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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RECOVERING THE 'SILENCED' VOICES: THE PLIGHT AND TRAUMA OF KAIBARTA PARTITION REFUGEES OF SONBEEL, BARAK VALLEY OF ASSAM

Dr. Mousumi Choudhury

Associate Professor Deptt. of Political Science Diphu Government College Diphu Karbi Anglong District, Assam.

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Abstract

The historiography of the Partition of India, the creative literature and the films evoked out of the pangs of Partition are primarily concerned with the Partition of Punjab and Bengal. Assam "as the third site of Partition" remained under the veil of silence for nearly six decades. In recent years, academic interventions are forthcoming to unveil the human history of the Partition of Assam which triggered a huge forced migration of population in the Brahmaputra Valley, Barak Valley and the hill areas of Assam. Given the discrimination that the Dalits experienced during and after the Partition of India, they are the triply marginalised group due to their caste, class and refugee identities. As the Dalits lacked agency in the Barak Valley, their plight largely remains unattended. In this context, the present paper is an attempt to recover the plight of the Kaibarta Partition refugees who were the victims of forced migration from Sylhet/ East Pakistan to Sonbeel area of Barak Valley of Assam especially, after the communal violence of 1950 in East Pakistan.

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Introduction:-

Studies about the Partition of India are chiefly concerned with the Partition of Punjab and Bengal and consequent forced migration, resettlement and rehabilitation of the Partition refugees in the new environment. Interestingly, the Partition experience of Assam was in the backseat for more than six decades perhaps due to fear of renewed violence. In recent years, attempts are forthcoming to unveil the "human history of Partition" of Assam drawn from oral history and memory of the victims of Partition and their progenies. The existing scholarly and literary writings on Partition are concerned with conflicting religious identities as the parameter of Partition (Butalia 1998:297). What needs to be explored are the plights of the linguistic, caste, gender, tribal and lesbian groups with their particularistic trauma triggered off by Partition. In Partition narratives, the voices of the Dalits Partition victims are either completely ignored or their voices remain marginal. As Urvashi Butalia has pointed out, "In its almost exclusive focus on Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims, Partition history has worked to render many others invisible. One such history is that of the scheduled castes or untouchables" (ibid). The present study is an endeavour to supplement the existing study of Partition by unveiling the "silenced" voices of the Kaibarta Partition refugees of Sonbeel area of Barak Valley of Assam.

Sylhet Referendum and Scheduled caste Politics

The Partition of Assam was preceded by a referendum to craft out a homogeneous *Asomiya* homeland in multi-cultural Assam by expelling the Sylheti Bengalis. It was therefore, ethno-linguistic divide rather than religious

Corresponding Author:- Dr. Mousumi Choudhury

Address:- Associate Professor Deptt. of Political Science Diphu Government College Diphu Karbi Anglong District, Assam.

incompatibility and intolerance which was the triggering factor of the Partition of Assam. Sarveswar Baruah in his speech in the Assam Legislative Council, 1936 had mentioned, “the line of division in Assam politics” is primarily not between Hindu and Muhameddan or on caste lines, but between the inhabitants of the Assam Valley and those of the Surma Valley (Baruah 2021).

The result of the referendum was pronounced in favour of inclusion of Sylhet into East Pakistan except three and half thanas i.e., Patharkandi, Ratabari, Badarpur and half of Karimganj subdivision that were retained in Cachar district of Barak Valley to establish land corridor with Tripura and Lushai Hills (present Mizoram). The Assam Pradesh Congress leaders and a reasonable section of the *Asomiya* elites hailed the victory as “a God-sent opportunity” in gratifying their long awaited aspirations to overthrow Sylhet outside Assam.

Invisible Partition Victims: Plight of the Kaibarta Partition Refugees in Sonbeel area of Karimganj

The Kaibarta community was primarily a fishermen community of Bengal, especially Eastern Bengal who were located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Their traditional occupation was fishing and boating. After the Partition of British India and particularly after the communal violence of 1950, a large number of Kaibartas fled their traditional home due to life-threatening situation in Sylhet/ East Pakistan and migrated to Sonbeel area of Karimganj sub division of Cachar district of Barak Valley with the patronage of Krishna Prasanna Choudhury who was then the Relief and Rehabilitation officer of Karimganj. Most of them migrated from Habiganj and Sunamganj sub divisions of Sylhet district. Some Kaibarta families of the Baisnavite sect¹ were the victims of forced migration from Sylhet who took shelter in Srirampur and Mongolpur villages of Sonbeel. Eventually, forced migration of Kaibarta refugees also took place from Mymensing district of East Pakistan.

Sonbeel² is the largest wetland in Assam, consisting of an area of 3458.12ha. The length of the beel is around 13.2 kilometer and the breadth is 4.2km. The beel is bounded by Chorgola of Karimganj district towards North, Kalibari Bazar towards East, Basantapur and other villages towards West. It is a confluence of two streams- Singla and Kachua. River Singla contributes 80% of water of Sonbeel.

The narratives of the first generation of Kaibarta refugees reflected one or other incident of violence³ by the *ansars* and Muslim miscreants, such as burning of paddies, desecration of idols, torching of their houses, threat of conversion, theft, robbery, abduction of women and forced marriage etc. in their villages which forced them to flee their homeland (Personal Interviews). Makhan Das who hailed from Bamai village of Habiganj sub-division of Sylhet district and presently located in Sonbeel shared in an interview about his experience of violence by Muslim *ansars* into his village and the neighbouring villages of Badighera and Naogaon etc. Initially, they collected ‘Jinnah Tax’ from the Hindu villagers by carrying Jinnah’s photograph with them. Soon, they were involved in gun fire wherein the Muslims fired bullets from the boats of the nearby river and the Hindus retaliated from their houses. This continued for three long days and people from both the communities lost their lives. Surprisingly, the administration did not intervene to quell the situation. Fear gripped the Hindu villagers and his father took the hasty decision to migrate. The family consisting of his parents, three sisters, himself and his younger brother, sailed on their boat through the river route to Sonbeel and took shelter in the rented house of Dinanath Paul and since then, the indescribable struggle for survival began (Narrated in an interview by Makhan Das).

Narendra Das whose family migrated from Murakari village of Habiganj sub division of Sylhet district in 1950 presently located in Sonbeel also narrated about the intensity of communal violence in Bamai which drove his family from his native village out of invasive fear and pervasive insecurity. They took shelter in Kalyanpur village of Sonbeel and the family survived amidst chronic struggle by adopting multiple means such as fishing, cultivation, masonry, preparing marriage mandap etc. with slim government support. In the process, they encountered acute physical sufferings and severe mental trauma (Personal Interview with Narendra Das).

Prasanta Das migrated from Fanduaka village of Comilla district of East Pakistan to Sonbeel in 1950 due to torture perpetrated by the Muslim *goondas* in various places of the district. He is the nephew of Krishna Prasanna Choudhury who with his displaced family stayed in his uncle’s house for months together. With a large family consisting of four brothers, five sisters, himself and his parents, the pangs of miserableness dictated their lives. Eventually, his father received land in the jungle terrain which was made somehow cultivable with the intense hardwork of the Ram Krishna Mission volunteers. Feelings of gratitude was overwhelming in his narration about the novel task of providing primary education to himself and his siblings by the Ram Krishna Mission School. At a later date, his father constructed a house in Gopikanagar village of Sonbeel. In remote Cachar, Sonbeel is all along a

neglected area. As a whole, Partition and its traumatic after-life dawned a nightmarish experience to them (Personal Interview with Prasanta Das).

The torture on the scheduled caste in Sylhet/ East Pakistan is echoed in the writings of Sushasini Das, a Gandian activist in her *Partition Diary* (2003) and Chanchal Kumar Sarma, a communist leader of Sylhet in his book, *Surma Upotokar Krishok o Sromik Andoloner Itihas* (1990).

The plight of the Scheduled Caste is echoed in Binayak Dutta's article, *Violent Parting: Recovering the history of Violence in Sylhet on Partition and After (1947-1950)* [2013], "Violence and violation of the Hindu minorities acquired a regular pattern between 1947 and 1950 and continued on varied scales and in varied forms with occasional smatterings of a large conflagration. While violence broke out on a large scale at Habiganj in 1947, in 1948 it was the turn of Noagaon. On the night of 11th February, about twelve hundred Muslims attacked the Kaibarta locality to take revenge for a failed attack on them about six months earlier. The mob scarred the villagers, who were mostly women and children" (Dutta 2013:29).

Those who did not experience violence first hand, the looming environment of tension, fear, insecurity, news of violence from nearby villages entrapped them into huge psychological crisis and triggered their forced migration. Most of the Kaibarta refugees migrated through the river Kushiara; some of them migrated with their country boats too (Personal Interviews).

Before Partition, Sonbeel was a jungle terrain, scarcely populated and predominantly inhabited by some Patnis, Maimals and Namasudras. In colonial period, the Patnis were brought from Jaldhup area of East Bengal by the then zaminder, Kumar Bahadur Gopika Raman Roy of Dewan Manik Chand Estate who are now settled in three villages of Sonbeel, viz, Anandapur, Devaddar and Gamaria (Das and Bhattacharjee 2015:31).

Violent protest and unrest took place in this area at the arrival of the refugees. Kudali, a nearby village of Sonbeel, witnessed a serious communal riot between the Kaibarta refugees and the Maimals (Muslim fishermen) which was somehow brought under control by the local police and district administration (ibid). Kudali was a village under Baidyanath Mukherjee Estate, the manager of which was Arobindo Choudhury (Personal Interview). After the riot, the Muslims of Kudali and Gamaria villages exchanged lands with some Brahmins of Maulavi Bazar of Sylhet and left their villages for good (Personal Interviews). Before Partition, the lone Lower Primary School that existed in the locality was 263 No. Nabin Gram Kendriya School with only one teacher teaching there (Personal Interview).

Table1:- Rehabilitation Colony of Sonbeel consisting of eleven Villages, Government of India Project

Serial No.	Name of the Villages
1	Dhritipur
2	Anandapur
3	Kalyanpur
4	Samriddhipur
5	Santoshpur
6	Swastipur
7	Shantipur
8	Mongolpur
9	Gopikanagar
10	Srirampur
11	Krishnapur

Source: Private Papers, Dewan Manik Chand Estate, Ram Krishna Nagar, 2013, Karimganj.

Table 1 depicts the names of the villages wherein the refugees were rehabilitated in Sonbeel by the Central Government of India. The villages were named by the Ram Krishna Mission of Karimganj. However, as per the records of the Ram Krishna Nagar, this project consisted 10 villages (Ram Krishna Math, 2011:5) whereas in the record of the Dewan Manik Chand Estate of Ram Krishna Nagar, the names of eleven villagers were recorded.

Attempts of Rebuilding lives: Rehabilitation of Partition Refugees in Sonbeel Government initiative and its Pitfalls

The linguistic divide between the largely Assamese speaking Brahmaputra Valley and the overwhelmingly Bengali speaking Barak-Surma Valley of Assam had its distressing impact on the prospects of rebuilding lives of the refugees. War of words was exchanged between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, on one hand, and Gopinath Bordoloi, the then Chief Minister of Assam on the other, relating to the rehabilitation of refugees in the Barak Valley. Series of failed negotiations with the Assam Government by the top level leaders, bureaucrats and even Governor of the State compelled the Central Government to take away the rehabilitation of refugees of the Barak Valley from the Assam Government since 1 May 1950 whereas refugee rehabilitation in other districts of Assam was retained by the Assam Government. Subsequently, for speedy implementation of the schemes and keeping mind on votes, the Assam Government had embarked on the rehabilitation of refugees in the Barak Valley (Government of India Papers, cited in Choudhury 2021).

The policy of the Government towards the refugees initially was to provide relief and eventually to resettle and rehabilitate the refugees in the new environment of Sonbeel. Krishna Prasanna Choudhury had appointed a clerk of the Relief and Rehabilitation Office of Karimganj to distribute cash dole to the refugees that continued for initial three months after the migration of refugees to Sonbeel in early 1950. As the refugees were sent to the rehabilitation colonies from the relief camp in 1952, two categories of loans were provided to them by the Government-- agricultural loan of Rs.975 and a business loan of Rs.800. In addition, housing plot and 5 bighas of cultivable land were also provided to them (Personal Interviews).

Ironically, both the loans were provided in fringe instalments and it stretched years together to actually reach the entire amount to them. Apart from this, the Central Government had to encounter a complex problem in their tenure of administering rehabilitation in the Barak Valley as the Assam Government was refrained from giving concurrence to the Centre in rehabilitating the refugees on land.

In Sonbeel, the refugees restored their traditional practice of fishing and Buro paddy cultivation to sustain themselves (Personal Interviews). As the loan was paid in fringe instalments, the refugees encountered extreme difficulties to carry on their occupation as they were unable to buy fishing nets, yarns, boats, agricultural tools, implements and good quality seeds etc. They even lacked proper irrigation facility to boost their cultivation. Eventually, the cost of production became more than the value of production. Consequent to that, a section of the Kaibarta refugees were compelled to switch over from their ancestral occupation of fishing and cultivation to small business such as coarse rice, pulsed rice, puffed rice and jaggery etc. to pull on their families in an unprecedented time (Personal Interviews). Eventually, water holding capacity of the beel has been reduced due to soil erosion, deforestation and land sliding in the hills of Mizoram from where it originates (Das and Bhattacharjee 2015:30-31). Due to shortage of rainfall, water does not remain in entire beel throughout the year. 'In winter, water level reaches to the deepest part of the beel and the upper part becomes a vast cultivable land'.

Table 2:- Amount Spent in regard to rehabilitation of Agriculturists and non-agriculturists refugees of Sonbeel.

Name of the colony	Number of refugee families	Agriculturist Refugees	Non Agriculturists Refugees	Amount Spent from May 1950 to February 1955	
				Agriculture	Non Agriculture
Sonbeel	1600	1350	250	11,21,385 (Rs)	2,50,000 (Rs.)

Source: Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of Assam, RHH/281/55

Table 2 explores the number of refugee families who were rehabilitated by the Government upto February 1955 and the amount spent in agricultural and non-agricultural pursuits. It is found that the number of agriculturists' refugees outnumbered the non-agriculturist refugees.

Table 3:- Loans paid to Non-agriculturalists Refugee Families in Sonbeel.

No of Non-Agriculturist Refugee Families	House Building Loan	Business Loan
250	Rs.500	Rs.800
Total	125,000	Rs.200,000

Source: Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of Assam, File No.129/153/82

Table 3 highlights the quantum of house building loan and business loans provided to 250 Non-agriculturist families by the Government.

In the deepest part of the beel, a number of fisheries do exist which are either manned by the government or by private persons. Hence, in winter, it does not remain as the common property. The Government beel fisheries are under the tutelage of an organisation named as the Sonbeel Fishermen Co-operative Society Limited (SFCSL) wherein the registered members are entitled to carry on fishing activity in the government beel fisheries (ibid: Personal Interviews). The members of the fishermen Cooperative society frequently sold out a huge quantum of fishes before they matured. Consequently, many species of the fishes got extinct in the long run. Intra-caste exploitation was a constant thing as the 'creamy layer' among the schedule castes availed the benefits of 'positive discrimination' and the poor ones hardly could garner any benefit out of it (Personal Interviews).

Subal Das who originally hailed from Baruala village of Sylhet and migrated to Sonbeel in 1940 for personal reason, narrated in an interface, "The Kaibarta leaders are responsible for under development of the area. By virtue of economic strength, the rich Kaibartas avail the opportunity to contest election in the Sonbeel Fishermen Co-operative Society Limited. Consequently, the poor Kaibarta Partition refugees and their progenies are the suffering lot. The rich Kaibartas plunder the fishes before they breed and grow. Sonbeel which was formerly acclaimed as an enriched storehouse of various species of fishes has ended up with extinction of many. The dream of Krishna Prasanna Choudhury to build up a self-sufficient Sonbeel is burnt into ashes" (Narrated in an inter-face by Subol Das).

Debasish Kar, a Professor of Life Science, Assam University, Silchar also expressed his concern about the sad state of affairs of Sobeel including the plight of the poor fishermen families. Sonbeel is popularly known as the *Sonar Beel* (Golden lake) due to exotic variety of fishes, green and lush surroundings, blessings of *Sanda pir* (a Sufi spiritual guide), source of idyllic joy of Nepur *majhi* (bargeman) and the fruit of intense hardwork and dedication of Swami Achinta Maharaj (Kar 2001:33).[translation mine].

Due to lack of income, the refugees were compelled to step outside their village to the town areas in search of work to sustain their families. The female refugees are compelled to work as domestic maids in Malini beel, Kalibarir Char, Chenkhuri areas of Silchar town, which is 79.5km kilometer away from their village. They had to work under situations of perpetual anxiety as their children were left alone at home (Personal Interviews). The male refugees worked as daily wage earners as mistry, mud cutters, masons and rickshaw pullers etc. Given the worst road condition, poor connectivity and perpetual anxiety, they got totally exhausted after returning home in the evening (Personal Interviews). "Sonbeel, Assam's largest wetland destroyed by rampant encroachment and pollution" (*The Telegraph*, 10 December 2008). Interestingly, even though Sonbeel has received the status of National wetland but the things did not change substantially. In addition to human errors, seasonal flood added more miseries to the refugees. "Every year from March onwards, the villages got filled up with rain water and became a gigantic lake. As the depth of the lake is very less, it created an enigmatic situation for the refugees". Some of the colony camps were set up in low lying areas such as Sonbeel and Mohaltali etc. which exposed the refugees to devastating flood and compelled them to be the victims of multiple displacement (Choudhury 2021:190). The refugees suffered from various diseases in the inhospitable jungle terrain of Sonbeel such as malaria, jaundice and dysentery etc. Lack of safe drinking water aggravated their plight. The doctors and the nurses were reluctant to step in such a vulnerable terrain as Sonbeel. Given that, one medical assistant was engaged by the Rehabilitation Office of Karimganj who visited Sonbeel refugee colony once or twice in a week with some medicines (Personal Interviews). Despite holding pristine beauty (Singh 2014) and a potential tourist hub, Sonbeel remains unexplored and re-inforces the apathy of the policy makers.

Table 4:- Scheme of Permanent Rehabilitation of 1,350 displaced agriculturists families and 250 displaced non-agriculturists families in Sonbeel.

Expenditure under different heads	Amount	Total
House Building	Rs.335 per family for 500 families and Rs.275 for 850 families	Rs. 167500 +Rs.233,750 =Rs.401250
Plough and Agricultural Implements	Rs.32 for 744 families and Rs.17 for the remaining 606 families.	Rs.23,808+Rs.10302=34110
Rent for fishing and purchase of yarns for fishing net	Rs.25 for 606 families	Rs.15,150
Household Utensils	Rs.15 for 1350 families	Rs.20,250
Plough Bullocks	Rs.125 for 1350 families	Rs.1,68750
Maintenance Loan	Rs.517 for 500 families and Rs.247 for 850 families	Rs.258,500 and Rs.209,950 respectively
Seeds		Rs.25 for 500 families

Source: Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of Assam, File No. 129/153/55

Table 4 explores expenditure incurred under various heads. Although house building loan was fixed at Rs.500, the amount was given in fringe instalments. The release of the loan money was not uniform. Many of the refugees received the sanctioned amount by more than three instalments. There is a variation in disbursing maintenance loan too that is reflected in the maintenance column of the above table (Table No.4).

The official policy of rehabilitation of refugees in the Barak Valley was not a well-thought plan; what worsened it was the pervasive linguistic discrimination, never-ending conflict between the Central Government and the Assam Government, unplanned management of funds and apathy towards this peripheral region. It is pertinent to mention that colonial Assam and North-East were not integrated with the mainstream colonial administration, hence the people of those areas experienced chronic under development during the colonial period. Such modalities of governance remained predominant in the mindset of the policy makers in postcolonial Assam too. In addition, these areas were hardly covered by the National and State level media due to its remote location and did not impact the election result. Therefore, the sufferings of the refugees of Sonbeel remained invisible to the outside world and got silenced in the cold storage of the minds of the refugees for decades.

Silver-lining amidst crisis and chaos: Intervention of the Non-state Actors

Dewan Manik Chand estate of Ram Krishna Nagar extended dedicated service to the refugees since the beginning of their forced migration and provided emergency food and shelter. The zaminder of the Estate was Kumar Bahadur Gopika Raman Roy who extended all possible assistance to the refugees to rebuild their lives. Nayeb Khagendra Chandra Dutta and Nayeb Umesh Chandra Das were meticulously involved in assisting the refugees in re-building lives. Sachindra Mohan Dutta who was popularly known as “Gandhi of Barak” also dedicated himself for the cause of the refugees. He along with Khagendra Chandra Dutta and Subol Das, the then (1950) Secretary of the Krishak Samity worked hard for constructing a dam over the river Kachua. In addition, Sachindra Mohan Dutta surveyed low lying flood-prone areas and set up Swliss gate in Sonbeel after much effort. Rakhal Das, a Communist leader also significantly contributed in championing the cause of the refugees. Consequent upon the Congress and Communist rivalry, Rakhal Das was shot dead. This incident reflects the disturbing political atmosphere of Barak Valley at that point of time (Personal Interviews). Gopesh Chandra Chakrabarty, a social worker of the area also contributed for the cause of the refugees (Pal 2001:41).

The Ram Krishna Mission of Karimganj was sincerely involved to provide relief to several thousand refugees in Karimganj after the communal violence of East Pakistan in 1950. Their aspirations coincided with the Central Government of India which expressed its interests to involve the Mission in relief and rehabilitation activities on behalf of the Government. Swami Gopeshwarananda was the president of the Ram Krishna Mission then who deployed Swami Shivoramananda, one of his close associates and sincere member of the Mission to provide leadership to other volunteers in the rehabilitation of refugees. Swami Shivoramananda was the camp-incharge of the

Ram Krishna Mission Camp set up at Karimganj in 1950 (Ram Krishna Math 2011:3). In this endeavour, they were joined by the students of local schools and colleges and also young volunteers. Initially, their primary responsibility was to transport truck loads of refugees from the Indo-Pak border, Sutarkandi to the camps in Karimganj and adjoining areas, then to construct make shift camps in view to their increasing numbers, to cook food for them, to arrange drinking water, to distribute coupons for food and to arrange medical assistant for them. At this hour of grave humanitarian crisis, large vessels were placed in houses of the local inhabitants of Karimganj wherein the women of the households poured handful of rice on each day of the week and at the end of the week those vessels were collected by the volunteers to cook food for the refugees (ibid:3-4) [Translation Mine]. At the request of the Central Government, the Mission volunteers were involved in assisting the refugees in rebuilding their lives in Sonbeel. Swami Shivoramananda, Achinta Maharaj, Swami Promeyananda, Gopal Maharaj, Swami Udgitananda, Swami Prathomanda and other volunteers of the Mission relentlessly put their efforts in constructing a Refugee Colony in Sonbeel by cutting and clearing of the dense jungle area. This project took three years time to be accomplished (1951-1953). Gradually, the colony was developed to a considerable extent. With Swami Shivoramnanda's constant efforts, *patta* of the land of the colony was collected from the Government (ibid).

Swami Udgitananda, who was the close associate of Swami Promeyananda (whose family name was Ram Gopal) shared his thought relating to indomitable courage and efficiency of Swami Promeyananda which yielded strength to rehabilitation, "At that time, seven huge boats as large as houses were used by the Mission volunteers in the rehabilitation activities of Sonbeel. Many a times, waves of the beel soared profusely high. Swami Prothomananda often rowed those boats and Ramgopal took the helm by virtue of being brave and skilled. Had Ramgopal not taken the helm, even though we were elderly to them and courageous, lacked confidence to board into those boats"(ibid).[translation mine]

To implement the Project in Sonbeel, Achinta Maharaj was involved in allotting land to the refugees on small hills with the help of an *Amin* (Surveyor) and the size of the holding was assessed in accordance with the number of members per refugee family. At the completion of the allotment, the refugees cleaned the forests and constructed mud houses. For cutting and cleaning of forests, a sum of Rs. 30 per refugee family was allotted by the Government which did not reach to them due to misappropriation by the middle men, even though signatures of receipts were collected from the refugees (Personal Interviews). The East side of Sonbeel was taken up by Achinta Maharaj. The villages under him included: Sangatipur, Srinagar, Anandapur, Mukam Tilla, Samriddhipur, Kalyanpur, Swastipur, Bargul, Bagan Tilla, Sontoshpur, Kalibari Bazar, Mongolpur and Gopikapur. The villages in the west side of Sonbeel were taken up by Krishna Prasanna Choudhury which included Rakhali Basti, Netaji Nagar, Gandhi Nagar, Sunai Chara and Champak Nagar (Personal Interviews).

Seventy one years of forced migration have elapsed with hoards of promises and election gimmicks to the refugees; but the surviving refugees and their progenies are spending subhuman lives due to lack of proper implementation of the Government schemes. The preponderance of Dalals and corrupt officials since the onset, further obfuscated the situation. This is reflected at the expulsion of Achinta Maharaj from Sonbeel since his sincere involvement and humanitarian assistance handicapped the sinister interests of the corrupt officials and leaders involved in implementing the schemes (Personal Interviews).

The surviving refugees narrated that the fierce tearing apart from their lost native home and homeland continue to trigger intense pain. In addition, fond memories and nostalgia for the lost home are still predominant in their psyche. Needless to say, their memory of trauma heightens due to financial distress, encompassing discriminations and apathy by the host government and rich Kaibartas, vulnerable diseases, intense fear and pervasive insecurity in the jungle terrain and given the natural calamities such as flood, erosion and landslides. This prevents the refugees to mentally integrate with the new place.

Intruding Past into Present: Perpetual Anxiety and trauma of being 'Stateless'

Sadly, a significant number of refugees in Sonbeel were not enrolled in the National Register of Citizens, the purpose of which is to identify illegal migrants residing in the North eastern city of Assam. Legacy and non-Legacy data are the criterias for proving the valid Indian citizenship. Significantly, a large number of Partition refugees lost their documents either in the process of flow, unsafe camps set up in the dense forest areas or due to successive floods. Many others were not provided refugee registration certificate and border slip etc. Consequently, they were unable to submit the requisite certification of proof of nativity. It is pertinent to mention that a large number of refugees in Sonbeel migrated through the river route and not through custom stations, hence they were not provided

migration or registration certificates (Personal Interviews). In Cachar, 62.2 percent refugee families in urban areas and 57.1 percent families in rural areas were found without proof due to administrative lacuna (Government of Assam, 1952, cited in Choudhury 2021:136). In addition, Sonbeel was a part of Karimganj subdivision (now district) under the Ratabari Constituency. At the upgradation of Hailakandi from sub division to district in 1989, Sonbeel was bifurcated and certain villages were included into Hailakandi. Invariably, a chunk of documents were also transferred there. Therefore, it is difficult to trace the old records to verify the documents of those refugees who submitted requisite papers related to NRC. In addition, the Assam Government has no such office wherein the documents of refugees were preserved. Surprisingly, fire broke out in the Relief and Rehabilitation Offices of Karimganj, Silchar and Hailakandi on the same day in 1960 under mysterious circumstances (Personal Interviews). Needless to say, valuable documents related to relief and rehabilitation were burnt down. Those who migrated after 1960, their documents were also not preserved due to official apathy. Even though, biometrics information of many refugees were completed and requisite documents were submitted to the concerned authority, they were not provided Adhar cards and ironically their ration cards were also taken away since their names were not enrolled in the NRC (Personal Interviews). Henceforth, their mental agony that set in since the days of the forced migration to Sonbeel till continues.

Conclusion:-

The refugees of Sonbeel are the victims of both religious fundamentalism and linguistic chauvinism on the eve of the Partition of Assam and its aftermath. In fact, they were trapped in the creation of contested 'homelands' and suffered fierce uprooting from their 'own' homeland. Ironically, they lost their homes, fulfilling rhyme of life and friendly intercommunity exchanges due to political conspiracy hatched by none other than their home Government. Even after seventy one years of their forced migration, Sonbeel suffers from communication bottleneck, health care infrastructure and services, economic prospects and education facilities etc. which speak a volume about the drudgery of the surviving refugees and their children in everyday life. The elected representatives from this area hardly ventilate their plights on the floor of the Assam Legislative Assembly or in the Parliament. The bitterest legacy of the Assam Partition are the violent ethnic conflicts, mostly centering around land and creation of conflicting categories such as migrants/immigrants/foreigners/locals etc. which created a complex situation in the region. To conclude, the surviving refugees and their progenies need immediate policy intervention to mitigate their constant agony and trauma relating to citizenship and to ensure effective implementation of the government schemes in their favour.

Footnotes

1. According to K.N Bose, many *namasudras* in east Bengal were boatmen or fishermen, especially in East Bengal, wherever there are rivers and canals, one can find the members of the *Namasudra* caste whom the Hindu society has always deposed as untouchables and making them live in the fringes of the village (Bose 1994). Many of the *Namasudras* of Bengal were *Vaishnavas* who organised regular *Nam Sankirtans* (Chanting the name of Sri Krishna) in their house-holds and reading of epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* etc. Given the conspicuous absence of caste discrimination, a significant number of depressed classes chose to adopt *vaishavite* tradition of the Hindu religion (Bandyopadhyay 2018).

2. Sonbeel is one of the largest lakes in South Assam and the largest wetland in Assam. It is located in Karimganj district and it connects both Hailakandi and Karimganj district. It is 35 kilometres away from Karimganj and 79.4 km from Silchar. 'Lake' means *beel* in local Bengali language. Both *Lotic* and *Lentic* eco system exist in Sonbeel.

3. At a village called Doghurkhal near Gopalganj in East Pakistan, some armed police and local Muslims raided some houses of *namasudras* and beat men and women, destroyed their properties and took away valuables. They mercilessly beat a pregnant woman that resulted in abortion on the spot (Personal Interviews). On 19th February, 1950, Sadarpur village under Jakiganj police station in Sylhet was attacked. The house of Suklal *Namasudra* was looted. When he went to the police station to lodge a complaint, the police stabbed him, then again wounded him with bayonet and finally kicked him out of the police station. At Pargam, the houses of Akrur *Namasudra* and Ramesh *Namasudra* were looted and forcibly occupied by the Muslims (Sinha 2012). Chanchal Kumar Sarma also highlighted about the torture and killings of the lower caste peasants in 1949 and torture of women leaders in jail. The *ansars* and Muslim fundamentalist forces did not even spare the pregnant women and tortured them mercilessly. (Sarma 1999). In Habiganj sub-division of Sylhet, the torture was intense. In addition, torture on lower class people happened in various parts of East Bengal/ East Pakistan after Partition and successive communal violence.

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