

BOOK REVIEW

The Trauma and the Triumph : Gender and Partition in Eastern India, (Ed.) Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta. First published in February 2003 by STREE, Kolkata, India. Pp. 272. ISBN 81-85604-55-X

The presentation of ethnographic research on India's 1947 partition over the last two decades has seen a shift in historiographical focus from "grand-politics" to "popular memories", which in turn has illuminated the many layers of refugee experience, and fed the growing debate on what it meant to be a refugee in 1947 and afterwards. The recent works of scholars and researchers have also helped reveal the heterogeneity and the unevenness in the experience of Partition refugees and generated a debate. From Lahore's Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories to Calcutta's Sunil Gangopadhyaya's reminiscences, and leading up to a current spate of popular Bollywood films such as *Earth*, *Mammo*, *Gadar* and *Shahid Bhagat Singh*, there have been attempts to understand how the Partition unfolded in its local and specific context and how it affected human lives and livelihoods. The variegated experiences of the different classes, castes and sexes are being sought out in these endeavors to document histories "from below", from the memories of those men and women for whom the reality of Partition was qualitatively different from the political actors and the national-level "architects" of modern India.

One unifying theme in this surge of refugee ethnography has been a desire to resurrect the experience of refugees by a re-living of the violence that - in the words of Gyan Pandey - "surrounded, accompanied

and constituted" Partition and scholars have recaptured the tremendous human cost, the dispossession and anguish of millions, and the violence and brutalities experienced by the thousands of ordinary people who found themselves on the wrong side of the new borders.

While the point of entry into refugee experience has necessarily to be the tragedy associated with involuntary dislocation, however, a series of stereotypical images have come to be associated with partition refugees. Since most partition case-studies have focussed on the refugee in the west, both academic and popular imagination have been caught up by the Punjabi refugee and even where the focus has moved towards Eastern India the representation of the East Bengal (*Purbo Bangiya*) refugee has remained at best sketchy and far between. Theories associated with Partition have kept images drawn from Punjab alive and have provided, in large measures, the terms of reference for post-independence understanding of the Partition refugee.

Such representation of refugees is jarred by startlingly different images thrown up by field research in settings along the eastern borders like Bengal and Assam. As the editors of the current book correctly point out, even the remarkable text on the 'human' history of Partition by Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) recognized this difference and left Bengal outside her discussion as it ". . . require [s] detailed attention; better not to pay lip service by including an interview or two". Similarly, the authors of yet another remarkable text, *Borders and Boundaries* confined themselves to the west because the partition of Bengal, they concluded, deserved a separate treatment (1998:1). The authors of this book, therefore, attempt to address this "serious gap", and they do so admirably.

This book, thus, locates itself within two sets of ongoing academic discussions: one, focus the lived and remembered experiences of India's 1947 partition as distinct from the several years of politically correct "national" histories trapped within the paradigms of the two-nation theory and its high politics, and two, a resurrection of the twice marginalised voices that have continued to remain submerged in these

new ethnographies, like the Dalits, tribals and women to name a few, as most of the new accounts continue to privilege Hindu, high/middle class, masculine voices and symbols.

My own understanding of the partition has primarily been through male voices, with fleeting references to an aunt from my mother's side who had 'disappeared' in the dead of the night when her entire family was fleeing their home in East Pakistan to India sometime soon after the partition. As children, my brother and I were warned never to bring up the issue of the missing aunt before the surviving members of the family; one of whom had lost an eye when she had fallen down from a tree where she was perched up hiding from potential Muslim attackers that fateful night. But my insights into women's experiences were limited to these two aunts alone, which said volumes about how partition memories were self-censored and silenced by the survivors themselves, both men and women. This is extremely surprising because almost every single family I knew as a child, all my immediate, near and distant relatives, had moved to India from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in and around 1947 and all of them had faced some form of persecution, violence or threat of violence.

In a very powerful introductory chapter, the editors suggest that the partition of Bengal despite some obvious political and existential convergences differed from the Partition of Bengal at least in four important aspects. One, the partition of Bengal turned out to be a continuous process running into the present time, while the partition in the west was a one-time affair. Two, in contrast with the depth and extent of violence in the west, the partition in Bengal produced a "process of slow and agonizing terror and trauma accelerated by intermittent outbursts of violence" (pg.2). Three, unlike in the west where the impact of the partition has been constant and definitive, in the east, the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 challenged and rejected the "two nation theory" of 1947. Finally, the border in the east remains porous and flexible down to this day, with constant cross-border movements and migrations while the western border has converted the region into two rigid divisions.

The two editors point out there was, however, one compelling similarity between the experiences in Punjab and Bengal. The Two editors printed out. 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 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 (pg.3). Through direct means of investigation, the researchers in this book came to know that some of them were taken advantage of by males of the same community and not of the other.

The first of a series of three volumes, the biggest merit of this book is that it continues to enrich the recent spate of research on women's experiences of the partition and bring out newer 'truths' that had been either buried or self-censored by survivors for a long time. The book uses a large number of female "voices" to mark a phenomenal journey from trauma to triumph in Bengal. The narrative moves from the women whose bodies were used as "territories to be conquered, claimed or marked by assailants" (pg.4), to the woman as the sole bread-winner in a refugee family, as agents in re-creating space in the process of re-settling in the outskirts of a new city making the passage from home to the world, as women displaying tremendous resilience to emerge victors against "the combined nightmare of assault, exodus, displacement, grinding poverty and broken psyche" (pg.6).

The book is divided into four parts . The first, titled "Analysis and Literary Evidence" focuses on the gender narrative of the partition, and highlights the political failure of the partition when viewed from the perspective of Tebhaga Movement. The second, titled "Interviews and Reminiscences" contains interviews with women refugees discussing outbreaks of riot in Dhaka, the trauma and triumph of women refugees in West Bengal, the heroic resistance put up by the leftist womens" cadres in the late 1940s and early 50s in East Pakistan. It ends with a short interview with aged widows of Brindavan whose "broken, disjointed" accounts more than fifty years later expose "the

tragic essence of the rupture” (pg.12). In the third part titled “Creative Texts’, the authors feature a series of creative texts to show that the partition on the east had not been ignored by creative writers in the past. The final part is titled “Documentary Evidences’ and records the impact of partition concisely. This is followed by a comprehensive bibliography that may be extremely useful for new research.

The collection of papers, creative texts and documentary evidences featured in this book succeed in re-shaping academic and popular understanding of partition victims, who have been primarily seen as victims of violence and blood-bath. While victimization at the hands of the “other” community is crucial to the understanding of women’s experiences of the partition, this volume perceptively brings out the many other roles played by women during and after the partition. In the struggle for existence and re-settlement, these researchers argue, the refugees changed the socio-economic scenario of West Bengal. For the women, in particular, there was a role reversal where many had to move from the home to the world, but which was not effected without tensions. The higher educational qualifications of the refugee women as well had an impact on the existing educational standard of West Bengal. The case studies of Bithi Chakravarty (pg.150) and Sukumari Chaudhury (pg.143), for instance, attest to the statement made by Urvashi Butalia in the context of Punjab, “Just as a whole generation of women were destroyed by the partition, so also partition provided an opportunity for many to move into the public sphere in a hitherto unprecedented way” (pg.6).

This book confirms that while scholarly work on partition is growing continuously, and memories are being resurrected to revise, even reconsider old assumptions and generalisations about partition, there still remains a lot to be said. The Partition ‘refugee’ was created by both political and civil society in postcolonial India and reproduced thus in Partition studies, contemporary literature, cinema, political agenda and nativist movements. Refugee-hood has been, and in the contemporary period, continues to be a far more pluralistic experience than popular, even academic, conceptions of it actually assume and it

is this plurality that is in urgent need of exploration. Clearly, the predominant trend of treating it as a uniform experience, albeit embellished with some local flavour, is an obstacle to a proper understanding of Partition migration. Recent research has thrown up various categories of “new” refugee experiences and this is an area where a continuous and deliberate research would contribute to enrich the refugee ethnography. The only regret is that the authors stopped short of examining refugee experiences in the further eastern district of Assam which too was partitioned into two in 1947 when a large chunk of its constituent district Sylhet was ceded to East Pakistan following a referendum. But all in all, one looks forward to the next volume of this series!

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