrations in search of economic security.

The differences of caste and class location begin to come into sharp relief once we begin listening closely to the stories of the homeland, conditions of arrival the journeys through which they reached Asansol and finally the after lives of receiving rehabilitation. Chakrabarti (1990), Samaddar (2006) Basu Ray Chaudhury (2009), Sen (2014), Banerjee (2017) mention that a major motif in telling the story of post-Partition is the loss of ancestral property and the pauperization of a large number of people overnight without any fault of their own. Though the typical memory of refugee-hood in the area as revealed in my initial conversations without individual references closely resembled this dominant narrative, individual life histories soon began to reveal a different story more in line with the Dalit narratives. In the 14 interviews conducted (two of them belonged to the same family) with SC/OBC camp refugees who came to West Bengal after Partition from districts mainly varying between Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur, Barisal and Dhaka, none of the families claimed to have huge tracts of farm land, sprawling *zamindaris*, farmed by hired labourers, unlike every single upper caste respondent. Most respondents replied that they either had medium to small tracts of farm land which they cultivated by themselves (or through community help) or they mentioned running small business which usually involved travelling to Kolkata or some other major city and procuring daily items on a whole sale rate and then selling them in family owned humble grocery shops. Rather than the fear of loss of property or socio- economic status then, most, respondents mentioned a pervasive feeling of insecurity as the reason behind their decision to migrate. Some refugees in my interviews also mentioned that they decided to migrate because the river was about to encroach their houses. Now, apparently this might not seem related to the Partition in any way but if seen in the light of precarity, uncertainty and government apathy was to mark the lives of these families after becoming

minorities in their homelands coupled with the fact of losing their lands to the river must have been reason enough to provoke them to migrate.

After crossing the borders the refugees who came before 1958 found themselves in various government camps with a brief interlude in the Sealdah station. The journey from the Bongaon border to Asansol is succinctly captured in Togorbala's story. Togorbala and her husband after a long journey reached Bongaon with almost nothing on them to help them survive on their own and had nowhere to stay. They registered themselves with the government officials and stayed at Sealdah station for a few days and then were moved to the Palla Camp. She told me the camp life was very difficult in the first camp with difficult conditions of living but it got much better in the second camp i.e, Nababnagar camp. In Palla camp she recounts irregular government doles had led to starvation and suicides. The sanitary conditions were also inhuman. Her husband had been able to make ends meet by selling cheap ice cream, the capital for which came from selling of doles and surviving on less than bare minimum for a while and yet this 'individual enterprise' was considered 'illegal' in a camp. The situation getting better in the next camp only meant doles getting regular and sanitary conditions only slightly better. The couple stayed at the camps for around five years, making them completely dependent on the government help and any attempt to become economically self-dependent later was rendered difficult by this period of complete dependence and helplessness. For Togorbala and her neighbours however camp life in the second camp seemed to be quite acceptable and when the decision of the government came to relocate them to Asansol they accepted that too without much protest indicating their very little expectations from the state and at the same time complete dependence on the government. On reaching Asansol, they got a total of rupees 1400 (combined amount for house loan and business loan) out of Rs.2200 allotted to each refuge family, the rest 800 being taken by the local middlemen. Moreover, an extra amount was charged from them as a cost of the tents given to them to live temporarily. Most academic and non-academic work have pointed out how meagre the amount was compared to the losses and yet for Togorbala and her neighbours the amount seemed only a little less than adequate once again pointing out to their extreme vulnerability. Further, Togorbala remembered that initially when they settled in Asansol they were allotted land in the low lying areas prone to flooding from the local lake and the entire area being inhabitable. They had to face a lot of hostility from the local land owners and of her neighbours was even murdered. Though the incident did not lead to any conviction the matter was resolved through police intervention and some compensation was paid. However, the threat remained. They even could not claim the entire plot that was allotted to them owing to the fear of the frequent presence of what they identified as 'anti-social' elements.

In my interviews I did not come across who crossed the borders between 1958 and the early 1960s but a significant number of refugees came to Asansol in the late 1960s in the wake of the Bangladesh War. Lakshmi Nath one such respondent mentioned that they crossed the borders one foot after several days of hardships after the Pakistani army entered their village. They had to leave home overnight and could carry practically nothing with them. Once in west Bengal they went to their distant relatives in the border district of Nadia but they could not find any financial stability. They finally decided to come to Asansol where some of the people in their kin network had settled hoping to find some better economic opportunities in

the industrial city. They squatted on newly cleared plots on the edges of the government colony and thereafter continued to live there. On their arrival they too found the area difficult to settle being prone to frequent flooding and having a scarcity of water. The area was also not electrified and had very few metalled roads. The area also being frequented by fringe elements bore a notorious name and safety and security even when at home remained a major concern.

### **Caste, labour and forced migration in Asansol**

Asansol emerged as an urban space because of the abundance of coal deposits in the neighbouring areas. In the early 1900s the establishment of a railway junction for the transportation of coal marked the beginning of urbanization in Asansol. Later the Indian Steel and Iron Company became the most prominent industry located in Asansol. However, in the colonial period the development was largely a product of economic interests of foreign capital owners, native princely rulers and big *zamindars*. It was only in the post-independence period a large number of industries were nationalized and a significant section of public sector undertaking came up in the region and as a result of the welfare maximising public sector industrialisation programmes played a very important role in producing new industrial-urban space and an altered urban hierarchical structure in this region. The huge investment in the public sector enterprises also aided the growth of medium and small scale industries owned by private bodies. Coal, steel, engineering and chemical industries were of chief importance in this period of industrial growth along with ancillary and mineral based industries. Market relations with neighbouring states was built up due to the well-developed transport network. Nationalization of coal and other basic heavy industries expanded the employment opportunity in the government sector and also substantially improved the wage structure. However, from the 1980s the employment opportunities began shrinking due to industrial disputes and from the 1990s onwards the introduction of liberalization and privatisation policies combined with the intensification of labour union and factory-owner clashes the majority of the large industries concerns were closed down, a large number of labourers were retrenched, employment generation came to almost a standstill and even the prospects in the tertiary sector dipped with general decline on the economic prospects of the town.

It is evident from these accounts that the refugees from the lower castes had very little to fall back upon and immediately entered the lowest levels of the formal industrial labour. This is in consonance with the trends of labour engagement in the region. The colonial system of production still in place and most of the factories in the area still being in private hands they were paid wages that were hardly enough for sustenance. They refugees also took up marginal positions in the informal economy. In fact, another respondent mentioned that the lack of employment opportunities after coming to Asansol from the camps, where they had been in a condition of forced unemployment, had immediately pushed the refugees into illegality. It was only later that some of them found jobs in the industries in an around Asansol. But the wages still remained abysmally low. Only with the help of a supporting



income could one afford to maintain formal employment but otherwise they had to carry on informal activities. The professions taken up by these refugees in the informal sector mainly included working as carpenters, wielding workers, masons or running small tea shops or grocery shops and so on and were extremely labour intensive and poorly paid and often entailed continuous shifts in the profession due to insecurity and financial instability. The extreme physical labour of such occupations often resulted in shortening of working lives or working lives being punctuated by severe periods of falling ill in the absence of support structures and any kind of social and financial security this led to further worsening of the fate of the families. Typically because of extreme conditions of poverty the working lives of these people began very early often at the age of ten or eleven and the extreme hardship meant that working lives could not be continued beyond a certain age. But even then often after working for 35 to 40 years these workers had very little to fall back upon at an advanced age. With no old age security or savings in the face of rising prices, often they have been forced to become dependent on their children, especially sons (who too have meagre earnings) or continue to work in some form.. They also benefitted from old age security schemes such as pensions, formal saving schemes such as provident funds and so on. Some of them, though very few in number have also been able to educate their future generations which has enabled them to compete and secure formal employments in the job market. But industrial closure from the 1980s and more aggressively from the 1990s led to many of the refugees losing their jobs without any compensation pushing them once again into the vulnerabilities of informal labour in the lowest rungs.

### **Gendering rehabilitation**

Given this context, in order to understand refugee rehabilitation in Asansol over generation from a gendered perspective let us once go back to Togorbala's story. On reaching Asansol, the industrial development of the town still in its nascent stages and economic opportunities being extremely limited, Togorbala recounted, her husband along with some other local men were initially lured by some local *mastans* into the illegal activities such as removing iron bars from the nearby railway tracks and they almost got caught for doing so. Her husband anticipating arrest fled to Bardhaman and went underground. Days of extreme hardship ensued for Togorbala thereafter. She had to sell the tin she had purchased to build her house to secure a meagre Rs. 100 to last her for what seemed an indefinite period at that time. She went on rice starch for days together feeding the little rice she could buy to her younger brother-in-law. Her husband was finally let off by the court as he was not a seasoned criminal according to Togorbala. Her husband not being adequately physically fit could not join in a casual labourer and started a small tea cum grocery shop in their compounds. Togorbala was largely responsible for running the shop once her husband was away to sell eggs on his head to earn some extra income, making her a labourer in the informal sector. They had been given a business loan by the government to set up the shop but in the area where they lived the remoteness of location and the perceived threat in the area hardly people travelled and their business failed to take off, making any kind of mobility extremely difficult. Even when they later opened a proper shop in the area the fate was quite the same.

Women's entry into paid labour force have been alternatively been claimed as trauma and triumph by the dominant popular memory and the feminist challenges to it, however, it is my contention both frames are inadequate to capture Togorbala's experience (Bagchi 2007, Chakravaty, Basu Guha Choudhury 2009). For Togorbala managing the tea stall did not mean any revolutionary change, already being used to helping her brothers in cultivation work in her paternal house. It did however mean huge burden for young Togorbala to manage work at home, (which entailed taking care of her children and brother-in-law along with her husband) and at the stall. Since Partition broke up the family she did not have support from her mother-in-law nor could she pass off the work to a domestic help like her upper caste middle class counter parts. Having earned a meagre income just about enough to sustain she could also hardly claim any separate control over the income from the stall. In a rather ironic situation, what struck me most about her life when first introduced to her was the fact that she still had to continue to work as an informal worker working part time from home, making paper bags at the rate of Rs.20 per kilogram even at an advanced age to provide for her subsistence. Involvement in paid work definitely then for her did not lend to any easy sense of triumph.

In the community that I explored male members of the house-holds had secured work as labourers and finally got into the formal sector but women could never enter these avenues probably because they were never thought to be physically strong enough for the work despite having a long history of being involved in non-domestic labour. The fact that women's participation in factory work and their suspicions about their sexual conduct went hand in hand in late colonial Bengal must have further made it difficult for women like Bokulabla to take up factory work (Sen). Moreover, from the late colonial period the official policy of labour engagement in the collieries increasingly marked out women as unsuitable for menial labour as such work was came to be understood as detrimental for their well-being (Dutt 2001, 2006). This model came to be replicated in all other industrial set ups.

Further, involvement in paid work did not lead to any incremental gains for Togorbala and her daughters. She mourned that despite wanting to study further she had to cut short the education of her daughters and marry them off not before paying a huge dowry though. She claims that they (she and her husband) had to do this because the environment around their home was 'not good' and there had been instances where the girls from the neighbourhood had been forced by local boys to elope with them and since their sons had grown up and were frequently visited by their friends at the home they feared a similar fate could befall their daughters as well. She in fact was happy to recount that her daughters had been married off to comparatively well to do families and did not need to engage in non-domestic labour beyond cultivation to earn their living. She also seemed to be slightly upset with the only daughter of the three who after having become an widow had joined groups of religious singers and was earning well for herself, most probably because she did not find it respectable enough.

Her relationship with her sons and daughters-in law and grand-children is also at best ambivalent. Poverty and contest for the meagre resources have made the family members quarrel some and deeply protective about their self-interests. She therefore in the same breath complained about her younger son and daughter in law not letting her use their gas for making gum for her papers bags and for keeping the only bulb in her compound switched off during most parts of evening and then empathized with their poverty and desperate conditions

of living. She complained that her grand-daughter had discontinued her education to get married with a man who soon left her back at her parents' house but understood the compulsions as well. She rued the fact that her grandson was becoming a rowdy- smoking and drinking and yet sympathized with his lack of employment. Though she complained about her elder son not taking care of her she took pride in his success of being able to throw a birthday party for his grandchildren and understood that the little mobility that they were experiencing had to be carefully safeguarded making it difficult for them to share it with the larger family. Only with her two of her daughters seemed to be less fraught with tensions.

What is significant here is the disruption of the upper caste idea that the moment of Partition as a disruption that could be finally overcome even though after immense hardship and loss. These life histories together point out that refugees were not a homogenous mass but group of people deeply divided around the axes of caste and class. Their poverty was not a consequence of displacement alone, but followed a longer trajectory marked by exploitation (economic, physical, sexual and so on). The event of refugee hood then only added to their vulnerability. Their attachment to land as a source of livelihood and the relative lack of social and cultural capital only delayed their exit and when they finally left they left completely empty handed. The long period of dependence on government doles while living in government camps made it difficult for them to start life afresh when the government support was suddenly withdrawn. The period that followed was a life marked by proto- slavery, sexual assault, denial of basic of human rights to say the least.

However, at this point the assumed homogeneity of the lower caste refugee also begins to break down. While for the men it was mostly their decision to leave the country for Togorbala the idea of force assumes other dimensions even though it might seem her migration was more out of choice. She being a child bride completely dependent on her husband had no say over the decision to migrate. Moreover, her husband had actively tried to conceal the fact of their migration from her family to avoid any hindrance. However, it is worth mentioning that while for Adhir Biswas' family could manage to sell their property even though at a very meagre sum such options were largely unavailable for others like that of Byapari's.

After migration the lower caste men protagonists were able to educate themselves and hence were able to attain some degree of mobility. In the case of Adhir Biswas (2014) and Monohar Mouoli Biswas () the fact that they had already been inducted into formal schooling helped them gain better employment opportunities later in life although the event of displacement severely affected their chances of mobility- like in the case of Monohar Mouoli Biswas refugee-hood meant no longer being able to access scholarships in his hometown for which he had become eligible. In the new state of West Bengal competition being extremely high and resources being limited access to such scholarships became difficult. For Byapari, however, camp life provided the first opportunity to acquaint himself with letters – an exercise he could not follow for long. It was only in the course of his political activism and his tenure in jail that he could revive this habit and he was able to establish himself as an award winning writer in Bengali. Togor bala and her husband did not get an opportunity to

get themselves educated after crossing over and hence could never secure a stable livelihood. Here, generation also becomes an important factor. While, the younger generation of refugees as depicted in the stories of Adhir Biswas, ManoharMouli Biswas and Manoranjan Byapari, could adapt in some ways to the new modes of life the older generation of lower caste patriachs – i.e., their fathers failed to get over their precarity, being employed only as temporary labourers at best. The fate of older generation women was even worse, where the only work available to them was extremely under paid domestic work.

The region of their residence, and the network of associations also played an important role in determining the levels of mobility and the course of rehabilitation. While for Adhir Biswas and Monohar Mouli Biswas their education allowed them to reside in Calcutta and marginally hinge themselves to the local economy Byapari had to leave the city in search of job. What followed was a life of vagrancy and destitution often marked by proto slavery and sexual exploitation. His political associations with Mahashweta Devi and later Shankar Guha Neyogi however helped him gain some stability even though political activism came at huge personal costs to him.

Togorbala, however, whose husband was registered as business class in government records and hence dispersed off to Asansol no such opportunity at gaining comparative social mobility made itself available. Although, they used the meagre government loan to set up a small stall they could never find customers and the business never really took off. Coupled with this was the regular threat of anti-social elements and defaulters. Their political activism also remained limited to voting for the party in power, the political control largely being in the hands of upper castes (both refugees and local people). Their immediate neighbours also being in equally precarious positions could not offer much help. It could be stated that at the time of the study it was observed that given the economy of Asansol had been largely ruined by the closing down of factories that once sustained the area the lower caste refugees are trying to safe guard whatever little mobility they have achieved and are unable to support those who get left out in the race.

Participation in paid work for Togorbala then did not improve her situation in any way but only added to her daily burden of labour. Further, Togorbala has been largely dependent on male support be it her husband or her sons even while owning some meagre amounts of property (her house was legally in her name) because of gendered conventions and hence ownership has not translated into tangible benefits or decision making powers. Her age and failing health has only added to her vulnerabilities as a worker in the unorganised sector and has further reduced her wages while she continues to work at very advanced age unlike the male protagonists of the Dalit narratives. The house hold as her space of power has also been lost to her younger daughter in law who being capable of much more physical labour than her has taken over the decision making role and age and physical infirmity has thus only meant increased vulnerability for her. It can be observed here that in a situation of extreme vulnerability often establishing a minimal social status for women such as Togorbala has meant strict adherence to the gendered scripts of the sacrificial wife, daughter-in-law and mother making it difficult for to assert her own decisions and interests.

Even in the present generation of lower caste refugees the distinctions continue. While the Kolkata based younger generations have been able to somewhat assimilate themselves into the larger fabric of the city often at the expense of forgetting their backgrounds, Togorbala's children and grand-children have inherited their parents' vulnerability. One of Togorbala's son has been able to achieve some stability to private entrepreneurship while the other continues to live precariously as small fish vendor. The situation of her grandchildren are worse as they hardly have the education or other forms of social and cultural capital to assimilate themselves in globalizing world. For her daughters their parents' caste, class and refugee status has meant early marriage and complete dependence on their husbands. The only daughter who has been able to carve out some degree of independence after the death of her alcoholic husband was derided for not being able to live up to acceptable standards of respectability. Her granddaughter too had married early, probably in search of some security and as a means of escape from the clutches of poverty and this had significantly affected the possibilities of higher education. However, her husband had soon deserted her and she had to come back to her maternal home where she now earned a living as a poorly paid private tutor, teaching kids from at pre-primary and primary levels.

Thus, we see that the legacies gendered of vulnerability created by the Partition instead of being undone continued and in some cases became intensified in the subsequent years. Since, women's physical safety had been an issue more so during the 1960s and 70s in a largely underdeveloped area without proper housing facilities or electrification women were married off at an extremely early age. Spending on their education was often beyond the means of a family whose immediate needs were survival. Besides, education did not bring much promise of gainful employment. Formal education of women also suffered because of the pressing need to share the burden of household chores with the mother who was almost always overburdened with work. While, sons could also not pursue higher education they learnt certain skills while working but these jobs were considered unsuitable for women because of existing conventions of labour engagement and because of the ever persistent threat of sexual abuse in these informal settings. What this meant was until the family was experiencing significant economic stability (there was only one such instance) women were married off at a very early age. This meant they often found themselves in a very vulnerable position in the family they were married to often having to face domestic violence or fearing being thrown out. Women who went out to work also desired that their girl children or daughter-in laws did not have to work for pay given the deplorable conditions of employment marked by stigma, threat of sexual abuse, and extreme exploitation. Thus, this pattern has continued over generations and continues till date and women's experience of paid work and its effects on subsequent generations have had a completely different trajectory than what has been told from the upper caste women's experience. Given that the male worker remained the ideal subject of trade unionism and given that women were forced to play complementary economic roles in most cases given the exigencies of the situation women's political roles also came to be ignored. It must be mentioned here that SC and OBC women were twice marginalised in terms of political organizations despite their very active participation. Given their caste location they often could not rise above the level of foot soldiers and given that

she was never quite the ideal subject of trade unionism her participation, no matter how 'active' (what constitutes active participation needs to be further complicated) as evident in the railway strike, the strikes of factory workers in IISCO, Hindustan Cables, Sen-Raleigh and so on has remained eclipsed. These women only appeared and continue to appear in the imagination of major political parties as crowd in rallies and marches, participation in which is often wrested through coercion and which almost as a rule is never recognised.

I further argue that what is interesting to note is that this has led to what can be called a 'masculinization' of the labour force. In most of the interviews I was told that there are economic opportunities in Asansol in the informal sector though the scope is limited. "Chakri nei tobe Khunte khaowa kaaj ache". The employment opportunities available to the youth of the families who once came as refugees are not formal employment contracts but jobs such as being toto (battery driven rickshaws) drivers, waiters, flower sellers so on and so forth. Once again these jobs are considered unfit for women being traditionally male dominated professions and also because they have very little provisions to ensure safety of women against sexual abuse. Sexual abuse in the town is rampant and is an effective tool for restricting women's mobility both spatial and economic but it must be noted it is inversely proportional to one's class standing in most cases making women in the lowest rungs most susceptible and vulnerable. Under such circumstances only a few families which have been able to achieve significant social mobility are able to educate their daughters with the hope of them securing a job in the formal sector later in life. Most women are forced to remain part time workers in extremely poorly paid jobs. But the prospects for the ones joining formal education is also bleak given the poor quality of public education (the best that such families can afford) and the regular flouting of reservation norms in higher education and rampant political recruitments

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