

The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India

Edited by: Jasodhara Bagchi, Subhoranjan Dasgupta

Stree. 2003

The resurgence of interest in the Partition of British India in 1947 has generated both cultural and social scientific responses in South Asia and abroad. However, scholarly attention on the two partitioned provinces, Bengal and the Punjab, has been rather asymmetrical as the Punjab has been the locus of most of these sociological and feminist studies. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta's anthology The Trauma and the Triumph is an effort to fill the lacuna in scholarship on the experience of the partition in the East. In the tradition of much of the feminist work on Partition, the book attempts to garner women's memories and struggles through oral histories, literature and critical analyses. By underscoring women-related issues as central to the Partition-narrative, it offers a social and cultural complement to extant studies on colonial politics and communal violence. Since Partition affected not only West Bengal but also Assam and Tripura because refugees migrated from the erstwhile East Pakistan—the eastern part of divided Bengal and present day Bangladesh—to all three states reconfiguring politics and society, altering their economies and sometimes even the demographic composition, it is appropriate that Bagchi and Dasgupta speak of Partition in "Eastern India"; but this inclusive gesture is somewhat compromised by the absence of any discussion on Assam. The editors, however, move beyond "India" and include literary and critical writings from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh.

The book comes with a fine Introduction outlining the differences in the partitions of the Punjab and Bengal. The editors indicate that with refugee migrations into West Bengal in the decades following Partition and up to the present, "the Partition of Bengal" unlike that of the Punjab "has turned out to be a continuing process" producing "slow and agonizing terror and trauma" (2). The gendered violence women endured, on the other hand, constitutes a commonality in their experience of Partition in both provinces. However, the Partition, the editors note, also wrought other important changes in women's lives so that formerly home-bound middle-class women frequently emerged as wage earners to support their

dispossessed migrant families. First in the section on literary and critical analysis, Jasodhara Bagchi's essay "Freedom in an Idiom of Loss" analyzes using Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel Epar Ganga Opar Ganga (translated as The River Churning) the social quarantine experienced by Hindu women subjected to intimate violence during the communal riots. She suggests, like Veena Das (Das, 1995), that the marginalization of violated women flows from a collusion between the nation and the community, and that chaste women's bodies function almost as boundaries preserving (and insulating) the "purity" of the nation. While Bagchi discusses Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel and cites her poem on the condition of refugees, it is surprising to find no discussion of her women-related short stories on the Partition "Epar Ganga Opar Ganga"—bearing the same name as her novel—and "Sei Chheleta" ("That Little Boy"). In her study "Re(Creating) the Home," Rachel Weber discusses how Partition re-defined social spaces and enabled women's participation in public activities, and asks "Have women really 'come out'? Drawing upon the data supplied by her interviewees (from the Bijoygarh colony) on their present reluctance towards paid work, she concludes that women's public visibility while "hailed as a liberating experience" (75) might not have been so. This general claim renders invisible individual women's experiences as well as leaves unquestioned whether Weber's interviewees felt the need to project their current middle-income status by deprecating women's paid work since women's non-participation in wage-labor is considered by some a marker of middle-class respectability. Meenakshi Sen's "Tripura: The Aftermath" studies the condition of Hindus and Muslims in Tripura, and importantly, the marginalized tribals. Her focus on suffering simply as a problem of religious intolerance weakens her analysis somewhat. And while she may be right that some Muslims were oppressed as Muslims, she is only partly right. Strangely left unsaid but informing her study throughout is the category of "class" that could have identified better the causes of suffering: the reason Dudu Mian, the husband of her interviewee Akia,

suffers owes less to his religious identity as a Muslim and much more to his lack of economic resources. In fact, Sen herself indicates that wealthy Muslims exchanged their property with Hindus from East Pakistan and not subjected to forcible deportation, took their time in leaving. Similarly when she says Anjali Burman, a migrant woman from East Pakistan, “is not a refugee in the real sense” (130) she fails to acknowledge that it is because of Burman’s elite status. Renuka Roy’s “And Still They Come” and a group study comparing the facilities available to refugees from West Punjab and East Bengal titled “East is East, West is West” reveal the central government’s stepmotherly attitude towards Bengali refugees. While gender constitutes the theme of the anthology, it is not the focus of all the articles and Dasgupta’s “History’s Creative Counterpart” instead offers a materialist analysis of Akhtaruzzaman Elias’ Khawabnama (translated as Dream Elegy) focusing on Partition and Tebhaga—the agrarian movement during the forties led by the left. Urvashi Butalia’s compelling piece, “The Nowhere People,” studies the peculiar stateless position of the people living in the chitmahals or the Indian enclaves inside Bangladesh, and vice versa, and thus bereft of rights of citizenship and subjected to attacks from the country within whose territorial borders the enclave exists. Butalia poignantly raises questions of nationality and belonging that are at the core of this anthology.

The inclusion of reminiscences, memoirs and daily logs on activist work, interviews and letters adds to the value of this anthology. As do the poems, a short story and excerpted scenes from a film and a play, most of them translated for the first time into English. The tubercular Nita’s cry in Ritwik Ghatak’s film Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud Capped Star), “I want to live,” perhaps best exemplifies the spirit of struggling migrant-women enumerated in the interviews, while Salil Sen’s play Natun Yehudi (The New Jews) sums up metaphorically the condition of the refugees. The bibliography is an added perquisite. Perhaps writings by Pratibha Basu (Samudra Hridoy, “Dukulhara”) and more of Prafulla Roy’s work (Bhagabhagi, Anuprabesh) could be added to a revised version.

This book will be a valuable resource for scholars working on the Partition, postcolonial South Asia and women’s issues as well as appeal to those with a more general interest in the area. This is the first in a projected multi-part series and we look forward to future volumes.