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Partition of India, the Barak Valley and the Women: An Analysis in the Context of Gender Role

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A brief introduction to the Barak Valley

The Barak valley is located at the southern border of Assam. At present it covers three districts i.e Cachar, Karimganj and Hailaknadi, which are situated on the river Barak and her tributaries. In fact, the river Barak is the life line of the valley. Linguistically, although the valley is dominated by the Bengali speaking population, other linguistic communities like the Manipuris, Dimasa, tea workers community etc. are also inhabiting here and a healthy coexistence is noticed in the valley. From religious point of view the Hindus and the Muslims are the major communities in the region.

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In the three sides, the Barak Valley is bordered by hill ranges: in the north by the state of Meghalaya and the North Cachar Hill District of Assam (Dima Hasao), in the south by the hills of Mizoram and Tripura, in the east by the hilly regions of Manipur. Only towards the west, the valley is bordered by a plain land i.e. the Sylhet Division of modern Bangladesh, which formed a part of Pakistan from 1947 to 1970. In the pre-independence period, this Sylhet Division was a part of Assam. In 1874, the British rulers added Sylhet and Cachar, the two Bengalee dominated (linguistically) districts to Assam for administrative convenience. Modern Karimganj District was a sub division in Sylhet. Present Hailakandi district along with the North Cachar Hill District were a part of Cachar. In the British period, Sylhet and Cachar, these two districts were jointly known as the Surma Valley Division of Assam. As both the districts were primarily neighbours and linguistically Bengali dominated, so there prevailed a regular socio-cultural and political communication between the two from the ancient period to the independence and partition of the country.

Partition of India and the Barak Valley

India achieved freedom on 15th August, 1947 but independence was accompanied by partition of India into two parts: India and Pakistan. The historic pronouncement of Lard Mountbatten on 3rd June 1947 provided for a referendum in the Sylhet district of Assam to ascertain whether the majority of population in the district would decide to join East Bengal (then Pakistan) or they would like to remain in Assam (India). As an outcome of the referendum major part of the Sylhet District decided to join Pakistan. Only three and half *thanas* of the Karimganj sub division i.e. Karimganj, Ratabari, Patharkandi and Badarpur voted to remain in India. So, after independence and the partition of the country, these regions were added to Assam as the Karimganj sub division of the Cachar district. .At the same time North Cachar Hill was separated from Cachar. Therefore, from 1947 to 1983 the present three districts of the Barak Valley i.e. Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi collectively constituted the Cachar district. In 1983 Karimganj and in 1989 Hailakandi were made

two separate districts. Since then, this Bengali dominated region of south Assam is popularly known as the Barak Valley.

Partition of India resulted in the influx of large number of displaced population from Pakistan to India. They were commonly termed as the "Refugees" by the government, press as well as by the people. Sometimes they were also called "Bangal" especially in West Bengal. The Barak Valley also witnessed a remarkable increase in population after the partition. The following table reflects the increase of population in the valley after partition.

Year	Total population	Variation	Percentage of variaiton
1941	8.951,40		
1951	11,15,895	+2,20,755	+19.78
1961	13,78,446	+2,62,581	+19.04

Gazetteer of India, Assam State, Cachar District Gazetteer, Government of Assam, 1991, Guwahati, p.57

It was reported, "Nearly one-fourth of the refugees were congregated in urban areas Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi and three fourth of this number spreading itself in the rural areas of these districts. From the above table it is found that immigration of the uprooted people continued almost in similar way till 1961. As per the Government record the largest portion of the immigrants in between 1947 to 1956 was the Bengalee Hindus. A fresh immigration took place after 1964 from East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) due to internal political instability.

Objective:

From the above facts, it becomes clear that as a result of Partition of India geographical and administrative resettlement was taken place in Barak Valley. Moreover, after partition Barak Valley witnessed huge influx of population with different social background from different areas of East Pakistan. Under suck backdrop, there was every possibility that this migration of population from neighbouring country might produce some significant impact on the life of the people of Barak Valley. In this paper an effort will be made to trace the impact of this historical event on the social life of womenfolk of Barak Valley. To find out the impact, the situation which prevailed before partition and resultant immigration must be taken into consideration. The timeline of this study is from 1947 to 1960.

Methodology

While writing the paper both primary and secondary sources have been used and the paper is basically comparative and analytical.

Women education- Before and after partition

In Cachar, the journey of formal and western education for women was started in 1890s with the establishment of a ME school for girls at Silchar under the initiative of the Christian Missionaries which was named Mission Girls' High School. In 1916 this school was upgraded to the status of secondary school. Later on it was undertaken by the government and was renamed as the Silchar Government Girls' High School. In 1921, Dinanath Nobokishore Balika Vidyalaya was started during the Non- Co-operation Movement with nationalist spirit. In 1941 at Silchar Chhotelal Institute was set up for girls. At Karimganj Madan Mohan Madhab Charan Girls School was established in 1935. At Hailakandi, Indrakumari Girls' High School was established in 1944 by local landlord family of Rai Saheb Hara Kishore Chakravarty. Journey of higher education of women was started with the establishment of Gurucharan College at Silchar in 1935 which was a co-education college. It is to be noted here that Gurucharan College was the only institution of higher education in Barak valley at that time.

So, it is evident that there was slow growth of educational institution for girls in this region. But the number of female students going to school was very negligible because of social taboos. Another notable fact was that education for girls was socially permissible only in the urban areas because these educational institutions were set up in towns like Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Those educational institutions for girls were established by the elite families of the urban localities. In the rural areas women were far away from education. Moreover, girls from educated elite families were permitted to go to school but up to certain level that is before marriage, not after marriage. In case of higher education, in Gurucharan College there was not a single female student till 1938-39. In 1945 in this college the number of female student was not more than forty five.

Very obviously women were not permitted to work outside home for earning. Till the early 1930s, it was difficult to get female teachers for girls' school. Here mention may be made of Suprova Dutta, a house wife and socio- politically active women of Silchar. In her diary she stated that though her family was in extreme financial crisis, her brother did not allow her to work outside home for earning to support the family. But still, there were some exceptions. In the late part of 1930s in Government Girls' High School at Silchar there were some female teachers like Chameli Das, Monika Choudhury, Amiya Biswas, Beena Biswas, Kanika Singha, Latika Singha and they may be regarded as the first generation of female teachers in Barak Valley. Till 1947, there was no female teacher in Gurucharan College.

But after partition of India gradual transformation in the field of women education in the valley can be noticed. Jailakshmi Bhattacharjee, an eminent educationist and a victim of partition wrote in her memoir that the displaced educated families who have settled in various areas of Barak Valley felt the urgent need of education for their children. Because they felt the only way to upgrade their distressed social status was education. For getting any employment education was primary requirement. So, Along with food, clothing and shelter, education became one of their fundamental necessities. But obviously situation was adverse. Only income of the male member of the family was not enough to satisfy the daily necessities of life. There was government aid in destitute camps but these were not sufficient. Under such circumstances, "refugee" women came forward and engaged themselves in earning to support their family. Financial support to family became priority in a struggle stricken life than preserving social taboos and norms. Therefore, along with the male children, the female children were also sent to schools. Though very slowly, women education was gaining ground in the urban areas which was later followed in the rural areas. A few educated women from the uprooted families like Aruna Bhattacharjee, Promila Roy Choudhury and Niharkona Roy Choudhury, Swarnalata Endo, Beena Das, Beena Bhattacharjee and some others came forward in this respect. It led to the increase in the number of educated women which to some extent reduced the scarcity of female teachers in educational institutions. Those teachers dedicated their life for the development of women education in the valley.

So after the partition, the demand for education appeared as a rising issue in the process of education in the valley. In response to this demand, initiative was taken partly by the educated personalities and partly by the government aid and these initiatives witnessed it impact within twenty years of the partition of the country. At Hailakandi, Srikishan Sharda College was established in 1950 which was a co-education college and second co-education college in the valley. At Silchar another co-education college named Cachar College started its journey in 1960 with the aid of the Refugee Rehabilitation Fund with aim to provide scope of education to the children of the displaced families. In 1962 at Karimganj, Rabindra Sadan Girls' College was established. In 1963 Women's College was set up at Silchar.

Number of girls' school was also increasing gradually. Two girls' high school at Karimganj, four girls' schools at Silchar were established at that time. At Hailakandi Haricharan Mahamaya Girls' ME School was established in 1958. In 1960 Haricharan Mahamaya Girls' High School was

established in 1960. So, it is evident that, Rai Bahadur Haricharan Chakravarty, landlord in Hailakandi took active interest in the development of women education in the locality. In the rural areas also some new schools were set up which were mostly co-education. It is to be noted here that a new area comprising villages like Ramkrishna Nagar, Netaji Nagar, Gandhi Nagar which were mainly inhabited by the immigrant population of Karimganj sub-division. After a prolonged struggle for survival the uprooted families set up their new settlement in those hilly forest areas. In 1949 and in 1953 two co-education high schools and in 1964 Ramkrishna Nagar College were established in these newly developed area. Total seventy four institutions in secondary level including high Madrasas and venture schools came into existence in the valley. Although there is no information in hand about the exact number of female students in those institutions during the period of study, but yet the growth of educational institutions for girls and co-education institutions in the Barak Valley where female students were admitted indicate the fact that women education was moving forward with its tiny but firm steps.

Search for survival: step forward from inner to outer world

Cachar had a close affinity to the people of Sylhet ethnically, linguistically, culturally and politically for a long period of time. But the decision of the partition and one stroke of the pen of Radcliff all of a sudden transformed fate and life of the people. About 1, 14, 000 persons from East Pakistan were censured in Assam as refuges of which Cachar alone absorbed about 60,000. Mostly they came from the neighbouring district of Sylhet. At the very beginning the density rate in the urban areas of Silchar, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Badarpur remarkably raised high due to the inhabitation of the immigrated families in those areas. Most of them belonged to the economically weaker section of Bengali Hindu community and were marginal farmers, fishermen, small shop owner, service holders, and so on. While in their homeland, they had no surplus wealth in their hand but at least they had a plot of land of their own to live in, a small shop for income, a service for maintaining their family and as a whole a settled and secured life. But the decision of the partition and communal riots compelled them to immigrate to a completely unknown land where survival was a burning issue because at the initial stage they had no shelter, no means of livelihood. So they took shelter in destitute camps. In camps government aid was supplied but those were not sufficient. Thus those people were thrown in extreme poverty.

Before partition, women in Sylhet lived a life of house wives in joint families. The whole family along with near relatives used to live under a common roof within the joint property system. The joint family system and patriarchal social structure provided a kind of socio-economic security to the women. But after partition entire scenario was abruptly changed. Women were thrown out under open sky with no means of livelihood and their security was challenged. Their in laws' property was lost, family members were scattered in to small units in search of survival. Joint family system was broken down and joint family system was evolved out of the need of the time. There were many widows who were living in their in laws' family under joint property. But when there remained no joint family, no joint property, those women became helpless in a single unit. Moreover, they were compelled to shift to a new place with no roof over head. Under such situation, they had no other option but to earn for survival. In most cases they had no enough education for getting job. Therefore, they tried to earn money by making selling sweets, *sandesh*, *boris*, etc which were commonly used in Bengalee households. Some women started sewing and selling *katha* and other ladies stuffs. There were many women who undertook the profession of midwives. On the other hand, the married women having their husband alive had to earn for their families because their husband was either untraced or physically unable to work or did not know any other work except cultivation which was not of any use in this new settlement where they did not have their own piece of land to cultivate. In such cases if they settled in rural areas the husbands had to work as landless labourers in someone's land. But in that case the income of one person was

not sufficient for maintaining a family. In most cases, those families settled in the urban areas where the women took the profession of domestic workers and the male members having no other option of earning adopted new professions like rickshaw pulling or any other unskilled profession. Thus many slum areas were grown up in the urban areas of the Barak Valley. Many new villages were also developed as the migrated cultivators and fishermen communities settled in countryside in large numbers.

Conclusion

Therefore, it is evident that, in the Barak Valley, the initiative of women education can be dated back to 1890s. In the urban centers of the valley educational institutions for girls were in existence under the initiatives of local landlords and elite families but the female student was very few in number. It was mostly due to the common social norms and taboos that confined the role of women within the four walls of the house. Only the girls of educated elite families used to attend the schools up to certain level. In rural Barak, in pre-partition period consciousness for female education was almost absent.

In the post-partition phase significant change was visible in respect of women education and women's role in society. There was remarkable increase in the number of educational institutions for girls, co-education colleges and schools in various regions of the valley. The need was mainly due to the education of the children of the displaced families. The following facts may be considered in this context.

Firstly, at that point of time, Sylhet was educationally more advanced in comparison to the Barak Valley. The people who came from Sylhet especially educated urban middle class families were very much conscious about the education of their children in this new land. As a result, many educational institutions came into existence one after another to cater the needs of the new settlers in this region either under the initiative of the refugee elites or by the government aid or from the Refugee Rehabilitation Fund.

Secondly, partition of the country gifted many families a homeless life and extreme poverty all of a sudden. For survival in this new settlement they required job for their next generation. In such a situation they realized the fact that education was the only means for up gradation of their socio-economic status and also to come out of the miseries of poverty and homelessness. The female members of such families came forward to share the financial burden with the male members to maintain the family. Obviously the question of survival became much more important than maintaining social norms and taboos.

Thirdly, the age old social order and traditional family structure of Hindu Bengalees were completely shattered to the ground. Most of the people were scattered while running to save their life in the midst of communal riots, mass killing, plundering and rape. Female members of these families were thrown in the state of anarchy and insecurity. In that vulnerable situation they were compelled to find out the means of survival because in this new life in an unknown land the income of the male members was not sufficient to maintain a family. Several women from the marginal income group who were not educated started working according to their own ability. They also felt the necessity of education for their next generation. May be a sense of insecurity of being further up rooted was working in their mind and so by adopting education they wanted to make their ground stronger for their next generation in this new settlement. Responding to the call of need number of female students in educational institutions started increasing gradually which was very negligible in pre-partition period. So, out of necessity and compulsion female students joined higher education and professional life.

In a very major way, violent aftermath of the partition brought forth a steady configuration of gender role and a total change in women's relationship to private and public sphere. Women's participation in public sphere became more and more acceptable in society in response to the need of the time. Naturally these transformations took place under compulsion but it influenced the original inhabitants of the valley to a great extent. As a whole the struggle for survival inspired the local people to send their girls in educational institutions and also started allowing women to join professional life. In this way, traditional restraints of the social norms imposed on women by patriarchal social order that the role of women should be confined within the four walls of home, women should preserve their sanctity and social dignity which was idealized in the Barak Valley throughout pre independence period began to be shaken gradually after the partition of India. Generally displaced women everywhere suffer loss, deprivation and violence. In the iconography of displacement women are always the victims in the need of care and protection. In the Barak Valley the scene was not different. Following encounter with violence, loss and pain- both physical and mental, those survivors have to configure their lives and selves. In the process of configuration, they were pressurized from two angles- one was from domestic front and the other was external world which was new to them and which was completely male dominated. Struggle for survival generated a kind of self confidence from within which can be considered a step forward towards women emancipation.

Such transformation was sure to come in the process of evolution but it could have been a long process. But partition of the country and thereafter influx of population, their initial crisis and struggle for survival has accelerated the process. From this point of view partition of India and post partition struggle cam be considered a turning point of social change. The initial crisis of the up rooted families most unconsciously but under compulsion had broken the barriers of patriarchal rules which brought about a significant transformation in the existing social structure and obviously had produced some positive impact on the women of the valley as a whole. From this point of view it can be concluded that those homeless women after losing the most secured corner of their own home realized the value of open sky and became the torch bearer of women emancipation in the Barak Valley.

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