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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**MEDIATING GENDER AND EMPOWERMENT: WOMEN PARTITION VICTIMS,
BARAK VALLEY OF ASSAM**

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Abstract

The Partition of India is the momentous event in the history of South Asia. It triggered bloody violence, a large number of brutal deaths, devastation, acute emotional, mental and psychological trauma to millions of people who found themselves on the wrong side of the newly created border after Partition. In addition, Partition generated a huge forced migration of population who were compelled to leave behind their ancestral home and hearth (wherein they lived for generations together) in order to save their lives. Although in the Partition violence, people suffered irrespective of their identity, its impact was experienced more severely by the socially and economically marginalized people such as women, Dalits, children and the differently-abled people. The Partition was carried out according to the Lord Mountbatten Plan of 3rd June, 1947 wherein Punjab was divided into East Punjab and West Punjab and Bengal into East Bengal and West Bengal. Ostensibly, the province of Assam also experienced Partition which is a 'lesser known fact in the history of Partition'. The fundamental cause of the Assam Partition was the linguistic divide between the Assamese and the Bengalis that started fomenting in colonial Assam due to the British policy of "Divide and Rule". In the Assam Partition, not only the region experienced Partition but also the Bengali speaking Muslim majority district of Sylhet in Assam to re-install connectivity with then Lushai hills (now Mizoram state) and Tripura hills (now Tripura state). The narratives of Punjab Partition is widely represented in history and creative literature and to some extent the experiences of Bengal too but Assam as the "third world of Partition" was in the "veil of silence" for more than six decades. It is only in recent years that academicians, researchers and novelists have taken interests to explore the "human dimension of the Partition of Assam" and its devastating consequences.

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The new Constitution of India that was adopted after independence has featured provisions to uplift the status of women by promoting equality between men and women. It has attempted to strengthen the legal system that aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against women. It has also envisaged equality in public employment etc.

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but due to pervasive gender discrimination and apathy, women continue to be the victims of myriad gender-related violence and prejudices. In fact, women as refugees are triply marginalised group who needed special support, empathy, adequate relief, resettlement and rehabilitation in order to re-install their lives in a new land. As the attempts of empowerment of the refugees is a less explored issue, little is known about the empowerment of refugees by the state and its agencies. Hence, the present paper aims to explore the struggle of the refugee women in rehabilitating themselves in Barak Valley of Assam who were the victims of forced migration from Sylhet/ East Pakistan. It also attempts to study whether any attempt was made in empowering the refugees by the host government especially the women refugees of the afore-mentioned valley.

Introduction:-

Women empowerment and forced displacement or migration have largely been a neglected area of study. While concentrating on refugees in developing countries, it is important to note that women mainly have lower social roles and less social power than men (Mulumba 2005, Dolan 2002, Lukunka 2011, cited in Krause 2013:29). Religion and culture, among other things were portrayed as challenges to empowerment in relation to using rights and community based approaches (UNHCR: 2008:27). The UNHCR has defined empowerment as a “process through which women [...] in disadvantaged positions increase their access to knowledge, resources, decision making power, and raise their awareness of participation in their communities, in order to reach a level of control over their own environment.” (Jabbar and Jaka 2016:312). The objective of women empowerment is to equip women with skills so as to enable them to be self-reliant, decision makers and problem solvers. According to Perkin and Zimmerman, empowerment theory and intervention aim at the wellbeing of individuals within their social environment (Perkin and Zimmerman 1995, cited in Sherefay 2020:12-13). Women’s economic empowerment is a necessary step towards women’s general empowerment which requires more active engagement and commitment from men and male-dominated institutions (UNHCR 2001:4).

“In the Gender Dimensions of Forced Displacement; A Synthesis of New Research” (2021) conducted by the World Bank Group in collaboration with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, it is conceived that ‘gender-related constraints and barriers are often amplified in situations of forced displacement and consider how policies and programmes can help to overcome obstacles and enable new opportunities to be realized’ (ibid). “the relationship between displacement and empowerment is mediated by contextual factors” (Vinck, o’ Mealia, Wei, Saiedi, Irwani, Pham 2022). The social structure in developing countries are largely patriarchal wherein women possess fewer rights. Forced displacement can break the ascribed gender roles and exert empowering impact on the lives of women in refugee camps and settlements. Krause’s Analysis of ‘Empowerment of Refugee Women in Camps and Settlements dislocation and refugee assistance’ have an impact on gender relations and the social status of women. He has argued that women empowerment can be more successful in settlements than in camps wherein equal access to resources can lead to women’s empowerment, while cultural changes can only be realized through self-initiatives from women refugees and their sense of ownership (Krause cited in Sherefay 2020:5). Yazid and Natania’s “Women Refugees; An imbalance of Protection and Being Protected” (2017) brings forth the empowerment and better protection of women refugees with specific needs, while Ritchie’s study “Gender and Enterprise in fragile Refugee settings: Female empowerment amidst male emasculation- a challenge to local integration” analyses gender and enterprise in fragile refugee settings through examining the refugee women’s public mobility and evolving economies in relation to the gender dynamics (ibid).

Asha Hans has highlighted that “women are marginalised during the processes of displacement and encampment because they are embraced by the new authorities and economic dependence which is contributing to women’s sense of powerlessness” (Hans 2008:69). As a result of forcible displacement, the learned and historically developed roles and functions of community members cannot be applied in the traditional manners because of the new living situation, and changing livelihood conditions during encampment. Therefore, Hans describes displacement as a “gendered process” (ibid). “During displacement, man lose their role as a provider and protector of the family, which results in a sense of frustration and powerlessness leading to an increased level of violence” (UNHCR 2008 :57). The analysis of women in conflict and post-conflict spaces discuss the binary of female peacefulness, docility and vulnerability versus male strength, power and independence. This increases the perception of women as victims of violence while the nexus of masculinity and conflict remains either unanalyzed or one-dimensionally presented as patriarchal and violent (Engels 2008 :Buckley-Zistel 2013, cited in Krause 2013: 33).

Objectives of the Study:-

The primary objective of the study is to explore the factors leading to the Partition of Assam which triggered a huge forced migration of population across the newly created border amidst engulfing insecurity, violence, devastation of property, fear and acute psychological trauma to a large number of population victimized by the Partition. Since women are the vulnerable victims of a man-made disaster as Partition, an attempt is made in this study to delve into the plight and trauma of women Partition victims who were compelled to migrate to Barak Valley of Assam from Sylhet/ East Pakistan after Partition and especially after the Communal violence of 1950. The nascent Indian state was duty bound to rehabilitate the Partition refugees in the Indian states. Hence, this study propels to analyse the rehabilitation measures undertaken by the Indian Government and its Assam counterpart towards the women Partition refugees of the Barak valley. This study also aims to understand the binary between women's powerlessness as victims of Partition and the state's rhetoric of women empowerment of the Partition refugees.

Methodology:-

The archival sources and the other available secondary literature related to the 'human dimension' of the Partition of Assam can not largely explore the pain, trauma and the enigmatic situation created by Partition. Hence, oral history and memory of surviving victims of Partition, second and third generation of the families of the refugees and a few persons related with the refugees are used as significant tools of exploring the actual humane history of women Partition victims of the Barak Valley. Although secondary sources have provided the historical context to understand the background of the problem, the sociological and anthropological aspects of the issue needed to be studied to explore the plight and trauma of the women Partition refugees of the Barak Valley. Interviews and informal conversation constitute a significant thrust of the study.

Historical perspective of the Partition: Assam and Sylhet:-

The independence of India in 1947 from the British colonial rule was accompanied by a bloody and tragic Partition. It unleashed violence, killings, destruction of property, rape, forced marriage, rupture of community life and triggered an unprecedented forced migration of population across the newly created border. About 15 million people were reported to be the helpless victims of forced migration (Butalia 1998). The Partition has divided the provinces of Bengal, Punjab and Assam. But Assam as the "third site of Partition" was under the veil of silence for more than six decades. In recent years, initiatives are undertaken by scholars and novelists to explore the "human dimension of the Partition of Assam". Interestingly, in the Partition of Assam, not only the state of Assam was partitioned, but the district of Sylhet also experienced the similar fate (Choudhury 2021). It is necessary to highlight that Sylhet was ethnically, linguistically and culturally a part of Dhaka division of Bengal which was sliced off arbitrarily by the British colonial administration in order to create Assam as the Chief Commissioner's Province in 1874. Previously, Assamese was the medium of schools and language of courts in Assam which was replaced with Bengali in 1837. Eventually, many of the posts of the British bureaucracy in Assam was occupied by Sylheti Bengalis due to their proficiency and qualification in English language. When the Assamese middle class emerged much later, they found the Sylheti Bengalis as their competitors in jobs.

Therefore, they started blaming the Bengali clerks for instigating the British administrators for this change and thus linguistic discrimination against the Bengalis gained ground with deep seated consequences. Given the fragile communal situation that erupted in parts of colonial India a year ahead of Partition, the Government of Assam in connivance with the All India Congress leadership anchored a "Referendum" in Sylhet (Choudhury 2021) which was held on 6th and 7th of July, 1947 to seek people's verdict either to retain it in Assam or to join East Pakistan. The result of the referendum was pronounced in favour of Sylhet joining East Pakistan except three and half thanas-- Patharkandi, Ratabari, Badarpur and half of Karimganj sub-division which were retained in Cachar district of post-colonial Barak Valley of Assam to establish land corridor with Lushai hills (present Mizoram) and Tripura state. The referendum is immensely 'controversial' till today due to large scale rigging and intimidation, deprivation of voting rights of two lakhs tea garden labourers who casted their votes in previous elections, severe threat, violence and intimidation by the Muslim League National Guards, dubious role of the Assam Pradesh Congress and the absence of the Congress leaders in the trying time of the referendum in Sylhet except Shyama Prasad Mookherjee.

Colonial Assam consisted of three geographical areas: predominantly Assamese speaking Brahmaputra Valley, overwhelmingly Bengali speaking Surma-Barak Valley and hill areas. There was a pervasive linguistic cleavage between the Barak Valley and Brahmaputra Valley due to the colonial policy of "Divide and rule" ultimately leading to the Partition of Assam. "Sylhet was considered a thorn on the path of enjoyment of full political ascendancy by the

politicians of the Brahmaputra Valley. The impending independence of the country had released this high expectation which the leaders wanted to capitalize even without Sylhet where they did not have any political stake” (Bhattacharjee2006:207).It is pertinent to mention that the Muslim League which did not enjoy any political foothold in Sylhet due to strong Hindu-Muslim unity. Given the wild communal situation and lawlessness immediately before Partition, it started communalising the social ambience of Sylhet by threat, intimidation, force. It was perhaps due to the demand of Muhammad Ali Jinnah to include the whole Assam into his proposed Pakistan. In their bid to unilingual Assam, the Government of Assam had given free hands to the Muslim League National guards to spread its tentacles and to inflict torture on the Bengali Hindus in one pretext or the other. Needless to say that the law and order situation (law and order is a state subject) largely remained non-existent in East Pakistan.

The study is located in Barak Valley of Assam which was known as the Surma- Barak Valley before independence. After the cessation of most part of Sylhet to East Pakistan after Partition, the region is now known as Barak Valley. It is located in Southern Assam consisting of three administrative districts--Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Among them, Cachar and Hailakandi belonged to the Cachar district of colonial Assam whereas truncated Karimganj was a part of undivided Sylhet. Geographically, the region is surrounded by hills from all sides except it shares its western plain boundary with Bangladesh. ‘The valley is the extension of the Greater Surma/ Meghna valley of Bengal in every aspect from culture to geography’.

Women as Victims of Partition: the Experiences from Barak valley:-

The experiences of women victimized by Partition of North-East India is less spoken of due to “geographical myopia” and neglect of the region for decades. In addition, history is written largely by men wherein women’s positive and creative involvement and contributions are not much recognized. On the other hand, due to patriarchy and their gendered status in the society, women were glorified as mother, wives and sisters than their role as writers, historians and novelists although things have relatively changed in recent years. Hence, we have minimal representations of women’s contributions on freedom struggle, decolonization and Partition. “If Assam represented the marginal in partition discourse, its women represented the marginal within marginal, or twice marginalised” (Datta 2010). The Partition of Assam triggered a huge forced migration of Bengali Hindu population from Sylhet/ East Pakistan to Barak Valley of Assam which actually began on 1946 after the Noakhali violence in East Pakistan but many people went back to their ancestral home once the situation turned normal. Due to brutal killings of Bengali Hindus coupled with a large scale rape, molestation, forced marriage, abduction and conversion of women in Noakhali violence, a large number of men, women and children took shelter in Surma-Barak Valley to save their life, religion, culture and honour (Deb Laskar:1992:74). The migration that was started after the Noakhali violence continued after the referendum and Partition. However, it took the shape of an ‘exodus’ after the notorious communal violence of East Pakistan of 1950. The decision of displacement was not the choice of the women victims but were thrust upon them. “Culture and religious norms have an influence on how gender roles are constructed” (UNHCR 2008:6).

Women as victims of forced migration experienced the brunt more severely. Apart from being the victims of rape, molestation, forced marriage and conversion, they experienced unspeakable pain, discomfort, physical, economic and psychological distress in the process of flow. Many of them had to deliver their babies on unsafe road without medical support and a large number of them were not able to provide safe and healthy childhood to their children. In addition, women experienced torture and harassment by the ansars at the check post of Latu, Mahishasan, Saola and Sutarkandi. Many a times, their belongings and little money were snatched away by the ansars at the check post in the Sylhet-Cachar border. In the name of search, the modesty of women was violated. In fact, the plight of the single women was much more severe due to lack of support in an alien land as well as absence of male members to protect them. Since women are perceived as the “honour” of the community, they were the earliest group of forced migrants from Sylhet/East Pakistan to Assam, West Bengal and Tripura. Women suffered severe psychological trauma as victims of forced displacement and eventual migration (Personal Interviews).

Empowerment and refugee hood- Women’s Experiences:-

Given the huge number of force migration of Bengali Hindu refugees in Barak Valley, the immediate responsibility of the post-colonial Central and the Assam Government was to provide roof and food to the refugees, to ensure their safety and eventually to resettle and rehabilitate them. But the Government of Assam was ‘stubbornly reluctant’ to accept the Bengali Hindu refugees. This evoked a serious conflict between Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister and Gopinath Bordoloi, the premier of Assam which compelled the Central Government to take over the rehabilitation of refugees of Barak Valley from 1st May, 1950 whereas the rehabilitation of other districts of Assam

was undertaken by the Assam Government. However, from February 1953, the rehabilitation of refugees in Barak Valley was taken up by the Assam Government by keeping their minds on vote and for speedy implementation of the schemes (Choudhury 1991:173). Ironically, both the Central Government and the then Government of Assam were conspicuous in their absence in the peak time (first three months --February, March and April, 1950) of forced migration of refugees from Sylhet/ East Pakistan to the Barak Valley when the refugees earnestly required the support of the governments to save their lives. It is pertinent to mention that the refugees survived solely due to the dedicated services provided by various voluntary organizations and empathy and humility of the individuals in Barak valley who helped the refugees in every possible manner (Yugoshakti, 9th May, 1950). The women organizations of the valley supported the refugees in general and women in particular by providing food, clothes and medicines in crucial times of their lives (Personal Interviews).

In order to resettle, rehabilitate and eventually to empower the women refugees, the Government of India and Assam had no rehabilitation policy. 'There was no international instrument to provide assistance to the Partition refugees. Interestingly, the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951 or the Protocol of 1967 were meant for the European refugees and the Partition refugees could not garner any benefit out of these instruments'. Hence, rehabilitation was carried out with national initiatives. In the absence of domestic legislation granting official legal status to forced migrants, they were not provided adequate resettlement and rehabilitation. The Government adopted ad hoc policies to resettle a vast number of refugees. This, in fact, prevented a large number of refugees to get themselves adequately rehabilitated. Two categories of loans were provided to the male refugees: Agricultural loan of Rs.625 and a business loan of Rs.975. These loans were provided in fringe instalments which the refugees could not gainfully use in the hardest times of their lives (Personal Interviews). Cash doles were provided for the first two weeks in the rehabilitation centers as well as for those who were returning to Pakistan (*The Assam Gazette*, June 27, 1951, p.984).

But the female headed families were not provided any loan rather they were pushed into temporary destitute homes with insignificant amount of cash doles and inadequate ration. Rachel Weber has articulated that, "The Bengali refugees in India also faced the problem of joint families divided into nuclear ones and they were further split up into male headed groupings where work was for the male bread winner" (Weber 2003:66-67). A large number of destitute refugees migrated from Sylhet/East Pakistan to the Barak Valley and their number was the highest in Karimganj subdivision. It was due to the fact that female members were sent to the other side of the border for safety and the male members stayed back to sell off their houses, paddy fields, livestock and also to hand over their kuldevota (family God) to safer hands. In addition, the number of widows and single women was high in some districts of East Pakistan (Personal interviews). Even though the Government set up four destitute homes, a large number of destitute could not receive minimum government support and some of them died in open pavements without food and roof (Personal interviews; the Government of India Papers, 1950). Many others were involved into the grim struggle for survival. They experienced a process of empowerment not due to the government initiatives but by their efforts to sustain the family and through constant efforts in the public domain. "Refugees and displaced women, especially single woman, go through a process of empowerment, as they have to fend for themselves. This they do in a very difficult environment, with hardly any support from anyone" (Hans 2003: 363).

Satindra Mohan Dev, the then Chairman of the Silchar Municipal Board has highlighted that lakhs of rupees were spent for the cause of the refugees without any tangible result. In the tea garden, no family became self-sufficient since very few were given 'khet' lands and none could get an economic holding even for a small family of four members (The Government of India, 1957). There were very few schools in such gardens and the girls could not be sent to schools located several kilometers away from their camps in hilly jungle areas due to security reason. Hence, they whiled away their times and in the process became the victims of child marriage (Personal Interviews). The living environments in refugee camps and settlements constitute a mainly isolated and poly-hierarchical space with limited livelihood perspectives and safety challenges (Crisp 1999, cited in Krause). This finding gets utmost relevance in regard to the refugees of Barak Valley in general and women in particular. In 1958, the Central Government set up the Central Destitute Home in Meherpur, Silchar in Cachar district and the temporary destitute homes were closed down. The destitute women from the temporary camps were accommodated in the Central home. One of the reports of the Government has stated that "The Assam Government closed down the Women's Home at Silchar and the inmates of that home were kept in the buildings constructed for the CTO at Ram Krishna Nagar of Cachar district while the remaining inmates were put in the new building constructed for the Central Home at Silchar. It proposed to utilize the remaining part of the Central Home at Silchar for the industrial estate (The Government of Assam, 1955).

To make the women refugees self-reliant, training institutions were set up by the Government but these institutes remained functional for a brief period of time due to government apathy and insensibility. Surprisingly, no consideration was put in place how with meagre government doles, the refugee women would be able to survive and sustain along with their children over the years. To some women refugees, lands were allotted in dense jungle areas which were not habitable in terms of pervasive insecurity and economic viability. Therefore, they did not agree to such settlements. Some other refugees left the destitute home and plunged into the grim struggle for survival with the assistance of their relatives or acquaintances (Personal Interviews). The Central Destitute Home in Meherpur, Silchar still exists with minimum ration provided to the inmates by the Government. No attempt was made to rehabilitate or empower them even after 75 years of Partition. They are the perpetual refugees who are surviving with the stigma of refugee-hood.

In order to enroll themselves in the Cotton college, the sole institution for offering B.Sc. course in Assam, the students of the Barak Valley needed to submit domicile certificates to the College authority which explored the absolute discriminatory practice of the Assam Government. It is pertinent to mention that the students from other districts were not required to submit any such certificate. Eventually, such practice was abolished but the rules relating to the qualifications for getting domicile was made more stringent as per the Rule 307, clause 2 of the Assam Executive Manual. The Government of Assam had declared that they were not responsible to provide any scholarship to those educational institutions whose students did not have the domicile in Assam, as constituted after the transfer of a portion of Sylhet to East Bengal (The Government of India 1950).

This discriminatory practice also persisted in Medical and Engineering courses etc. Scholarships and stipends at the disposal of the state of Assam were also awarded to students and candidates who were either Assamese or domiciled in Assam (ibid). Gopinath Bordoloi declared in the Students' Congress in Golaghat, "Undoubtedly Assam is for the Assamese" (*The Shillong Times*, 13th October, 1947). The Assam Government needed to formulate schemes for the rehabilitation of refugees by starting production centers or to provide them rehabilitation benefits if they had acquired any self-reliance skill. The Rehabilitation Department of Assam had considered that the displaced persons who wished to move out of home should be given a dole of Rs.25 instead of Rs.15 as the cost of living in Assam was high. But the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India did not agree to this enhanced rate because such a revision might lead to similar demands from other states (Personal Interviews).

The initiative of making refugee women self-reliant was infested with insincerity, bureaucratic inadequacy and policy-failure. Hence, the attempt to set up Khadi industries in women's home was not materialized. It became evident from the letter of R.V Subrahmanian addressed to the Secretary, Orissa Public Service Commission that 'the industries officer, Relief and Rehabilitation department was instructed to explore the possibilities of introducing some schemes, particularly paddy husking in the destitute homes and Ghani oil pressing in the colonies and also to explore the possibilities of calendaring and sizing unit in the district of Cachar. He was expected to function as a liaison officer between the Relief and Rehabilitation department on the one side and the industries department on the other. But the work of Industry officer was not found satisfactory as he alleged to have lacked practical knowledge and realistic approach to the problem. Since he did not even possess clarity of thought, his proposals were often no more than a jumble of vague ideas. Even though he completed nearly one year in his assignment as an Industrial Adviser to assist the Relief and Rehabilitation Department in the preparation of schemes for the establishment of cottage/small scale industries, he failed to formulate even a single practical scheme and was eventually terminated. For suitable candidate, it was felt to create a fresh post of industrial adviser at the head quarter of the Relief and Rehabilitation department, Assam in the scale of 600-40-800-50-1150 plus usual allowances. As this would be a new post, the Government of India would be willing to share the expenditure with the Assam Government in the ratio of 80:20. But at the end of 1957, many of the rehabilitation colonies set up in jungle tillas had developed very little and setting up the industries was a herculean task (The Government of Assam, 1957).

The Secretary, Relief and Rehabilitation Department, had stated that some of the inspecting officers of the Relief and Rehabilitating department in Cachar district and the whole staff of the department who were deputed in connection with the implementation of the Tractorisation scheme by the Central Tractor Organization did practically nothing and consequently the operation got terminated (ibid). These clearly indicate lack of vision, proper work culture, apathy and bureaucratic failure in implementing the schemes for setting up industries for the refugees in general and women refugees in particular. Natural calamities such as incessant rain resulted flood and also earthquake which had further deteriorated the plight of the refugees. Consequently, some temporary training centers got devastated by storm which were not repaired. Hence, women were not adequately benefitted by these schemes.

Inflation was rampant and prices of commodities soared up putting the poor refugees in utmost distress. They became sick due to hunger and suffered diseases but medicines and all other essential commodities were not easily available. At times, these were available at black market prices which the refugees could not avail [ibid].

The District Mahila Samity, Cachar conducted an in-depth research to improve the living condition of the women refugees by making them self-reliant and suggested the following proposals—

- a. Training in husking, bamboo and cane baskets, poultry, weaving, spinning, sewing, embroidery, making lace, tailoring and envelop making etc.
- b. That a hostel attached to the Sibro Sundori Nari Siksashram should be re-opened and the literate women refugees must be trained there in nursing and midwifery.
- c. The women who served as teachers in Pakistan might be given further training in the Silchar Training School and in Udharband Basic School and eventually could be engaged in village reconstruction work.

(Submitted by the Members, Executive Body, All India Women Council, Cachar District Branch, Silchar. 18th June, 1950, Government of India 1951).

The Rehabilitation Ministry intended to formulate a scheme under the tutelage of the Mahila Samity, Karimganj to train the refugee girls of Karimganj adequately so that they could find out suitable employment for them. This Samity had 20 working centers of which Karimganj Center was the oldest which again had six sub-centers within the sub-division wherein training were imparted in weaving and other activities. The greatest hurdle that the Samity experienced was that it did not possess any permanent building of his own and the number of women refugees in Karimganj was significantly high than other refugee concentrated areas (The Government of Assam, 1955, cited in Choudhury 2021:113). Hence, the plan got delayed and finally could not help many refugees (Personal interviews). In regard to the training of the refugee women, the Secretary of the Central Refugee Board of Cachar district informed to the Controller, Relief and Rehabilitation through a letter that nearly 75% of qualified ladies might be absorbed in the Basic Training Center in Udharband, (about 7 miles away from Silchar) which had the seat capacity of 100, out of which 70 percent were lying vacant. The refugee Board demanded that all restrictions in this regard should be removed. The Assam Government was not willing to get the women refugees admitted in this training institution since they were not able to pay fees. Hence, many seats remained vacant.

The Central Refugee Board put an appeal to the Relief and Rehabilitation Controller for arranging stipends for the women refugees by the Central Government so that those qualified women refugees on completion of training, might be engaged in educational reconstruction of the country and also to meet the acute demand of trained teachers by the Central Government (The Government of India, 1950-51). The plight of the refugee women in ITA refugee colonies was more disastrous. In Arunaband Tea Estate, neither cooking utensils was provided to the refugees nor the axe. Hence the refugees were compelled to sustain in open spaces almost without food, safe drinking water and insufficient clothes. In Chandighat tea estate, the camp was in a deplorable condition, so did other such colonies. In many of such camps, water poured heavily in their houses in rainy season since low quality tin and other materials were used in constructing such camps which damaged all belongings of the inhabitants. The children in such camps suffered from fever and other diseases. No adequate medical aid was provided to the camp inmates. In spite of repeated requests to the Manager of the Tea estates, the grievances of the refugees were not entertained. These hilly tracts wherein such camps were constructed was jungle-infested and the refugees were the worst victims of flood. Thailu camp, Batthal Camp along with others were totally un-habitable. Arkatipur camp, is on hilly jungle areas wherein neither arrangement was made for water and nor road or pathway. The most distressing fact was that women had to defecate in the open which made them extremely vulnerable to errant individuals as well as to wild animals, wild mosquitos, dreaded insects and natural calamities.

Therefore, their severe plights were less exposed to the greater world around them. In Balacherra Tea estate, sanitation arrangement was not satisfactory. Many refugees suffered from malaria, dysentery, diarrhea and other diseases. The plight of the families of hill tribe refugees of this garden was more disastrous. Many of them died and many others were on the verge of death. The refugees were not given utensils and tools for ploughing (Personal Interviews: the Government of India 1951). In Durlavcherra tea estate camps, 400 men, women and children died and more were on the verge of death due to malaria, dysentery, diarrhea, cholera, typhoid and naga sore etc. (The Government of India, 1950-51). The situation was further intensified as the local Muslims quite often threatened them with dire consequences. A large quantum of tea garden lands were encroached by the tea garden labourers since those lands were not patta lands (ibid). Relating to the miserable condition of the women refugees in destitute camps, the Cachar District Branch of the All India Women Council submitted a memorandum to the Minister of

State, in-charge of Relief and Rehabilitation, Ajit Prasad Jain on 18th June, 1960. It stated about the congested, inadequate, unbalanced diet, deteriorated health condition of the women inmates which demanded special care and proper diet for the new born babies, nursing and expectant mothers. The said organization also highlighted that the physicians were not called even in case of dire necessity and the members of the Mahilla Samity were refused access to those camps to get first-hand information about the condition of the inmates. The Cachar District Branch of All India Council however, suggested that preference should be given to social workers with liberal ideas while selecting the camp superintendent and other officers of those homes (ibid).

Engendering Empowerment: Case Studies:- Suniti Bala Dey was the victim of forced migration from Laxshmipara of Sylhet to Karimganj sub-division of Barak Valley. In 1962, some of her family members visited Barak Valley as tourists and during their stay, war broke out between India and Pakistan which sealed their chances of return to their native village. In 1964, communal violence occurred in various parts of East Pakistan. In their village too, infighting took place between some of the Hindus and the Muslims. Since her husband interfered to resolve the differences, he was put behind the bar. A case was filed against him wherein the Muslims won the case. Consequent to that, the property of Suniti Bala's family was declared as the enemy property and their house was requisitioned. Her husband was released after a few months and immediately Suniti Bala and the remaining family members crossed over to the Barak Valley to save their lives. They reached Karimganj from the border with the assistance of the volunteers of the Ram Krishna Mission. In the absence of financial support from the government and lack of sustainable employment, they suffered extreme financial hardship. Suniti Bala tried her best to get her enrolled in Udharband Training Centre but due to inability to pay fees, she failed to do that. In 1969, their elder son was engaged in a petty job in London with the assistance of their relatives and acquaintances, and then the family received little financial succor (Personal Interview).

Anindita Bhattacharjee who was the victim of forced migration from Sylhet to Silchar has stated that with great efforts, she convinced her father-in law and husband to get their daughter, Anamika admitted in Cotton College but due to stringent process of acquiring the domicile certificate, her daughter's aspiration of studying science course remained unfulfilled. Many other refugee girls also could not study in science stream for their gendered identity, poverty and pervasive linguistic discrimination in Assam as stated by Anindita. For some middle class refugees, they were able to enroll their sons in science and medical courses outside Assam due to financial assistance extended by their friends, relatives and acquaintances but the lower class refugees were not able to do that due to lack of social network and financial constraints. (Personal Interviews). Mridul Dasgupta enrolled one of his sons in Calcutta University to study science course with the financial support of one of his friends in Karimganj. His younger son used to take tuition, trudging in between hostels or relatives' house and finally completed his graduation. But his daughter could not complete her studies due to financial constraints and insecurity of sending girls outside (Personal interface with Mridul Dasgupta). Bibha Deb has narrated that even though her daughter was meritorious and was very keen to study medical course (MBBS), due to financial constraints and lack of social networking, she could not fulfil her daughter's aspirations. In those days, girls were less exposed to outside world, so could not be sent for tuition or tailoring shops to earn some bucks to continue their studies (narrated in a Personal Interface by Bibha Deb). Hence, empowerment has class, gender and linguistic underpinnings in the context of Assam. Thousands of women in Assam received 'declared foreigner' notices, often arbitrarily and disproportionately. These marginalised women live in constant fear, enduring a 'harrowing ordeal to prove their Indian citizenship, despite being born and raised here. Keya Nath, Anuradha Das, Dipti Deb, Anima Roy and many others were either compelled to languish many years in the detention camp in Silchar or their husbands. Many were separated from their spouses because either husband or wife was branded as D-Voter and compelled to spend in those camps in a pitiable condition. Some of them died in those camps (Personal Interviews).

Women as Bread Earners: After Partition, the social status of many middle class women came down from what they previously enjoyed. On the other hand, the navigation of women in the public domain changed the previous socially prescribed subordinate role of women.

During freedom struggle and after Partition, women came out from the inner terrains of their homes, actively participated in the processions and hartals and also started speaking in public forums. They had to make decisions and braved risks in the situation of turmoil and insecurity. Many a time, they performed as active participants of rebuilding home and family rather than the gender stereotypes of perceiving as passive victims. 'Forced displacement can be an empowering experience for women if they actively attempt to challenge traditional gender roles in order to increase their involvement in their environment, including the political and economic aspects'

(UNHCR 2001:8). Women's experiences of refugee-hood in flight and during asylum will differ and would inevitably impact upon their adjustment process. More importantly, however these experiences can lead to empowerment through a process of politicization and self-awareness as well as disempowerment as a result of brutality and violence and is generally depicted in available literature on women refugees (Moussa 1991:14). Shanta Sarkar who was a house wife at the time of Partition was compelled to cross over to the Barak Valley from her native village Alamdin during Sylhet Referendum due to incidents of sporadic violence in her neighbouring village. While the male members of her family stayed back in their native village in East Pakistan, all the female members were sent to a relative's house in Hailakandi sub-division of Surma-- Barak Valley. Her father used to send money to the relative for a year since two of her sisters also stayed in the same house. But the cultivable land of Shanta Sarkar's family in Sylhet was captured by the Muslims by instigating her brothers to get involved in an imbroglio which closed down the source of income. Consequently, her father was unable to send money to the relative. Even though the relative did not ask money and told them to stay with them without any hesitation, Shanta started taking tuition in the neighbouring houses and shifted to a rented house nearby in order to release burden from her relatives who extended whole hearted support to them in times of dire necessity.

To supplement her income, Shanta started preparing pickles and *sandesh* (a popular Bengali sweet made with milk, sugar and coconut) required for marriage and other auspicious occasions in Bengali households. With unrelenting struggle, she got her sisters married after few years. Meanwhile, a fierce communal violence broke out in East Pakistan in 1950 and her entire family moved to Barak Valley and took shelter in a camp. Her father and brothers started preparing marriage *mandap* (a covered structure with pillars beautifully decorated which is constructed temporarily for a Hindu wedding) and other manual works for survival. The prices of the commodities was essentially high and hence the struggle was unparalleled. The fierce tearing apart from the place of birth, relentless struggle as refugees and uncertain future traumatized the entire family (Personal interview). Mridula Das Roy who hailed from Sylhet town was a victim of forced migration to Karimganj after the communal violence of 1950. She was a reputed performance artist of Sylhet Jattrar Dal, a theatre group performed in various parts of East Bengal. After migration, it was absolutely difficult to pull on their lives since they were unable to carry much cash nor was able to sell out their home and land. They registered themselves in a refugee camp in Karimganj since they had no relative or friends in the Barak Valley. But due to the sub-human living realities of those impoverished and filthy camps, she along with her family left the camp within a few days and took shelter in a rented house. Their epic struggle for survival began wherein her brothers started working as mechanics although they were educated. Mridulla took over the work of selling bitten rice, puffed rice etc. door to door in Karimganj town area. The social status what she enjoyed previously came down drastically and it was a humiliating experience for her to do such "trivial" work. In the grim struggle, she crossed "marriageable age" and remained unmarried throughout her life. Her passion for theatre remained dormant and a painful negotiation with the self was all-pervasive as victims of Partition (Personal Interview). Debika Purkayasta was located in a Louta village in East Pakistan and was a student who led a fulfilling pre-partitioned life in her native place. After Partition, the communal relation between the Hindus and the Muslims of her village got deteriorated. Despite that, the family stayed back there given the uncertainty of finding job and prospect of business in a new place. After Sylhet referendum, two girls of her village were abducted and subsequently converted into Islam.

In that situation, all the female members of the family were sent to Silchar in Barak Valley in an acquaintance's house. Her father, uncle and younger brother stayed back in their ancestral house to sell out their live stocks and house. Subsequently, the Hindus of the village were threatened to leave the village since a Hindu boy protested against the torture and intimidation inflicted on the Hindus. Due to this, he was beaten up to that extent leading to his hospitalization wherein the Muslim doctors did not treat him properly. Finally, a Muslim neighbour helped him to shift to Silchar with the risk of his own life. In that situation, her father did not get the opportunity to sell off their house and land but managed to sell out the furniture and livestock in a cheaper price and moved to Barak Valley to save their lives. With unrelenting struggle, her father started earning which was meagre to pull on a large family. To supplement the family income, her brothers who were students had to discontinue their studies. Debika too could not continue her studies and joined as a nurse in a hospital with the help of an acquaintance. The pay was meagre and irregular but she continued with it. In free time, she was engrossed in knitting which paid her some money. After few years of struggle, her job was regularised which provided some relief to the family. Even though, the financial difficulty was relieved to some extent, the mental trauma of parting with the home and homeland, friends, neighbours and serene ambience was all-pervasive (Personal Interviews).

Conclusion:-

In the conclusion, it can be said the refugees who took refuge in the Barak Valley were looked as the rival linguistic group in the largely Assamese speaking Assam. Hence, the relation between the host government and the refugees were acrimonious. In fact, the plight of the refugees were not taken sympathetically which was a serious impediment in their rehabilitation and empowerment. The gendered identity of women refugees added more constraints in their resettlement and rehabilitation. Even though the Indian Constitution has outlined gender equality in terms of status and opportunity and eventually chalked out various policies of empowering women, the women Partition refugees of Barak Valley could not avail much benefit out of these schemes due to gender disparity, apathy and indifference to their plight. As women, the refugee women were the triply marginalised group who had to suffer relentlessly to re-instate their lives from the ashes of Partition. Education is a vital tool of empowerment, but many of the refugee women in the Barak Valley could not get the facilities of schooling in the jungle terrain earmarked for the rehabilitation of the refugees. Many others were compelled to part with their studies in view to supplement the family income for survival.

Thus Partition put many refugee girls out of school. The schemes which were formulated to rehabilitate the refugees in general and women in particular lacked vision, zeal and sincerity. The conflict between the Central Government and the Assam Government was one of the major reasons for the proper implementation of the schemes. A small sections of women were able to defy the constraints to some extent with little support from their relatives or friends and were able to manage their bread and butter and eventually empowered them. A large number of middle class and especially lower middle class women became the pitiable victims of Partition and remained disempowered throughout their lives. Women's voice is meekly heard due to under-representation of women in the decision making body. Even decades after the event of Partition, the Government is unable to rehabilitate the women refugees in the Central Destitute Home, Meherpur Silchar. Hence, refugee women in the Barak Valley were the victims of apathy, discrimination and diseases and even death.

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