Chapter - 7
Freezing Silence: Unveiling the Voice of Women
Partition Victims of Cachar

Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed, women whose children and husbands are sacrificed in the name of national integrity and unity. And for every fire that is lit it is women whose job it is to painfully build a future from the ashes... We women will have no part of this madness, and we will suffer it no more... Those who see their manhood in taking up arms, can be the protection of no one and nothing.

(From a pamphlet brought out by Women Against Fundamentalism, Delhi, cited in Butalia 2000:181)

This chapter grows out of a concern to look at Partition and its impact on refugee women in Assam's Cachar District. Women experienced double victimisation; as refugees and as women. They painfully bore the brunt of Partition as vulnerable victims. However, their voices have long remained unheard. It is therefore, necessary and important to study the pangs and predicament of women victims of Partition in Cachar. The present chapter is an attempt in this direction.

Patriarchy and gender biases played out strongly both during and after Partition. First, man acted as the perpetrator of violence and women as vibrant agents of post-conflict reconstruction of family and community. Second, migration was encouraged both during Partition and after the communal violence in East Pakistan in order to protect the honour of women symbolised as community honour. Third, women responded to the catastrophe of Partition with relentless effort, rekindled spirit and feeling of care and continuous sense of responsibility. They set aside their own sufferings and disturbances while
representing the other. All these remained unacknowledged. Rather patriarchy internalised it as a matter of fact that women are a class by themselves over whom violence can be unleashed. Fourth, in spite of shouldering a very dynamic role they were never the decision maker except the destitute or single women and in that too their role was not acknowledged. Given such crucial factors, this chapter is an attempt to venture into the psyche of the women Partition victims of Cachar. In doing so, we take into consideration their experiences of displacement from their homeland and of integration into Cachar. Their voices muted, they suffered silently behind closed doors. Hence an attempt has been made in this chapter to break the muteness, and to foreground insights from gender perspectives. We hope that the study would bridge the gap in studies dealing with Partition history which hitherto remained incomplete in the absence of tale and trauma that women experienced in Sylhet and then Cachar. The study is primarily based on interviews with surviving refugee women in Cachar, the office bearers of women organisations and local people. It is supplemented by archival records, government documents, memorandum and legislative assembly debates and relevant literatures.

7.1 Refugee Women and Patriarchy

Women as the victims of violent patriarchal structure of society continue to experience physical and emotional violence both within their homes and outside. In fact, the marginal position they generally endure in society turns them extremely vulnerable during conflict and the experiences of women in the Partition of India was no less different. In spite of all this, the women’s chronicle in the man made disaster like Partition, by and large remained in the veil of silence due to patriarchal prerogatives which largely ignored women’s experience. The male-centered elitist historiography of the Partition of India tends to exclude perhaps deliberately the brutality and violence unleashed on women during Partition and its aftermath. The Subaltern School also maintains that “there exits groups like peasants, women and others whose voices have remained silent or marginalized, who may possess a notion of community
different from, even in opposition to, that of the nationalist Project” (Guha Thakurata 2003: 102).

In fact, the coerced silence that prevailed around the Partition in the absence of women’s narratives gave us partial view in understanding the history of the Partition in India. “Implied in their coerced silence is the usurpation of their right to speak by the patriarchal ally-inspired state’s meta-narrative” (Khan 2007: 201). However, excavating the memory or experiences of women victims of Partition provided us significant inputs to retrieve the women’s voice that lay shrouded in freezing silence and could act as a regenerative force in articulating the history of the Partition in India.

Significantly the famous precept of Joan Kelly is relevant here who intended to “restore women to history and history to women” (Dasgupta 2003: 13). The useful insights that this study could inform hopefully enrich and supplement the experiences of women victimised in Punjab and Bengal.“Partition narratives of Assam can acquire totality only if it can accommodate the ‘inner terrains’ of the female psyche” (Datta 2010: 76).

But the women’s voice as counter voice or to restore women’s voice through oral narratives entailed some limitations perhaps due to a couple of social, psychological and cultural factors. Many a time, it was difficult to excavate the extremely painful and frightening nature of the memory of women survivors due to the reluctance to remember their traumatic past or more significantly the accompanying fear literally freeze them into silence. This was in fact evident while interviewing the women Partition victims of Cachar. Another difficulty we often have to encounter in interviewing women was that, most often the male-dominated society considers women as inferior and hence they were not allowed to speak or their experiences were counted irrelevant. It was not uncommon that in many cases women were so much conditioned to patriarchal values that they themselves volunteered the male member/s present during interview to speak in their favour by turning the questions or queries directed to them. Rachel Waver, an American scholar of Urban Planning who also worked on Bengal Partition observed, “I also faced difficulties in interviewing women.
Often at times husbands and sons would speak for the women in their families or would dismiss the women’s achievements, choosing to focus on their own lives and careers instead” (Weber 2003: 61). However, to explore the situation that the women entailed and endured during their displacement from East Pakistan/East Bengal and particularly from Sylhet and their eventual integration to Cachar helped us to construct narratives on women Partition victims. We could reasonably argue that the women Partition victims experienced marginalisation both as women and as refugees (Basu Roy Choudhury 2007: Khan 2007: Datta 2010). This was further compounded with the largely insensitive attitude of the Assam Government and the apathetic Central Government.

7.2 Unveiling Silence; Literature and Novels: Voices of Women Writers and Novelists on the Partition of India

experiences of the Partition in East were little represented and there has been a silencing process in the writings about the two Bengal (Guhathakurata 2001: Chatterjee 2007). Shelley Feldman focuses “the invisibility of Bangladesh/ East Pakistan in Partition historiography characterized by silence and exclusion” (Cited in Menon 2003: 124).

Reading of Partition novels written by women too entailed the lingering affects of the Partition trauma. These novels sensitively explore the inner turmoil and pangs and predicament of the women. Bapsi Sidwa’s *Cracking India* (1991), Krishna Sobti’s *Sikka Badal Gaya*, (1994) Attia Hussain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, (1979), Mani Kapur’s *Difficult Daughter* (1999), Quratulain Hyder’s *River of Fire [Aag Ka Darya]* (1998), Taslima Nasrin’s *Phera* (1993), Jyotirmoyee Devi’s *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga [The River Churning]* (1967), Anish Kidwai’s Memoir *Azadi Ki Chhaon Mein* (1990), *Torn from the roots- a Partition memoir* written by Kamla Patel (1977) etc. explore the tragedy and the trauma that the women had to suffer during Partition and its aftermath. The near absence of any narrative reinforced the trauma and the trial that women experienced since their displacement up to their rehabilitation and integration in Cachar remained in the cold storage in the minds of the victims.

7.3 Women, Community and Honour: Perspective and Manner of Migration: Sylheti Women Refugees in Cachar

The painful consequence of displacement experienced by the innocents during the Partition of Sylhet was a relatively ‘less known chapter’. Since Sylhet is marginalised in Partition historiography and the silence that prevailed in the minds of the novelists, littérature and the victims of Partition in erstwhile Surma Valley or present Barak Valley perhaps speaks many predicaments to grapple with. It is observed that most communities share the common concern to represent woman as the icon of honour of the community. “Women, even in ordinary peaceful times, are seen as icons of the honour of the community. The easiest way to assail a community, therefore, is to define the sexual purity of its women” (Bagchi and Dasgupta 2003:4). Since Partition unleashed a chain of violence and women were targeted as the prime victims of persecution, many
people in Sylhet feared the possible rape and dishonour of women and that acted as a strong motivating factor of migration of many Hindu Bengali displaced and the refugees. Thousands crossed over primarily to save the honour of their women (My interface with Radharani Das on 5 June 2006).

Though rape was less marked its presence in the Bengal Partition and Sylhet as compared to Punjab but incidents of rape could not be eliminated altogether. From the oral accounts that have been extracted through interviews and conversation with the Partition victims in Cachar and other relevant documents, we had come across incidents of rape that were reported from many areas of East Pakistan. The renowned Congress leader of Sylhet Purnendu Kishore Sengupta who was one of the witnesses of East Bengal Violence Investigation Commission also reported cases of rape in Kulaura rest house in Sylhet district (*Yugoshakti* 26 July 1950). There were many cases of forced marriages too.

The desecration on women in many villages under Biyani bazaar and Barlekha police station in Sylhet district like Sannseshwar, Kanishyl, and Harkunji etc. was widely reported. Some Muslim *goondas* acted in connivance with some *zaminders* and East Pakistan military perpetrated brutal torture on the innocent people including women who belonged to backward community like *Namasudra*. In many households women were beaten up and some were abducted. The desecration of idols was also reported. In Saneshwar, women were also arrested along with men as they assembled peacefully in Saneshwar market in protest. The condition of the arrested women was disastrous. One lady got abortion within the jail compartment. Her relatives met the jail authorities with a request to provide some necessities like clothes, oil etc. but she was not provided the afore-mentioned things by the said authority (*Yugoshakti* 9 Sep, 1949). In Harkunji village elderly women were also the victims of inhuman torture (ibid 16 September 1949).

Supported by evidences we could note that in East Pakistan inclusive of Sylhet, the women had to experience physical violence and brutality like abduction, rape, conversion, slavery, forced marriage etc. as their counterparts in
Punjab. But the intensity of violence in comparing to Punjab might be less. But those who experienced violence individually, their pain and predicament, sense of guilt, social disapproval, stigma etc. were the same to women victimised in Punjab during and after Partition. Moreover, the psychological aspect of fear of persecution could not be ignored. Many women who might not experience violence first hand but the fear of persecution created intense fear into their mind. As Meghna Guhathakurata observed “Violence is not always to be measured by external acts of murder, loot or abduction... What is crucial to note is that violence also typifies a state where a sense of fear is generated and perpetrated in such a way as to make it systematic, pervasive and inevitable” (Guhathakurata 2003: 99).

The stigma of women’s sexual purity was so deep seated in our patriarchy that in Punjab, women became victims more at the hands of their families and kinsmen than from the other rival community. “The fear of abduction or falling into the hands of the enemy compelled hundreds of women to take their own lives, equal numbers to be killed by their own families, and literally thousands of others to carry packets of poison on their persons in the eventuality that they might be captured. And many committed suicide after they were released by their captors for having been thus ‘used’ and polluted” (Menon and Bhasin 2000: 212). “Previously, in communal riots predominantly fuelled by religious passions, women were usually spared. In 1946, children and women were also killed. Killing and manhandling (rape, forced marriage, kidnapping, ‘wholesale abduction of girls’ etc.) of women were seen for the first time on a large scale during the Noakhali (Bengal) massacres of the Hindu minority in October 1946)” (TP Documents cited in Zins: 2007: 69). But the Partition of India and communal violence accompanied by it violently altered all previous norms and women were targeted to define the honour of community. “The attacks on women and children, including the inscription of slogans on women’s bodies as part of the orchestrated violence against the ‘other’ community indicated that organized barbarism was becoming increasingly heedless of consequences or the possibility of future reprisals” (Saint 2010:6). In fact, women’s body constituted a
Partition had tremendous impact on the lives of women victims in many invidious ways. Consequent to deteriorating communal violence in East Pakistan the grown up female members of the family increasingly became the serious causes of concern to the family patriarchs. In some instances, women were forced to marry with persons available in the immediate situation of insecurity without much enquiry as a result of guardian’s uneasiness with the prospect of a young unmarried daughter. Ananya Saha, a 90 years old Partition victim who is a present resident of Patharkandi in Karimganj district recalled that she was forcefully married to Babul Saha after Partition. Her husband along with her migrated to Karimganj in 1950 during communal violence and routinely tortured her for dowry which her father was unable to provide in the turbulence of Partition. Fortunately, a neighbour helped her to join a teaching job that finally saved her from the torture of her husband. The virtually homeless Saha had no contact with her immediate family who migrated to Tripura after communal violence in 1950. More than sixty-four years had passed since she finds it difficult or rather impossible to come out of the trauma of parting with her family and torture of her husband (My interview with Ananya Saha on 23 May 2006). During Partition, cases of hurriedly arranged marriages were not very uncommon (Interviewed Ashalata Ayan on 18 June 2006).

Thus the heads of the families with young female members were concerned with the honour of women and marriage was considered as the viable option to save their honour from possible intimidation of the other community. In order to protect the family honour which was related to the purity and sanctity of their family, women had to endure dishonour, humiliation and intense sufferings. Some of them could not reconcile with their new life. In fact, the sufferings ultimately led them into silence. Thus one significant propelling factor of migration during Partition and its aftermath was to protect the honour of women that has been figured prominently in the tale of migration of Bengali Hindu families.
The consequences of migration from East Pakistan/ East Bengal to Cachar were unprecedented both in extent and in magnitude. The increasing difficulty and the compelling situations under which they entailed their journey from their homeland in situations of utmost fear, violence and uncertainty compounded when they found their men folk to whom many of them were dependent were also equally vulnerable in the turbulent situation. A large number of women had to take unknown hostile terrain to cross the border in almost wretched physical and psychological condition. Sometimes, they as part of a large foot column were forced to take difficult terrain without food, water or rest and under the constant fear of possible attack of the wild animals and mob. "Yugoshakti" reported that thousand of women crossed through unsafe and vulnerable Putni Gate of Sylhet. As most of them were not acquainted with the chores of the outside world, they experienced the consequences of displacement more perniciously. The pangs and woes crumbled them all through their journey towards their search for "safer" place. Hence, women faced particular vulnerability during their move. In such a situation the pregnant women faced extreme physical difficulties and mental exhaustion (My conversation with Suniti Das on 12 June 2006).

After Partition the Government set up checking posts in the border areas of Sylhet like Latu, Kulaura, Mahishasan, Saola, Sutarkandi etc. (Narrated by Umesh Das in an interface on 6 June 2006). Very often, the people at the check post inflicted inhuman harassment to women. The Amrit Bazar Patrika reported on March 23, 1950 "Ladies were subjected to inhuman torture in the name of search. At Latu Railway station, passengers were dragged out with luggage and detained till the second train 12 hours later after the first and kept waiting" (Amrit Bazar Patrika, March 23 1950).

The women found it extremely difficult to board the overcrowded train or bus and the plight of pregnant women and women with infants or new born were absolutely dismal. The Latu and the Kulaura railway stations were overcrowded which created increasing difficulties to the women on the run. Yugoshakti reported, "In the absence of vehicles more than thousand women and children had to spend in Sutarkandi" (Yugoshakti 31 March 1950).
There was inadequate arrangement on the part of the government in the reception camps. Due to lack of food and medicine the refugees spent intensely difficult time. A transit camp was also set up in Fakira Bazaar in Karimganj subdivision. The tin shaded bamboo hut could not accommodate a large number of refugees. Sometimes some volunteers helped the women to put up in nearby schools where they had to spend days almost without food in the situation of endless agony. In the reception camps in Mahishasan, the inmates were given only a cup of tea and a piece of bread in a day (My interface Dhirendra Paul on 14 June 2006). Consequently, the inmates had intensely difficult time in such camps. Suranjana Devi who was an inmate of Destitute Camp in Meherpur, Silchar from 1958-64 recalled that she had to stay near the checking post in Mahishasan for two days with her two children in a school with a cup of tea and a piece of bread. She reiterated that there was darkness all around the school in which she had to stay and the pierce howling and roaring of wild animals and the wandering men folk created a terrifying situation (My interview with Suranjana Devi on 1 June 2006). "Randhawa writing on the mass exchange of population between the two partitioned parts of India says that few showed pity for age or sex, and many aged or infirm persons who could not walk were deserted by their relations and left to die on the roadside" (Hans 2003: 356).

7.4 Resistance and Compulsion: Pangs and predicament of Forced Migration

A close interaction with the surviving women Partition victims in different parts of Cachar and the Partition victims still languishing in the Central Destitute Home in Silchar, we have come to know the painful situation and extreme drudgery under which the women victims had to rebuild their lives in Cachar. Some others still have been languishing in the Central Destitute Home at Silchar in Cachar district even after sixty-four years of independence and Partition.

Considering the women who were basically the builder and nurturer of home and family, a forcible tearing apart from a reasonably composite social and cultural life was a violent tearing apart from the century old conviction, beliefs,
chastity and the purity that women attached to their ancestral home. From the oral accounts of the refugees, it is found that the women were extremely reluctant to leave their home which they built up with painstaking efforts and with utmost care. This in fact insinuated a sense of intimate belongingness to them. It is relevant to quote Anjali Bhardwaj, ‘It is interesting to note how often in Partition narratives it is the women who protest against leaving their homes in search of a different way of living in an alien land. Refusing to link their fate to the search for an impossible home somewhere else, they voice their opposition to migration, and assert their devotion to the ordinary and daily rhythms of life which make up their material, emotional and religious habitat’ (Bhardwaj, cited in Bhalla 2006: 55).

“Women’s protest against this wanton uprooting is recorded in a memorable shot in Nemai Ghosh’s film Chhinnomool, showing a group of Hindu peasants leaving East Bengal. An old woman of the community does not see the point of leaving the ancestral home (bastu)” (Bagchi 2003: 27). An interview with Nibedita Nag explored the heroic resistance put up by the Leftist women cadres in the late 1940’s and 1950’s in East Pakistan (ibid 2003: 12). It is ultimately the woman who is responsible for converting the house into home, imbuing it with love, warmth and care at the cost of their hard toil and sacrifice.

Swapna Goswami a Partition victim of Karimganj in Cachar district recollected “My mother was extremely reluctant when she heard that we had to leave the village. The decision of migration came suddenly due to the tensed situation created by communal violence in 1950. In the day of our departure, she was unwilling to leave the threshold of the puja room. She took hold of the kulodevota clung into her chest and cried endlessly. She lamented that it was inauspicious to leave the bhitemati of the ancestors. She became silent after migration. I was quite young during the time. The incident deeply moved me. I still remember her piercing cry” (My interview with Swapna Goswami on 4 December 2006).

There were other women Partition victims of Cachar like Anima Das, Ashalata Ayan, Madhuri Debnath, and Ratibala Ghosh etc. who narrated that they
were reluctant to leave their home and hearth so fondly nurtured but were forced to leave everything behind in moments of unprecedented loss and anxiety generated by Partition. In some cases, women especially widows and destitute migrated to Brindaban out of compulsion. Driven by pangs of agonising struggle in mundane life and the neglect by the family during and after Partition they ultimately took refuge to religion. Some of them were found to spend a couple of years in different parts of Assam and Tripura. Finally, they went to Brindaban finding no refuge (interviewed Smriti Dasgupta on 12 October 2006).

Madhubala Das, a widow of Bamui village of Sylhet district migrated to Karimganj and spent a couple of years in a camp there. The camp was closed down and the government sent her in a destitute home at Silchar. Her parents who were reluctant to shelter her and her son sent them to Brindaban (My interview with Babli Das, a camp inmate of Madhubala Das on 15 June 2006).

Subhoranjan Dasgupta’s interview with Partition victims migrated from Noakhali, Jessore and Sylhet etc. had brought forth the agonizing memories of violence and displacement of women who took refuge in Brindaban in utterly devastated condition. In this context, the interview of Sushilla Dey with Dasgupta was a startling exposure of the family deserted the women in distress. Dey, a resident of Ubata village in Habiganj sub division of Sylhet district became widow when she was around sixteen years of age. Her parents took away the land given to her by her in-laws. When riots broke out in 1947, her parents left her with her aunt and crossed over to Assam. Later on, her aunt’s brother helped her and her daughter to board a packed train. She went to her parents in Badarpur from where they were sent to a relief camp in Silchar. She spent fourteen years in the camp. When the camp was closed down she went back to their parents who promptly sent her to Brindaban. Meanwhile she got her daughter married who died during childbirth (Bagchi and Dasgupta 2003: 189-90).

### 7.5 Trail and Trauma: A Silencing Process

Women who finally reached Cachar and Karimganj on the other side of the border after unprecedented physical hazard and almost with a broken spirit,
found a Bengali speaking host community wholeheartedly welcomed them at Karimganj.

The lower middle class women took shelter in government makeshift camps that provided them insufficient food, insecurity and robbed away all privacy and womanhood. In Karimganj among the displaced population the number of destitute women was more and the destitute camp was the biggest in the state (Government of Assam 1950). The refugees who took refuge in camps were totally destitute when they arrived, with no possessions except the rugs they wore. Their number included many single or widowed women. In Karimganj subdivision destitute camps were set up in various refugee concentrated areas like Maizgram, Ram Krishna Nagar etc. In Karimganj Puran Bazaar field, a destitute camp was set up (interviewed Ratibala Ghosh on 14 December 2006). But as the number increased the Government had to set up another destitute camp there. In spite of this, many women squatted in relief office verandah in a miserable condition (Government of Assam 1956).

The large numbers of women in the midst of refugees is a common feature of refugee communities the world over, as observed by Susan Forbes Martin (Martin 1991). The Government sent the refugees to unfriendly dense forest areas like Dohaliya, Vaterbandh, Ram Krishna Nagar Chagalmoya, Maizgram, Sonbeal and Kalinagar etc. where deadly diseases took heavy toll of their lives. Moreover, those rehabilitation sites were the free roaming places of wild animals. Nirmalendu Purkayasta, a Partition victim of Maizgram in Karimganj recalled that the government gave them settlement in a dense forest like Maizgram. They piercing and howling of animals inflicted fear and insecurity. Besides, his mother had to kill snakes regularly. In one night she killed fifteen numbers of snakes. He reiterated that they were compelled to live a life without sanity and the plight of the women victims of Partition was more severe. The everyday difficulties and insecurity continued to remind them of their desh wherein they lived a peaceful life (My conversation Nirmalendu Purkayasta on 12 June 2006).
Partition thus pushed the women into extreme hardship, insecurity, and degradation. The social status of many displaced Bengali Hindu women came down from what used to be prior to the displacement. The experiences of women of the lower class Hindu women were dismal. Partition brutally converted them into destitute and dislocated their lives. For example, the women in the Sonebeal area in Karimganj sub division (now District) had to work as domestic maids in Chenkhuri, Kalibarir Char, Malini Beel area in Silchar due to lack of means of livelihood in their village and their husband had to work as rickshaw-pullers, mud-cutters, street labourers etc. At the end of the day, they had to come back bearing with worst road connectivity from Silchar to their village in Sonbeal to take the custody of their home and children whom they left for the whole day to fend for themselves. The sudden coming out of the housewives from the domestic terrain to the totally unknown outside world was full of uncertainties and fear. There were many instances where the women had to supplement the family income. "The Partition converted these housewives of yesterday – the wife of a farmer and a mason, respectively --- into maidservants, leaving a deep impact on their whole psyche" (Basu 2002:158). In the absence of male guardian, the responsibility of rearing families came upon women. In many cases, they had to take the custody of old and minor siblings which compounded their difficulties in an alien land.

The overwhelming presence of women among the displaced population and their distress was reflected in census report too that was conducted by the government. On July 1949 refugee census was conducted in Assam which enumerated the number of displaced population in Cachar as two lakhs fifty one thousand of which fifty percent were women alone (Government of Assam 1956). The Census observed that the condition of the lower middle class women was disastrous. It was they who had to take shelter in government makeshift camp in a devastating condition. The female wing of the Karimganj Puran Bazaar Mahilla Camp had no roof and thus the refugee women were exposed very badly in scourging sun and torrential rain (Yugoshakti 18 May 1951). Such insensibility was observed in the entire process of rehabilitation of refugees in Cachar.
In 1947, the Women’s Section of the Ministry of Rehabilitation was set up to meet not only the economic needs but also the psychological, educational and emotional needs of refugee women of Punjab. The charismatic women like Sucheta Kriplani, Mridula Sarabhai, Rameshewari Nehru and others took up the challenge of working for women and children refugees in the western sector (Hans 2003: 357). However, such an attempt was missing in the East. In fact, the government was indifferent to the refugees sheltered in Cachar. Though women homes were set up and still the women victims of Partition have been languishing in Central Destitute Home in Meherpur area of Silchar in Cachar district but the abysmal functioning, rampant corruption and gender insensitivity pushed the women into extreme difficulties (interviewed Meena Das on 6 June 2006).

Women like Matangini Das of Terohati Gram of Sylhet, Rathibal Ghosh of Latu Station and others have been struggling in the existing Central Destitute Home at Silchar in Cachar district in a pitiable condition. Even after sixty four years of Partition, the government could not rehabilitate them. Their present life was a denial of human sanity as they have been surviving trivially as refugees. The memory of their home and homeland where they lived with dignity, contentment and reasonably organised life haunt them quite often (Interviewed Parul Das on 3 December 2006). Such unending yearning for one’s home and homeland with no hope of return reminds us of Taslima Nasrin’s *Phera* which focuses on a woman’s individual journey where memory and nostalgia mingle and the journey finally ends in the tragic self-realization that she belongs nowhere and she has no home but in memory (Nasrin 1993).

Though the Government set up homes to shelter the destitute but many were excluded in the process. From the file of rehabilitation ministry it could be quoted “Regarding admission to camps, homes and infirmaries we have to say that admission to these establishments are done as per direction of Government of India who in their circular No24 (59) 58 DT.24.4.58 have decided not to admit any more in these camps, homes and infirmaries. However, a provision of granting relief assistance on an *adhoc* basis out of the discretionary fund is there in all deserving cases” (Government of Assam 1956).
Given the extremely sub human condition and impoverishment that women were forced to endure in different camps; a large number of them registered their protest against the insensitivity of the government. On 27 July 1952, the relief and rehabilitation officer, Karimganj along with two other officers arrived to the rehabilitation office for disbursing loan to the refugees. Immediately they were gheroed by the refugee women in large numbers. They launched Satyagraha in the compound of the rehabilitation office and shouted slogans like Amra Khudartho, Khaidyo diye pran Bachao (We are hungry, give us food and save our life) Bhumihin Amra Bhumi Chai (We are landless, we want land), Punarbasan hoi nai (rehabilitation was a failure) etc. Pregnant women in spite of physical difficulties also joined the group and cases of fainting were reported. The situation turned so tense that the rehabilitation officers had to stay inside the office for 16 hours. At night the police personnel were deployed near the rehabilitation office. Only in the morning, the angry refugees were pacified by some refugee leaders (Yugoshakti, 27 June 1952).

In another incident, Hiranbala Devi who was a resident of Puran Bazar Refugee camp No.3 put an allegation regarding the non-payment of loan. She appealed for the loan several times. Instead of providing her loan, she was humiliated at the rehabilitation office. Consequently, she had to resort to hunger strike. Later on she was paid Rs. 975 as loan in fringe installment within a span of three years which she could not use gainfully (Government of Assam 1955).

There were other instances which clearly reflected the indifference and insensitivity inflicted on refugee women. In one instance, a refugee woman was picked up from the street and brought to the hospital by some municipality sweepers. She was not attended by any of the medical staff. As she lay exposed to sun and rain, she died after two days. In a meeting held at Silchar on 29 May, 1955 the refugee leaders alleged that the matter was brought to the notice of the authority but unfortunately no response was paid. Letters of protest were proffered to the Union Relief and Rehabilitation Minister, Meher Chand Khanna. A protest meeting was also held and agitation launched on the issue (Government of India 1950).
The incident related to Sneholota Das was equally painful. Das (70 years) migrated to Karimganj with her son and daughter-in-law from Sylhet to Karimganj. Finding no place anywhere, she took shelter in the verandah of rehabilitation office of Karimganj. She repeatedly appealed for help to the concerned officers, but no body attended her and her family. Exposed to torrential rain for seven days and almost without food, she suffered from high fever. Eventually, she was shifted to the hospital where she died in the same night (interviewed Bela Das, the sister-in law of Sneholota Das on 13 December 2006).

Allegation was also made about the gross insensitivity of imparting training to the refugees. The Cachar District Refugee Sanmelan, Reception Committee highlighted on 8 November, 1954 in a meeting that the women who enrolled themselves in Dhai Training in the government institutions were stopped training in the mid way in the pretext of shortage of money and hence many of them could not complete their training (Government of India 1954).

There were numerous cases we extracted from the oral accounts of women like Heera Devi, Kiranbala Das; Sujata Biswas that reflected the stories of marginalisation and insensitivity inflicted on women Partition-victims who took refuge in Cachar at the moment of humanitarian crisis (interviewed Heera Devi, Kiranbala Das and Sujata Biswas on 5 May 2005). Given the the pitiable condition of the refugees, the Assam Pradeshik Mahilla Samity, Cachar Division submitted a Memorandum to the Chief Minister of Assam urging to grant free studentship to the refugee students, construction of ladies hostels, jobs for refugee ladies in the girls primary, middle and secondary schools all over the province, rehabilitation of female members of the fishermen, weavers and cultivators etc. (Government of Assam 1955).

Chaitram Gidwani, the President of the All India Refugee Association during his visit to Cachar expressed his displeasure regarding the pitiable condition of women in the unhealthy makeshift camps. He appealed to the Assam government in a statement signed at Silchar to modify the existing policies with the intent to solve the problem of the refugees with a national outlook (Yugoshakti 4 May 1951).
Apart from this, several Memoranda were submitted to the concerned authorities to ameliorate the pitiable condition of the refugee women but it hardly melted any ice or simply fell on deaf ear. Partition-induced displaced Bengali Hindus of Cachar continued to be the victims of discrimination in post-colonial Assam.

7.6 Rupture and Devastation: Inner Reality of Partition

Partition and consequent displacement invariably ruptured the lives of many women refugees in Cachar doing away usually with normal life practices. The familial bond and social support network was broken by the Partition of the country. For example, the government issued migration certificates in 1956 from a list drawn up of people who would get priority in entry. This priority list included orphans, single women and widows (cited in Hans 2003:362). This step was pro-women and children as they allowed entry for some women and children under the special category. The policy in fact must have had a negative impact on a large number of women and children. Because restrictions on their entry without family support and then dispersal to unknown territory must have affected them adversely as they would have had no social network and became the targets of abuse.

The leaders who agreed to Partition and promised all necessary facilities to the refugees remained oblivious about the promises made. They acted like colonial bureaucrats with no humanitarian consideration to look into the pangs and predicament of the refugees. Dislocated by Partition, many refugee women in Cachar had to take up the responsibility of families and by the time the other members of the family settled down they often crossed “marriageable age.” Thus dislocation and eventual responsibility of rearing families closed off the options of marriage to many women. Consequently, they had to live either alone or as spinsters. Some others could not enter into marital relations due to their parent’s inability to get them married due to financial crunch. In many cases, they became burden to the family and sometimes had to bear with humiliation in ‘brother’s family’ after the death of the parents.
Rajani Kanta Nath of Palpara Sylhet and presently located in Vaterbandh area of Karimganj recalled that he had five daughters during Partition and was unable to get them married because Partition destroyed his profession as a weaver and he could not get any opportunity to start anything afresh after migration. Due to lack of resources his daughters remained unmarried (narrated by Rajani Kanta Nath in an inter-face on 20 May 2006).

Dibakar Bhusan Dey, a Partition victim in Karimganj narrated that they were unable to get their younger sister married due to lack of resources. After migration they had to struggle incessantly for providing sustenance to a relatively large family. In the grim struggle of survival his sister remained unmarried (Interviewed Dibakar Bhusan Dey on 21 May 2006).

Some of the women Partition victims like Parulbala Das, Hironmayi Devi, Swapna Biswas, Kusum Bala Debroy of Karimganj district narrated that they had to survive as burden in their family due to lack of resources. Some others like Neeta Das, Sukla Chakrabarty, and Sushilla Deb were engrossed in providing sustenance to the family and crossed “marriageable age”.

There was immediate breakup of the social mode of behaviour after Partition. Enakshi Ganguly Thukral observed that, “Because women in India are much less mobile than men, the breakdown of village and social units [because of displacement] affects them much more severely. The fact that she might be leaving relatives and friends behind, or may never again meet her daughter, who is married into a village which will not be displaced, is a great cause of concern for the woman” (Thukral 1992: 23).

Asha Hans observed that “A refugee woman is a product of a system over which she has no control. In her journey from her home to exile and back she undergoes various transformations, most of which are related to the violence that permeates her life. The existing refugee regime rarely provides her protection from gender based and gender -- specific persecution” (Hans 2003: 378). In view of the supported facts we can say that in the whole process of insensitivity, adjustment and dislocation women had to suffer defilement before death.
7.7 Re-installing Life and Rebuilding Home

Partition pushed the women to move into the public sphere from an essentially confined domestic life. Urvashi Butalia observes, "Just as a whole generation of women were destroyed by Partition, so also Partition provided an opportunity for many to move into the public sphere in a hitherto unprecedented way (Butalia 2003: 6). Rachal Waver characterizes "this movement into the public sphere as an expansion of refugee women’s domestic realm." Subhoranjan Dasgupta observed that "it was the dramatic opening of a new realm which paved the way for future generations of Bengali working women and activists" (Dasgupta 2001:135).

The coming out of women from the domestic chores to the outside world wasn’t easy especially after violent expulsion from their native land to lead an insecure life in an alien land. In West Bengal the women received support from the left parties who encouraged the refugees to participate in rallies, procession and demonstrations. This gradually cemented their bond with the local population. But the women in Cachar could not garner such support but had to struggle independently. Buddha Prakash observed, “While for some women victims in Partition an incipient feminist consciousness was combined with a sense of entrapment in their situations, others waged a low, relentless and noticed struggle in order to create a space for themselves in the post-partition period” (Ravikant and Saint 2001: 201). In some cases, when the sole bread earner died or dispersed on the other side of the border, the entire burden of the family responsibility shouldered on them. They cope with the conflict and restlessness through bearing and rearing of children. Women bore the burnt of haunting Partition on the other hand and burn of patrilliny on the other.

The Government made the young inmates into permanent refugees by putting them in camps for years together. They were not imparted training as such to be self-reliant. Though the Government set up some training institutions in various places of Cachar, but they were functionally inadequate in terms of infra-structure and functioning. Among the four training cum work centers in rehabilitation colonies three were closed down within a short time. A number of
studies have shown that the refugee women are quite often unable to use their skills in the country of asylum (Kaapanda and Fenn 2006: 65).

The inmates of the camp could not depend on the government training institutions. Ashalata Ayan a Partition victim and a present resident of Sonakheera area of Karimganj district recalled that she took nursing training from the government training institution of Udharband. Her husband was seriously ill during migration and hence she had to support the family consisting of four members. She had to spend money for getting training in the said institution. Had her maternal uncle who was an Assam government employee not sent her money she could not have availed herself of the opportunity.

The memorandum that was submitted to Shyamaprasad Mookherjee by Shyama Prasad Reception Committee Cachar, Silchar 27 May in 1950 stated that some Japanese experts came during that period in Cachar when a large number of destitute women were in urgent need of training to become self-sufficient. The experts brought with them lucrative schemes and necessary machinery for cottage industries. But there was no attempt on the part of the government to introduce the skills to train the refugees. Paula Banerjee observes “The overwhelming presence of women among the refugee population is not an accident of history. It is a way by which states have made women political non-subjects. By making women permanent refuge, living a savage life in camps, it is easy to homogenize them, ignore their identity, individuality and subjectivity” (Banerjee 2001: 18).

The training institution attached to Central Destitute Home at Silchar also could not solve the livelihood of the inmates because of its functional inadequacy. It could benefit some of the refugees. The inmates of the destitute home are depended on government doles which are also irregular.

Adari bala Pal of Sylhet who took refuge in Mahishasan in Karimganj narrated that Partition virtually converted them into destitute. She recalled that she had to migrate in the turbulent situation of communal violence in 1950 with two children and her mother-in law. To support her family, she had to join a tailoring shop with much reluctance. She felt embarrassed to work in a man’s
world as those days women hardly came out of their home. As she was confined to the domestic life till Partition and not allowed to meet the male guests, she was extremely embarrassed to work in an extremely insecure environment in an alien place. She could not send her girl child to school because she was entrusted to look after her ailing mother-in-law. This invariably led her daughter to discontinue studies. She lamented that the holocaust of Partition and monstrous displacement ravaged her life altogether (Interviewed Adaribala Paul on 16 June 2006).

Radha Goswami recollected that as her brother was quite young during Partition and her mother was seriously ill, she had to move outside to provide sustenance to the family. All the while she felt nervous and uneasy. It took long years to get along with the outside world. She also shared the same feeling that Partition shattered all sanity of their lives and a feeling of homelessness pervaded her psyche (interviewed Radha Goswami on 30 May 2006).

Seema Sen who came as a destitute in Karimganj recalled that she had to work in a household in an almost devastated condition fiercely separated from the family during migration in a penniless condition. She recalled “we lived a happy and respectable life in our ancestral home in Sylhet but after Partition I was compelled to work in someone’s household. We belonged to a solvent high caste *kayasta* family and it was considered trivial to work in someone’s household. I was quite young during Partition and came out from the inner terrain to a totally unknown world in an alien place. Consequently, I had to endure extreme insecurity, humiliation and shame.” She remorsefully narrated how Partition converted them as destitute from a reasonably respectable life which they enjoyed in their native place (My conversation with Seema sen on 6 June 2006).

7.8 Summary

To sum up, in the whole narrative of the Partition of Sylhet, the voice of women inevitably got silenced. In fact, the women victims of Partition had to experience the affects of displacement more perniciously-first as women and then
as refugees. Kaapanda and Fenn observed that they are uprooted from their social and cultural context, which previously structured their behavioural roles and value systems. Displacement and Dislocation for women often means the dismemberment of families which produces drastic changes to family structures (Kaapanda and Fenn 2006: 68).

In the process to retrieve the voice of refugee women in Cachar, we found them ambivalent and hesitant. This might be due to the difficulties in essentializing the multiple challenges they had to confront in the moments of dislocation and after in the process of rehabilitation and integration to Cachar. Relatively speaking, the voice of single women is much more confident than the housewives. Perhaps the struggle they launched individually in rebuilding lives boosted their morale. Moreover, they were the decision makers and to some extent free from the male domination within the family.

The government pushed the Partition-induced refugee women to survive in impoverished and totally insecure relief camps. The Women Camp in Karimganj was without roof. This clearly pointed out the extreme apathy and gender insensitivity of the relief officials. Many women refugees complaint of harsh treatment meted out to them by the relief officials. The plight of women outside the camp was also pitiable where they had to survive with constant insecurity and in extreme drudgery due to inexperience and fear to work in the outside world. Many of the young girls were forced to be alienated from their studies and childhood due to sudden responsibilities to look after their young siblings or ailing family members. The epic struggle of women in unfriendly, hostile jungle terrain in the name of rehabilitation colonies like Dohaliya, Vaterbandh, Ram Krishna Nagar, Sonbeal, I.T.A colonies like Chagalmoya, Eriligul etc. was irretrievably gruesome. In such tracts, they were at the threat of deadly diseases like malaria, typhoid, jaundice that took heavy toll of lives. Moreover, the free roaming of wild animals in unfriendly hostile terrains posed constant threat to them. The burning funeral pyre in day in and day out in Dohaliya literally indicated the insensitiveness of the government towards the refugees. Sometimes, they were forced to leave the camps with their husband and
children due to pathetic condition that prevailed in the camp in the hope of saving their lives. But in many cases, they had to experience acute poverty, homelessness and insecurities. The government made the women victims languishing in Central Destitute Home as permanent refugees due to their insensitivity to rehabilitate them even after sixty four years of Partition. Their perennial sufferings in re-building homes and families during multiple displacement remained in the cold storage of their mind. For many women victims, Partition and consequent monstrous displacement destroyed their lives altogether. Hence, women Partition victims of Cachar like women of all times showed resilience and relentless efforts to build up the worn out families and communities in difficult time.
Notes:

1. Apart from some exceptions like Nighat Said Khan and Neelam Hussain, no sustained effort has been undertaken from the Pakistani side to collect and catalogue women’s stories of Partition, hence leaving out a pivotal dimension from what is perceived to be the collective discourse (Khan 2007:100).