

# Women and Population Flows in India<sup>1</sup>

By

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Two hundred years back Emmanuel Kant had presumed that democracies are inherently more peaceful. Although prophetic in many ways but this particular assumption of Kant has proved to be seriously wrong. The experiments in democratic state formations have neither led to social justice for all nor has it facilitated conditions of peace. In fact it has shown that in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural state democracy may lead to the reinforcement of traditional cleavages based on religion, language, ethnicity, caste and gender and transform them into newer inequities. This has led to massive displacement of populations in the world.

In discussing human flows several words and phrases occur routinely. Since some of them are often used interchangeably they create confusion. For example, migrants, refugees, illegal settlers, and displaced persons are casually used to mean one for the other. The displaced Kashmiri Pandits of the valley are referred to as Kashmiri migrants as much as illegal Bangladeshi settlers in India are called Bangladeshi infiltrators or simply 'Bangladeshis'. Similarly, the internally displaced persons (IDP) are generically termed as refugees. However, as this paper is concerned with the broad phenomenon of women's forced migration in/from/to India all the categories have been merged under the comprehensive notion of human flows, or, population movements. In this instance, since I will largely speak of forced migrant women I will privilege narratives on refugee women, IDP women and trafficked women to and from India.

## **State Formation and the Question of Abducted Women**

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 witnessed probably the largest refugee movement in modern history. About 8 million Hindus and Sikhs left Pakistan to resettle in India while about 6-7 million

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Muslims went to Pakistan. Such transfer of population was accompanied by horrific violence. Some 50,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 non-Muslim women in Pakistan were abducted, abandoned or separated from their families.<sup>2</sup> The two states of India and Pakistan embarked on a massive Central Recovery Project during which some 30,000 women were recovered by the respective states. Some incidents relating to these abducted women exemplify the politics of gender during partition. Even when the two countries could decide on little else they decided that the abducted women must be restored to their families. Problems arose over the process and progress of recovery. An Abducted Persons bill was brought in the Indian Parliament. Boys below the age of 16 and women of all ages were brought under this bill which gave unlimited power to police officers regarding abducted persons. If a police officer detained any women under this bill they could not be questioned in any court of law. Although numerous amendments were proposed in the House the bill passed unchanged on 19 December, 1949.<sup>3</sup>

Many explanations are given for this forcible repatriation of women. Menon and Bhasin (1998)<sup>4</sup> point out how national honour was bound to women's bodies. According to Jan Jindy Pettman (1996) repatriation was made a nationalist project because women's bodies became markers of male honour. As usual women's bodies became "part of other people's agendas."<sup>5</sup> Abducted women were not considered as legal entities with political and constitutional rights. All choices were denied to them and while the state patronised them verbally by portraying their "need" for protection it also infantilised them by giving decision making power to their guardians who were defined by the male pronoun "he". By insisting that the abducted women could not represent themselves and had to be represented, the State marginalised them from the decision making process and made them non-participants. Even today the refugee women do not represent themselves. They are represented by officials. For the abducted, it was their sexuality that threatened their security and the honour of the nation. Thus, their vulnerability was focused on their body. By denying agency to the abducted women the State made it conceivable to deny agency to all women.

### **Untold Tales of Dislocation: An Exercise in Nation Building**

Following the Partition, 30 lakh refugees entered West Bengal by 1960. In the 1970s, the state witnessed another massive exodus from East Pakistan during the formation of Bangladesh. Although the Government of India (GOI) received the refugees but it also made it clear that the refuge would be temporary. The refugee camps along the border were called 'transit relief camps'. Over fifty percent of refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh consisted of women.<sup>6</sup> In case of these refugees the treatment was slightly better than that meted out to the abducted women of former years. Many women's organisations came up to help these women such as the Nari Seva Sangha and Ananda Ashram. During the first phase of

refugee influx from the East the West Bengal Government established five sponsored colleges with stipulation that 75 percent of the students must be from refugee families. Four of these were co-educational colleges and only one; the Sarojini Naidu College for Women in DumDum was women's college. During the second phase the GOI had applied and got a huge loan from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The number of women refugees increased because of fear of sexual persecution of women. Rape had already been recognised as an instrument of war.

During the first phase, many women were sent to camps in Titagarh, Kartickpur, Ranaghat, Bansberia and Bhadrakali. But there was only one institution named Uday Villa that was responsible for the rehabilitation of single women.<sup>7</sup> There were however many women who did not find space in these camps. They were forced to seek refuge in Kashi or Brindaban.<sup>8</sup> Even 29 years after the creation of Bangladesh there are 2910 Bengali women struggling to survive in Brindaban<sup>9</sup>. Most women who are now living in Brindaban have had little or no institutional support. They earn their livelihood often by begging. Many of them have been sexually abused during the riots in East Pakistan. They were unwanted in their country of birth and were displaced due to persistent fear of further abuse. According to some estimates over 200,000 Bengali women were raped in Bangladesh in 1971-1972.<sup>10</sup> Even when they came to India, the state run institutions found their position precarious. The Indian State could not push them back because it was trying to portray the "issue at stake was a humanitarian one."<sup>11</sup>

Women refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh portray that institutional responses varied with individuals. If women were considered respectable and therefore useful for the nationalising and state building project they were accommodated within the majoritarian community. Otherwise they were further displaced and forced to live their lives outside the community. They remained permanent refugees living in the margins of society. As women are seen as "the most dangerous bearers of moral decay," their rehabilitation becomes even more precarious.<sup>12</sup>

### **A Failed Nationalizing Project: Sri Lankan Women in India**

Since 1980s, ethnic tensions between the Tamil minority and Sinhala majority have led to several waves of refugees from Sri Lanka. By 1989, there were about 160,000 refugees from Sri Lanka to India, largely women with their dependents. Initially, the State Government provided these refugees with shelter and rations, but still many of them preferred to live outside the camps. Like the second wave of refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, India stressed that the Sri Lankan refugees would eventually go back to their "homes". However, unlike the refugees from the East, the Sri Lankans were called "refugees" rather than "evacuees". They were registered and issued with refugee certificates. In terms of education and health, both registered and unregistered refugees enjoyed the same

rights as the nationals. Nevertheless, in absence of specific legislation, their legal status remained ambiguous.<sup>13</sup> The precarious nature of their status became clearer in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. NGOs access to the camps, refugee's freedom of movement and access to education and informal occupations were all curtailed.

After Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, the politicians began to shun the refugees.<sup>14</sup> As most of these were women, they were initially considered harmless but with the number of female suicide bombers swelling there was a marked change in GOP's attitude to women refugees.<sup>15</sup> What the Government of India failed to acknowledge was that the number of female bombers swelled after the IPKF operations, due to a demographic imbalance.<sup>16</sup> The government turned a blind eye when touts came to recruit young women from the refugee camps in Tamil Nadu to work as "maids" in countries of Middle East. Most of these women were then smuggled out of India and sent to the Gulf countries. Often they were badly abused. One such case that caught the public eye was that of a young girl called Sivitha. She was smuggled to the Gulf with thirty other women. Her employer "took sadistic pleasure in thrashing her." Twice she fell into a coma. Unable to bear this, she sought refuge in the Sri Lankan embassy. She was sent back to Sri Lanka, into the war torn area of Vavuniya. She tried to get back to India to her parents but failed. Ultimately she committed suicide.<sup>17</sup>

Even when the situation is not so extreme it is still traumatic for young women. In Indian camps, refugee families are given a dole of Rs.150 a month, which is often stopped arbitrarily. Women are discouraged from taking up employment outside the camps. The camps are not conducive for the personal safety of women as they enjoy no privacy. But what is more worrying is that without any institutional support women become particularly vulnerable to human traffickers. These people aided by network of criminals force women into prostitution. Millions of rupees change hands in this trade and more lives get wrecked every day.<sup>18</sup> Yet even in these miserable conditions many of the widows living in camps wear the *pottu*.<sup>19</sup>

Women from the North and Northeast Sri Lanka are worst affected by the political conflict. Many of them who are unable to cross international border swell the ranks of the internally displaced. Even in such camps, women are responsible for holding together fragmented families. Today roughly one-third of all households in Sri Lanka are headed by women and the numbers increase many fold in the camps for internally displaced. In Alles Garden Camp in Trincomalee, majority of women IDPs are widows.<sup>20</sup> Although 89 percent women in Sri Lanka are literate, due to two decades of armed conflict, women from North and East have lower levels of education. Almost one out of every four women is illiterate.

A failed nationalising project in Sri Lanka has encouraged the government to segregate women who are considered threatening. They are displaced from their homes and ghettoed in camps. As for Sri Lankan Tamil women in India, Rajiv Gandhi's death convinced the State that these women are of little use for India's nationalising and nation building project. From

asylum seekers they were reduced to the status of hostages who were so dangerous that they had to be segregated. Thus, when human traffickers arrived, the State turned a blind eye. This was one way of phasing out women who were considered problematic. The situation of refugee women and collusion of the state in their displacement becomes clear when one analyses the situation. This leitmotif continues when one looks at the situation of internally displaced women in India.

## **Internally Displaced**

### **The Case of the Line of Control**

The conflict over the line of control (LOC) between India and Pakistan is an inter-state conflict that has resulted in severe dislocation and displacement of populations in both sides. The state vs. community conflict in Kashmir resulted in the displacement of over 250,000 Kashmiri Pandits from the valley into Jammu and Delhi. The National Commission for Women undertook a survey of displaced Kashmiri Pandit women. According to their report, the policy of the Government of India (GOI) regarding them is premised on the idea that they will return to the valley whenever the situation is conducive for safe return. Women of the Kashmiri Pandit community stated that they left Kashmir for fear of persecution in the hands of the Muslims. However a “majority of women said that they have heard about the victimization of women but personally they do not know.”<sup>21</sup> Most of the women questioned felt that the government did not have a specific rehabilitation policy for women. They felt that if there were policies that helped them to become economically independent they would have been better off. Although most of them did not feel any threat in person; they were sad because they found “themselves completely excluded from this quest for a new Kashmiri identity.”<sup>22</sup>

The more recent displaced in Kashmir has not been so fortunate. In 1999, India and Pakistan clashed over Kargil and although that war ended there are intermittent skirmishes between the two armies periodically leading to enormous displacement. In 1999, 60,000 to 100,000 people were displaced in India. After 13 December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament, there has been a steady build up of troops near the border. Around the same time, the Indian army ordered 20,000 people to evacuate from more than 40 border villages in Indian-administered Kashmir, while tanks, fighter jets and heavy artillery are moved into place.<sup>23</sup> By 2002, over 100,000 people have been forced to migrate from the LOC alone.<sup>24</sup>

From the Pakistani side of the border, there are reports that more than 45,000 people are displaced as of June 2002. Many of them are unable to return to their homes even temporarily because their villages have been mined in anticipation of an Indian ground attack. As in the Indian side of the border so in the Pakistani side the first to be displaced is women and children. They “had to endure long exhausting mountain treks before

finding shelter with relatives in nearby villages, in schools, government offices or temporary makeshift camps. Others would stay at their homes during daylight and seek shelter elsewhere during the nights when shelling became more intense.<sup>25</sup> The shelling of villages had dire consequences for women. Many of them were injured and needed medical attention that was already scarce. In a report discussing the fate of one such woman who suffered leg injuries it was stated “because of the pressure on beds she was moved from a bed with a fan (vital in the searing heat) to one that had no ventilation. Her son complained to the hospital authorities but with no success.”<sup>26</sup>

According to observers, “in the ultimate analysis the women of Kashmir have had to bear the end of the violence that has wracked the valley. It is they who as widows, half widows, rape victims, victims of religious dictates, and victims of displacement have to ensure that the pattern of life continues as normally as possible even when the times are abnormal.”<sup>27</sup> Not only are they the first to be displaced even in displacement they are pushed into sub human lives. According to one eyewitness report, the people relocated from the Indian side of the border were put in relief camps which were formerly storage sheds or condemned factories. In one such camp, for the internally displaced, due to war it was reported that 200 people including women and children were packed in an 1800 sq ft. area. These camps had no heating facilities in the bitter cold winter. Due to unhygienic condition and poor relief many of the inmates fell sick. On their arrival these people were given five kilos of rice per head and four litres of cooking oil. They had no money to buy even fuel wood. “Several women, old persons and children were suffering from cold dysentery and influenza,” and they had almost no health care facilities. These displaced including women and children were dumped and forgotten.<sup>28</sup>

The camps had no privacy for women and their lives in these camps were extremely harsh. Even an ICRC report discussed the gravity of the situation faced by the internally displaced from villages near the LOC. It stated that these people were “experiencing great difficulty in providing for themselves and their children, especially in the wintry conditions now prevailing in these mountainous areas.”<sup>29</sup> Many of these women were maimed when they tried to return to their homes that were heavily mined. They are neither consulted nor conferred with before they are displaced. They are not allowed to carry personal items such as enough warm clothes with them because the trucks that transport them do not have enough rooms. Even now many of these displaced women and children remain so because their villages are totally devastated. Although they are non-combatants they still have to continue paying an enormous price for the vagaries of the two governments that have decided to continue their conflict no matter what the cost.

### Gujarat Genocide and the Situation of Displaced Women

The events began with over 1000 *kar sevaks* travelling from Ahmedabad to Ayodhya by Sabarmati Express on 22 February 2002. On the way they reportedly harassed Muslim men and women in the train and in respective stations. While they were returning on 27 February there was again reportedly altercation with Muslim vendors in the Godhra station. Soon near Falia it was discovered that a coach was on fire. As a result about 59 people died of whom 26 were women and 12 children. It is still not clear how the coach caught fire but the supporters of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made it as an occasion to mount a massive attack against the Muslims in Gujarat leading to dislocation and displacement of an unprecedented scale. Soon violence spread across Gujarat. In Ahmedabad alone about 50,000 Muslims were displaced. While the events were still unfolding it was becoming clear that the attack was not just against minority community but also against women of the minority community as well as the majority community if they appeared errant. Among the first group of women to collect testimony of riot affected women in Gujarat were members of the Vadodara PUCL and Shanti Abhiyan. They came out with a report on the basis of testimonies collected from women from 27 February until 26 March. They found out that between 28 February and 22 March more than 39 Muslim houses were gutted and 19 shops looted only in Baranpura area. There were two police points close by and a fire brigade, which refused to respond to the callers for help. In Bahar colony when women asked police to help them “the police refused to listen to them and in fact did laathi charge on them to drive them into their homes. Among others an elderly woman Ameena Memon was badly hit in the laathi charge.”<sup>30</sup> In another incident Hamida Bano Ibrahim, a 40 year old woman was hit by a police so hard that her right hand was fractured in three places.<sup>31</sup> One of the recurrent themes of the report is women’s anger at the role played by the police and state machinery. The women were caught up in the reign of terror promoted by the police. Even women from the majority community were suffering from fear psychosis because they were constantly warned that the Muslims might attack them.

The Citizen’s Initiative of Ahmedabad sponsored the first fact-finding visit by a women’s panel. Between 27 March and 31 March the six-member team visited seven relief camps in both urban and rural Gujarat. These were in Ahmedabad, Kheda, Vadodara, Sabarkantha and Panchmahals district. The team found compelling evidence of extreme sexual violence against women during the days of mayhem. In every case of mob violence there was evidence of pre-planned targeting of women. There were gruesome testimonies of how violence against women was used as an instrument to displace people. In one such testimony from Naroda Patia minor girls said that mobs started chasing them with burning tyres. “We saw about 8-10 rapes. We saw them strip 16 year-old Mehrunissa. They were stripping themselves and beckoning to the girls. Then they raped them right

there on the road.” In another camp a rape victim spoke of her experiences. She said that while running away from the mob she fell behind as she was carrying her young son, Faizan. “The men caught me from behind and threw me on the ground. Faizan fell from my arms and started crying. My clothes were stripped off by the men and I was left stark naked. One by one the men raped me. All the while I could hear my son crying.” The fact-finding team also found evidences of police complicity in this carnage. Not only women were forced out of their homes and targeted in the streets even the police helped the attackers. The report said that in vast majority of the cases police refused to lodge First Investigative Reports. When questioned about violence against women even the District Collector of Panchmahals said, “maintaining law and order is my primary concern. It is not possible for me to look into cases of sexual violence.” Women hid in the forests for 3 to 4 days before they could reach the safety of camps. The report said the relief camps were organised by Muslim community leaders with hardly any help from the government. The report also stated that an “immediate impact of the violence is the creation of female-headed households. In many cases entire families have been killed. Women testified to having witnessed several members of their family dying. They were dealing not only with the trauma of this loss, but facing a future with their life’s savings and livelihood sources destroyed.” Many women in the camps stated their fear about going back to their homes where they might be targeted again.<sup>32</sup> Other groups such as Citizens Tribunal and All India Democratic Women’s Association corroborated these evidences.<sup>33</sup>

There were other initiatives where women visited Gujarat to find out about the situation of riot-affected women. Among the last to visit Gujarat was a team set up by the National Commission for women, which is mandated as the apex body for the protection of women’s rights. During their visit they went to Himmatnagar, Ahmedabad, Godhra, Kaiol and Vadodara between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> April 2002. One of the members of this team wrote about her experiences of camp life. She said: How long could anyone stay in the camps? The temperature was already 43 degrees. In the next few weeks it would soar to 47 or 48 degrees. There were babies, infants and newborn under the canvas. There were pregnant mothers, the old, and the ailing. Water, sanitation and privacy were in short supply. There was no privacy during waking or sleeping hours, to feed the baby or change one’s clothes. The situation was mired in pathos and humiliation.<sup>34</sup>

The National Commission for Women reported that many of the camps “were not up to the mark” and they asked the government to carefully supervise relief. They pointed out in the camps organised by the government there were no representation of women in the organising committee. With several pregnant and lactating women and children they felt there should be adequate representation of women in these committees. They also felt that security arrangements for women and children were inadequate “who feel extremely insecure in the present circumstances.” There were no special provisions for pregnant women. The committee



observed that, “sanitary towels and other personal items of clothing such as undergarments, footwear etc. also need to be provided.” They also observed that there was a lack of lady doctors and gynecologists. More importantly there were no facilities for women and girls to who have been widowed or orphaned to get any special training to earn their livelihood. No efforts were made to make women aware of the compensations that were promised to them. Although inadequate these compensations could at least give some confidence to women who are traumatised by their own destitution.<sup>35</sup> What the members of the committee were most concerned about was that, “no one seemed to have asked questions related to rehabilitation. What efforts were being made to make their homes and localities safe? Or to determine, in consultation with them, where the women without men folk or children without parents would go?”<sup>36</sup> The displaced women in Gujarat were thus truly nowhere people.

### **Development Related Displacement: Dams and Displaced Women**

As in any other kind of displacement women and children are also particularly vulnerable in development related displacement. The National Commission for Women decided to undertake a study on the effects of development related displacement on women in building the Tehri Dam. The Tehri project is a multi-purpose irrigation and power project in the Ganges valley 250 km. north of Delhi, located in the Tehri Garhwal district of Uttaranchal state. Initially in 1969 the Tehri Dam Project Organization (TDPO) estimated that about 13,413 persons would be affected by the construction of the dam. But a working group for the Environment Appraisal of Tehri Dam established in 1979 put the figure of expected internal displacement to 85,600 persons. According to the 1995 report of TDPO out of 135 villages affected, 37 would be fully submerged once the dam is completed. The total land affected by the project is 13,000 hectares.<sup>37</sup> The National Commission for Women conducted a survey on displaced women in Tehri project. In that survey they found out that although the terms of rehabilitation was extremely modest but “even this was not fully implemented.”<sup>38</sup>

The displaced women, most often they lost their share of livelihood and the area where they are relocated did not provide them with any possibilities of supplementary sources of income. Even the government had no programmes for their skill enhancement and so their chances of economic independence were severely restricted. Thus, displacement has resulted in their disempowerment. According to the survey projects, these projects displaced people from their traditional habitat resulting in “profound economic, psychological, environmental and cultural disruption.”<sup>39</sup> The women were severely affected because of breakdown of social units. Displacement resulted in mental trauma and loss of mobility because they were relocated forcibly in an unknown place. All this contributed to women’s sense of powerlessness.<sup>40</sup>

The displacement and relocation process in the Tehri Dam project was not as violent as the Sardar Sarovar Dam project, which is a part of the Narmada Valley Development Project (NVDP). The building of the Sardar Sarovar dam was stopped in 1995 when the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) petitioned the Supreme Court that no further building of the dam could be undertaken without rehabilitation of those who had already been displaced. But in February 1999, the Indian Supreme Court through an interim order permitted the Gujarat government to resume the building.<sup>41</sup> Then again in October 2000, the Supreme Court gave a go-ahead for the construction of the dam. From that time, the Gujarat government with increasing brutality has undertaken forcible eviction of tribal people. Some of the methods of eviction followed by the police are to enter a village and beat up women and children. This has been reported from most areas that are evicted. In one such news item it was reported that, "on 20th July 2002, about 400 police people entered the Man dam project affected village Khedi-Balwari (Dist. Dhar, M.P.) and forcibly evicted the village using terror tactics. The women and even children were severely beaten up, the houses looted and the people were picked up and dumped at the so called 'resettlement' site Kesur, 75 kms away, where they remain under a virtual arrest with large number of police guarding them. The whole Khedi-Balwari village is now under the control of the police."<sup>42</sup>

Not only are women harassed and physically dumped in resettlement sites, which are totally unplanned but women also face severe problems in these sites. These problems start from no toilets for only women to bigger problems such as refusal to give women headed households the status of Project Affected Families (PAF). Women are the worst sufferers in this process of displacement and relocation. Even when relief is given it is in the form of cash handed over to the male heads of households. Thus women are much less able to influence decisions of how the money ought to be spent. If women protest, the police often physically abuse them. The lands that are handed over to them are often of very low quality and cannot be cultivated.<sup>43</sup> Sometimes "gender bias in resettlement is often manifested through non-recognition of women's ownership of land. For example, in Sardar Sarovar project, women with land titles (*patta*) were not given land for land."<sup>44</sup> Often people are displaced multiple times and each time they are displaced they become poorer.<sup>45</sup> One observer clearly states, "the most culpable aspect of state-induced impoverishment of displaced populations is the phenomenon of multiple displacement. It has been documented, for instance, that as a direct result of the lack of co-ordination between the multiplicity of irrigation, thermal power and coal-mining agencies ... most oustees have been displaced at least twice, and some three or four times in a matter of two or three decades and with each displacement the villagers were progressively pauperised."<sup>46</sup> Thus the process of dam building in India have displaced not only thousands of people, mostly tribals but also caused severe disempowerment of women affected by displacement. The dalit and adivasi women often do not have

deeds to the land that they have lived in for years. Because of lack of deeds these women and their families are not treated as PAF and so they cannot claim compensation. Often these women become destitute and easy prey for traffickers. Many of them end up in brothels. The Government has no programmes for either their skill enhancement or for their protection. These are the women who are worst affected by development projects. The UN Guiding Principles have no meaning for them.

## **The Trafficked**

### **India, Bangladesh, Nepal: The Paradise for Trafficked Bodies**

Recent newspaper reports from the borders of India and Bangladesh are rife with news of the growing trafficking of women and children in this region. If one looks at the history of the term “trafficking” it can be traced back to “white slave trade”. Before the great wars it meant the coercion or transportation of Caucasian women to the colonies to service white male officers. At that point, the term did not include indentured labourers from the colonies to the plantations where often they were coerced, cheated and abused. The international community tried to combat these abuses by humanitarian legislation that addressed concerns of women’s vulnerability. The term used to describe the abuse of women in the process of migration was “trafficking”. Efforts to stop trafficking in the 1980s and 90s went hand in hand with efforts to abolish prostitution. Therefore trafficking and prostitution came to be understood as two parts of the same process.

To find out why this whole region is vulnerable to traffickers one needs to realize that this is a region of endemic poverty, social imbalance and political violence particularly against vulnerable groups of whom women form a large part. Each part of this region is undergoing certain social and political turmoil where more and more women are getting marginalized. For instance, in Bangladesh, globalisation, growth of fundamentalism, modernization policies such as building of dams etc. have all contributed to violence against ethnic and religious minorities, and against women. Of course minority women are in a double bind. They are attacked both as minorities and as women. The fundamentalists who have increased their control in the political arena strive to maintain a predominantly male-dominant status quo. According to Meghna Guhathakurta, “it was advantageous therefore for the fundamentalists to target women who step outside the bounds of social norms since they represented a potential threat to the male-dominant status quo.”<sup>47</sup> To compound all of these developments there is endemic poverty and land alienation of poorer groups of people in *chars* (enclaves). Such developments have led to widespread control and destabilization of women in the region leading to their displacement. A fall-out of this is an increase of trafficking of women and children across the border.

Women from Bangladesh are largely trafficked to India. From India they might then be taken to Pakistan or the Middle East. In a research by *Sanlaap* in two red light areas of West Bengal it was revealed that most of these women migrate from one place to another. Ninety percent of the red light areas that they have identified as places that they have worked in are situated in the states that border Bangladesh. Most of these are either in the Northeast or in West Bengal. In one particular red light area named Changrabandha about Sixty-six percent women said that they have come from Bangladesh. In Dinbazar, many of the sex workers have said that their mothers came from Bangladesh. The report clearly states, "The rate of trafficking in Changrabandha is remarkably higher than Dinbazar. The red-light area of Changrabandha is adjacent to Bangladesh border and women are trafficked through this border like any other commodity."<sup>48</sup> Most of the women in sex work were illiterates. Many of these women entered prostitution when they were younger than eighteen years of age. Most of these women came from families who were wage earners and cultivators or their mothers were sex workers as well. The mothers who are themselves sex workers find no alternative except allowing their daughters take up the same profession because as children's of sex workers they are stigmatised and discriminated. They are deprived of education or even a social environment with any promise or hope. The socio-economic profiles of sex workers of at least Dinbazaar and Changrabandha portray that these women and children did not have too many options to take up other professions.

Even while in the profession their lives are never secure. Basically there are three to four modes of operation. They can work independently, or on contract basis or even under a madam. Women in the third category had to give up all their earnings to the madam, and they were given room, food and some other necessities in lieu of their payments. Even on contract basis they give half of their payments to madams. The best of them earn about Rs. 5000 per month. This takes care of their necessities and their children. Some of them even send money home. Their insecurity is portrayed by the fact that they are trafficked often from one centre to another. These women are at the mercy of both criminal and police. Being near the border often they are forced to give shelter to criminals from either Bangladesh or India. Also the police use them for sex without any payment. They often cater to truckers crossing zero point and to attract them they take to the roads.<sup>49</sup>

There are cases where women who are brought from Bangladesh to the metropolitan towns in India face tremendous brutality. In January 2003, five Bangladeshi nationals, of whom two were minor children crossed the Indo-Bangladesh border and entered India. The Border Security Force (BSF) arrested them from a Baro Bridge across the Ichhamati River. The area in which the incident took place is under the jurisdiction of the Basirhat police station in the North 24 Parganas. The Bangladeshi nationals including one Jayanti Bala Das were all taken to the Soladana BSF camp at around 5 pm. On the same night (10 January 2003) one BSF personnel allegedly raped Jayanti Bala. Thereafter these "infiltrators" were put in a small boat with

holes and efforts were made to push them back. Allegedly when the boatman refused to go he was threatened on the point of gun. The boat capsized in the middle of the river and only Jayanti Bala and her one-year-old son could save themselves. On 13 January the villagers of Bagundi, who had given her shelter, handed her over to the police of Basirhat. She was charged under section 14 of the Foreigners Act. On 21 January a dead body was found in the Brickkiln Canal in South Basirhat. The man was identified as Jayanti's husband Basudev. When a case was lodged against five BSF personnel the BSF men were unwilling to hand over their personnel to the Basirhat police. Although the BSF disagreed that Jayanti was raped but the officer in-charge of this case stated that initial examinations proved that she was molested.<sup>50</sup> On 27 January the SDJM of Basirhat issued warrants against five BSF men. In July, Jayanti was handed over to the Sromojibi Mahila Samity for safe custody and on 15 September 2003 a writ petition was filed on her behalf. The cases are still pending.<sup>51</sup>

Jayanti's case reflects the situation of women who are trying to cross the border. Their status of being a foreign born woman increases their vulnerability. No one is willing to shoulder any responsibility for these women. The state that they leave is glad to get rid of them and the state that they enter finds them unwanted. This has been proved last year when in February 213 gypsy snake charmers who have always led a life of seasonal mobility crossing borders at certain times of the year were stopped in zero point in Satgachi in Cooch Behar. They had to remain there for days as both India and Bangladesh was unwilling to take them back until one night they just disappeared. No one knows what happened to them and even less do people care. From the Indian side we were told that they were pushed inside Bangladesh. No one even asked for evidence of what happened because this is a gray area. In such a situation woman can be exploited by anyone and are therefore particularly vulnerable to traffickers.

The border itself is a place of endemic poverty, substantial illiteracy among women and children and enormous violence against women. In a recent survey undertaken in three border villages namely Shikarpur, Charmeghna and Nasirerpara it was found out that most women in this area are illiterate. In Shikarpur out of 515 women only 190 had some forms of literacy, in Charmeghna out of 590 only 100 women are literate and in Nasirerpara out of 470 women only 85 are literate.<sup>52</sup> These women have very few options to improve their situations. Their problems are compounded by increased militarisation and criminalisation of the area. Here every other day women and children are molested or killed. On visiting one such border near Charmeghna two chroniclers poignantly write:

To assert that the control of the border still belongs to them the border security on both ends sporadically does a well-orchestrated show of national safety through aggression. It is then that one witnesses the elaborate, flexing of muscles and the violent exchange of fire and mortar. On such occasions the border sky is lit up by man made conflagrations and the air swells with the sound of brutal human games. At the end of it all,

what are lost on both sides are the expendable lives of common people like Baba-Hasim, and Kanakchampa and the eyesight of 6-year-old Sonia, who paid the price for playing, foolishly enough, in her own front yard.<sup>53</sup>

Women living in these borders live a life of extreme hardship. They are the quickest targets for both the security personnel and the criminals. “The robbers demand women during their raids and when they get none they leave threatening dire consequences: ‘you can hide your livestock in the camp. You can hide your money in the bank. But where will you hide your women?’”<sup>54</sup> Any study on traditional security pays no attention to such insecurities, which has become part of their every day lives.

## Conclusion

The cases that I have dealt with in this paper are cases of displacement due either to conflict, developmental projects or endemic poverty that results in near death situation. They are also all cases of displacement due to coercion. The one category of displaced that I have omitted are calamity-induced displaced or those displaced as a result of natural disaster. One reason why I have considered only conflict-induced and development-induced displacement is because in both these forms of displacement the hand of state power is obvious. In most of these development and conflict induced cases, state policies result directly in displacements. Even in displacement related to community vs. community conflicts, the state can play a partisan role as is obvious from the situation in Gujarat. Mostly in all states of South Asia women are relegated to the margins of citizenship. They are hardly ever equal partners in the process of state formation. State machineries seek to create a “unified” and “national” citizenry that accepts the central role of the existing elite. This is done through privileging majoritarian, male and monolithic cultural values that deny space for difference. Such a denial has often led to the segregation of minorities, on the basis of caste, religion and gender, from the collective “we”. Thus, displaced women are often doubly marginalized since state policies are weighted against them both because they are women and also because often they are members of minority ethnic, religious and linguistic groups.

Women’s bodies form the battlegrounds for contests of male power. According to one observer in South Asia “mystified notions of chastity” have guided attitude to women.<sup>55</sup> This has led to the acceptance that women in South Asia belong to their communities. Women as symbols of group honour are raped, molested and tortured so that men may be shamed. The media often plays up this concept of women’s honour to incite one group of people against another. For example, after the Godhra incident there were false media reporting of the rape of Hindu women by Muslim men leading to the targeting of Muslim women in the riots. Another alarming trend is that there are increasing incidents of raped women being murdered after rape. In Gujarat many raped women had been

murdered during the riots. This is particularly true of violence sponsored by machineries of state, as is obvious from the previous example.

That the states of South Asia, including India, at best infantilise women and at worst abuse them will become obvious if one looks into their responses towards displaced women. When in the Indian parliament the issue of torture of women in Gujarat came up, the Minister of Defence commented that in civil war such things happen. In Sri Lanka the unwillingness of the state, notwithstanding the UN resolution 1325, to involve women's groups in talks for peace is another example of the male centrism of South Asian states. In Nepal, the apathy of the state to impose anti-trafficking laws, again reveals the bias against women in state policies. When the state becomes an actor in displacing groups, violence against women reaches an unprecedented height because often the perpetrators enjoy impunity. Unless the state changes its attitude towards women, groups of minority women and ethnically different women will continue to be displaced in large numbers.

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Sections of this paper has been previously published in "Resisting Erasure – Women IDPS in South Asia," in Paula Banerjee, Sabyasachi Basu Raychowdhury and Samir Das edited, *Internal Displacement in South Asia* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> For a scholarly account of gender in the politics of partition refer to Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (Delhi: 1998) and Urvashi Bhutalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Delhi: 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Paula Banerjee, "Refugee Repatriation: A Politics of Gender," *Refugee Watch No 1* (January, 1998) pp.8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (Kali For Women, Delhi, 1998)

<sup>5</sup> Jan Jindy Pettman, "Boundary Politics: Women, Nationalism and Danger," in *New Frontiers in Women's Studies: Knowledge, Identity and Nationalism*, Mary Maynard and June Purvis, eds. (London: 1996) p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics on Bangladeshi refugees is not easily available. Sukumari Chowdhury suggested the percentage to the author in September, 1996, in Calcutta.

<sup>7</sup> Bolan Gangopadhyay, "Reintegrating the Displaced, Refracting the Domestic: A Report on the Experiences at Uday Vila," *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Pradip Bose, ed. (Kolkata: 2000) p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> Institutions such as Shesh Kiron in Varanasi and Amar Bari in Brindaban house women refugees from Bangladesh.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews taken by Subhoronjon Dasgupta. Excerpts of the interview published in "Widows of Brindaban: Memories of Partition," *Refugee Watch*, Nos. 10 & 11 (July, 2000) pp. 44-45.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Summerfield, "The, Social, Cultural and Political Dimensions of Contemporary War," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, Vol. 13 (1997) p.7.

<sup>11</sup> Irene Khan, "The Refugee Problem: A South Asian Perspective," *Peace Studies Reader, 1* (Sage, 2001). The paper was presented in Maulana Azad Institute of Asian Studies in 1997.

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- <sup>13</sup> Nirmala Chandrahasan, "A Precarious Refuge: A Study of the Reception of Tamil Asylum Seekers in Europe, North America and India," *Harvard Human Rights Yearbook, Vol. 2* (1989) pp. 55-96.
- <sup>14</sup> C. Amalraj, "Sri Lanka: The One-eyed Hope," *The New Leader* (1-15 June, 1995) p. 19.
- <sup>15</sup> About 23 female suicide bombers died by March 1998. Source: Yerimalai Report.
- <sup>16</sup> Joke Schrijvers, "Constructing Womanhood, Tamilness and The Refugee," in Selvy Thiruchandran ed., *Woman, Narration and Nation: Collective Images and Multiple Identities* (New Delhi: 1999) p. 179.
- <sup>17</sup> "The Maid Running Madness," *South Asia Refugee Information, Vol. 3* (September, 1996) p.1 Also see "A Journey Without End: Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India," *Refugee Watch, No. 2* (April, 1998) pp. 9-11.
- <sup>18</sup> "Refugee – The Human Cargo," *South Asia Refugee Information, Vol. 5* (December, 1997) pp. 5-6.
- <sup>19</sup> Dharini Rajasingham-Senanayake analyses why pottu is a mark of challenge when widows wear it as traditionally it is a mark of married women in "Post Victimization: Cultural Transformation and Women's Empowerment in War and Displacement," Selvy Thiruchandran ed., *Woman, Narration and Nation: Collective Images and Multiple Identities* (New Delhi: 1999) pp. 136-151.
- <sup>20</sup> The author visited Alles Garden Camp Trincomalee on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2001.
- <sup>21</sup> "Kashmiri Migrants" in *Impact of Displacement on Women*, National Commission for Women, New Delhi, 2001, pp. 95-96.
- <sup>22</sup> Asha Hans, Women Across Borders in Kashmir: The Continuum of Violence," in *Women In Conflict Zones*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (York University Publication) p. 79.
- <sup>23</sup> "Villagers Flee India – Pakistan Border," BBC Report, 29 December 2001, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/1732865.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/world/south_asia/1732865.stm)
- <sup>24</sup> Displacement in Kashmir due to military tensions and armed clashes between India and Pakistan (1999-2002), [www.idpproject.org](http://www.idpproject.org)
- <sup>25</sup> *Profile of Internal Displacement : Pakistan*, Compilation of the information available in the Global IDP Database of the Norwegian Refugee Council, January 2003, p. 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Kashmir: Asian sub-continent on the brink of catastrophe (An eyewitness account from a socialist in Pakistani Occupied Kashmir), Committee for a Workers' International, May 2002, [http://slp.at/cwi/infos\\_int/neu\\_0205\\_kash.html](http://slp.at/cwi/infos_int/neu_0205_kash.html)
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- <sup>30</sup> "Gujarat Carnage: Women's Perspectives on the Violence in Gujarat," By PUCL Vadodara and Shanti Abhiyaan, Vadodara, 27 February-26 March, p. 7.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 8.
- <sup>32</sup> Syeda Hameed, Ruth Manorama, Malini Ghosh, Sheba George, Farha Naqvi and Mari Thekaekara, *How Has The Gujarat Massacre Affected Minority Women?: The Survivors*



*Speak*, Fact-Finding by a Women's Panel, Citizen's Initiative Ahmedabad, 16 April 2002.

<sup>33</sup> The Concerned Citizens Tribunal Reported "A distinct, tragic and ghastly feature of the state sponsored carnage unleashed against a section of the population, the Muslim minority in Gujarat, was the systematic sexual violence unleashed against young girls and women. Rape was used as an instrument for the subjugation and humiliation of a community. A chilling technique, absent in pogroms unleashed hitherto but very much in evidence this time in a large number of cases, was the deliberate destruction of evidence. Barring a few, in most instances of sexual violence, the women victims were stripped and paraded naked, then gang-raped, and thereafter quartered and burnt beyond recognition." *An inquiry into the carnage in Gujarat*, Citizens Tribunal - Gujarat 2002, Published by: Citizens for Justice and Peace, <http://www.sabrang.com/tribunal/vol2/womenvio.html>

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<sup>35</sup> "Report of the Committee Constituted by the National Commission for Women to Assess the Status and Situation of Women and Girl Children in Gujarat in the Wake of Communal Disturbance," in *The Gujarat Pogrom: Indian Democracy in Danger*, Compilation of Various Reports, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, June 2002, pp. 48-56.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp. 1-25.

<sup>41</sup> V. Venkatesan, "A Triumph For Gujarat," *Frontline*, Vo. 16, no. 6 (13-26 March, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Alok Agarwal, "Villages Evicted with Police Terror Tactics, Preparations on for Demolishing: Women, Children Also Beaten Up: NBA Demands that Submergence Should be Stopped Till Resettlement is Over," NBA Press Release, 21 July 2002, [www.narmada.org](http://www.narmada.org)

<sup>43</sup> Angana Chatterjee, "Whither Democracy in India," June 2002, [www.narmada.org](http://www.narmada.org)

<sup>44</sup> Comment attributed to Chitroopa Palit (Silvy) in Mohammed Asif, Lyla Mehta and Harsh Mander, *Engendering Resettlement And Rehabilitation Policies And Programmes In India*, Report of the workshop held at the India International Centre on 12 and 13 September 2002 organised by the Institute of Development Studies and Action Aid, India with support from DFID, November 2002, p. 5.

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<sup>47</sup> Meghna Guhathakurta and Suraiya Begum, "Bangladesh: Displaced and Dispossessed," in Paula Banerjee, Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and Samir Das eds., *Internal Displacement in South Asia* (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2005)

<sup>48</sup> *Project:Linkage, A Situational Analysis on Trafficking and Prostitution in Dinbazaar (Jalpaiguri) and Changrabandha (Cooch Behar)*, A Sanlaap Initiative Report, supported by Gana Unnayan Parshad and Human Development Centre (unpublished) p. 18.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 14 January 2003.

<sup>51</sup> "News From The Indo-Bangladesh Border," *Refugee Watch* 19 (August 2003) p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Survey undertaken by Subharati Banerjee under my supervision for her unpublished M.Phil thesis *Bharat Bangladesh Simanta Samasya: Charmeghna, Shikarpur o Nasirerparar Porjalochona* (Problems in Bengal Bangladesh Border: A discussion of the three villages of Charmeghna, Shikarpur and Nasirerpara) Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Calcutta, 2000-2001, p. 73.

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<sup>55</sup> Samir Das, "Ethnic Assertion and Women's Question in Northeastern-India," A.K. Jana, ed., *Indian Politics at the Crossroads* (New Delhi: 1998), 177.