

Notions of Gender: Rehabilitating refugee women in Partition's aftermath

Sandip Kana¹

This article seeks to recover the experience and agency of refugee women during the process of rehabilitation after Partition, focusing on technical training.² It explores the ideas that underpinned the process of rehabilitating refugee women in the immediate years following the Partition of India in August 1947, within the Bombay state. This article contributes to attempts in the historiography to challenge conventional histories of Partition that have marginalised women and focuses on recovering the agency of refugee women in rebuilding and reshaping their lives.³ It will be argued that the Bombay state's notions of gender shaped and informed the type and content of rehabilitation that unattached refugee women⁴ received. Whilst the state showed little evidence of any genuine concern regarding the welfare of refugee women, unofficial organisations designed and implemented various schemes to rehabilitate refugee women. This article will reveal the fraught and unequal relationship, between a relatively absent state, and these unofficial organisations.

On a broader scale, the purpose of rehabilitation was to transform the refugee into a productive labourer that actively and voluntarily worked to further projects of national development. This was part of a statist top-down ideal of 'productive citizenship' that was imposed upon refugees.⁵ There is a distinction to be drawn here between the approach of the state and unofficial organisations. For the former policies of rehabilitation were driven by a desire to transform 'useless'⁶ refugees into productive agents of the state, whilst the latter sought to use rehabilitation to improve the welfare of the refugees. Despite the diverging aims, in both cases, technical training was entrenched into the rehabilitation process as it was the only means by which to equip the refugees with new industrial skills.

¹ Sandip Kana, History PhD candidate, King's College London, sandip.kana@kcl.ac.uk

² Vocational and technical training focused on rehabilitating able-bodied refugees (male and female) by training them in various cottage industries, with the aim of making them fit for absorption into industries.

³ This literature has been referred to as the 'hidden histories.' The key texts of it being: R. Menon and K. Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition: How women experienced the Partition of India*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998).

⁴ 'Unattached refugee women' refers to widows who were not able to access rehabilitation and relief through male family members. They entered official records as 'unattached women', or women who quite literally were not attached by familial ties to an adult male. This article focuses on refugee women who fled from the Sindh province, and were resettled within Bombay.

⁵ Uditi Sen has shown how a singular ideal of citizenship gradually came to be dominant within the regime of rehabilitation. In this framework able-bodied refugees (male and female) were increasingly recast as productive agents of post-colonial development. Refugees were required to demonstrate their willingness to engage in productive labour and to actively contribute to furthering projects of national development. See, Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 15 and p. 17.

⁶ The term 'useless' to describe the refugees can be found in various state documents and correspondence on the refugee process that emerged within the refugee camps. The term was widely used by Sudhir Ghosh, Secretary of the Faridabad Development Board for the Faridabad refugee camp (East Punjab). See, Faridabad Development Board, Digitalised Public Records, National Archives of India, File No. 29(197)/50- PMS (Volume V), and Faridabad Township Scheme, National Archives of India, File No. RHB22(1)/49.

While the state sought to remain relatively absent, unofficial organisations took up the mantle, exhibited the necessary leadership, and ensured that refugee women were not marginalised from rehabilitation efforts. The absence of the state was not surprising and was in line with how welfare is pursued in India. David Arnold has shown how the idea that the state ought to be responsible for the provision of welfare was one that had not rooted itself politically within India.⁷ Instead, in the absence of the state, Indians looked to forms of welfare that stemmed directly from unofficial indigenous voluntarist philanthropic organisations, to 'uplift' and 'improve' the 'backward' and marginalised groups of Indian society.⁸ These colonial developments in how indigenous forms of welfare was pursued transitioned into the post-colonial period. This was visible in how the rehabilitation of refugee women was pursued outside the institutions and structures of the post-colonial Indian state. Unofficial organisations composed of a variety of voluntarist indigenous organisations, that were already operating within India's existing social welfare network.⁹ These unofficial organisations were highly localised and geographically scattered given that they were operating outside the institutions and structures of the state.

The earliest historical narratives of Partition focused on an obsessive search for the root cause or genesis of it. In these histories Partition was defined as an entirely political exercise, and understood in terms of its constitutional history, inter-governmental debates, or the negotiations between political elites.¹⁰ As a result, the experiences of ordinary people, on both sides of the newly drawn borders were ignored. This led to a firm shift to try to recover the subaltern perspective, with attempts to recover, largely through oral history interviews, the lived experience of Partition for millions of people, who overnight became refugees.¹¹ However, Udit Sen firmly argues that, even a history of ordinary people tends to become a socio-economic and political history of ordinary men, where the experiences of women are marginalised.¹² In

⁷ Arnold argues that in India private charity was mobilised to improve welfare standards by indigenous actors to fill the void left by the paucity of state relief. Therefore, creating a dependency and reliance on unofficial organisations, rather than the state to provide welfare. See, David Arnold, 'Vagrant India: Famine, Poverty, and Welfare under Colonial Rule', in A. L. Beier and Paul Ocobock (eds.), *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective*, (Ohio: Ohio University Press), p. 118, p. 120, and p. 125.

⁸ Carey Watt explores how Indian philanthropic and social welfare efforts, during the colonial and post-colonial periods, was concerned with 'uplifting' and 'improving' 'backward' and marginalised groups of Indian society, such as the so-called 'Depressed Classes.' See, Carey Watt, 'Philanthropy and civilising missions in India: States, NGOs and Development', in Carey Watt and Michael Mann (eds.), *Civilising Missions in Colonial and Post-colonial India: From Improvement to Development*, (London: Anthem Press, 2011), pp. 271- 316.

⁹ The most prominent indigenous voluntary bodies included the Servants of India Society, the Social Service League, the Gokhale Education Society, and the Ramakrishna Mission. See table 1.0 in this article for an overview of the unofficial organisations operating rehabilitation policies for refugee women within Bombay.

¹⁰ See, Rizvi Gowher, *Linlithgow and India: A study of British policy and political impasse in India, 1936-1943*, (London: Royal Historical Society, 1979); R. J. Moore, *Churchill, Cripps and India*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of Partition in India, 1936-1947*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹¹ See, Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Kavita Puri, *Partition Voices: Untold British Stories*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

¹² Udit Sen, 'Spinster, Prostitute or Pioneer? Images of refugee women in post-Partition Calcutta', (Italy: European University Institute, 2011), p. 1. For a powerful example of the focus on the experiences of men, see, Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The refugees and the left political syndrome in West Bengal*, (Kalyani: Lumiere Books, 1990).

the last two decades there has been an emerging body of literature, referred to as the 'hidden histories', that has attempted to recover the experience and agency of women during and after Partition.¹³

For all its devastating consequences Partition had the capacity to transform lives in unexpected directions - this was especially the case for refugee women. Peter Gatrell has shown how fresh job opportunities became available to refugee women after Partition. The Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation created a Women's Section to train prospective teachers, nurses, and clerical workers. Female police officers were recruited from the ranks of refugees to help trace girls who had been abducted. Women went out to work to replace the income lost when male family members were killed.¹⁴ Gargi Chakravarty argues that these social and economic changes brought about by Partition delivered an emancipation of sorts for refugee women. Partition had shattered the private world of the home that women refugees had inhabited before.¹⁵ However, Sen has recently suggested that there needs to be a greater level of critical interrogation of these romanticised narratives of viewing Partition as 'a coming out' for refugee women in the public sphere.¹⁶ This is evidently seen within the type and content of training that refugee women received, that were explicitly informed and shaped by notions of gender.

Technical training was used to train unattached women refugees in a new trade, to prevent dependency on charity, and the creation of economic migrants.¹⁷ This included cottage industries such as spinning, weaving, embroidery, and toy and doll making as well as employment training in nursing, midwifery, and as teachers. These unofficial efforts were shaped by a dominant top-down gendered interpretation of citizenship. This ensured that the type and content of women's training was firmly entrenched within a gender discourse. The training offered to refugee women emphasised their 'natural' attributes as nurturers or taught them low-paid home-based artisanal skills which were considered 'appropriate.' They did not involve uprooting Indian women from their proper place in the home.¹⁸ Thus, their rehabilitation, reinforced the vocational bias, which was to make them 'efficient home-makers, good mothers and successful housewives.'¹⁹

The State's Response

¹³ See footnote two for the key texts that have underpinned the 'hidden histories.' The focus has been on moving away from depicting women's experience of Partition as a story of loss and victimhood. Instead, seeking to uncover the agency of women in rebuilding and reshaping their lives. For recent contributions see, Udit Sen, 'Spinster, prostitute or pioneer? Images of refugee women in post-Partition Calcutta', (Italy: European University Institute, 2011), and Gargi Chakravarty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee women of Bengal*, (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005).

¹⁴ Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 164.

¹⁵ Gargi Chakravarty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee women of Bengal*, (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005), p. 101.

¹⁶ Sen, 'Spinster, prostitute or pioneer?', p. 16.

¹⁷ Hema Pinjani, 'Sindhi resettlement at Ulhasnagar', *Historicity Research Journal*, 3/4 (2016), p. 7.

¹⁸ Udit Sen, *Citizen refugee: Forging the Indian nation after Partition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 210.

¹⁹ Industrial and Technical Secondary Education Committee Recommendations, Box 3 File No. TEC 1050-I Part 1, 1950, Maharashtra State Archives, Chapter III.

From the outset the Bombay government firmly situated notions of gender within the training of refugee women:

[In] An overpopulated country like ours, where all active young and adult male workers are not fully and gainfully employed, and where even those who are workers are often underemployed, it would lead to greater unemployment among men, if women entered technical occupations beyond the "mother crafts" in larger numbers. It was therefore argued that the problem of employment of refugee women and giving technical training to them for procuring jobs is of secondary importance from the point of view of the national economy.²⁰

This statement is quite revealing about the intentions and motivations of the state. Firstly, it firmly situates the employment prospects of refugee women within the domestic sphere. Secondly, the state attempts to justify its policies, by arguing that increasing the employment of women would lead to greater levels of unemployment for men. It reveals how the state's policies emphasised difference, between men and women, in terms of the value of their economic contribution. This could go some way to explaining its absence in constructing practical policies for rehabilitating refugee women. In another statement by the government, we are given another possible reason for their absence.

'We have built up a democratic system of education and therefore it would be in the fitness of things that women should come forward to start educational institutions of technical character and administer them to rehabilitate the refugee women.'²¹

The rhetoric emerging here from the Bombay government was reflective of what the central government was advocating. This was a general reluctance to actively or directly implement policies to rehabilitate refugee women. Instead, the preference was to delegate such work to unofficial organisations.²² There was no comprehensive state led policy of rehabilitation and economic reintegration devised for refugee women, either within Bombay, or more widely across India. This stands in stark contrast to the active intervention of the state in providing relief and education to male refugees and the children of displaced people through large financial investments.²³ Whatever help was provided towards economically rehabilitating refugee women emerged through the nature of localised, and geographically scattered interventions, by unofficial organisations - it was never accorded the status of state policy.²⁴

Unofficial Organisations

For unofficial organisations, the overarching aim of providing unattached refugee women with technical training was to secure their long-term welfare by providing them with the opportunity

²⁰ Quoted in, Report of the National Committee on Women, Ministry of Education, Digitalised Public Records, National Archives of India, MINISTRY_OF_EDUCATION_B3_1958_NA_F-40-57_58, 1958, p. 116.

²¹ Industrial and Technical Secondary Education Committee Recommendations.

²² Sen, *Citizen refugee*, p. 206.

²³ Udit Sen argues that in West Bengal within state discourse refugee women were 'economically unrehabilitable', thus they were marginalised from state interventions and reliant upon the efforts of non-state actors. See, Sen 'Spinster, prostitute or pioneer?', pp. 8-9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

to learn and master the technique of a trade. However, its type and content were clearly shaped by the state's notions of gender. For instance, one of the initial efforts to this end in Bombay was the establishment of the Nari Seva Sadan (1947) at Kurla (East Bombay). Here 1,700 unattached refugee women and children were housed. Whilst the children were provided with primary and secondary education, the women were provided with technical training in sewing, embroidery, and tailoring, according to their strength and aptitude.²⁵ The gendered nature of training was also reflected in the Ladies Section (1948), which was established within the Ulhasnagar Vocational and Technical Training Centre. Here technical training was offered to refugee women in textiles, tailoring, spinning, basket-making, soap-making, vegetable and fruit preservation and dressmaking.²⁶ These two cases are representative of wider localised efforts to rehabilitate refugee women that were firmly anchored in the 'mother crafts.' This was in stark contrast to the type of technical training that male refugees received at the Training Centre, which additionally touched upon light industries such as, electrical and wireman's courses, turning and fitting, basic mechanical engineering, carpentry and leather work etc.²⁷

Table 1.0 provides a snapshot of the efforts of unofficial organisations operating within Bombay. It outlines the type and content of training they provided.²⁸

²⁵ *The Times of India*, 17 November 1951, 'Refugee women's rehabilitation.'

²⁶ Cottage Industries Scheme, Box 21 File No. SCI 1056, 1956, Maharashtra State Archive.

²⁷ *Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in Bombay State*, (Bombay: The Directorate of Publicity, 1958), pp. 18-19.

²⁸ It is important to note that activities listed here are by no means exhaustive as many local organisations may not have left a paper trail, and their efforts were unlikely to be recorded in official reports. The organisations in this table have been compiled from the following: Cottage Industries Scheme, Box 21 File No. SCI 1056, 1956, Maharashtra State Archive; *Rehabilitation of displaced persons in Bombay State*, (Bombay: The Directorate of Publicity, 1958), pp. 18-19; Industrial and Technical Secondary Education Committee Recommendations, Box 03 File No. TEC 1050, 1950, Maharashtra State Archive.

Social and welfare organisation/ institution	Type of technical training offered
Harni Cottage Industries Centre	Carding, spinning, and weaving
Kantra Stri Vikas Girha	Tailoring, textile, and embroidery work
Mahila Udyog Mandal	Tailoring, textile, and embroidery work
Nirvasit	Tailoring, textile, and embroidery work
Irwin Hospital	Nursing and midwifery
Shri Jain Hindu Mahila Udyog Griha	Basic craft work
Technical school (run by Nagrik Sewa Semiti)	Tailoring, embroidery work, and spinning
Sindh Seva Samiti Narishala	Tailoring and embroidery work
Ladies Industrial Cooperative Society Camp No 1.	Hand embroidery work and tailoring
The Sindhi Ladies Industries Cooperative House Camp No. 3	Tailoring and machine embroidery
Gamibai Nari Seva Sedan	Tailoring and embroidery work
Bharat Nabila Kala Mandir	Tailoring
H-Ranery & Sons	Plastic goods, raincoats, toys, and handbags
Government Narishala Vocational Training Centre Camp No. 5	Tailoring and embroidery work.

Table 1.0.

At first glance, it is abundantly clear that, across Bombay, notions of gender shaped and informed unofficial organisations activities, with few training opportunities beyond textiles. However, rather than this being a result of the organisations, this was determined by the state. The activities of these unofficial organisations, given their highly localised nature, were extremely, if not entirely, dependent on financial assistance from the state. The state did provide, where necessary, grants-in-aid to support the financial (recurring and non-recurring) costs of rehabilitation activities instigated by unofficial organisations. However, state funding was only provided for those activities, where it deemed that the training was 'appropriate', and conformed to their gendered interpretation of citizenship, which limited the role of women to the home. Unsurprisingly to secure funding for their activities, it was not uncommon for unofficial organisations to stay within the limits imposed by the Bombay state.²⁹ For instance, the Narishalla Industrial Training School for refugee women, focused its technical training on

²⁹ *Report of the National Committee on Women's Education*, (Delhi: Ministry of Education, 1959), p. 7.

tailoring, spinning, and embroidery. It was conscious that training outside of the domestic sphere, would have restricted its access to financial assistance from the state, for its activities.³⁰ The Bombay government's position was abundantly clear, it explicitly argued that 'any form of technical training in fields beyond "mother crafts" was a waste of money, energy and health.'³¹

Whilst the state was happy to delegate the implementation of schemes and policies targeting refugee women, it retained firm control over the direction of policy.³² To this end the rehabilitation efforts for refugee women remained limited to the 'home industries' - this being trades where production could be carried out from the household. Thus, not interfering with the woman's role within the domestic sphere. In this way there was no need for elaborate factory buildings as production could be carried out in small shabby workshops, often situated in the front room of the house, an outdoor shed, or courtyard.

However, there were attempts at diversifying the type and content of technical training for refugee women within Bombay. The Pimpri Refugee Industrial Cooperative Society put forward plans to establish a match factory in Pimpri (south-east Bombay). By exposing refugee women, albeit to very basic scientific knowledge about the various chemicals involved in the production of the matches, the society was providing an alternative form of technical training. This did not go unnoticed by the state, who were reluctant to offer any funding for the factory.³³ As a result, the factory costs estimated to be Rs. 10,000, of which, Rs. 2,000 was donated by the society, with the remaining Rs. 8,000 coming from bank loans.³⁴

The match factory was constructed on a plot of land that was lying in the middle of the Pimpri colony (north-west Bombay) where there were many refugee tenements constructed around.³⁵ This allowed the refugee women to be trained within the 'factory.' The technical training was provided in an enclosed plot that contained a shed with brick flooring and corrugated iron sheet outer walls and completed with partitions and a roof. The actual production of the matches was carried out from the women's tenements. The scheme of training lasted a month, with up to 100 women workers to be trained for a period of 25 days. The production of the matches was prepared from splints from bamboo and veneer from straw boards. The chemical raw materials and tools required to produce the matches were provided for the refugee women

³⁰ Industries in Ulhasnagar, Box 8 File No. INDU 1054, 1954, Maharashtra State Archive.

³¹ This argument encompassed all types of technical education and vocational training for Indian girls and women, both within the school environment and beyond it. See, Industrial and Technical Secondary Education Committee Recommendations.

³² Sen, *Citizen refugee*, pp. 208-209.

³³ Scheme 'D' Class Match Factory at Pimpri, Scheme of the Pimpri Refugee Industrial Cooperative Society to start Match Factory at Pimpri, Box 3 File No. INDP 1055, Labour and Social Welfare Department, 1955, Maharashtra State Archives.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ The Explosive Department did deem the plot safe to construct the factory despite being in the centre of a residential area. Scheme of the Pimpri Refugee Industrial Cooperative Society to start Match Factory at Pimpri, Box 3 File No. INDP 1055, Labour and Social Welfare Department, 1955, Maharashtra State Archives.

by the society.³⁶ This meant that the capital investment required to support the home industry was minimal.

This match factory was representative of the localised efforts at providing refugee women with a diversified type of rehabilitation. Although these efforts were limited, it does reveal the fraught and unequal partnership between the official regime of rehabilitation and unofficial organisations. Ultimately, it was the former that retained control, due in part to its financial resources, over the rehabilitation process, allowing it to enforce a gender discourse that limited the training of refugee women, to trades where it thought their strength and aptitude was best suited.

Conclusion

Partition did bring about great historical changes. For the lives of uprooted women in its aftermath there were signs that their lives were gradually transformed for the better. However, this article has attempted to show the limitations of this 'coming out' for refugee women in the aftermath of Partition. The rehabilitation activities of unofficial organisations operating within Bombay was framed within a gender discourse. In this way ideas and policies of rehabilitation served to reinforce existing gender roles. Moreover, in the absence of accounts of how the refugee women perceived their own actions, it is difficult to argue how far Partition did represent a 'coming out' for them. For Rachel Weber, her interviews with the middle-class women of Bijoygarph (Calcutta), concludes that for many refugee women they viewed their new roles thrust upon them by Partition, as temporary and situational aberrations.³⁷ Even if the rehabilitation of refugee women was shaped and informed by notions of gender, their presence in the cottage industries would pave the way for future generations of young women to enter the workforce in larger numbers.

³⁶ Scheme of the Pimpri Refugee Industrial Cooperative Society to start Match Factory at Pimpri, Box 3 File No. INDP 1055, Labour and Social Welfare Department, 1955, Maharashtra State Archives.

³⁷ Rachel Weber, 'Re-creating the Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta', in Jashodhara Bagchi and Shubhoranjan Dasgupta, (eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, (Kolkata: Stree, 2003).