CHAPTER FOUR

FROM RUPTURE TO RESILIENCE:
WOMEN’S AGENCY IN LOSS, DISPLACEMENT AND SURVIVAL

In this chapter, I have elaborated the fact that like violence, the workings of memory in recalling the sense of loss, displacement and survival need to be understood in terms of the structure of ideas within which they are perceived, retained and represented. In the whole upheaval caused by Partition, women played significant roles in every phase, right from dealing with the occurrences of violence, displacement and loss to refuge and reconstruction of life. As I have stated earlier in this study, my main attempt is to understand the differences between the ways in which men and women recall events. It is difficult to separate the two in absolute terms and there remain areas of overlap. Yet women’s recollections especially become vital as they throw open various facets of the patriarchal normative constructs of that time as well as their critique. They also offer clues to understanding lived realities that provide alternative visions of cross-community relations and differ from, or nuance, the mainstream discourses of division, hostility and rupture. At places their narratives actually offer counterpoints to the dominant narratives of animosity and hatred and forge larger bonds of solidarity across religious divides. Women’s narratives also demonstrate a distinct shift in gender identity in their resistance to gendered stereotypes of vulnerability and victimhood, and in the exercise of their own agencies in shaping every stage of their own lives and those of the family and community in the Partition and post Partition scenario.

The perceptions of loss, displacement and survival are closely all related to the notions of violence. The notion of loss is closely related to the notion of violence. The notions
of violence, I have found, is very much dictated and shaped by pre-conceived notions of community, self and other. In many instances fear and threat of violence actually exceeds the actual act of violence. The act itself, and its extent, are always dictated by notions of violence already existing within the community. Similarly the sense of loss is always closely related to the ideas of what constitutes ‘loss’, as understood by the individual, the family and the community. I think the sense of loss in all these cases is closely determined and shaped by one’s class/caste and gender position in the society. In many instances it is not the physical loss of life, property et al per se but rather loss as perceived within the mind that fixes the meaning of loss as conceived by the subject. In such cases, family, community values and beliefs vis-a-vis the positioning of the subject go a long way in determining the idea of loss with which she/he relates. Here I have focused primarily on women’s gendered positioning and its impact on memory and the sense of loss.

I have found that the personal, for the woman, constituted not just of herself, but also her family, the larger community and primarily her motherland —‘desh’. Any loss meant a loss related to any or all of these elements. Displacement resulted in a perpetual loss of a part of self, as related to these factors of desh, larger community and family. Displacement also ushered in a state of self-lessness; a perpetual void; a numbing of feeling in absence of any anchoring to ‘desh’, family and community, an extension of her immediate self and family. Survival thus meant trying to recreate the part of the extended self left behind— thus the overarching reference to the home and the hearth; the friends and the community; the flora and fauna; the rituals and festivals; the cuisines and customs of the space and time left behind. The transition was not smooth and eventual; it was a snapping of ties at one go and a sudden jolt.
These women’s narratives actually exhibit a kind of tension between this sense of void and a sense of assertion through the effort of holding on to the past that has a direct bearing on the formation of their identity of self. There is a resistance on their part against accepting changed states and identities forced upon them by the maneuvers of the State (political division, partition etc) and they determinedly hold on to their earlier socio-cultural ties. In the face of interventions by the State, and devastation caused by it, the women hold on to their identification with their earlier habitat and socio-cultural fabric, and this marks a big shift in the formation of gender identity – in the aftermath of the upheavals of Partition, women begin to forge identities for themselves that are at a difference from those constructed earlier that were far more pervasively defined by the patriarchal structures they inhabited.

This shift in focus in formation of gender identity takes place later, after the Partition, in the late 40s and early 50s, and is carried forward to the workplace when migrant women join the workforce in West Bengal in large numbers. Survival strategies also grew out of this shift in gender sensibilities and helped them to pursue this change with greater confidence. A deep indictment of the State also resonates periodically across their narratives.

**Loss**

In this section we get to understand how for all the uprooted women the loss of one’s *desh*, larger community, and socio-cultural fabric is perceived as the greatest loss, one which takes away from them their whole sense of being. Women begin to break away from the patriarchal structure when they actually address and acknowledge this loss and place it above the loss of one’s immediate family- here the husband, son, brother or father. This marks a distinct shift in their sensibilities and paves the ground for the ‘historic assertion’ of the Bengali refugee women that is widely talked about. The act of going out to take up work became imperative
for women in more ways than one, because apart from addressing financial needs it also enabled them to assert their identities in the face of the complete loss of identity that was a result of the Partition. Partition compelled them to forego all their bearings that had helped to consolidate their sense of being, like the proximity to one’s ‘desh’, the community, the flora, fauna and the larger socio-cultural milieu. Thus in the post Partition scenario, large numbers of women resisted the tags conferred on them by the State - of refugees, victims, permanent liabilities, et al – and stepped out of their homes to forge their own identities. Women’s identities thus began to be constituted henceforth as much outside the patriarchal structures of their own communities as within them.

The loss of basic human dignity at the everyday level and the complete dehumanization in relation to basic experiences of life like hunger, disease and death made women cling to their past bonds more stubbornly. This was a widespread feature of women’s agency in the post Partition scenario, be it in the camp or the colonies vis a vis the organic habitat to which they once belonged. This stubbornness also bolstered their will to exert their agency at every level of their lives after Partition. Every object from the past, no matter how insignificant, like a kantha or a jhanta, added to a layer of their identity and helped to re-assert it in the face of a state of complete devastation and disorder. This marked a shift from the patriarchal structure where the father, son, husband or even the State provided a woman with a name, identity and a sense of security. In the changed post-Partition scenario the motherland-desh with all its richness, and memory of the past habitat, became the only points of reference, resistance and re-construction for these women.

The most common sense of loss that underlines all the narratives alike is the sense of loss of one’s homeland or desh. Here loss and displacement get closely linked to one another. This is a potential loss which pervades all the other kinds of narratives of loss, even the ones
dealing with death. In spite of its centrality in all the narratives, I think this is perceived by
men and women at different levels.

The population of East Bengal was largely land-centric or engaged in vocations which
were closely related to nature, as I have already discussed in my previous chapters. For the
men, land relations and occupation functioned as a determinant of their power relations and
socio-economic status vis-a-vis the other members of the community. For women, largely
considered to be the repository of the cultural life of the community, nature had a different
significance. The changes in nature would entail corresponding markers of the cultural life
like specialities of rituals and festivals, culinary specialities, and the like, at different times of
the year. The domestic space marked the venues of most of these activities. These were also
times when community ties would be renewed and strengthened. The experience of Partition
that brought in its wake massive displacement and exodus resulted in this primal sense of
being wrenched from one’s roots.

Dr. Shanti Basu became tearful while she recalled:

সব ছেড়ে আসার দুঃখ কি কখনো ভোলা যায় । আমি
এখনো যাই বাড়িটা দেখে আসি । আমাদের বাড়ির
গেটের দুদিকে দুটা চাঁপা ফুলের গাছ ছিল । ওই সব
ছেড়ে কি কাছের ভালো নাগে ....ওখানে একটা বড়
পুকুর ছিল । ওটা বুঝিয়ে দিয়েছে । ওখানেও বাড়ি
তুলবে । আমরা ওখানে পুকুর পাড়ে বসতাম মনে পড়ে
। ওখানে বসে গল্প করতাম । বাড়িটা অনেক হাত
পাটেছে; কিন্তু আমি এখনো যাই, গিয়ে মাঝে মাঝে
বাড়িটার সামনে দাড়াই (S. Basu, interview)।
The pain of leaving everything would never go away. I still visit the place, look at my house. We used to have two champa plants on the two sides of our gate. How can one feel good after leaving all that behind….They have filled the pond. We used to sit by its side and talk. The house has changed several hands; but still I visit it sometimes, go and stand there in front of it (my translation).

Rani Roy Choudhury expressed her desire to go back and said:

সব ছেড়ে এসেছি। মনে হয় দেখে আসি গিয়া। কেমন সব হয়েছে। সেই গাছ সেই পুকুর সব চোখে ভালে (R.R. Choudhury, interview)।

[I had to leave everything behind. I feel like going back to see it all again. How things are now. Those trees, the pond, everything appear before my eyes (my translation).]

I think, for men this uprooting means more a loss of a physical space, a geographical displacement, losing one’s socio-economic bearing, loss of one’s janmabhoomi (land of birth) or matribhoomi/poitrik-bhitemati (motherland/ancestral place). It correspondingly means economic/occupational loss and thus loss of status. Veena Das, similarly discussing the men, survivors of the carnage of Sikh men in Delhi in 1984, observes “Most of our discussions centred around the kinds of tools that were required for them to resume their work. The men felt their economic loss very deeply, and getting back to the tools of their trade seems to have become symbolic of a return to their previous identities” (1992, 385).

I have observed that for women it means a rupture of the very basis of life. Uprooting for them means a loss of home, disintegration of family and snapping off of community ties.
The dissolution of the immediate robs her of the very anchoring to life. In this context, there is no doubt that the insignificant becomes the vital in this whole story of loss and suffering. Thus there is the repeated reference to looting or loss of utensils (bashon, haanri), broomsticks (jhaanta/jhaantar shola). In fact, there are narratives in which women actually talk about being successful in carrying broom-sticks to India. Thus the loss of these becomes potential loss for them. The broom-sticks here carry the additional sense of cleanliness of house and even in case of displacement, the sense of clearing of a place, a pre-requisite to setting up a home and starting life anew. Because of such layering of meaning, the whole process of the addition of value to the valueless is something that has intrigued me to a great extent.

Anima Sen states:

আমার বাবা সব ছেড়ে চলে আসে । ...কিন্তু আমার ঠাকুৰ্মা নিজের সঙ্গে অনেক কিছু নিয়ে এসেছিল, ঝাঁটার শলা পর্যন্ত (A. Sen, interview)।

[My father left everything behind and came ‘here’….My grandmother, however, brought with her many things, even the broom sticks (my translation).]

Another woman, Labanya Prabha Das recalled,

যখন আমরা বাড়ি ফিরলাম, দেখলাম কিছু নাই । ওরা সব নিয়া গেছে, সব বাসনপত্র, চাল-ডাল, তেল, তরি- তরকারি সব...সব । ...বাড়িটা ছিল, বাকি সব নিয়া গেছে... ওরা ঝাঁটার শলাটা পর্যন্ত রাখে নাই (L.P. Das, interview)।
When we returned to our house we found nothing was there. ‘They’ had taken away everything, utensils, all grains, oil, vegetables, all…all…. The house was still there but everything else was taken away…. They did not spare even the broom sticks (my translation).]

For Anita Hawlader, the regret for not being able to even bring along a woollen blanket was still there after all these years.

[When we returned to our house we found nothing was there. ‘They’ had taken away everything, utensils, all grains, oil, vegetables, all…all…. The house was still there but everything else was taken away…. They did not spare even the broom sticks (my translation).]

The disjunction of their existence, in terms of loss of home, village, community as perceived by the women has hardly left them even after all these years and even when the family is able to get back a foothold in life, this sense of loss continues to haunt them. She can never be reconciled to this sense of loss ever in her life, admits Hawlader. Women living with their family still have somewhat regained a grasp of their lives, the loss disappearing in the underbelly of the everyday family life, but especially for the women living in the camps, I have observed, this loss is still palpable, a loss that is closely intertwined with their present status of existing in the margins.
The desh that they have left behind has perpetually occupied their memory and in spite of starting life anew, this country has always remained a place of refuge and not a ‘home’. Rachel Weber similarly points out the significance of the difference between the concepts of ‘home’ and ‘house’ for a displaced person:

The relationship between spatial forms and social processes becomes evident when we discuss the difference between the concepts of ‘house’ and of ‘home’. Whereas ‘house’ is the physical structure of residence, ‘home’ represents particular social relations both inside and outside the physical structure, relations which link residents to other families, to communities and to the state. The concept of home conjures up images of family, warmth, security, emotion and stability (1995, 198).

It was a similar experience for the women in Pakistan as Nighat Said Khan elaborates:

They also lost the security of friendships and other relationships that define social structures and social space…the yearning for the earlier home is invariably a yearning not only for the space that it signifies, but also a yearning for the natal home; for friendships; and a freedom to relate that they had had previously (1994, 161).

Rachel Weber next compares the concepts of bastu and bari/bhite and that of basha; the latter has always a temporary ring to it. The nostalgic regret for the past bari/bhite (home and hearth) that one has to leave behind is hardly reconciled by the present basha even in instances where the family owns it.

May be, the second generation managed to get assimilated into the mainstream but for the generation that is under my study, this place continues to be a surrogate home, the sense of loss and separation becoming permanent. Their identity constantly shifts between the binaries of ‘here’, ‘there’; ‘now’, ‘then’; ‘before Partition’, ‘after Partition’. There seems to
be a dual existence for them between these extremes. Or it can also be termed as a “division of the self” as Nighat Said Khan points out. “Yet life and personal histories are truncated into two distinct categories: pre Partition and post Partition, leading to a division of the self. The horror of the partition lingers and consumes, and continues to determine how one relates not only to the outside world but to oneself” (1994, 160).

My interviewee, Malati Chakraborty\textsuperscript{24}, who lives with her son, when asked which country she considers to be her desh, said that now she would call neither Bangladesh or India her desh and that she has no desh. She said she is now a “refugee”. Thus, for her the sense of loss and uprootedness is permanent, making her feel perpetually displaced. Similarly, for Rani Roy Choudhury from the same colony, India, after all these years still remains “porer desh” (somebody else’s country). Perhaps she can never be reconciled to this sense of loss of her ‘own’ land/country. Though she lives with her husband, two sons and daughter-in-laws and grandchildren, this loss is something that she clings on to as her very ‘own’ and it haunts her. When I asked her about her unfulfilled wishes if any, she replied:

\begin{quote}
{
েয ভােবেছিলাম, আসা ছিল না যে বিয়ে হবে, ঘর সংসার হবে, কোন গতি হবে । উদ্ভাস প্রায়, মা বাংলাদেশে, বাবা আগেই মারা গেছেন, ভাই বেই । তাদের আর কি আশা থাকতে পারে (R.R. Choudhury, interview)।
\end{quote}

[The way we had come, I had no hope that I would get married, have a home and family, have something worth. We were almost like refugees. My mother was in Bangladesh, my father

\textsuperscript{24} Malati Chakraborty, Interviewed by Sudhanya Dasgupta Mukherjee, No. 1 Motilal Colony, October 2001.
had died earlier. I had no brother. What else there is to hope for the likes of us (my translation).

For another woman, Hemlata Sarkar the loss of desh remains incomprehensible till date.

ঔরা ভাগ করে নিয়ে এলো। আমার দেশ বাংলাদেশ।
এটা কি আমি বুঝি না (H. Sarkar, interview)

[They divided and shared the country. My country is Bangladesh. I do not understand what this place is for me (my translation)!]

Hemlata Sarkar’s situation is more ironic as this is the place she is doomed to live for the rest of her life as a Permanent liability of the state. The issues of identity and sense of belongingness becomes more complex in the cases of the women in the camps. There are several issues that surface from the interviews of these women. The most common of them all is the refrain about one’s identity which is again closely related to their relation vis-a-vis the state/the place they now inhabit. These women mostly believe that they are now nowhere people who do not belong anywhere.

For Hemlata Sarkar, she is unable to understand the complex dynamics as how a desh can change. For her “it has not changed since I left it behind. I still consider Bangladesh to be my desh”. Her sense of doom becomes more evident when she says that though her desh exists and it ‘has not changed’ since when she left it she cannot go back; neither can she visit her own people nor can they visit her. In her imagination her ‘desh’ has as if frozen in time and space. She refuses to go back, lest she finds that it no longer exists. Mentally she does not belong here, neither does she want to go back or can go back to one she has left behind though that is where she feels she belongs.
How it must feel for one to live without a ‘desh’, not to have a desh at all (with all its richness), not have a desire to belong to one? There is kind of no anchoring to her identity in term of the space where she thinks she belongs, where all her memories belong. East Bengal, as she perceives it does not exist nor is it accessible. In a larger context of space, the nation, she has now a desh which but exists in her mind. As the central protagonist in Amitav Ghosh’s much talked about semi autobiographical novel *The Shadow Lines* observes about her grandmother’s anxiety and dilemma: “She had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” when she had to write in her passport Dhaka as her place of birth. The protagonist poignantly observes “people like my grandmother, who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection” (Ghosh 1995, 194). I think memory is perhaps the only refuge, the only way these women can hold on to that which is otherwise frozen in time and space.

Physical loss—injury, death or affliction to self, immediate family, extended family were not the only factors which constituted loss. I have come across just a few direct victims (those who have undergone violence like rape/abduction, conversion, loss of family members, relatives). For them, the loss is very palpable and specified. People who had witnessed such kind of violence not on self but had heard about it in other spaces constitute the majority of those interviewed. These are the people who have largely migrated out of the fear/threat or apprehension of impending violence on self. Yet, these people also consider themselves as potential victims largely prompted by this sense of how they perceive loss.

This is particularly true for the women, as to them, as discussed earlier here, the basic rupture of the fabric of life constituted of a potential loss. Hemlata Sarkar who migrated to India from Dhaka just after Partition thinks that though she did not suffer direct violence, she is a victim of Partition, nonetheless.
I was not a victim of the riot but was a victim of the partition. I had to leave my own home, my marital home, my relatives. Did it cause any good to me? Now I am spending my life begging. I have heard that my relatives are keeping fine. But it is not possible for me to go there. They cannot come either. That I had to come here proves that I am a sufferer. Lot of things happened for which we had to come....I am staying in the camp, in the colony. All of us are sufferers or else why should we be staying here (my translation)?

Similarly, there are many such women for whom uprootedness in itself becomes the central motif of loss. For these women, who are also sometimes direct victims of loss in terms of death, disappearance or separation from family members, the loss of homeland becomes the thread which connects other losses. The absence of the sense of closeness and security that one’s own land offers intensifies the other losses. For instance, loss for Suruchi Pal, whose husband had turned mad after watching the Partition disturbances and later died, is perceived
more in terms of the insecurity related to the separation from land and fear/threats accompanied by it rather than the death of husband.

I was having a small child then; I had to flee with my child. The child was only eighteen/nineteen days old. My brother-in-laws hid themselves wherever they could. All the temples in our house were burnt down by them. Shitala temple was shattered. Radha Gobinda’s temple, Krishna’s temple—all were destroyed. They slaughtered the cows and dumped them into the water. They asked us to read the namaz on Fridays, told us to take off our sankhas (conch shell bangles worn as signs of marriage) and wipe off the sindoor (vermillion) from our
forehead. We had to abscond. Then we left for Chandpur after some days for who could tolerate such torture. Thereafter, when things cooled down a bit after two to two and half months later, we reached here clad in a single piece of cloth and carrying an infant (my translation).

She adds:

আমাদের তো এইদিকে আসার প্রয়োজন ছিল না।
আমার স্বামী না থাকলেও আমি জন রাইথ্যা চাষ
করাইলেও আমার জীবন সুখ চলে যাইত। কিন্তু ওদের
ভয়ে আমরা সব ছেড়ে পালাইয়া চলে এলাম (S. Pal, interview)।

[We had no reason to come to this side. Even if my husband had died, I could have used labourers to till and harvest my land and spent my life in happiness. But we had to leave everything and flee out of fear from there (my translation).]

Nighat Said Khan discussing the experience of the Pakistani women similarly states:

The sense of loss of a country; a home; family, especially the natal family, permeates the present…. The notion ‘country’ is described variously as mulk, quam, and watan,…The watan is in India but it is not India. What then does the country mean outside its geographical and political boundaries? Implicit in the definition of country is the sense of home; of an emotional relationship…with the space that one inhabits and one’s connection with it. Few of the women have this relationship with the new country, especially not in terms of emotional space, and home for them is what they left behind. Identity with the country is, therefore, also truncated with political loyalties being given to the space they now inhabit, and emotional loyalties given to one’s home in another” (1994, 160–61).
Closely linked to the loss that is hardly reconciled even in the period when life has been reconstructed, is the perpetual schism suffered in terms of loss of peace of mind and sense of security. These become closely linked not only to the sense of loss but also the conditions accompanying displacement. This state of being may not always be prompted by direct violence. Anguish, constant fear and apprehension of impending danger and exposure to threat fed on by the different tellings of the incidents that make the round and also few personal experiences lead to persistent anxiety and corresponding loss of peace of mind.

The sense of humiliation is the mainstay in all these narratives related to perpetual loss of peace of mind—humiliation sensed in the whole process of having to leave one’s home, country (*desh*) behind. Humiliation/harassment was also felt at the time of migration (in rout) or primarily after reaching India. The humiliation caused by the sense of being unwanted in this part of Bengal, often taunted as ‘refugees’ or ‘Bangal’, having to languish in transit camps or permanent liability camps, or at the mercy of estranged relatives, having to fight the apathy of the local people, has never left the people who migrated from East Bengal. At the same time, the anger and hurt in the uprooted people that their suffering has not being fully acknowledged is also there.

Suruchi Bala Kundu of Dhubulia Camp and Infirmary ruminated about the differences in her status since Partition, the perpetual loss of peace of mind that it prompted and the uncertainties of the present:

`খাঁন, সামীনা, নাই, ছেলে নাই, আরো অশান্তি।
সরকারের মুখের দিকে চাইয়া থাকি। দিনে দুর্বার থাই,
না দিলে না থাই। ওনার মুখের দিকে চাইয়া থাকি।
আর ওখানে গরিব হলেও দুর্বলা দুটা থাইসি। আনন্দ`
Surabala Das living as a Permanent Liability in Bansberia Women’s Home thinks that the past (here the initial days of her stay in India) was traumatic but the present is no less harrowing:

[Here I do not have my husband, my son, it is more disturbing. We keep on staring at the face of the government. I eat twice a day that too I don’t, when they do not give. I am completely depended on their mercy. But there we ate two square meals even though we were poor, we felt happy. Then my state of mind was not like this. Here do I have that kind of peace of mind? I no longer have that age, those days, those people and that kind of a peace of mind (my translation).]

Surabala Das, interview.
[Earlier we used to stay in great hardship, with small children, somebody’s husband had died, somebody’s daughters were abducted, somebody had their husbands killed in front their eyes. Still now we have so many injustices done to us. For instance, we are lying down inside our rooms somebody will come and break the windows and take them away. When we report these to the officer they do not pay much attention to our words. After all they do not stay here. I am telling these things to you only. There is nobody to look after this place, everybody is doing whatever they like to do (my translation).]

The anxiety of Surabala Das is not without basis as I found the Home area to be dilapidated with portions of the old military barracks which the women inhabit coming off and the old quarters lying in ruins. Earlier the area was well demarcated and protected and no outsider could venture in and out according to one’s whim. But now trespassing in the area by the people living in the colonies surrounding the camp has become regular and stealing rampant, with the outsiders taking away the doors, windows and the likes at their will as the home inhabitants admitted.

There is also the sense of anxiety about the fate of the next generation whose future seems equally helpless. In most cases they are non-literates/semi-literates, unemployed, without any skill/vocational training and often of poor health. Biraj Bala Das, staying at Dhubulia Camp and Infrimary as a Permanent Liability, started sobbing as she expressed her concern for her two unmarried daughters who stay with her.
I have no hope left. I have two daughters left. They did not get any job. We are completely dependent on whatever help the government provides. After every fifteen days we go and spread our bag, whatever they give we bring back with us. We somehow manage with that little. What else hope is left for us? If tomorrow I pass away what will happen to my daughters? Who will they depend on? If somehow they could have managed to earn a living then also they could have lived amidst ten people. But now who will look after them? Today there is no relative beside us. We do not have any news where our own people are (my translation)!

Finding a place for oneself, after migration, was a real struggle for existence which in turn gave birth to a permanent sense of unrest and insecurity and led to perpetual loss of mental peace. Migrants having relatives already staying in India found a temporary shelter here, but not without a sense of being neglected or becoming a burden; as most of the respondents recount. Namita Ghosh recalls her experiences after coming to India during Partition. Her whole family had taken refuge in a relative’s place. She remembers that after the death of her father they were sent away by their relatives to a Camp, Rupashree Palli at Ranaghat (later a colony).
We faced enormous difficulties after coming here. At first we had taken shelter in one of our relative’s houses at Belghoria; there so many of us huddled together in one room. Amidst all this, grandmother expired; father was indisposed; there was no food; we continued to live in this fashion. Then somehow we could get a footing. What a storm it was that the whole family faced (my translation)!

The feelings of humiliation and neglect and the sense of insecurity are more deep rooted for the people staying in the camps particularly the women. Most of the women from the camps recall how along with the physical hardships in the camps they were also exposed to vague indignities. The women/family found itself in extreme conditions in the camps. Anxieties related to minimum requirements of food, shelter and well-being of family was a constant pre-occupation for the women and it shattered their sense of security and peace of mind.

I recall the case of one woman in particular— Chapala Baidya in one of the resettlement colonies in Hooghly, who recounted how she got persistent headaches and tears would not stop flowing from her eyes ever since she left home and came to this country. In this case, I think, the sense of loss and displacement working in tandem have created a sense of trauma which is manifested in terms of chronic physical symptoms. Similarly, Subhadra Gain feels that she has developed ‘heart disease’ ever since she has arrived in this country. Durga Debnath from the RIC Colony near Cooper’s Camp feels she has been attacked with
various diseases due to the immense anxieties that she is living with since her arrival here. Hemlata Sarkar believes that her life has changed perpetually ever since she arrived in this country—moving with her daughters from one camp to another, leaving her ancestral home behind.

Thus for these first generation women living in camps, loss and the mental anxiety associated with it is manifested in the forms of physical illness like high blood pressure, anaemia, asthma, diabetes, gastro-intestinal diseases, which are very widespread and common amongst these women. Some second generation members also suffer from some kind of illness or the other and also disabilities like mental retardation, deafness, blindness, physiological anomaly etc. which in turn indicates the state of neglect and apathy and utter deprivation that they were born and raised in. To cite some instances, Sushila Das’s (from Ranaghat Mahila Shibir) daughter is cripple in one leg. Durga Debnath (from RIC Colony previously within Cooper’s camp area) has a middle aged son who is deaf and dumb and is mentally retarded. She has two other daughters who are married and settled outside the Colony but who refuse to maintain any contact with their mother and brother. Then at Champta Women’s Home, Rashmoni Das’s daughter had a deformity, a big bulge in her stomach and was very emaciated. As already stated, I have observed that all the second generation members in the camps are middle aged, in most cases non/semi literate and unemployed.

Along with this sense of loss which was more abstract but manifested in more physical terms was the actual loss, the death of a family member, which was prompted by the havoc caused by the Partition and the changed circumstances for the refugees. One loss which was felt at several layers, caused by Partition got fused with the subsequent losses, in the aftermath of the Partition and constituted of an all-pervading narrative of loss. The
individual incidents of subsequent losses got absorbed into the larger sense of loss and thus enabled the people to negotiate with it and continue with life.

The women in the camp often recall how death of family members, especially infants, became an everyday affair for those living in the camps. Overcrowding, rampant diseases, absence of basic civic amenities and infrastructure and absence of any social security measures had a heavy toll on the camps inhabitants and especially their children. Malnutrition was rampant along with death from starvation. Besides there were deaths due to snake bites, diseases like Cholera, Malaria and Diarrhoea were common. In all my interviews of the camp inhabitants they have mentioned how each of them have lost one child or the other, one family member or the other, after coming to the camps. Even arranging for a decent burial for the dead would be an impossible affair for the camp inhabitants given the limited resources and space they had. Many women have referred as to how they would throw the dead infants in the open spaces with match sticks in their mouths (a symbolic gesture for cremation) only to helplessly watch the corpses being eaten away by the wild foxes and dogs.

Anila Bala Dey of Dhubulia Camp and Infirmary recalls:

খুব কষ্টে চলেছ আমার সংসার। খুব কষ্ট। ওই যা ডোল পেতাম তাতে চলত। অসুবিধে মানে যেমন তেমন অসুবিধে নয়, ওই বোঝা, বাচ্চা কাছা ভো সব সইয়া যেত। প্রথম যারা আসছিল না, ধরন ওদের পাঁচ জন ছেলেমেয়ে, একজন থালি আছে, রক্ত আমাশায়ে বাকি সব নেছ। সব উড়ে গেছে, এমন মরা মরেছ। সব এমনই ফেলাইয়া দিয়ে, একটু মাটি খুঁচাইয়া এমনি
[I ran my family with lots of hardship, lots. We lived on whatever we got as dole. Because of difficulties, not mere difficulties but the piling of dirt, all the children were dying. The people who had come initially, say they had five children, only one was alive, rest had died of blood dysentery. People died in such large numbers that they seemed to have vanished; the dead were just dumped... a handful of soil was dug and just dumped there. Otherwise, these areas had forest and bodies would be dumped in there amidst trees. They could not give the bodies a decent cremation...my husband too died of blood dysentery at Chadmari (camp) (my translation).]

Veena Das makes the important observation how “social structures intervene decisively in directing the manner in which such emotions as guilt or sorrow are formed, and in which the world can be reformulated” (1992, 390). Das points out the cases of the women survivors of the Delhi carnage:

Women, in contrast to men, felt their responsibility to their children intensely….It is significant that the woman felt her failure lay in the feminine function of providing nurture through food….Women grieved for their dead husbands and sons, were torn by remorse that they had been unable to provide their dying men with water. However, the nature of their remorse was different from that of the men, who were assaulted by the feeling that they had lost faith (1992, 391).
By the same logic and considering that within the overall patriarchal values of the community, women are entrusted with the roles of care givers and caretakers; after all these years women still bear the guilt of not doing enough to save the lives of those who died in front of their eyes. Sushila Das of Ranaghat Mahila Shibir, staying alone with her cripple daughter recounts:

[I cannot just express the kinds of pain we had to take at that point of time. My husband died here...the eldest son had departed and he died out of that grief. Moreover, he did not have food to eat; we went through such tough times....I could not provide him with food. He died as I could not give him food (she started sobbing at this point)....I raised this room with some money which we managed to save by fasting; we need to have a place to stay in. We have to face so many brick bats, so much uncalled for hazards, so many hurdles—I have no son, no husband (my translation).]

Whatever its manifestation in terms of representation by men or by women, the fact of death and its grotesque forms as apparent in the camps, cannot be overlooked and calls for
a mention here in relation to loss. Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty in his book *The Marginal Men* talks about his experiences about this whole dehumanizing process in the camps where ‘loss’ took an altogether different meaning. He remembers the lament of an ex-inhabitant of Cooper’s camp, “We ceased to be humans. We behaved like beasts” (Chakraborty 1990, 158). Hunger and death was common in every relief camp. Hundred died, especially the old and the infirm and the children. He narrates the eye witness account of one Bijoy Mazumdar, a member of the UCRC team who managed to sneak in into Cossipore camp. There he came across a macabre scene which he reported that he never came across in his long life.

The ground floor hall crammed with refugee families…All was confusion inside. Midday meal was being cooked in a dozen chulah’s (makeshift ovens), and spiralling smoke filled the room. There was a cacophony of voices—shrill cries of children, fighting, playing and romping about, women chattering among themselves, dejected men talking in whispers. Over against this pandemonium was a heap of several dozens bloated and stinking corpses, piled one upon the other and stacked against the wall at the back of the room (Chakraborty 1990, 158).

The ghastly sight nearly knocked the visitors down. The picture of the rotting corpses was published in *Swadhinata*. Bijoy Mazumdar’s story is corroborated by numerous eye witness accounts of the inmates of Cooper’s camp and Dhubulia camp. Chakraborty elaborates further the state of affairs:

These dead bodies were not removed or disposed off in the course of the day. They were kept stacked against the wall of the hut for days together. Corpses grew in number and the heap grew in size. The sight and stench of rotting corpses became so familiar that nobody seemed to bother. …Nothing mattered anymore….From the living to the dead was but a step. In all the
Nissen huts and halls death as well as life had lost their mystery, and became a plain, humdrum and devoid of meaning” (1990, 158).

He recounts the lament of one woman from Dhubulia Camp who shuddered while remembering the harrowing experience. “The whole camp was filled with the lament of bereaved women. Had you been there in those days you could have seen rows of wailing women with dead babies in their arms on both sides of the road waiting for the truck which would collect them for the burial” (1990, 160). Chakraborty states how “once a week trucks would come to carry the cold human cargo to the cremation ground” on the outskirts of some jungle somewhat removed from the camps. There the bodies received a partial cremation in collective fire, as “a partial cremation in a collective fire would bring a tidy sum for the sub contractors” who were paid Rs. 16 for cremation of each body. “Dead bodies of children were occasionally buried” says Chakraborty “but more often simply thrown into the jungle….The bodies of the children were food for hyenas, jackals and other wild beasts in the jungle” (1990, 159).

To describe these kinds of experiences of people I quote Ashis Nandy who while describing Partition experiences quotes Abramowitz Henry (1986) “These passions when remembered in tranquillity, do not encourage one to speak; they induce to distance oneself from those times and be silent. Indeed they invoke an ‘encapsulated’ self and stories about the self with which one cannot leave in normal times.”(quoted in Ashis Nandy, 1999, 310). Nandy says that people often place such experiences “outside the range of normality, sanity and even comprehensibility” and perhaps that is their way of coping with trauma. “It makes the return to normality slightly easier for many” (1999, 324).
The major themes that emerge in this section about what constitutes of loss as perceived by women are - the loss of one’s habitat, socio-cultural fabric; loss of belongings-objects that re-asserts ties and sense of belonging and loss of basic dignity in terms of the bare minimum elements of life like hunger, disease and death. These experiences of loss resulted in the following affects - resistance of State and assertion of previous socio-cultural space; shift in gender sensibilities which are carried on to the sphere of other spaces like work and an indictment of the State.

The narratives of Dr. Shanti Basu, a doctorate in Bengali, and of Rani Ray Choudhury, a non-literate woman, both inhabitants of earstwhile East Bengal, cited in this section can be analysed here. In Dr. Shanti Basu’s narration, ‘pukur’ (pond) symbolised a kind of open common space where women would gather and share their own everyday stories of joy and sadness. It would give them a sense of ‘exclusive women’s space’ within which they enjoyed certain freedom and liberties. These spaces of ‘galpo’, stories in Bengali, would be the exclusive domain of women where they could articulate their aspirations and express themselves freely without being monitored. For the people who had private ponds this was more true, but even for those who visited community ponds, it meant getting a chance to meet other women in the village and interact with them. Given the conservative social set up of that time, when women visited the ponds men were usually debarred or they shy away from visiting the same.

Water and flora become motifs for a kind of protective backdrop for all these narratives. ‘Pukur’ and ‘gacch’ (pond and trees) were frequently recalled as spaces that offered freedom from restrictions, and provided a sense of refuge by absorbing ‘stories’, shared secrets and exclusive tete-a-tete. Loss of that space was thus perceived as a great and perpetual loss. In the changed post Partition scenario these women could no longer enjoy the
privilege of a private women centric space as a ‘pukur’, more so in an urban set up where the upheaval of Partition planted them in its aftermath. Open spaces constituting of ‘pukur’ and ‘gacch’, was also contrasted with the claustrophobia and cramped atmosphere of the colony or camp life.

The regret was evident in Dr. Shanti Basu’s words as she recalled her subsequent visits to her ancestral house, which had changed many hands she stated. But she particularly mentioned the flower trees ‘geter du dike duto chapa phuler gacch chilo’ (We used to have two champa plants on the two sides of our gate) and the ‘baro pukur’ (big pond). The pond getting filled for further construction was specially mentioned by her. Thus not only losing the space but the space being completely physically obliterated (filled and construction happening on it) is something that pained her more. It was a loss not only for her but as if a loss for the future generation of women who would be denied the opportunity of sitting by it and exchanging stories.

The same logic that applied to the reminiscences of Dr Shanti Basu explained Rani Roy Choudhury’s nostalgia for trees and ponds. She mentioned leaving everything behind but what she specially mentioned were the trees and ponds which, she said, often appeared before her eyes even later. Even after all these years, she gets a sense of freedom, space and mental peace visualising the trees and ponds. Her only reason for going back, she said, would be in a way to check out “how things” were.

In these two cases what is interesting to note is that irrespective of their educational background or exposure, for these two women, one a doctorate and the other a non-literate, the point of reference for one’s identity lay outside the patriarchal structure of ides and within a very organic, living habitat that once they were part of.
Closely related to this loss of exclusive space was the sense of loss of things, however insignificant, like *jhanta or kantha*, which gave these women a sense of belongingness and agency. Brooms, apart from being a thing of great utility and importance for any average Bengali household and a facilitator of household chores, carried with it a sense of agency for these women. It is the pre requisite for clearing out a space to start something afresh -here starting a life and home anew. Thus the attribution of importance to even a simple thing depends upon its extent of appropriation and absorption in the cultural life and habit of any community. Thus the repeated reference to ‘*jhnatar shola*’ (broom sticks) and the chances of carrying one with oneself is a kind of an assertion of one’s ability and agency to be able to clear up the mess or the chaos and reconstruct life once again.

The respondent Anima Sen’s family did not land in India as a complete destitute unlike many others and was able to bring some essential things with them. Yet in her account too the reference to broom sticks being saved along with many other essential belonging speaks of the centrality of the item in her memory.

A.Hawlader, a non-literate respondent, once inhabitant of Champta Women’s camp and later rehabilitated with her then adult son is happy that when she came to this country she could bring with her some puffed rice, a staple food for any Bengali household at that point of time, and some ‘*kanthas*’ (handstitched cloth wrappers). *Muri*, a staple Bengali snack, is something in the making of which mainly the women in the household were involved. Similarly, the *kanthas* were made by women out of old worn *saris* stitched in layers and used in everyday Bengali lives. The fact of a *kantha* being handstitched out of worn-old clothes (sarees used by generation of women in the household) gives it the special quality of carrying the touch of loved ones (especially mother, grandmother, sister, aunt and other female members); wearing a kantha would mean retaining the touch of loved ones
close to oneself. The warmth the layers of cloth provide is also steeped in a sense of familiarity, security and belongingness. It is as if a continuation of a sense of an exclusive women’s identity carried forward through generations.

Being able to bring these two familiar items, muri and kantha, gives A. Hawlader immense mental peace and it seems, helps her to go on and accommodate with her sudden unfamiliar surroundings (after her displacement) and to retain some sense of rootedness and familiarity. Thus it gives the sense of a part of one’s lost self, one’s family and earlier generations being brought along.

Nurturing a deep sense of loss, Hemlata Sar kar, an inhabitant of Bansberia Women’s Home and relegated to the Permanent Liability Category, considers herself very much a victim though she did not witness violence first hand. In her narrative she says that she did not suffer communal violence during Partition but was made to leave everything that she considered her very own - her own house, her own soil, her in-laws’ place, her relatives et al. She thinks she is living here almost as a beggar having lost what was her own, there in East Bengal. Though she knows that her relatives are doing fine there in Bangladesh, the fact that neither of them can visit each other, itself creates a sense of potential loss for her. For her having to stay in numerous camps is also a state of victimhood.

Similarly for Suruchi Pal, an inhabitant of Noakhali and a sufferer of communal violence first hand in 1946 and also to some degrees during and after the Partition, more than a threat to self or the loss of life, loss is perceived as a threat to the socio-cultural fabric of her and her community’s existence. She particularly mentioned how the temples in her house of Hindu deities like Krishna, Radha –Govinda, Shetala etc were destructed and desecrated-burned, broken and damaged. The tension and apprehension in her tone was evident even after all these years when she recalled how the Hindus were petrified when
their water bodies were polluted with carcasses of dead cows, they were forced to recite the Friday Namaaz and the Hindu women were asked to throw away their sankha and sindoor-the most sanctified symbols for any Hindu married woman. Thus for this Hindu woman who is both internally and externally displaced, loss constitutes of not other physical/material details but more of these onslaughts on her socio-cultural life. She perceived it as a potential threat or as representative of the loss of the ethical-moral world and the value system, not only for herself but for other women like her as well and for her entire community. These have greater emotional value for her than loss of even her husband. She admits the fact that even in the absence of her husband she could have managed well with the help of hired tillers to cultivate her fields. But the apprehensions and threats of the rupture of the moral-ethical world closely related to her socio-cultural world finally made them take the decision to leave. But still they tried to negotiate the stay by moving out to another place called Chandpur within East Bengal without leaving the country at the first instance but eventually had to migrate.

For Suruchi Bala Kundu, a Permanat Liability category inhabitant of Dhubulia Camp and Infirmary, residing with her daughter and child grandson, the benevolent State was no replacement for the loss of her overseer. She saw herself as a beggar staring at the face of the donor-here the State. She said that when the donor obliged then they ate or else they kept staring. But in East Bengal, she stated, inspite of being poor they could eat two square meals. They were happy and did not have such a state of mind as she presently had. Here she had neither that time, age, those people, that benevolence, and that peace of mind, she said. In her narrative there was also the sense of the loss of the country ‘desh’, the ultimate symbol of the protector. The figures of the husband and son are as if surrogate protectors. In case of absence of the ‘desh’, one’s husband and son protects but in her case as if none of them were there-the ultimate protector and in its absence even the surrogate protectors. Thus for both Suruchi Pal
and Suruchi Bala Kundu and other women like them, the ‘Motherland’, one’s ‘desh’ takes on the motif of the ultimate protector. The image of the land with all its richness, with its flora, fauna, flowing rivers and repository of socio-cultural ethos is something that cannot get replaced by the image or concept of a very male protective patriarchal State, particularly in the minds of the women of this particular generation. Therefore an entire generation of women’s narratives shows signs of resisting the patriarchal structures in their own ways, forging solidarity through their own concept of a larger community, space and bonding which triggers shifts in the gender awareness of their generations and even the generations later.

The sense of resistance by the women, and their efforts to protect their own cultural spaces, were heightened by their experiences of the indignities at the basic existential level of hunger, disease and death. One after another, women recalled their stays in the State run camps, the inhuman existence there, the widespread diseases and the death of dear ones, the near starvation like situation, lack of any livelihood options and a life where they ceased to be humans. They were indefinitely being kept on dole. Dole was discontinued in cases whenever the camp inhabitants tried even minimum means of earning a living. These people also could not fall back on any skill training. Thus an entire generation and few subsequent ones were pushed into a complete state of dependence and their will to work was complete crushed.

For Biraj Bala Das, staying at Dhubulia Camp and Infrimary as a Permanent Liability with her two grown up daughters, there is no job and the only little support is the help given by the government. She terms this as begging of a sort on their part. She dreads a future when she will be no more and her daughters will be on their own, without any support, without any kin and without any skill base. She does not hold much of a hope from the State and says that with little help they could have atleast be standing on their feet and not living on the margins.
The whole exchange by woman like Birajbala Das is made more complex by the fact that these women are the inhabitants of women only camps and thus under the direct protection of the ‘benevolent’ protective State. Initially these women were subjected to a prison like regime imbued with gender insensitivity at every level. At present they are left exposed to the neglect and apathy of not only the State but also to more open forms of aggression particularly by its male citizens, like trespassing, theft etc. But nonetheless, these are the women, the sole members of earlier complete families, who talk about the loss of the ‘Motherland’, and this motherland as the ultimate protector rather than their functional patriarchal counterparts like husbands, sons and brothers. These women more openly reject the patriarchal domination and find solace in the female figure of the Motherland with all its bounty. Existing in the margins, they break away from the patriarchal trope in every form - the State, the family, the father, husband, brother, son et al.

**Displacement**

Displacement brings in its wake not only rupture in the mindscape in terms of being separated from one’s desh, home, community, it means physically being torn apart, uprooted and expelled or impelled to flee or move out/being dislocated from one’s home and the immediate surroundings. Unlike notions of loss and violence (except in cases of direct violence) which are perceived at a more abstract level, largely shaped by the structure of ideas within which it is internalised and identified, displacement is experienced at a tangible level of being a state physically felt.

Here I will restrict myself to discuss the displacement of people from erstwhile East Bengal to India across the border having migrated to India—the displacement of people from the transit camps to the government camps, displacement from one camp to another,
displacement from temporary shelters to squatter settlements in *jabordakhol* colonies, private or government sponsored colonies. I have also come across such people who have migrated several times back and forth between the two countries. Then there are few people who are both internally and externally displaced.

Here I have primarily focused on the discussion of the gender implications of displacement—what does displacement mean to a woman; how does she relate to it and remember it differently than a man.

“Women are the original ‘displaced persons’, leaving the safe haven of the natal home to the humiliation-riddled anxiety of the marital one”, comment Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (2002, 13). I found the migrant woman not just doubly displaced, having to leave both her marital house and the land of her natal house too, but as being displaced over and over again in her transition from the original home to the country and place of migration and the place of the final settlement. This is particularly true for the women in camps, who in most cases, have lived in more than one camp before finally finding a place in the camp that she presently resides. For some, it constitutes even staying in more than four–five camps since their arrival in India.

Here I would cite Padma Rani Saha’s25 case. She first arrived at Boangao from Barishal in East Bengal. She stayed at Boangao for two nights, then at Sealdah station for two–three days. From there she was sent to Ranaghat where she stayed for two months. Next, she was sent to Salbani Camp at Midnapore where she stayed for five–six years. She also stayed at Kapashdanga Colony in Hooghly for eight–ten years. Lastly she has been living in Dhubulia Camp since the last forty years. Similarly, Surabala Das living as a Permanent

---

Liability in Bansberia Women’s Home had to change places several times. She first stayed a few days with her mother and sister at Rupashree Camp at Ranaghat. Then was moved to Boangao for few days, next stayed at Babughat transition camp for three months, then at Bhadrakali Camp along with daughter for eleven to twelve years before shifting here at Bansberia Women’s Home where she has been living for the last thirty years.

For woman like Padma Rani Saha and Surabala Das, a state of being displaced and being in transit is not yet over as they have never been able to resettle themselves, recreate the home and return to the mainstream. People were uprooted again and again. Once they started settling in a place they were mercilessly uprooted and placed in another camp. This is evident from the narrative of Chapala Baidya who now lives in Kapasdanga, a re-settlement colony in Hooghly and recalls her stay in Kurmitola Camp in Murshidabad:

[I stayed there for many years, planted so many trees, many survived, drum stick plant, lemon plant…my husband died in]
that camp. We stayed there for 15 years…after my husband’s
death I requested the DM that that we have struggled here, we
will struggle wherever you take us from here, better let us stay
here, ten years many of us have been living together here, we
worked together, we planted jute, sowed chillies…anyway I
came to Bansberia with one young son and two daughters. I
stayed there for twenty years. Only women used to stay there
and those with sons who were small. I have been staying
here for eighteen years (my translation).]

Thus many like Chapala Baidya tried to connect to a place and rebuild a sense of
home but were displaced again and again. They have been living in a state of utter poverty
and destitution since as evident from their state (as I found them) and also their accounts.

This is especially true for the women who belong to the category of the Permanent
Liability. There are many such women in camps who are still known by the nomenclature of
being a ‘Permanent Liability’ of the State (discussed earlier in the Introduction). These are
the women who are still languishing primarily in the ‘women only’ camps but are also there
in camps with mixed population. Partition has not really thrown open any opportunities or
promise for them. Spaces have not been opened up and on the contrary whatever little space
they had in terms of the community life also got fragmented. Traditional roles neither got
challenged nor reinstated. Instead, even after more than sixty years of independence, they
were left to negotiate with completely new roles as Permanent Liability—a term bespeaking
their state of complete doom and helplessness.

Even for those who have never lived in camps and have been able to return to the
mainstream, the sense of dislocation continues till date and gets closely linked to the primary
sense of loss. Dislocation for them means a process which cannot be reversed. Thus the sense
of separation and rupture becomes more poignant in terms of home lost, homeland left
behind, family ties and kinship ties snapped forever. Thus there is the constant refrain/lament for a loss that cannot be recuperated. In many cases, this would also prompt another reaction, a total failure to describe the extent of loss in words. A rush of emotions would block articulation/definition.

Nighat Said Khan describing the experiences of the women in Pakistan makes a similar observation:

The dislocation for women was even more traumatic than men. Almost all of the ones that we spoke to were married at the time of Partition, and came here with their husbands’ family, but almost all of them got dislocated from their natal families. This further broke their links with their own homes and families and with that the support, physical and emotional, that women do get from their natal home even after they enter their marital homes (1994, 161).

She further elaborates “Many describe the instant that the decision was made to leave: that there was no time to put anything together or to make arrangements, or even to say goodbye. Women, were by and large, not consulted in making this decision” (1994, 159). This becomes especially ironic in the context of Khan’s statement that “the migrants from India have not been assimilated socially into the Pakistani fabric even at the micro level. They are still seen as refugees or panahgir (those seek safety) and identify themselves as such. This is true also in the Punjab despite the fact that in the Punjab the migrants share a Punjabi identity, culture and language” (1994, 159).

Then there is the stark semblance about how women perceived this dislocation as enumerated by Khan and as I heard them while interviewing the women of Bengal. Khan says “some of these women were even unaware of Pakistan until some years after its creation. Almost all had never heard of the Muslim League, or the movement for Pakistan” (1994,
Out of the 100 women Kahn interviewed only fourteen said that they had understood the implication of Partition, or felt that there was need for it, and even fewer understood the concept of a separate country with borders that could be crossed. She says for instance how women in Sind, “where nearly all had family still settled in India”, came with the intention to go back once “things had settled down”. This reminds me of the echo in the Bengal side where nearly all women stated how they had felt that the ‘going away’ would not be permanent and that they ‘soon would be coming back’ and that the disturbances were only a ‘passing madness’. The narrative of how ‘they had hidden their ornaments’ under ‘cow dung in the cowshed’, or dug it in the ‘courtyard of the house’ or ‘in the backyard’ or how they intentionally ‘drowned their utensils in the ponds’ only hoping to recover all after coming back, is very common with women remembering the instance of leaving home. The realization that the displacement was permanent and irreversible created a “perceptible yearning for the past” for the women that will not leave them. “This yearning is translated into how they perceive their lives” (Khan 1994, 159).

For a woman, displacement means the tearing apart of the very basis of her existence as discussed earlier. It means not only a re-organisation of space but also re-organisation of a whole set of factors related to it which has deep bearing on her life. Rachel Weber points out that it offers a redefinition of gender.

The act of migration involves more than just a change in physical environment; it involves a rupturing of bonds to a place and to a place-based identity (Buttimer and Seamon 1980). Recreating the home and the house puts an increased pressure on the domestic sphere, women’s territory, and involves an increased reliance on the strategies and resources within the home. The boundaries between public and private shift back and forth to accommodate this reorganisation of space (1995, 199).
The creation of refugee camps and colonies, shelter in rented houses and transition from sprawling houses close to nature to a one-room refuge involved a “reorganisation of space as well as an alteration of the emotional affiliations with the home.” claims Weber. With this reorganisation of space comes a refiguring of gender roles. In the camps where several families are living within the same space, the andar/private—bahir/public divide gets dissolved to create new terms of social and familial interaction.

The lack or complete absence of privacy is not only felt in terms of conjugal life but also in terms of more basic, immediate requirements of life. Lack of the basic civic amenities—inadequate facilities of cooking food, bathing and toilet facilities have a different implication for women. Exposure to men prompts adverse experiences and a sense of insecurity, sense of insult and threat of indignities. In case of those in re-settlement colonies and rented houses too, there is also a reorganisation of space and corresponding changes in social interaction and redefinition of individual identity. In these places women always find that their spaces have shrunk.

The loss of the exclusive domestic space caused by displacement brings corresponding loss of bonds of intimacy, support, friendship that these spaces had carved out previously for the women. Most of the families could not afford to build/rent more than one room initially. The physical barriers of public and private disappeared after they migrated. Women shared their space with men; they complained about their sense of permeability and lack of privacy.

During that period Kolkata witnessed one of its worst housing shortages to date. There are instances when people tried to forcibly occupy houses abandoned by Muslim occupants/owners. Even women participated in such acts of forced seizure and occupation.
Thus the women, hitherto uninitiated into the public domain, would in this case be in the forefront under the changed circumstances of uncertainties created by displacement. The interview cited under elaborates a similar experience:

[At that point of time, the houses at Maniktala got forcefully occupied. We had not got anything as yet. How long so many of us could live there. My maternal uncle’s family, our family all had arrived at the same time at my aunt’s place, there was no more room. Thus we too tried for forcible occupation. But we were unfit to do such things. Lady police came and evicted all. Then we rented room at Mirzapur Street and stayed there for some time. After that we rented a room at Sovabazar and left for that place (my translation).]

This happened not only in the Kolkata metropolis only but also in the suburbs and in places where the local Muslims were either driven out, killed or they themselves deserted the places and fled or were shifted to some other place by government intervention. The exact happening could not be ascertained from the narratives, neither were the people who
occupied such spaces keen to know. The more immediate reaction of the moment demanded a search for a shelter, a place to stay, the foremost requirement for the survival of the family.

Sushila Das recalls:

[All of us went to the camp. Mother said I am not going to go to the camp. Ma used to stay in a Musalmaan house at Kakinara, Gol Ghar….From Sealdah I went to Bankura and my mother, grandmother, uncle and few others went to Kakinara. My aunt used a shovel to drain out that blood, then wiped it with cow dung and mud and then started living there. Once I visited them, I found something like beetle nut stain in the rooms, even in the bathroom. When I asked they replied that the Musalmaans were killed here and thus the stains (my translation).]

Then there is not only a reorganisation of the familial space, not only is the house different in the refugee colony, but the entire community is organised in a different manner. Women in their recollection of their previous home, speak about self-supporting, closely knit/enclosed communities cut off from those unrelated either economically or familially. They describe sprawling compounds with ponds, fields and large open spaces. In contrast, in the colonies, communities are interdependent, the spatial organization follows a more “maze-like” pattern rather than sharp marked out boundaries and lines of organisations. Also there is an assimilation of people from various class/caste who due to the changed circumstances come to inhabit the colony. This brings about not only to a redefinition of the boundaries of the community but also leads to reconsolidation of self-identity vis-a-vis the community at large and within the family. In the camps, similarly, there are no sharp boundaries or strict lines of organisation of space or of caste/class groups though as I have observed there is concentration of the lower caste groups in the camps.

Another change prompted by displacement is the disintegration of large joint-families into single nuclear units. The exodus itself prompts families to break up; with some members migrating before the entire family decides to move out. In many cases, it is especially relevant for the womenfolk of the house who are the first to be transported to a safer place. Reorganisation of space after migration also contributes to this disintegration. In the camps, for instance, lack of space and organisational difficulties prompts the disintegration of large joint-families into smaller nuclear male-headed groupings and permanent liability camps for the widows, women with or without children and without male escort, and for destitute women and children.
The concept of a family grouping puzzle many of the newcomers in the camps says Rachel Weber. This creates a strong sense of loss and insecurity with the dissolution of age-old family ties and organisation. For the people in the colonies and in the rented houses, it is a similar break-up into smaller units with a male head, creating a sense of loss, and isolation. Spatial as well as economic factors contribute to this process of disintegration initiated primarily by displacement. Sanyamani Sarkar migrated with her relatives and neighbours, but once in the camp she was separated from the others. She found herself alone in the women’s camp with her son who was allowed to stay with her as he was still an infant. Her relatives were sent to various other places. She recalls:

আমি ছিলাম, আমার ছেলে ছিল, আমার ছেট ছেলে বলে সাথে ছিল। আমি মেয়েহেলেদের ক্যাম্পে ছিলাম।
আমার আর্থিক স্বজনদের কোথায় কোথায় পাঠাইল; বিহার, মহারাষ্ট্র, আন্দামান (Sanyamani Sarkar, interview).

[I was there, my son was there, my son was small enough, so he was with me. I was staying in women’s camp. My relatives were sent to various places—Bihar, Maharashtra, Andaman (my translation).]

Displacement also brings in its wake tremendous mental agony caused by both physical hardship and the sense of suffering and loss that grows from it. Women often remember the kind of insecurity/uncertainty and trauma they felt on being jostled on the way during their migration, all the while feeling a threat to their and their family’s life and honour. Looting was common on the way. The journey often entailed several detours and travel by foot, boat, steamer, train and all sorts of combinations and lasted for several days, at times getting halted at some place due to uncertainties of all kinds. There were chances of
separation from family members or children, harassment from all quarters—authorities and men of the ‘other’ community in East Bengal, apathy from the authorities and general population on this side. Total chaos, over-crowding and acute civic conditions were prevalent at the places at the border or the transit centres. Equally intimidating and humiliating were the search operations at the border apprehension of which created havoc in the minds of the women (discussed in the Introduction). To quote Sushila Das:

Our stop was Khulna Benapol. When I reached Khulna from my village they kept all my stuff at Khulna and Benapol. There a Muslim girl took away the chain on my neck, the bangle from my hand, I had money tucked in my thighs; after putting us inside the godown that woman checked us. They opened our hairs, checked inside our armpits, everywhere. The children were turned upside down. They looked whether money was tucked in the waist, inside the breasts etc. This way they tortured us while checking (my translation).]
The people who found a place in the camps have more harrowing stories to tell as to how there was severe shortage of food, drinking water or other basic civic amenities. Starvation, disease, death of infants, exposure to inclement weather and the like were very common experiences for these people. Those who made it to the rented houses and colonies, the scars felt in the wake of the journey and in its aftermath left deep impressions of trauma and insecurity/uncertainty.

[We were able to come after much hassle. First we came to Barishal on a steamer. There were streams of people everywhere. We tried for four days to board the steamer but failed. On the fifth day we somehow managed to get a place after pleading with the police. We were searched after reaching Khulna. The Musalmannns searched us. We stayed there for one day. We had to take our food on plant leaves similar to a destitute feeding arrangement. From there we reached Sealdah station. There were also hundreds of people. The state of affairs cannot be described. What to say. One cannot just bear the sight of the spectacle (my translation).]
Displacement in a way compelled people to undertake a journey, from a familiar space to an unfamiliar terrain, from certainty to an unending uncertainty; a journey which is rid with anxiety and ambiguity and one which did not have a fixed destination or either a hope of one. I found that for some, in their minds, this journey is not over yet as they are not fully able to comprehend its impact in their lives and understand their present state of existence even after all these years.

Ashis Nandy calls it the “journey to exile”, an exile which lasts for not a decade or two but one which “ensures a lifetime of homelessness” (1995, 306). He remarks that the journey of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as young nation-states cannot be narrated without reconstructing and working through the memories of the other journey “which the victims—and other’s identifying with them—have continued to make in their mind in the last five decades.” According to Nandy, that journey “like a dirty unending war, has territorialised and frozen the shifting, fluid cultural and psychological borders among religious communities in South Asia” (1995, 321). “It was a journey that south Asians had not previously seen. It uprooted people from habitats that they had known for centuries, if not for thousands of years” (1995, 307). The diversity in South Asia claims Nandy was based not only territorially but also in the intricate structuring of “interpenetrating, layered lifestyles, cultures and self definitions.” Partition dealt a severe blow to it.

Nandy also elaborates how people often cope with this journey. Often in this journey, that one undertakes again and again in the mind, “one remarkable and consistent part…is the fondness and affection with which the survivors remember their multi-ethnic, multi-religious villages” (1995, 322).

Underneath the fearsome memory of villages exploding in violence, is the image of a village, pristine in its ability to
reconcile—in fact celebrate—differences, even when that difference is tinged with caste hierarchy and principles of purity and pollution….Usually, it would appear that, over the years, all struggle, suffering and conflicts have been painstakingly erased from the village of the mind….It misleads one about the past and romanticises what have always been ambivalent, if not hostile social relations….It looks like a crucial means of coping with posttraumatic stress….Resorting to an idyllic past may be the survivors’ way of relocating their journey through violence in a universe of memory that is less hate-filled, less buffeted by rage and dreams of revenge (1995, 322–333).

At the same time, Partition violence, and the ensuing trauma, dislocation and loss becomes in memory “an interplay of two forces—the village that has been contaminated or poisoned and the city that regurgitated the poison that was already within it” claims Nandy (1995, 323).

Nandy next elaborates the notion of the city for the people and the emotions attached to it.

The city of the imagination had already turned mildly pathological during colonial times….It now symbolized the loss of neighbourhood and community, combined with greed, amoral individualism, and a certain ruthlessness. Its seductiveness was now tinged with a certain sinfulness…a journey to the new city could no longer be imagined as only a self propelled one, a product of one’s personal whimsy…one could now be forced to abandon one’s village home and pushed wholesale into a foreign city (1995, 323).

Survivors remember this dislocation very vividly, “remember their victimhood, they live with the trauma; they even re-do in their minds the journey across the border, marking the end of innocence, even the ill treatment and brutalization at the end of the journey in
strange cities”. Thus it is only in the memory of the village that “some semblance of restoration of a moral universe is possible”, a village from which one has been exiled and the memory of a culture to which one should be loyal (Nandy 1995, 323).

Nandy provides another interesting insight into the forms of dislocation and its significance for the people when he argues:

If one had been living in a city in pre-partition days and not in a village, the image of the city has been split. For those uprooted, the memory of the abandoned city has acquired—especially if they came from addictive cities like Lahore, Calcutta, Delhi, Dhaka, Karachi, Lucknow, Hyderabad—some of the features of the remembered village. It continues to haunt the victims despite the passage of time. However, that is not the whole story. On another plane, the city that gave one shelter has become witness to one’s humiliating, forced integration into an anonymous mass. This other city of the mind is the one where one became a worker or a professional; and here one ceased to have a vocation or occupy a unique, culturally identifiable space. On this plane, the city took away one’s cultural location, only to give one an identifiable cultural stereotype. For, being a refugee also often made one part of a recognizable, usually endogamous caste-like group (1995, 323–324).

Perhaps this explains, why for many of the displaced, their official abode, the country where they have been living since more than last sixty years, still remains a foreign land and their abandoned village or city still lingers in their mind as the eternal homeland.

Finally, another very important point that needs to be addressed while discussing the impact of dislocation on women is the question of what dislocation meant in the lives of the women who were abducted. Though actual accounts of abduction is difficult to come by in people’s narratives of Bengal partition and also in the recorded histories (except as in
Noakhali), an allusion to people having known about it was made by almost every second person I have interviewed. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin’s description of the abducted women can be stated as a case in point to highlight the plight of the women in question, no matter which community they belonged to.

Abducted as Hindus, converted and married as Muslims, recovered as Hindus but required to relinquish their children because they were born of Muslim fathers, and disowned as ‘impure’ and ineligible for membership within their erstwhile family and community, their identities were in a continual state of construction and reconstruction, making of them, as one woman said to us, ‘permanent refugees’ (1993, WS-6).

Thus dislocation for these women meant not only a dislocation and lack of anchoring in terms of their identity but a constant state of flux also in terms of the immediate milieu, space and time, they were supposed to negotiate with—from their native, natal/marital place to the place of the abductor; if recovered, from the custody of the recovery officials to the nearest camp; from the state of recovery to the state of repatriation; from the temporary Homes in the country of repatriation to the respective families or relatives and in case of rejection by the same return to the Homes to a now “alien family”.

In all, approximately 30,000 women, Muslim and non-Muslim, were recovered by both countries over an eight-year period. Although most of the recoveries were carried out between 1947–1952, women were being returned to the two countries as late as 1956, and the act was renewed in India every year till 1957, when it was allowed to lapse (Menon and Bhasin 1993, WS-6–WS-7). The recovery of the women and children to their ‘rightful’ community became a point of national honour which held great importance claims Veena Das. It was as if the only way to restore the social and moral order and to vindicate
community and national honour. However, it is the government’s construction of the identity of the abducted women that needs to be called into question states Menon and Bhasin.

It was a construction that defined her, first and foremost, as a member of a community and then invested her with the full responsibility of upholding community honour; next it denied her any autonomy whatever by further defining her as a victim of an act of transgression which violated that most critical site of patriarchal control—her sexuality (1993, WS-8).

Menon and Bhasin argues how by becoming the “father-patriarch”, the state reinforced the “official kinship relations” by discrediting and in fact declaring illegal, those practical arrangements that had in the meantime come into being and were functional and were accepted and thus in a way it seemed that the only answer to “forcible conversion was forcible recovery.”

This reinforcement of the legitimate family required the dismembering of the illegal one by physically removing the woman/wife/mother from its offending embrace and relocating her where she could be adequately protected. It also entailed representing the woman as ill-treated and humiliated, without violation or choice and –most importantly- without any rights that might allow her to intervene in this reconstruction of her identity and her life (Menon and Bhasin, 1993, WS-11).

Also during that time there were people who tried to critique this stand of the government. Menon and Bhasin point out how one member of the Parliament, Mahabir Tyagi in fact, declared that such a recovery was the real abduction, legally speaking; “my feeling is that already violence has been committed on them once…would it not be another act of violence if they are again uprooted and taken to the proposed camps against their wishes” (1993, WS-10). The women had absolutely no say in the whole matter, for instance,
where they are to live, with whom they are to live, and in the matter of the custody of the children. The legislation declared their marriages to their abductors illegal and their children illegitimate; they could be pulled out of their homes on the basis of a policeman’s statement; they could be transported out of the country or confined in camps against their wishes; have virtually no possibility of any kind of appeal and as adult woman and citizens, be once again exchanged between countries and by officials.

In this context, it is interesting to consider the whole issue of abduction and recovery in the context of the women in Pakistan. Nighat Said Khan states “Pakistani society, did not relate to the issue of abducted women and to the women themselves, in the same way as did the Indian State” (1994, 170). Similarly, Menon and Bhasin make an observation about the state of affairs regarding the abducted women in Pakistan which gives a picture contrary to that in India.

The experience of Pakistan suggests that recovery there was neither so charged with significance nor as zealous in its effort to restore moral order. Indeed. Indeed informal discussions with those involved in this work there indicate that pressure from India, rather than their own social or public compulsions, were responsible for the majority of the recoveries made. There is also the possibility that the community stepped in and took over much of the daily work of rehabilitation, evidenced by findings that the destitution of the level of women was appreciably lower in Pakistan…both the Muslim League and the All Pakistan Women’s Association were active in arranging the marriages of all unattached women, so that “no woman left the camp single”. Preliminary interviews conducted there also hint at relatively less preoccupation with the question of moral sanction and ‘acceptability’, although this must remain only a speculation at this stage (1993, WS-10).
Finally it is appropriate to conclude with what Menon and Bhasin have to say: “It is rather unlikely that we will ever know what exactly abduction meant to all those women who experienced it because it is rather unlikely that they will ever talk of it themselves, directly; society still enjoins upon them the silence of the dead around an event that, to it, was shameful and humiliating in its consequences. Yet society and state, father, husband and brother,…placed upon them the special burden of their own attempt to renegotiate their post-Partition identity, ‘honorably’” (1993, WS-11).

There are many gender implications of displacement that has come out here. For all the migrant women displacement meant primarily breaking of ties and a redefinition of gender experiences. For them it impelled a complete reorganisation of space, gender roles and a whole set of related factors -a complete wrenching from one’s roots and bearing into a perpetual, irreversible process of unsettling changes. Many of these changes were quite intimidating for these women. More than conceptual, the physical barriers of public and private disappeared in the course of displacement bringing in its wake a whole set of negotiations for the migrant women. The loss of the exclusive spaces caused by displacement brought corresponding loss of bonds of intimacy, support, solidarity that these spaces had carved out previously for the women. Thus the constant refrain to loss of ‘phul gacch’, ‘pukur’; the constant duel existence for most of these women between open space (pukur, gacch)/crammed camps, colonies, squatter settlements; sense of peace/sense of separation, loss; nostalgia for desh /remorse for present.

Under the protective regime of the State the camp women were put under a state of perpetual displacement. Almost all the camp inhabitants testified to the fact of being shifted again and again. Thus whatever spaces of solidarity were being built in the wake of their stay were truncated again and again (as exemplified by the interview here of Chapala Baidya),
thus reinforcing the pain of the snapping of ties with one’s Motherland. The tag of Permanent Liability further clamped down on whatsoever sense of autonomy outside the State perview and thrusted upon them an identity of complete dependence and control. These apprehensions were conveyed through the women’s narratives.

There are also narratives like that of Sushila Das, a Permanent Liability category camp inhabitant from Ranaghat Mahila Sibir who posed ethical moral questions about her own family and community when she spoke about the complete chaos to find a shelter that followed the displacement. She talked about times when she found refuge in a camp and the rest of her family members went to take possession of some evacuee property.

It seems her mother came to occupy and started living in a house that retained marks of the violence that was perpetrated on the people who inhabited it before. Inspite of them having to clean the house of the blood stains in the aftermath of the killing they remained unperturbed as the overarching urge was to secure a place to stay. As narrated by the respondent, the extent of the blood clot was so that it had to be scooped out with spades. Thus the place was cleaned and later wiped and purified with cow dung, in keeping with the Hindu rites of purification. But some blood stains remained or could not be removed as the respondent later discovered. But that did not deter the occupants from continuing there.

The narration throws open several issues- a tacit acceptance of killing of minorities and of the prevailing sense of how the enemy property deserved to be owned by the majority community (here the Hindus) by whatever means. The whole question about whether the occupants themselves killed the inhabitants before moving in or just occupied an evacuee property is also thrown open for investigation.

For women experiences of displacement due to abduction and exposures to sexual harassment in the wake of the displacement (while her transit from one country to another)
are features which were a direct fall out of their gender identity vis a vis the ‘multiple patriarchies’ of State, her own community, the oppositional community, the family, religious group etc.

Sushila Das narrated her escape from Barishal via Khulna and Benapole. She mentioned searches which involved physical violence that verged on sexual assault of a kind though done by women searchers. The narrator especially mentioned that the searcher was “a Muslim woman” (Musolmaaner biti) and that she not only took away all her belongings but strip searched her. She stated how all the private parts of her body were subjected to inspection. The searchers, even though women themselves, exerted force and aggression in conducting the search and as though the primary intent of the searchers was to subject the female body of the ‘other community’ (here Hindu women) through scrutiny, sexual aggression and transgression. In this case, the description of the search reminds one of similar ones done in prison cells, on criminals to prevent escape attempts or violence within the cells. Thus a whole aspect of criminality or criminal offence was thrust upon the migrants in such cases of their attempts to bring away whatever valuable with them.

Here is a case of the women of the other community (here Muslim women searchers) too getting implicated by her own community within the system and becoming the tool for dispensing the order of the patriarchal State machinery and its bureaucracy.

The women’s narratives thus foreground a range of feelings and reactions that stemmed from their experience of displacement. These women, however, never let the remorse and resistance that they felt come in the way of the reconstruction of life in the pre-Partition scenario. Rather they became the main catalysts of change for the family and the community and became pivotal for their survival and sustenance. They played indispensable roles in the
reconstruction of lives. Examples are galore in Camps and Colonies of how women made negotiations and pressed for changes and built bridges and camaraderie.

Survival

Robert J. Lifton defines the survivor “as one who has come into contact with death in some bodily or psychic fashion and has himself remained alive” (1967, 479). The survivor’s role has been of great significance in understanding the magnitude of the impact of the cataclysmic events in recent times from Hiroshima to other “extreme” historical experiences, like the German Holocaust.

Amrit Srinivasan in his essay “The Survivor in the Study of Violence” states that the fascination with the survivor—“the one who is touched by violence but manages to ‘get away’ and lives to testify to the brute facts of violence”—is surely very new in the study of violence, more particularly communal violence—one of the characteristic problems and phenomena of the modern world.

It was in the production of a new kind of evidence, whose documentation would compensate for the unexplained ‘residues’ of rational history-writing, that the survivor proved crucial. As an ordinary member of society speaking from private memory and experience, the survivor furthermore provided a corrective to the understanding of history as an exclusive specialist activity. Since, by very definition, his testimony did not take the normal for granted as something known and in need of no explanation, the survivor represented a historical source which facilitated the movement of history away from event to structures. The earlier preoccupation with the unique could now give way to an interest in the ordinary responses of actions of men in society. Given the lack of recorded historical data on average people in everyday
situations, the survivor’s privileged epistemic position as one mediating life and death, chaos and order, speech and silence proved very valuable in permitting the historian to smuggle the social structure into his studies, through the back door as it were...the mechanism of remembering and forgetting, describing and classifying, recounting and recreating, explaining and expressing, reflected in the survivor’s testimony, all led back to the social fabric itself and the secrets of the collective life of which he served as a receptacle. The outburst of mass hysteria, aggression, totalitarianism and confrontation to which the survivor was witness, certainly dwelt on the irrational forces of history; but at the same time they pointed to the hidden and intangible forces that shaped society. The apparent tendency of the historian, therefore, to concentrated, via the survivor, on shattering experiences and periods of disturbances and stress, was only to highlight the tension between rational structures and instinctual reactions common to social life which could not be allowed to go unrecorded. It was the survivor’s revelations, consequently, whether ‘healthy’ or ‘morbid’, symbolic or rational, which provided a prime documentary source leading to the collective consciousness of the people under study (Srinivasan 1992, 306–307).

The value of the survivor for the study of violence came into focus in India, particularly following the Delhi carnage of the Sikhs in the aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi on 31 October 1984. A variety of investigative literature was produced and varied documentation activity was carried out at that time, on the violence as a measure of the unprecedented nature of the riots and their ghastly dimension. The emphasis was not on evincing proof but on recording an event “as it was seen by people who lived through it’, the survivor’s speech moved centre-stage and it was permitted a significance beyond the personal and purely instrumental” (Srinivasan 1992, 309). The particular brutality of the violence
brought back memories and led to connections to be made between previously unconnected events of national significance, claims Srinivasan, given the simple but very real fact that those who experienced 1984 in Delhi were the same as those who experienced or inherited the collective memory/amnesia of Pakistan in 1947. “7.5 percent of Delhi’s total population, it must be kept in mind, is made up of Sikhs, most of whom settled there after Partition” (1992, 310). It is also important to mention in this context that most of the survivors of 1984 were widows and children.

In my interviews, for the people who witnessed Partition, Survival had a deep rooted significance. Survival for them was a part of a constant effort in the interpretation of events of historical importance as they impinged on their personal lives and altered their relations within themselves and with the outside world for all times to come.

Veena Das in her essay “Our Work to Cry: Your Work to Listen” quotes Lifton (1967) to make her observation.

The survivor is not only confronted with creating patterns of mourning for a whole lost world, but also with recreating the world. Lifton (1967) calls this process formulation, and defines it as the process by which a survivor establishes those inner forms which can serve as a bridge between the self and the world. The psychological work of formulation includes, for him, the important psychological work of creating a sense of connection, a sense of symbolic integrity, and a sense of movement. The survivor is in a state that is marked by isolation, meaninglessness and stasis, and the establishment of these three processes is part of the psychological process of reformulating the world (quoted in Veena Das, 1992, 391).
Das says that she saw this in work with the survivors of the 1984 Sikh riots in Delhi. “The survivors of Sultanpuri were, indeed, engaged in this work of reformulation…the movement was essential to the task of reconstructing the self and the world…their sense of connection and integrity could be established in how the future can be framed” observes Das. In this reconstruction of the future the women played an important part, “their encompassment in the community and the possibility of new kinds of movement helped to frame the future” (1992, 391-392).

In my study of the Partition, I have found the women always playing a crucial role in their struggle, to use Veena Das’s words, “to establish meaning and build the bridges between the self and the world”. For these women, Survival does not always mean getting over or being reconciled with the sense of loss but, nonetheless, learning to accept, cope and live with it and reconstruct life rather than giving up on life which again point to the indomitable human spirit to survive amidst all odds. The sense of deep resignation which comes with age, with the witnessing of gross human misery and experiencing immense agony make them leave with no more wish at this age but to die or be one with God. Yet none of them contemplate the wish to take life in their own hands.

In spite of having witnessed death/disappearance of family members/children, being uprooted from home and left almost as destitutes, having experienced dishonour to self/family, having minds scarred beyond repair and lives permanently altered, they struggle for rebuilding life and regain sanity. In fact many of the women living in women only camps expressed a sense of camaraderie when they discussed how over the years they have lived together, helped each other and discussed their memories amongst each other.
Surabala Das of Bansberia Women’s Home narrates how they spend life within the camp:

আমরা সব একা একা থাকি, সবই করতে হয়, দোকানের জিনিস, কয়লা, নিজেরা গিয়ে কিনি। যা পারি আমি। এইভাবে চলে ...আমরা ওইসব দিনের কথা নিজেদের মধ্যে গল্প করি, যখন দুই তিন জন একথানে, একসাথে হই (S. Das, interview).

[We all stay on our own, we have to do everything, stuff from the grocer, fuel, everything we have to buy on our own. Whatever we manage we bring. This way life goes on—we all discuss those days amongst us, whenever two three of us sit together, by ourselves (my translation).]

Namita Ghosh, the retired general assistant of Bansberia Women’s Home has made the camp her second home. She did not marry, does not have a family of her own but has adopted a girl of one of the inhabitants who is long dead. She has been living in the camp for the last forty years. She became tearful as she talked about this place:

নিষেধা জীবন শেষই হয়ে গেল। কত বছর থেকে এখানে আছি আমরা, এই এক যাত্রায়। এখন এখানে আমার মাতৃ পুরনো কয়েকজন ইনস্ট্রুমেন্ট ছাড়া আর কেউ নেই। তা আছে তো, চলে যাচ্ছে। এখন আর কদম বাঁচব বল (N. Ghosh, interview).

[Now life is almost over. So many years we all have been here. In this same place. Now like me there are only few old inmates here. But we are still here, life is going on. Now how long will we live? (my translation)]
The excruciating suffering and pain of the women raise a question as to what makes survival worth it. The answer perhaps is the unique human spirit of never giving up hope. Here I would like to examine what survival means in a woman’s life. In my study, though I came across fascinating tales of survival both of men and women, I feel some differences in the ways in which men relate themselves to survival and how women related to it. Here I will explore some.

In the first chapter, I have already discussed how the question of women and their honour emerge as a central issue of contestation in the whole discourse of nation building. Though aggression on the women of one community by the ‘other’ community is considered a potential form of violence, loss or threat of loss of the honour of the women is a loss considered far more vital. In case of displacement fear of rape, abduction and dishonour are primary motivating factors behind large-scale exodus. In case of survival, the survival of the women in an unscathed state becomes one of the primary considerations/concerns of the family/community. It becomes a considerable pre-occupation for the women themselves who seem to identify with the community’s view and consider themselves as the repository of the community’s honour. Nighat Said Khan too similarly observes “The threat of rape, molestation and abduction was considered more fatal than death itself, since to live a life without honour was a fate worse than death” (1994, 164).

After a long interval, even now when women recall their experiences of survival in the face of threat, the anxiety in their voices appears to be palpable. They remember chilling experiences where they have managed to outlive the threat, their honour mostly being at stake. For instance, some of them recall having disguised themselves as the women of the ‘other’ community, erasing/hiding all markers of the community that they belong to—like wiping off sindoor, giving up the sankha (bangles), and wearing burkhas. Unmarried girls
(being special targets of attacks as virgins) would either adopt to hide behind a *burkha* or would be posed as a married woman. Good looks provoking more advances (as admitted by the women themselves), women would take advantage of the cover of the *burkha* and use it as a tool to both camouflage and withhold looks and identity.

The few men who come up with narratives of adopting to similar strategies of survival, in the guise of a Muslim, did not have to protect self-honour which stands as the central concern for survival, especially for the women. For the men, it was a mere attempt to save life from aggression (except in cases where castration threats were obvious). Here I would like to state that in not one of my 116 interviews did I come across reference to incidents of castration though few people have referred to incidents where men were stripped and checked. Perhaps there is a social taboo and corresponding silence attached to the theme which has to do with male sexuality and threat to it. Thus the fear and fact of castration during partition violence is something that has seldom been dealt with, except in literature from Punjab. I have not come across any such themes in literature from the Bengal side. However, the potential silence around the whole issue makes it difficult, but nonetheless, important to be probed.

Women would also recall tales of getting assistance in survival form the ‘other’ community prompted by acquaintance/friendship with family and village ties. In such cases, there is a paradox where women do not hesitate to let go of their community markers and pose as women of the ‘other’ community in order to survive; in other instances, they will preserve their sense of otherness even in moments of acute crisis and will never allow their identity to get merged with that of their saviours. The women would not eat, drink water at a Muslim house or even use the same utensils for preparation of food which ‘they’ have used.
The first case may be exemplified by citing the instance of Dr. Shanti Basu who recalls an incident of the time when she was staying alone in her marital house in Jessore at the time of Partition. Some fifteen men, women and children had come to her house to seek refuge for a night. They said they were being chased away by the Musalmaans. The men were wearing lungi and the women had wiped off their sindoor. For the second instance, I will cite the interviews used in chapter two (Subsection: Otherness of the Saviours) dealing with violence and memory to prove my point. In the case of Labanya Prabha Das, it is the more vital anxiety of the honour being at stake that prompts adapting to new strategies of survival; in case of Rani Roy Choudhury, it is more a question of long internalised values that is being put into jeopardy by changed circumstances. Life and honour no longer in acute crisis they would hold on to these beliefs and look for alternatives—like coconut water would replace normal water and uncooked food replace staple diets.

Survival for women in most cases does not mean only survival of self. It is more—a survival with the family, with children. Survival and sustenance of the home, hearth and the family are important as women remember how they have risked their lives, come out of hiding, cooked food and then gone back into hiding again. The women remember the kind of suffering their children had to endure in the process of trying to avoid danger of an attack. Women recall specific problems related to pregnancy, childbirth that created difficulties in adapting to survival strategies. In one instance, a respondent Labanya Prabha Das, even after all these years, nurses the guilt of leaving her sleeping child behind in the house in a frenzy to go into hiding fearing the news of an impending attack on the village. Though the next instance, she remembers coming back and taking the child along, the guilt has never left her. Thus survival instinct of the self is closely linked with that of the others in the family. Similarly Sushila Das gives vivid details of the desperate situations the women found themselves in while trying to save themselves and primarily their children:
Survival for women, in most case, is also closely associated with community ties. Women remember taking refuge in groups which were constituted only of women and children of the village and of the particular community under attack. They would huddle, jostle together with their children in a particular place in case of an attack or an impending one. This state of togetherness offered a sense of security and solidarity. Thus even in face of a threat, survival does not mean foregoing community ties and engaging in finding a refuge in isolation. For men, it is more a case of finding a hideout for oneself in order to survive. I have found no account of men huddling together but in almost all the narratives of women there is this reference of the phenomenon of huddling together as a group. This sense of connectedness pervades the tales of survival of the women and perpetually provides the impetus for survival and makes survival worth it.
We all escaped in whatever state we were in, to the house of the local zamindar—the Duttas. We stayed there for three four days together. We used to eat there, sleep there- all the women folk of the village (my translation).

Labanya Prabha Das remembers another instance:

Irrespective of day or night we often used to go and hide in the forest. What days we had (she became tearful). All the time we were apprehensive of an attack. Without food, without sleep, without day or night we lived that way. It was the month of phalgun. Sometimes we would stealthily come and get a blanket from home to cover our child. It was not my plight alone. Everybody was hiding in a similar way (my translation).]
And again she says:

আমরা রাল্লার মাঝে উঠিয়া দোড়াইতাম (L.P. Das, interview)।

[We used to run, our cooking half way through (my translation).]

Closely linked to the act of survival is the concern for sustenance. Concern for sustenance underlines every step right from outliving the violence and the loss and undergoing the displacement. Interestingly, under all these circumstances, the arrangement for food always seems to remain the liability and concern of the women. Sustenance for the women does not mean maintenance/providing for the self. It is intrinsically linked to the sustenance of the family and the children.

The women often remember how even in the face of threat in hiding they were continuously plagued with the concern of providing food for the children and others in the family. I have already discussed how they came out of their hidings, got back to their devastated homes, prepared some food and came back to hiding again. Women remember that even when they were huddled together in a group, they managed to cook some food and feed their children. During and after displacement, managing food for the family would similarly be a constant preoccupation and cause of anxiety for the women. Women remembering camp-experiences, particularly recall their concerns of seeking out sustenance for the family. Food and drinking water were of the primary concerns; others being that of shelter and surviving ailment and disease. In the aftermath of displacement, amidst physical and economical hardships, arranging food and shelter remain a primary cause of anxiety equally for the women who were not settled in camps but elsewhere in the colonies/rented houses.
Thus the whole issue of survival/sustenance not only of the self but also of the family in the context of uprootedness, loss of home, hearth, security and space become significant, making survival more meaningful. Hence it also takes on a special area of remembrance for the women.

One may refer to any or almost all the interviews of the camp women who narrate similar concerns. Even after all these years food and proper shelter remain one of the central factors of anxiety for the women in the camps especially those who are living alone with daughters. The ration/dole they get is often irregular and insufficient.

Nighat Said Khan talking about the experiences of women from Pakistan makes a similar observation:

How did women cope with the extreme physical and psychological trauma ….How did they ‘synthesise’ this experience and creatively transform it? How did they pull through? Rather than seeing the women as the flotsam and jetsam of history, we will look upon them as those who keep things from falling apart (primarily because they have been able to keep themselves from falling apart),…..At such times, we believe that women would have the inner strength to not only make a relationship with the future, the absence of the present, for themselves, but also for their families, and by so doing, sustain—perhaps unknowingly and certainly invisibly—a society equally wounded and traumatized (1994, 166).

Survival and sustenance especially in the aftermath of displacement mean a total re-articulation/redefinition of self and the surrounding. Changes in the physical environment prompt a reorganisation of the physical attributes and conditions of life; it urges readjustment in the mental plane and attitude too. “The women” argue Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta “displayed exemplary resilience, fortitude, patience and strength to emerge victors
against the combined nightmare of assaults, exodus, displacement, grinding poverty and broken psyche. They not only kept their new shelter in camps and refugee settlements intact but also ventured out to acquire skills and earn” (2002, 17). The memory of this struggle occupies a large part of recollection of those days with its myriad implications. Though many scholars have highlighted the “historic assertion of the refugee woman as the tireless breadwinner”, I have found that for the women becoming a breadwinner it is not always an assertion of their identity and aspiration. For many, though they continue to struggle relentlessly for a livelihood, it is a yoke which brings in its wake painful negotiations with the self and the familial/social relationships.

The women’s relationship to the public and the private sphere changes and with it comes a re-figuration of gender. Rachel Weber in her essay “Re (creating) the Home: Women’s Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta” has pointed out that with nations and communities reconstructing themselves, there is bound to be a change in the way women are perceived, signified and deployed to serve new purposes and agendas. She says that during the period in the aftermath of displacement and exodus, the agenda was the reconstruction of the home and the homeland and women’s role inside and outside the home changed to accommodate these new responsibilities. She quotes from Joan Scott (1985) who argues a similar point “Massive political upheavals that throw old orders into chaos and bring new ones into being may ultimately revise the terms and the organisation of gender in search of new forms of legitimation” (quoted in Rachel Weber, 1995, 205).

The women’s negotiation with the changes in their physical environment and their space is also closely linked to their sense of sustenance and survival of the family. It is not always a liberating experience for them. Many of the women I talked to, in fact, remember
the sense of humiliation they feel being associated with kind of jobs below their status, for instance, as housemaids. For the women settled in the camps in rural settings it means being associated with all kind of odd jobs like working in the agricultural sector which involve hard physical labour. Then in most cases, venturing out into the public domain brings with it a sense of insecurity and exposure to indignities, as many of the women still recall.

For many of these women, it does not mean forging of new identities or exploring new possibilities, rather it means a mere extension of the domestic sphere, making them bear the double burden of working inside and out of home without any real choice to forego any of these responsibilities. Women’s role in the public sphere gets legitimised, I feel, only when it does not upset/alter the delicate balance of the domestic sphere and power relations. Rachel Weber similarly argues:

Refugee women did not really move into public life, but rather the domestic realm expanded to include their participation in political, community and economic affair….Many returned to the world of the home as soon as their families were comfortably situated, financially and physically. Many of the second generation daughters do not work outside the home because, as one of them stated, ‘We don’t need to now’ (1995, 208).

The kind of work they come to be associated with too has a degree of stereotyping; women being housemaids, lower grade clerks, stenographers, nurses and the like. A deep sense of humiliation imbued the recollection of Bakul Sil:

ওই কোনো রকমে কণ্ঠে শিঠে চলত । মাইনসের বাড়ীতে বিগিরি করসি, আমার ছেলে তাঁর কাজ করত, আর আমি বিগিরি লোকের বাড়ি (B. Sil, interview)।

[We could just manage somehow. I had to work as a domestic maid (she started crying at this point). My son used to work as
tanti (weaver) and myself as jhi (domestic maid) (my translation).

Surabala Halder recalls that after being affected by Partition once and for all, when she came to India she became the only earning member of her family, comprising of her husband, her daughter and her two sons. They were at a point of starvation. Her daughter died. She took up the job of a domestic help and has been working since. I think for her, the demarcation of the private and the public has ceased to exist. However, her role as the one who has to look after the house and the children (in her case even the grand children) has not changed. It has simply undergone an extension where she has the double burden of working inside and outside of home and has no choice over any of them. Another woman Subhadra Gain recalls the state when the official dole was discontinued:

[For about nineteen/twenty years the dole was stopped. We were asked to go to Dandakaranya for rehabilitation but we refused to go. Government help was withdrawn because of that….Then we managed by working very hard. Both of us...]

উনিশ কুড়ি বছর অন্তত ডোল বন্ধ ছিল । ওই দন্ডকারনে পুনর্বাসনের জন্য যেতে বলেছিল,যাই না ভাবে তার জন্য সরকারী সাহায্য বন্ধ করে দিয়েছিল... তখন এই খাটাখাটিনি করে দুজনে চলত । দুজনেই সমানে খাটাখাটিনি করতে লাগলাম । ...মাঠে ঘাটে জন মজুরি থাকতে লাগলাম । তখন ছেলেগেল ওলা ছোট । এক একটা ঘরের ভিতরে পাঁচ কেন্দ্রি করে ছিলাম । ...জন মজুরি, যে যেটা করে থেয়ে বাঁচতে পারে, এইভাবে প্রায় উনিশ কুড়ি বছর থাইলাম (S. Gain, interview)।
started working equally hard…started working as a daily labourer/wage earner in the fields and outside. Then our children were small. Five families together we used to live in one room…Daily labour or whatever way to feed, we took to working and continued in such a way for nineteen/twenty years (my translation).]

Even after getting rehabilitation, she describes the ongoing state of hardship for women:

পুরুষেরা ধর এক থেকে, এক কাজে গেল, হল না, ফিরে আসলো। ...বিশেষে মেয়েছেলরা কি করবে, ওই সূচ সূচ কারোর জামা প্যান্ট রেডিমেডে সেলাই করে দিয়ে। কেউ বিড়ি বান্ধবে, মানে এখনো কেউ বসে নেই। কোনো মেয়েছেলরা বসে নেই। মে সাইয়ে দশ ক্লাস, এগারো ক্লাস পড়ে, তাও এসে বিড়ি বান্ধবে। তারাও বাঁকি সময়টা বিড়ি বান্ধ, পাতা কাটে (S. Gain, interview).

[Male members go to work but come back if they fail to find one. What happens to the women in the evening… Some of them get themselves engaged in sewing jobs. They sell shirt, pants for readymade wears. Some start binding bidis (tobacco leaf). No woman sits idle. Even a girl who is studying in class ten or eleven also comes and bind bidis. In their spare time they bind the bidis, cut leaves (my translation).]
For many women like Namita Ghosh, the retired general assistant of Bansberia Women’s Home, it means foregoing studies for taking up a job to sustain the family and provide for the younger siblings.

আমি পড়াশুনাকরতে পারলাম না । খুব ছোট বয়সে আমাকে ও আমার দিদিকে চাকরিতে চুকে পড়তে হল । কোন, সেতেরা বছর বয়সে । এখানে কি পেয়েছি? সব নিজের তোরে তৈরি করতে হয়েছে । তোমাদের জেনারেশনের কেউ চিন্তায় করতে পারবে না... এখন ভুলেই গেছি কি পেয়েছি, কি হারিয়েছি (N. Ghosh, interview)।

[I could not continue my studies. At a very early age myself and my elder sister had to take up a job. I was only sixteen or seventeen then. What have I got here? Everything had to be acquired by my own effort. People belonging to your generation cannot think of it...I have forgotten now what I have achieved and what I have lost (my translation).]

My own aunt, Sabita Ghosh, took up job at the under age of seventeen, as the only bread- winner to feed a family of nine which migrated from East Bengal and tried to resettle in Kolkata as a result of Partition. She continued working in the same office for forty years and retired from there. For her, working was not only an assertion of her agency but also a necessity. The economic constraints gave her no options.

তখন তো এমন প্রয়োজন, কারণ বাবা একা, আমার এভিলো ভাই বোন, বাবা সামান্য মাইলে পায়, বাড়ি ভাড়া দিয়ে থাকা, নাহলে পড়াশুনা হবে না, খাওয়া দাওয়াই হত না, কোনো রকমে চলত।
[Then the necessity was such because father was the only earning member, we were so many brothers and sisters, he used to get a meagre salary, we had to pay so much of rent, otherwise we had to forego our studies, do without food, somehow we managed. Thus I realized that without me doing a job none of us brothers or sisters would have managed a foothold. Thus as a result of my job we all could get established. Without me working my father could not have managed alone. Then father had such an accident. Even after that we could continue our studies just because of my job (my translation).

In spite of the sacrifices that she had to make throughout her life she felt that she could contribute something and make a difference to others. In one of her anecdotes she remembers how she struggled as a working woman to raise her son Bua:

বুয়া হল পরে,প্রথম পাঁচ মাস ছুটি নিলাম তো, উইডাউট পে, আর কভ, অফিস তো জায়েল করতে হবে, চাকরি তো আর থাকবে না... আমাকে সকল অটার মধ্যে বেরোতে হোত, দশটায় এটেডেস। ফিরে আসতে আসতেও আটটা হোত। একটা মেয়ে ছিল,
[After Bua was born, I took a leave of five months but how long can one take leave without pay, after that I had to join, otherwise I would have lost my job....I had to go out at eight in the morning as my attendance was around ten. By the time I returned it used to be eight in the evening. There was a girl who used to look after Bua...today one person tomorrow another, he grew up like that...sometimes on my return I would find such a cacophony. Once I found that he had a fall and his nose had a cut here, then another day I found that he has smashed his head. He used to be very naughty and had fallen off the balcony...another day he was found hiding in the paddy field...yet another day I found that he had set fire to all our clothes in his attempt to look for his clothes after lighting a lamp...this way one day or the other almost every day I used to hear about some mishap after coming back...and what food he...
used to have who knows…he grew up this way….I was in such mental anxiety (my translation).]

Her story (also partly stated in the Introduction), from beginning to end remains one of self-denial; denying oneself attention, basic access to decent food, clothing, medical help, rest, leisure, and above all denying her to exercise her own identity as a woman. For women like her, who took on the role of the breadwinner, self-denial ironically gave rise to a sense of empowerment. The self-denial never got addressed by the self because then one had to give up that space of being the caretaker, it never got addressed by others in the family or the society because then somebody else had to step in and don the mettle of the saviour. Thus acknowledging the space created for women as a result of Partition without addressing the whole culture of self-denial that got imbued amongst the entire generation of women who came out into the public domain, would be unfair.

Luckily, for me my aunt never appeared as a victim of circumstances though the ingrained nature of her self-denial even after all these years makes its presence feel at instances. Her tremendous courage and strength to carry forward her struggle, to see her family survive and not to give up in the face of adversity gave us all, the next few generations, the spirit to hold on, to have hope, to rebuild, to stay connected. Her figure always remained elusive to me, so tender after all these years of struggle yet so firm. She is the one I saw crying at the slightest distress of others; again she is the one who had all the while made the harshest sacrifices. She has remained one of the greatest inspirations in all my endeavours in my life.

However, her story does not exist in isolation as already discussed. The assertion of the refugee women merged into an already established tradition of women’s activism in Bengal. This was something unlike the situation in Punjab. In Bengal when the refugee
women came into the scenario they did not land in a vaccum, they could not immediately get integrated within a larger women’s movement either. But in Bengal there had been a constant politisation of women since a long time. Moreover, the refugee women carried with them their own shift in gender sensibilities.

Thus in this section the various themes that emerge are that how for many women survival remained a life changing experience; that survival of not the self rather the immediate family and the larger community remained their primary concer; how in post Partition scenario their experiences of coming out of Partition helped them forge new grounds of solidarity and gender identity.

Survival remained a near death experience for many of these women. Sushila Das from Barishal, a place which witnessed large scale communal violence during and after Partition, remembered her brush with death. As already cited, the narrator mentioned situations where they had to hide amidst graves or spaces dug out for graves; women gave birth in such situations; babies were gagged to stop them from crying etc. Here it seems that there existed a thin line between life and death. Babies were born inside these spaces. Also taking refuge inside graves, which in normal instances people avoided even having any contacts with, implies the degree of desperation and the extent to which people are pushed during such instances where life and death lose their distinctions. The living world is no longer enough to seek refuge thus people would take refuge in the world of the dead. Going to the graves to save oneself thus takes on the ultimate metaphor of going even to the nadir to save oneself, pushing oneself to the last extent. It also talks about taboos being broken in times of crisis-Hindus taking refuge in Muslim’s graveyards.
In life threatening situations too, the primary concern for women remained not the survival of self rather an effort and instinct of collective survival, as is revealed by the narratives. Such efforts foreground new areas of solidarity and care forged by women in situations of strife. Labanya Prabha Das’s narration here, like many other women validated this claim. The narrator described how in that troubled time, women in particular faced the impediment by sticking to each other; thus bespeaking of their sense of getting peace and sense of security from a state of togetherness and solidarity. The narrator stateds how the women ate together and managed some sleep together, which in a way it seems, gave them some respite from the threat of persecution. Thus the individual crisis got absorbed within that of the greater crisis faced by other women like the narrator and thus offered her some solace to bear it with greater resilience and courage.

Women resisted patriarchal value systems and redefined gendered roles to enter spaces hitherto considered to be men’s, in order to sustain their families. Camp women narrated how they ventured into hard physical labour, a bastion of male members. Subhadra Gain, primary educated, inhabitant of Coopers Camp recalled how for twenty long years, when their dole was discontinued (as they refused to settle outside West Bengal) she toiled with her husband as a manual labourer doing very heavy physical hardship. Both she and her husband worked primarily as agricultural labourers. Their children were all very small then and it was extremely difficult for her to manage her home and her work. They also could only afford a very meagre existence where they shared the same space with five other families. They also did some odd jobs to sustain themselves. She stated how even after the rehabilitation the ongoing state of hardship continues for many of these women.

She narrated how women took up hardwork not only outside but also within their homes. Apart from that, whatever little spare time they managed to get they tried to add to
their income by doing odd jobs like rolling bidis, sewing etc. Even adolescent girls were not spared from this gendered division of labour, their social obligation and stereotype. Very young girls, still in their school, would work along with their mothers in their spare time to add to the family income. This gendered division of labour and the initiation into taking up this regime of double work thus started early for even the second generation of these refugee women.

Starting very early, as adolescents to function as adults, barely at the age of fifteen or sixteen, they had to brave the outside world on their own to provide for their families. Nobody offered them any space or nurtured them to attain a kind of maturity to face the challenges that life posed for them in the aftermath of an upheaval like Partition. This also brought in its wake tremendous mental and physical agony, hardship and sacrifice.

Women across the board, irrespective of their educational or class background joined the workforce. For middle class women education was of great moral and emotional value and having to forego it brought in its wake great mental pressure and agony. Narratives of most of the women from the middle class had the constant refrain about the fact that how they had to forego their studies to engage in gainful employment to provide for the rest of the family. In many cases they had to take up jobs much below their own levels –working as clerks, stenographers, typists, attendants, nurses, sales girls et al and thus forced to feed into the larger gender exploitation and stereotype.

Their struggles however, marked an indictment of the State which on one hand, assured refuge to these women and their families and in some instances, as in Camps, even exerted moralistic efforts to protect them and on the other hand was unable to address even their basic needs to dignity, food, shelter, livelihood and social security like health, childcare.
etc. These experiences led to a shift in gender sensibilities and helped them to mark their presence into an already established tradition of women’s activism in Bengal.

To chart the history of women’s emancipation in Bengal in brief - in the early half of the nineteenth century, in the nationalist discourse, the issues of “women’s emancipation” remained one of the central focus. The women’s question however, seem to disappear from the “public agenda of the nationalist agitation in the second half of the nineteenth century”. Partha Chatterjee terms this period precisely as one when “the lives of middle class women, coming from that demographic section that effectively constituted the “nation” in late colonial India, changed most rapidly” (Chaterjee, 1999, 133). These changes, argues Chaterjee, took place mostly outside the arena of political agitation and unlike the women’s movement in the nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and America, the battle for the new idea of womanhood was waged in the home.

The Brahmo women already had certain liberties granted to them within their community by the late nineteenth century. As early as 1882 Sarnakumari Devi, the sister of Rabindranath Tagore took on leadership roles for her community and formed the Ladies Thesophilical Society in Calcutta (a multireligion association of women) to educate and impart skills to widows and other poor girls to make them economically self reliant. She also became a member of the Indian National Congress. Women from urban educated communities formed their own women’s organisations during this time in all major cities like Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and started encouraging women to come out of their houses and take interest in broader public issues.
Partha Chatterjee in his essay “The Nation and its Women” remarks “The spread of formal education among middle class women in Bengal in the second half of the nineteenth century was remarkable” (1999, 129). He quotes the contemporary figure of that time to show that from 95 girls school with a total attendance of 2,500 in 1863, the figures went up to 2,238 schools in 1890 with a total of more than 80,000 students (ibid). He cites the example of women like Chandramukhi Bose and Kadambini Ganguly who were celebrated as what Bengali women could achieve in formal learning. “They took their bachelors of the arts degrees from the University of Calcutta in 1883, before most British Universities refused to accept women on their examination rolls” notes Chatterjee. He also emphasises how the development of an educative literature and teaching materials in the Bengali language undoubtedly made possible the quite general acceptance of formal education amongst middle class women in Bengal. Around this time there is also large number of women writers emerging from the middle class homes.

In 1910, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, daughter of Swarnakumari Devi formed the Bharat Stree Mandal (Great Circle of India Women), with the object of bringing together “women of all castes, creeds, classes and parties… on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of the women of India.” (Aparna Basu). It opened branches all over India to promote women’s education. Sarala Devi considered Purdah to be the main obstacle for women’s education and teachers were sent round to women’s homes to educate them. She wanted women to escape male domination. Sarala Devi started training women in the use of the sword and *lathi* in 1903, as she was actively involved in nationalism of a militant kind (Kumar 1993 as quoted in Mapping the Women’s Movement, Chapter-4). Only women were allowed to join her organization. The Bharat Stree Mahila Mandal however proved to be a short lived venture. Another woman, Devi Choudhurani was also active in pressing for
women’s rights social, economic and constitutional and was active in Indian national Congress.

A large number of women in Bengal were also involved in the *Bango Bhango Andolone* (to resist the partition of Bengal suggested by Lord Curzon in 1905), in the Swadeshi movement 1905-1911 and also in the Home Rule movement. But the involvement of really large number of women all over India in the national movement began when Gandhi launched the first Non Co-operation Movement and gave a special role to women. Women also participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement, in the Quit India Movement and in all the Gandhian satyagrahas. They held meetings, organized and marched in processions, picketed shops selling foreign cloth and liquor and went to jail all over India. Bengal was one of the main nerve centres of all these activism with women taking leadership roles.

While thousands of women joined the freedom movement in response to Gandhi’s call, there were others like Preetilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta who could not accept his creed of non-violence and joined revolutionary or terrorist groups. The two well known terrorist groups in undivided Bengal Anushilan and Yugantar had many young women members.

In 1927 the AIWC (All India Women’s Conference) came into being and many educated Bengali women joined its ranks and became dedicated workers. People like Ashoka Gupta actually worked along with Gandhiji in some of the worst effected villages in Noakhali during the 1946 communal carnage in undivided Bengal.

Communist women were already active in undivided Bengal trying to sensitisie and ward off communal feelings amongst the masses. Gargi Chakravartty states that the Bengal Famine of 1943 provided the backdrop for a dress rehearsal for a number of activist communist women, who later got involved in the struggles of the refugee women in the
aftermath of Partition (Chakravartty 2005). The Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS) was the central body set up by the communist women during the Bengal Famine to reach out mainly to the poor peasant and working class women as they were the worst hit. AIWC alone was not equipped to deal with such a human tragedy were 3.5 million people were killed. Soon MARS had 40,000 women members working as relief workers comprising of both communist and non-communist women like Rani Mahalonobish, Lila Majumdar, Pushpamoyee Basu, Aruna Munshi, Shanta Deb and Mira Dutta Gupta to name a few important ones. MARS was also active in the aftermath of the Great Calcutta killing in August 1946 and did door to door campaign to promote peace and curb communal feelings. MARS activist Leela Roy’s group (the women’s wing of the Forward Bloc) and other voluntary organisations worked with a large number of refugee women at the Sealdah station (Chakravartty, 2005).

With the banning of the Communist Party MARS was banned too and there was a heavy crack down on communist activists like Manikuntala Sen, Suhasini Ganguly and Gita Mukherjee etc. Non Communist members of MARS protested the arrests. At this time the mothers of many of these political prisoners who were detained without trial formed the Mother’s Committee (Chakravartty, 2005). These elderly women, till that point only confined to their domestic space, came out onto the streets in processions demanding the release of political prisoners claims Chakravartty. Such peaceful processions also had to face the bullets of the police and also had its martyrs-Latika, Geeta, Pratibha and Amiya killed (on 27 April 1949) but though not directly connected with the later refugee movements, it set the trend for similar acts of refugee women taking to streets and defying the police to put forward their demands in later days.
Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the Bengal famine with the militant struggles like Tebhaga, women’s agency entered a new dynamism. According to Kavita Panjabi:

The Tebhaga movement took place across undivided Bengal in 1946-47 to retain *tebhag*, or 2/3 instead of the 1/3 of the crop they cultivated on land sub-let by *jotedars* or middle-men. Catalysed by the Communist Party of India, it occupies an important place both in the history of land reform in India, and in the history of local national liberation struggles from below. Tebhaga was also marked by the largest participation and leadership ever of women in rural political struggle in Bengal. Urban women from the Communist Party of India and the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity (Women’s Self Defence League) united with thousands of peasant women to shape the movement and lend it force (Cooper 1988; Chakravarty 1980; Chattopadhyay 1987; Ghatak 1984; Sen 1985). …there seem to have been approximately 21,000 to 25,000 enrolled women activists. The actual number of activists is estimated to have been 5-6 million (Ghatak 1984: 35; Kamal 1996: 2), so it seems more likely that about 50,000 women participated in the movement. Tebhaga continued to its last phase in 1949-50 only in some areas such as Nachol, Narail, Khulna and Mymensingh (in East Pakistan) and South 24 Parganas, Midnapore and Hooghly (in West Bengal) (2010: 59).

According to Gargi Chakraborty many Leftist women activists from East Bengal, working with the grassroots landed in West Bengal with the streams of migrants and got scattered in camps and colonies. These women eventually played a great role in mobilising the women into the refugee movement and the larger leftist movement. Women in colonies, who had the least political orientation, were in the forefront in all the struggles when it came to saving their settlement against the hired goons of the landowners or the police, mainly in the *jabordakhol* colonies (Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty 1990; Gargi Chakravartty 2005;).
Sukumari Choudhuri, a Noakhali victim turned activist, who was in the forefront of the worker’s movement describes her witnessing and taking part in several such instances:

I myself have seen how the nefarious agents of the landlords tried to evict the refugees from the empty plots and how the heroic land grabbers resisted them with all their might. Using ordinary kitchen utensils, like ladle and chopper as weapons, the womenfolk staged defiant battles… we organized many agitations and withstood teargas and brutal lathi charge of the police. (The Trauma and the Triumph Vol-2, 2006, 148)

Women kept on making their presence felt in several of the movements like the food movement, the movement against the Eviction Bill and the several workers’ strikes that took place throughout the fifties and sixties. Sukumari Choudhuri, recalled her days when she gave leadership to one such agitation that took place in Bengal Lamp Factory at Jadavpur, Kolkata.

This was around 1953-54. With the festive season drawing near, there was an agitation for the payment of Puja bonus. Female workers at that point numbered around 150 to 200. The picture had been quite different in the initial years, we were hardly ten at the beginning. Gradually refugee women trained and helped by Nari Seva Sangha and other government organisations were inducted. We used to fix filaments. The male co-workers worked on the machines. Later girls also shifted to machine work. The bulk of these workers hailed from East Bengal.

Our salary was very poor. In 1955, our agitation for the payment of bonus sharpened. Matching shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts refugee women participated wholeheartedly in the agitation. (The Trauma and the Triumph Vol-2, 2006, 145)
She reminisces that their strike had continued for about six months and how women from other refugee colonies like Bijoygah Colony and Nisha Colony too joined them in their collection drive to support the workers. These agitations were quite radical in nature and the most significant aspect of them to me appears to be the fact of the extent of active participation of common middle class migrant women in them.

Gargi Chakraborty states that the active participation of women in the refugee movement in protest against the Eviction bill and their demand for regularisation of the colonies broke down some inhibitions in the minds of the men and men in tradition bound orthodox families too had to accept the new situation and the great sociological change which even entered the middle class and lower middle class families. (2005, 70) Women were seen widely in public life in colony committees and school committees.

Chakraborty points out the inner contradictions of this change

This politicisation of the refugee women and their identification with the Left (as they soon actively campaigned in the election) however, could not remove the gap between the professed ideology of gender equality and the experience of their day to day life…Communist women, at that point never engaged in a critique of the patriarchal structure, which was evident even in the organisational structure of the Left parties. Women were asked to lead processions in the struggle for the rights of the refugees but they were marginalised in the decision making process. (2005, 71-72)

Inspite of the limitations the Leftist movement offered these women a space, mobility and legitimacy hitherto uncommon amongst the women from this particular social structure.
The cultural world of West Bengal was also agog with the participation of the migrant population. The Group Theatre Movement and starting of IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) created a space for women to enter the public domain of the cultural world and take part in performing arts like the theatre, song and dance. Economic need was a major reason which brought women towards theatre, clubs, jatras and cinemas. But the theatre movement gave some kind of legitimacy to these kinds of choices. In fact, refugee girls also took up jobs in police service (the first batch of women was appointed in the Calcutta Police in 1949), and women like Sabitri Chattopadhyay and Bina DasGupta (the former a well known Bengali film actress and the latter a very established Jatra actress from yester years) took up acting as a profession (Chakraborty, 2005).

All the colonies had a pulsating cultural life. The much awaited annual events of Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Swaraswati Puja etc organised at a community level, “apart from the devotional aspect,….became a major cultural event in the colony life” (Chakraborty, 2005). Besides, there were celebrations of Paila Baishakh (Bengali New Year), Pochishe Baishak and Baishe Sravan (birth and death anniversaries of Rabindranath Tagore). Performances by the community men and women were common in these places. Several of my respondents also talked about attending sessions called “sab peyechir ashor” in their colony neighbourhood every evening as young children where they were taught song, dance, performances and physical exercise (known as Broto Chari Nritya). Several clubs also joined hands to organise cultural programmes. The annual cultural event “generating enthusiasm among the displaced people of the entire Jadavpur area” held for three to four days every year by Jadavpur Sanskritik Samiti (Chakraborty 2005, 98) can be a case in point. Similarly Banga Sanskriti Samellan would take place every year for three to four days at Marker Square, an open ground behind College Street Market. The larger chunk of the audiences would
comprise of the refugee population. Thus cultural activities found a prominent place in the lives of the colonies and formed a progressive cultural ambience.

Thus this entire period “marked some small but important shifts” in the position of the women. It is the state /tag of victimhood that refugee women resisted or tried to dispel at every level by forging their agency and identity to bring about a positive change in the milieu that they inhabited. Therein lay their agency and their significant contribution to history of the times.

**Conclusion**

In the whole upheaval caused by Partition, women played significant roles, which reveal important aspects of gender relationships vis-à-vis the family, the community and the State. Though heavily implicated within the patriarchal systems of each of these institutions, women showed extreme resilience in overcoming their adversities and taking on roles which became central not only in the reconstruction, survival and sustenance of their selves but more so of the family and the community.

For many of these women their sense of being uprooted and displaced is still not over after all these years. The desh that they have left behind has perpetually occupied their memory and they still live a ‘dual life’, a life in which Partition marked a watershed. Partition meant a rupture of the very basis of their lives. For the women living in the camps this loss of home, village and community is even more palpable, given their present state of existence on the margins of society even after sixty years of independence. Closely linked to the loss that is hardly reconciled is the perpetual schism suffered by the women in terms of loss of peace of mind and sense of security.
The women, be it of the Camps or of the colony, refused to accept the State as the “father-patriarch” and retained in their minds their allegiance to the figure of the protective, benevolent female figure of the Motherland. It is the only thing that gave them some sense of refuge, security and solace. They did not enjoy the status of citizenship nor did they aspire for one. “I am a refugee still”, ‘Bangladesh is my desh” and “I do not understand what this place is for me”, “this is somebody else’s country” were some of the statements that brought out their total cynicism and refusal to accept their present identity or the effort to be tagged by the State. Such accounts actually opened up spaces where women’s agency challenged the accepted patriarchal structure be it the identity of the father patriarch, the husband, the male guardian or the larger State.

As already stated earlier, in spite of having witnessed death/disappearance of family members/children, being uprooted from home and left almost as destitutes, having experienced indignities and dishonour to self/family, having minds scarred beyond repair and lives permanently altered, women struggled to rebuild lives and regain sanity. Memory became an important ingredient for them to build bridges between the home and the world; between their generation and the next; between states of complete ennui to one which offered some hope in life.

Thus the tendency to read a Partition survivor’s narrative as “always a victim’s narrative” does not apply to especially a woman’s narrative. Imposing any “fixed identity” of victimhood on these narratives tends to rob the narrators of their identity as “agentive subjects” in a very complex arena of conflicting forces. Rather the women open up new spaces of gender identity as they talk about greater solidarity across communities; offer critiques of their own community’s norms and structures; reflect upon shifts in gender
sensibilities and greater assertion and resistance against State manoeuvres; and protectively hold on to memories of exclusive socio-cultural fabric and kinship ties and build bridges across generations.

The substantial increase in the visibility of refugee women in the public life of West Bengal, their pursuit of education, and their participation in the cultural and economic life of the State changed the social milieu of West Bengal; it also created opportunities for women here to forge new living forms of identity and assertion in the public domain. Thus the economic, political and cultural participation of refugee women in public life truly set up milestones in the transformation of not just the women’s movement, but the entire gamut of public culture.

To me these narratives, especially those of the women, have always come forth as embodying the ultimate human spirit of survival and efforts to outlive predicaments that change life forever and punctuate memory for all times to come.