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Veiled Figures: Attached Settler Women in Andaman's Post-colonial Archive

By Raka Banerjee¹

Abstract

Dominant discourse on India's eastern Partition (1947) has constructed settlement as a masculine prerogative and man as the settler prototype. Women were eligible for rehabilitation on account of being "attached" to a male guardian, who would be assigned the head of the household in granting state benefits. In the case of these attached settler women transported by the state to Andaman Islands, a range of marginalities—region, gender, caste, and class—intersect with each other to create a veiled figure. The essay locates the settler women in the island's post-colonial government archive to bring out the state's construction of gendered settler subjecthood. By pushing the industrious settler women into the peripheral category of attached women, the state's rehabilitation machinery and the island administration made invisible the range of rehabilitation services performed by them. This statist representation of the settler women, seemingly devoid of any agency, is challenged by a deep reading of the archival material focused on highlighting articulations of settler subjectivity. Even after granting the attached women full citizenship, the newly independent post-colonial Indian state continued to treat women as non-actors in this particular trajectory of rehabilitation. Scholars have observed the swift disappearance of women from the state's archives as the focus shifts from the event of Partition to the process of rehabilitation, which this essay interrogates by using previously unexplored archival material to study the representation of attached settler women and their role in the statist schema of settling the heteronormative family, the islands, and the nation. By reading the archival material against the grain and identifying evidence against a statist representation, the essay interrogates the settler women's position as peripheral subjects at the margins of nation. Finally, the essay uses these archival traces to argue for the central position of settler women in the rehabilitation of settler families in the Islands.

Keywords: Gender, Migration, Bay of Bengal, Partition, Settler identity, Andaman Islands, Archives, Feminism, Postcolonial India

Introduction

The settler women, the "attached"² women of India's eastern Partition and subsequent waves of migration to India who were transported to the Andaman Islands and settled in its settlement villages by the Indian state, are not adequately apparent in the historical record of the Andaman Islands. The state upheld settler men as the subject of rehabilitation and agent of settlement, while the settler woman were present only as attached subjects to the male head of the settler household. This population was settled in two phases—the colonization scheme (1949-52 and 1953-60) and the rehabilitation scheme (1965-80) (Biswas 2009; Roychowdhury 2011; Chakraborty 2012; Anderson et al., 2016; Heidemann & Zehmisch 2016)—and the archival documents discussed in this essay pertain to both schemes ranging from 1951 to 1969. Drawing from archival sources, specifically five accounts of settler women, the essay destabilizes the prototypical figure of the male settler and advances the women's contributions

¹ The article is part of the author's doctoral research, which is an interdisciplinary study incorporating Island Studies and Partition Studies, through the lens of gender, to explore the identity-making of Bengali settler women in the Andaman Islands. Raka Banerjee has a PhD in Women's Studies from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She is a recipient of the Jawaharlal Nehru Scholarship for Doctoral Studies (2019-2020), and Asian Graduate Student Fellowship (2020), National University of Singapore, among others.

² Women migrants and refugees of the eastern Partition (1947) who were accompanied by male guardians.

within the process which has been effaced as a result of statist representation. The essay counters this portrayal of settler women which produces a veiling of a gendered settler figure. Using archival evidence and traces, this essay demonstrates the key nature of the settler women in the scheme of settlement and the need for a gendered telling of this history.

Sen (2017) has explored the processes by which the Andaman scheme was forgotten from the dominant Calcutta-centric partition scholarship and emphasizes the importance of regional variation to understand the complex identities that dispersal and resettlement forged. While the paternalistic state dealt with “unattached”³ women as secondary subjects in the scheme of rehabilitation by reserving the performance of full citizenship as a male prerogative (Sen 2018, 20),⁴ in the case of the attached settler women full citizenship did not guarantee a positive change in their status. Further, attached women’s categorization in the state’s schema of rehabilitation depended on their attachment to the male guardian/ward, and was subject to change with shifts in their family composition. As Sen (2018, 201) rightly observes, women swiftly disappear from the state’s archives once the focus shifts from the jarring event of Partition to the lengthy process of rehabilitation. In the case of the attached settler women in Andaman Islands, their subjective experiences were subsumed under the umbrella of the heteronormative family unit the state was trying to produce in its new settlements. As a result, a range of marginalities—regional, gendered, being attached to a male guardian, caste, and class—intersect with each other to create a veiled figure of the settler women. The settler women’s voices are truly the ones forgotten from the partition discourse. In order to address this lacuna, I have consulted the Andaman & Nicobar Secretariat Archives, Port Blair to tease out threads from the settler women’s lives, their representation in the administration’s files, and finally, how it sheds light on the state’s construction of a gendered settler subjecthood in the Andaman Islands. Their voices in the archives, no matter how infrequent, are rarely unmediated. But it is by questioning these silences and empty spaces and further inspection of their muffled voices that one can bring out the subjectivity of these “othered” women actors (Vaidik 2010, 145).

The essay uses archival evidence—primarily correspondence between the settlers and the administration, and within administration on settlers’ issues, and government reports—to “recreate the voices” of the first-generation settler women (Hartman 2019). It is in the process of textually interacting with the administration that the settlers inadvertently produced these archives.⁵ Yet the power of recording, categorizing and preserving these records, that is, the “moment of fact assembly” or the “making of archives,” rested on the administration, resulting in the construction of a particular settler narrative and production of settler history (Trouillot 1995, 26).⁶ For the island administration, the settlers’ issues revolved around successful

³ Widowed women, unmarried women, women with minor male ward, and women without any male kin.

⁴ The unattached women were primarily categorised as “permanent liability” of the Indian state. The permanent liability, in its original conception, included six types of persons: First, helpless old women above the age of 55 and men above the age of 60, without any male relatives to support them; second, the infirm who suffer from permanent disabilities which hinder their ability to engage in gainful employment and have no father or male relative to support them; third, the unattached women without an adult able-bodied son, father or father-in-law, or any other relative in a position to support them; fourth, unattached boys up to the age of 16 and girls – categorised as “orphans” – until they are gainfully employed or married, and without any adult relative to support them; fifth, dependents of the first two categories, including wives, sons up to the age of 16 and unmarried daughters, and dependents of the third category, including sons up to the age of 16 and unmarried daughters; and finally, a category curiously titled “hard cases,” people not strictly covered by the existing categories but that could be admitted to the homes at the discretion of the authorities (Ghosh & Dutta 2009, 200).

⁵ “Groups, indeed whole societies, that operate outside a written culture do not produce archives in the conventional sense” (Fowler 2017, 3)

⁶ “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the

fulfillment of quotas of settlers to be transported to the island, ensuring successful repayment of loans provided to the settlers, and repatriation of unsuccessful settlers, which results in silences in the archive from the settlers' perspective. According to Fowler, one of the reasons for these silences in an archive is the very politics of creation of archives wherein certain records are "simply not created," as in the case of the settlers' issues and correspondence on these issues which are catalogued under the revenue section files over rehabilitation files (2017, 6). These narratives highlight what we know of the lives of the early settler women, and this essay uses these as "counter-narratives" (Hartman 2019) to the statist bureaucratic representation of settler women. This evidence, therefore, helps to "*locate* them in history, and then reinterpret and challenge the historical record" (Menon & Bhasin 1998, 10).

The essay disentangles the statist construction of gendered settler subjecthood by first, situating women as key subjects critical to the very scheme of settlement; second, analyzing the state's treatment of its women subjects and their representation in the state's archive; and third, countering this statist constriction by demonstrating the settler women's contributions to the settlement.

Centering Women in Settlement

The Japanese occupation of the Andaman Islands from 1942 to 1945 led to a serious crisis of the island's infrastructure and resources, most notably depletion of agriculture and shortage of labor (Sen 2011a, 222). While the somewhat impromptu schemes were initially aimed at meeting labor shortages in the Island, by 1952 refugee rehabilitation and agrarian expansion were intertwined to inform the policy of the five-year Colonization and Development Scheme, which continued till 1961 (Sen 2018, 86). In 1953, the government proposed that the able-bodied migrants from agricultural backgrounds would be taken to Andaman for rehabilitation, which was designed with the agenda of utilizing their labor to make Andaman habitable (Chatterji 2007). The officials from the Andamans would arrive at the mainland refugee camps a little before the monsoon to choose eligible families. No single persons were allowed, and each family unit could be of four or five members only. Their aim was to identify healthy, fit, and young male farmers. The officials would then interview the male head of the family and briefly acquaint them with the destination, place, climate, and entitlements. They were cautioned that initial success in Andaman depended on extreme labor. The requirement was exclusively for hard-working agriculturalists, who usually belonged to the lower-castes and lower-class (Sen 2011a, 227). In order to ensure the toiling capacity of the working male, his hands would be checked for calluses (Lorea 2017, 4). An often-overlooked reality of the selection criteria was that women and children out-numbered the said able-bodied men, and this gave rise to complications as discussed in the following section (Sen 2017, 148). Women were not only central to the male settlers' eligibility to being selected for the scheme, but also for settling the island settlements by performing both socially and biologically reproductive labor. Much emphasis was placed on affirming the legitimacy of settler family units wherein women settlers played a pivotal role (Hinchey 2020). The island administration and the statist rehabilitation machinery paid close attention to the prospective settler women transported to the island and took great efforts to maintain what was in their understanding a legitimate family unit. Settler women are found in these interstices of the state's archival peculiarities. Unable to find significant cues from files on rehabilitation, I began looking through apparently unrelated files and this led me to find obscure correspondence on

making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)" (Trouillot 1995, 26); "Sources and archives are neither neutral nor natural. They are created. It is this that is the reason for so many silences. Archival creation is, of course, a human process, starting from individuals who produce the records, continuing through the selection process used by archivists and ending up with cataloguing and delivery of documents" (Fowler 2017, 1-2).

seemingly trivial matters.⁷ There I found women asking to be paid their absconding husbands' wages, an instance of hunger strike by a settler woman, and girls being denied access to a residential educational facility because one of their guardians (father, in this case) was alive. More importantly, we find girls willing to go far away to study and fathers willing to send them. I found a woman being repatriated to West Bengal with her brother-in-law's family because her husband could not be traced, another woman and her family (including her infirm husband) being sent off to a Permanent Liability Camp⁸ in the mainland because her husband could not be what the state wanted him to be for the colony, and a range of such histories. In the following sub-section, the essay discusses the case of one Rajani/Sarojini⁹ Samadhar which brings to question the state's construction of settler women's subjecthood and introduces the vibrant worlds of the early settler women in the island settlements.

Case of the Woman Hunger-Striker

A unique account from 1968—a woman hunger striker¹⁰ protesting the repayment of colonization loans lent to the settlers by the administration—challenges the statist representation of settler women as passive subjects. The protest began with the objective to pressure the administration into writing off colonization loans. Settlers of the colonization scheme had received a loan of 1730 Rupees (Rs.) per family (house building Rs. 800; plough animal Rs. 700; cost of utensils, seeds, and manure Rs. 230), at 4.5% interest, recoverable in ten annual installments.¹¹ The administration, however, found it difficult to recover these loan amounts from the settlers. The task of settlement and agricultural expansion could not move at the pace anticipated by the administration. Settlers struggled to grow crops, sell them at profitable margins, and still have the money to repay these loans. Further, the first few batches of settlers were given these amounts not as loans but as initial capital for settling in the islands. These factors constrained the new settlers' ability to repay the colonization loans as expected by the administration. Under these circumstances, a settlers' agitation which can easily be considered historic due to a settler woman's pioneering role as leader, began in Diglipur, North Andaman. Correspondence between the Deputy Commissioner and the Chief Commissioner of Andaman and Nicobar Islands informs that Smt. Rajani Samadhar and Sasidhar Mondal began a hunger strike on 25th May 1968, after the Tahsildar, Mayabundar attached a settler's property in Kishorinagar and settler processions were being taken out daily to press for their demand to release the land. All revenue officers were issued instructions not to resort to coercive measures like attachment or sale of movable and immovable settler property for recovery of government dues. While the settler's property was immediately released, a group of 42 settlers including a former member of the Home Minister's Advisory Committee (Shri Bipad Bhanjan Biswas) observed a token hunger strike on May 17th, 1968, and began building the base for a prolonged agitation to write off the colonization loans.¹² After MP K.R. Ganesh asked the leaders to call off the strike and the local administration advised the agitators to "go

⁷ These official files also contain unofficial voices, present through such correspondence and assertive of their grievances against the backdrop of becoming new citizens. (Roy 2012, 19)

⁸ Established by the state to accommodate women without male guardians, young children, and infirm men, as permanent liabilities of the state, who lived in these camps as wards of the state.

⁹ Her name appears both as Rajani and Sarojini in different documents in the same file.

¹⁰ File No.: 15-52/68-J(1). Subject: Agitation by settlers at Diglipur to write off colonisation loan. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue Section. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archives, Port Blair.

¹¹ File No.: 15-52/68-J(1). Subject: Agitation by settlers at Diglipur to write off colonisation loan. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue Section. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archives, Port Blair.

¹² A total of 2831 families settled under the ongoing colonisation scheme received a loan of Rs. 1730 per family (house building Rs. 800; plough animal Rs. 700; cost of utensils, seeds and manure Rs. 230) incurring a total expenditure of about Rs. 52 lakhs. The loan carried interest at the rate of 4.5% and was recoverable in ten annual installments.

back and start cultivation.” Following a public meeting on June 8, they resolved to picket at government offices if their demands were not met in the next few days. They even left their ploughs in front of the B.D.O.s office as an indication of their intention not to cultivate their land in protest against the alleged government’s apathy. From 25th May to 10th June the peaceful protests carried on without the administration yielding to the settlers’ demands. Since it was called off all too suddenly without any details on the process of negotiation or of convincing the settlers, perhaps it was achieved through coercive means. It is possible that similar protests were taking place elsewhere in the settlements, but the administration was all too keen to suppress them, resulting in silences in the archival material available.

It was reported to the Chief Commissioner that Horlicks, barley, water, lemons, and lime juice were noticed in the hunger strikers’ pandal.¹³ They were also seen eating thin arrowroot biscuits and were being taken to attend the call of nature. This further led the local administration to believe that they might have been taking milk undercover. Moreover, the letter begrudged the hunger-strikers’ “satisfactorily healthy condition” indicating it was not a hunger-strike at all. Another correspondence notes the agitation as a “political stunt,” making note of the fact that the hunger strikers were taking lime juice.¹⁴ The letter stresses the hunger-strikers’ normal health condition and details of their alleged food consumption, to anchor the image of the settlers as “troublemakers” and inauthentic, conniving persons looking to con the administration for resources and facilities. The administration believed the settlers were “reluctant” to repay the loans, implying their financial capability to repay the loans but their assumed unwillingness to do so. The inability of the settlers was painted by the administration as premeditated reluctance, highlighting the innate mistrust between the two. Correspondence in the file further notes that while the “ill-advised” agitation was allegedly being conducted on “no party lines,” it was being supported by the Secretary (Suresh Halder) of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, in addition to Ramesh Mazumdar of Diglipur and “some Congress men” in their “individual capacity.” Eager to quarantine the island settlements from the refugee militancy of Bengal, the island administration took active steps to prevent the rise of “self-appointed leaders”¹⁵. The other reason for the administration’s concern was the possibility of the agitation and hunger strike being politically motivated. The recurring need for producing the island space as non-political—in a manner of promoting anti-factionalism and strengthening its diversity as resource—feeds into the idea that politically oriented settlers are undesirable and troublemakers like the militancy of refugees in Bengal. Biswas (2009, 51) mentions how two “ringleaders” were sent back to the mainland presumably for protesting upon arrival in the Islands, reaffirming the need to produce the Islands as a “sanitized” space—a “mini-India” (Zehmisch 2017).

Instances of such overt resistance and direct correspondence between women settlers and the administration were rare, and women’s issues in the new settlement mostly come up in the context of the settler family’s plight. The following section uses four archival pieces of evidence of settlers’ issues to identify women’s representation in the administrative documents, what such representation might be saying about the women settlers, and finally, the administration’s treatment of the women settlers.

¹³ File No.: 15-52/68-J(1). Subject: Agitation by settlers at Diglipur to write off colonization loan. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue Section. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archives, Port Blair.

¹⁴ File No.: 15-52/68-J(1). Subject: Agitation by settlers at Diglipur to write off colonization loan. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue Section. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archives, Port Blair.

¹⁵ File No. 1-723/50. Subject: Rehabilitation Scheme for Settlers from Bengal. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archive, Port Blair.

Gendering Settler Subjecthood

The island's settlement schemes revolved around the exclusive need for adult men capable of performing hard labour. The conjugal unit was the laboring unit and settler women were responsible for both sexual as well as reproductive labor, in addition to the social reproduction of the settler family (Vaidik 2010). As a result, when "unfit"¹⁶ men found their way to the island and were unable to cope with the conditions of settlement, neither the island-space nor the agenda informing it had a space for such people. Such is the case of Jogendra Sarkar, who arrived at Rangat as a settler on 7th June 1955. He was settled in Janakpur, Middle Andaman. But when he was taken ill, he was admitted to the local civil hospital for prolonged treatment of his chronic heart ailment. In November 1955, writing to the Refugee Rehabilitation Commissioner in Calcutta, the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Port Blair informed him that Sarkar had been deemed unfit for hard work in the islands by the senior medical officer at the hospital. Therefore, he and his family consisting of his wife and two-year-old son would become the State's permanent liability (P.L.) due to the absence of another adult male member. Since there were no P.L. Camps on the island, they would have to be repatriated to West Bengal for admission into a camp run by the Govt. of West Bengal. It was also pointed out that the repatriation would also facilitate Sarkar's early admission into a hospital for further treatment. However, Sarkar passed away in November before he could be repatriated. In a letter from the Deputy Commissioner, Port Blair in May 1956, it was communicated that his family (his wife, two-year-old son, as well as a six-year-old child) would be repatriated to Calcutta as "destitutes" for admission to Chandmari P.L. Camp. Further, his loan bond and details of other dues were to be sent to the Refugee Rehabilitation Commissioner at 10-A, Auckland Road, Calcutta along with the information of repatriation for recovery of the loan amount. Since the island administration was preoccupied with recovery of colonization loans, once the male head of the family was deemed unfit for labor, the whole family unit would be shipped back and arrangements made for new settlers. They were labelled destitute by the administration and sent back to the mainland as permanent liabilities of the state, leading to their transfer from one bureaucratic category to another.

The domain of the settler women's work was determined by the island administration, and the state did not have adequate avenues for conducting the task of social reproduction when mothers died. In a correspondence from July 1955, the Chief Commissioner's office wrote to the Additional Refugee Rehabilitation Commissioner, West Bengal, regarding the petition of a refugee settler from Mathura named Rajani Ranjan Sarkar, whose wife had died leaving behind five daughters to raise on his own.¹⁷ The petition claimed that he could not look after so many daughters and wished to put some of them in some training establishment for refugee girls in the mainland. In a letter addressed to the Chief Commissioner written by Sarkar himself, in December 1955, he requested that his daughters be sent to a training facility so that they could be looked after, educated, and eventually trained to become self-dependent. Since the West Bengal government had refused to extend any assistance, he explained that without the assistance of the Andaman administration if he were to go to West Bengal with his five daughters, they would surely be subjected to unending slander (*lanchhana*). Given his old age of 63, he was worried that if he could not assure a secure future for his daughters (ranging in ages from 5 to 18), they would face extreme distress. However, his request could not be considered as the existing rules did not permit any child to be admitted to a residential facility if either of their parents were alive. While it can be assumed that the settlements lacked such facilities for education, training, and employment for girls in the initial years of settlement, the

¹⁶ File No.: 29-6/55, Subject: Refugee Miscellaneous, Judicial/Revenue Section, Andaman and Nicobar Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair.

¹⁷ File No.: 29-6/55, Subject: Refugee Miscellaneous, Judicial/Revenue Section, Andaman and Nicobar Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair.

problem of raising one's daughters demonstrates the role of the settler woman in the family unit and the state's dependence on these women's unremunerated social reproductive labor for the perpetuation of the settler society. In case of male children this perhaps would not have been a problem as they were eligible to lay claim on the family's rehabilitation land as rightful owners and live off the land. In this case, it is the absence of the mother that problematizes the family's continuation in the island settlement as the single father found it difficult to perform what was presumably her role—looking after their five daughters—in her absence. It is in such absences that one gets to know of the settler women in the island.

In case of the above settler family, in spite of the absence of the settler wife, the male settler and his children were eligible to continue living in the settlement as legitimate settlers. The opposite, however, was not true. In case of the absence of a settler man, his family could no longer continue to reside in their allotted settlement. The most illuminating account, in this context, is of Smt. Jyotirmoyee,¹⁸ whose husband absconded from the island on the pretext of purchasing goods from the mainland for his tailoring business. After her husband fled the island, her brother-in-law requested that his family be repatriated to the mainland as they were faced with extreme financial hardship. Since Jyotirmoyee's husband fled without repaying his colonization loans, the administration ordered for her repatriation with her brother-in-law's family. While it is unclear whether and how these loans were recovered, according to Biswas, families were allowed to be repatriated on condition of repayment of all loans, and if they were found to not be in a position to do so, the administration neither allowed them the permission to leave nor sanctioned free passage money to avail of the ship facilities to the mainland (Biswas 2009,77). Even in such cases, the administration neither trusted the women settlers to stay on as rightful owners of the rehabilitation land, nor did it allow them to be repatriated to the mainland without a male guardian. The correspondence between the Chief Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner brings out the convoluted reality of the women settlers' lives from the perspective of the administration:

the Deputy Commissioner writes to the Chief Commissioner in favour of her repatriation, stating: "As her husband has gone away, I don't see the point in her remaining here. She will only get into trouble and increase the number of illegitimate children here and may therefore be allowed to go." In response the Chief Commissioner writes against the memo: "Let her go. She will be a good riddance." However, the official response reads: "The Chief Commissioner is pleased to order that Srimati Jyotirmoyee may be allowed to go back. Full particulars may please be furnished for communication to the Government of West Bengal."

Therefore, in case of the women who were left behind in the Island, by condition of not having a male guardian the women simply did not belong. Without men, they were destitutes who would get into trouble of a particularly sexual nature which would result in the birth of illegitimate children, creating difficulties for the administration. Hence, transporting such women to the mainland was a "good riddance" for the Island administration. Menon & Bhasin point out, for women "belonging" is uniquely linked to sexuality, honour, and chastity, where family, community, and country must agree on their legitimacy in order to bestow upon them membership within its fold (1998, 251). Therefore, the shift from being attached to unattached creates discomfort for and exposes the hypocrisy of the administration and state towards its women settlers. The notions of sexual purity and morality, which dictated the practice of

¹⁸ File No.: 10-16/49-52(A), Subject: Repatriation of refugee settlers at their own request and at their own expenses; Judicial/Revenue Section, Andaman and Nicobar Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair.

convict marriages in the colonial settlement (Vaidik 2006), continued to inform the legitimacy of post-colonial settler families in the Island. In that regard, at the core of the issue is the ideological production of the family unit, which dictated both the colonial and the post-colonial criterion for settlement. The state's preoccupation with the composition and legitimacy of the family unit majorly stems from the fact that it is also the labouring unit in the post-colonial Island settlement. The settler women were responsible for both sexual and reproductive labour, in addition to social reproduction and everyday domestic labour. By making invisible the range of rehabilitation services performed by them, the administration pushed the industrious settler women into the private role of attached women – present in the settlement simply by virtue of being attached to their male guardian, devoid of any role, agency, and subjectivity.

Acts of dissent, like desertion and abscondment, become gendered acts as they merit differential treatment from the island administration. A group of 47 artisan settler families arrived in Andaman on 31st January 1951, of which 42 families were settled, including Gour Dass Haldar who was initially enlisted as a fisherman and later reenlisted himself as cultivator in Wandoor.¹⁹ In May 1952, Thanu Haldar requested the Chief Commissioner—the document bears her thumb impression—that she be given her husband's wages on his behalf as he appeared to have left for Calcutta without her knowledge. Her husband, Gour Das Haldar, was working in the PWD department and his wages for the period between 26th March and 4th April 1952 were not collected by him. Since he appeared to have left the Islands without intimating her and she had to provide for her three children who were in a state of starvation, she requested the administration to provide her with pauper rations till her husband came back to Port Blair. Further, she added that she was a refugee. The amount which was due to Gour Das Haldar was Rs. 53 and before it could be decided whether it should be disbursed to Thanu Haldar, it was discovered that her husband was planning to run away aboard S.S. Maharaja. When he was detected on the ship by the Shipping Authorities, he was brought back to Port Blair to his wife. As a result, her plea for grant of pauper ration was dismissed. Further, the issue of payment of his wages to his wife was also rejected. In June 1952, correspondence from the office of the Deputy Commissioner addressed to the Chief Commissioner states, Gour Dass Haldar had received a loan of Rs. 1567.90 (subsistence allowance for 2 months at Rs. 100/month is Rs. 200; house building advance cash Rs. 500 and cost of G.I. sheets Rs. 213.15; advance for small trade Rs. 500; passage money from Calcutta/Port Blair Rs. 90; cost of utensils given by the West Bengal government Rs. 38.20; diet charges Rs. 25.80). He was provided with land in Wandoor for cultivation but he failed to do so. The correspondence notes, "His family consists of 6 members and due to his big family he even failed to maintain them by enrolment in the CPWD, as a labourer and gradually this family has practically turned into a destitute. He cannot be a good settler here."²⁰ Since he had no means to repay the loan, he transferred the 4 bundles of G.I. sheets to the Tahsildar (Refugees) which was then given to another settler for house building. His family of six (self, wife Doli, mother, daughter of 8 years, son of 6 years, and son of 2 months) was recommended to be repatriated to mainland as destitute by the earliest sailing to Calcutta. In the context of the penal settlement, Vaidik observes that for the convict escape from the Island was a source of hope during times of hardship (2010, 136). From the case of Thanu Haldar's husband the same seems to be applicable for settlers, especially in the initial years of settlement in the islands. The phenomenon of escaping the Island must have been a source of constant anxiety for the administration, as it looked upon settlers' requests to visit the mainland (for making purchases or to meet their kin), Biswas informs, with considerable suspicion (2009, 57). Vaidik reads this desire to escape as the convict's act of resistance and

¹⁹ File No.: 10-16/49-52(A), Subject: Repatriation of refugee settlers at their own request and at their own expenses, Judicial/Revenue Section, Andaman and Nicobar Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair.

²⁰ File No.: 10-16/49-52(A), Subject: Repatriation of refugee settlers at their own request and at their own expenses, Judicial/Revenue Section, Andaman and Nicobar Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair.

self-expression in the face of a structured life of discipline—a “creative moment” when the convict takes charge of their own life (2010, 138). In such cases, however, it is the male convict and the male settler who is capable of such self-expression and resistance, and in the case of the absconding settler man, settler women are left devoid of any control over their life in the islands.

Countering Statist Representation

The settler women's negotiation with the rehabilitation regime and their contributions to the changing dimensions of gender in the settler society counter the statist representation of settler women in its post-colonial archive. Taken together, these aspects interrogate and challenge the statist representation of settler women in the island's administrative records and open the discursive space for explicating a gendered settler subjectivity.

Settler Women Negotiating Rehabilitation

The archival profile of Thanu Haldar,²¹ introduced in the previous section, presents the case of a settler woman who has been deserted by her husband Gour Das Haldar, which in the eyes of the administration, has rendered her ineligible to continue as a settler. Though the issue of payment of Gour's wages to Thanu was rejected,²² the very fact that she communicated her predicament to the island administration, most likely with the help of scribes (as the document bears her thumb impression) who could put her complaint into a written document, and proceeded to demand the money owed to her by virtue of being the settler's wife, indicates the settler women's scope of interaction in the island. Her role may have been secondary and of significance by virtue of relation to the male settler, but she was neither passive nor entirely disconnected from the workings of the settlement.

Altering Gender Dimensions in the Settler Society

In light of archival evidence presented in this essay, it can be inferred that the role and position of women were surely undergoing changes as a result of transportation from the mainland and settlement in the Andamans. A 1969 correspondence from the Vice President of Andaman and Nicobar Kisan Sabha, Diglipur, addressed to the Home Minister, GOI, states that the only girls' hostel in the islands was in Port Blair and because “everybody knows the girls require more supervision and control at the adolescent age,”²³ he is requesting the Ministry to establish a girls' hostel in Diglipur. Moreover, the only high school in Diglipur tehsil was in the headquarters, which forced girl students from outlying areas of the 21 villages to stop their education midway. A girls' hostel would have ensured the women students' continued access to education in this newly established settlement. The letter also highlighted the need for a woman doctor at the Diglipur hospital, along with the request for a dedicated labor ward and a special ward. In response to these requests, the Chief Commissioner's Secretariat at Port Blair writes, the woman doctor posted to Rangat (headquarters of North and Middle Andaman) was assigned a monthly visit to Diglipur hospital which nullifies the need for a full-time woman doctor at Diglipur. Further, a portion of the women's ward was already being used as a maternity ward. On the issue of the girls' hostel, the secretariat writes that girl students requiring accommodation may be directed to the girls' higher secondary school in Port Blair (over 220 kms away from Diglipur), as the distance from the existing high school in Diglipur was walkable from the neighbouring villages. A similar predicament is presented in the case

²¹ File No.: 10-16/49-52(A). Subject: Repatriation of refugee settlers at their own request and at their own expenses. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue Section. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archive, Port Blair.

²² They were ultimately repatriated to Calcutta as Gour Dass Haldar was unable to repay his loans.

²³ File No.: 15-95/68-J (1), Demands of Settlers, Judicial/Revenue Section, Andaman and Nicobar Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair.

of Rajani Ranjan Sarkar,²⁴ as pointed out in the previous section, which offers a window into the settlers' demands in the new settlement and points to ongoing changes in the island's settler society.

Conclusion

The essay has highlighted the transported settler women's central position in the post-Partition Island settlements. The settlement was established on the basis of the settler women's labor across the public and domestic spheres. The women's pivotal position in the scheme is further underlined by the bureaucratic criterion of selecting family units, presupposing the women's productive and reproductive labor for settling the rehabilitation villages. The state's post-colonial archives, however, paint a different—if somewhat incomplete—picture of the settler women's role in the scheme of settlement. This conspicuous absence of the settler women figure is starker in contrast to the visibility of the metropolis-centric Bengali refugee women (Bagchi & Dasgupta 2003; Chaudhuri 2009; Sen 2011b; Bandyopadhyay 2014; Chakraborty 2014, 2018) in the mainland Indian context. The essay addresses this incongruity in the state's representation of the early settler women, by interrogating the archival documents and identifying traces and evidence therein to patchwork a gendered settler subjectivity. The essay hopes to contribute to the growing body of contemporary critical scholarship on the Andaman Islands, as well as the larger Bay of Bengal, and in speaking with this literature foreground the specific island-centric gendered histories of displacement, migration, and settlement across the Bay and in the Andaman Islands.

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²⁴ File No.: 29-6/55, Subject: Refugee Miscellaneous, Subject list: Judicial/Revenue Section, Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archives, Port Blair.

- File No.: 15-52/68-J(1). Subject: Agitation by settlers at Diglipur to write off colonisation loan. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue Section. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archives, Port Blair.
- File No. 1-723/50. Subject: Rehabilitation Scheme for Settlers from Bengal. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archive, Port Blair.
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