

Partition at the Eastern Border: Relocation and Rehabilitation of Refugee Women

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In 1947 the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into two sovereign states India and Pakistan is one of the most important landmark events in the history of South-East Asia. Though conventional elitist historians of partition studies focused on the 'cause' of partition, later the focus has been shifted to the aftermath of partition. Partition of the Subcontinent undoubtedly brought untold sufferings, tragedy, trauma and violence for the large section of the people at Western border and Eastern border of India, many of them had been forced to get accustomed to a new identity as 'refugee' for the rest of their lives. What is unique about the Bengal Partition is that unlike the massive exchange of population in 1947-48 and till 1950 on the western border, the influx of refugees continued for many years after partition, and continues in different forms on the eastern border of India. Another important feature is the extent and depth of violence was more in Western border; one may find it to be a reason of focusing the writings of partition on Western border. Partition, that separated families overnight by redrawing the geographical map compelled them to live with the disastrous memory, Women and children suffered the most. Gender perspective is gradually becoming very important to study the aftermath of Partition. Women were abducted, raped and severely tortured. Women's sexuality assumed a symbolic significance and became the war zone of the two religious communities, i.e the Hindus and Muslims. In my paper I will try to discuss the issues of violence on women of Eastern border which is different from Western border. There has been a gap in scholarship especially addressing the human angle from the gender perspective in the case of the Partition in the East in comparison to the Partition in the West. I will also focus on the Government's role on recovering and rehabilitation of refugee women of Eastern border i.e Bengali women. In September 1947 after the Prime ministers of both India and Pakistan jointly recognized the women problem and issued a statement to recover the abducted women- this effort was named 'Central Recovery Operation.' The Ministry of Rehabilitation set up separate home for women, women Camps and different training centers. Women were provided necessary food, shelter and training in different sectors to support themselves financially. Non-Government Organizations also took active role. How far did this rehabilitation programme help the women to relocate themselves with their new identity 'refugee' in a new socio-economic condition? And how far the opinion of refugee women had taken up by the Government while relocating and rehabilitation of them? How successful were the various programmes in changing the social landscape of the refugees will be studied.