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BIRTH OF A SQUATTERS' COLONY: REVISITING HISTORY THROUGH REFUGEE NARRATIVES

Sudeshna Paul¹✉

Abstract:

Squatters' colonies form essential feature of the social, political, cultural and topographic landscape of West Bengal. 'Destitution and despair' of East Bengali Hindu refugees as the 'impetus behind' and 'impervious unity and unanimous struggle' of refugees as the 'means for success' in establishment of these colonies have been part of the official account and popular discourse relating to refugee movement in Bengal. Refugee women's agency in land grabbing movement and counter-eviction struggle are celebrated as the steps towards shattering the patriarchal demarcation between private and public. Present article offers a micro-sociological study of a squatters' colony, and based on the narratives of real life experiences of colony-people who lived through the struggle of self-rehabilitation, it tends to highlight the varied nature of needs, perceptions and aspirations of refugees; contest and negotiation of power; conflict and clash between selfish/egoistic interest and community-centred interest; political battles; and patriarchal exploitation of gender roles that were pervasive in the colony life during those days of self-rehabilitation. It also focuses on how the temptation of generalization in meta-narrative analyses tends to obscure the obvious dynamics of life- cohesion versus conflict, exploitation versus subversion of power-politics within the squatters' colonies, which micro-level social researches may bring forward and thereby signify the scope for re-writing history.

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1.0 Introduction:

Squatters' colony is an integral part of the landscape, culture and history of West Bengal. If the province called West Bengal is a historical progeny of the colossal event of partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, numerous squatters' colonies in the state are vindicated to claim their descend from the same ("Squatters' Colonies," 1954; Chaudhuri, 1983; Chakrabarti, 1990; Nandy, 2017; Sengupta, 2019). Nevertheless, there is a long and volatile history of political and legal battle that led the squatters' colonies in West Bengal to gain their righteous status in the form of *patta* or lease deed from the state. It was only after 1977, when the Left Front came to the state power for the first time, that the process of land (re-)distribution was initiated by the sympathetic state government under the joined supervision of the Refugee and Rehabilitation Department and local Colony Committee; and from 1981 onwards the inhabitants of the squatters' colonies gradually received their land deeds. The land-agreement was stipulated as a '99-year lease' (Ray 2002:175)

1 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Assistant Professor, Kalyani Mahavidyalaya, City Centre Complex, Kalyani, Nadia, 741235 West Bengal, INDIA. E-mail: sudeshnapaul2004@yahoo.com

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which included a restrictive clause that the beneficiary families could not sell the land within ten years after receiving their land titles.

1.1 Rationale and objective of the study:

Squatters' colonies, since their inception, have become part and parcel of the life, history and culture of West Bengal. Numerous literature- poems, stories, novels and dramas- are written (e.g. *Arjun* by Sunil Gangopadhyay, *Bakultala P.L.Camp* by Narayan Sanyal etc.); films have been made (e.g. Ritwik Ghatak's Partition Trilogy- *Subarnarekha*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, and *Komal Gandhar* etc.); popular theatres (e.g. Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee*) have represented the life, struggle, battle and plight of the colony dwellers; which obviously constitute great cultural treasure of Bengal. There exists a rich body of meta-narratives about the refugee history of West Bengal that by the aid of empirical description, political analysis and/or activist's insight bring forward the united struggle, both internal & external, of the displaced persons through a series of processes (see Bandyopadhyay, 1970; Chakrabarti, 1990; Sinha, 1995; Singha, 1999). Since the last three decades scholars of social science, particularly researchers interested in partition and refugee studies, have been exploring different refugee colonies of West Bengal, with an interest to focus on refugee agency, their economic and political struggle for relocation, and the agency of refugee women- their trauma, struggle, hardship and battle amidst all oddities in the colony etc.; while posing questions relating to the role of state in making refugees, process and policies of rehabilitation, various refugee policies- national and international, border politics and infiltration etc. (see Guha Thakurta, 2003; Chatterjee, 2002; Ray, 2002; Sen, 2011, 2014). All of these scholarships are interested in understanding from a human dimension, the refugee issue- an ever increasing problem of global politics since 1945 (Hakovirta, 1993) and which in the 21st century is still shaking the world with its multifaceted dimensions and proliferations.

Yet, what seems the least focussed part in all these cultural studies and scholastic works on refugee settlements, is the episode of *jabardakhal* (forcible occupation of land) itself. The historical plunge of East Bengali refugees to relocate themselves by forcible occupation of vacant lands near Calcutta (now Kolkata), and its suburbs expanding today's North and South 24 Parganas and other districts of West Bengal, is depicted in these works (Bandyopadhyay, 1970; Chakrabarti, 1990; Singha, 1999) in a way that tends to confine the huge, multidimensional, multi-experiential process into a common narrative pattern for all. This narrative portrays:

- The sheer need and desperation of the hapless refugees as the common and only cause that organized their plunge for *Jabardakhal* (Chakrabarti, 1990; Mukhopadhyay, 2003).
- Refugee women as warriors in the *jabardakhal* of land and as well as in unequal battle against the state authorities and /or private landlords, whose land were thus in stake (Chakrabarti, 1990: 65, 81-2).
- Conscious presence of refugee women in public sphere: Their desperate participation in the "land- grabbing movement", even bearing physical assault by the police force, their daring role in fending off the attackers and defending their newly erected houses demonstrated the conscious existence of women in the public arena (Chakravartty, 2005; Sarkar, 1984).
- Wholesome unity and unanimous struggle of the squatters that turned the otherwise unattainable and herculean project of squatting and resettlement into a success (Chakrabarti, 1990: 35-7).

The East Bengali refugees, as Chatterji (2007:1009-10) explains, displayed huge disparity not only in terms of their class, status, education, and occupation, but also in terms of the material possessions that they could have moved cross-border and in the capacity to which they could have built favourable social network and nexus in the host-land. Hence, the first narrative which says

that nothing other than their homogeneous destitution that instigated such a united, dangerous and illegal plunge on the part of the refugees in host-land, is put to question. Especially, the first wave of East Bengali refugees (migrants before 1950) to West Bengal was composed of people mostly from the privileged section of society- i.e. so-called high-caste, middle class *bhadralok* (urban and rural), a significant portion of which had prior contact of some form or economic capacity to arrange at least a roof over their heads in this part of Bengal. There were 'private colonies', settlements that were established by exchange of properties with the evacuee Muslims. There were state sponsored refugee camps, where refugees had become already frustrated with the 'denial' (Chatterji, 2007: 127-50) policy of the government. There were indeed a good portion of refugees, who were literally roofless and had to spend days in the railway platforms, footpaths and streets of Calcutta (Chakrabarti, 1990:11). Therefore, at least the first wave of influx might hardly display homogeneity of plight and destitution except the shared psycho-social trauma of dislocation among these refugees. Further, the majority of these refugees, being middle-class *bhadralok*, were otherwise largely peace-loving, law-abiding people. By the end of 1950, West Bengal witnessed 149 squatters' colonies occupying 2390049 acres of land (Chakrabarti, 1990:80); and most of them were the results of local initiatives of self-help rather than any centralized movement organized by the Left dominated refugee organization NVBKP (Sen, 2011). Hence, it becomes clear that the *jabardakhal* movement, as squatting in West Bengal became popularly known, was started by the first wave of refugees to West Bengal. There could be no question as to the plight, trauma, existential suffering of the refugees; but the clause that it was their homogeneous destitution that solely led to their desperate unanimous organization for the forcible land grabbing plunge, demands further probing. The establishment of Bijaygarh had tacit support of government (Chakrabarti, 1990); and recent researches on local history of squatters' colonies (see Samaddar, 2014; 2016) that focus on the hitherto hushed up issues like division, discontinuity, rupture, diversification, internal conflicts etc. during the course of refugee movement & colony establishment have thrown considerable challenges to the so called theory of iron-unity, unanimous struggle, and unilinear progress of refugee settlements. Further, Ganguly (1999) mentioned various inner clashes within the colony regarding matters like, land distribution, rampant irregularity in maintaining records of accounts in the office of the colony committee, redistribution of already distributed plot in exchange of money, conflict of leadership and over party politics and so on. Hence, albeit the popularity of the fourth common narrative, i.e., the narrative of refugee unity, the squatters' colonies remained a fertile ground of constant contestation and negotiation between community interests on the one hand, and inner politics within the refugees centring round complex local interests and over the issues of personal gain or loss, on the other. Each squatter's colony has its own history (Sen, 2011:9) of leadership, organization, conflict of interest and power-politics in ploy behind its establishment (as depicted in the novels -Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun* and Pratibha Basu's *Alo Amar Alo*), which the partition literature as a whole is still to unveil.

The second argument is raised against the narratives (2 and 3) about the role and agency of refugee women. The standard models and popular myths of refugee resistance, as Sen (2014) writes, are 'accounts of the bravery of refugee women, who fought at the vanguard, or the strategic use of women and children as shields against the police.' The logic behind putting women at the forefront was the Bengali *bhadralok* cultural ethos legitimized by the same patriarchy, which circulated the popular cry- "our women in danger"- as the enough justification for fleeing homeland; and a value system shared both by the refugees and the government that women being seen as the weaker sex and requiring male protection would provide a certain imperviousness against physical attacks by men in public (Sen, 2011: 4-6, 11). Hence, the strategic use of refugee women in the battlefield reflects the ploy of the same gender politics inherent in the patriarchal construction of social

norms. Sen (2011) wrote about the discursive image of women as unequal participants, whose contributions were seen as inspirational or symbolic rather than substantive. Chakrabarti (1990:95) also seems to display such reductionist attitude as he cited women's participation in public demonstrations and rallies organized by the UCRC (United Central Refugee Council) as mere proof of the leadership skill and strategic prudence of the UCRC to exploit maximum of the human resources for its end.

This kind of scholastic discourse hardly reflects any notion of women's agency, whether in terms of loyalty to any political ideology or in untainted allegiance to a struggle. Then why is there the myth of refugee women as warriors that most of the squatters' colonies seem to live by? By allowing their women into public to increase the mass of protestors (Chakrabarti, 1990: 95), putting women at the forefront in the battle against eviction, highlighting young mother with child in her lap walking in rallies- did the East Bengali refugee politics try to circulate again the cry- "our women in danger" (Sen, 2011:4), and that too in the host land; which would harness sympathy amongst general public and compel government to succumb to refugee demands? Exploration into the local history, oral accounts of protagonists, memory of refugees may be of help in finding answers to these questions which the official accounts of partition and the meta-narratives on refugee lives have kept under the veil of silence.

The growing interest of recent social science researchers into the exploration of local or micro histories may prove valuable by bringing into light the unique experiences of each colony- its establishment, struggle against eviction attack, the role of settlers, the development of leadership, conflicts and power politics in the course of its development, clash between self-centred and community-centred power politics and all the consequences as lived by the people there in; and thereby help bridge the gaps in existing body of knowledge relating to refugee lives in West Bengal (Sen, 2011:17; Samaddar, 2014, 2016).

With an interest to add to this new genre of micro history, I intend to present in this article, a micro-sociological study of one such squatters' colony established in 1949 in North 24 Parganas of West Bengal. With an exclusive focus on the episode of its establishment- land-grabbing and counter-eviction struggle, the objectives of present study are:

- To understand the turmoil of situation and power politics in totality that along with the destitution of refugees, paved the path for a successful *jabardakhal* operation.
- To understand the agency of the refugee women in establishment of the colony and struggle against eviction; and how this agency of women refugees are perceived by the settlers in reality.
- To understand the history of development of the colony- the dynamics of power, struggle, leadership, politics and conflict in those early years of relocation, as perceived by the refugee settlers of the colony.

2.0 Locale and Methodology:

The present case study is based on Deshapriya Nagar Colony, one of the oldest squatters' colonies of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal, India. It was during the course of my field work for PhD research project that the data for the present study were collected. Deshapriya Nagar Refugee Settlement, commonly known as Deshapriya Nagar Colony, comprises a vast area of land that measures around 157 acres and falls under the jurisdiction of Kamarhati Municipality. In this colony, I found several first-generation refugees (those who were at least at 5 years of age while fleeing from their homeland and therefore could narrate their direct experiences of refugeehood as well as about establishment and development of the colony), who were of prime interest for my

purpose. The colony bore all the features that could be associated with a refugee settlement, i.e., forcible occupation of land, struggle against eviction effort, and the organized struggle of the refugee settlers for developing an abandoned landed area into a settlement, where in the uprooted East Bengali folk could hope for striking the root of their lives again. For a detailed and in-depth understanding of the colony life during the days of its establishment and early period of development, I had to build up a kind of relationship with the field and the respondents so that they could recollect and share their memories and feelings without hesitation. Though it was a mixed-method study, it required a kind of style/ practice analogous to that of ethnographic fieldwork. I had to spend considerable amount of time in the field talking to people about their experiences, activities, feelings and perceptions about the life in the colony. The totality of the formal and informal conversation with the colony people led to shape the refugee narratives which served as the primary data for the present study. Initially, I adopted the method of sample survey, judgemental or purposive sampling technique, and qualitative interviewing with the aid of unstructured schedule as the tool of data collection. The original fieldwork was done in two phases. My primary interest in this study was on the direct experiences of the refugee people, and thereby on the first generation refugees, who numbered one hundred and fifty four (seventy nine male respondents and seventy five female respondents) in my sample. The first phase interviews helped me to select several cases of interest (thirty cases) pertaining to my study. Later, i.e., in the second phase of fieldwork, these selected cases were followed up more extensively with qualitative interviews yielding unique life experiences.

2.1 The colony land: Location and previous history:

Deshapriya Nagar refugee settlement, constitutes a good portion of the small but renowned locality of Belgharia, which is about 5 miles north of Kolkata (or, erstwhile Calcutta), and have a railway station bearing the same name. The colony is situated along the western side of the Sealdah Main (north) Railway line near Belgharia railway station. In the 1940s it was mostly a vacant and abandoned, vast, shallow land covered by bushes, which were infested with ferocious animals of prey. The landed property of the area was originally in the possession of three rich and small *zamindars* (big landowners) of West Bengal. However, they left the landed property without any significant use, care and superintendence. During the Second World War, the entire area came under military occupation. After the end of the Second World War, when the Military troops went away, the entire land and military camps became vacant and were reluctantly left under the mere care of a Nepali guard.

3.0 Memory versus history: Past resurrects through narratives:

According to the official history, it was 15th of October, 1949, the auspicious night of *Durga Mahastami* (the third and the most vital day of *Durga puja*); when a group of almost fifty East Bengali Hindu refugee families marched towards the deserted land and forcibly seized and occupied several plots without much resistance at that point of time. Nakuleswar Banerjee, a refugee from Faridpur district of East Pakistan, led this group of East Bengali refugees in this *jabardakhal* mission. Most of the families, who took part in the first *jabardakhal* operation, were of *Faridpuri* (natives of Faridpur district in East Pakistan) origin.

Most of the settlers in the colony fled East Pakistan by 1950, i.e. they were part of the first wave of East Bengali refugees in West Bengal. In the present sample only 19.48% of my respondents admitted that the members of their families were involved in the first night-expedition of *jabardakhal*. Though the popular story of this operation revealed that women refugees also took active part with their male counterparts, I found only one woman who admitted that her maternal aunt took part in that night-operation of land grabbing. All the rest confirmed that no woman of

their families was actively involved in squatting. I could meet only two men who were incidentally a part of this operation, but they could not remember any woman who took part with them in that event. The other primary witnesses of the *jabardakhal* operation could not be reached either on account of their death, or having left the colony many years ago; and a few of them never settled in the colony as told by the old colony settlers.

I met Ranen Som (all names of the respondents in this article are fictitious in order to stand by the ethics of confidentiality), a seventy six years old man, who had participated in the first *jabardakhal* operation. His pieces of recollections, sometimes spontaneous and sometimes in response to my queries are compiled below to form a coherent story of what the refugee people actually did to grab the land:

Then all twelve members of our family were spending days in a small rented house in Naodapara, Belgharia. One day, just before Durga festival, one of my friends took me to a secret meeting. There I met Nakuleshwar Bandopadhyay, the man who organized the *jabardakhal* operation here. There were other refugees like me. They seemed to be quite accustomed to such meetings. In that meeting it was decided that we would grab the landed plots under military jurisdiction on the night of the third day of Durga festival. According to the plan, we gathered at about 11p.m. that night beside the railway station. ... We were a group of about fifty refugees. We carried strong bamboo sticks, iron rods, small homely knives as our weapons. When we broke the gate of the fencing boundary of this land, we found only one Nepali sentry there. Quite easily and almost without any violence we took the sentry under our custody, bound his hands and feet tightly with ropes and put him inside one of the Military barracks. The leaders might have known about the loose protection system, but I expected a great deal of battle. Nothing such happened. Then we chose our land plots and hurriedly built makeshift homes with bamboo sticks, hogla leaves etc. that we found there on the spot. A few refugees started living there with their families from then on. But others like me used to live there at nights to keep guard on to our possession. (Respondent statement 1, 12/08/2009, Interviewed by author)

“You had women squatters in the group. What was their role in the operation?” I intervened. The old man replied,

“Women? They might have been with us. Some of the refugees had come here directly from Sealdah platform. They had no shelter to keep their families. They perhaps brought their women with them. And what would the women do? Do you expect them to fight like men?” (Respondent statement 2, 12/08/2009, Interviewed by author)

“But I heard that women too fought with men to grab land here. Isn’t it true?” I asked. The man paused for a moment, and then put an end to the issue answering sullenly, “I can’t say”.

Mongala Das was the only respondent in my sample who said that the women of her household had joined the *jabardakhal* struggle. She was speaking about her experience of those days in the following manner:

One evening, some people came to our rented house and sat for a meeting in the small room where we all used to live. We, the women naturally went out and sat in the corner of the small veranda where we used to cook. The men were talking in a low voice. ... When all others were gone, my maternal uncle said that they planned to grab some land. They wanted women also to join them. I was surprised. But my maternal aunt appeared quite enthusiastic. After that day, men of our house went out every evening. ... It was the night of the Durgastami. No one in our house could dine properly that night. I remained at home alone. All the others in the house including my maternal aunt went out. She was a brave woman. I could not even think of talking with other men; and see, what she had done! I heard that she was the first person to kick on the gate of the boundary of the land. She had a strong figure. I spent the whole night with acute fear. ... The next morning my husband came and told me to take some necessary belongings with me. Thus we

came here. I found that they had already erected a makeshift hut. The land was very low. But this area was a little bit high. It was our own house. I could not resist tears. At least no one would call us *bharatia* (people who live in the house of other people in lieu of some money as rent on monthly basis) from now on. (Respondent statement 3, 10/03/2009, Interviewed by author)

I searched for Nakuleswar Bandopadhyay, but could not find even a close relative of Nakuleswar. Parimal Sinha Roy, presently a septuagenarian refugee settler who had been involved in the *jabardakhal*, informed me that Nakul and his family never settled on this land. They had their own house in Kolkata. Then why did Nakuleswar take the risk of leading the illegal operation? In Parimal's own words:

Nakuleswar Banerjee was basically from a talukdar family of Faridpore. Hence he had enough money to purchase his own house. Being previously a zamindar, he knew many refugee people here. He perhaps wanted to grab this land with the refugees and in lieu of supporting them to resettle; he wanted to re-establish another talukdari here. The refugee settlers would be his subjects, as he thought. But we were totally against any kind of such subjection here. So when we realized his hidden plan, all the refugee settlers protested together. The first event of such protest happened on the day he declared that the name of the colony would be after the name of his late father Hemchandra Banerjee. We all protested. Why? This is the land of refugees. We fought for our right. We named it Deshapriya Nagar after the name of 'Deshapriya' (a title meaning 'one who is dear to mother Bengal') Jatindas Mukhopadhyay, the great freedom fighter. There were hidden but collective grief against Nakul and his peers in the colony. He was providing, or keeping better plots for his own people. Often it was heard that he was trying to sell the plots against a good amount of money. He was accused for renting some plots to refugee people. From that day Nakul started facing protests regularly. Ultimately he left the land. (Respondent statement 4, 15/11/2009, Interviewed by author)

The above narratives provide real life descriptions from the real actors of one of the *jabardakhal* movements organized by the East Bengali refugees in West Bengal. It was indeed a desperate and heroic plunge on their part in search for a permanent location (place) for settlement. They did wait for a legal settlement; spent nights with the whole family under the open sky, or platform shades; huddled together in the ghastly camps or closed four walls of rented houses; but the period of waiting seemed only to prolong. Therefore, striving for *jabardakhal* was the need of the day for the East Bengali refugees (Chatterjee 2002: 21).

But a deeper penetration into these narratives does open up many other aspects of the relational dynamics among the refugee people. Firstly, most of these refugees, who participated in this illegal land-grabbing operation, belonged to the middle class *bhadralok* background with or without some education. They migrated from rural or urban parts of East Pakistan, having more or less good amount of landed property and household at their possession in their native land and enjoyed a respectable position in their native locality. For these category of people living as *bharatia* in other person's house in lieu of payment was a kind of status degradation; especially when the landlord was an *edeshi* (native West-Bengali) with a social status equal or perhaps less than that they had in their native land. In addition to it, the facts like lack of space, burden of payment of rent and disgrace caused by the native landlords, made their life difficult. Hence, not only those refugees, who were struggling without a roof over their heads, but also those who had rented rooms for living thought themselves belonging to the category of 'home-less people' without a piece of land their 'own land' for settling permanently. So grabbing and occupying a landed plot was for them a requirement for being able to identify themselves as citizens of this host land.

Quite interestingly, this case also reflects a secret game of power politics that had been playing its role in organizing and realizing the whole operation in which the hapless refugees were dragged in by exploiting their despair and were turned into agents of seizure and unauthorized occupation of land. Nakuleswar Bandyopadhyay, another East Pakistani migrant, masterminded the whole

plan and exploited his vast contacts with different private boarding houses in Belgharia, which were then primarily occupied by the East Pakistani Hindu refugees. He never had a plan to settle in that forcibly occupied land, but wanted to regain his lost status and power of a feudal lord as he used to enjoy in his native land. That Nakuleswar's activities and agency had hardly been selfless, but a deliberate manoeuvre to buttress own economic and political hold in the host land by exploiting the loyalty of the squatters, was further expressed by Parimal Sinha Roy's assertion,

Nakul was a member of Congress party. He exploited his contacts with the congress leaders. After he left the colony, we faced aggressive attacks from the goons. Even police also attacked us. They arrested the refugee men of our colony and took them to the local police station. I was also a victim of such arrest. (Respondent statement 5, 15/11/2009, Interviewed by author)

However, the most interesting fact that this *jabardakhal* event entails is a tremendous battle and alliance between two unequal forces- sheer need of refugees for land in order to strike root (the first step towards relocation) in the host land on the one hand, and the greed and covetous conspiracy of the power-monger for regaining the old power-position by keeping the rootless mass under his subjection and whims, on the other. Though the oral accounts presented above, speak of the triumph of indomitable and unified agency of the poor refugees, whether the *jabardakhal* itself would have been possible devoid of the initiative, contacts- political and mass, power, influence and leadership, however self-seeking that might be, of the said Nakuleswar Bandyopadhyay, who hardly belonged to the category of destitute, remains a question. The native Congress leaders might also ponder over future electoral/political gain of securing loyalty of a considerable mass of refugees, in favouring however tacitly, this wealthy migrant's aspiration, especially as this person had been a co-party-worker. Hence the initial *jabardakhal* remained unexpectedly non-problematic for the squatters.

Further, the squatters were not passive recipients of such power politics. Some of them formed allies with Nakuleswar; and were involved in and gaining by unscrupulous dealings and practices relating to the distribution of plots. These squatters were obviously the Congress supporters by their political allegiance. Some of the other squatters, having possessed some or other forms of cultural capital- education, direct or indirect involvement in nationalist movements and freedom struggle, membership of trade unions, could apprehend the tyranny of the former group. Their collective grief and disgust exploded in the form of united protest during the event of naming of the colony, which initiated the inner-struggle between the Nakuleswar group and others. Eventually the latter took hold of the colony committee, the decision making body of the colony. Was this triumphant group of squatters devoid of any party-politics or was there covert influence of left politics behind this conflict that not only succeeded in annihilation of a feudal force but gave a heavy blow also to the trust/sympathy that some refugees still held for the Congress Party? The squatters now moved towards self-rehabilitation under the aegis of the colony committee named as *Deshapriya Nagar Udvastu Punarbasati Samiti* (DNUPS). As Prabodh Dutta, another first generation refugee narrated:

Mainly some of the factory workers, who settled in this colony, formed the body of the committee. They took the initiative to allot plots on a 'first come first served' basis to the newly arrived refugees. The committee organized the colony people into one united body. ... It was towards the end of 1950 that the committee joined the UCRC. In the mean time, leaders like Pran Krishna Chakraborty, a patriot, who had been initiated into the communist ideology during his exile in the Andaman Cellular Jail, started visiting the colony. We did not know him as a communist then. People listened to his speeches spell bound. Other young people also used to visit our colony. In the evening we listened to them. How cordially they spoke to us! We the refugees gained a lot of strength from their words. Later, I came to know that they were veteran communist leaders. (Respondent statement 6, 18/01/2010, Interviewed by author)

The transfer of colony leadership from the hands of feudal power into the hands of some 'factory workers' might be indicative of the influence of Communist Politics behind the abovementioned clash and conflict amongst the group of squatters, especially in face of the fact that the colony later turned out to be a strong bastion of left politics and many of the colony leaders were committed workers of leftist trade unions; and the frequent visit of communist party workers, often in disguise, might add to the scepticism. I could not reach any definite conclusion regarding the issue as most of the time my respondents were found so overwhelmed cherishing the meta-narrative of the 'unity of the squatters during those early days' that further probing on my part, I felt, would appear as insolent cynicism, and thereby aggravate apathy of my respondents.

I find some interesting issues regarding the role and position of women in the above narratives. According to Mongala Das, women were invited to take part in the *jabardakhal* operation. Women, whose honour and protection were once the primary cause of fleeing the native land, now, were needed by the patriarchs for squatting in the dark of the night. Did they want to exploit their women to create sympathy in the heart of the enemy force? How did these refugee men expect to protect the honour of their women in the hand of these enemies? Was it because that this time the enemy was not from the other community? No answer could be found, except that, "it was the need of the day". Patriarchy defined the 'need', and thereby 'the necessity'; and then defined and redefined the concepts of 'other', 'safety', 'honour', and the various 'ought to do' for the women at its own discretion while rationalizing the fragility of those definitions via the term 'situation' as the object of transference.

Why did the women take part in that forcible and illegal occupation of land? Did they passively follow the orders of the men? It was not possible to get conclusive answers to the above posed questions as I never had the opportunity to talk to any of the women who actually took part in the *jabardakhal* operation. Analysing Mongala's narrative we find, she attributed to her maternal aunt an extra ordinary vigour by describing her as a woman with 'strong figure' and 'very brave'- terms associated with masculinity in general, while describing herself as a weak, fearful, worrying, insecure person. This entailed that the dichotomous role relation of men and women and the stereotypical perception of gender were very much present among the refugees even during that period of colossal turmoil. Mongala and the women of her family were being involved in the public sphere bit by bit as the demarcation between the spheres-public and private, became fuzzy. Again, Ranen Som's utterance, "Do you expect them to fight like men?" testified how refugee men, in reality, recognized women's contribution.

Further, the obvious contradictions in the above accounts compel one to question: were the 'women land grabbing warriors' a myth, created by the official history writers of the colony to make it equally sensational with the state- recorded history of seizure and settlement movement by the East Bengali refugees? Quite interestingly 51.3% of the total respondents were found to believe and speak fervently about the battle of refugee women in that land grabbing operation. This trend of collective belief along with Ranen Som's account on the whole, helped substantiating the above posed cynicism. In my analysis there might be two reasons behind the existence of such controversy, both pointing to the all encompassing gender politics in the squatters' colony:

i. If women really were active in the struggle of forcible land-grabbing, it was not due to their role as fighters, but due to the stereotypical femininity that patriarchy used to attach to them, i.e. 'helplessness', 'natural weakness', and the most concerned 'sexuality' that might easily be perceived under threat without safe settlement. Women as shields in the battlefield might have been a necessity for rootless refugees; but recognizing or admitting that now perhaps wounded the masculinity of the same refugees after relocating themselves successfully on the land once grabbed. Hence, the patriarchs maintained their masculine dignity highlighting the safety concern

for women in order to rationalize the acts of those who dragged their women into the illegal land-grabbing operation.

ii. If shelter-less refugee women had been only the passive followers of their family men in that night, the popular and official accounts as against the individual narratives of denial of women's agency in squatting must be analyzed as another dimension of historical exploitation of women by the refugee patriarchs of the colony. The refugee men of the colony had propagated such myths about women land-grabbers so as to attribute more sensuality to their struggle in order to attract public sympathy in favour of their illegal occupation. They deliberately portrayed their women - 'naturally' shameful, weak and in-house dwelling species of mankind, standing in the warfront that entailed the drastic alteration of their nature and space, in order to regain their traditional feminine space and status; which would further attract appreciation from the patriarchal state and society.

After the initial triumph, the expected blow that these squatters had to face was eviction assaults organized by the state police and/or private hoodlums hired by the original owners of the landed property. Surprisingly, only 27.9% of my respondents said that after the initial settlement in this colony land they had to face eviction attacks. 62.34% of my respondents stated that they/their families had faced no such humiliation; and 9.7% of the respondents did not know whether any eviction effort was organized against their settlement. Anti-eviction struggle and movement of East-Bengali refugees have become a legend in public discourse of West Bengal. The counter-eviction struggle of the settlers was even acknowledged by the bulletin published by Deshapriya Nagar Refugee Rehabilitation Committee on occasion of the golden jubilee of the colony. How was it possible that most of the refugee settlers in the present sample appeared so indifferent (either denied or were ignorant) to such a dreadful struggle? The threat and apprehension of eviction, and the struggle against it by the refugee settlers of the colony was a fact; but confusion rose regarding the intensity, frequency, and gravity of such attacks, which also put in question the actual motto of the state towards the realization of the eviction bill. This confusion seemed justified as Dr. B.C. Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, had argued that the government possessed virtually no power to evict a squatter from unauthorized occupation of land or premises except through a prolonged process of legal action and the enactment of the Bill sought to reconcile the demands of law with the needs of the refugees (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 1951). If the state showed intense interest and used its full strength in favouring the land owners, who bore real loss due to such squatting, the struggle against eviction would have been a bloody one that could not be deciphered with such indifference as the 72% of my respondents maintained.

About the role of women in anti-eviction struggle, 54% of the respondents acknowledged that women took positive initiative to resist the eviction effort. Among the 72% of the respondents whose families never witnessed eviction attacks, there were people (25.97%) who believed that some women of the colony fought to resist eviction effort.

I asked Mongala, "Did you, the women of the colony directly fight against the goons or the police? Were you on the battle ground?" Mongala said,

I heard of some women who fought against the attackers. But I never went there. Even I do not know who those women were. But we had our duty on such crises. Whenever we had come to know about such attack on any part of the colony, we, the women, used to blow conch shells to inform the whole colony about such attack. Then the people of the colony from different parts came united and threw challenges to those attackers. (Respondent statement 7, 10/03/2009, Interviewed by author)

According to Amulya Chakraborty, the squatters in this land had been allowed enough breathing space before they had to face harsh eviction attacks. This perhaps goes to the credit of Nakuleswar

Bandyopadhyay, who had exploited his political connections with the ruling Congress party and built up a solid network with the leading politicians of the State Congress, so as to establish a refugee squatters' colony. Mongala Das said,

"On the third evening after the jabardakhal, police came to the colony. But they merely threatened us to leave the place, and some oral counters by Nakul and others made them back out."
(Respondent statement 8, 10/03/2009, Interviewed by author)

According to Parimal Sinha Roy's words:

"After Nakul had left the colony, we faced repetitive and aggressive attacks from the goons. Even police also attacked us. They arrested many refugee settlers of our colony. I was also a victim of such arrest. They took us to Chhutihghat Police Station, in Barahnagar. But they released us the same night. What would they do? The police are also human beings. Couldn't they feel the plight of poor refugees? But they were duty bound." (Respondent statement 9, 15/11/2009, Interviewed by author)

Monibhusan Dey, another octogenarian refugee settler narrated me about the same eviction attack. He said,

The police, once, attacked the colony during the day time. Most of the refugee men were not present in the colony. Then the young boys, even the children, and the women also combated the police force. The police arrested some colony people, including women. We got the news in the factory, and rushed at once to the colony. We found some of the houses destroyed. ... We found earthen stoves broken into pieces, and pots of half-boiled rice spattered on the floors of shattered huts. ..We then marched towards the police station. As a result of our united agitation, they had to release all the captives. (Respondent statement 10, 26/07/2010, Interviewed by author)

It becomes clear that initially the state police was ordered to carry out an official raid against the squatters but not to evict them. When the squatters were no longer in Nakul's good book, they faced the real music of state atrocity that did not even spare their women. But the fact that the police released all the arrested refugees without any further legal action against them raises another important question: was it the success of the united agitation of the squatters or was the state itself ambivalent regarding the refugee question? Parimal Sinha Roy attributed it to the human sensitivity under the cover of uniform that influenced the policemen to release the refugees. I found behind this act of 'bitter benevolence' by the state police, the in-between position of the state of West Bengal regarding the refugee issue. On the one hand, the state was pleading to the central government for the arrangement of fund for relief and rehabilitation of the victims of partition; and on the other, it was practicing disputable discourse with and epistemological denial (Chatterjee, 2002:7) to 'refugee' claims as the escape strategy to avoid further burden over its already fragile economy.

Moreover, it was from this phase of anti-eviction struggle that refugee women were assigned with clear-cut responsibility of operating as alert and signal mechanism. Though women's role and activity in direct battlefield was never recognized, their specific role and involvement in counter-eviction struggle was at least recognized across gender in the colony. The signals used by women were the sounds of conch shell, or *ulu* sounds which by tradition fell in the domain of women's activity and could be used from within the confines of the home. Monibhusan admitted that on one state-sponsored eviction attack some refugee women had been arrested by the police. His description of the eviction attack proved that the public space in form of state police had intruded the private domestic sphere of refugee women, who fought to save their newly found domestic set-up, which tradition had ordained them to protect, maintain, nurture and keep alive. However, whether these women consciously entered the public domain to combat the police attack or they fought earnestly to save their newly built private sphere against public intrusion and destruction, remained still obscure. However, the fact that in patriarchy women were pawns in the hands of

men, either from their own community/group or from the 'others', became further evident. On the one hand, the role of the state in arresting refugee women can be analyzed in two ways: i) as another example of homogenized treatment for the refugees across gender; and ii) as a threat towards refugee men, quite similar to the Muslim fanatics of East Pakistan, that their women could be taken away even here in this land of refuge, if they dared go against the ruling authority. On the other hand, the refugee men were also found to emphasize the arrest of their women to describe the extent of police atrocities in order to solidify their claim as victims. However, from the refugee narratives one can unmistakably grasp that women of the colony started developing consciousness about the outer world and became aware about the state-wide politics and struggle of refugees. As a result of this, I found Mongala, an old illiterate refugee woman from rural East Pakistan, confidently spoke out the popular slogan of the Left party, "what is achieved through struggle will be kept through struggle", in describing her experience of relocating life in the colony.

All of my respondents were found enthusiastic in describing the positive role and activity of the DNUPS, the official protagonist of the squatters in this colony. It not only served as the fundamental architect in constructing a developed habitation that one sees today with the old name but united the colony also with the state-wide historical struggle of the refugees. But, I hardly got any reference of women's activity, or participation in the history of development and performance of the said committee from my respondents. The decision making body of the refugee colony still ignored women's agency in decision making, and leading a public organization, which remained exclusively the man's arena.

4.0 Conclusion:

The above study may appear small in scope; but through exploration of the real life experiences of the real actors in the actual setting, penetration into the memory of people, and analysis of verbal accounts of those who lived through the struggle of resettlement in the colony, it poses challenge to the common general narrative of "homogeneous destitution and despair" of refugees as the only impetus behind their ferocious plunge for squatting. It unfolds the presence of heterogeneous status perception, need and aspiration of refugees; which along with constant negotiation and contest of power-politics and power-nexus within and surrounding these people, set up a unique dynamism in motion that gave shape to the present colony. Future refugee studies may look into this dynamic aspect of resettlement to challenge and guide policies of refugee rehabilitation. Further, posing question to the celebrated myth about East Bengali refugee women, who seemed to break shackles of patriarchy by shattering the border between private and public, the study indicates how the refugee women in this unequal fight for resettlement were exploited as pawns by the patriarchs of their own community as well as by the patriarchal state. Refugee studies and gender studies will find ample scope to delve into the issue further at their intellectual discretion. It also focuses on the importance of micro-histories of refugee life and local narratives that appear unparallel as a way to negotiate between present and past; and help in rewriting history that is closer to truth by the aid of exploration, cross-verification and elimination of value judgments present in hither to existing body of knowledge.

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