

PARTITIONED IDENTITIES: WOMEN IN THE BORDERLANDS

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Abstract

Partition came as one of the most massive convulsions of human history, creating two states, namely India and Pakistan (East and West). Later East Pakistan was liberated from the west and the state of Bangladesh was formed in 1971. Partition arrived as a sword, dividing not only people's consciousness but also their lives, their families, their identity and their lands. Hastily enough people were uprooted and found themselves at a new place, passing through some of the arduous times, which are still lingering in their collective memory. Pakistan was created on the basis of religion and those with Muslim majority areas were supposed to be included in the state of Pakistan. Despite the fact that Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) was a Buddhist majority district, it made excluded from India and made a part of Pakistan leaving the minority ethnic communities in the hills at the whims and fancies of the new rulers. The indigenous women of this region were subjected to exploitation by the arrival and impact of outsiders under different regimes. This study focuses on the plight of the indigenous women of ethnic minorities who were not only deprived and exploited in CHT and during their journey to India but they also at their place of settlement. Against this backdrop, the paper aims to explore how post colonial border impacted borderland women, leaving them in a state of double deprivation. How these women belonging to minority communities negotiated borders- borders of territory, of community, of patriarchy and of conflicts both of their own land and also of a foreign land away from their homeland.

Key words: women, partition, minorities, identities, South Asia.

Introduction:

As Bhasin and Menon argues the rendering of the social and emotional fabric that took place in 1947 is still far from mended (Bhasin 2011). In 1947, at the wake of the partition, some sixty million Muslims of ninety-five million Muslims became Pakistanis; some thirty-five million stayed back in India, the largest number of Muslims in a non-Muslim state (Bhasin 2011). Similarly many non-Muslim like Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Christians also became part of Pakistan. The sufferings of the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) was destined with a simple stroke of a pen by Sir Cyril Radcliffe,

Chairman of Bengal Boundary Commission, in total violation of Indian Independence Act of 1947 by illegally awarding the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the homeland of the ethnic hill people, with 97.5% non-Muslim population and majority Buddhists and rest Hindus, Christians and animists to Pakistan which was created as a homeland for the Muslims (Kudaishya, 2000). There was no justification of annexation of CHT by Pakistan even after numerous appeals by its people. Even a referendum was denied to the indigenous hill people to decide their own fate. Hence, the seed of suffering was sowed for the hill people of the CHT with political treachery in 1947 with continued religious persecutions, economic exploitations on the

ethnic minority people. Whereas women have figured much less than men in partition histories, least are the women of the eastern part of India's borders, India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Furthermore, the minority ethnic women on the borderlands have failed to attract the interest of the researchers. This study is an attempt to shed light on the minority groups of tribal women who faced atrocities in the hands of the majoritarian policies of the government.

Partitioned identities: Women in India's borderlands

Women remains the most vulnerable section of the society and the worst affected during partition as they are the most and the easiest target with no voices to retaliate on their own. The indigenous women of Chittagong Hill Tracts were subjected to exploitation by the arrival and impact of outsiders under different regimes, first by the colonial rulers, then by the neo-colonial oppressors, under the regime of Pakistan first and later in the hands of the Bangladesh government which is getting severe with the homogenizing policies of the government with the settlement of the Bengalis in the regions habited by the tribals.¹ As indigenous peoples, Adibashi women are subject to all the exploitation, human rights abuses and insecurity that their own communities suffer.² These women are abused and exploited not only in the hands of the state but also in their homes by families in the forms of domestic violence, sexual abuse, psychological abuse and forced marriages.

¹See Chandra K. Roy, *Indigenous Women: A gendered perspective*, May 2004.

² See *Marginalisation and Impunity: Violence against women and girls in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*. A study commissioned by the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission under the supervision of Dr. Bina D'Costa, May 2014.

They also have minimal exposure and access to education and employment. This is not the end to this prolonged oppression and exploitation as many of these indigenous women fled to India in search of better living opportunities and are still lingering as stateless. With continuous persecution in the hands of the military and the Bengali speaking Muslim settlers, this minority ethnic community crossed the India-Pakistan border and escaped to India. In the course of the formation of the state and in an attempt to control the borders, the process of inclusion and exclusion left these minority groups stateless in parts of South Asia.

The Indo-Bangladesh border is a convoluted region; both sealed and porous. Again the fencing is neither contiguous nor continuous. Movements of women across borders are particularly from vulnerable minority groups seeking better livelihood, security, sometimes trafficked and thus escaping various forms of violence. However, these women do not just wear an identity of victimhood but they are agents of their lives too. Several factors impacted the lives of women at the borders of India and East Pakistan. The factors included social, economic and political factors that reflected the patriarchal control over women. Borders are regimes of control; it is where the presence of the state is mostly seen controlling and regulating behavior at the borders. Women are seen as moving between different worlds, imagined homes and imposed homes and being part of perennial flows between locations. These vulnerable minority women were the victims of the wrath of the state and the majority on either side of the border. Recalling the horrifying incident of her aunt that occurred in CHT, Maya Chakma (name changed) lamented in despire;

It was Wednesday, October 1961, most horrifying day for Smt. Sunita Chakma (name changed), my aunt and for all of us. The illegal Bengali Muslim infiltrators jointly attacked our village. All the houses of

*the village were set on fire and burnt to ashes. Those who were able to flee away saved their lives and those who could not, met the icy hands of death. Smt. Sunita Chakma, my aunt was also caught by those butchers while she was fleeing for life. She was taken to a place outside the village and barbarously gang raped after which she was given a blow with a sharp weapon, but very miraculously, she was saved as the weapon did not properly hurt her. The butchers thought that she was no more alive and left the place.*³

It should be noted here that there existed a sense of mistrust and animosity between the minority hill tribes and the majority Bengali speaking Muslims of the plains. The hill people ruminate the Bengali speaking Muslims as outsiders to their territory and hence illegal infiltrators. This division was created as soon as the compartmentalization of the territories took place. This is just one of the many barbaric treatment that the indigenous minority communities like the Chakmas faced at the hands of the majority. Similar was the fateful instance with Monika Chakma (name changed);

*In the wee hours of a cold December morning, a group of Muslim infiltrators attacked Chakma houses. While trying to escape the assault, Monika Chakma felt into the trap and was brutally raped and molested in turns. She fainted after the horrific incident. When she woke up, she was under treatment at her relative's place.*⁴

These atrocities against the ethnic minorities of Bangladesh have not ended there and it continues till this date at times getting worse than ever. The massive militarization and transmigration program have led to extreme vulnerability and poverty more affecting indigenous women, their security and safety in the CHT. Furthermore, the ethnic minority communities of Bangladesh have long been marginalized from mainstream political and social processes. A woman who is now in Tripura expresses about atrocities in CHT,

*“About 50 army personnel came in the night and rounded up the whole village and gathered us in place. In the morning all the men were arrested. I was tied up hands and legs, naked. They raped me. There were three women there. They raped me in front of my father-in-law. After that we were tied up together, naked, facing each other. Then they left. Three other girls were raped in front of me. This happened in the month of Ashat (June/July) of 1985.”*⁵

Rape has become a recurring sign of assaults by the military as well as the Bengali settlers in the hills of CHT. In October 1990, also in Rangamati district, 14 young girls were gang raped by an army patrol as they were returning home from a Buddhist religious festival in the late afternoon.⁶ Forced intermarriage is one way in which women are used as an instrument to integrate the hill peoples into Bengali society and to change the demographic balance in the area. Many women reported that they were forced to convert to Islam as a policy of integration into the larger Bengali society. To escape the atrocities in the hands of the military and the Bengali settlers, many ethnic minority communities fled from erstwhile East

³See ‘Persecution of Human Rights in CHT,’ a report compiled by Jana Samhati Samiti, September 1987.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵See ‘Life is not Ours’ Land and Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Report of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, May 1991.

⁶ Ibid.

Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) to India. Now they are settled in different parts of India's northeastern states. Purnima (name changed) recalls in grief,

"I was barely twelve years old when we migrated from Chittagong. I remember that enough agricultural lands to survive. As we are cultivators, land is the only asset that we possess. But suddenly one day all our land vanished, submerged under water. We were helpless, with no shelter and no food. The Government promised that we would be shifted to another land, but no such promises were kept. We had no other way but to come back to our own country where our brothers and sisters lived. But the journey was not easy neither the life here is."

So, these tribal women from CHT are now settled in different parts of India in a very distressful condition. They are extremely marginalized; deprived of basic social and economic rights, with no legal status, their claims for political status and land rights are curtailed every time. This state of denial and deprivation prevents the women from negotiating their rights. As we have seen, the community as a whole is deprived and dejected of their rights and benefits, the women in the society are leading a life of further rejection and vulnerability. Their sufferings were not limited in their place of origin and while crossing the borders alone but also at their place of settlement. Deprived of their rights, land, education, employment and any kinds of benefits from the government doomed the society into abject poverty. Lack of all the rights and benefits shoves the women section in a state of double deprivation because it is this section of the community, which is the worst sufferer. Because like any other patriarchal society, here too boys are always preferred than the girls be it access to education, employment or in the decision making. In case of education, girls always take a

backseat when it comes to preferring the boy or the girl child. The quality of life is affected because of marginalization, because of patriarchy and because of state and central government's role. Trafficking of chakma girl child has emerged as an alarming issue today. There are many cases of Chakma girls being exploited in domestic homes, in some officer's bungalows, or red light area or wherever. There are also many cases where the parents are not in contact with their child for so many years that it is almost difficult to trace the whereabouts of their daughter. These are all poverty stricken families who are not only economically but also socially and politically deprived.

Conclusion:

Although it had quite been an arduous task to draw the borders of negotiation between women and patriarchy, women and conflict, women and rights as all were intertwined and wove in as one whole. However it was not difficult to ascertain the minority indigenous women of India and Bangladesh border living in perpetual poverty, with poor development and infrastructure, in a zone of conflict without accessibility to land, jobs and rights have led to nothing but marginalization making them the most vulnerable of the lot. It cannot be denied that this long drawn marginalization of the community with its most deprived women section has its roots in the partition of the nation and its catastrophic aftermath. In the wake of nation state building process many minority communities became the scapegoat of violence. The worst affected are the women section being the most vulnerable and weaker sections of the society. Body of a woman always becomes the lone representation of a family and community's honour, not to mention of women's body as a representation of nation's honour and pride. Violence against women is not only an attack on the physical body but also a set back to the internal psyche of a women and therefore partition and its consequent violence have a long-term psychological and

emotional impact in the minds of the victims who survive. Here I have tried to bring out the voices of the unheard, the least spoken and written about, women belonging to the small ethnic communities on the India-Bangladesh borders.

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