The Bengali settler women living in the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal are witnesses of a long history of displacements and migration. These first generation settler women—the youngest of whom are now in their sixties—migrated with their families from East Pakistan to India after the Partition of India in 1947, and arrived in West Bengal. However, the state government unable and unwilling to accommodate their large numbers dispersed the refugee population to camps across the country. Some of the women were born in these refugee camps as their mothers were dispersed at the departure of the animals with the arrival of settlers; Shushama Roy chose to juxtapose the settler women’s vocabulary, and the use of the state’s dictionary meaning, offer eight thematic groups. The claim-making words (migration, border slip, batch, settlement) form the biggest category, followed by words for authority (commander, department, military), and words for state benefits (paddy land, plot). Words for accommodation (camp, quartal, colony), transport (rail, ship, LTC), and organization (meeting, leadership, group) are primarily used to describe the period of waiting and being transported from camp to camp before being transported to the island. The settlers experienced a major life events like the loss of a more conceptual category, which offers insights into the history of Partition. The mandatory conditions on the island have led to the incorporation of several words, such as tourist, lodge, agenda, conference. The words not only narrate Partition from the settler women’s standpoint, but also firmly places them as participants in the resettlement process.

**Bengali settler women in the Andaman Islands**

Raka Banerjee: So, what was the first wedding—your wedding—on the island like? Was it in keeping with all Bengali rituals and customs? 

Prabha Bawali: In observance of all customs and rituals. We were living next to each other, when we were in No.1 we used to live next to each other in the quarter. My aunt-in-law and my mother arranged the marriage. I was merely 13 years old, I couldn’t study for too long either, while living in Uttar Pradesh I attended school for 2-3 years. After coming here, I went to school and was married off early. My father used to say, what’s the point in educating a girl [kalo mayor paroration koraga ki korbo] (laughs). 

RB: In Bangladesh, women’s lives were mostly restricted to the household, and post-marriage they would observe purdah … RB: Even so! It’s up to the person to maintain their dignity – but my mother still won’t give up. 

PR: … and they would observe purdah … RB: Yes, they would observe purdah … 

PR: … did that change while in the camp or after coming here? 

RB: It didn’t change in the camp. There were people from different places, right. After coming here, well, now, no one cares for such rules—not even in the villages. 

PR: In the camp, there must have been many people and perhaps it wouldn’t be possible to stay indoors all the time … 

RB: Even so! It’s up to the person to maintain their dignity [jai shonman tar kache]. Even to this day, my mother – we don’t cover our head – but my mother still won’t give up covering her head.

**The Focus**

Recentering the Bay of Bengal

Connected spaces in an inter-Asian borderse

**Wording lifeworlds**

**Bengali settler women in the Andaman Islands**

Roka Banerjee

**The Bengali settler women living in the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal are witnesses of a long history of displacements and migration. These first generation settler women—the youngest of whom are now in their sixties—migrated with their families from East Pakistan to India after the Partition of India in 1947, and arrived in West Bengal. However, the state government unable and unwilling to accommodate their large numbers dispersed the refugee population to camps across the country. Some of the women were born in these refugee camps as their mothers were dispersed at the departure of the animals with the arrival of settlers; Shushama Roy chose to juxtapose the settler women’s vocabulary, and the use of the state’s dictionary meaning, offer eight thematic groups. The claim-making words (migration, border slip, batch, settlement) form the biggest category, followed by words for authority (commander, department, military), and words for state benefits (paddy land, plot). Words for accommodation (camp, quartal, colony), transport (rail, ship, LTC), and organization (meeting, leadership, group) are primarily used to describe the period of waiting and being transported from camp to camp before being transported to the island. The settlers experienced a major life events like the loss of a more conceptual category, which offers insights into the history of Partition. The mandatory conditions on the island have led to the incorporation of several words, such as tourist, lodge, agenda, conference. The words not only narrate Partition from the settler women’s standpoint, but also firmly places them as participants in the resettlement process.

**Becoming ‘settler women’**

The permeation of statist vocabulary into the settler women’s speech is indicative of the impact of Indian government and society on their lives, which is not necessarily configured around a public-private division of spaces and roles. The settler woman worked in the fields, and the children, on the island, we have been able to capture these women’s stories forever. It was a female elephant, very large, very strong, and even back then or else we would have captured these words not only narrate Partition from the settler women’s standpoint, but also firmly places them as participants in the resettlement process.

**Notes**

1. Interview with Shushila Das, Bharatpur (Nc), Neil Island (Shoahaw Deepa), doted 25 Jan 2019.


5. Lower caste population in Bengal who were the worst affected of the Partition refugees and had little or no resources to start over in India.

6. This is a personal account.


