

Wording lifeworlds

Bengali settler women in the Andaman Islands

Raka Banerjee



Settlers at the jetty. Photo from the collection of Dr. Swapan Biswas.

The Bengali settler women living in the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal are witnesses of a long history of displacements and migration. These first generation settler women – the youngest of whom are now in their sixties – migrated with their families from East Pakistan to India after the Partition of India in 1947, and arrived in West Bengal. However, the state government unable and unwilling to accommodate their large numbers dispersed the refugee population to camps across the country. Some of the women were born in these refugee camps as their families awaited rehabilitation. Assembled from the camps, the ‘willing’ refugees were brought to Calcutta where they started their journey for Andaman from Kidderpore dock.

The words that have entered their vocabulary through these experiences, especially in the process of settlement in the Islands, can be a valuable resource for understanding the women’s lifeworlds. The article presents three vignettes from the island, followed by a discussion on the taxonomy of the settler women’s lexicon, and finally, a note on the importance of female settler subjectivity in writing a gendered account of Partition rehabilitation.

Vignettes from Neil

1. Reminiscing the scarcity of resources on the island during the initial years of settlement, Shushila Das says “There was not a thing in Neil. We had to boil the seawater to make salt. The boat service wasn’t regular. Over time these facility improved. So much so, one needn’t go to Port Blair in preparation for big events anymore. One can find everything right here. The mainlanders [mainland’er lok] have taken over the market, all non-Bengalis [obangali], had our settler families been proactive no one would have been able to take over the market!”¹

2. The settler’s brush with the ‘wild’ comes out strongly in Shushama Roy’s recollection: “Men could not go out for fear of elephants. There were 14 elephants. The mahout’s [elephant minder] house was close to our land. The elephants used to drag the huge trunks till the jetty, then they would be loaded. Before we had come, we heard, that a man in No.5² was killed by the elephants and then the elephant crossed the sea and went off to Havelock. But this is something we have only heard. When the elephants were to be taken away, the feisty ones refused to board the LCT (light cargo transport), there was one obedient elephant who went ahead and boarded the LCT and then one by one all the elephants were guided by it to board the LCT. There were no cameras

back then or else we would have captured these sights forever. It was a female elephant, very intelligent. There was nothing here and a few souls were brought to such a place! (laughs)”³

3. The following dialogue with Probha Bawali⁴ demonstrates the intergenerational changes in gendered practices across locations:

Raka Banerjee: So, what was the first wedding – your wedding – on the island like? Was it in keeping with all Bengali rituals and customs?

Probha Bawali: Yes, in observance of all customs and rituals. We were living next to each other, when we were in No.1 we used to live next to each other in the quarter. My aunt-in-law and my mother arranged the marriage. I was merely 13 years old. I couldn’t study for too long either, while living in Uttar Pradesh I attended school for 2-3 years. After coming here, I wasn’t sent to school and was married off early. My father used to say, what’s the point in educating a dark girl! [kalo meye r porashona koraye ki korbo!] (laughs)
RB: In Bangladesh, women’s lives were mostly restricted to the household ...

PB: Yes

RB: ... and they would observe purdah ...

PB: Yes

RB: ... did that change while in the camp or after coming here?

PB: It didn’t change in the camp. There were people from different places, right. After coming here, well, now, no one cares for such rules – not even in the villages.

RB: In the camp, there must have been many people and perhaps it wouldn’t be possible to stay indoors all the time ...

PB: Even so! It’s up to the person to maintain their dignity [jar shonman tar kache]. Even to this day, my mother – we don’t cover our head – but my mother still won’t give up covering her head.

Womanspeak in understanding identity

The *namasudra*⁵ refugees were dispersed across India as labourers for the development of inhospitable areas. Their settlement on the Islands is part of this violent history and the politics of rehabilitation in post-Partition India. However, women’s contribution to the process is hidden and overlooked in the study of post-partition resettlement, because women were not understood to be primary owners of land, but simply persons ‘attached’ to the male head of the family unit.

The permeation of words like *migration*, *refugee*, *rehabilitation* and *settler* into the women’s vocabulary, and the use of the state’s vocabulary by the women to identify themselves, reveals the impact of the rehabilitation process on the women’s lives. While discussing the changing gender norms in island society, Shushila Das responded, “We have been freed [shadheen] by Indira Gandhi, even then everyone should have a sense of judgement ... (assertively) it depends on each individual as to how they should conduct themselves.”⁶ The invocation of the state in a matter as seemingly innocuous as women covering their head demonstrates the far-reaching impact of Partition. It exposed the settler women to the functioning of the state and placed them in an ‘everyday’ relationship with the state. In the first vignette, we find the words *boat*, *facility* and *mainland* indicating a change in the subject’s location away from the mainland and on to the island where they faced hardship over material scarcity, while simultaneously locating the Bengali settler community’s marginal position in the island’s local economy in the present day.

In the second vignette, the words *jetty* and *LCT* are used in narrating an incident of transporting elephants off the island, which must have been a public spectacle for the settlers; Shushama Roy chose to juxtapose the departure of the animals with the arrival of the settlers to the wilderness, to better express the irony. The third vignette, read alongside Shushila’s assertion, indicates the changing gender norms for the settler women over time, where women’s honour and respectability are shown to be closely governed by the logic of the public domain. The word *settler* refers to a category devised by the state to set apart a group of refugees as ‘pioneering agriculturalists’ who would contribute to the development of the island.⁷ The statist category is used by the population to identify themselves and to assert legitimacy of claim over social, economic and political resources.

A taxonomy of the words according to their meaning constructed by the settler women, which may or may not differ from the words’ dictionary meaning, offer eight thematic

groups. The claim-making words (*migration*, *border slip*, *batch*, *settlement*) form the biggest category, followed by words for authority (*commander*, *department*, *military*), and words for state benefits (*paddy land*, *plot*). Words for accommodation (*camp*, *quarter*, *colony*), transport (*rail*, *ship*, *LCT*), and organization (*meeting*, *leadership*, *group*) are primarily used to describe the period of waiting and being transported from camp to camp before being transported to the island. The settlers’ experiences and major life events like riot form a more conceptual category, which offers insights into the women’s subjectivity. Contemporary conditions on the island have led to the incorporation of several words, such as *tourist*, *lodge*, *agent* and *tsunami*. An analysis of the words not only narrates Partition from the settler women’s standpoint, but also firmly places them as participants in the resettlement process.

Becoming ‘settler women’

The permeation of statist vocabulary into the settler women’s speech is indicative of the impact of displacement and settlement on their lives, which is not necessarily configured around a public-private division of spaces and roles. The settler women worked in the household and on the land in order to ‘settle’ on the island. They participated in public meetings about the development of the new settlements. Their lives were less restricted than their mothers’, yet, early marriage, gendered expectations of running the household, and post-marriage restrictions on mobility persisted.

Partition has been studied and narrated from a predominantly Bengal and Calcutta-centric perspective, with little focus on the large numbers of people rehabilitated across India. Moreover, gendered refugee experiences have found limited space within such accounts.⁸ Inclusion of the voices of settler women, subsumed under the patriarchal family and the protectionist state, living in locations of cartographic and discursive oversight, can bring out complex narratives of their negotiation with the rehabilitation regime. Not only will such inclusion help in understanding women’s contributions to their rehabilitation, but also in studying gender and Partition through the intersectional lens of caste-class-location and formation of identities.

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Notes

- 1 Interview with Shushila Das, Bharatpur (No.4), Neil Island (Shaheed Dweep), dated 25 Jan 2019.
- 2 Neil consists of five settlements. No.1: Lakshmanpur, No.2: Neil Kendra, No.3: Ramnagar, No.4: Bharatpur and No.5: Sitapur.
- 3 Interview with Shushama Roy, Bharatpur (No.4), Neil Island (Shaheed Dweep), dated 24 Jan 2019.
- 4 Interview with Probha Bawali, Ramnagar (No.3), Neil Island (Shaheed Dweep), dated 25 Jan 2019.
- 5 Lower-caste population in Bengal who were the worst affected of the Partition refugees and had little or no resources to start over in India.
- 6 *ibid* note 1
- 7 Sen, U. 2011. ‘Dissident memories: Exploring Bengali refugee narratives in the Andaman Islands’, in Panayi, P. & Virdee, P. (eds) *Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration during the Twentieth Century*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp.219-244; Sen, U. 2017. ‘Memories of Partition’s “Forgotten Episode”: Refugee Resettlement in the Andaman Islands’, *Sūdasien-Chronik - South Asia Chronicle* 7, S.147-178.
- 8 Menon, R. & Bhasin, K. (1998) 2017. *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition*. 70th Anniversary Edition. New Delhi: Kali for Women. Reprint, New Delhi: Women Unlimited; Butalia, U. (1998) 2017. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books. Reprint, New Delhi: Penguin Random House India; Bagchi, J. & Dasgupta, S. (2003) 2007. *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India, Vol.1*. Kolkata: Stree. Reprint, Kolkata: Stree; Chakraborty, P. 2018. *The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender and the Political*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.