

Intersectionality of Women and Caste: A study of Matrimonial Advertisements in Post-Partition West Bengal

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ABSTRACT: Migration study has been a fairly neglected domain in India and especially in West Bengal, a state witnessing the longest chain of migration. The initial leftist rhetoric, especially since 1960s, prevalent among the writers, filmmakers, critics and even refugees in West Bengal refrained from looking at some significant socio-cultural domains. Coming out of the shackles of this homogeneous class-centric model towards the end of the last century, there was a renewed interest in exploring some of those unheard voices, especially the ones of socially marginalized castes. However, this should have been more anthropological and intersectional in nature. This article aims to explore one such neglected corpus of an intersectionality of Gender and Caste by probing into the social institution of marriage. My article concentrates on Oral narratives and other printed records to delve deep into this significant but neglected issue.

KEYWORDS: Migration, *Ghoti-Bangal*, Intersectionality, Women, Namasudra, Marriage

As we look at the available scholarship on the history of migration from East Bengal and eventually a successful or catastrophic rehabilitation in West Bengalⁱ or even outside the state, we only find the role of bureaucracy being given emphasis in either its meaningful intervention (as in the case of government colonies), indifference (Squatter colonies) or sheer tyrannical measures (Marichjhanpi massacreⁱⁱ). The treatment has been more official in nature than a humane way to understand the changing matrix of socio-cultural relationship. The state-less offspring of partition from East Bengal, newly identified as ‘refugees’ having no legitimate claim for land and home (‘udbastu’ literally means ‘bastuhin’ or ‘homeless’) in West Bengal, had to fight against the anti- migration sentiment prevailing among the indigenous people of West Bengal. Partition could hardly dissolve the age-old differences in dialect, food habits or many other socio-cultural customs between the traditionally designated ‘Ghotis’ (natives of West Bengal) and ‘Bangals’ (originally from East Bengal). It is not to deny the other side of a community formation who could assimilate in a newly created space for *ghoti-bangal* (People from West and East Bengal) alike. Bengali films like *Ora Thake Odhare* (They Live That Side) (1954) and *Sharey Chuattor* (Seventy Four and Half) are ideal examples of this new space where the two erstwhile different cultures are shown to go through a process of assimilation.

However, partition of 1947 entailed a new rift between Ghoti and Bangal for space, remorseless struggle for jobs and unflinching efforts to secure shelter (by force or consent) and food. This eventually resulted in ‘Bangal’ becoming more careful to uphold their identity as ‘Bangal’ and ‘Ghotis’ did the same as well. Jayanti Basu reflects on this Ghoti-Bangal crisis as she refers to one of her respondents sharing an otherwise funny but deeply rooted cultural clash with his Ghoti school friends. They used to recite such lines “*Bangal*

manussya noy, jano ek jontu/ laf diye gache othe, lej nei kintu” (2013:63) (Bangals are not human beings, they are like animals/ they jump up the tree, without any tail).

Although in literary works this crisis is usually seen through the lens of migration of Hindus from East Bengal, this was fuelled by many other factors. Calcutta was becoming a lucrative place for business and this domain was largely occupied by the Marwaris and Gujaratis. Satyajit Ray brilliantly captures this field of entrepreneurship in his film *Jana-Aranya (The Middleman)* (1976), where in an iconic scene the entire Burrabazar area is depicted as the business hub with practically no participation from Bengali youth. They were more interested in securing jobs than getting into a business. In fact, Utpal Dutta’s character scathingly comments on the caste-Hindu character Somnath for their perpetual apathy to do anything not traditionally suitable for the Brahmans. Utpal Dutta’s sarcastic statement, “*Tomra Brahman Santan! Tomra Vikkha korte paro, souda korbe kano?*”(You are all Brahmans. You can be beggars but not businessmen), is more towards an ideological construction of ‘*brahman*’ than their actual entrepreneurial inability. To point out how these social terminologies often cling to ideological construct than economic status, I will produce a part of a letter written likely by a Brahman (as the content of the entire letter suggests) to one of the secretaries (Mr. Narendra Mohan Bhattacharya) of Relief Committee during the days of Bengal famine in 1943. The letter reads:

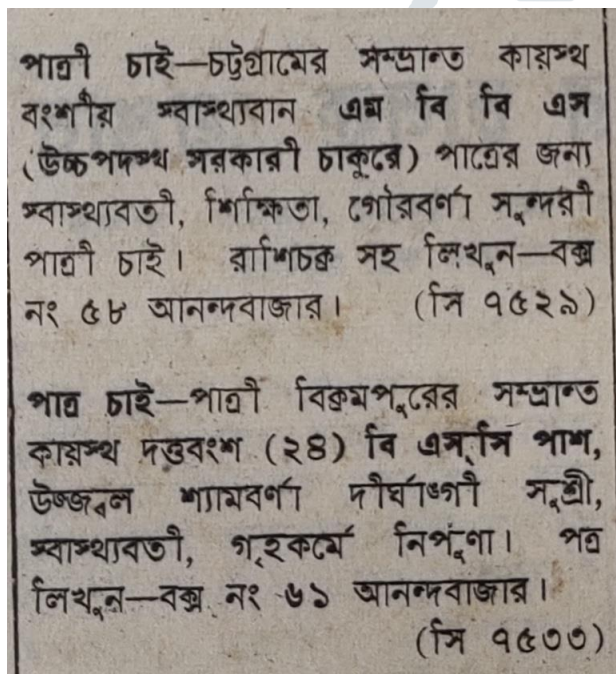
Mahashay, Faridpur Jelar Kotalipara Porgonar Ontorgoto Unsiya grame pray sare char hazar loker bas. Ihar Singhovag jomijomahin pray vikkhabritti obolombonkari Brahman Moddhobitto sreni. Amra purbe apnader theke o Hindu Mohasobhar theke sahajjo paiyachi...ⁱⁱⁱ

*(Sir, there are at least 4500 people under the jurisdiction of Kotalipara Pargana in Faridpur district. Most of these people are **landless middle class Brahmans** and Kyasthas living in utter destitution. We had previously got some help from you and Hindu Mahasabha...)* (emphasis is mine)

The socio-economic turmoil in post-partition West Bengal was also gradually changing the age-old frameworks of man-woman relationship in the institutionalized form of marriage. Owing to this, I bring forth a discourse on marriage in the post-partition West Bengal with its complex and ever changing relationship with gender and caste structure. I have studied the matrimonial advertisements published in *Anandabazar Patrika* from 1955 to 1983. The study clearly establishes the ever-changing locus of marriage with two constants- commoditized representation of women and a socially acknowledged emphasis on caste. I propose to study this ‘Intersectionality’ of ‘woman’ and ‘caste’ as a theoretical paradigm that helps to explore multiple identities of women having been variously used by the patriarchy to subjugate them. Moreover, this subjugation is directly proportionate to their socio-cultural and even economic marginalization. Sameena Dalwai’s (2019) recent book *Bans and Bar Girls: Performing Caste in Mumbai’s Dance Bars* brilliantly touches on this linkage between caste, sexuality and woman work force- a model that has been, as Sharmila Rege opines, largely embraced by the dalit feminist positions towards the end of 20th century^{iv}. Sameena Dalwai shows in her book that the bar girls in Mumbai largely came from the Bhatu and Kolhtani communities (these are Scheduled caste communities) and their performing arts could substantially earn them their livelihood instead of engaging in the specific manual labors prescribed only for these socially

marginalized dalit women. This book is a significant contribution in locating this ban on productive labor of the Scheduled caste women not in a moral stance but in a purely economic one.

In post-partition West Bengal, refugees were marked as homogenous identity having uniform demands, which were making the migrants in late 50s and 60s completely bereft of everything. However, this article aims to focus on marriage relationship during this period and doesn't intend to include any bureaucratic policies revolving around refugees. Matrimonial advertisements in post-partition Bengal can be potentially considered as a benchmark to firmly nullify the idea of forced migrants/refugees as a homogenous entity. Initially the 'east Bengal' identity was coupled with the exact topographical locations in erstwhile East Bengal like the following advertisements read:^v



However, this topographical specificity gradually receded to the idea of disclosing one's identity merely as "East Bengal". I believe this is largely due to the process of cultural integration into a new identity by discarding the pre-conceived notion of community. The pre-partition cultural rifts between different parts of East Bengal were gradually getting amalgamated in the larger oeuvre of refugee identity in post-partition west Bengal. However, one needs to remember that a good number of people with their roots in East Bengal were already living in this side of the border due to their educational and professional attachments. Hence, they can't be technically labeled as

'refugee'. But, since this group of people contributed to only a meager section of East Bengal identity in post-partition West Bengal and most of them had their pre-partition permanent settlement in this side of the border, they don't come within the purview of my article. My focus in this article is on the contours of woman's identity in a new world. Joan Scott believes, "Massive political upheavals that throw old orders into chaos and bring new ones into being may ultimately revise the terms and the organization of gender in search of new forms of legitimation" (1985:49). This needs to be asserted here that these new forms of legitimation, as observed by Joan Scott, hardly ever refrain from subjugating the identity of women.

Postcolonial Migration study in Bengal has tried to unfold a lot of discourses, especially with regard to the inevitable changes or victories earned by the woman refugees. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Sengupta's (2007) *The Trauma and the Triumph* is a case in point. However, I find a notable limitation in their study for not venturing beyond the domain of *ucchoborner bhadramohila* (upper caste aristocratic women) and South

Calcutta colonies. I think it should also have significantly concentrated on the absence of triumph or change by looking at the man-woman relationship in post-partition West Bengal. The advertisements rather hint at the caste-ridden world of matrimony with its eventuality of a caste-conscious society. Ambedkar in his efforts to champion the cause of traditionally defined lower caste people deals with this problem of acute caste consciousness and prescribes a remedy in the following words:

I am convinced that the real remedy is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling- the feeling of being aliens- created by caste will not vanish... where society is already well-knit by other ties, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy for breaking caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste. (2014:216)

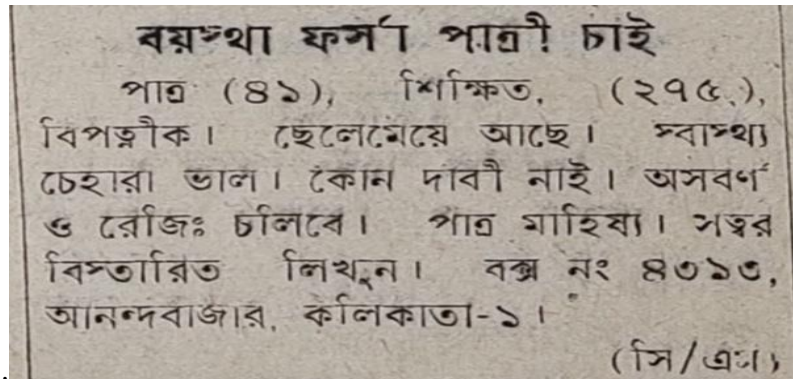
এম, এ, বি, এ, আই, এ, ও ম্যাট্রিক
কন্যাদের অভিজ্ঞতারকরণ, এই মাঘ,
ফাল্গুন কিংবা আগামী বৈশাখেই,
কন্যাদের বিবাহ দিতে হইলে, সর্বপ্রথমে
কন্যাদের বিবাহ কখন হইবে বা আদৌ
বিবাহ হইবে কি না, ইহা অজ্ঞাতভাবে
জানিবার জন্য মাত্র ৮ টাকা সহ কন্যার
রাশিচক্র বা কন্যার জন্ম সন, তারিখ ও
সময় পাঠাইবেন—আমি বাকসিদ্ধ ও
অন্তর্দৃষ্টিসম্পন্ন ঠাকুর সর্বানন্দের
মতানুযায়ী গণনা করিয়া ফলাফল
লিখিয়া জানাইব—পুত্র ও কন্যাদের
বিবাহিত জীবন সুখময় কিংবা দুঃখময়
ইহা সঠিক লিখিয়া জানাইব। আমার
১০ বৎসরের অভিজ্ঞতার ফল—গণনায়
দ্রুতমত ও মনুষ্য হইবেন। বর্তমানে,
আমার হাতে ২২টি রাঢ়ী ব্রাহ্মণ, ২০টি
বামন ব্রাহ্মণ, ১০টি বৈদ্য ও ২৭টি
কায়স্থ গেজেটেড ও কোডেনটেড
অফিসার (I & II), ইঞ্জিনিয়ার, ডাক্তার
ও চার্টার্ড একাউন্টেন্ট পাত্র আছে। দ্রুত
বিবাহ সন্নিহনের জন্য আমার অফিসের
জরুরী ফিঃ জমা দিলে—আমি বিবাহ
ঠিক করিয়া দিব, এই নিশ্চয়তা দিতেছি
—তবে পাত্রী শ্যামবর্ণা হইলেও দেখিতে
খুব সুন্দরী না হইলে—বিবাহ-সংযোজন,
একটু সময় লাগিবে জানিবেন। অবিলম্বে
ফিঃ জমা না দিলে, সর্বতোভাবে desirable
পাত্রদের বিবাহ অন্যত্র ঠিক হইয়া
মাইবে। আর এই বিবাহ সংযোজন কার্যে
আমি আমার আনুষঙ্গিক খরচাদি বারদ
ঐ ফিঃ ডিল্ল অন্য কোনও দালালী গ্রহণ
করি না—আমার বিবেকবাক্সি অনুযায়ী
উহা আমি হেয় কার্য মনে করি জানিবেন
—পণ্ডিত কে, সমাজপতি, বি, এ, ভূগু-
শাস্ত্রী, অফিস—২৯১১, বেনেটোলা
লেন, কলিকাতা—৯, সময়—সকাল ৯টা
—১০ইটা, বৈকাল ৬টা—রাতি ৮টা,
(বৃহস্পতিবার ও শনিবার বন্ধ)।

The matrimonial advertisements in the post-partition West Bengal almost invariably carry the evils of acute caste-consciousness. There was more or less the same scenario in advertisements for both prospective bride and groom. However, I have found some interesting advertisements that deserve to be analyzed for their caste-gender binary. Here I reproduce a snippet of a professional and divinely gifted matchmaker who primarily aims to captivate the attention of perpetually worried father figures having marriageable daughters.^{vi} The matchmaker claims to have a good number of ‘lucrative’ caste-Hindu prospective grooms like 22 Radhi Brahmans (Brahmans from West Bengal), 20 Varendra Brahmans (Brahmans from East Bengal), 13 Baidyas and 27 Kayastha higher officials. It is also noteworthy to see a topographical inclination in an otherwise caste-laden advertisement. Radhi and the Varendra Brahmans suggest a structural rigidity like provincial preference not being compromised even after the cataclysmic event like partition.

However, I must admit the fact that this was not the usual pattern of advertisement since in most cases it was merely labeled as Brahmans, Kyasthas or Baidyas. There is another significant disclaimer in the advertisement stating that a prospective bride’s parents might have to wait for a considerably longer span of time if their daughters are not good looking or fair in complexion. In spite of some exceptional post-partition narratives of emancipated women breaking the public-private binaries like Ritwik Ghatak’s film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*(1960), or Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga*(*The River Churning*)(1995), partition couldn’t eventually take away the patriarchal subjugation that women have always been subjected to.

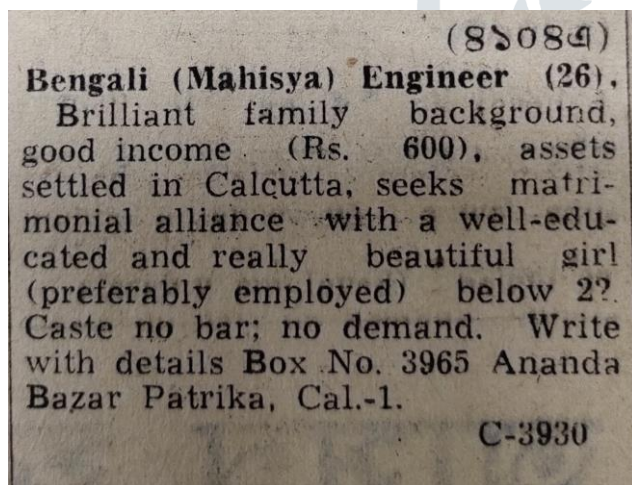
Such matrimonial advertisements in 1950s, 1960s and 1970s have caste as a significant determinant and only in few exceptional cases I have found the line ‘Osoborne Bibaho Cholibe’/ ‘caste no bar’. Probing further into

the modus operandi of such prospective marriage proposals without any caste preferences, I could get clear pattern emerging out of that. In such cases, the grooms have made disclaimers like ‘Bipotnik! Chelemeye



ache'^{vii}(widower having sons and daughters),

So, any prospective groom's sanctity of caste can only be compromised in such exceptional cases where the bride had a conventionally designated lacuna. There was only one unconventional advertisement that I found in 1960s where the line 'caste no bar' featured without any problematic disclaimer. This may be worthy to mention that it was the only advertisement given in English language in a Bengali newspaper. I produce the advertisement here to show a liberal face of an otherwise caste-ridden Bengali society in the second half of 20th century^{viii}



Breaking the caste rigidity in matrimonial relationship has been a rather unpopular trend with mostly women at the receiving end. One such exceptional case was my respondent Smritikana Deb, eldest daughter of a riot affected family from Noakhali, who had to marry Vivekananda Biswas, a Namasudra by birth. Such oral narratives proved to be extremely significant for me to make a balance between the nuances as rendered by the

newspaper advertisements and subjective experiences of my respondents. Smritikana Deb (she became Smritikana Biswas after marriage) recounts:

My father fixed my marriage with a Namasudra person but I didn't have any idea about it before I got married. No one told me anything about this. But all my doubts became clear when my father said that marriage is the last and most important thing for a woman. Now I am nearly 84 and a widow for the last 7 years and I believe that partition, riot and migration made the women suffer most.^{ix}

While listening to Smritikana, I could make my perspective clear that not even a colossal national and socio-political tragedy like Partition can make things different for women. Although, it was the time to come out of a deep rooted trauma to reinstate in a new land with new culture, new people and different topography, the trajectory of being a woman remained an irrevocable determinant. This could even surpass the importance of

caste. This is likely what prompted Urvashi Butalia to say “The history of partition made no mention of women...I would attempt to make them visible. That would, in a sense, complete an incomplete picture.”(2017:126)

My endeavor to see these post-partition matrimonial advertisements in a well-known Bengali newspaper is largely governed by the fact that it can succinctly portray the marriage of women as basically a series of compromise, especially when the fathers of marriageable daughters were worried about their skin color or outward luster. Smritikana Deb (Kayastha) getting married to Vivekananda Biswas (Namasudra) can be surely considered as an exceptional case but this nevertheless posits a threat to the social institutions controlling the mechanism of Brahminical patriarchy. This is, I strongly propose, what partition sometimes did in case of Bengal. When Uma Chakravarti says, “The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to the upper caste purity of blood has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes, so such women have to be carefully guarded” (2003:1), she probably misses the point of shifting tensions between gender and caste in Bengal produced by the aftershocks of partition.

Smritikana Biswas didn't live up to many significant social benchmarks (like skin color, an attractive look and literacy) for expediting her marriage but her sister-in-law was qualified enough and got a government job. She was also a fair-skinned good looking woman. Did that help her in any way? When my grandmother Smritikana Biswas came up with the story of her sister-in-law Nilima Biswas' (Nilima Chowdhury after marriage) married life, I could sense the rigid structure of Brahminical patriarchy where “*pratilomic varnasamkara* (the mixing of castes) represents the breakdown of the elaborate edifice of social order”(Chakravarti 2003:34). Nilima Biswas' marriage depicts a scenario where the rigidity of caste disapproves all other bonds like topography or the same fate of being a refugee. My grandmother says:

Nilima (Biswas before marriage) had a love marriage with Matilal Chowdhury. They loved each other and eventually married to the utter dismay of Matilal's mother, who vehemently rejected this marriage because Nilu (Nilima Biswas) was a Namasudra by birth. After their marriage, when Nilu and Matilal were living in Matilal's ancestral house near Agartala, Matilal's mother never touched her daughter-in-law. Nilu used to cry and she later told me that during bedtime, when Matilal went to meet his mother, he had to take a bath before getting in her room to maintain the chastity of a Brahman.

These two narratives are apparently paradoxical in nature but they surely converge at the same point. A Namasudra woman is despised by a caste-Hindu family but at least 10 years before this marriage of inconvenience, a Kayastha woman had married in this Namasudra family. In the first narrative, partition and the resultant crisis compel a Kayastha woman's father to compromise his deeply embedded caste-consciousness. Smritikana had previously narrated her childhood experience of caste discrimination as practiced by her own family. She recounts:

We stayed in Feni district in Bangladesh. I distinctly remember that the Brahmins and Kayasthas didn't live in the same village with the people of Namasudra community. The Namasudra community had a separate village in our area. We, especially the girl children and women, were never allowed to go to their area. Likewise, the Namasudra people were prohibited to get into our area that exclusively belonged to the upper caste people.

However, since my grandfather was a renowned teacher, many Namasudra students used to come to my grandfather for private tuition. They had to come as their community hardly had a teacher at that point of time. If any of the Namasudra students drank water at our place, they had to wash the glass himself. They were untouchables. Once they left the place, my grandmother came out and cleansed the verandah by water as if she was purifying everything.

In the other narrative, Nilima Biswas' professional 'triumph' as a refugee woman goes begging because of an imposed caste structure. She is surely one of the women that Manikuntala Sen describes in the following manner: "These (refugee) women were able to take the responsibility for maintaining their entire families... They had merged into the huge ocean of humanity in West Bengal. These women from East Bengal were teachers or nurses or clerks; was there any work that they couldn't do? They formed the majority of the working women of West Bengal." (Menon 2017:72) But, this couldn't ensure the purgation of a traditionally defined lower caste woman.

Another interesting feature of these matrimonial advertisements is that they have a paradigm shift as we move to 1980s. Prior to this, one can hardly find such advertisements coming from any family other than the caste-Hindus with one or two exceptional cases where we find the 'jalachal' or intermediary castes like Tili and Sadgop. This is possibly due to the deplorable material state and poor literacy rate of communities like Namasudra that we don't see them accessing the public domain through newspapers till 1970s. By then, a few of them had started getting into the core of conventionally acknowledged mainstream traits. There was also notably a slow but steady shift in their professional structure. Partha Chatterjee points out this shift in 1991-2001 time periods as he says, "The dependence of the Namasudra on agriculture has declined from 56.7% in 1991 to 38.3% in 2001." (2016:100) This is also worthy to mention here that according to the 2001 census reports, 71.9% Namasudras are literate "which is higher than the aggregated national average for SCs (54.7 per cent)." (Census of India 2001) This possibly suggests a larger section of Namasudra population getting educated and eventually tilting their inclinations to white-collar professions.

What I have tried to show in this article is that the migration of uprooted Hindus from East Bengal/ East Pakistan also needs to be seen in the light of social institutions like marriage. They represent a clash of old and new, *ghoti* and *bangal*. But, more than anything else, they point out the unsettled crisis of a caste oriented reading of gender. Caste has continued to prominently or subtly control the socio-cultural agendas even in the 21st century India. Surprisingly enough, this also controls the world of some educated women. Uma Chakravarti justifiably refers to the anti-Mandal agitation in Delhi with specific reference to one of the placards displayed by the women protesters which reads "We don't want unemployed husband." (2003:1) This was surely a protest against the government's decision to implement OBC quota in administrative service but beneath this professionally colored protest against economic disparity depriving the caste Hindus, there is this subtle hint of ideologically constructed caste consciousness. As Uma Chakravarti concludes, "What the placards were saying was that these girls would be deprived of upper caste IAS husbands. But what they were

also saying was that the OBCs and dalits who would now occupy these positions in the IAS could never be their potential husbands.”(2003:1)

NOTES:

ⁱ Prafulla Chakraborty’s *The Marginal Men*, Joya Chatterjee’s *The Spoils of Partition* and Haimanti Ray’s *Partitioned Lives* are some of the most significant studies in this field. However, none of these works concentrate on the nuance of caste composition of migrants.

ⁱⁱ Ross Mallick (1999) & Annu Jalais (2005) were the first scholars to come up with a comprehensive study of this planned casteist genocide.

ⁱⁱⁱ The letter (dated 19.12.1943) is retrieved from Bengal Relief Committee Report preserved in NHML, New Delhi.

^{iv} For a detailed analysis of how this intersectionality of caste and gender has been approached by dalit women writers, see Rege (2006), *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonies*

^v This advertisement is from Anandabazar Patrika on 4th April, 1956 as retrieved from the National Library, Kolkata.

^{vi} Ibid, 27th September, 1958

^{vii} Ibid 31st July, 1959

^{viii} Ibid 13th September, 1962

^{ix} The interview was taken on 8th December, 2019 at Smritikana Biswas’ residence at Netajinagar Colony in Howrah district (West Bengal). All subsequent references to Smritikana’s narrative are from the same interview.

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