

# REFUGEE WATCH

**A South Asian Journal on Forced Migration**

**Politics, Space, Memory: Identity Making in the Wake of Partition**

**61 & 62**

**Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group**  
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# Introduction

By

**Samata Biswas \***

Saadat Hasan Manto's 1955 Urdu short story "Toba Tek Singh" has been translated into many languages. Considered one of the most poignant renditions of the "madness" of the Partition of British India, Manto's story has had a rich afterlife. One of the most notable of these is poet Gulzar's rendition of the "many [P]artitions", in a poem of the same name. In that, Gulzar wants to tell Bishan Singh of the story "Toba Tek Singh" that "There are some more Partitions to be done/That Partition was only the first one". This special issue of Refugee Watch pays close attention to the Partition of British India in 1947 and the subsequent independence of Bangladesh in 1971, from Pakistan. Taking cue from Gulzar's poem, we look at the long history of the Partition and its aftermath—the movements and returns, the "Fleeing and Staying", the centres and the peripheries, the people, and their memories. The issue is also interdisciplinary in scope, straddling the disciplinary locations of Area Studies, Memory Studies, Literature, Ethnography and Autoethnography, etc. Amena Mohsin's article "The Politics of Space: Refugees, Displaced and Stranded" takes Mohsin's own childhood experiences military officers' internment camp in Pakistan after the liberation of Bangladesh, and juxtaposes it with experiences of women displaced after the Kaptai Dam tragedy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh and the agency and informed resilience of Rohingya refugee women in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Mohsin argues that in these disparate instances, the space of internment, confinement, camp—attain cognitive signification, going beyond the territorial imagination of nation states. The space of the camp, as a site that encompasses "bare life" of the refugees is also studied by Nasreen Chowdhory, in "(Re)Interrogating Camp and Refugees in Forced Migration Studies", indicating the "temporary/transient/in-between space [which] has now become and almost permanent state of being for refugees". Chowdhory argues that the "abnormality"; of camps are deemed to be the normal in refugeehood, in which a temporary sanctuary assumes peculiar permanency.

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Sumanta Mondal's analysis of Bengali Dalit author Manoranjan Byapari's (translated) autobiography, *Interrogating My Chandal Life* also takes into consideration the Dandakaranya Project, set up in 1958 to accommodate East Bengali refugees. Byapari's family travelled to the inhospitable terrain and unfamiliar language of the Dandakaranya camp. but were driven out by endemic poverty and difficult circumstances. Refugeehood, even for a well-formed group such as the east Bengali refugees into West Bengal carries with it its own margins—here, the margins are of caste and class. Byapari created an alter ego to narrate the story of his life, “Jeeban”, a Bengali word meaning life itself, and it is through Jeeban that he chronicles the horror of a Dalit refugee experience. the physical and verbal abuse, the trials and the tribulations. While Dandakaranya and later Marichjhapi for Byapari are spaces that signal the exception that a Dalit refugee is, to the Bengali bhadralok refugee imagination and articulation, in “Thakurnagar as a Political Location: Place Making Practices of Matua Refugees in West Bengal”, Praskanva Sinharay records instances of how a Dalit refugee settlement in Thakurnagar, West Bengal, becomes, through conscious, agentic action, a space for political mobilisation, and religious as well as cultural identity formation. In “Bazaars of Post-Partition India: Micro Stories of Pain, Courage and Hope” Sarabjeet Dhody Natesan undertakes an autoethnographic enquiry of Lajpat Nagar in Delhi, yet another instance of placemaking by the refugees, especially refugee women, through particular clothing practices, food and acts of naming. In her evocative reading of the Bangladesh refugee crisis in 1971, Meghna Guhathakurta points at the multiples journeys made by innumerable individuals and families to various places in India and back--shedding light on the prolonged process of border making, formation of refugee subjectivity and attestation of refugee resilience. Through family archive, interviews, letter and images, Guhathakurta explores the notion of staying, a commitment to one's homeland, even through processes of displacement. The streets of Calcutta in 1946, home to affected Muslim in the Great Calcutta Killing, turned into hostile, even threatening spaces. Violence reorganised the urban space of Calcutta, creating pockets for this newly recognised national minority of the about-to-emerge nation state, which was soon to be followed by further violence during and after the Partition. Space then constitutes an important category in these articles' understanding of the history of Partition and Bangladesh Liberation War, shaping as it does, identities, experiences and belongingness.

Formation of identity ties together the next set of articles in the volume. Anindita Ghoshal's article on the growth of identity politics in Tripura, questions the systematic marginalisation of refugee and tribal populations in this northeastern Indian state, in which both communities strove to stake their claim on the cultural and geographical landscape of Tripura, at odds with one another. Anindya Sen, Debashree Chakraborty and Dipendu Das's article on yet another northeastern Indian state, Assam, looks at the “disaggregated identity formation process” in the Bengali majority Barak Valley of Southern Assam. The authors argue that different reasons, modes, times of arrivals and class as well as caste positions of the refugee and



economic migrants hindered the construction of any one identity based on the fact of migration alone. The Sylhet Referendum (also referred by Sen, Chakrabroty and Das) and the political decision of including Cachar and Barak Valley in Assam (instead of what would go on to become Bangladesh) has had, according to Joyati Bhattacharya, been instrumental in creating displacement and dispossession of Bengali-speaking people of the area, a dispossession and cultural alienation that has strengthened in the contemporary moment. The identity of children lost or abandoned during and after the Partition of British India, children born to abducted and untraceable women, or forcibly returned women form some of the imposing and important historical debates traced by Pallavi Chakravarty. Women and children during the Partition and subsequent forced displacement embody the blinkered vision of the state in providing for this dyad during this exceptional time of crisis. Nisharuddin Khan's contribution to this volume speaks of another form of movement, that of return. Muslim refugees who returned to West Bengal between 1947 and 1967, although insignificant in number, in comparison to those who left, are cases in point where the right to return was recognised by the state by the 1950s and led the way to multiple modes and reasons for return. While the legislative support for the returnees, especially in the case of property, was negligible, the stop gap arrangements made for them, by various governments, only buttress Nasreen Chowdhory's argument that temporariness is assigned a sort of permanence in refugee lives.

The three book reviews in the special issue bring to focus recent research in Partition history and memory. While Anasuya Basu Ray Chaudhury and Sekhar Bandopadhyay's book *Caste and Partition in Bengal* foregrounds the relatively little researched politics of caste as well as Namashudra mobilisation in undivided Bengal (the aftermath of which can be seen in Thakurnagar and in Byparai's autobiography); Anindita Ghoshal's *Revisiting Partition* enquires into the even less researched site of refugee movements and partition in the north east of India (which, once again, is addressed in Ghoshal's own article in the present volume, as well as by Anindya Sen et. al and Joyati Bhattacharya). The review of *Inherited Memories* reflects the by-now established trend of memorialising the Partition through personal and community narratives, an inheritance of memories as an inheritance of the Partition itself.

# **(Re)Interrogating Camp and Refugees in Forced Migration Studies**

By

**Nasreen Chowdhory \***

Agamben points out that the camp situation reduces them to naked life, “absolute bio-political space...in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation,” yet refugees as residents of camps can reinterpret their existence in camps as politicised space.<sup>1</sup> Most refugees located in North and South live separately from what is presumed to be normal and mainstream and their location beyond the city limits is an indication of their marginalisation and scant access to resources. Camp space becomes the paradigmatic of stratification on one hand, and diversification of membership prevalent in contemporary society. My paper will analyse the space within the domain of forced migration studies and suggest that like the refugees, camps too have become tools of society when it should have been rather a place of exception. The paper will engage theoretically with camps as loci within forced migration studies and critically addresses the following: a) the refugee-subject relation in developed and developing world, b) the interrelation between refugee subject and camp, and the usefulness of camp as an analytical tool to understand forced migration study.

## **The Refugee Subject in Global Context**

An increasing number of scholars agree with the premise that refugee syndrome was a fallout of post-Cold War issue.<sup>2</sup> But it subsequently opened a new range of issues and possibly rethinking about the significance of international migration, refugees. Some other literature deals with the issue of international migration and how it exceeds the bounds of humanitarian concern, which directly touches on debates on national and international security, nationalism, ethnicity, development, citizenship, and democracy.<sup>3</sup> It is imperative to locate refugee discourse within the statist paradigm to understand its implication in terms of their rights and privileges that exist

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within this framework vis-à-vis its own citizens. State is an important category that both defines and excludes refugee/immigrant/alien rights. The insider-outsider dichotomy defines the true meaning of rights and privileges enjoyed by those who are either outside or inside the state parameters. The refugee movement and its constant sense of mobility challenge state territorial norms and boundaries. Refugees as a category seek to de-territorialise the very concept of statehood, and its legitimate boundaries, that result in re-examination of their position of exceptionality in forced migration to that of being a normal phenomenon.

Numerous literatures on asylum and immigration agree on the premise that asylum is shaped by a complex configuration of national interest and international norms. Steiner makes a compelling case on European asylum policies. Based on parliamentary debates of three countries viz., Switzerland, Germany, and Britain, Steiner attempts to understand the confluence of factors that contribute to either strengthening asylum policies of any country or in some cases might even weaken the existing ones. Studies on asylum demonstrate the weakness in the dominant international relations paradigm that seeks to explain state behaviour on the basis of the rational pursuit of assumed national interests of the state. Steiner separates concepts for analytical purposes, national interest, and international norms. International norms have been defined as explicit international and regional agreements that determine and institutionalise the asylum process, the definition of a refugee, the principle of non-refoulement, and the link between asylum and human rights. He asserts that it is rather dubious to expect that national interest can be strengthened with the acceptance of refugees, along with the contention that it strengthens democracy, and enables the opportunity to express humanitarian sentiments. These factors might act as a constraining mechanism and influence any decisions towards asylum policies and subsequently harm refugee interests. Loescher believes “the formulation of refugee policy involves a complex interplay of domestic and international factors at the policy-making level and illustrates the conflict between international humanitarian norms and sometimes narrow self-interest calculations of sovereign nation-states.”<sup>4</sup> Collinson writes “[a] moral, legal or humanitarian obligation to offer protection to refugee, in practice will always be balanced against the political and economic interests and concerns of potential asylum states.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Shacknove argues, “closer[efugee policy has always been at least one part state interest and at most one-part compassion. Appeals based solely upon compassion, solidarity or rights are only occasionally successful.”<sup>6</sup> Joly asserts that “ethical factors...generally play some part when supranational values are accorded sufficient importance or when a particular conjuncture allows the refugees’ interest to coincide with other interests at stake in the variegated fabric of national and international factors at play.”<sup>7</sup>

More literature is now linking refugeeism with notions of citizenship, nationality, and democracy. Some recent literature reveals the interface of immigration and refugeeism with citizenship and democracy. Walzer asserts that membership allows for an “exclusivist membership in the

democratic state which is essential for a democratic society.”<sup>8</sup> Soguk’s interpretation is different from others, he contests that refugee being a negative concept, rather in terms of their capacities to effect disruptive changes in sites of governance, including Connolly.<sup>9</sup> Despite the negative connotation of refugee as a term, this particular author claims and views refugees as a positive sum that impacts changes in “sites of territorial governance.” Both refugees and immigrants transgress political and cultural boundaries and undermine the “democratic and its institutions as the domain of the life of citizen.” Their existence in any state and its territory construct and negotiates new identities for democratic space. Thus, despite their ambiguous status which is invisible and uncertain, refugees participate in the “exclusionary legal, cultural, political, and economic practices of a specific kind of democracy” which privilege the citizen as the proper entity of a sovereign state. However, refugees are instrumental in creating tension and making their presence felt in any events of discrimination, despite their improper status, which subsequently makes them more visible than “invisible.” Citizens draw *raison d’être* from their position within the state based on membership. This clearly puts refugees at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their position in any state. Furthermore, to a certain extent, territorial democracy is a specific manifestation of the sovereign territorial state, which clearly contests any space for refugees who are disruptive and fails to reaffirm relations, identities of the territorial, and citizen-oriented democracy.

“The nexus between state and citizen represents the lowest common denominator of any reflection upon citizenship.”<sup>10</sup> According to Ralf Dahendorf “[t]here is no more dynamic figure in modern history than the [c]itizen.”<sup>11</sup> “Citizenship is civil rights, political participation. Social welfare on the other hand is identity and recognition”. Citizenship is a contentious issue and has much more significance once an individual has crossed the international border. Once in an alien territory, refugees have no rights other than those entitled to under international law more specifically stipulated under international refugee law. The identities of refugees are enmeshed with nationality along with the question of statehood, citizenship, becomes a vital issue that both shapes and governs the state’s recognition towards their distinctive identity.<sup>12</sup> Increased state defensiveness and redrawing citizenship boundaries are partly in response to the perceived threat of differences due to decades of population and refugee movement across borders within the region of South Asia. In developing countries, refugees lack both *de jure* and *de facto*, civil, political, and social rights.<sup>13</sup> Many refugees in developing countries suffer indignity and lack of respect because in most cases, they lack “the capacity claims” that can be implemented independently of governments. That is why millions have been voting with their feet homewards in anticipation of recouping citizenship rights they lost when displaced and are unable to achieve in the context of exile. Refugees politicise “space” by imploding the cartographic logic that engenders it.<sup>14</sup> “What the map cuts up,” says Michel de Certeau, and Soguk are the “stories [that] cut across.”<sup>15</sup> Refugee becomes those stories, which cut across the cartographic logic of the territorial state and its privileged sites of identity and start negotiating point.<sup>16</sup>

State, therefore, is the primary cause of refugee flow. It also has a pivotal role in determining when it should allow entry and exit of certain refugee groups. The debate is much more relevant in the context of countries that have passed through decolonisation and have either inherited colonial institutions or have undergone massive reformist movements. The debate when situated in the South Asian context has special relevance.<sup>17</sup>

State and national borders are defined through immigration and citizenship politics by denying “migrant” or refugee groups any rights during the period of stay in exile country. There is an ongoing debate regarding who belongs as an insider and who is an outsider, premised any rights they might enjoy, during the period of exile. Therefore, there is a constant tussle between the insider and the perceived outsider both in relation to territory and identity. These conflicts often crystallise over competition for control of the state or in protests against particular groups’ control over resources or complete access to certain resources. Sometimes, the notion of identity i.e., nationality, depends on the idea of memory and vice versa. Any individual or group identity is a sense of sameness over time that is sustained by remembering and is actually remembered is defined as “assumed identity.”<sup>18</sup> Sometimes, memories are revised to suit the current identity, thereby giving memory more longevity that transcends the present one. Thus, making both memory and identity social constructs, which means that they can either be used or abused, also means that at a certain point, they can be re-asserted to meet certain/particular purposes. The political meaning and identity of refugees and their status have been both universally accepted and acknowledged in accordance with UN Convention. In its application, states discriminate depending on whether it contradicts the state’s jurisdiction. Refugees depend on the state for its determination process and its consequent protection and assistance on the administrative system of the host government. Hammer refers to this category of foreign nationals that enjoy rights that are intrinsic in national citizenship as denizens. These are foreign citizens who are “...entitled to equal treatment in all spheres of life, with full access to the labo[u]r market, business, education, social welfare, even to employment in branches of the public services, etc.”<sup>19</sup> Kibreab contends that countries that treat refugees as denizens are less likely to return on their own to their countries of origin.<sup>20</sup> Silverman makes a geographical distinction. He asserts that countries in the north are likely to give denizen status to incoming refugees, rather than those living in the southern states. However, in most developing countries nationality and citizenship are inextricably interwoven with each other.<sup>21</sup> Citizenship rights are accessible to nationals only, and the basis of entitlement to rights is nationality, not necessarily residence. The basic thrust of the citizenship model is to dissociate nationality from citizenship.<sup>22</sup> Non-nationals, particularly, refugees are least likely to receive such rights and entitlement. Also, a corollary to this is that a person’s “natural” entitlements to rights are deemed to rest within his/her own country of origin i.e., nationality. Although citizenship right is subsumed under nationality issues, that state has absolute jurisdiction. In the case of refugees, they strive for lesser rung of the hierarchy and have some basic rights that can only be

enjoyed by citizens. The equation is reversed for refugee or non-citizen category as they lack nationality of the host-state but might have some rights stipulated under international refugee law.<sup>23</sup>

Ascertaining the refugee question through the lens citizenship is important.<sup>24</sup> Do refugees contribute to the ethos of statehood, or do they threaten the very premise of statecraft, and thereby challenge the territoriality notion of democracy<sup>25</sup> and that of nation state.<sup>26</sup> These notions are both exclusionary and heavily stacked against non-citizens while privileging citizenship. Also do refugee groups and immigrants challenge and attempt to dislocate the rights and privilege of citizen's rights by cutting across the notion of territoriality? Are immigrants and refugees an exclusive category with de-territorial identity? Do asylum seekers and alien groups aim to problematize the existence and presence through discourse in order to delegitimize the notion of statehood or the very notion of the state itself? If it is true, then do refugees pose a threat to the state and citizens or is it one of the many reasons put forth by the state in its attempt to control further proliferation of refugee movement by undermining their rights vis-à-vis citizen rights.<sup>27</sup> Refugees threaten the relational hierarchy of the citizen/nation/state constellation, a hierarchy that refugees refute as a "figure of aberration, a figure that lack proper agency, proper face and voice."<sup>28</sup> In this section, I have engaged with the refugee subject in global context, while evaluating the statist paradigm and its relevance in both North and South.

### **Interrelation between Camps and Refugee-subject**

The earlier sections have discussed the creation of the refugee subject and its reinforcement by the state. Camps in this context have assumed importance in refugee and forced migration studies. While the refugee subject is a creation of the state processes in both the developed and developing world, the construction of camps in this narrative has assumed a specific centrality. While engaging with the historicity of camps in the refugee narrative, it cannot be denied that indeed a temporary/ transient/ in-between place has now become an almost permanent state of being for refugees. In the context of the developing world, the notion of a massive and mixed flow of people has become very relevant. Often the reality of the developed world holds relevance to the developing world, both as conceptual categories and historical context which is a problem. The protracted nature of displacement and governmental technology of migrants produce the identity of migrants.<sup>29</sup>

Camps remain a problematic area in forced migration studies primarily because of their sway on the discipline and policies that tend to impact refugee lives. While Agamben's work on the zone of indistinction emerges quite clearly where the state of exception is, it is the suspension of law that has become the norm. Refugees are those who inhabit terrains, denied access to law, resources, rights—where lives exist in a state of limbo. To borrow from Agamben's state of exception, the "bare life" and zone of indistinction are refugees deprived of rights etc., yet the very nature of exception has transformed the abnormal into normal. Refugee subject in

camps has become normality in everyday existence, where the state subjects its existence from being an abnormal to normal. Interestingly, the relationship between refugees and camps is close, as one draws legitimacy from the other. Often terms such as “human refuse,”<sup>30</sup> “pariahs”<sup>31</sup> and “urban outcasts”<sup>32</sup> are associated with refugees, who presumed to be unwanted people, that, contribute toward instability and a burden to the resource-strapped society. “If all this continues . . . camps will no longer be used just to keep vulnerable refugees alive, but rather to park and guard all kinds of undesirable populations.”<sup>33</sup> In this context, this represents the embodiment of refugees, especially those denied of rights, status and entitlements. Camp therefore can be understood as space inhabited by illegal/aliens/refugees etc., those who live on the margin, an abnormality that assumes normal existence based on their location of stay. Therefore, camps represent normalcy to “bare life” where the sovereign has suspended its legitimacy.<sup>34</sup> Homi Bhabha, writes, “the stateless,” “migrant workers, minorities, asylum seekers, [and] refugees” who “represent emergent, undocumented lifeworlds that break through the formal language of ‘protection’ and ‘status’ because”—he says, quoting Balibar—“they are ‘neither insiders [*n*]or outsiders, or (for many of us). . . insiders officially considered outsiders.”<sup>35</sup> This captures the essence of migrants and refugee populations around the world today. Chakrabarty suggests that today there are more detention centres in and around Europe than before which is the result of state failures connected to a whole series of factors: economic, political, demographic, and environmental i.e., “globali[s]ation of capital and the pressures of demography in poorer countries brought about by the unevenness of postcolonial development.”<sup>36</sup> Notwithstanding, the cause, the reality appears that indeed there are more camps/detention dotted in Europe and outside.<sup>37</sup>

Presently, Syria is going through unprecedented political strife and a civil war generating extreme violence and insecurity. Since the uprising in 2011, Syrian civilians have been forced to flee their homes, cross the borders and seek protection in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon<sup>38</sup>, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan. According to the latest UNHCR data, 3,726,988 Syrian refugees are registered in this part of the Middle East Region,<sup>39</sup> including 619,160 in Jordan. Representing approximately one-tenth of its population, the country hardly managed such an important influx of refugees and has rapidly needed external assistance to respond to the Syrian crisis. For that reason, camps have been established, since then managed by UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency (whose role is to provide assistance and protection to refugees and other persons of concern), in collaboration with a wide range of humanitarian partners and NGOs. Nearly, 80 per cent of Syrian refugees live in Jordan’s urban and rural areas, and the remaining 20 per cent live confined in those camps. The very definition of camp has been transformed into the normal day-to-day lives of refugees. The encampment of refugees is the new reality, especially keeping in mind the meagre resources. A slight point of departure is the African refugee camps where people are perceived to assume certain “legal consciousness,” i.e., by developing a special relationship to legal rules, spontaneously claiming justice or equity, and

refusing to live in a “state of exception,” where they would be deprived of any legal rights.<sup>40</sup> In this instance, such possibility becomes lower as opportunities to negotiate with the state become less and refugee subject as an agent gets enmeshed into camp formation. Thus, camps and refugees have now become the new normalcy in a much-skewed world, with the exception of becoming the everyday norm of society.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

The paper has discussed the interconnection between refugee subjects and camps. The close proximity between refugee and the state i.e., the creation of refugee subject on one hand, and on the other how their location in camps have indeed transformed them from being exceptional to normal. In a manner of speaking refugee discourse can be seen in relation to statist regimentation and how the state is both instrumental in one hand generating refugees and also sustaining refugeehood inside and outside camps. It is often the latter that is missing while there is ample literature on the former. Refugee figures central to statecraft, which though challenges the prevalent hierarchy, yet it being at a peripheral and marginal level impact the discourse on statehood. By placing refugees and immigrants centrally to any discussion on citizen’s rights, poses the question of who is in and who should remain outside the domain of statehood. This is a double-edged argument, while stating that refugees occupy the centrality in the state’s jurisdiction, yet it does not fall within the framework of territoriality that constitutes the boundaries of the state. In other words, refugees are being who seeks to deterritorialise the state while existing outside the domain of statehood. In this kind of setting, camps are created by the state to provide temporary sanctuary which assumes a peculiar permanency. While arguably, camps were places of exception in forced migration where the sovereign was supreme as life is reduced to bare life. However, the metaphoric use of camps has transformed the lives of refugees from a point of exception to that of everyday reality, wherein the abnormal becomes the normal.

*This article builds on the author’s ongoing research engagement with the issues of refugees, camps, migration, and protection of the state and previously published works: Nasreen Chowdhory, and Nasir Uddin, eds., Deterritorialised Identity and Transborder Movement in South Asia (Singapore: Springer, 2019); Nasreen Chowdhory, Refugees, Citizenship and Belonging in South Asia: Contested Terrains (Singapore: Springer, 2018); Nasreen Chowdhory, and Biswajit Mohanty, Citizenship, Nationalism and Refugeehood of Rohingyas in Southern Asia (Singapore: Springer, 2020).*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti, and Cesare Casarino (London, and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 40.1; B. Harrell-Bond, (1998), “Camps: Literature Review,” *Forced Migration Review*, no.2 (1998): 22–3, <https://www.fmreview.org/camps/harrellbond>.



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# Calcutta Riots of August 1946: Muslim Experiences from the Troubled Times

By

**Sohini Majumdar \***

On August 16, 1946, Calcutta was subjected to an inexplicable violence that was unprecedented in the annals of carnage in the city. Popularly coined as the Great Calcutta Killing, the communal riots are memorialised in popular discourses as a testimony to the culpability of the Muslim League ministry, particularly H.S. Suhrawardy, in facilitating Muslim communal onslaughts on Hindu inhabitants of the city. In course of vicious rioting, members of both the religious communities were brutally attacked: Hindus were killed by Muslim mobs, while Muslims were subjected to the communal rampage of Hindu goons.<sup>1</sup> There exists a rich literature on violence that was inflicted on Hindus in Calcutta.<sup>2</sup> What is often elided in these accounts is the fact that many Muslim residents, irrespective of their political positions, became victims of Hindu communal forces and were internally displaced. But it was not an undifferentiated picture of violence, as there were multiple instances when Muslim residents were saved by their Hindu neighbours and vice versa. This paper revisits the Calcutta Riots of August 1946 to bring to the fore the diversity and complexity of Muslim experiences, which is often neglected in the grand narratives of communalism and communal violence. Along with examining stories of displacements, trauma, and violence, the paper investigates instances of help, protection, and kindness that showed familiar bonds of neighbourliness and remained resilient despite communal polarity. In the final section, the paper reads a few letters written by Muslim residents both to the Congress and to the Muslim League that underscore an erosion of faith in their respective political parties, especially at a time when both parties claimed to represent and protect Muslim interests in the region, albeit in their own specific ways.

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## **Prelude to Riots: Communal Propaganda, Pamphleteering, and Escalation of Violence**

In an article published in *Dawn* in August 1946, a concerned resident of Calcutta, Mr. A. K. Pillai, tried to explain the possible causes of the appalling calamity,

Let us honestly face the question why has the Direct Action Day resulted in such terrific fury in Calcutta alone. It is to be remembered that Calcutta remains a predominantly Hindu city in a Province where Muslims have the majority. Even where the Hindus and Muslims agreed as on the holding of the Rashid Ali, it turned out to be anything but a peaceful observance in Calcutta. This largest of the Indian cities has also the largest underground population of unsocial elements who as a rule do not distinguished (*sic*) between community and community or between temple and church and mosque. A Hindu shop, a Mohammedan shop, a European bank and Government post office all become equally the target. Besides, Calcutta has more deep rooted terrorist activities than any other place in India.

Calcutta is also the city where wealth and poverty have reached their respective heights and depths. To social stability nothing can be more disturbing than such a glaring disparity. This disparity has a most disquieting feature about it in the singular circumstance that nearly the whole of this fabulous wealth is concentrated in Hindu hands while its Muslim population is obviously the most poverty stricken. In such a hopeless ill balanced situation, the slightest excitement would furnish the explosive factor. On the present occasion quite possibly extraneous agencies might well have fanned the fire.<sup>3</sup>

The letter captured the agony that pervaded public life in Calcutta in the decade of 1940 and confronted its ability to integrate and reconcile the differences that existed between different religious communities, which in this context meant Hindus and Muslims living in the city. It is usually believed that the last few years of British rule in Bengal, particularly since the Riots of 1946, was the most significant period of communalisation of social and political relations of the region. In this letter, where a Hindu individual was writing in *Dawn*, the Muslim League's mouthpiece, blaming not the Muslim community but the "antisocial elements" for creating communal troubles in Calcutta, however, showed how it was still possible to rise above communal barriers and to think about how riots and especially, the violence associated with it affected all religious communities and social classes. Taking a cue from this, the first section evaluates the escalation of violence preceding the riots that made it possible for the communal fury to unfold in Calcutta, in which propaganda played a prominent role. As the section will show, various political groups and membership organisations belonging to both religious communities played a part in it.

Calcutta was a predominantly Hindu city in the Muslim majority province of Bengal that recently elected a Muslim League government in 1945.<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of the British rule, the situation in Calcutta was notably volatile because of a combination of factors, including social, political,

economic, and moral dislocation caused by the Famine of 1943–44, food shortage, wartime destruction, rising unemployment, communal mobilisation, extreme starvation, sporadic violence, and failure of political negotiations between Congress and the Muslim League over the question of transfer of power created a deep cynicism and destroyed the moral psyche of the city.<sup>5</sup> Sir. F. Burrows, Governor of Bengal, wrote that the long-term causes of the Calcutta Riots were the protracted “struggle for power between Hindus and Muslims, in which Calcutta was a focal point, the weakening of authority which is an inevitable consequence of our impending departure, the dislocation of normal life of Calcutta by war and famine, and the presence of a Muslim minority in a predominantly Hindu city.”<sup>6</sup> What happened in August 1946 was not just a communal clash that the city had witnessed time and over again. Rather the Calcutta Riots were characterised by a new form of violence that specifically targeted members of the “other” religious community. Sumit Sarkar writes, “[m]urder was the primary objective in the Calcutta riots, not—as often in earlier communal outbreaks—desecration of temples or mosques, rape, or attacks on the property of relatively privileged groups belonging to the opposite community.”<sup>7</sup> More important than the scale of horror and carnage, was the pattern of violence, for the communal violence of 1946 consisted of acts of brutality, torture, and destruction to annihilate and massacre the “other” community.

The Great Calcutta Killings were certainly not engineered by the All India Muslim League. But their call for Direct Action did result in communalisation of local politics.<sup>8</sup> The failure of negotiations among leading political parties was interpreted by local leaders and politicians in their own distinctive ways, as they tried to do a face to face “communal sorting out” of their differences on the ground.<sup>9</sup> That such an extreme solution would result in one of the most vicious bloodbaths in history was perhaps not adequately foreseen. On August 4, 1946, a conference of Muslim League representatives was held at Zakaria Street, Calcutta, to consider the programme for Direct Action Day. It was later elaborated and circulated through local newspapers, pamphlets, and posters. The League President gave orders to observe the day in a peaceful manner to show support for the League’s decisions, regarding the withdrawal of acceptance of Cabinet Mission proposals and the policy of attaining Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> The Calcutta District Muslim League called for a “complete *bartal* and general strike in all spheres of civic, commercial and industrial life,” except in emergency services.<sup>11</sup> Non-Muslims were also called upon to join hands with Muslims in their fight for Pakistan. A mass procession and a meeting were organised at the Ochterlony Monument and H.S. Suhrawardy, the then Chief Minister of Bengal, was scheduled to preside over it. Muslims were asked to congregate in Maidan to display their solidarity and united strength.

Francis Taker observed that throughout the first half of August, speeches of political leaders belonging to both Congress and the Muslim League were inflammatory and violent in nature.<sup>12</sup> Though the Muslim League urged its supporters to observe Direct Action Day peacefully, M.A. Jinnah’s statement of “bidding goodbye to constitutional method,” was open to

various interpretations.<sup>13</sup> In Calcutta, the League leaders gave notably provocative public utterances. Abul Hashim, a prominent politician from the Bengal Provincial Muslim League (BPML) declared, “where justice and equity failed, shinning steel would decide the issue.”<sup>14</sup> Nazimuddin, the previous Chief Minister of Bengal, stated that “there are 150 different ways to cause trouble particularly as the Muslim League is not restricted to non-violence.”<sup>15</sup> H.S. Suhrawardy stated in unequivocal words that bloodshed and disorder were not necessary evils in themselves if resorted to for a noble cause and among Muslims, no cause was dearer or nobler than Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Local leaders carried on extensive mobilisation in various localities. The police reported that there was an increase in mob activities.<sup>17</sup>

Several provocative pamphlets that were circulated during this time testify to the rampant communal propagandism that preceded Direct Action Day. A pamphlet that gained considerable popularity had fiery words written on it,

It was in his month of *Ramzan* that the holy *Quoran* was revealed! It was in this month of *Ramzan* that 313 Muslims were victorious through the grace of God over many *Kajers* in the battle of Badr and the *Jehad* of the Muslims commenced! It was in this month that ten thousand Muslims marched to Mecca and were conquerors and thus there was the establishment of the kingdom of Islam. By the grace of God we are ten crores in India but through bad luck we have become slaves of the Hindus and the British. We are starting a *Jehad* with Your Name in this very month of *Ramzan*. We promise before You that we entirely depend on You. Pray make strong in body and mind-give Your helping hand in all our actions- make us victorious over the *Kajers*—enable us to establish Kingdom of Islam in India and make proper sacrifices for this *Jehad*—by the grace of God may we build up in India the greatest Islamic kingdom in the world.<sup>18</sup>

Another Bengali leaflet, signed by Rafiuddin Ahmed Siddiqui and A.K.M. Fazlul Kader Chowdhury, the President, and the Secretary of the District Muslim League respectively, was intercepted by the Intelligence Branch. It was titled “Call” and it stated that “*Muslim India is facing its gravest crisis today. A clarion call has come to ‘wake up Muslim India.’ March on with your standard flying high. We are now at war with reality.*”<sup>19</sup> The various pamphlets circulated by the Eastern Pakistani Mohajahed Corps had titles like, “Our Sacred Soil Which We Shall Turn Into Pakistan By Our Might” or “Death to Caste Hindu Congress and Death to Constituent Assembly.”<sup>20</sup> Urdu newspaper *Asre Jadid* wrote that “to the Muslims Direct Action means a fight and a fight imply violence.”<sup>21</sup> Various meetings held under the aegis of the Muslim League and Anjuman-e-Mofidul Islam urged Muslims to join the Muslim National Guards, in order to “sacrifice” for the achievement of Pakistan.<sup>22</sup>

Communal propaganda, however, was not the preserve of any political group. A Hindu Mahasabha leaflet titled “16<sup>th</sup> August—Beware” played on the fear and prejudices of the Hindu public. The leaflet claimed that Direct Action Day supported the League’s demand for Pakistan and although the Hindus and non-Muslims of Bengal were opposed to it, and to assist or

join the *hartal* would amount to supporting the demand for Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> Another pamphlet issued by the Hindu Welfare League, which was intercepted by Intelligence Branch, stated that the League had instructed Muslims to intensify communal feelings, breed hatred against Hindus, and perpetuate violence on the Hindu residents.<sup>24</sup> Intelligence Branch record mentions a pamphlet that stated that an individual named Habibur Rahman had issued a statement, referring to a “verbal circular” approved by Jinnah and the Muslim League Working Committee. The pamphlet claimed that Rahman, who had left League in favour of Congress, had disclosed that the circular had called for a wholesale destruction of the Hindu population in Calcutta.<sup>25</sup> Another Hindu pamphlet retorted, “*Hindoo—Ankhe Phar kar paro! Chhati par hat dhar kar shocho* (Read this leaflet with open eyes and reflect for a moment with your hands placed on your bosom)- Is it a communal riot? Is it not a declaration of war against you? Danger is ahead. Take measures to protect yourself. This way lays your safety.”<sup>26</sup>

The official view maintained that later enquiries proved sections of both communities foresaw and prepared against the impending trouble, but neither party planned to start the rioting.<sup>27</sup> Nor did the administration predict the impending carnage that engulfed the streets of Calcutta with such ferocity. On August 15, 1946, an “Acid Debate” took place in the Bengal Assembly, when the Bengal Government under League Ministry announced its decision to declare August 16, a public holiday to avoid trouble. The Bengal Provincial Congress Committee held a meeting to protest the decision of the League government because according to Congress, the demonstrations for Direct Action Day were communal and anti-national in character. They blamed the Muslim League Government for imposing the “fiat of the League” on the entire people of Bengal, with all the authority and sanction of Governmental power behind them. Had the political parties taken a non-militant stand and allowed a one-day strike to take place, the subsequent history might have been different.

### **Violence on Ground: Displacements of Muslim Residents**

The observance of Direct Action Day inaugurated a spate of rioting for five consecutive days. Official reports documented that three thousand people died and seventeen hundred were injured, although unofficial numbers were higher.<sup>28</sup> The pervasive nature of the Calcutta Riots blurred the boundaries between victims and attackers. The saviour of one community often turned into the murderer of the other community. The numerous local stories from the Riot days poignantly show how the lives of many residents were shattered, who were forced to leave their homes, who no longer felt secure in places that were predominantly lived by members of the other community. This section highlights local stories of violence and displacements of Muslim residents in the city.

An extract from the confidential reports of the Intelligence Branch described how an old resident from Katua Khoti Lane, Md. Rafuquddin, left his *para* (neighbourhood) on August 16, 1946,



From the morning of 16/8/46 the people of our own *moballa* was preparing for a procession of ML [Muslim League] to attend the meeting at Esplanade. That being a Ramzan day I went to bazar at about 1:30 pm. On the way to bazar I saw some people gather in our locality for procession. At around 2 p.m. I heard slogan “*Allah Akbar*” mixed with great noise from Bazar and saw the procession of our *moballa* (Katua Khoti Lane) proceeding towards Esplanade. As soon the procession reached Jagu Babu’s Bazar brickbats, stones was (*sic*) thrown at it from both sides of the road. As the procession was disorganized the Hindus and Sikhs were attacking it from both sides with *latbi* and daggers. After midnight we heard slogans of *Bande Mataram* and *Jai Hind* gradually approaching our locality to attack the locality. The Police Patrol party came after repeated phone calls from our locality. In the morning we set up peace committee with Hindus of our locality but failed. At about noon we left our house, leaving everything to the mercy of the Hindus and took shelter in Presidency jail. I went to see my house after 2 days and saw it along with other houses were broken and all our household property were looted. *I have lost everything except the lives of my family members.*<sup>29</sup>

Similar was the fate of Sharfuddin Ahmad. He lived in Chetla, a predominantly Hindu area. He left his house after Muslim families in his locality were attacked by some Revolutionary Socialist Party goons.<sup>30</sup>

My house at 6 Mahesh Chandra Datta Lane is the only Muslim house situated in a backward area in Chetla, P.O. Alipore. The first report that we heard of riot was from a RSP fellow recently came to my locality living at 7 Mahesh Datta Lane. He began to gather crowds around him and said Muslims gave such exciting statement in front of gurudwara that the Sikhs could not keep their heads cool and that Muslims forcibly entered Kalighat gurudwara. I found he was spreading mischievous lies in my locality fomenting trouble that would victimize my family and relatives. So I asked him what slogans excited Sikh and he said fumbly ‘*Congress Party Dhangsa Hok*’ and denied that he said Muslims entered Gurudwara. So I told my neighbor that he is spreading false rumours. I saw later that the RSP fellow had gathered a number of lathis and dozen low class people in a room 100 yards from my house and so I rang to Khan Bahadur Abdur Rahman, Minister of Bengal who telephoned Alipore P.O. to arrest these men. In the same building one Police magistrate was living who could not find the room of these men. Soon after 50 young men began to tour the area with baton, knives, rocks in Mahesh Chandra Datta Lane alone. All Friday nights conch shells were blown creating false panic and alarm. At 12 I toured my area in a peace squad, which met hostile elements among the Bhadrakalok class in front of a mosque at 12 Moyerpara Road. On the same day at 2:30 four Sikh with 200 Hindus of mixed elements attacked the above mosque and murdered the Imam and another Moulavi. The whole of Saturday night we passed a house where 6 Muslim families have been living for nearly half a century. On Sunday morning on receipt of information from friendly neighbours all the families left the house, leaving everything and fled on foot to house of Khan Bahadur Abdur Rahman, Minister. After this we heard of stray stabbing cases on Muslim in Chetla area and the same RSP fellow responsible for the murder of Ghulam Muhammed Mustafa Chaudhuri who was kidnapped and murdered near our house and thrown into Tolly Nala from

Durgapur Bridge. No Police or Military came. I am staying in a safe Muslim place with my own family. I would not venture to return to my house in a predominantly Hindu area.<sup>31</sup>

While the police record does not mention any further detail about the RSP member who attacked Sharfuddin, it was not uncommon during the Great Calcutta Killing, when members of political groups, including the socialist and secular ones, turned into “protectors” of their “own” community and “killers” of the “other” community.<sup>32</sup> This was particularly true for political parties, who had a history of participating in violent agitations.<sup>33</sup> For instance, the notorious Muchipara goondas, like Jagabondhu Bose and Bhanu Bose, who despite being members of a socialist-secular party, like the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), carried on a communal rampage in Muslim neighborhoods.<sup>34</sup> These men had been active during the violent anticolonial struggle, and in August 1946, they emerged as defenders of the putative Hindu community and attackers of Muslim communities. As Ishan Mukherjee writes, the nationalist characters of Hindu goons co-existed peacefully with their credentials as leaders of murderous communal groups.<sup>35</sup> Because of their connections with mainstream political organisations and their history of participating in nationalist movements, neither the police nor the organised political leadership intervened to stop their atrocities on Muslim residents.<sup>36</sup> The result was fateful for men like Sharfuddin, who had to confront these local, yet extremely powerful and communalised goondas. Ashis Nandy writes that “lower caste musclemen” and “criminal elements” who were considered social outcasts or outsiders turned into “heroic protectors” of middle class Bengali Hindus during the communal confrontation.<sup>37</sup> Gopal Patha, who was a meat seller, and Jugal Chandra Ghosh, who ran an *akhara* (gymnasium) in North Calcutta, were such men.<sup>38</sup> They had strong links with the Hindu Mahasabha and in August 1946, they, like the RSP person mentioned by Sharfuddin, carried out extensive killings of Muslims in various bustees.<sup>39</sup>

Indiscriminate attacks on members of the other community were a distinctive feature of the August killings. A police report documented the horrific story of a Congress Muslim and an eye specialist, Dr. Jamal Mohammad, who became a victim of communal violence.<sup>40</sup> Dr. Mohammad lived in Bhowanipore, a locality with a high concentration of affluent Bengali Hindu families, like the houses of B.C. Ghosh and Justice C.C. Ghosh. As violence spread to the southern parts of the city, Dr. Mohammad took shelter in the house of N.C. Chatterjee’s father. The report narrates how he was dragged out of the house and killed at the doorstep of the house of B.C. Ghose. *Morning News* wrote that Dr. Ahmed appealed to the frenzied mob, “Why are you killing me... I am a Congressman and have served the Congress all my life.” Unhinged by his pleas, the Hindu mob killed him with the words, “We don’t care... You are a Muslim and that is enough.”<sup>41</sup> The Kazipara bustee, a Muslim pocket on Debendra Ghosh Road in Bhowanipore, was completely wiped off, which killed around one hundred Muslims.<sup>42</sup> Muslim residents of Bhowanipore suffered enormous losses, as every Muslim house in the area was destroyed.<sup>43</sup>

Few days after the savagery, *Morning News* reported the “shocking story” of an unbridled massacre of Muslim men, women, and children, the destruction of Muslim houses and properties, and the incendiarism of Hindu mobs in Saheb Bagan bustee on Satish Mukherjee Road.<sup>44</sup> This small Muslim bustee was situated in the Kalighat area, a predominantly Hindu locality. A Muslim procession coming from Tollygunge was stoned near Rash Behari Avenue. Some two hundred Muslims fled from the troubled area and took shelter in a mosque in the Saheb Bagan bustee. Soon after, the bustee was attacked by Hindus from the neighbouring locality, who were mostly respectable men of the community. Many inhabitants of the bustee were killed and the mosque was destroyed. The diary of P. Barnes also documented the incident.<sup>45</sup> Another news report, titled “Savage Cruelty on Students,” detailed how students from Taylor Muslim Hostel in Bow Bazar were evacuated and later, relocated to safer places following communal attacks on the hostel.<sup>46</sup>

Muslims, who lived in other parts of Bengal and came to Calcutta on Direct Action Day to show their support for the Muslim League, were shocked at the communal fury. Retired Lt. Col. M.S. Alam Joarder recalls his memories of the Riot when he was a young boy. Alam was born in the village of Nagdah in Alamdanga, in Nadia district. Alam and his sister used to visit Calcutta almost every weekend, touring famous sites, like the Victoria Memorial and the Zoological Garden. Alam recalls riding the train to Calcutta, which he found to be a beautiful city with lots of attractions. One day in 1946, Alam heard about a big procession on the Grand Trunk Road (now Jessore-Kolkata-Haridaspur Road). Little Alam and his sister wanted to join the procession with their father. But it was too crowded, and his father decided not to take them to Calcutta. Later, his father came home in sweat and blood. An awful Riot had broken out in Sealdah station where Hindus were killing Muslims and Muslims were killing Hindus without any reason. Alam’s father said, “Thank God I came home alive. If I took two of you with me, I would not have been able to save you from the mobs.”<sup>47</sup>

Assaults and attacks were inflicted upon the community who were a minority in a particular area—Hindu houses were burnt and gutted in predominantly Muslim areas, while every effort was made to obliterate Muslim presence in Hindu localities. Locals were often involved in such acts of atrocities. On August 16, 1946, a Muslim procession was attacked at Russa Road, a predominantly Hindu area. This was followed by a general massacre of Hindus in Metiaburz, a predominantly Muslim area.<sup>48</sup> In Park Circus, a Muslim majority neighbourhood that housed many affluent Muslim families, there was wanton destruction of Hindu households. The houses of Dr. U.P. Basu, retired Principal of Medical College, P.C. De of Indian Civil Service, and B.C. Dutt, an advocate of Calcutta High Court, were ransacked and burnt and their family members were molested.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in Hatibagan Market disturbances broke out when a group of Muslims who had taken shelter in the Market were attacked. Later, the armed forces rescued the Muslims from the Market to Nikasipara.<sup>50</sup> In general, however, police were largely inactive when violence reigned supreme in the city. In most situations, local police withheld from preventing members of their own community to engage in violence,

while in many others, they became silent spectators to the communal drama, refusing to help victims from the other community. The ineffectiveness of the police spoke both to the communalisation of members of the police force as well as to the administrative crisis of the colonial state.<sup>51</sup> The result was a massive dislocation of people, who fell victim to communal violence. The multiple accounts show that Muslim inhabitants in Calcutta were as much victimised by communal violence as Hindu residents; yet popular memories and literature on the Calcutta Riots focus too little on Muslim experiences.

### **Mobility, Symbols, and Meanings: Internal Migration and Communal Segregation of Urban Space**

It was not just the killings, the destructions, the lootings, or the atrocities, but the larger exemplary purpose of communal cleansing that defined the nature of violence during the Calcutta Riots. It was no longer considered safe to live in areas where a particular community was a minority. Violence led to a localised construction of collective fear. Many Muslim residents managed to move to areas inhabited by their co-religionists. For instance, at 86 Vivekananda Road, a Muslim girls' hostel opposite to the Maniktolla Bazar was raided by Hindu students. Some of them were molested, while others were kidnapped. Sergeant. Stiffle rescued twenty-one girls from the hostel, who were then given temporary shelter in Park Circus.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, some Muslim women, along with the family of Md. Siddiqui, were moved from a Hindu neighbourhood in Debendra Ghosh Road for "safety." Communal violence reconstructed the notion of "safe" and "unsafe" areas. Rumors often intimidated residents of mixed localities, urging them to move to other areas.<sup>53</sup> Through such processes, the imperfectly segregated residential pattern in Calcutta was reinforced and given a communal clarity.<sup>54</sup> This sort of communalisation of space was one of the main effects of the Calcutta riots on urban, social equations.

A letter published in the *Morning News* explained how urban space was reshaped in course of the Riots. A Muslim resident from Calcutta, A. Hamid wrote,

Whoever started the riot one thing is clear as broad daylight that the foundation of Pakistan had been laid in this great city of Calcutta with Muslim blood. The evacuation of Hindus from Muslim localities and vice versa, had established two zones viz Hindu and Muslim in the city.<sup>55</sup>

In another letter written to the editor, Kazi Abdul Quddus argued how internal migration facilitated communalisation of urban space,

The recent happenings in Calcutta and migration from one area to another by Hindus and Muslims are clear pointers to the fact that both communities accept Pakistan in practice. That Muslims have saved the lives of and protected many Hindus in Muslim localities does not detract from the cogency of the argument. Although migration by Muslims and Hindus is said to be on

decrease, there is no doubt that Muslim Calcutta and Hindu Calcutta have come into being and will be larger as days pass.<sup>56</sup>

Control over urban space figured prominently in course of the conflicts. Areas and localities, a *mohalla* or a *para*, came to be categorised and demarcated as Hindu or Muslim, as “our” or “their” in terms of the religious identity of its inhabitants. Often words like “Mohammedans,” “Pakistan,” and “Jai Hind” were written on shops and houses. Tapan Raychaudhuri recalls that it became impossible to enter a Hindu locality wearing a *lungi* or a Muslim locality wearing a *pajama* and *punjabi*.<sup>57</sup> Such physical markers constructed new symbolic-spatial boundaries within Calcutta, while simultaneously reifying communal identities.

The meanings that were attributed to such symbols (attire, area, and the body itself) had quickly transfigured itself during the riot days into a communal framework. Pradip Kumar Datta focuses on how the “body semiotic” became an important sign of an antagonistic communal divide. It was in the course of the riots that the “body” was itself communalised. Datta writes that riots “take to their [il]logical conclusion...the burden of meaning placed by the urban gaze on the communal signifiers of the body.”<sup>58</sup> Immediate communal recognition of an unknown body was an obvious fact by the participants in riots. It was here that symbolic identification, for e.g., a Muslim by his *lungi* became vital. The Calcutta Riots of 1946 consolidated the “symmetry between the body and its communal significations.”<sup>59</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that attempts to annihilate the “body” of the “other” were unprecedented.

### Shared Living in Extraordinary Times: Stories of Hindu and Muslim Cooperation

Despite the gory violence, the Riots did not represent a homogenous picture of communal fanaticism. There were multiple instances where people from one religious community saved members from the other religious community.<sup>60</sup> Such stories of local experiences challenge the monochromatic and rigid categorisation of communal violence by offering alternative examples of human integrity, courage, and benevolence. Few days after the violence, Ebadat Hossain, a resident from North Calcutta, wrote of his experiences during the Riots,

I used to live at College Street where 9 Muslims and 56 Hindus including Shyam Babu, Rakhil Babu or Phani Babu used to occupy different flats. They not only offered us protection but provided food for us for four days. Special mention in addition to the foregoing should be made of Babu Anil Bagchi and Sandhya Rani the actress who along with other saved 2 Muslim families.<sup>61</sup>

Similar was the experience of Peary Lall Das of 15/B Shah Aman Lane, Kidderpore. In this predominantly Muslim area, local Muslims saved the lives of hundreds of Hindus of the area.

There are about 500 Hindu dhobis in Mominpore Road, Rajab Ali lane, Ekbalpore Road, Ekbalpore lane, Ibrahim Road and Pipe Road. Through the indefatigable efforts of the Muslims of the localities all the Hindu dhobis were protected and saved and not one of them even suffered molestation. At 4/1 Mominpore Road about 100 Hindu Chamars were saved. In Shah Alam Lane 50 Oriya Hindus and some upcountry Hindu gowalas were also safeguarded by Muslims and escorted to Ekbalpore thana to be sent to the Relief center. But for the magnanimity of Muslims not a single Hindu could have escaped from these areas.<sup>62</sup>

These letters underlined the various ways by which a section of the population remained calm, retaining the bonds of local neighbourliness. For instance, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) gave shelter to people belonging to the other religious community and people shared no hostility among themselves inside the building.<sup>63</sup> In another instance, a few Muslim families were marooned in Dover Lane, in Ballygunge area, for two days.<sup>64</sup> When police did not bother to protect them despite their repeated calls for help, a group of local schoolboys defended them with lathis from mob attacks. Similarly, at Garcha Road in Ballygunge, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh residents held joint meetings and decided to guard the entire area to prevent outside mobs from entering—Hindus were to resist Hindu mobs and Muslims were to resist Muslim mobs.<sup>65</sup> When the situation became tense, the inhabitants of the locality jointly decided to evacuate Muslims for relocation to safer areas. They were also able to protect the mosque in the area. In Gariahat, a professor named Niren Roy gave shelter to several Muslim workers to protect them from an infuriated Hindu crowd and he stood guard until they were rescued to safety.<sup>66</sup> In another instance, in Park Circus, Mr. Rehman, an old resident, fought with an irate Muslim mob for more than an hour and saved thirty-six out of a family of thirty-nine Hindus and moved them to safety.<sup>67</sup> A news report mentioned about a Hindu sadhu in the Burra Bazar area, who gave shelter to six Muslims.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Communist leader Krishna Benode Roy and his family were rescued by their Muslim landlord.<sup>69</sup>

The working class in Calcutta, particularly the industrial labour belt around Calcutta, fought formidably against communal forces. Tramway workers, shopkeepers, and textile workers stood firm to defend those who were attacked. *People's Age* wrote, "Hindu and Muslim workers fought together against all fiendishness. The Muslim worker stood up against Muslim mobs. The Hindu worker held back riotous Hindu mobs."<sup>70</sup> The fact that the Tramway Workers' Union had earlier decided to go on strike on August 16, 1946, helped to minimise the chances of disturbances. So, when the fateful day in August brought in its trial of murder and loot, the organised working class kept away from it, as dockworkers, seamen, trams, gas, and textile workers maintained their solidarity.<sup>71</sup> Particularly notable was the Calcutta Tramway Workers' Union who helped to stop looting in various localities. The union members, along with some students, saved the Victoria Institute Hostel for Girls on Upper Circular Road.<sup>72</sup> *People's Age* praised them with the

following words: “in the bustees as well as in middle-class localities, these cases actually happened side by side with gruesome butchery and looting.”<sup>73</sup>

At the other end of the city, jute workers of Alam Bazar, from the very beginning, pledged themselves to save their bustees, housing both Hindus and Muslims.<sup>74</sup> On August 17, 1946, a local committee was formed in the area, with local Congress and League leaders, who worked alongside the Communist workers. On the same night, when they were attacked and peace was broken, Hindu and Muslim workers showed remarkable unity by bringing out a peace squad. Similarly, seven hundred strikers of the Standard Pharmaceutical Company and three hundred strikers of the National Tannery did not join the riots.<sup>75</sup> Instead, they hoisted red flags at the factory gate and one of their workers said, “Red flag is guarding our factory, and that is why this riot could not touch our workers.”<sup>76</sup> Another story from a Muslim Rescue Centre in Park Circus speaks to the spirit of anti-communalism that coexisted with communal violence. When Communist leader Ghulam Quddus, met several Muslim workers of the Brooke Bond Tea Co., and Joya Engineering Works at the rescue centre who were anxious to get back to work, he asked, “[b]ut, there are Hindu workers inside, how can you work together now?”<sup>77</sup> The workers swiftly replied that “inside we have got our Union.”<sup>78</sup> The role played by workers, often under the aegis of their respective unions, undeniably played a pivotal role in resisting a communal take-over of certain localities and factories.

Peace processions and peace committees were formed throughout the city, in various mohallas and paras, as violence continued unabated on the streets. On August 17, when a Muslim bustee in Tollygunge was attacked by an outside mob, a vigil of Hindu and Muslim volunteers warded off their repeated attacks.<sup>79</sup> On the same day, when the military opened indiscriminate fire, the same Muslim bustee gave shelter to one hundred fifty Hindus.<sup>80</sup> A day later, on August 18, 1946, in the early morning, a peace procession of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs paraded through Moulali and Taltola area carrying Muslim League, Congress, and white flags, as they chanted slogans like “*Hindu-Muslim ek ho.*”<sup>81</sup> On the same day, Hindus and Muslims in that area met at Moulali Darga to discuss how peace could be restored in the neighbourhood.<sup>82</sup> Such peace processions were most numerous in Park Circus and Tilajala bustee area.<sup>83</sup>

Along with ordinary people helping each other, political leadership also took a part in establishing peace in the city. On August 19, 1946, Sarat Bose and Surendra Mohan Bose, along with Suhrawardy made a joint appeal to stop the communal fury.<sup>84</sup> *Hindustan Times* retorted that the League, particularly Suhrawardy, who was responsible for the Riots was trying to shield his culpability by associating himself with Congress leaders.<sup>85</sup> Soon after, a peace mission comprising Kiran Shankar Roy, Surendra Mohan Ghosh, M.A.H. Ispahani, Sirdar Niranjan Singh Talib, Shyamsuddin Ahmed, and Giani Mehra Singh toured the affected areas, carrying Congress and League flags.<sup>86</sup> The All India Congress Committee (AICC) in its draft resolution called upon every citizen to form ward or mohalla peace committees to promote communal harmony.<sup>87</sup> Surendra Mohan Ghose,

President of Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, formed the Bengal Congress Relief and Rehabilitation Committee to help displaced families.

Bengal had hardly got over the ravages of the famine of 1943, when came the epidemic. Since then, the province has been passing through a state of chronic famine. Now we have got these communal riots. The damages done in these riots can be adequately repaired only by the Government. But circumstances as we are in Bengal, we cannot leave everything to the care of the Government much as we have wished and tried for such a position. It has become so to speak, an unavoidable responsibility for the Congress to look after the wounded and refugees and to arrange their rehabilitation. Hence, Bengal Congress Relief and Rehabilitation Committee has been formed.<sup>88</sup>

Suhrawardy visited the affected areas, while Abul Hashim urged Muslims in Bengal and in India to contribute at least one per cent of their monthly salary to help the victims of the Calcutta Riots.<sup>89</sup> While leaders across the political spectrum might have been pushed to take a stance against violence and to make a virtue out of the necessity of the situation, it was ordinary people who stood beside their neighbour, amidst savage butchery, resisting the onslaught of brute communalism.

### **An Erosion of Faith: Organised Political Leadership and Muslim Members**

There is a substantial literature on the “blame game” that ensued in the official and political circles in the aftermath of the Riots.<sup>90</sup> This section focuses on an unexplored question: how ordinary Muslims, belonging to both the Congress and the Muslim League, reacted after the Riots? Whom did they hold responsible for their sufferings? It was gradually becoming clear that the neat distinction between the politics of Congress and of the Muslim League that had partly fuelled the violent outbreak began to lose its meaning among ordinary Muslims. Belligerence and rancour against the organised political leadership were pronounced, as popular sentiments contravened communal partialities. Many people lost confidence in their respective political parties and felt betrayed by their own political leaders. A Congress Muslim, Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chowdhury, who lived in Suhrawardy Avenue, Park Circus, was fiercely critical of the cavalier attitude of the Congress during the Riot days. He wrote a couple of letters to the central leadership of Congress, blaming the party for its inability to help the innocent people. He stated that Congress had succumbed to *goondaism* and to the unsocial activities of the League organisation. He reasonably questioned that if Congress claimed to represent all sections of Indian people, shouldn't the Congress party have come forward, in an organised manner, to defend the hearth, home, and honour of Indian men and women? Instead, they became an onlooker to the dreadful drama of violence. In his letter to AICC, Ashrafuddin stated that the violence that engulfed the streets of Calcutta was a result of the fight for



power between the League and Congress, to which ordinary people fell victim.

Why should the innocent Hindus and Muslims be victims for nothing? It is a fight between the Congress and League organizations. If it is inevitable which appears to be so let the members of two organizations fight it out amongst themselves with whatever arms each can secure and decide the issue once for all. Neither the League people nor the Congress people as a whole understand the nonviolent gospel of Gandhiji. You desire a peaceful transfer of power from the hands of the British Government, but how can that happen when the British is determined to throw you in the arena of fratricidal war. Pray, therefore do not for Heavens sake run after the mirage of peaceful transfer of power.<sup>91</sup>

Many nationalist Muslims had to bear the brunt of both the frenzied Hindu mob as well as the Muslim League supporters. Congress leadership failed to protect such men, like Dr. Jamal Mahammad, who had served their party loyally. In another letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, Ashrafuddin underlined the frustration of nationalist Muslims who were caught unaware of Congress's ineptitude and lack of institutional support,

I have shifted my place of residence twice and yet do not feel safe. Bengal Congress organization during the dark days not even cared to enquire of us except in the case of Moulvi Nausher Ali. I am glad to inform you that some individual Congress friends are taking keen interest about us, but they have their limitation. It is a goonda Raj that is ruling us in this province and so we cannot expect any assistance from that quarter to save our lives and property. It is the Ministry itself which is responsible for creating this hell in our part of the country. Although the members of Muslims in the Congress is smaller than that of Hindus in Bengal, yet there are thousands of Muslim Congress members scattered all over the province. Our active Muslim Congress workers in different districts and villages run the risk of their lives all over the provinces in the present conditions created by the League. There is hardly any organisation or sincere friends to give protection to the rank and file of the Muslim Congress in this province. Bengal Provincial Congress organisation do (*sic*) practically nothing except issuing statements in the Press. In one word they are not concerned about us at all. We are on the crossfires. There have been cases in which Congress Muslims have been killed by the Hindus mob in the locality where the cream of Hindu society lives. Those who are at helm of affairs of the Congress in the city of Calcutta did not or dared not to move their little fingers to stop this carnage, for they have no sanction behind them, neither have they any organisation in the real sense of the term to support them. I am stating to you the bitter truth. Now I seek your advice in this vital matter. Please let me know how we should conduct ourselves in these awful days and save our lives both from the hands of the Leaguers and also Hindu mobs. Is there any chance of getting any protection from any quarter? Should we be treated like untouchables by the Congress organisation here?<sup>92</sup>

He concluded by saying that if Nehru was not invested with the power to face the contemporary situation, he should not continue in the Interim

Government. These letters brought to light not only the variegated perceptions of responsibility but also a deep sense of anguish that arose from a feeling of helplessness. Another Muslim, Abdur Rahman, who was a member of the Muslim League, was disillusioned with the Muslim League attitude. He was fiercely critical of Abul Hashim, the Secretary of BPML.

What Hashem Saheb did when slaughter of men was going on in Calcutta riots. He did not even pass by the side of the League office when thousands of people went to take shelter there. No trace of Hashem Saheb or his followers could be found at the time of rescuing Muslims from Bhowanipore, Sobhabazar, Lattopara area or in giving relief in such cases. The Muslim public took the responsibility of looking after themselves as no help from Provincial Leaguers were obtained. Hashem Saheb was at that time busy in maintaining the girls' of Mannujan Hall in the name of rescuing them. Now we find that the girls are being married with his follower youths and he himself is reported to be the candidate for one of the girls.<sup>93</sup>

It is true that the League, like the Congress, was quite intensely fractured, and there existed several factions within the party itself. For e.g., the supporters of Suhrawardy, Nazimuddin, or Abul Hashim always did not see eye to eye, though they were a part of the same League party structure. Hence, the anger that Abdur Rahman vented against Hashim might be representative of the groupism that existed within the party, but at the same, it also reflected some of the legitimate anxieties and frustration that ordinary Muslims were developing against the organised political leadership. The fact that it was, to a certain extent, the failure of main political parties to provide an amicable solution to the question of power sharing and in fact, their handling of matters led to the violence; it was even more natural for common people to become cynical of political leaders when communal violence overtook the city. Muslims, belonging to Congress as well as to the League, became disenchanted with their parties, resulting in a decline of confidence in organised political leadership.

## Conclusion

Historical and popular literature credit Gandhi for the "miracle" he did in Calcutta by restoring peace and tranquillity in local communities.<sup>94</sup> He came to Calcutta in October 1946 and then again in August 1947. Relegated from the frontline of Congress politics, Gandhi was given the opportunity to test the continued salience of his methods and philosophy in Calcutta, at a time when the familiar world was collapsing in an exceptional way. Indeed, Gandhi was successful in establishing peace in the region and the city did not witness any major communal conflagration at this scale in the coming years. Yet, under the purported peace, strong undercurrents of hostility continued that only accentuated in the years after Partition. The formation of the new postcolonial nation states stoked new kinds of political thinking that harped on a permanent demarcation of communal space, where Hindus belonged to India and Muslims belonged to Pakistan.<sup>95</sup> The Calcutta Riots of 1946

initiated a pattern of routine violence, fear, and communal propaganda that was imprinted on political life in West Bengal after Independence. From the beginning of 1949, Calcutta again witnessed a series of episodic violence, culminating in the communal riots of 1950. But this time, in the post-Partition context, it was fuelled with retributive vengeance and directed exclusively against Muslims in the city, who were now categorised as “national minorities” in the new nation state of independent India.<sup>96</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sikhs also played a significant part in the communal clashes and mostly sided with Hindus in the city, but the scope of this paper is restricted to the analysis of the Hindu-Muslim relations in the city.

<sup>2</sup> G.D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India* (Oxford University Press, 1990). Khosla’s work was first published in 1949. While the book is a rich collection of events during and in the immediate aftermath of Partition, the book frames the League and Muslims in general as primary aggressors during the Calcutta Riots of 1946; Dinesh Chandra Sinha and Ashok Dasgupta, *1946: The Great Calcutta Killing and Noakhali Genocide: A Historical Study* (Kolkata: Tuhina Prakashani, 2011). Sinha and Dasgupta focus on stories of the displacements of Hindu residents of the city, whereas an examination of the specificities of Muslim experiences is lacking in their historical narrative; Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots In Bengal, 1905–1947* (New Delhi: SAGE, 1990), Nariaki Nakazato, “Calcutta Disturbances: Colonial Administration, ‘Riots Systems’ and Local Networks,” in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, eds., Tanika Sarkar, and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015), and Anwesha Roy, *Making Riots, Making Peace: Communalism and Communal Violence, Bengal 1940–47* (India: Cambridge University Press, 2018), examines the anatomy of the riots, class composition of the rioters, behaviour of the rioting crowd, organisational structure, and the formal-informal networks. This article adds to this scholarship by examining a less studied area: local, daily experiences of ordinary Muslims of the city during the riots of August 1946.

<sup>3</sup> A. K. Pillai, “Direct Action Day,” *Dawn*, 1 September 1946.

<sup>4</sup> I use the word predominantly Hindu or predominantly Muslim area to mean that a particular community was a numerical majority in the locality in 1946. I used the Census of India 1941, Part IV, Bengal to ascertain whether Hindus or Muslims were a majority in each area. R. A. Dutch, *Census of India 1941, Part IV, Bengal* (Simla: Manager of Publications, Government of India Press, Delhi), 74–105.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the role of famine in destroying the collective consciousness of the city and in facilitating a communalisation of politics, see, Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots, and the End of Empire* (India: Harper Collins Publisher, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Sir F Burrows (Bengal) to Lord Pethick-Lawrence, August 23, 1946, in, Nicholas Mansergh, and Penderel Moon, eds., *Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power 1942–47*, vol. VIII (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1970), 293.

<sup>7</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), 432.

<sup>8</sup> “Collection of Information Concerning Politics,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 1104-46, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>9</sup> Sumit Sarkar, ed., *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India 1946* Part 1 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), xxi.

<sup>10</sup> “Note on the Causes of the Calcutta Disturbances August 1946,” Pyarelal Collection, M.K. Gandhi Papers, File No 148-Government of Bengal, Home Department Political, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Pyarelal Collection, File 148, “Notes the Causes,” 10–11.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Francis Taker, *While Memory Serves* (London: Cassel and Company Limited, 1950), 154.

<sup>13</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sinha, and Ashoke Das Gupta *1946: The Great Calcutta Killings and Noakhali Genocide: A Historical Study* (Calcutta: Tuhina Prakashani, 2011), 64.

<sup>14</sup> Extracts from “Abul Hashim’s Speech in the Legislative Convention,” *Star of India*, April 10, 1946.

<sup>15</sup> Extracts from “Nazimuddin’s Speech,” *Morning News*, August 11, 1946.

<sup>16</sup> Extracts from “Suhrawardy’s Speech,” *The Statesman*, August 5, 1946.

<sup>17</sup> Pyarelal Collection, “Notes the Causes,” File 148, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Pyarelal Collection, “Notes the Causes,” File 148, 15.

<sup>19</sup> “Leaflets Brought to the Notice of IB in connection with Direct Action Day,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 717D-46, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>20</sup> “Leaflets Brought to the Notice of IB,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 717D-46.

<sup>21</sup> Sinha, and Das Gupta, *1946: The Great Calcutta Killings*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> “Calcutta Muslim National Guards,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 634–44, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>23</sup> Pyarelal Collection, “Notes the Causes,” File 148, 15.

<sup>24</sup> “Leaflets Brought to the Notice of IB,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 717D-46.

<sup>25</sup> “Leaflets Brought to the Notice of IB,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 717D-46. The pamphlet claimed that Rahman was a former member of the Muslim League who had recently joined the Congress rank. It stated that Rahman had claimed that League had given orders to all local Muslims to destroy Hindus. It is noteworthy to mention that a notorious goonda, named Habibur Rahman or Habu goonda, played an active role during the riots under the banner of Muslim League. He died on the streets in the ensuing violence, but he remained committed in his loyalty to the League. It is not known whether the pamphlet was referring to Habu goonda or not because if it is the same person Habibur Rahman (or Habu goonda) did not shift his political allegiance as the pamphlet claimed. In this connection, it might be noted that rumours were widespread during the riot days, and it might not be amiss to argue that this pamphlet was trying to create panic among Hindu population in order to communalize them, by spreading rumours about Rahman’s claim. An extensive study of Habibur Rahman is done by Nakazato, “Calcutta Disturbances,” 291–94.

<sup>26</sup> “Leaflets Brought to the Notice of IB,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 717D-46.

<sup>27</sup> Pyarelal Collection, “Notes the Causes,” File 148, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Letter of Field Marshall Viscount Wavell to Lord Pethwick-Lawrence, August 21, 1946, in Mansergh, and Moon, eds., *The Transfer of Power*, 273–74.

<sup>29</sup> Extracts from “Reports of the IB Officials and Assistants Regarding the Incidents Witnessed during the Direct Action Day Declared by AIML Office of DIG, IB,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 717/46(6), West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>30</sup> “Reports of the IB Officials and Assistants Regarding the Incidents Witnessed during the Direct Action Day,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 717/46(6).

<sup>31</sup> “Reports of the IB Officials and Assistants Regarding the Incidents Witnessed during the Direct Action Day,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 717/46(6).

<sup>32</sup> Nariaki Nakazato, drawing upon Paul Brass’s concept of “institutional riot system,” has evaluated the role “specialists” of riots played in August 1946 and Nakazato has given specific attention to the antisocial elements or goondas and their significance during the riot days. Nakazato, “Calcutta Disturbances,” 283–319.

<sup>33</sup> Members from both the Muslim and Hindu community had goonda gangs, who were often members of mainstream political groups, like the Muslim League, Congress Socialist Party, or Revolutionary Socialist Party (India). During the Riots, most of these groups were communalised, as they turned into killers of the other community. For further details about the goonda gangs of Calcutta, see, Nakazato, “Calcutta Disturbances,” 283–96; and Ishan Mukherjee, “*Agitation, Riots, and the Transitional State in Calcutta, 1945-1950*” (Unpublished PhD diss, University of Cambridge 2017), 249–82.

<sup>34</sup> Mukherjee, “*Agitation, Riots*,” 1, 2, 262. The term goonda can be loosely translated as goons. For a specific definition of goonda in the colonial context, see, “Indian Political Situation, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India,” India and Burma Committee. Paper I.B. (45), Nicholas Mansergh, and Penderel Moon, eds., *Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power 1942–47*, vol. VI, no. 28 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1976 ), 70–1. >

<sup>35</sup> Mukherjee, “*Agitation, Riots*,” 262.

<sup>36</sup> Mukherjee, “*Agitation, Riots*,” 263. Mukherjee discusses the goonda-politician-media-police in Calcutta, particularly in the aftermath of the Riots.

<sup>37</sup> Ashis Nandy, “The Death of an Empire,” *Sarai Reader* 02 (2002): 14–21, <https://sarai.net/sarai-reader-02-cities-of-everyday-life/>; <https://southasia.ucla.edu/history-politics/independent-india/death-empire-ashis-nandy/>.

<sup>38</sup> Debjani Sengupta, “A City Feeding on Itself: Testimonies and Histories of ‘Direct Action’ Day,” *Sarai Reader* 06 (2006): 288–89, <https://sarai.net/sarai-reader-06-turbulence/>.

<sup>39</sup> Sengupta, “A City Feeding on Itself,” 290.

<sup>40</sup> *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry*, Record of Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence, vol 3 (Calcutta: Government of Bengal, 1947-48), 177.

<sup>41</sup> “Congress Muslim,” *Morning News*, September 2, 1946.

<sup>42</sup> *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* vol. 3, 175.

<sup>43</sup> *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* vol. 3, 175.

<sup>44</sup> “Reign of Terror in Kalighat: Murder, Loot, and Destruction by Hindu Mobs,” *Morning News*, August 28, 1946.

<sup>45</sup> *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* vol. 3. 179.

<sup>46</sup> “Savage Cruelty on Students,” *Morning News*, 28 August 1946.

<sup>47</sup> Mohammad Shamsul Alam Joarder, Interview by Farhana Afroz, and Joelle Raichle in Dhaka, January 16, 2012, *The 1947 Partition Archive, Stanford University*, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/1947-partition/catalog/rp602hw9371>.

<sup>48</sup> “Commission of Enquiry into the Recent Disturbances in Calcutta, Howrah and 24 Parganas. I.G.P’s Report,” Intelligence Branch Records, File No. 393/46, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>49</sup> *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* vol 3, 143.

<sup>50</sup> *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* vol 3, 17.

<sup>51</sup> The proceedings of the *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* focus on the role played by police in letting the communal fanfare to continue. Meticulous study of

police action during August 1946 is done by Ranabir Samaddar, "Policing a Riot-torn City: Kolkata, 16–18 August 1946," *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no.1 (2017):1-30. Through an examination of police conduct and crowd conduct during the riots, Samaddar shows how the geopolitical logic of riot, and the administrative logic of police ran against each other. By critically reading the *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* volumes, he uncovers the politics that framed the very discourse of the Commission and shows how that Commission itself was unable to use the knowledge it produced, through its interrogation, in governing the city.

<sup>52</sup> *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* vol.3, 155.

<sup>53</sup> Nandy, "The Death," 14–21.

<sup>54</sup> For communal patterns of living in Calcutta, see, Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 262–63; Joya Chatterji, "Of Graveyards and Ghettos: Muslims in Partitioned West Bengal 1947–1967" in *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics* eds. by Mushirul Hasan, and Asim Roy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 222–49.

<sup>55</sup> A, Hamid, "Letters to Editor," *Morning News*, August 27, 1946.

<sup>56</sup> Qazi Abdul Quddus, "Letters to Editor," *Morning News*, August 27, 1946.

<sup>57</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bangalnama* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2007), 151.

<sup>58</sup> Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 108, 259–60.

<sup>59</sup> Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 260.

<sup>60</sup> Anwesha Roy has also explored the efforts of anti-communal resistance in the city during the Calcutta riots. Anwesha Roy, "Calcutta and Its Struggle for Peace: Anti-Communal Resistance, 1946–1947," in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades* eds. Tanika Sarkar, and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (New Delhi, Social Science Press, 2015); Roy, *Making Riots, Making Peace*, 171–75.

<sup>61</sup> Ebadat Hossain, "Hindus Save Muslims," *Morning News*, August 31, 1946.

<sup>62</sup> Peary Lall Das, "Muslim Thanked," *Morning News*, August 24, 1946.

<sup>63</sup> Nandy, *The Death of an Empire*, 14–21.

<sup>64</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 692; Nikhil Chakravarty, "Those Who Fought to Save Brothers," *People's Age*, September 15, 1946.

<sup>65</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 685; "Workers' and Common Man's Heroism Against Fratricidal War," *People's Age*, September 1, 1946.

<sup>66</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 685.

<sup>67</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 692; Nikhil Chakravarty, "Those Who Fought."

<sup>68</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 685; "Workers' and Common Man's Heroism," *People's Age*.

<sup>69</sup> "Calcutta in Grip of Insane Lust for Patricidal Blood." *People's Age*, August 25, 1946.

<sup>70</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 684; "Workers' and Common Man's Heroism," *People's Age*.

<sup>71</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 683; "Workers' and Common Man's Heroism," *People's Age*.

<sup>72</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 684; "Workers' and Common Man's Heroism," *People's Age*.

<sup>73</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 684; "Workers' and Common Man's Heroism," *People's Age*.

<sup>74</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 693; Chakravarty, "Those Who Fought."

<sup>75</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 693; Chakravarty, "Those Who Fought."

<sup>76</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 693; Chakravarty, "Those Who Fought."

<sup>77</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 693; Chakravarty, "Those Who Fought."

<sup>78</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 693; Chakravarty, "Those Who Fought."

<sup>79</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 691; Chakravarty, "Those Who Fought."

<sup>80</sup> Sarkar, *Towards Freedom*, 691; Chakravarty, "Those Who Fought."

<sup>81</sup> "Peace Procession Parades Streets," *Hindustan Times*, August 19, 1946.

<sup>82</sup> “Peace Procession,” *Hindustan Times*.

<sup>83</sup> “Peace Procession,” *Hindustan Times*.

<sup>84</sup> “Congress-League Joint Appeal for Peace,” *Hindustan Times*, August 19, 1946.

<sup>85</sup> “Congress-League Joint Appeal,” *Hindustan Times*.

<sup>86</sup> N.N. Mitra, ed., *The Indian Annual Register, 1919–1947*, vol 57 (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2000), 187.

<sup>87</sup> “Draft Resolution, All India Congress Committee Papers,” File No G-60, P1 (Part II), 1946, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

<sup>88</sup> “Draft Resolution, All India Congress Committee Papers”. File No G-60, P1 (Part II), 1946.

<sup>89</sup> Extracts from news report, “Circular by Abul Hashim,” *Dawn*, October 4, 1946. Abul Hashim urged the Muslim public in Bengal to donate money to the Bengal Muslim League Relief Committee for rehabilitating the displaced Muslims.

<sup>90</sup> Das, *Communal Riots*, 187–92; Rakesh Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal: From Famine to Noakhali* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2005), 254–69; Roy, *Making Riots, Making Peace*, 164–66. Ranabir Samaddar engages with the issue by exploring urban politics during and in the aftermath of the riots by deconstructing the *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry* deliberations on questions of culpability, police action, and positions of political parties at a time when the colonial state was collapsing and losing its control over the city. Samaddar, “Policing a Riot-torn City,” 1–30.

<sup>91</sup> “Letter from Ashrafuddin to Kripalani,” AICC Papers, File No CL-8/1946, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

<sup>92</sup> “Collection of Materials for Newsletter etc.,” AICC Papers, File No G-1/1946, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

<sup>93</sup> “Leaflets Brought to the Notice of IB,” Intelligence Branch, IB File No. 717D-46.

<sup>94</sup> Roy, *Making Riots, Making Peace*, 214–46.

<sup>95</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay talks about the popular understanding of the communal demarcation of space between Hindus and Muslims in West Bengal. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “The Minorities in Post-Partition West Bengal: The Riots of 1950,” in *Minorities and the State: Changing Social and Political Landscapes of Bengal*, eds. Abhijit Dasgupta, Masahiko Togwa, and Abul Barkat (New Delhi: SAGE, 2011), 3–17.

<sup>96</sup> In the Great Calcutta Killings, members of both communities were victims of violence, while in the 1950 riots, it was specifically Muslims who were targets of attacks. Hindus became targets of communal attacks in East Bengal (East Pakistan).

# From the Margins: Refugee Women and Children in the Wake of India's Partition and Forced Displacement

By

**Pallavi Chakravarty\***

The Indian subcontinent witnessed the largest mass migration due to the Partition of the country in 1947. For the Muslim League, the creation of Pakistan was a long-held dream come true, while for the Indian National Congress it was a heavy price paid for independence from colonial rule. Although exceptions to such feelings, were prevalent in both parties, they were unanimously convinced that Partition was the final solution to all the evils of communitarian strife in the country and that once it was done, all problems would be resolved magically. This was a naive thought as Partition itself brought many problems, too much to handle for the nascent nation states, and then there was in this spectre the reality of “long Partition” which continues to haunt to this day the entire subcontinent. This paper does not address the question: Why the country was Partitioned?<sup>1</sup> Rather, the attempt here is to examine the impact of Partition on the most vulnerable population—women and children. There has been growing research on the theme of experiences of women and children in situations of such mass conflict. Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin pioneered in bringing to light the violence faced by women and thereafter how they emerged out of it. Likewise, in a more recent phase, Gargi Chakravarty, Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, Anjali Bharadwaj Datta, and Uditi Sen among others focussed on the image of the woman who survived it all and was not just a victim.<sup>2</sup> The focus on children's experiences has been very few due to a lack of adequate sources.<sup>3</sup> This article attempts to bring to light the impact of migration on women and children with a focus on the Partition in the east i.e., the Bengal side of the story, however, a few instances

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from the western side i.e., Punjab, will also be cited as examples. Using archival records as well as oral testimonies and evidence from literary works, the idea is to show the varied experiences of women and children during this episode of violence and mass displacement from home and it also looks at the different means adopted by them to deal with this traumatic experience. In situations of conflict and large-scale displacement, women and children become particularly vulnerable and hence their requirements need special attention as well as sensibilities from the host state and community. With forced mass displacements increasing globally, one can look back at Partition induced displacement and migration as an example of resilience that emerged out of the experiences and coping strategies of the refugee women and children coming out of one of the largest mass displacement experiences in the Indian subcontinent.

### **The Experience of Violence**

Undoubtedly, the violence experienced on account of the Partition of the country was unparalleled in its nature. It was not just “us” against “them” or one community against the other rather as pointed out by Urvasi Butalia, it was violence observed in the family as well in the name of protecting the honour of the “family, community, and nation.”<sup>4</sup> The violence was not just “real” and “direct” but also subtle and discreet, especially in Bengal where the calming presence of Gandhi had successfully prevented the bloodshed witnessed in Punjab. Such violence often was also “routine” or “everyday” and hence often ignored by the politicians and policy-makers but difficult to ignore by the victims of the same.<sup>5</sup> Then there was the other form of “bureaucratic violence” in the zealous guarding of the borders through the regulation of mandatory identity cards, permits, passports, and migration certificates for movement across the once united country.<sup>6</sup>

Women were the worst victims of such multiple of forms of violence. The state committed its own violence against women through an Act which seemed was introduced to protect them but ground realities show that it did more harm than benefit to these women.<sup>7</sup> The Act was the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act, 1949 which continued till 1954, and through this Act all women (and male children upto 16 years of age) who were abducted by the other community or forcibly converted were to be searched for and then recovered and restored back to the original community through the efforts of the State. Further, all inter-communal/faith marriages/unions after March 1, 1947, were declared null and void and all such women were to be “recovered” and “restored” back to the home of their original community to which they belonged. This resulted in the dual displacement of the women. Notions of purity and impurity were deeply ingrained in the psyche of the Hindu (and Sikh as well in the case of Punjab) household. A woman touched by a Muslim would never be accepted wholeheartedly by their family was a constant fear these recovered women often had, and if a child was born out of such a union (as the Act continued till 1954) then it would be even more

difficult to get back to family, as it was imperative that the child would not be taken in. Thus, such violence spelled doom for the women and the children. In such situations, women refused to return to their homes post-recovery from their abductors. Anis Kidwai while working with these women writes,

Muslims seethed at these refusals, young men flushing at this ignominious disgrace of their community's honour. Fathers would rant, 'Shame on such daughters! This is why a father prays so hard for a son. At least a son will be a support to his father in his lifetime, and after his father's death, guard the family honour!' As for the sons, the one sentiment that moved them was a desire for revenge and anger at their sisters. How could the immoral wantons want to live with those who had murdered their relatives!<sup>8</sup>

It was indeed their own families which refused or were certainly unwilling to accept these women back home post-recovery from their abductors/forced marriages and this has been the theme of classic literary works in Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindi languages. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (later made into a movie by the same name) and Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti* (also later made into a TV series) are notable examples depicting the plight of such women who were no longer accepted back into their own families. This was so commonplace that even Gandhi had to send out earnest pleas in prayer meetings to such families requesting them to accept back these women,

It is being said that the families of the abducted women no longer want to receive them back. It would be a barbarian husband or a barbarian parent who would say that he would not take back his wife or daughter. I do not think the women concerned had done anything wrong. They had been subjected to violence. To put a blot on them and to say that they are no longer fit to be accepted in society is unjust.<sup>9</sup>

Bengal, however, saw fewer such instances of abduction and forced marriages largely due to the "golden hour" of Gandhi.<sup>10</sup> But nonetheless, the Recovery and Restoration Act was applicable hereto, and through the rare mention in the literary works, one can read of such experiences of women. The classic example is Sutara in Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*.<sup>11</sup> Sutara had seen the rape and murder of her mother and sister by the Muslims of her own village. She was given shelter by her Muslim neighbour for months after which they felt it safe for her to return to her brother who had migrated to Kolkata. But instead of being happy and relieved to see the sister return, her brother and his wife were rather sceptical. They wondered what impact this would have on the life of their own daughter. Seeing this reluctance in accepting her back, Sutara leaves for Delhi where she finds more women like her abandoned by their families because of this touch by the "other," leaving Sutara in much wonder about whose fault it was after all! The crux, however, of the story is that the violence women faced ("real" or "psychological") is something which has not and cannot be written ever with full justice, and certainly something which men have not understood,

there is no recorded history of the real *stree parva*. . . .The *stree parva* humiliation by men?. The *stree parva* of all times? The chapter that remains in control of husband, son, father and one's own community—there is no history of that silent humiliation, that final pain. . . .The *stree parva* has not ended; the last word is not yet spoken.<sup>12</sup>

Instances of forcible conversion and abduction have been noted in the testimonies of the incoming refugee men and women in a survey conducted unofficially by social worker Ashoka Gupta and her ICS husband Saibal Gupta as part of their individual enquiry into reasons for migration in post-1964 Calcutta riots situation.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 1: Reasons for Migration to West Bengal as Narrated by the Incoming Migrants to Saibal Gupta and Ashoka Gupta**

Name and Age	Present Address	No. of Member	Address in East Bengal	Profession & Income	Reasons for Leaving East Bengal
Sm. Chiramani Devi (48 years)	Bora Kuli PS: Ramanagar DC: Murshidabad	13	Dharusha PS: Paba DC: Rajshahi	Agriculture Surplus income after meeting all expenses Rs.500	Five members of the family were murdered and himself ( <i>sic</i> ) severely injured in the riot at Dharusha. All property looted. Tobe ( <i>sic</i> , though) insecurity to life and property...had to come with family, 2 killed on the way and relieved of Rs.1000 cash and 70 <i>bharis</i> ( <i>sic</i> , measure of gold) of gold in border.
Bhairab Ch. Ghosh (30 years)	Char Kuthibari PS: Ramnagar DS: Murshidabad	5	Dharusha PS: Paba Dt: Rajshahi	Agriculture Monthly income Rs.130	Riots on the 16 <sup>th</sup> Baisakh led to massacre of Hindus of all ages. 24 of his own relations were killed. Pregnant women murdered after which delivery took place. Gruesome stories of women's breasts being cut off and babies being dashed against trees mentioned. Relieved of cash and ornaments at the border.
Bhatarani Ghosh (18 years)	c/o Dhananjoy Ghosh Dt: Murshidabad	6 (including her parents)	Dhuroil Dt: Rajshahi	Husband's income Rs.5000 a year and father's income	Father's house looted on 12 <sup>th</sup> Baisakh and on 16 <sup>th</sup> Baisakh,

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and brother and sister who were killed)	Rs.3000 a year (trade and agriculture)	father's property was acquired using false documents and when opposed by husband he was threatened murder hence they left their home and property with husband's parents in the home. Everyday Muslims would wash beef in the tank and throw cow carcass after killing it in their open grounds.
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**Source:** Ashoka Gupta Papers, School of Women Studies, Jadavpur University  
Note: PS: Police Station; DT or Dt.: District; SM: Srimati

Thus, through this very brief selection of eyewitness accounts, one can see the varied forms of violence refugees in general and refugee women complained about upon reaching India. The form of violence which was experienced in Bengal was often dismissed as “psychological violence.” With only a few instances of “real violence” (other than the experience in 1946, 1950, 1964, and 1971)<sup>14</sup> and yet a continuing influx of refugees, the state tried hard to show that there was no real need for this migration which was more out of psychological factors and rumours.

The official correspondences between India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Bidhan Chandra Roy (Chief Minister of West Bengal) regarding the attitude of the central government towards the migration in the east are instructive in this regard. Nehru opposed strongly any such migration from East Pakistan,

I have been quite certain, right from the beginning that everything should be done to prevent Hindus in East Bengal from migrating to West Bengal. . . . If as you suggest things have gone too far already then naturally we shall do what we can but I shudder at the magnitude of the misery that will come in its train. To the last I would try to check this migration even if there is war.<sup>15</sup>

If such was the attitude of the State, that of the executives was not too different either. Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay (ICS and Rehabilitation Commissioner for 24 Parganas, West Bengal, and a refugee himself) noted that while fear as a factor for migration was genuine, it was also psychological—“*manoshikē nipiron,*” as fear centered around the concept of preserving honour of self and of the community as that embodied in the unviolated body of the women was a constant concern of some refugee men. One of the refugees in response to Bandyopadhyay's query on why he migrated, narrated that often when the women went to take a bath in the pond, some Muslim men would remark, “*Pak Pak Pakistan, Hindur Bhatar Mussolman*” (This is Pakistan, the husband of a Hindu will be a Mussalman). In

yet another incident narrated by another refugee, it was said that once one of the Muslims called out to the ladies in the pond “*E bibi, bela je bede cholo. Aar deri keno? Ebar ghore cholo*” (Oh Bibi, it is evening now, why delay any further, let's go home).<sup>16</sup> A first-hand account of this omnipresent fear in the minds of Hindu women can be observed as Nalini Mitra's narrates that “it became increasingly difficult for me to pass through a locality infested (*sic*) by Bihari Muslims on my way to college.” But it was only when in the workplace, too, she heard obscene remarks being directed towards her, that she realised it was time to leave and “at that instant I realised that it would no longer be possible to stay in my beloved motherland. How could one live in such a filthy environment?”<sup>17</sup> Such threats, real or psychological, of rape, abduction, or forced marriages of women, be it Muslim or Hindu by the “other” community compelled families on either side of Bengal to migrate.<sup>18</sup>

Partition narratives of refugee women in Bengal have primarily remained as discussion of the experiences of *bhadramahila* (upper caste, upper/middle class women), while those from the *nimmoborgo* (the lower caste, lower class women) have for long been marginalised or rarely been written about. Off late, works on Bengal Partition have brought back the focus on the dimension of caste within the ambit of Partition studies.<sup>19</sup> Sarbani Banerjee pointed out that *bhadralok* orientation of the heroic narratives of the sacrifice of refugee women has been immortalised in *bhadralok* literature and cinema and Dalit experiences of Partition challenge such a homogenous representation of refugee plight in Bengal. The largely absent figure of the lower caste Bengali refugee in the classic works of Bengali literature and cinema is a stark reminder of the caste-blind attitude towards post-Partition rehabilitation measures from below as well. Even within this marginalisation of the experience of the Dalit refugee in post-Partition Bengal, the Dalit refugee woman suffers from a dual marginalisation based on both caste and gender. Hence while, as noted by Banerjee, Dalit authors like Manoranjan Byapari and Adhir Biswas have written volumes on their experiences and the marginalisation they faced, even they have hardly breached the theme of Dalit refugee women and their sufferings during and in post-Partition times. The women of their own families are mentioned only in stray references, with the central plot revolving around the men alone while women are depicted as compliant, pious, and devoted to family and God. Salil Sen's cult play, *Notun Yehudi (The New Jew)*, only fleetingly refers to the lower caste family of Keshtodas (a *Namasudra* peasant and house help of the upper caste refugee family he has crossed the border with). And in this too, his wife Ashalata (introduced at the end of the casting page) is further marginalised as she hardly has a voice—be it in the decision to migrate from East Pakistan, or in the decision to purchase a plot of land in Calcutta where, ultimately, her husband was cheated and whatever little money they had was lost in the process. She is shown to be in quiet compliance with her husband's decisions be they right or wrong.

While these women are either lost or only fleetingly remembered in personal memoirs and literature, the official archives throw some light on

their predicament either when they are subject of violence (the 1950 riots were primarily attacks on the Namasudra population in East Pakistan) or actors in violence (the police records regularly maintained a section on protests and *dharnas* by women from camps, who were once again primarily lower caste refugee women/families). In his very public resignation from the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly, the towering leader of the Dalits in Bengal, Jogendranath Mandal, mentioned the violence afflicted upon the Dalit women in East Pakistan. In his open letter to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan, he described the atrocities that the Scheduled Castes (SC) faced in East Pakistan. He talked of the betrayal of the Government of Pakistan with respect to their responsibility towards the Dalit-Muslim alliance and how it was difficult for any non-Muslim to continue to stay in Pakistan. He received several petitions from other SC leaders vis-à-vis the worsening situation of the SCs in both West and East Pakistan. He noted how it was becoming impossible to stay on as previously envisaged. One such petition he received was from Manohar Dhali, East Pakistan MLA, and Scheduled Caste Federation member, narrating the atrocities that occurred in the Khulna district in East Pakistan in the following words,

All sorts of atrocities were committed in that area of Chitalmari Union. Women were criminally assaulted and raped, properties looted, cattle taken away, persons brutally assaulted as a result of which some had already died, women were kidnapped, converted, and married, images of deities broken, cows have been slaughtered and some families have been converted into Islam. All these atrocities are said to have been done by the Muslims of the locality with the help of the Police . . . (all this needed to be stopped immediately else it would become) impossible for the members of the minority community, especially the Scheduled Castes, to live here.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the experience of violence for women, be it from the *bhadralok* or the *nimnborgo*, was universally traumatic and one which was ridden with silences for long—silence from the women, the family, and the State. Only with chance discoveries in the alternate archives and/or careful gleaning of the official archives have the various forms of violence come to light.

Likewise, even less documented have been the experiences of children who have witnessed such unprecedented violence and forced displacement from home/homeland. Nonetheless, in all, a myriad of experiences from their perspective can be observed. There were children born to recovered women, children who were part of the refugee families, who had seen death and murder, loot and arson, and who too had to leave their homes behind and migrate to a different land with their parents and families; and then there were those, though very few, who were simply abandoned by their own family on the long trek to safety.<sup>21</sup> Children born (or to be born) to the recovered women faced a hopeless future and their case was hotly debated in political and social circles. Gandhi's view on such children was absolute—they belonged to the mother and when they grew up, they could choose their own religion. He said,

If a girl is a Sikh, in my eyes she remains a Sikh, if a Hindu, she remains a Hindu. If my daughter has been violated by a rascal and made pregnant, must I cast her and her child away? Nor can I take the position that the child so born is Muslim by faith. Its faith can only be the faith of the mother who bore it. After the child grows up he or she will be free to take up any religion.<sup>22</sup>

In a debate on this subject, Y.D. Gundevia suggested that such children should be treated as “war babies” and left behind in the country in which they were born. This view was contested by N. Gopaldaswamy Ayyangar, who like Gandhi, believed that such a child should stay with the mother. The final decision was reached upon the intervention of Mridula Sarabhai (a leading advocate for the recovery and restoration of such women) suggesting that these women would be allowed to take their children with them to the transit camp in Jullundur and stay there for fifteen days, after which they would have to decide whether they wanted to keep them or not. On the ground, field workers like Kamlabehn Patel agreed with the view that the mother should not be separated from the child, and in fact, in many cases, it was really difficult to do so, yet there were instances where women in the age group 30–31 willingly left behind these children in the state from where they were being “recovered” as they felt “ashamed” to reunite with their families with these children; while on the other hand, the first-time mothers offered much resistance at such a separation but in the end had to let go for the sake of “acceptability” back home.<sup>23</sup> Patel narrates how, then, such children were flown from the camp in Jullundur to Allahabad where they would be housed in the Kasturba Bal Niketan Children’s Home,

There was an air service between Amritsar and Delhi. We asked them if they would agree to take the babies to Delhi, they agreed. Then, we would put each baby in a basket with an envelope containing its history. The basket also had a few clothes and other things. The basket would then be handed over to the air hostess who would hand it over to one of our social workers in Delhi. From here it was sent again by plane to Allahabad. Once there it would be taken by our social workers to the hospital. I think we sent across some two hundred or so babies in this way.<sup>24</sup>

Here as well, it was not as if their future was really bright—some of them were adopted (male children were gladly taken up by Sikh families) but female children, unfortunately, often ended up trafficked or as domestic helps. A large number of them also ended up on the streets. In fact, there were also references from the social workers that these children were possibly taken by the missionaries and converted to Christianity.

Yet what this does show is that while the women who were abducted could not exercise any choice in their recovery and restoration to their original community and nation, the children born out of such unions were not recovered and restored. They were either allowed to remain with the father (if identified) or more likely that they were sent to different children’s homes. While this arises out of concern for the “acceptability” of the women back

into their original homes, it also shows the patriarchal notion with which the State was operating. Women could not decide where they wished to live and could also not take any decision with regard to the final fate of their children born out of such liaisons. And since the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act defined abducted persons as women of any age and male children of sixteen years, it again shows that women of any age were inferior to males above sixteen years in the decision-making process. Put very succinctly by Butalia,

Just as the abducted women had to be brought back into the fold of their religion, their nation, community and family, so also their children had to be separated from them, rendered anonymous, so that the women could once again be reinstated as mothers, and the material proof of their liaisons made less threatening or dangerous by being taken away from the mothers.<sup>25</sup>

The condition of the unborn children was far worse—they were denied the right to live as illegal abortions took place in the transit camps or in the women's homes. The State, discreetly giving in to the sensibilities of the receiving family, arranged for the "cleansing" or "*safaya*" of such women in the camps itself. Talking about it, the Camp Commandant of a Women's Home in Karnal, Damyanti Sahgal,

points out that the process of getting rid of children in the womb—"safaya" she calls it (in Jullundur this was known as 'medical treatment') was taken up by the state, and specific hospitals were targeted (she names Kapur hospital in Delhi) which, according to her, made their fortune on such cleaning operations. And this out of a special budget put aside by the state, and at a time when abortion was not yet legal in India. Kamlaben Patel corroborated this. She said that pregnant women were taken to Jullundur where they were kept for periods of up to three or four months—enough time for an abortion—and given what she referred to as "medical treatment"<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the children who came along with the refugee families (male or female-headed families) as a result of the decision to migrate or having been pushed out of their homes upon the Partition of the country, the evidence of nostalgia for a way of life lost, of friends left behind, of disruption in education/employment opportunities and of dreams shattered can be found in their recorded testimonies. There are also the stories of growing up too fast to fend for the family and thus a loss of childhood. Bani Bhattacharya, born on January 5, 1934, in Bogra district in present-day Bangladesh, nostalgically recalls the school built by her grandfather for the education of the children of her village. She tells how she studied in that school with a scholarship till Class VI and could have continued to study as well as pursue higher education had the Partition not disrupted their lives. She mentioned how the family had even celebrated every year the Independence Day of Pakistan even though the heart belonged to Netaji and Gandhi. The family decided to migrate much late in 1950 after the Bagerhat riots in East Pakistan when they saw that staying on could not be an option anymore with hostility all around. As she recalls her



dreams of higher education one can see her eyes well up and in tears, she says, “*deshbbager karo bhalo hoye ni*” (No one benefited from the Partition). She emphasised repeatedly that “I lost my land, my home, my education.”<sup>27</sup>

Then there were the abandoned children—parents killed, or families lost or often parents themselves left these kids behind unable to protect them—who too were sent to special homes for children but again their future too remained blur. Citing one instance from the oral narratives collected by Urvashi Butalia, Savitri Makhijani (a record collector with the United Council of Relief and Welfare, the organisation which looked into the works of relief and rehabilitation) mentioned that once when a large camp at Lahore was shut down, they saw some dozen children were left behind who seemed to belong to no one. So, upon the advice of Mridula Sarabhai, they were sent to one of her Homes in Delhi. Advertisements for their adoption were aired on All India Radio and received positive responses, however, the preference was for male children. But in the one case when a girl child was taken in by a family, immediately after two or three days she was returned with the complaint that she was “too naughty”. It was apparent that the person had wanted to adopt the girl child more as a domestic help rather than as a child.<sup>28</sup>

Through an analysis of the oral testimonies sometimes unknown and unexpected themes emerge. An interview with Prem Kakkar (aged twelve at the time of Partition) reveals the terror of violence within the family in the psyche of a child. She overheard her mother once telling that the worse had started and so she would shoot her four daughters rather than let the “others” get to them and then shoot herself in the end. However, eventually her mother decided to take them on flight to Delhi and there the family once again restarted their fortunes having lost much material wealth in the looting and forced migration.<sup>29</sup> Here was a child of twelve listening to such discussions of possible death at the hands of one's own mother, the life-giver. And while this story has a happy ending, the death of many female children at the hands of their own mother or close relatives has been documented in glorious terms, celebrated as martyrdom for the family community and nation.<sup>30</sup>

What children did during these days of mass violence and communal frenzy is also often chanced upon through these narratives. Murad (a *tonga* driver in Lahore) notes how indifferent he had been for long to all the looting and rioting happening around him then as a child and it was only after experiencing threats and anxieties of death and harm that the child suddenly matured from a phase of indifference to growing up and becoming more watchful for self and survival.

I would always be playing...My maternal uncles took me to their homes. They thought I would be killed while I was playing out on the streets...we were attacked by a group of Sikhs and then they left after killing my uncle among others. There was another uncle of mine. He came after some time, shook me and said what now. We should run away, I said. They would not spare us even if they killed my uncle. [a train came and we boarded for Pakistan, at some distance it stopped and 4 of these boys got down. They were offered *lassi*

(sweet milk)] I said no, I will not drink lassi, they must have poisoned it...All three of them had lassi but I did not. I said better to drink river water, the soldiers have checked it. Its free of poison. We came back. All three collapsed and were dead.<sup>31</sup>

So, the little boy, from playing around even amidst bullets completely ignorant of the consequences, had, in a space of few days, seen a murder in front of his eyes, just escaped from murder himself (and also advised his uncle), as well as was looking out for himself for all possible dangers, successfully even avoiding it. The narrative further goes on to add how he ultimately reached Lahore with the little money he had saved for this journey and how he manages to find odd jobs till finally, he becomes a tonga driver. Hereto how through his ingenious means he was able to learn the roads of Lahore which were completely alien to him all this while. He would ask "the passengers when to turn, where do you want to get to, which road leads to your place. *I tried to hide the fact that I knew nothing...I tried to be clever so that he (passenger) could not find out I was not a Lahori.*"<sup>32</sup>

While these narratives give us some idea of the disruption in the lives of the children who came with the refugee families, at the other end, the children born to abducted women who became simply untraceable, leave us with questions and silences: Where are these children? What are their stories? These are the known silences of this chapter in history. Even if these children were made to stay back (with paternity deciding their fate as noted above), apart from stray references in the accounts of the social workers about the Kasturba Bal Niketan (in Delhi and Allahabad) or the Sharda Bhawan in Allahabad, these children of Partition live without a history, without a trace. Again, at the other end of the spectrum, there are those children from such Homes for Women who have gone on to attain some level of professional success and they too do not want to recollect this phase of their life. Butalia cites the instance of a successful female doctor who lived with her widowed mother and little brother in the Gandhi Vanita Ashram, Jalandhar (Jullundur), and was brought up by the social workers there. However, the benefit of an upper class background allowed her some privileges like entire education being paid by the Ashram and winning scholarships to study medicine and finally coming out of the Ashram. Today she refuses to recollect these humble roots of her origin, insisting that she was a self-made woman, her mother was different from the Ashram women (not abducted but widowed hence not "impure" or "tainted"), and thus does not acknowledge the contribution of the Ashram in her professional life.<sup>33</sup>

### **Surviving the Trauma and Displacement**

The story of women and children in post-Partition India was a dual narrative of living with violence as well as "coming out of Partition."<sup>34</sup> Refugee women and children ought to be a category exclusive to the refugee in general. The programme of rehabilitation of refugees across the world keeps only the refugee in general in mind. Only in those cases some special care is extended

to refugee women and children where there is no adult male head as guardian for these refugee women and children. Male refugee children are taken care of only till a certain age (sixteen or eighteen years of age) after which it is expected that they can take care of themselves, and any female member of their family too is disenfranchised from the relief measures provided by the State. Thus, globally speaking as well as in the Indian context, the relief measures for refugees are centered around the male refugee and his family. It is only in the absence of this male head of the refugee family that the refugee women and children are visible to the protector State. This sort of patriarchal notion of refugee rehabilitation programme has often come under criticism by the relief workers, civil society, and refugees themselves. In such a scenario, the individual efforts of women and children for coming out of such catastrophic events are rarely documented in the official archive and it is here that alternate sources become primary for our research into these images of refugee women and children.

In the aftermath of Partition and large-scale displacement due to it, the State came up with exclusive camps for women and children—Women's Homes as they were called, or the other option was Permanent Liability Camps/Homes. Single or "unattached" refugee women (i.e., those without any male guardian) were sent to such Homes directly from the border or the temporary relief camps. It was expected that after imparting some training in domestic crafts like stitching, knitting, tailoring, basket-weaving, etc, these women would be able to eke out a living for themselves by getting employed in small jobs or setting up their individual businesses. But those who could not earn enough or who were much older and/or incapacitated could continue to stay on in these homes as Permanent Liability for the State and survive on the doles handed out to them. But women who had male children would eventually have to leave these homes as it was expected that the son would get a job through training centres and such women would then be dependent upon the son and not the State anymore. In reality, women with sons left these homes as soon as the sons turned major and got jobs, but those with daughters could not go to live with married daughters and hence continued to be the recipient of doles from the State.

Women living in these camps often complained about the unsanitary conditions of living, insufficient doles, lack of opportunities to work, and inadequate relief and rehabilitation aid offered here. In the process of making their demands and pointing out their grievances, refugee women often got politicised. In Bengal, they often participated in the refugee movement led by the Communist Party here. The camps also became places where the women became easy prey to sexual predators outside or inside. We find Ashoka Gupta ruing the fact that the help given in the Camps and Women's Homes was always inadequate and could never fully financially empower and stabilise the position of women or the family: "We tried to rescue some of them. We organised vocational training, gave sewing lessons and other such training to give them a respectable means of earning their living. But the truth was how much money could something like sewing bring

in? Especially when one's very sustenance, the medical treatment of one's whole family, depended on it?"<sup>35</sup> In all likelihood, she argues, it was quite natural that such women would then take to other forms of work (hinting, perhaps, at sex work).

Apart from the State sponsored aid, refugee women often showed individual initiative as well in the process of rehabilitation. Bengali cinema and literature are rich in such images of the working refugee woman—the teacher, the clerk, the sales representative, and often the sex worker too.<sup>36</sup> Manikuntala Sen notes in her autobiography the impact of the refugee women from East Pakistan upon the employment scene in Bengal and argues that it was the women of East Bengal who taught the women of West Bengal to come out and work. She remarks, "I noticed a positive awakening, particularly amongst women. Had they not been uprooted, this change might not have occurred so quickly....I was often on tour and whenever I boarded a train, I used to run into these women who travel up and down, crowding the compartments meant for women, and for men too. . . . I learnt that some were at school, some at college, while others were teaching."<sup>37</sup> The women were also found to be equally comfortable speaking amongst themselves the rustic *Bangal* language in the railway compartments on their way to work or back from work as well as the more sophisticated Bengali language of the West Bengal dialect in their workplace in Kolkata.

This positive side of the great divide in the lives of refugee women is noted in the official records too. According to a survey conducted by the Directorate of the National Employment Service, West Bengal, there was an increase in the demand for employment among women in the post-Partition era. This survey, while commenting upon the trends in female employment, also stated that as soon as the family was in a relatively better position, the traditional norms of the family came back into existence and women withdrew from the work scene. Maximum number of women who were employed were unmarried, and post-marriage these women often left their jobs; and more educated women were to be found in higher income groups, although their numbers were few. These women were employed in schools and offices (as clerks and typists) and were mostly unmarried. Most of the married women constituted the lower-income groups. They, possibly, were those who assisted their husbands in agricultural work or were employed in domestic services. In conclusion, the official survey maintained that women preferred clerical jobs and aspired to train for the same. The solution, thus, recommended to solve the issue of securing employment for women was that there should be more such training institutes that could impart training to women in office work.<sup>38</sup>

And very recently a statistical analysis of the impact of the refugee women in the field of domestic service has been carried out by Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty.<sup>39</sup> Through very extensive research on the classifieds of the time as well as census data on employment, they are able to show that after the Partition of Bengal, domestic services became one the largest recruiters of refugee women from East Bengal. Classifieds in widely circulated newspapers clearly indicate the high demand for refugee women as

domestic help which in turn again reflects the “feminisation of labour” argument. Even more so now it was these refugee women who were replacing the upcountry men (from Bihar) in their stronghold over this sector since colonial times. Using census data, they were further able to show that in most jobs (medical, health, education, and majorly domestic services), the displaced women greatly outnumbered the women from the host population. They also observed that domestic services had become one of the most “acceptable” jobs for refugee women because it was seen as an extension of their domestic roles. The classifieds sometimes hint at this aspect: “Wanted for a family of only husband and wife a female who would do household chores like a family member. Bed, board and pocket money offered.”<sup>40</sup> However what is also noted is that in several such classifieds (as cited above too), women’s salary is mentioned as “pocket money.” Hence, not only the State but even the potential recruiters amongst the public considered women’s earnings as mere supplementary.

Thus, from the discussion above, two points about the general scene of employment of refugee women are clear: first, the refugee women took to jobs only in dire circumstances, and also that once the family was settled it was the women who were the first to be withdrawn from the employment scene. Second, in many ways the question of too many potential employees and little work in contrast as well as the notion that women getting paid less compared to men allowed for the feminisation and casualisation of labour.<sup>41</sup> It cheapened the market rate (at least in domestic services or in other unorganised labour sector.) Women were trying all they could do to steady the boat of the sinking family. So, with no special privilege given exclusively to the refugee women, unless one was an “unattached” refugee woman, the struggle of these doubly marginalised sections (by way of gender and by way of being refugee in a new state) was even more noteworthy. Their struggles were simply unending—during and post-Partition. Their children recollect not having seen their mothers who were otherwise omnipresent in their lives before Partition but were forced to look for work outside the *antahpur* (inner quarters of the home). Such exposures saw these children also growing up before their age. Hena Chaudhuri’s narrative points to one such example of a childhood sans the omnipresent figure of the mother. She refers to the earnings her mother sent from their home in East Bengal as crucial to their survival in West Bengal. Her mother had stayed back in East Bengal to take care of their home and land, the earnings from which she sent to their family residing in Chandmari Camp near Calcutta. She said that their “financial condition turned from bad to worse...Ma did her best to send as much cash as possible...She wanted us to maintain the same high standards of living that we had before migrating. Alas, this remained a dream...Ma had to bear the entire burden, which she continued to do cheerfully.”<sup>42</sup>

For children, both Hindu and Muslim, post-Partition times were days of broken dreams as they were dealing with a disruption from the past. Mohammad Hafizur Rahman, who did not leave Calcutta despite the riots, poignantly recollects his “unpleasant Childhood” days, and tells that while he

continued to live in his ancestral house in Kolkata, getting higher education and a government job was extremely difficult for him as time and again he was reminded that he was a Muslim who should go to Pakistan. Despite being meritorious he had to appear for exams as an external candidate and it was only because he was truly talented that the Principal of St. Xavier's College gave him admission. He built onto this opportunity that he got but regrets that despite all merit he could not get a government job. Very subtly and discreetly, according to him, he was singled out as a Muslim applicant.<sup>43</sup> Thus, not only a nostalgia for the lost homeland but also for the lost opportunities due to this massive disruption in the form of Partition and resulting migration remained prevalent emotion amongst the children coming out of Partition. Refugee children, having come to a new land, had to deal with multiple changes of space, of roles (their own as well as of people around them), of acquaintances, etc. The loving mother, the caregiver who was present all day and night became a fleeting presence in their lives in the quest to help the family survive. Like Murad, many children matured faster and transitioned into early adulthood either for themselves or to take up the "burden" of the family. Life in the camps of refugee children had often been painted as idle with nothing other than playing around, getting reprimanded by the elders, or being ignored by the family. Schooling options were limited and only the most focussed among this group could make any use of them. Life was about survival and searching means for the same.

Refugee children in male-headed families recollect their contribution to setting up squatter colonies of Kolkata which were a unique symbol of refugee assertion in Bengal. The vacant plots of land were forcibly occupied by desperate refugees (normally *bhadralok*, i.e., upper caste/ middle class) to set up their temporary homes, zealously guarding day and night these makeshift homes from being bulldozed by the owners of these lands (State, private Hindu and/or Muslim) till finally, it became an accepted colony in government records. The frontline of defence in all such clashes were refugee women and children. The police too noted with a sense of helplessness that they had to go slow and with much control since women and children were invariably used as the first line of defence to be breached while removing the squatting refugees. But what this also shows is that children too were aware of what their role was and hence one can understand the idea of loss of a regular stress-free childhood that these witnesses lament about in their recollections of those days.

On changing roles and relations Kalyan Kumar Sanyal, another refugee from Kumarkhali in East Pakistan, recollects that what he saw in Kolkata and in his village in East Pakistan was "unbelievable." Hindus and Muslims, all erstwhile known to each other and who had been living together, turned enemies overnight and started looting and killing each other. His family had to flee from their ancestral home literally with just the clothes they had and his father, a government servant, became the sole breadwinner for a family of twenty-five people living in a four-room house. The entire interview details the good relations between the Hindus and Muslims in East Pakistan.<sup>44</sup> His father being a government servant, they had travelled across most districts

of East Pakistan, and it is from these observations that he finds it most “unbelievable” that the same people were now against each other.<sup>45</sup> Snigdha Sen, recollects vividly the beautiful home left behind in Comilla and the scenic beauty of her town, and peaceful relations in Comilla even when they finally migrated, more out of fear and hearsay than out of any real experience of violence seen or experienced themselves. But what is also remarkable in this recollection is the insistence that she was only five or six years old at the time of their migration to Kolkata and yet, in her own words, no other child of that age could recollect the whole village and ambiance left behind as she could. This she insists because she still feels the loss of her homeland and misses the same to this day. And since it is a videographed interview, one can see the welling up of eyes and choking up of voice as she narrates the lost homeland. She also talks of how her father sold his printing press and started a new business in Calcutta, but it was her mother who for the first time came out of the inner quarters, took up a teaching job in a school and it was through those finances that the family started to revive. Her own schooling, she attributes to her mother's insistence on higher education for the children. She ultimately went on to become a Professor of History in a reputed college in Calcutta. But to this day it is the memory of the lost home, the lost childhood, of an overworked mother, that keeps coming back to her.<sup>46</sup>

Looking at the memoirs of the *nimnoborgo*, Manoranjan Byapari and Adhir Biswas, both have recounted in their memoirs how excited they were to move into Calcutta, the City of Joy, even at the cost of Partition. For them, had it not been for Partition, their lives would continue as local helps to the big zamindars, forever dreaming of making the big transition to city life. Partition and displacement as well as the refugee tag, at least for this marginal group, in their opinion, brought the opportunity to come to the city, eat in the camps, and get free education and whoever wanted to study could also do so and it worked as a path of social mobility. Moving to Calcutta was an opportunity they lapped up at the first instance without any regret of the past left behind for, in their own words, there was nothing left for them to look forward to in their villages. The city, on the other hand, and government aid in Calcutta, no matter how paltry it was, offered them the hope of a better life chiefly through the educational opportunities provided in the government-run camp schools.<sup>47</sup> Partition marked a rupture in the lives of the women and children from the lower caste just as it did for those from the upper caste, yet, at the same time, there were a few positives drawn by some refugee women who found new opportunities before them which would not have been possible pre-Partition,

From there [to] here the social respect and status has increased. Here people are more decent, there it was a village, there was no town, there were too many mosquitoes. Here it is a town meaning there are many things to see. There it would be the usual, everybody would be busy with their own families and profession. The life has become better... *The division of the country was good because in Pakistan there was no such thing as education.* Here women study amongst men and in Pakistan everything was restricted to the village and work, for instance a

Halder would do fishing, a farmer would do farming meaning there was no touch with education. *Here people even if they starve they will try someway to educate their children. Like I have not studied but I have educated my four children till class tenth. I could not afford their further education. Maybe they will educate their children even more.*<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Women and children were the most vulnerable victims of Partition displacement, and such victimisation was amplified not only due to violations from the perpetrator but also due to the lack of recognition from the State and other agencies about the special needs of care and justice while providing relief and rehabilitation to women and children. Asha Hans notes that the “woman-child dyad has more specific needs than the general group of refugees,”<sup>49</sup> and the government should be extremely mindful of their specific needs. And while one must be mindful of their special needs, it does not imply that these groups are to be treated as those who are completely dependent upon the State and devoid of their own will and agency. The above instances have shown that while the State tried to be the grand patriarch and the parent-protector for these vulnerable groups, yet in so doing the individual will and agency of these groups were being denied or ignored—women had no choice in the recovery, and restoration programme (neither over their own self nor over their children); children too, were under the care and protection of the State till they reached the age of majority and thereafter, irrespective of their stage of rehabilitation they were left to fend for themselves and their dependent families. Any rehabilitation programme must centre around the individual rather than the group and be tailored to their specific needs. Rehabilitation is not solely the responsibility of the State, rather also of the host society to make the incoming migrants feel at home, especially when coming from traumatic experiences of violence and forced displacement. Nonetheless, what is also evident from the above instances is that using their individual agency women and children were able to come out of this event even though there might be many who could not. At the end of the day, the human tendency to try to survive against all odds does come into play here. And those are the evidence which come from the narratives of those who survived. But that the scars remained is also evident from the testimonies of the children coming out of Partition.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion on Partition historiography, see, Joya Chatterji, “New Directions in Partition Studies,” *History Workshop Journal* 67, no. 1 (2009): 213–20; Joya Chatterji, “Partition Studies: Prospects and Pitfalls,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (May 2014): 309–12; Pankhuree R. Dube, “Partition Historiography,” *The Historian*



77, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 54–79; David Gilmartin, “The Historiography of India’s Partition: Between Civilization and Modernity,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (2015): 23–41.

<sup>2</sup> Jasodhara Bagchi, and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and The Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, 2 vols. (Kolkata: Stree, 2003 and 2008); Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Viking, 1998); Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005); Ritu Menon, *No Woman’s Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004); Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000); Anjali Bharadwaj Datta, ““Useful” and “Earning” Citizens? Gender, State, and the Market in Post-Colonial Delhi,” *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 6 (2019): 1–32; Udit Sen, “Spinster, Prostitute or Pioneer? Images of Refugee Women in Post-Partition Calcutta,” Max Weber Programme EUI Working Papers MWP 2011/34, European University Institute, 2011, <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/19216>.

<sup>3</sup> Rachna Mehra, “The Birth Pangs of a Divided Nation,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 75 (2014): 1247–52.

<sup>4</sup> Urvashi Butalia, “Community, State and Gender: On Women’s Agency during Partition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 17 (April 24, 1993): 12–24

<sup>5</sup> Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–65* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Memoirs of social workers like Anis Kidwai [*Azadi Ki Chaon Mein* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1990)], Kamlabehn Patel [*Torn from the Roots: A Partition Memoir*, trans. Uma Randeria (Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2006)] cites examples of women who did not want to return back home through this programme as they felt that they might not be accepted in their families after this violation of their honor at the hands of the other. Archival records too, as found in Rameshwari Nehru and Mridula Sarabhai Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, show how the two women were at loggerheads over the question of recovery and restoration with Nehru against this programme and Sarabhai vociferously in favour of it. Rameshwari Nehru papers and Mridula Sarabhai papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

<sup>8</sup> Anis Kidwai, *In Freedom’s Shade*, trans. Ayesha Kidwai (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), 149.

<sup>9</sup> Mahatma Gandhi at a prayer meeting in Delhi on December 7, 1947. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 98 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, December 6, 1947–January 30, 1948), 9, <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-literature/collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi-volume-1-to-98.php>.

<sup>10</sup> The Partition violence had started in Bengal through the infamous Calcutta Riots of 1946 following a ghastly intervention in Noakhali soon after. Seeing this, the emissary of peace, Gandhi came down to Kolkata and travelled the districts of East and West Bengal spreading the message of communal harmony. This worked. In fact, even the ever so vain Viceroy, Mountbatten, was compelled to remark that the “one man boundary force” Gandhi had done what a whole combined Punjab Boundary Force could not do for Punjab, i.e., quell the raging communal fires. For details, see, Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> Jyotirmoyee Devi, *The River Churning: A Partition Novel*, trans. Enakshi Chatterjee (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Jasodhara Bagchi, introduction to *The River Churning: A Partition Novel*, Jyotirmoyee Devi, trans. Enakshi Chatterjee (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> A survey was conducted with testimonies recorded in hand by Ashoka Gupta and Saibal Gupta which can be accessed in Ashoka Gupta Collection, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University Kolkata.

<sup>14</sup> The high points of migration coalesce with these years which saw the worst form of inter-communal violence in East Pakistan and West Bengal. For details on different phases of violence and consequent migration on Bengal Partition, see, Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (Kalyani: Lumiere Books, 1990); Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Roy, *Partitioned Lives*; Pallavi Chakravarty, *Boundaries and Belonging: Rehabilitating Refugees in India, 1947-71* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Nehru to Roy, dated August 25, 1948, in Saroj Chakrabarti, *With Dr. B.C Roy and Other Chief Ministers: A Record upto 1962*, (Calcutta: Benson's, 1974), 109.

<sup>16</sup> Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay, *Udbastu* (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Samsad, 1970), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Nalini Mitra (Director of the Refugee Rehabilitation Department of the West Bengal Government), "Interviews," interviewed by School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, in "Porous Borders Divided Selves," *Seminar* 510 (February 2002): <https://www.india-seminar.com/2002/510.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> For instances of such threats to Hindu women in East Pakistan as well as Muslim women in West Bengal, see, Roy, "The Routine of Violence" in *Partitioned Lives*, 147–82.

<sup>19</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Caste and Partition in Bengal: The Story of Dalit Refugee, 1947-61* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022); Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranth Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) to name a few works.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from M. Dhali to J.N. Mandal, January 7, 1950, in Mahapran Jogendranath Mandal, *Caturthha Kbanda*, 102, cited in Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question*, 199.

<sup>21</sup> Few newspaper reports and anecdotal references show that the old, infirm, and sometimes even infants and small children were abandoned in the open fields or in the camps as it was felt they might not be able to take the long journey to safety.

<sup>22</sup> Gandhi at a prayer meeting in Delhi, December 26, 1947, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 98, 118.

<sup>23</sup> Kamlabehn Patel, *Torn from the Roots: A Partition Memoir*, trans. Uma Randeria (Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Kamla Patel, in Butalia, *Other Side of Silence*, 201–02.

<sup>25</sup> Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 209.

<sup>26</sup> Butalia, "Community, State and Gender," 54.

<sup>27</sup> Bani Bhattacharya, interview by Sarita Bose in Kolkata, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.1947PartitionArchive.org>.

<sup>28</sup> Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 197.

<sup>29</sup> Prem Kakkar, interview by Anachal Geeta Singh, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, <https://www.1947PartitionArchive.org>.

<sup>30</sup> For such instances, see, Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*.

<sup>31</sup> Interview of Murad in Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 217–18.

<sup>32</sup> Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 219.

<sup>33</sup> Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 198.

<sup>34</sup> Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service: A Memoir of a Social Worker*, trans. Sipra Bhattacharya, and Ranjana Dasgupta (Kolkata: Stree 2005), 215.

<sup>36</sup> Ritwik Ghatak's classic film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* iconised the typical refugee woman coming from East Pakistan in the figure of Nita who worked as a teacher to help her family stand up on their own but sacrificed her desires of marriage and material well-being and towards the end even her life. His other film *Subarnarekha* (the name of the river flowing in East Pakistan) on the contrary showed how desperation of refugee women made them take to prostitution as well. Likewise, iconic works like Salil Sen's *Notun Yebudi* (the New Jew) too is a play that shows the hapless dotting daughter taking up prostitution as a means to keep alive her father and the family in general. For a more scholarly analysis of such a representation of the refugee woman, see, Manas Ray, "Growing Up Refugee," *History Workshop Journal* 53, no.1 (Spring 2002): 149–79.

<sup>37</sup> Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* (Calcutta: Stree, 2001), 181.

<sup>38</sup> "Employment Among Women in West Bengal," Directorate of National Employment Service, West Bengal, November 1958, West Bengal State Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Ishita Chakravarty, and Deepita Chakravarty, "For Bed and Board Only: Women and Girl Children Domestic Workers in Post-Partition Bengal (1951–1981)," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2013): 581–611.

<sup>40</sup> *Jugantar*, September 22, 1956, in Chakravarty, and Chakravarty, "For Bed and Board," 591.

<sup>41</sup> For the argument on 'feminisation of labour' in the context of post-partition Delhi, see, Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, "'Useful' and 'Earning' Citizens?" 1–32.

<sup>42</sup> Interview of Hena Chaudhuri published in Bagchi, Dasgupta, and Ghosh, eds., *The Trauma and The Triumph*, vol 2, 83.

<sup>43</sup> Mohammad Hafizur Rahman, interview by Sweta Chakraborty in Kolkata, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, August 8, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Interviews/memoirs of bhadrakol refugees talk of mutual amity between Hindus and Muslims in East Bengal. However, such narratives need to be read with some caution as mentioned by Dipesh Chakrabarty who calls out the wilful amnesia of these refugees with regard to the notions of purity and pollution which had always reigned supreme in Bengal and on account of which Hindus and Muslims were always at a distance from each other quashing all possible dreams of intermingling. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 32 (August 10, 1996): 2143–51.

<sup>45</sup> Kalyan Kumar Sanyal, interviewed by Subhasri Ghosh in Kolkata, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, December 12, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Snigdha Sen, interview by Deborshi Chakrabarty in Kolkata, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, June 10, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*, trans. Angana Datta, and Jaideep Sarangi (Kolkata: Bhatkal and Sen India, 2015); Manoranjan Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*, trans. Sipra Mukherjee (Kolkata: Samya, 2018), among others.

<sup>48</sup> Atishi Haldar of Malo caste and resident of the government colony in Jagatpur (Kolkata), interview by Sudhanya Dasgupta Mukherjee, cited in Sudhanya Dasgupta Mukherjee, "Women's Narratives of Partition in Bengal," (unpublished PhD diss., School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, 2012), 255.

<sup>49</sup> Asha Hans, "Refugee Women and Children: Need for Protection and Care," in *Refugees and the State: Practices of Asylum and Care in India, 1947–2000*, ed. Ranabir Samaddar (New Delhi: SAGE, 2003), 355.

# Thakurnagar as a Political Location: Place Making Practices of Matua Refugees in West Bengal

By

Praskanva Sinharay \*

In the run-up to the Lok Sabha election in 2019, a refugee settlement in the district of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal called Thakurnagar drew considerable political attention as Prime Minister Narendra Modi started his poll campaign in the state from here.<sup>1</sup> Modi visited the headquarters of a religious organisation called the Matua Mahasangha, sought blessings from its spiritual head Binapani Debi (reverently referred to as “*Baroma*”), and addressed a rally that was organised by the Mahasangha with support from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In his speech that largely focused on the welfare schemes run by the BJP-led central government, Modi made a targeted appeal to the local audience at the rally on two grounds. First, he emphasised the importance of Thakurnagar multiple times in his address by calling it “a sacred soil” (*pavitra mati*), the land of Matua icons Harichand and his son Guruchand Thakur, and a place that has been “witness to a social movement.”<sup>2</sup> Second, Modi invoked the memory of Partition of India at the time of independence in 1947 which led to the migration of millions of people in the subsequent decades. He added that the BJP-led central government is committed to grant citizenship to certain groups of refugees such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains who, as he argued, migrated to India from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh due to communal tension in these countries.<sup>3</sup> There was noticeable enthusiasm among the Matuas, a religious community of almost exclusively Namasudras, about this event as it was the first-ever visit of a Prime Minister to their religious headquarters.<sup>4</sup> On the ground, what Modi’s campaign visit really echoed is the growing salience of Thakurnagar as a political location that is integrally connected to the community, identity, and politics of an electorally important Dalit refugee constituency.<sup>5</sup>

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Refugee Watch, 61 & 62, June & December 2023.

After the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003 by the then BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government, the demand for Indian citizenship became central to Namasudra refugee politics. Under the provisions of the Act, the citizenship status of Namasudra refugees, who migrated to India after 1971, came under legal-official scrutiny. Many encountered arrests, administrative harassment, and the threat of disenfranchisement as they were suspected as “illegal migrants” in West Bengal as well as in other states.<sup>6</sup> As a result, refugee outfits like Udbastu Kalyan Sangha launched a movement under the banner of the Matua Mahasagha demanding “unconditional citizenship” (*nirshorto nagorikotto*) for East Bengali refugees in India through reamendment of the 2003 Act. Since its inception in the mid-2000s, this movement provided the Matua Mahasangha considerable visibility as an emerging representative institution in rural politics and established its reputation as guarantor of Matua votes in the realm of electoral competition.<sup>7</sup> Concurrently, it also brought Thakurnagar—“the first Dalit refugee colony in India started by an independent Dalit initiative”—to the mainstream political limelight.<sup>8</sup> This paper examines the making and transformation of Thakurnagar as a place that has evolved as the epicentre of Dalit refugee activism in contemporary West Bengal. Based on literary and ethnographic evidence, the paper looks at the place making practices of Namasudra refugees in and around Thakurnagar to show why and how did this place develop as a sacred, civic, and political location, and in turn, shape their community and identity in the post-Partition decades. In doing so, the paper reflects on the relationship between caste, refugeehood, and place making in postcolonial India.

### **Partition, Migration, Caste and Place Making**

While the Partition of India in 1947 led to the displacement of millions of people from their homelands, it also necessitated a parallel trajectory of emplacement of these refugees in the newly independent nation states. In postcolonial India, the emplacement of refugees in their new environments were influenced by multiple factors such as their caste and gender identities, differential state action and rehabilitation policies vis-à-vis various refugee communities, harsh geographical conditions of the relocation sites, and periodic changes in citizenship laws.<sup>9</sup> Writings on migration and rehabilitation of East Bengali refugees, as scholars have pointed out, have largely revolved around the struggles and experience of mostly the upper castes who shifted from East Pakistan in the immediate years after Partition, and relocated in and around the metropolis of Calcutta.<sup>10</sup> The ways in which the lower caste refugees, such as the Namasudras, resettled in mostly unfavourable conditions in Permanent Liability Camps or in forest tracts outside West Bengal, and eventually inscribed their collective identity in these locations over time have received lesser academic attention.<sup>11</sup> In other words, little has been explored about the place making practices of lower caste refugees which, as I aim to

show in this paper, have been integral to their community building, identity formation, and politico-cultural activism in the post-Partition decades.

Place making as a conceptual tool in anthropology, urban studies, and migration studies has added to our understanding about the relationship between space, place, community, and identity of a particular set of people living in a given territory. As Phillip Zehmisch puts it, “place making may be defined as the social, cultural, religious, economic and political transformation of spaces into places through naming practices, rituals and institutions.”<sup>12</sup> A space acquires meanings over time, as Gupta and Ferguson have suggested, through a myriad of popular practices, initiatives, beliefs, and assertions, and eventually achieves “a distinctive *identity*” as a place.<sup>13</sup> To put it differently, places are products of collective human action such as making infrastructural changes to physical environments, finding familiar as well as establishing new social, cultural and political networks, and assigning specific meanings to spaces through memorialisation practices, cultural objects, and institution building.<sup>14</sup> The processes of making a place, in turn, perform a cohesive function of binding a group of people together as a community. In his study on the hill sheep farmers in Teviothead, Scotland, John Gray has argued that place and community emerge together and are “mutually constitutive,” that is, “place-making and the resultant sense of place are an essential part of how people experience community.”<sup>15</sup> Other studies have shown that migrants and refugees from the same racial groups or with shared histories of displacement have different experiences of community based on their respective place making practices in new locations. For example, one can think of the Vietnamese immigrants in the USA whose place making practices in California and Boston shaped their community and identity differently in these two places.<sup>16</sup> The case of Hutu refugees, who settled in contrasting environments—an isolated refugee camp and the Kigoma Township—in rural western Tanzania to escape the genocidal massacre in Burundi in the 1970s, is another example that shows the “radical differences in the meanings ascribed to national identity and homeland, exile and refugee-ness” in these two settings.<sup>17</sup>

In India, the categories of space, place, and community are inseparably linked to caste. Based on Dalit autobiographical narratives, historian Ramnarayan Rawat has explained how Dalits’ experience of growing up and living in spatially marked *jati muhallas* (caste neighbourhoods) have historically played a formative role in shaping their “Dalit *jati chetna* (consciousness).”<sup>18</sup> The reproduction of exclusionary spaces along caste-class hegemonic relations have also been done through policies and practices of the State. In her study of making of Chembur on the outskirts of Bombay (now Mumbai) since the late colonial period, Geeta Thatra shows how Dalits were pushed to the fringes of the city, although the question of caste remained invisible behind the veil of “techno-managerial rationality” of modern urban planning.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, practices of Dalits such as organising processions, religious functions, and mass events to make claims over the public sphere have time and again led to violent clashes with the upper castes in different parts of India, thus creating what Karthikeyan Damodaran has termed

“contentious spaces” and have simultaneously bolstered the process of their community and identity formation.<sup>20</sup> However, as Rawat has noted, “the constitutive role of space in the institution of untouchability and in Dalit political mobilization has received comparatively less academic attention” compared to other modalities such as occupation and struggle for dignity.<sup>21</sup> Academic research on the Dalit movement, Rawat thus suggested, needs to pay more attention to the spatial modality of the caste question for a deeper understanding of the histories of caste neighbourhoods, the social experience of living in marked spaces, and the processes of making places and building political solidarities around it.

One of the key factors that impacted the emplacement of Partition refugees in postcolonial India has been the dynamics of caste. As David Turton has argued “displacement is not just about the loss of place, but also about the struggle to *make* a place” that bolsters community formation, and offers migrants and refugees a shared socio-cultural milieu, a sense of security in a new environment, and a platform for collective action.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, accounts of place making underscore the agentive role played by migrants and refugees in transforming spaces into places. To understand the emerging political salience of Thakurnagar and its inseparable connection to the Matua electorate, it is therefore necessary to examine the place making practices of post-Partition Dalit refugees in this settlement over these years.

### **The Birth of Thakurnagar**

Thakurnagar is located between Gobardanga and Chandpara along the Sealdah-Bongaon railway route in North 24 Parganas district, bordering Bangladesh. It is roughly 65 km from Kolkata and 25 km from the border at Bongaon. The area comes under Gaighata Block of Bongaon Subdivision and includes the census villages of Gaighata, Ichhapur, Gutri, Bora, Karola, Ganti, Chikanpara, Kaya, Manikhera, and Shimulpur. The cluster of these villages, what came to be known as Thakurnagar since its establishment in 1948, is predominantly the settlements of Namasudra refugees who migrated from East Pakistan in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly from Khulna, Satkhira, Jessore, Jhikargacha, Barisal, Bhola, and Faridpur.<sup>23</sup> Many Namasudra families moved to these villages in the subsequent years, either from other rehabilitation camps and sites or from Bangladesh after 1971 through religious and caste linkages. In the pre-Partition days, the area was sparsely populated and was part of the Jessore district. Over the last seven decades, there has been a phenomenal growth in population in and around the place. The population under the jurisdiction of Gaighata police station, for example, was 56,558 in 1951; 133,916 in 1971; 267,554 in 1991; and it rose to 330,287 in 2011.<sup>24</sup> The area also prospered economically. The main occupation of the people is agriculture and horticulture, which is evident from the big and vibrant sugarcane and flower markets adjacent to the local railway station. A considerable section of people is also engaged in government and other white-collar professions, private and local businesses, or work in the informal sector in various services such as contractual labourers and domestic help. As N.B



Roy, a chronicler of Namasudra history and politics, noted, “Thakurnagar was originally a fallow land overgrown with shrubs and “Ulu” grass but today the place has changed beyond recognition.”<sup>25</sup>

The chief architect of this refugee settlement was Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (1902–90), a prominent Namasudra leader, the fourth-generation heir of Harichand Thakur (founder of Matua religion), and former head of the Matua Mahasangha.<sup>26</sup> At the time of independence, P.R. Thakur was a member of the Constituent Assembly of India with support from the Congress party. Unlike another stalwart leader Jogendranath Mandal, P.R. Thakur advocated the view that Namasudras should gradually migrate to India and resettle here, and even supported the rehabilitation policies of the Congress government of transporting refugees to locations outside West Bengal. His differences with Congress emerged in the mid-1960s when Namasudra refugees, who migrated amidst communal tensions, encountered police repression and denial of administrative assistance such as doles and rehabilitation after migrating to India. Although he quit the party, Thakur remained active in refugee movements through his continued association with multiple refugee organisations. His foremost contribution towards refugee rehabilitation, however, was the making of what Matua writer Kapil Krishna Biswas has described as, “India’s first non-government refugee colony.”<sup>27</sup> In December 1947, Thakur founded a company called the Thakur Land and Industries Limited. This company acquired a large tract of land from a local zamindar the next year, which included the Chikanpara, Ganti, Shimulpur, Karola, and Bora *mouzas*, with an objective of redistributing it as plots among refugees to rehabilitate them.<sup>28</sup> Thakur wrote to his acquaintances in East Pakistan about his plan of setting up a refugee colony, encouraging them to migrate to India and buy shares of the company in exchange for land.<sup>29</sup> Noted Matua preachers like Gopal Sadhu and Bipin Gosai, among others, bought shares of the company and were allotted plots of land.<sup>30</sup> These Matua preachers and leaders played a crucial role in building networks and bringing more people to settle in and around the area through their religious influence and connections. Thakur himself relocated to this newly established colony with his family in 1948. The place was subsequently named Thakurnagar after P.R. Thakur.<sup>31</sup> However, there is another interpretation behind this naming. According to Matua writer Debdas Pande, the place was perhaps called Thakurnagar after its namesake Matua centre at Matiakhali, Khulna.<sup>32</sup> Irrespective of interpretations, Thakurnagar became inseparably linked to P.R. Thakur and “stands as a monument to his memory.”<sup>33</sup>

## Exile and a Sacred Place

The making and transformation of Thakurnagar as a place happened broadly on three axes: firstly, the residence of P.R. Thakur as well as memorialisation practices revolving him; secondly, the Matua religion and its rituals; and thirdly, Dalit refugee politics and activism. This section will focus on the first two aspects while the discussion on refugee politics and activism will follow in the later sections. The house of P.R. Thakur, also popularly known as the

*Thakurbari*, is perhaps the most high-profile residential building in Thakurnagar. It is at this house where Modi came to meet P.R.Thakur's wife, Binapani Debi, during his visit to the Matua Mahasangha's headquarters in 2019. Many other leaders across political parties like Subhash Chakraborty and Mamata Banerjee have frequented this house to seek blessings from the Matua matriarch over the last two decades, particularly before elections. The house, quite interestingly, was named "The Exile" by P.R.Thakur [Fig.1]. Being the residence of the heir of Matua preceptors Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, it shares an affective bond with the Matua refugees. Kapil Krishna Biswas, a noted Matua writer, described the house as "the shelter of the fearless commander of the underprivileged people's liberation movement."<sup>34</sup> Although Thakur held the opinion that Namasudras should gradually migrate to India after Partition, his decision to call his residence "Exile" at a time when he was planning to build a refugee colony around it reflects, to borrow a conceptual expression from Edward Said, a "contrapuntal" awareness.<sup>35</sup> On one hand, the permanent sense of loss caused by Partition and displacement—"the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home"<sup>36</sup>—is evident from Thakur's naming of his house as "Exile"; while on the other, there is also a corresponding sense of commitment in him towards emplacement of fellow refugees in a new environment for which he purchased land and founded a company. Following Said, it can be argued that the processes of emplacement of migrants, i.e., building "habits of life, expression or activity" in a new environment "inevitably occurs against the memory of this things in another environment."<sup>37</sup> The rapid transition of Thakur's residence into a public space called *Thakurbari* and the refugee colony of Thakurnagar into the *Sreedham* (a sacred place) of the Matuas in India, as discussed below, exemplifies this contrapuntal process that represents not only the loss of place but also the efforts of the refugees and the role of memory in making a place.



**Fig. 1:** "The Exile," also called *Thakur Kutir* is the house built by P.R. Thakur after he migrated to India after Partition. At the top of the entrance door, the name "P.R. Thakur" is engraved. Binapani Debi is sitting inside her room and there is an image of P.R. Thakur in the background, © Author, Thakurnagar, 2013.

Soon after moving to Thakurnagar in 1948, P.R. Thakur and his wife constructed a *Harimandir* (temple of Harichand Thakur and his spouse, Shanti Debi) next to their house on the eve of the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur, the most auspicious day in the Matua calendar.<sup>38</sup> The construction of this temple not only transformed P.R. Thakur's residence into a space for public sociality, but it also simultaneously reminded the local Matua residents of the ancestral home of the Thakur family at Orakandi (now in Bangladesh). The temple eventually became the nucleus of the larger refugee settlement. In fact, it is this *Harimandir*, next to P.R. Thakur's family residence, that has built the reputation of Thakurnagar as "Sreedham" among the Matua refugees. From the beginning, the architectural planning of the Thakurbari compound and the religious-cultural activities held there resembled that of their counterparts in Orakandi. Currently, the Thakurbari compound consists of the residential buildings of the family members, the *Harimandir* and other temples, a pond called *Kamana Sagar* (literally meaning, the sea of wishes), a ground for mass events, and office of the central Matua organisation. Drawing parallels between Thakurnagar and Orakandi—the two main centres of the Matua religion in a Partitioned Bengal—is extremely common in the Matua public discourse, particularly in Matua literature. In his preface to a book on Orakandi and Thakurnagar, for example, Matua writer-turned-political leader Kapil Krishna Thakur writes about how the religious festivals which are organised at Thakurnagar were started following similar practices at Orakandi.<sup>39</sup> For the Matuas, Orakandi signifies the original *Sreedham* in memory of which *Sreedham Thakurnagar* was built. In addition to its religious-cultural significance, Orakandi also occupies an influential position in the larger context of contemporary Matua politics. The relevance of Orakandi became evident in two recent events: first, when a Matua delegation from Orakandi led by Thakur family scion Padmanabha Thakur attended Modi's rally at Thakurnagar in 2019; and second, when the Indian Prime Minister visited the *Harimandir* at Orakandi during his official trip to Bangladesh at the time of West Bengal State Assembly Election in 2021. At the later event, Modi promised to upgrade a school and set up another at Orakandi as part of the diplomatic dialogue between India and Bangladesh.

The making of Thakurbari, in particular, and Thakurnagar, at large, as a sacred place involved a host of other "platial practices" initiated and continued by Matuas in consultation with the Thakur family.<sup>40</sup> This includes: a] organisation of mass events such as the *Baruni Mela* (a fair, also called the Matua Dharma Mahamela), *Rathiyatra* (chariot festival), *Gosai Sammelan* (meeting of Matua preachers) and collective prayer meets; b] revival of the Matua Mahasangha and expanding its network; and c] imagination and depiction of Thakurnagar as a sacred place in Matua popular culture, particularly in vernacular print literature. Let us first look at the mass events. The *Baruni Mela*, an annual congregation held on the eve of Harichand Thakur's birth anniversary till date, was the first mass event that was started at the Thakurbari in 1948. It is a week-long celebration that is attended by thousands of devotees from different parts of India, and many from Bangladesh. The activities include traditional dances and prayers at the

Harimandir, holy dip in the Kamana Sagar, community feasts, and spending leisurely time at a fair organised next to the Thakurbari premises. The fair consists of book stalls of Dalit literature, ornament and garment shops, fast food joints, and recreational outlets. The next year, in 1949, another annual event viz. *Rathyatra* was started. However, the Matua *Rathyatra* held in Thakurnagar is different from its conventional Hindu counterpart. The idols of deities that are placed in the chariot are not that of Hindu gods Jagannath-Balaram-Subhadra but of Matua icons Harichand Thakur and his wife, Shanti Debi. At the time, the Matua leadership, particularly Binapani Debi, also decided to organise monthly prayer meetings called *Shanti Sabha*, named after Shanti Debi. These meetings, primarily led by the women, played a formative role in mobilisation of Matua devotees who resettled in and around Thakurnagar. The devotees engaged in activities such as conducting these meets, collection of donations, preparation of food, purchase of musical instruments, and so forth. The standard itinerary of a Shanti Sabha includes *puja* (prayer, worship), performance of devotional songs, followed by distribution of *prasada* (holy offerings). A striking feature of these meetings is the prevalence of a larger popular practice of making *maanat* (prayer vow), that is, a belief system where a devotee makes a wish to the God with a condition and vows to give donation (money, jewellery, food grains, etc.) to the temple upon fulfilment of the wish (such as cure of illness, appointment in jobs, and similar private issues). Apart from the local residents, the practice of making *maanat* at the Shanti Sabhas attracted Matuas from outside Thakurnagar to attend these meetings. On one hand, these initiatives became an important source of revenue for the Thakurbari, and on the other, these practices assigned specific meanings to the settlement of Thakurnagar and shaped its “distinctive identity” as a place that is sacred. In modern South Asia, mass events and prayer practices have historically functioned as key factors behind the formation of a “political community” and collective identity of religious groups.<sup>41</sup> The case of the Matuas is no different from this larger political phenomenon. However, as the case of Thakurnagar demonstrates, these popular initiatives also function as crucial platial practices for refugees and migrants that make them simultaneously reinvent their place, community, and identity in a new environment.

The organisation of mass events, however, necessitated the presence of an institution. The religious organisation of the Matuas was first established in 1932 under the supervision of Guruchand Thakur. Initially, it was called the Sri Sri Harichand Mission and was renamed the Matua Mahasangha a year later in 1933.<sup>42</sup> P.R. Thakur, Guruchand Thakur’s grandson, became the first *sanghadhipati* (institutional head) of the Matua Mahasangha. However, the political developments at the time of Partition led to the decline of the Namasudra movement in Bengal, including the organisational politics of the Matuas.<sup>43</sup> After migrating to India, P.R. Thakur tried to revive the Mahasangha. But it remained an organisationally weak outfit for a long time because of factionalism within the Matua leadership. In 1965, Mahananda Halder, a prominent Matua leader, and a few others formed a separate organisation called the Harichand Seba Sangha due to his differences with P.R.

Thakur.<sup>44</sup> More than a decade later, in 1980, the two organisations were finally merged under the initiative of Matua leader Susil Kumar Biswas and was named the Harichand Matua Seba Sangha.<sup>45</sup> In 1986, the working committee of the Harichand Matua Seba Sangha renamed it as the Matua Mahasangha.<sup>46</sup> Two years later, it was officially registered as the main organisation of the Matuas in India with its headquarters in Thakurnagar. Although interrupted by many ups and downs over a period of four decades, the processes of making and consolidation of the Matua Mahasangha in its current form institutionally connected the *Thakurbari* to the larger Matua refugee population dispersed in different parts of India. The organisation gradually expanded its network through membership drives, setting up its local branches in Namasudra-dominated neighbourhoods, or bringing under its umbrella the existing local Matua outfits that operated in the multiple refugee settlements in West Bengal and in other states like Pilibhit (Uttar Pradesh), Malkangiri (Odisha), Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and elsewhere.

Thakurnagar has also been consistently represented as a sacred place in Matua print literature and other mass media platforms. Consider the following lines from a poem by Jagadish Chandra Halder, a Matua poet:

Thakurnagar the Holy pilgrimage  
Lakhs and crores of devotees come here  
Maddened in Thy name  
Forgot the Vedas-Vedanta – their tearful eyes  
Call Hari Guruchand.<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly, the poet not only imagines Thakurnagar as a pilgrimage visited by millions of people, but also characterises the devotees as those who forgot the foundational Hindu scriptures by being maddened in the name of Harichand-Guruchand. The imagination of Thakurnagar in this poem is enmeshed with the anti-caste character of Matua religion and its followers. There are many examples of thematically similar poems and songs that depict Thakurnagar as a *tirtha* (pilgrimage) of the downtrodden masses. Moreover, Thakurnagar has developed as a Matua cultural centre.<sup>48</sup> The Matua Mahasangha publishes a magazine called the Matua Mahasangha Patrika and a wide range of religious and organisational texts. Book stores and other shops, particularly those in the Thakurbari premises, are deeply involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of Matua literature, art, music, and cultural objects. Apart from the key religious texts and the official publications of the Mahasangha, visitors can buy books and magazines on Matua religion and Namasudra history, society and politics, photographs and idols of Matua and Hindu deities, music CDs, and religious ornaments of the Matuas in these stores.

## The Development of the Refugee Colony

While the presence of the *Thakurbari* provided Thakurnagar its symbolic significance as a sacred place, the infrastructural transformation of the refugee colony is a parallel yet different story of place making, i.e., the ways in which

the physical environment of the area from a large expanse of mostly marshy land developed into a refugee township through institution building, memorialisation practices, negotiations with the State. P.R. Thakur, and subsequently the Matua Mahasangha leadership are quite rightfully the protagonists of this story. The first educational institution set up in Thakurnagar in 1949 was a boys' high school [Fig.2]. It was established under the initiative of P.R. Thakur. Two years later, in 1951, he received a grant of Rs.80,000 from the state government for developing roads and drinking water facilities and providing each family a sum of Rs.200 and two bundles of corrugated iron for building houses.<sup>49</sup> The local railway station also came up in the same year. In 1956, a girls' high school was established. Other essential institutions such as health centres, post-office, and markets were set up in the initial years after Partition. The rapid infrastructural development of the place thus led to a huge influx of refugees in the area. An estimate of roughly fifty thousand Dalit refugees resettled in and around this colony within the first ten years of its establishment.<sup>50</sup>



**Fig. 2:** The entrance gate of Thakurnagar Higher Secondary School, established in 1949, © Author

As already mentioned, practices of memorialisation lie at the heart of place making. In any given place, the names of institutions and spaces of public interest, the memorials and statues on the streets, the graffiti on the walls, and visible acts of commemoration of chosen icons speak a lot about its people, history, and politics. For example, most of the post-Partition refugee colonies that came up in and around Kolkata like Netaji Nagar, Bapujinagar, Chittaranjan Colony, Baghajatin Colony, Sucheta Colony, and many others were named after freedom fighters and nationalist leaders like Subhash Chandra Bose, M.K. Gandhi, C.R. Das, Jatin Das, Sucheta Kripalani, and others. These names, as Anwasha Sengupta has noted, were “homage to the freedom movement” by refugee leaders of these colonies and acts of “placing

the refugees within the narrative of the nationalist movement.”<sup>51</sup> Not all colonies, as Sengupta also points out, were named after national icons. Colonies like Bijoygarh, Azadgarh, and Ramgarh which were built on lands, occupied forcefully (*jabardakhal*) by the refugees from the local landlords, had the term “*garh*” (fortress) in their names that signifies “memories of refugee resistance and their politics of representation” in a new environment.<sup>52</sup>

Thakurnagar was established in the same year as Bijoygarh colony of Kolkata. However, unlike the colonies of Kolkata, this rural refugee settlement offers a very different narrative of memorialisation and naming practices. The icons of this place are not the upper caste nationalist figures, but Dalit saints and leaders. Since the beginning, the commemorative practices of Matua refugees in and around Thakurnagar revolved around the icons of Harichand Thakur, Shanti Debi, Guruchand Thakur, and his wife Satyabhama Debi. For example, it is common practice among people in this area to name their commercial establishments such as shops after the Matua icons. Moreover, in contrast to the urban, upper caste refugees who resettled in colonies in Kolkata and viewed their acceptance of Partition as a moment of “sacrifice for the Indian nation,”<sup>53</sup> there is no such explicit rhetoric of sacrifice or signs of identification with the nationalist freedom movement in the place making practices of Dalit refugees who resettled in Thakurnagar. Rather, Partition, the decision to migrate, and start anew generated a permanent sense of loss. The most glaring example of this, as discussed above, lies in the name of P.R. Thakur’s house “Exile.”

After the death of Thakur in 1990, the memorialisation practices in Thakurnagar took a new turn. The emergence of a new iconography around the architect of this refugee colony dotted the entire landscape of Thakurnagar. This is evident from popular initiatives as well as institutional efforts undertaken in the area since the 1990s. On the first day of my visit to Thakurnagar, I came across an outfit called the P.R. Thakur Samaj Kalyan Samiti at Ganti. It was established in 1990 to commemorate Thakur. An activity of this outfit, as I noticed in an advertisement banner on the street, was offering free coaching to students for a scholarship examination [Fig.3]. Local residents have also constructed busts and temples of P.R. Thakur. A few years after his death, in 1993, for example, the locals constructed a bust of P.R. Thakur near the local health centre that was unveiled by Binapani Debi. Another prominent memorial of Thakur is right outside the railway station. If one steps out of the railway station and walks towards the Thakurbari, two memorials attract the visitor’s eyes. The first one is a bust of former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the foundation stone of which was laid by P.R. Thakur in 1984. The second one is a temple of P.R. Thakur that was constructed with donations from the local vendors’ union and residents and inaugurated by Binapani Debi in 2006. The Matua Mahasangha also played an active role in the making and promotion of this new iconography. A temple called P.R. Thakur Smriti Mandir was constructed where P.R. Thakur was cremated within the Thakurbari premises. The dais at the *nata mandir* (community hall in front of the *Harimandir*) has been recently renovated and named P.R. Thakur Mancha with his image in the background. In 1994, the

Matua Mahasangha took a decision to donate some land for the construction of a school called P.R.Thakur Bidyapith. The foundation stone was laid by Binapani Debi, and the school was established in 1997.



**Fig. 3:** The office of a local organisation called P.R.Thakur Samaj Kalyan Samiti in Ganti, Thakurnagar. The organisation is advertising its initiative to provide free coaching to school children. © Author.

Apart from these local popular initiatives, a key demand of the Matua Mahasangha towards the government has been the official recognition of the Matua icons through the naming of institutions or public spaces after them. Over the last two decades, the Mahasangha has quite successfully negotiated with the political parties and the government in terms of its demands. In 2007, for instance, a road in Thakurnagar was named P.R. Thakur Sarani by the Gaighata Panchayat Samiti. After 2009, the Thakurnagar station has also been upgraded and the ticket counter was remodelled to resemble the Harimandir at Thakurbari. In 2013, a government college named after him was set up by the State Government, and more recently, in 2018, a state university called the Harichand Guruchand University was established in Thakurnagar. These decisions of successive governments vis-à-vis the demands of the Matuas in the recent past reflect the growing importance of the community as a crucial vote bank and the increasing closeness of different political parties with the Matua Mahasangha.

### **The Movement for Citizenship and Political Contestations**

The recent attention that Thakurnagar has received as a political location, as mentioned at the outset, is the result of the movement of Dalit refugees against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2003. After the enactment of this law, the Matua Mahasangha in collaboration with refugee outfits organised a hunger strike at the Thakurbari premises. They demanded the reamendment



of the 2003 Act and unconditional citizenship rights in India for refugees from Bangladesh. Twenty-one people, including top Matua Mahasangha leaders, participated in the hunger strike. The decision to organise the protest at Thakurnagar under the banner of the Mahasangha, as a prominent refugee leader during our interview revealed, was taken because of the organisation's "network" (*sangathan*) and "religious appeal" (*dharmiyo abeg*).<sup>54</sup> On the fifth day of the strike, a confrontation between the police and the protestors took place as a contingent of the former reached Thakurbari to disperse the latter. The visit of the police to the Thakurbari angered the local Matuas and they gathered in large numbers compelling the forces to retreat. On the seventh day, Ramdas Athwale, a Member of Parliament (MP) and the leader of the Republican Party of India visited Thakurnagar as the representative of the Central Government and promised to address the demand of the Matuas. The strike was thereafter withdrawn. But the protest decisively transformed the image of the Matua Mahasangha from a religious to a political representative organisation of Dalit refugees. Simultaneously, Thakurnagar gained visibility as a political location for Dalit refugee activism apart from being a sacred place.

First, the protest led to the direct engagement of the Matua Mahasangha in strictly political activities such as organising periodic agitations, submitting deputations to the government authorities to look into the interests of the Bengali Dalit refugees, and negotiating with the police and the local administration in case of arrests or other forms of harassment. In 2005, for instance, a delegation of Matua Mahasangha visited the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to discuss their demands. A decade later, in 2014, the Mahasangha leaders organised another hunger strike at the Thakurbari compound on the citizenship issue. This strike was withdrawn after BJP leader Krishnamurti Bhandi visited Thakurnagar and reassured the leaders to resolve their demand. Moreover, different refugee organisations and other outfits such as the Joint Action Committee for Bangali Refugees, the Purba Banga Dharmio Sankhalaghu Udbastu Kalyan Parishad, the Bangiya Lokokobi Sanstha, and the Bangla Bachao Nagarik Mancho have worked closely and in consultation with the Matua Mahasangha leadership from time to time over these years on their shared political agenda. In other words, the emergence of the Matua Mahasangha as a crucial stakeholder in contemporary Dalit refugee politics since the mid-2000s transformed Thakurnagar into a site of political activism.



**Fig. 4:** A temporary gate, with images of Matua preceptors, Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, along with that of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. The gate was installed at the entrance of the *Thakurbari* premises before Home Minister Amit Shah's visit in 2021. The gate-cum-poster is a call for a public meeting at *Sreedham Thakurnagar Thakurbari* in the run-up to the West Bengal Assembly Election the same year, © Author.

Second, the movement brought the Matua Mahasangha close to the political establishment [Fig.4]. Not only did the leaders of all the major political parties frequented Thakurnagar to seek support from the leaders, but multiple members of the Thakur family and other Matua leaders have been nominated as candidates in elections by different political parties. In 2011, P.R. Thakur's youngest son, Manjul Krishna Thakur, won the Gaighata constituency seat in the State Assembly election and was appointed the Minister for Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation. Between 2011 to the present day, five members of the Thakur family have become either MLA or MP. In 2021, Thakur family scion Shantanu Thakur became a Union Minister in the incumbent BJP government. Moreover, political parties donated considerable sums of money for the development of Thakurbari and Thakurnagar in general in the last one and a half decades. Engagement with electoral politics has bolstered the political significance of Thakurnagar. Most recently, in June 2023, a physical confrontation broke out between the supporters of Shantanu Thakur and those of TMC leader Abhisekh Banerjee when the latter visited *Thakurbari* to campaign before the panchayat polls.

Finally, let us look at the most recent development in the politics around this place. After coming back to power in 2019, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 was passed by the Modi government. While the passage of this Act led to nationwide protests and has been challenged in the Supreme Court; this law, if implemented, will partially meet the longstanding

demand of the Matuas. The BJP's position on the citizenship issue thus has brought the party closer to the dominant Matua Mahasangha leadership. A section of the Matuas, nonetheless, remains dissatisfied with the 2019 Act for two reasons: a) it fails to meet the original demand of "unconditional citizenship" because of the mentioned cut-off date; and b) the delay in notifying the rules of the Act by the BJP government. However, the 2019 Act and the political campaign around it, particularly since 2014, on the one hand, has communalised the citizenship issue by positing the polarising binary "*udbastu banam onuprobeshkari*" (refugee versus infiltrator); and on the other, it has acted a tool of political engineering for the BJP and its Hindutva allies to integrate the Matuas, the followers of an anti-Brahminical faith, within the Hindu majoritarian establishment. This politics of communal polarisation and thereby integrating Dalits within the Hindu fold has serious political implications for Thakurnagar as a place. In August 2020, for instance, the Matua leader and BJP MP Shantanu Thakur sent soil and water from Thakurnagar to Ayodhya (in Uttar Pradesh) before the *bhumi puja* (ground-breaking ceremony) of the upcoming Ram temple at the site of the demolished Babri Masjid.<sup>55</sup> This act also led to a controversy as a section of the Matuas alleged that the soil from Thakurnagar was rejected. These contestations over Thakurnagar and attempts to assign newer meanings to this place among political actors further indicate its growing political salience.

## Conclusion

"Place" argued Karin Aguilar-San Juan, "can and does operate as an anchor, a platform, and an organizing device" for migrant communities.<sup>56</sup> This is evident from the above discussion on Thakurnagar where Namasudra refugees have inscribed their collective identity in the post-Partition decades through a series of platial practices, primarily around an anti-caste faith, religious organisation, iconography, and movement to assert their demands on citizenship, recognition, and representation. The making and transformation of Thakurnagar happened at two overlapping levels. At one level, it developed as a sacred-civic place, akin to Orakandi, through popular initiatives such as temple construction, organisation of mass events and prayer meets, memorialisation practices, as well as economic activities and building of institutions such as schools, railway station, post-office, health centres, and markets. At another level, it evolved as a political location which is a site of political contestations and where the presence of the Matua Mahasangha headquarters and leadership continue to provide a sense of security and protection to the displaced Dalit refugees in a new environment. After the passage of the 2003 Act, the political salience of Thakurnagar became stronger because of the Matua Mahasangha's movement for citizenship rights at a time when many Dalit refugees encountered police and bureaucratic harassment for being suspected as "illegal" migrants. For example, the Matuas consider and frequently use the Matua Mahasangha identity card issued at Thakurbari as an important document to avoid administrative heckling.

Moreover, Thakurnagar provided a distinctive sense of community to the local Matuas. In contrast to the Matua refugees who resettled in the Andamans and whose “place-making processes embeds the narrative of refugee rehabilitation...within the nationalist master narrative of Mini-India” and are marked by a “loss of relevance of Partition”<sup>57</sup>; the Matuas of Thakurnagar express a contrapuntal awareness as they kept the sense of loss caused by Partition and memories of home alive in their placial practices such as naming. This consciousness has been central to their political activism and the formation of community identity. In the recent past, the house of Manjul Krishna Thakur and his family within the Thakurbari compound was named “The Expulsion.” This family currently heads the dominant faction of the Matua Mahasanga.<sup>58</sup> Like “Exile,” the name of this next-door house too echoes the permanent sense of loss. Additionally, the name also characterises the present politics of the Matuas as it reflects how Dalit refugees continue to struggle to prove themselves as Indian citizens even after seventy years of Partition. However, it is undeniable that the place making practices and assertions of the Matuas in Thakurnagar over these years have made this place the seat of Dalit refugee activism in the changing political landscape of West Bengal.

*All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Prasun Chaudhuri, “Matuas: Nobody's people, Everybody's Votebank”, *The Telegraph*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/matuas-nobody-s-people-everybody-s-votebank/cid/1686964>.

<sup>2</sup> Bharatiya Janata Party, “PM Shri Narendra Modi Addresses Public Meeting in Thakurnagar, West Bengal,” *YouTube*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjj\\_9uSNTbw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjj_9uSNTbw).

<sup>3</sup> The BJP-led union government introduced the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2016 in the Lok Sabha. The highlights of this Bill are: a) it makes religion for the first time a criterion for acquiring Indian citizenship by removing people of six religious communities (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians), who migrated to India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan before an extended cut-off, from the definition of “illegal migrants”; and b) it reduces the number of years required for the acquisition of citizenship by naturalisation. The Bill, however, did not pass in the Rajya Sabha and was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee. In 2019, the BJP once again made the citizenship question a key poll campaign issue. After coming back to power, the Modi government passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019. The passage of the law led to country-wide protests. See, Syantani Chatterjee and Natasha Raheja, “India’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA): Citizenship and Belonging in India,” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review (Forum)*, September 7, 2020, <https://polarjournal.org/2020/09/07/indias-citizenship-amendment-act-caa-citizenship-and-belonging-in-india/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Namasudras, an “ex-Untouchable” caste, constitute the second largest Scheduled Caste community in West Bengal. A large section of the Namasudras are

followers of the Matua sect which was introduced in the late nineteenth century by Harichand Thakur as an anti-caste religion.

<sup>5</sup> I use the word “Dalit,” meaning “broken” or “crushed,” in the context of the Namasduras and Matuas because it is popularly used as a self-referential term. The other terms that the Matuas use to identify themselves are *patit* (fallen), *nipirito* (oppressed), and *pichiye pora manush* (the backward people).

<sup>6</sup> Vasudha Chhotray, “Nullification of Citizenship: Negotiating Authority without Identity Documents in Coastal Odisha, India,” *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no.2 (2018): 175–90; Praskanva Sinharay, “To Be a Hindu Citizen: Politics of Dalit Migrants in Contemporary West Bengal,” *South Asia* 42, no.2 (2019): 359–74.

<sup>7</sup> Praskanva Sinharay, “A New Politics of Caste,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 34 (August 25, 2012): 26–27.

<sup>8</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, “In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition,” *Policies and Practices* 59 (2014): 13, <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/PP59.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Pradip Kumar Bose, “Refugee, Memory and the State: A Review of Research in Refugees Studies,” *Refugee Watch* 36 (December 2010): 1-30, <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/rw/%20files/RW36/1.Pradip.pdf>; Joya Chatterji, “Dispersal and the Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-dwellers and Squatters in West Bengal,” *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no.5 (September 2007): 995–1032.

<sup>10</sup> Mahbubar Rahman and Willem van Schendel, “‘I Am Not a Refugee’: Rethinking Partition Migration,” *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no.3 (July 2003): 551–84.

<sup>11</sup> There are exceptions to this larger trend in the existing scholarship. For example, scholars such as Ross Mallick, Jhuma Sen, Phillip Zehmisch, and Madhumita Mazumdar have tried to look at the rehabilitation processes, policies, and sites related to lower-caste refugees. See, Ross Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 1 (1999): 104–25; Jhuma Sen, “Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives,” in *Partition: The Long Shadow*, ed. Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2015), 102–27; Phillip Zehmisch, “Between Mini-India and Sonar Bangla: The Memorialisation and Place-Making Practices of East Bengal Hindu Refugees in the Andaman Islands,” in Churnjeet Mahn, and Anne Murphy (eds.), *Partition and the Practice of Memory* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 63–88; Madhumita Mazumdar, “Dwelling in Fluid Spaces: The Matuas of the Andaman Islands,” in *New Histories of the Andaman Islands: Landscape, Place and Identity in the Bay of Bengal, 1790–2012*, eds. Clare Anderson, Madhumita Mazumdar, and Vishvajit Pandya (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 177–178.

<sup>12</sup> Zehmisch, “Between Mini-India,” 74.

<sup>13</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no.1 (February 1992): 6–23.

<sup>14</sup> David Turton, “The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement: Lessons from Long-Term Field Research in Southern Ethiopia,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18, no. 3, (2005): 258–80.

<sup>15</sup> John Gray, “Community as Place-Making: Ram Auctions in the Scottish Borderland,” in *Realizing Community: Concepts, Social Relationships and Sentiments*, ed. Vered Amit (London: Routledge, 2002), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

- <sup>17</sup> Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no.1 (February 1992): 35.
- <sup>18</sup> Ramnarayan S. Rawat, "Occupation, Dignity, and Space: The Rise of Dalit Studies," *History Compass* 11, no.12 (2013): 1059–67.
- <sup>19</sup> Geeta Thatra, "Dalit Chembur: Spatializing the Caste Question in Bombay, c. 1920s-1970s," *Journal of Urban History* 48, no.1 (2022): 63-97.
- <sup>20</sup> D. Karthikeyan, "Contentious Spaces: Guru Pujas as Public Performances and the Production of Political Community," in *From the Margins to the Mainstream: Institutionalising Minorities in South Asia*, eds. Hugo Gorringe, Roger Jeffery, Suryakant Waghmore (New Delhi: Sage, 2016), 178–200.
- <sup>21</sup> Rawat, "Occupation, Dignity, and Space," 1060.
- <sup>22</sup> Turton, "The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement."
- <sup>23</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (Delhi: Sage, 1999), 98.
- <sup>24</sup> Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation*, 98; Also see Census of India 2011 West Bengal District Census Handbook North 24 Parganas, Series 20, Part XII-B, (Directorate of Census Operations, West Bengal), 26.
- <sup>25</sup> N.B. Roy, *A People in Distress*, vol. II (Calcutta: B. Sarkar and Co., p.250).
- <sup>26</sup> For a discussion on P.R. Thakur and his political career, see. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.); Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space."
- <sup>27</sup> Kapil Krishna Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi, Thakurnagar O Matua-der Nana Prasanga* (Thakurnagar: Nikhil Bharat Prakashani 2010), 66.
- <sup>28</sup> Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 66; Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation*, 96.
- <sup>29</sup> Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 69–70.
- <sup>30</sup> Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 69–70.
- <sup>31</sup> Roy, *A People in Distress*, 250.
- <sup>32</sup> Debdas Pande, *An Approach to Matuism* (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, 2008), 112.
- <sup>33</sup> Roy, *A People in Distress*, 250.
- <sup>34</sup> Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 66.
- <sup>35</sup> Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 186.
- <sup>36</sup> Said, "Reflections on Exile," 173.
- <sup>37</sup> Said, "Reflections on Exile," 186.
- <sup>38</sup> Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 67.
- <sup>39</sup> Kapil Krishna Thakur, Prasanga Katha, in Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 8.
- <sup>40</sup> I borrow the term "platial", meaning "the action of place making," from Aguilar–San Juan. For details, see, Karin Aguilar–San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) xxv-xxvi.
- <sup>41</sup> Sandria B. Freitag, "Sacred Symbol as Mobilizing Ideology: The North Indian Search for a "Hindu" Community," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no.4 (1980): 597–625; P Sanal Mohan, "Creation of Social Space through Prayers among Dalits in Kerala, India," *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2, no.1 (2016): 40–57; Karthikeyan, "Contentious Spaces."
- <sup>42</sup> Pande, *An Approach to Matuism*, 106–07.
- <sup>43</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "Historicising Caste in Bengal Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVII.50 (2012): 69–70.

<sup>44</sup> Pande, *An Approach to Matuatism*, 113.

<sup>45</sup> Pande, *An Approach to Matuatism*, 113.

<sup>46</sup> Pande, *An Approach to Matuatism*, 113.

<sup>47</sup> Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 71.

<sup>48</sup> Bandyopadhyay, and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space," 13.

<sup>49</sup> Bandyopadhyay, and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space," 13.

<sup>50</sup> Bandyopadhyay, and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space," 13.

<sup>51</sup> Anwesha Sengupta, "The Refugee Colonies of Kolkata: History, Politics and Memory," *Sahapedia*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.sahapedia.org/refugee-colonies-kolkata-history-politics-and-memory>.

<sup>52</sup> Sengupta, "The Refugee Colonies of Kolkata."

<sup>53</sup> Sengupta, "The Refugee Colonies of Kolkata."

<sup>54</sup> Interview with leader of a prominent refugee organisation, Madhyamgram, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, October 25, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Indrajit Kundu, "BJP MP's Bid to Send Soil from Matua Community in Bengal for Ram Temple in Ayodhya," *India Today*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bjp-mp-s-bid-to-send-soil-from-matua-community-in-bengal-for-ram-temple-in-ayodhya-1706189-2020-07-31>.

<sup>56</sup> Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons*, xx.

<sup>57</sup> Zehmisch, "Between Mini-India and Sonar Bangla," 86.

<sup>58</sup> In 2015, the Matua Mahasangha was divided into two factions due to a rift within the Thakur family.

# “Interrogating My Chandal Life”: Manoranjan Byapari and the Silenced History of Bengali Dalit Refugees

By

**Sumanta Mondal \***

Manoranjan Byapari’s autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* gives an intense first-hand experience of the violence and fragmentation brought by the catastrophic chains of reactions set off first by the Partition and later by the urbanisation in Calcutta. He gives an intense and in-depth description of the failure of the rehabilitation schemes by the government, the unfulfilled promises made by various leaders during the fervent 1960s Calcutta followed by the stormy decades of the 1970s, the violent repercussion of the militant Naxalite movement, the forgotten episodes of the Marichjhapi massacre in 1979 where thousands of innocent Dalit refugees were killed mercilessly by the government and finally the darker sides of the corrupt politics and the criminal world. It has been narrated from the perspective of a lower caste Namasudra refugee, something that has never been done before in Bengal’s mainstream literary world. Manoranjan Byapari uses literature as a weapon, almost like a sentinel for his conscience, gives voice to the voiceless and he is willing to fight bigotry. He is willing to wage a fight against the hierarchical society. Byapari’s autobiography is a critique of the constant dehumanising social forces of a caste-ridden society that get buried in urban post-colonial settings. Through his autobiography, he vents the anguish and frustration of the Namasudras. Although his autobiography narrates his own predicament and the difficult journey of his life, it is universal in nature as it transcends the Namasudra community as a whole. His voice of protest can be noticed in an unprecedented ardour where only harsh truth is being said. His autobiography, therefore, becomes an expression of his anger and retaliation. The pain of the discrimination became unbearable for him, which made Byapari vocal. His work is powerful, albeit a violent expression of truth. The assertion of the self is very prominent in his work.

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The various imposed negative identities like Dalit refugees and *Chotolok* (lower caste) have further pushed him to the periphery of Bengali society. His work almost acts as an impetus behind the emergence of Bengali Dalit literature and can be categorised as Protest Literature. His autobiography is not just an account of the history of one oppressed Dalit but the silenced history of the disturbed times of the Partition and the post-Partition trauma. This book is a moving chronicle that portrays the wound of Partition induced displacement, the ultimate failure of refugee rehabilitation, the atrocity and physical abuse committed in Marichjhapi, the dark side of politics and corrupt society, the militant Naxalite movement, the shady world of crime, the agony of an imprisoned life, and the emancipated soul of a budding writer.

Byapari's autobiography originally written in Bengali as *Iitibritte Chandal Jiban* was first published in 2012. Later it has been translated into English by Sipra Mukherjee and published in 2018. He is explicitly vocal about his Namasudra identity and it also shows his ongoing search for liberation from discrimination. The very act of writing about his Dalit life becomes an act of resistance because Byapari through his writing asserts his Dalit identity. Revolt and anger run in Manoranjan Byapari's blood. It is ingrained inside him. He is placed on the border of class and caste within the discourse of Bengali history. In post-Partition Bengal, the issue of refugee politics, poverty, unemployment, hunger, and atrocities have been rising drastically. This forces an individual to take dire actions to merely survive in this world. The narrative is driven more often by his immediate actions than by his emotions. His autobiography acts at once individual and communal portraying the torrents of mental anguish. So, it was not so difficult on the translator's part to translate the language as his prose is urban and contemporary. Byapari's self-narrative is packed with brutal and intense events, taking the reader's attention from one major event to another with rapid speed and movement.

The autobiography is a self-narrative of atrocity drawing attention to the oppressive conditions within the Bengali community. It unravels the atrocity self-narrative into testimony and evidentiary statements that are explicitly political in nature. His autobiography portrays the individual, cultural, and social injury where the Dalit body acts as a site of exploitation and marginalisation as poverty, hunger, anguish, sexual abuse, and agony all intersected to make the Dalit body truly obsequious. In the autobiography, the body becomes the site of unpleasant oppression, and where the narrative speaks of human rights violations and trauma. His misery does not consist of one grievous event but it is a continuous process of horrific incidents, it exists as a subalternity continuum. While the trauma becomes a never-ending process delineating Byapari's individual pain, anguish, and physical torture, but still, he gives voice to all the other Dalit refugees who remain voiceless to this day. He acts as a witness within the dynamics of human rights discourse and brutality inquiries by making public what is private. It is almost parallel with a *Künstlerroman* in which Byapari's victimised self rises to an educated self and the recognition of his self-dignity; as he charts his trials, tribulations, and survival for existence. The atrocity is beyond what has been portrayed in the

autobiography. It is an autobiography of trauma, agony, loss, and survival. Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography is an amalgamation of both a social narrative and a personal account. One of the most prominent attributes of his autobiography is the self-assertion of his Namasudra identity. At times he proudly declares it and at other times he asserts it out of frustration, rage, and disgust. The self-narrative explores his Chotolok location in the periphery of the hierarchical society. He had lived many lives from being a Dalit refugee, an illiterate child labourer, cook, rickshaw-wallah, alcoholic, criminal, Naxalite revolutionary, and prisoner. The autobiography is packed with unconventional similes, abhorrent metaphors, and parallelism to reflect upon his social self, assert his Dalit identity, depict his traumatic experiences, and portray the life of rootless Namasudra devoid of respect and honour in society.

Byapari portrays the dark world of crime, poverty, displacement, and the failure of rehabilitation schemes. Each chapter of the book unravels excruciating pain, trauma, resistance, and retaliation against the hidden apartheid and hypocrisy of the existing hegemonic political and social framework. He rejects traditional romantic aestheticism to expose the crisis of political situations and personal sufferings. He adopts the technique of alternative aestheticism to unveil the hidden truths of the Bhadrakalok society. Byapari begins his life narrative with an emphatic ‘I’ to announce profusely his Dalit identity: “I was born into an impoverished Dalit family.”<sup>1</sup> He makes the assertion of his marginal self. Byapari tries to discard the humiliating identity of an illiterate Chotolok and emancipates into the new intellectual figure by entering the world of letters inside the prison and bringing steadiness to his otherwise fluid refugee life. His odyssey from the struggle for existence to the path of a celebrated writer and making a place in the prestigious literary world and Bhadrakalok society is remarkable. Byapari's autobiography is both a self-reflection and a socio-political account of the trauma of a Dalit refugee in Partition and post-Partition West Bengal.

### **The Uprooted: Displaced Home and Fragmented Identities**

Manoranjan Byapari was born around 1950-1951 into a destitute Namasudra family in a place called Turuk-khali which was near Pirichpur village in the district of Barisal in East Pakistan. Despite the improvised situation, their community was helpful and there was no dearth of kindness as they would help Byapari's family in time of need. Even though his neighbours, relatives, and friends were poor and belonged to the same Namasudra community, they would still try their best to set aside for Byapari's family a handful of rice. His implementation of social realism draws the attention of the readers to the post-Partition socio-political conditions of the Namasudra community as a means to expose and critique the hegemonic power structures behind their harsh realities. From the very beginning of his autobiography, there is a strong resonance of self-assertion: “There are quite a few Manoranjans, and also quite a few Byaparis. But you will not find another Manoranjan Byapari. I am only one. In me is the beginning and in me is the end.”<sup>2</sup> He also makes the

readers aware of his improvised condition—a life bereft of happiness. It also shows the vicious circle of eternal marginalisation which is a cycle of subalternity continuum: “My life has not been sweet. I have lived my life as the ill-fated Dalit son of an ill-fated Dalit father, condemned to a life of bitterness.”<sup>3</sup> His family was pushed into a life of darkness and traumatic existence but still, he managed to survive on his own will, resource, and strength. At a tender age, Byapari along with his family of four (grandfather, father, mother, and his brother Chitta) were forced to migrate to India because of the fear of the communal riots. They arrived in India at Shiromanipur camp in the district of Bankura. Byapari’s life narrative is based on his social position as a Dalit and his personal traumatic experiences as a refugee. The autobiography portrays that his social knowledge stems from his social position and experiences that he had endured rather than from any educational institution of production of knowledge.

### **The Wounds of Partition: Life as a Refugee**

Gail Omvedt observes that in most of the Dalit self-narratives, the “image of the oppressed mother, the toiling father, both often pushing the son (not so often, sadly, the daughter) to education in spite of grinding poverty; the vulnerability to violence in the form of rape, casual beatings and more vicious atrocities...the formed and humiliating labour represented by caste-based ‘duties’” are a recurrent theme.<sup>4</sup> This is also true in the case of Byapari. He along with his family were forced to migrate and take shelter at Shiromanipur camp from 1953 to 1954. Again, they were displaced to the Doltala camp in 1960. The educated upper castes or Bhadrals were unwilling to stay at the camps with the other poverty-stricken, illiterate, lower-castes Chotoloks like *Muchi* (cobbler), *Nama* (non-Aryan), *Jele* (fisherman), and most of the upper castes “with the help of the caste Hindu officials or ministers in West Bengal, managed a space within or near Calcutta...because the primary condition to being given land here was education and the Bhadralk identity- an identity that was unaffordable to all but the upper castes.”<sup>5</sup>

His father, Bipin Byapari, used to travel many miles and sat in the railway station in the prospect of work with his spade, *gamchha* (coarse cotton cloth), and basket. But the majority of the time, he would not get work, he would return home soulless, empty-handed, and famished. Byapari’s family was dependent on his father as he was the sole breadwinner. But unfortunately, this extreme exhaustion took a toll on his health making him bedridden, lashing about on the bed with pain like a slaughtered spectre. As luck would have it, his sister Manju died due to starvation. Byapari laments that no language could possibly describe the pain of starvation, poverty, penury, and destitution which they had to endure. Those past unbearable days could not be possibly expressed in nice poetic-sounding words as it would not do any justice to the victims. Ironically, words failed to describe the excruciating misery that they were going through. It echoes Gail Omvedt’s

observation on the pervading themes and social realism in Dalit autobiography:

I have seen my father writhing in agony as he inched towards death, a day at a time, without any medical treatment. I have seen my mother living the life of a rat in its dark hole, unable to step outside into the sunshine when the cold and dank interior chilled her. I have seen my sister die of starvation, and watched helplessly my three other siblings exhausted by malnutrition and fasting. My aged grandmother went around the market collecting rotten or worm-eaten potatoes and eggplants and papayas. Trying to squeeze what little nourishment she could from these rejected foodstuff.<sup>6</sup>

Byapari then took the decision to take his destiny into his own hands and decided to run away. He decided to run away to an uncertain future as at that tender age he had no idea about the atrocities of the world that lay outside.

Byapari's autobiography gives the readers microscopic insights from the perspective of the subcontinental Partition diaspora and highlights the interface between nations, forced migration, statelessness, displacement, and transnational consciousness. The events following the 1947 Partition of India saw an exodus of Bengali Dalit refugees from East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) to West Bengal. In Bengal-East Pakistan, the Partition occurred in a gradual, complex, multi-faceted, and successive process that was stained by the personal disaster that resulted in suffering and traumatic memories of many uprooted refugees. In the first wave, mainly upper-caste Bengali Bhadrals migrated from East Bengal prior to the 1947 Partition. But with their substantial social power and capital, they managed to negotiate with the government and received proper rehabilitation in the new land. But in the second wave, from the 1950s onwards, mostly lower castes migrated. The Namasudra refugees had to flee their homeland for the possibility of communal violence and ostracism. They were forced to take refuge in government refugee camps. They had to endure a persistent amount of displacement and segregation unleashed by the post-colonial government. Manoranjan Byapari explained how the displaced Namasudra refugees were later forced outside of West Bengal to alienated places like Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Orissa, Bihar, Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. He argued that the segregation of the people in the refugee camps was based on caste identity. Byapari acknowledges both the failure of refugee rehabilitation and the issue of caste and bigotry associated with the Partition and the politics of forced migration and displacement. He realised in his early days as a refugee that not all refugees are equal. The condition of the camps was abysmal. The rehabilitation camps were associated with a space of exile, alienation, and imprisonment. They were misplaced as the “dispersal of refugees” and were forced to accept the new resettlement because the government feared the potential of dangerous political mobilisation in the refugee camps; which happened quite often and even Byapari's father got beaten by the police because he protested. “As my father groaned and cursed his fate deep into the night, I swore with my childish intelligence to take

revenge on the police who had beaten my father.”<sup>77</sup> Hence, the Namasudra refugees were relegated to the margins. He indirectly equalised the forceful and selective rehabilitation of the uprooted refugees as misplacement and asserted the failure of the government to uplift the Namasudra community. The whole process was described as a cataclysmic failure.

### **The Dispersal of Refugees: Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi**

Byapari’s uncle, after much discussion, advised his father to migrate and join them in Dandakaranya. So even though his father, who once hated the idea of Dandakaranya agreed to take a chance and join his brothers there. He was unaware of the impending dangers that were lurking in the dark jungles of Dandakaranya. He had no prior knowledge of what was to come in their ways and push them further into the margins. Byapari’s family was again displaced. The Dandakaranya Project came into existence in September 1958 to rehabilitate the displaced refugees in the districts of Bastar in Chhattisgarh, and Koraput in Orissa. The arid land was unsuitable for agriculture and was already inhabited by the tribals. It was supposed to provide homes for the residuary refugees, but the conditions were abysmal. The displacement was hence an endemic process. The Namasudras were selectively chosen for this project as the majority of them were farmers by profession and hence they could cultivate the lands.

Our usual tools did not work on this...It would take days to eke a decent living out of this land. To make matters worse, this was the month of May. The sun burnt our backs with the bite of a hundred angry snakes. It was the notorious loo of Bastar which was blowing, causing blisters to form upon our bodies...everyday of life lived here was an added pain. I would return to Bengal.<sup>8</sup>

Many frustrated refugees deserted Dandakaranya due to a lack of basic amenities and migrated back to West Bengal and founded their shelter at Marichjhapi in Sundarbans in 1977. Dandakaranya has been examined as an adjunct to the Marichjhapi massacre. The Marichjhapi massacre in 1979 is considered one of the catastrophic events in the history of postcolonial Bengal where hundreds of Dalit refugees were killed mercilessly. When the Namasudra refugees settled in Marichjhapi, the state government committed inconceivable abomination and violence upon them to cast them out of Marichjhapi immediately. The Marichjhapi chapter was one of the most fearful incidents and dark history of the Bengal genocide where hundreds of Dalit refugees were beaten, starved to death, killed, and raped. It was basically a result of the state government’s crude politics of policy reversal in the case of refugee rehabilitation and resettlement in the Reserve Forest area. Jhuma Sen rightly posits in her article, *The Silence of Marichjhapi*, “Partition resulted in the loss of bargaining power of the Dalits because, being divided along religious lines of Hindu and Muslims, they became politically minorities in both countries.”<sup>79</sup> Despite the government’s eagerness to publicise the

migration of refugees as an instance of successful rehabilitation but in reality, it was characterised by mismanagement due to a lack of planning. It was in fact adversely inadequate, delayed, and ultimately a complete failure.

The treachery inflicted upon the poor people who returned from Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi island. Marichjhapi. A ruthless saga of massacre and rape, arson and plunder that is comparable to the likes of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Perpetrated by the state on a small, riverine island nearly forty years ago, the brutality of the violence would be difficult to match in the annals of human history.<sup>10</sup>

Byapari's father and younger brother Chitta passed away before he could meet them. His father was already badly injured after he broke his ribs on being beaten by the police at Marichjhapi but ultimately his *Baba* (father) could not bear the pain of the death of his younger son and sadly, out of grief and bad health, he passed away. Byapari laments about the continuous forms of pain and brutality that he has to endure where atrocity came in incessant waves, one after the other. Before even he could pause and reflect upon it, another gruesome violence would come up in his way.

### **Jeeban: Byapari's Alter Ego**

Byapari significantly uses an alter ego named “Jeeban” which means life in Bengali. Byapari's alter ego Jeeban becomes a symbolic character that carries out the function of “destruction” and “reconstruction”. He becomes the allegorical figure of the Namasudra's eternal struggle with the hegemonic society and its corrupted people. The struggles of Jeeban become an example of the struggles of the entire Namasudra community. The third person Jeeban almost becomes a metaphor for the vicious cycle of subalternity. It shows his perennial attempt to establish and discover the figure and meaning of the “self”. Byapari's autobiography perfectly characterises Gopal Guru's theory of “counter-rejection.”<sup>11</sup> The agony of Jeeban, thus, became an exemplary fragment of every Namasudra refugee's struggle for existence. The body of Jeeban becomes a site of appropriation and a locality of oppression. Both the self and the body sustain torrents of pain, mental anguish, and humiliation. Here the trauma attaches to both the body and the soul. Byapari's usage of “traumatic realism” centers around the Dalit body as the foremost site of marginalisation. The wound scarred the psyche of his Namasudra self. The pain was so raw and intense that he dissociates himself and gives himself an alter ego named Jeeban. The traumatic realism in Byapari's narrative is so intense while depicting the raw vulnerable trauma of his childhood that Byapari takes refuge in the third person. He named his younger self Jeeban who got molested, cheated, beaten, raped, and exploited. He takes the readers on a wild ride while narrating the dark times of his life. Amulya Thakur, ironically, a Brahmin who wore the sacred thread around his neck, and was the preacher of purity and dignity molested Jeeban. “But this was against my desires and my cultural conditioning. My body and mind revolted and the word rushed out from my throat, ‘No’...In much the same way that this

young boy, call him Jeeban, slipped and fell into dark and harsh times. Every station has a certain disembodied person about it.”<sup>12</sup>

The autobiography also shows how soft casteism was still prevalent in postcolonial Bengal as the tea stall owner bluntly boasts that he gave Jeeban the job because they belonged to the same Kayastha caste. Jeeban had to lie about his surname to survive in this cruel world. Here Byapari exposes the fact that surnames are signified by the concept of impure, dishonesty, and discrimination. Sardonicly, the tea stall cheated him and never paid him his dues. His surname carries the connotation of caste hierarchy and a sense of otherness. Byapari’s rage began to engulf him and he became vexed with himself, with the Bhadrakalok society, and with humanity in general. Jeeban got sexually abused by a *havildar* (police), ironically donning a Hanuman tattoo. The fact that the *havildar*’s job was to protect the citizen, but his narrative grotesquely exposes how the *havildar* violently traumatised Jeeban’s body and soul. It shows the hypocrisy of the power structure for gross violations of the people’s expectations.

All that humanity had aspired for with its civilization, its culture, its traditions, were pushed back in the violent savagery of that night. Like a hungry hyena, the *havildar* had pounced upon the helpless Jeeban...as the *havildar* poured dirty, sticky, foul indignity onto Jeeban’s body and soul...betraying all that was held sacrosanct by humanity, all that was decreed by the vocation of the police, the man raped Jeeban. He raped Jeeban’s soul, his spirit, his identity.<sup>13</sup>

Byapari employs the narrative strategy of distancing while depicting the horrific incidents of his boyhood. The pain, humiliation, and starvation described in those episodes were so raw and excruciating that Byapari distances himself as a third-person narrator named Jeeban. While doing so he is able to evoke the unfiltered emotions that violated both his body and soul. Despite Byapari’s hesitation to be labelled as a victim, the little boy Jeeban who once run away from his home to make his future better can only be portrayed as one sufferer of the inhumane society. In depicting Jeeban as the third-person narrator, Byapari exposes the dark side of the society where a little child had to face the worst kind of abuse and exploitation at the hands of the protector.

### **Cursed from Birth**

Byapari had a myriad of identities from cowherd, tea stall boy, child labourer, cook, sweeper, criminal, jailbird, and rickshaw-wallah. His multifaceted roles articulate the pangs of his anguish, and his experiences of the darker side of the Bengali society which was tinged with violence, abuse, hatred, cruelties, and discrimination. Violence and humiliation came crashing repeatedly like waves in his life as if he was cursed from his birth. When Byapari was a cook, he got a job at a rice-eating ceremony. He did an excellent job at cooking as people were happy with it and praised him but unfortunately, his joy was marred when they found out about his caste identity. He had to endure extreme forms of humiliation and shame for it. By birth, Byapari belonged to

a Namasudra family that has been stereotyped as impure, criminal, and untouchable. Here we again see how the hegemonic caste hierarchy played its part and exposed the Bhadrалoks who were still practicing discrimination and the notion of untouchability in the garb of the progressive liberal minds. In the ceremony when it was revealed that Byapari and his friend belonged to the Chandal<sup>14</sup> community, the upper castes humiliated them by making them do sit-ups while holding on to their ears. They even forced them to bend down and rub their noses against the ground. Byapari and his friend were filled with shame and disgust and they had to flee away from there at the break of the dawn. They did not even bother to wait for their dues as their souls were filled with shame. The incident must just be simple fun for the upper castes, but for them, it was the ultimate form of discrimination and ignominy. In another incident, the party members started beating Byapari by tying him around the lamppost for no fault of his. He was held to be the scapegoat as the Bhadrалoks always looked upon the Chotoloks as criminals. The main accused was excused because he was Kayastha by caste and his father was well off. Byapari here points out the ways the Bhadrалok society discriminates against people and divides them on the basis of caste and class. Here the Bhadrалoks represented the “haves” and the Chotoloks represented the “have-nots”. The Bhadrалoks did not feel guilty about beating the “have-nots” as they knew that they won’t have the power to retaliate. This was an example of a political necessity. Byapari starts searching for alternative deviant values thus discarding the traditional Hindu values. He swore against Hindu God and denounced God as he lamented that God was never beside him even when Byapari was an ardent follower. He summons Satan and professes himself as a worshipper of the rival. He asked Satan to give him immense strength. By doing so, he uses resistance and revolt to cripple and dismantle all forms of atrocity. He subverts the practice of worshipping the traditional religion. Byapari defied the traditional boundaries of structured religion. Jaydeep Sarangi, and Angana Dutta postulate,

Submitting to the ‘devil’ frees him from the obligation of being non-violent—which is one of the celebrated qualities of the elite conceptions of the divine. Violence and aggression saved his life and restored human rights to his fellow suffers frequently. It is a painful narration of how long-standing exploitation and oppression can push one towards a life of violence in self-defence—that maybe be unfairly labelled as deviant. With great care he unearths the situations which may push the underclass towards ‘deviance’- as understood by the elites.<sup>15</sup>

Manoranjan Byapari was drawn into the Naxalite movement more because of his need for survival in the new land than its ideology. Byapari got caught in two major revolutions. The first movement he was associated with was the militant Naxalite movement but he was way too young to grasp the intensity and the horrors of the revolution that was yet to come. The second revolution he got associated with was Mukti Morcha which led him to Shankar Guha Neogi at Bastar. This time he pushed himself into active politics. Even though he did not agree with all the ideologies, the revolution



was ingrained in his blood. The pain of an empty stomach made him travel from one place to another. Certain situations forced him into the revolution. Byapari met Shankar Guha Neogi, who was the founder of Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha in Dalli. Byapari's meeting with Neogi marked the beginning of his short-term career in politics. He was amused by Neogi's ascetic lifestyle and his smiling face despite all the sacrifices he made in his life. Byapari idolised Neogiji for what his Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha stood for. Neogiji initiated many health programs like anti-liquor efforts, education for all, and their own health center called the Shaheed Hospital. Byapari is eternally grateful for the impact that Neogiji had on his life. Without his help, he and his family could have possibly been wiped away into the darkness. Neogiji was as significant as an epic warrior because he was the protector and saviour for hundreds of people like Byapari. He went to any extent to save the poor and put himself in grave danger in hours of their need. Unfortunately, Sankar Guha Neogi was murdered in 1991 by the forces of the capitalist class. After his demise, Byapari vowed to continue his mission by letting his grief be the strength to fight against injustice.

### Introduction to the World of Letters

Byapari was booked under Sections 148/149/307, clause 3/5. The two years of imprisonment he wondered how his life could be worthy. He was then encouraged to learn to read and write in jail. He called the other prisoner his *Guru* (mentor). The prisoner inspired Byapari that if the green sapling can grow from the hard cement cornice so can Byapari in the prison. He motivated Byapari to search for joy and hope despite being imprisoned. He encouraged him to yearn for more despite Byapari being enclosed within the prison cell.

Look at that cornice of the National Library. See that tiny green sapling there? How do you think it grows there? How does it draw water from that hard cement cornice?...The truth is there is water and nourishment in that hard concrete too. The proof of that is the living sapling. It would have died otherwise. But its roots yearned for water, searched for water, and found it. What is the bottom line, then? He who searches, shall find...Search. Here too you shall find joy and hope.<sup>16</sup>

In prison, he was introduced to the world of letters. Thus, began Byapari's odyssey from the dark world of illiteracy to the world of knowledge. Byapari first started writing with twigs on the prison floors and later Bhuvan Sepoy gave him chalks so that he could practice his letters. He slowly became engrossed in the world of letters. He started writing on the prison cement floor making words with the newly learned letters. He was so bewitched by the world of his dreams that one night in the jail he dreamt of a bright angel-like figure who conveyed that the letters written on the prison floor are not simply just letters, but Byapari's emancipated life. He had an insatiable hunger for learning. Byapari donated blood in the prison and got a pen to practice his letters and become a writer. His thirst for education was unstoppable as his

unlettered darkness had made his way to the world of knowledge through his experience in jail. The wheels of fate did turn for Byapari when he met with Mahasweta Devi by chance. He was carrying her on his rickshaw when he asked the meaning of the word *jijibisa*. Devi was surprised at the question and responded the word meant “the will to live.” The word is synonymous with Byapari’s life as he survived in this diabolic world because of his desire to survive. The word *jijibisa* is the quintessence of Byapari’s life. Mahasweta Devi then encouraged him to write about his life as a rickshaw-wallah. His first work entitled ‘I Drive Rickshaws’ got published in the January-March issue of *Bartika* in 1981. Thus, with the help of Mahasweta Devi, Byapari voyaged from the world of darkness to the world of dignity and respect. Manoranjan Byapari became the epitome of resistance. His knowledge is born out of his struggle, anger, protest, resistance, and retaliation. His accomplishment is born out of his blood, tears, sweat, and hunger. He uses his literature as a medium of war and his pen as a sword to fight for the marginalized and oppressed people and give them voices to dismantle the crippling injustices meted against them in the world of Bhadrals. Byapari concludes, “Educate yourselves. Education will engender the conscious, and consciousness will engender revolution. May you be the winds of change that bring revolution to the stagnant pond of society.”<sup>17</sup>

## Epilogue

When Byapari returned to Calcutta, he was introduced to the writer Alka Saraogi, who created a character in his name in her novel *Shesh Kadambari*. This acted as an impetus for his re-entry to the literary world after a few years of hiatus. But poverty and hunger made it impossible for him to follow the respectable life of letters. Despite all the hindrances, writing was his only resort and hope of living a dignified life. His body became weak, and he could no longer fight physically so he made the pen his sword, and his work a battlefield. So, when he detested the oppressors of society, he waged a furious battle against those oppressors through his writings. He killed them in his narratives. Byapari confesses that he harbours a weakness for the Namasudra community. Acknowledging the ills of the Dalits, he knows in his heart that they are not the same as the self-centered corrupted Bhadrals. Byapari understands that in postcolonial Bengal both caste and class somewhat became inseparable in community-building.<sup>18</sup> Some may condemn him as a Namasudra refugee, the others may condemn him as an illiterate rickshaw-wallah and criminal. But the truth remains that Byapari has been discriminated against by both groups. The upper castes prohibited the entry of the Chotols into the domain of the Bhadrals literary world. The Bhadrals resented Byapari’s ingress into their intellectual domain. They had a clear distinction between the world of Bhadrals and Chotols. Byapari refused to bow down to this oppressive discrimination. He had to wage a double battle. He uses his narratives to vent out anger, resistance, and retaliation against the social hierarchy which was responsible for his marginalisation. All his works are born out of resentment, anger, and pain. Consequently, it becomes a tool

for the oppressed to resist crippling discrimination and protest against the prejudiced social order and make their voices heard. Byapari blatantly exposes that there is a difference between “them” and “us” as “they” have restricted the entry of the Dalits into the intellectual world. The Bhadrals resented the entry of a Namasudra into the world of letters. He openly vouches that it is a battle that he is willing to fight. Coincidentally, the Bhadrals have done Byapari a favour as he gets immense strength out of anger and not love. It acts as an impetus to keep his fury alive. Hence, his books are born out of this hatred and anger.

In the Epilogue, Byapari confesses that even today when he closes his eyes, he sees the young boy suffering from pangs of hunger. But Byapari tells the young boy to rebel, break, and destroy the oppressive and hegemonic society. He urges the young boy to go ahead and use whatever he has access to get out of the ashes and arise a new life like a phoenix. Byapari ushers him to restore his life after being destroyed by society.<sup>19</sup> His later life in Calcutta is wound up in a reflective form. Byapari delivers a powerful message of hope and reassures the young boy that the Dalit consciousness and human spirit in his newly awakened soul can annihilate any form of formidable obstacle. He urges the young boy to break the shackles of marginalisation. He tells him to rebel against the hegemony of the unequal power structures. The Bhadrals failed to appreciate the hard work and literary merits of the Chotols and they fail to explore the complex labyrinth of their marginalisation and the eternal struggle for existence. Their literary works are always discredited as the works of Chotols by the elite Bhadralk critics and readers. Byapari’s self-narrative is marked by seething pain, anger, resistance, and retaliation. The Namasudras held the hegemonic power structures and socio-political influences responsible for their sufferings in their discourse.<sup>20</sup> As a matter of fact, they were compelled to use their pen as a weapon and voice their lives as they were victims of repeated marginalisation, violence, and humiliation. The majority of the elite Bhadralk intelligentsia detest the literary product of the Dalits as they consider it unworthy. This attitude makes it impossible for the Bengali Dalits to get their works published by any mainstream publishing house. Manoranjan Byapari being a victim learned it the hard way as his works mostly went unnoticed by the Bhadralk society. Byapari hence urges the readers to lift the tapestry of darkness and see the naked truth of the hidden marginalisation of the Bengali Dalits. When one accepts the truth of casteism in Bengal, one can see the horrid conditions the Namasudras had to sustain. His blunt narration throws light on the veil of deception and polished hypocrisy of the Bhadralk society. “Here I am. I know I am not entirely unfamiliar to you. You’ve seen me a hundred times in a hundred ways. Yet if you insist that you do not recognize me, let me explain myself in a little greater detail, so you will not feel that way anymore. When the darkness of unfamiliarity lifts, you will feel, why, yes, I do know this person. I’ve seen this man.”<sup>21</sup> With the help of unique Bengali idioms and turn of phrase, Byapari narrates his hapless and fragile situation where he had to endure extreme poverty, starvation, and malnutrition. Despite being repeatedly exploited by all, his intense emotions of agony and anger take the form of his self-narrative.

In the face of eternal adversities, Byapari gives the readers a ray of hope and exemplifies gracefully that willpower is all needed to survive any form of atrocity. His awakened soul can overcome the most intimidating barrier. Even though life appeared to have spread obstacles in his way, Byapari still manages to survive despite falling down a few times. His literary products are born out of his misery and suffering. Byapari's autobiography cannot typically be ascribed as a Dalit testimony because the sense of individuality, loneliness, solitude, and fragmentation is too strong. His self-narrative is all about resistance, fury, revolt, and vengeance. He bluntly shows the difference and the division between the Bhadrals and Chotols. Many incidents in his autobiography also show how caste and class amalgamate into one to form an identity. Evidently, the truth remains that there is still a visible division between the Bhadrals and the Chotols. The reality of equality will remain an illusion as long as caste discrimination will persist in Bengali society. His writings convey the frustration of being marginalised by the hegemonic system. The alternative aesthetics of his life-narrative draw strength from this anger and portrays the familiar reality of an oppressed Namasudra refugee being exploited by the powerful Bhadrals society that continuously denies him opportunities and privileges. This autobiography explores the gloomy side of the otherwise unknown tales of an oppressed Namasudra.<sup>22</sup>

The unknown lanes of Calcutta tell the story of life in the margins, about the existence of the “other” fourth world, the existence of the “other” people whose voices were either silenced or unheard, their faces unseen, and those who lived in the fringes of the Bhadrals society. Byapari exposes the fact that caste discrimination is more an issue of unequal power dynamics and disparate social forces. His story is from a perspective of a Dalit refugee from the periphery of society who had to struggle for mere food and shelter. His autobiography is composed within a sociological and historical framework. Thus, Byapari's alternative aesthetic is quite unlike that of the contemporary Bhadrals writers. His self-narrative is a tale of a desperate struggle in a world of many unknown faces to secure a respectable identity and a dignified life. It is an impeccable saga of becoming a known face and making a due space for himself in the intellectual domain of Bengali society. The ability of a Bengali Dalit refugee in becoming an established writer in the Bhadrals literary world, the jhibisa of a rickshaw-wallah acquiring the identity of a published writer constitutes the prodigious in Byapari.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Manoranjan Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*, trans. Sipra Mukherjee (New Delhi: SAGE, 2018), 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 3–4.

<sup>4</sup> Gail Omvedt, preface to *The Poisoned Bread*, ed. Arjun Dangle (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2020), ix–xviii.

<sup>5</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 20–1.

<sup>6</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 37–8.

<sup>7</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 135–6.

<sup>9</sup> Jhuma Sen, “The Silence of Marichjhapi,” *Bangalnama*, July 6, 2009, <https://bangalnama.wordpress.com/2009/07/06/the-silence-of-marichjhapi/>.

<sup>10</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 235–6.

<sup>11</sup> Gopal Guru, “How Egalitarian are the Social Sciences in India?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 50 (December 14–20, 2002): 5003–9.

<sup>12</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 56–7.

<sup>13</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 96.

<sup>14</sup> The Namasudra community was earlier known as Chandal. The term “Chandal” is derogatory and considered a casteist slur. They are lower caste people who are relegated to the margins of society. By the late nineteenth century, the Namasudras transitioned from the Chandal identity.

<sup>15</sup> Jaydeep Sarangi, and Angana Dutta. “The Wheel that Turned: Manoranjan Byapari Writes Back in *Itibritte Chandal Jiban*,” *The Apollonian*, vol.1, no.1 (Sept. 2014), [https://theapollonianjournal.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/ta-1-1\\_sar.pdf](https://theapollonianjournal.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/ta-1-1_sar.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 197.

<sup>17</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 257.

<sup>18</sup> Manoranjan Byapari, “From Wheels to Stalls” interview by Jaydeep Sarangi, *Lapis Lazuli* II, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 1–8.

<sup>19</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 349.

<sup>20</sup> Manoranjan Byapari, and Meenakshi Mukherjee, “Is There Dalit Writing in Bangla?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 41 (October 13, 2007): 4116–20.

<sup>21</sup> Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, ix.

<sup>22</sup> Sipra Mukherjee, “Manoranjan Byapari,” in *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Re-Imagined*, ed. Judith Misrahi-Barak, k. Satyanarayana, and Nicole Thiara (New Delhi: Routledge, 2020), 15–29.

# “Let’s Return to Our Own Home”: Muslim Return Migrations in Post- Partition West Bengal 1947–64

By

Nisharuddin Khan \*

*Jugantar* in 1950, published a cartoon with the title “*Fire Chal Apon Ghar/e*” (Lets Return to Our Own Home).<sup>1</sup> The cartoon had the image of two families, visually that can be identified as Muslims and Hindus walking in opposite directions from the Indo-Pakistan border in West Bengal through the Benapole, Darshana, Bangram, and Banpur border outposts. During the initial years of the Partition of India, refugees crisscrossing the border was a common phenomenon and with the passing days it became a matter-of-factly incidence that remained the baseline of population transfer, i.e., Hindus will move to India and Muslims to Pakistan. But this cartoon was an anathema to the commonly accepted understanding of the refugee movement as unlike the popular pattern of refugee route, the Muslim family was returning to West Bengal through the Banpur and Bangram border and the Hindu family to East Pakistan/East Bengal through the Benapole and Darshana borders. The news column next to the cartoon, while providing the statistics of the arrival of refugees at Sealdah station in Kolkata, mentioned that out of the incoming flows of refugees, sixty-two Hindus and fifteen Muslims returned. This act of inflow and outflow of the refugee population is spelled by *Jugantar* as “*udbastu gomonagomon*” (the unbridled refugee crossings) and without any hesitation indicates the realities and possibilities as well of reverse/return migration tendencies of the refugees born out of the Partition of India and the cartoon title specifying the desire to return to their own “home” brings into analysis the significant caveat in Partition refugee studies of reversal tendencies migration or voluntary repatriation. Following Partition, a significant number of Muslims left West Bengal for East Pakistan for various reasons including communal riots, economic hardship, patriotic ideals etc. However, often, their initial decision to migrate changed and many Muslim refugees returned to

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West Bengal after a while. This paper focuses on the return migration of Muslims from East Pakistan to West Bengal in the aftermath of Partition and tries to understand the logic of the return migration: Why did they return? How did the West Bengal government and the Indian government perceive these returnees? How were their lives after returning? The story of this return migration to their “homes” is not only preserved in the government communication in the archives but also has been vividly detailed in the then newspaper reports and has remained as memories etched in the lived experiences of the returnees.

### **Return Migration: The Magnitude**

The Partition of British India triggered a two-way migration of religious minorities across the Bengal border. Though the Partition literature has overwhelmingly focused on the patterns of migration among the Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan to India,<sup>2</sup> a substantial number of Muslims did move in the opposite direction. According to the 1951 Pakistan Census, East Bengal had 699,079 Muslim refugees of which 486,000 were from West Bengal. By the end of 1960s, according to historian Joya Chatterji’s estimation, around 1.5 million Muslims had left West Bengal for East Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> Partition migration, however, was not limited to a one-time border crossing. As the existing scholarship has shown, it took varied forms, particularly in East Pakistan and eastern India, involving internal displacement,<sup>4</sup> dispersal,<sup>5</sup> desertion,<sup>6</sup> and return. Return, the most understudied form of Partition induced migration, was perhaps the most significant one in terms of magnitude. Between 1950–52 newspapers widely reported the figures related to return migration in East Pakistan and West Bengal and the governments routinely announced the official figures. The numbers provided by the newspapers and the provincial governments did not always match. But they help us to make sense of the phenomenon of return migration. According to the estimates of the East Pakistan Government, between February 1950–May 1950, 360,000 Muslim refugees came from West Bengal to East Pakistan. On the other hand, about 45,000 Muslims returned to West Bengal by 25 May 1950.<sup>7</sup> For the period between May 6–June 30, 1950, the West Bengal government provided the following figures for the returnee Muslims by train and air and did not include the data of the returnees who took alternate transports like steamers to cross the border or walked through the border to return back.

**Table 1. Muslim Return Migrations to West Bengal, May 6–June 30, 1950**

Date	By Train	By Air	Total
06.05.1950	2035	–	2035
07.05.1950	1302	–	1302
08.05.1950	1988	–	1988
09.05.1950	1098	100	1198
10.05.1950	3487	140	3627
11.05.1950	1909	76	1985
12.05.1950	2508	82	2590
13.05.1950	1316	93	1409
14.05.1950	1694	–	1694
15.05.1950	2501	–	2501
16.05.1950	2054	–	2054
17.05.1950	2909	86	2995
18.05.1950	3446	73	3519
19.05.1950	2683	75	2758
20.05.1950	2088	90	2178
21.05.1950	3287	–	3287
22.05.1950	2407	55	2462
23.05.1950	3394	94	3488
24.05.1950	3072	76	3148
25.05.1950	3032	88	3120
27.05.1950	2835	67	2902
28.05.1950	2232	–	2232
29.05.1950	1605	–	1605
30.05.1950	3383	–	3383
01.06.1950	3427	47	3474
02.06.1950	2033	–	2033
03.06.1950	1625	–	1625
05.06.1950	2133	53	2186
07.06.1950	2973	–	2973
08.06.1950	2180	–	2180
14.06.1950	1758	62	1820
23.06.1950	2454	57	2511
30.06.1950	1770	60	1830

Source: The statistics were published in the Press Note of the Government of West Bengal in *Jugantar*, daily between May 6–June 30, 1950, compiled by Author.

The next set of numbers is from the August 31, 1950, issue of *Dawn*, a leading English daily published from Karachi.



**Table 2. Incoming and Outgoing Migrations between India and East Pakistan, April 1950–August 1950**

Months	Incoming Migration		Outgoing Migration	
	India to East Pakistan		East Pakistan to India	
	Hindus	Muslims	Hindus	Muslims
April	79,183	43,498	1,32,185	6,580
May	1,58,763	90,440	2,04,102	28,913
June	1,62,943	77,239	1,77,977	53,454
July	1,34,552	1,00,410	1,64,486	55,594
August	1,68,866	58,806	1,51,985	53,442
<b>Total</b>	7,04,307	3,70,391	8,30,735	1,97,963

Source: Dawn, August 31, 1950

From the above statistics, it is known that between April 1950 and May 1950, a total of 3,70,391 Muslims migrated from India to East Pakistan and a total of 1,97,963 Muslim immigrants from East Pakistan returned to India during the same period. On the other hand, more Hindus were on the move, compared to the Muslims, during this period. This figure considers only the traffic along Darsana and Benapole borders. There were other entry and exit points between the two Bengals. On February 8, 1951, the Governor of Bengal, K.N. Katju in his speech to the Legislative Assembly said,

Out of 35 lakhs of refugees who had come into West Bengal, it is estimated that 12 lakhs have gone back to their homes in East Bengal. Similarly, out of 11 lakh Muslims who had migrated from West Bengal, it is estimated that 7.50 lakhs have returned to their homes here. These are welcome developments, and I hope that they will continue.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout 1951, similar figures were published by various newspapers and the governments of East and West Bengal shared their figures as well in the Assemblies and in press bulletins. In 1952 return migration seemed to remain an important part of the cross-border migration in Bengal and the intensity of return migration increased in the second half of the year as India and Pakistan introduced the passport-visa system for crossing the Bengal border. Immediately before the introduction of the passport system on October 15,

1952, a large number of migrant Muslims returned to West Bengal. They feared that they could no longer be able to return to West Bengal once the passport system was introduced. This seemed to them to be the last chance to return to their homeland. As a result, return migration increased in West Bengal. Md. Rafik’s brother Abbas Razzak, a resident of Mayureswar in Birbhum district, used to work in a bank in Khulna in East Bengal. Abbas was in East Pakistan for several years after the Partition. After the riots of 1950, Md. Rafik wrote to his brother requesting him to return to West Bengal. Finally, in 1952, Abbas Razzak returned to his hometown of Mayureswar in West Bengal just before the passport system was introduced. When the passport system was introduced, his brother could not come back.<sup>9</sup> According to the figures published in *Jugantar* in the first week of October 1952, a total of 19,421 Muslims returned to West Bengal.<sup>10</sup> It was a period of intense cross-border movements between India and East Pakistan as many were afraid that the new paper regime would make border crossing immensely difficult. Therefore, the refugees and the returnees rushed to the other side. Return migration of Muslims continued in the years after the introduction of the passport system. But after the introduction of the passport-visa system, it was difficult to legally migrate particularly for a Muslim coming from East Pakistan to India. Migration now needed the government’s written approval in the form of a visa or migration certificate. Therefore, many Muslims came secretly and settled down in Muslim majority areas to become invisible.<sup>11</sup> The Indian government remained suspicious of the Muslims coming from East Pakistan, even if they were returnees. Hindus and Muslims continued to cross borders as refugees and returnees, at times despite huge risks.

### **Governments and the Right to Return!**

Though the Partition of British India triggered massive cross-border migration of the religious minorities, both the Indian and the Pakistani governments had categorically promised that they would be fair to all citizens alike, irrespective of their caste, class, and religion. Except for Punjab, where there was an agreement on the total transfer of population, minorities elsewhere were asked to stay put and those who had already migrated were encouraged to return. Thus, from the beginning, both the dominions granted the right to return of the Partition refugees. In the context of Bengal, Jawaharlal Nehru initially thought that Hindus from East Pakistan had taken temporary shelter in West Bengal because of the unstable communal situation, and he sincerely believed they should go back to their country. In 1948 Prime Minister Nehru said in the Parliament that “the policy of the Government has been to create conditions in East Pakistan itself to stop the exodus of refugees from there and also encourage those who have come to go back.”<sup>12</sup> At the Inter-Dominion Conference in April 1948 held in Calcutta, the governments of both the Bengals agreed on various aspects of minority safety and encouraged the refugees to return. The Neoghy-Ghulam Muhammad Agreement was signed at this conference by which the representatives of the two Bengals agreed on the security of the minorities as well as on the needs of

the return migration and form the Provincial Minorities Board and the Evacuees Property Management Board in West Bengal and East Pakistan for “protecting the interests of the minorities, removing fear from their minds and inspiring confidence in them.”<sup>13</sup> The term “evacuee” was explained in the Agreement as “a person who has left the province in question on or after 1-6-1947 and who declares his intention to return as soon as normal conditions are restored.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the very use of the term acknowledged the right to return of the refugees.

However, the agreements signed at the Inter-Dominion Conference failed to remove the uncertainties and concerns regarding the safety of minorities. Minorities of both Bengals felt insecure, and migrations continued across the Radcliffe Line. The communal situation deteriorated particularly towards the end of 1949 and by the early months of 1950 riots spread across East and West Bengal producing new waves of migration. The riots triggered massive cross-border migration once again bringing the leaders of the two dominions to the discussion table. On April 8, 1950, after six long days of discussions, the Prime Ministers of the two countries signed the Nehru-Liaquat Pact also known as the Delhi Pact to protect the rights of minority Muslims in India and minority Hindus in Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> It was agreed that the governments would not forcefully stop the ongoing migration, rather would attempt to ensure the freedom and security of their minorities and would encourage refugees to return to their own countries. This was highlighted in the ‘E’ part of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact 1950 which mentioned,

In order to help restore confidence, so that refugees may return to their homes, the two Governments have decided (i) to depute two Ministers, one from each Government, to remain in the affected areas for such period as may be necessary; (ii) to include in the Cabinets of East Bengal, West Bengal and Assam a representative of the minority community. In Assam the minority community is already represented in the Cabinet. Appointments to the Cabinets of East Bengal and West Bengal shall be made immediately.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, Section 5 of Part B of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact mentioned,

Rights of ownership in or occupancy of the immovable property of the migrant shall not be disturbed. If during his absence such property is occupied by another person it shall be returned to him provided that he comes back by the 31st December, 1950. Where the migrant was a cultivating owner or tenant, the land shall be restored to him provided that he returns not later than the 31st December 1950. In exceptional cases if a government considers that a migrant’s immovable property cannot be returned to him, the matter shall be referred to the appropriate Minority Commission for advice.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the authorities assured that by migrating, the refugees would not lose their property rights. The governments of East and West Bengal and Assam also promised to be more sensitive toward the needs of the minority communities living in their territory. They promised monetary aid and assistance to the returnees as well. Unlike previous bilateral agreements, the

governments of both India and Pakistan seemed more earnest in implementing the Nehru-Liaquat Pact. The Pact instilled some confidence among the refugees and many of them began to return to their homelands, even if temporarily to make arrangements for their properties. The governments routinely published the numbers of returnees along with the refugees.

In 1951, the Evacuee Property Act was passed in West Bengal to rehabilitate Muslim returnees. This Act can be called the direct and effective result of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact. The West Bengal Evacuee Property Bill, of 1951 was introduced in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly on February 21, 1951. While introducing the bill, Rai Harendra Nath Chowdhury said that “this Bill is being brought forward to implement the provision of the Indo-Pak Agreement regarding evacuee property.”<sup>18</sup> It made the provision of return of properties to any Muslim who had left West Bengal during the 1950 riots, provided they returned within a stipulated period of time. This policy of the West Bengal government to return the property of the returning Muslims was praised by the Muslim members of the Legislative Assembly. For example, Janab Mudassir Hossain, a Muslim member of West Bengal, said,

I congratulate the Government for bringing forward this Bill though it was a bill belated...it fulfils all the conditions under which it would enable an evacuee who had be rehabilitated in his own home. That is the main object of the Bill. This is a commendable measure.<sup>19</sup>

The main objective of the Act was the management of evacuee property and its restoration to the returnees. It stated,

An evacuee may at any time after he returns to West Bengal but not later than the appointed day [31.3.1951] apply in writing to the Committee for the restoration of any of his evacuee property of which the Committee has taken charge.<sup>20</sup>

The Evacuee Property Act (1951) also contained a separate provision that was made for those evacuees who could not return by March 31, 1951. Thus, an evacuee who could not return by the given date but had made it before December 31, 1953, could still apply in writing to the Committee for the restoration of his property. Thus, the return of the refugees was accepted and facilitated, at least on paper. The official position encouraged many refugees to return. According to the official documents, before March 31, 1951, as many as 32,000 Muslim migrants returned to West Bengal from East Pakistan and were reinstated in their properties that were recovered from the possession of the Hindu refugees.<sup>21</sup> Out of these 32,000 returnees, 28,000 were from Nadia district, a border district that was severely affected by the recent communal disturbances. In a note dated September 26, 1951, the Government of India informed the Government of Pakistan that by May 1951, a staggering number of 234,450 Muslims had returned from East Pakistan and 149,240 had been rehabilitated in their abandoned property.<sup>22</sup> According to the data presented by Renuka Ray in the State Legislative

Assembly in 1953, after the formation of the Evacuee Property Act (1951), 12,320 of the returned Migrant Muslims had applied for restoration of their property, while 1,547 were rehabilitated in their abandoned property and 4,933 applications were rejected as the applicant did not return within the specified time or they had already exchanged their property.<sup>23</sup> The Annual Report of the Ministry of Rehabilitation (1956–57) stated that,

[t]he Government of West Bengal took steps to restore property of 12,400 returning Muslim families. In 15,500 cases, restoration has been effected by private negotiations, making a total of 27,900 cases of restoration. Only 800 cases now remain in which the property of returning Muslims has to be restored and even in these cases effective action is being taken to ensure speedy restoration.<sup>24</sup>

In December 1966, the West Bengal government sent a report to the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India on the rehabilitation of returning Muslim migrants. According to that report, till June 1965, nearly 35,364 returnee Migrant Muslims requested for return of their evacuee property, 12,606 of them were reinstated in their abandoned property and 22,696 applications were cancelled due to various reasons, whereas 60 applications were still pending.<sup>25</sup>

**Table 3. Restoration of Properties to Returning Muslim Migrants in West Bengal, up to June 1965 [Under West Bengal Evacuee Property Act, 1951]**

Districts	No. of Valid Applications	No. of Cases Rejected	No. of Cases Restored to Possession	No. of Cases Covered by Sec 5 (3) of the Evacuee Property Act	No. of Cases Pending
Bankura	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Birbhum	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Burdwan	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Calcutta	1,416	923	493	Nil	Nil
Cooch Behar	4,704	563	4,141	Nil	Nil
Darjeeling	131	113	18	Nil	Nil
Hooghly	96	40	55	Nil	1
Howrah	1,241	1,149	91	Nil	Nil
Jalpaiguri	1,197	926	271	Nil	Nil
Malda	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Murshidabad	105	12	93	Nil	Nil
Midnapore	35	35	Nil	Nil	Nil
Nadia	23,755	16,640	7,115	Nil	Nil

24 Parganas	1,550	1,321	169	1	59
West Dinajpur	1,134	974	160	Nil	Nil
<b>Total</b>	35,364	22,696	12,606	1	60

Source: File No. P(P-IV)-286(1)/65, Pak II section, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

## Refugees Versus Returnees

The bilateral agreements and the number of returnees, however, tell a partial story. They seem to give us an impression of a government sympathetic to the plights of the returnees. The reality, however, was different. Though some of the returnees did get back their properties, many did not.<sup>26</sup> For them life was immensely difficult. In many cases, the houses and properties of the displaced persons were in the possession of the refugees who had come from the other side of the border. On their return, a clash of claims was often inevitable between the original owner and the new residents. This kept the cycle of migration on. For instance, after the Nehru-Liaquat Pact was signed, some Muslims returned to their homeland Sonadanga in the Nadia district, but they were tortured by local Hindus and they again migrated to East Pakistan.<sup>27</sup> On June 4, 1950, 14 Muslim families returned from East Pakistan to Sahinagar village under Kotwali police station in Nadia district.<sup>28</sup> But again, a Hindu refugee group attacked and stabbed them and looted their property. After this incident, eight returnee Muslim families again migrated back to East Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> The files of the Intelligence Bureau are full of such incidents from various parts of West Bengal. Often political parties like the Congress and Mahasabha sided with the refugees in driving away the returning Muslims. For example, Congress leader Bikash Ray said in a public meeting at Hanskhali in Nadia district that, “*kono Muslim ke elakai probesh korte deben na*” [do not allow the entry of any Muslims in the locality].<sup>30</sup> Similar allegations were raised in other border districts and villages of West Bengal against the Hindu refugees for preventing the return of the migrant Muslims. There was a widespread consensus among political activists, bureaucrats, refugees, and the local Hindu community regarding the logic of Partition. Their understanding of Partition made Pakistan a Muslim country and India a Hindu country. Therefore, when Muslims tried to return to their own houses in India, they often faced resistance, and often fiercely.

The failure to restore the properties to the returning Muslims became a point of conflict between the governments of the two Bengals. Pakistan complained that the “West Bengal Government is not agreeing to resettle returning Muslims migrants on their properties in West Bengal.”<sup>31</sup> The Pakistan government also reported that Hindu refugees have settled permanently in houses and lands belonging to the Muslims in many border villages of West Bengal.<sup>32</sup> All these allegations were denied by the West Bengal government as “[n]either is it a fact that this Government have been systematically settling Hindu refugees in lands and houses in the border

villages of this state.”<sup>33</sup> Based on the West Bengal government’s report, the Indian Foreign Ministry wrote to Karachi,

The policy of the Government of West Bengal, on the contrary has always been to restore their properties to returning Muslim migrants desirous of re-occupying the same, and in pursuance of this policy, that Government has evicted many Hindu refugees found in occupation of lands or building of Muslim migrant. That Government has also finalised the draft of the legislation proposed on the subject in Clause VI of Part B of the April 1950 agreement and action in accordance with it will be taken by them as soon as the law comes into force.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the Foreign Ministry of the Government of India complained that the Hindus who returned to East Pakistan after the signing of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact were tortured and forced to migrate again to West Bengal. The Indian Foreign Ministry sent a telegram to the Pakistani government mentioning three such incidents soon after the Pact was signed.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the blame game continued.

Indeed, neither India nor Pakistan was enthusiastic about the returnees. Though on paper return of migrants was encouraged by the governments of East Pakistan and West Bengal in the immediate years after Partition, the reality was different. The returnees were seen as potential law and order problems and economic liabilities. The economic logic was crude—a nation-state could not provide room for an indefinite number of people, it was argued. Therefore, there should be some check or method of choosing who could enter a country and who could not. According to the logic of Partition, a Muslim always had less right to enter India than a Hindu, even if the former was from India. Nehru himself wrote the following lines in one of his fortnightly letters addressed to the chief ministers,

We...face return of considerable numbers of Muslim who had gone over to Pakistan but who wishes now to return to India. This is a welcome indication that conditions in India have improved and are better than those prevailing in Pakistan. We have encouraged people to return. But if all these traffic is one way only, obviously this leads to great difficulties and comes in the way of rehabilitation.... our general policy now is not to prevent people from coming back if they wish to do so, but to point out the difficulties they will have to face in regard to accommodation and business or occupation.<sup>36</sup>

Nehru himself was most accommodating towards the Muslims of India both who stayed put and those who were returning. His other colleagues and the bureaucracy, however, were more reluctant to make room for the Muslims coming from East Bengal. In May 1949, in a letter, C.N. Chandra, the Secretary of the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India, wrote to the Chief Secretary of the Government of West Bengal,

The Government of India attaches great importance to their early rehabilitation . . . Return of Muslims from Pakistan is bound to [retard] the rehabilitation of displaced persons. In the circumstances it is hoped the

Provincial Governments will not allow permits for permanent settlement to Muslims wishing to come back to India till the displaced persons have been satisfactorily rehabilitated.<sup>37</sup>

The Government of West Bengal shared the sentiments of the letter quoted above. They tried to come up with effective measures to prevent the arrival of these Muslims from East Bengal. Local Muslims were kept under surveillance in several districts of West Bengal. The district administration was instructed to regularly inform Calcutta about the local Muslims who hosted people coming from Pakistan regularly at their homes. The district administration was also instructed to take action against the local Muslims who invited and sheltered these Pakistani Muslims in 24 Parganas and Nadia districts.<sup>38</sup> There was a widespread fear among the officials of West Bengal that,

Pakistan Government is encouraging the landless Muslim population to come over to this end as such embarrass the economy of this province as to strengthen the predominantly Muslim areas in the border to justify a demand for annexation of fresh territories to that dominion on the basis of communal percentage in order to counter any such demand from this end.<sup>39</sup>

While apparently government’s problem was with the Pakistani Muslims entering West Bengal, and not the returnees *per se*, it was almost impossible to distinguish between a returnee and an immigrant Muslim at a time when citizenship rules were yet to be formulated and passport system was yet to be introduced. Such bureaucratic mindset complicated the process of return.



Figure1. Passport Check-post at Banpur Station in Nadia District, West Bengal  
Source: “Yatrider Namaiya Diya Sunyo Trainer Pakistan Hoitey Bharate Agomon,”  
Jugantar, October 19, 1952, 1.

After the riots of 1950, things changed for a while, and border crossing, in whatever direction, became easier. The immediate task of both



governments was to ease the communal tension in their respective territories and the least that they could do was to allow free passage across the borders. But no government could imagine people shuttling between the two territories for an indefinite period of time. Hence, Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan decided that December 31, 1950, would be the final date to return if the returnees wanted to claim their rights over the properties left behind. The date was extended later to March 31, 1951. The border remained open till October 1952. Then the passport-visa system was introduced from midnight on October 15, 1952, to monitor border crossings on the Indo-Pakistan border and passport check posts were set up at various entry points in West Bengal such as Banpur [Pic.1], Gede, and Pirojpur in Bangaon to check the passports and visas of train passengers arriving from East Pakistan.<sup>40</sup>

After the introduction of the passport system, Muslims entering West Bengal without any valid documents were considered illegal. On October 15, 1952, the Barisal Express with a total of 340 passengers entered the Bangaon border of West Bengal, of which 263 Hindus were allowed to enter India but 44 Muslim passengers were not allowed to enter India.<sup>41</sup> Many Muslims were arrested for entering West Bengal. In November 1957, the police filed a case against 21 Muslim returnees in West Dinajpur, eight in Jalpaiguri and several in Coochbehar for violating passport rules.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, an individual crossing the border with Pakistani passport and Indian visa had to return once the visa had expired. If after 1952 a person had to travel from Pakistan to India (or vice versa) with the intention of settling down either she had to establish herself as an Indian citizen or had to have migration certificate. For a Muslim coming from Pakistan, whether a returnee or an immigrant, obtaining migration certificate was almost impossible as it was only given to people who were at risk. The India government, following the logic of Partition, did not consider Muslims in Pakistan to be at risk. On the other hand, proving citizenship was also equally difficult for most, particularly if s/he had migrated to Pakistan without any document.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, a common way for the intending returnees was to get a Pakistani passport and Indian visa but to continue to stay on in India even after the visa had expired. For instance, Obaidur Rahman who returned to West Bengal in the early 1960s did so. At the time of Partition, he migrated alone to East Pakistan with the hope of a better future. He settled in Dhaka where he got married and started practicing law. However, after his divorce, he returned to West Bengal on a Pakistani passport. After his visa expired, he refused to return to Pakistan and tore up his Pakistani passport. His family, friends and relatives were in West Bengal. He was staying at his birth place. Pakistan was a foreign land where, after his divorce, he had nothing to look forward to. He said, “*ami Pakistan jabo na dekhi apnara amake ki kore deshantorito koren*”(I will not go to Pakistan, let's see how you deport me).<sup>44</sup> But he did not get Indian citizenship and could not practice law in West Bengal. Though he was not pushed back to Pakistan by the concerned authorities, every Monday he had to go to the police station to give “*bajira*” or routine enquiry. For the rest of his life, he lived in his hometown in Birbhum without citizenship. Thus, Partition turned

him into a stateless person. The experiences of return, however, were diverse. Muslims belonging to different class, with diverse educational and occupational skills, and networks returned to West Bengal for different reasons. Their lives after return also varied considerably.

## **Narratives of Return**

### **The Optees**

During the Partition, the Partition Council gave the option to all government officers and employees who worked in the colonial administration of India to join either the Government of India or that of Pakistan as per their own wishes. In most cases, Hindu/Sikh employees chose India, and Muslim employees chose Pakistan. The Hindu officers from East Pakistan opted for West Bengal and Muslim officers from West Bengal opted for East Pakistan as their workplaces. In the communal atmosphere of that time, the Muslim officers felt protected in East Pakistan and the Hindu officers in West Bengal. The Partition Council however recognised that for many employees it would be rather difficult to make the final decisions immediately, particularly if their birthplace and choice of workplace based on their religious identity did not match. Hence, the Partition Council gave them two alternatives i.e., they could mark their decision as final or as provisional. Those who would mark their option as provisional could change it within six months. Not surprisingly, many did so as they needed more time to decide which government they wanted to serve and in which country they would want to live. Whether they would prioritise their religion or their birthplace as their country of work. Thus, they kept the option of return open. Take the case of Yair Mohammad for instance.<sup>45</sup> He was an employee of the undivided Bengal government. Before Partition, his posting was in Suri, Birbhum district. He was the assistant of the Sub Divisional Officer (SDO) of Suri. He was from Murshidabad district. He opted for East Pakistan during the 1947 Partition hoping that being a Muslim majority district, Murshidabad would also be included in Pakistan.<sup>46</sup> That would mean his ancestral home and workplace would be in the same country. But three days after Independence, Murshidabad was declared to be a part of India. As an optee, Yair Mohammad had to go to East Pakistan. He was posted in Khulna. But his family remained in Murshidabad. He could not adjust to the new circumstances in East Pakistan. He suffered from illness. Finally, he came back to West Bengal as he had marked his choice as provisional. The Indian government allowed him to join the services and he was posted in the Kandi subdivision of Murshidabad in 1948. Many others who opted provisionally for Pakistan returned to West Bengal within six months. Some of them, however, did not get their jobs back as their posts were already filled with Hindu refugees from East Pakistan.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, even when the six months term was over, some of the optees asked the government for permission to return. For example, in 1949, some optees working in East Pakistan demanded to go back to India as they were allegedly mistreated by their colleagues and their loyalty to Pakistan was always

suspected.<sup>48</sup> They also said that they were originally from India, and they had relatives in India, so they wanted to return. They even staged a procession on the streets of Dhaka with these demands, but the government did not pay any attention to their demands.<sup>49</sup> But by giving the government employees the six months window to rethink their choice of option, India and Pakistan both acknowledged their right to return, provided it was within the stipulated period.

### **The Hesitant Migrants**

In addition to the optees, many Muslims had migrated hesitantly.<sup>50</sup> Some of them left their homes and lands under someone else’s supervision, had taken leave from their jobs but did not resign, and crossed the border to understand the feasibility of permanently settling down there. Many of them thought Partition would be a short-lived affair. Hence, they did not think it would be prudent to leave their jobs and sell properties in India. For example, Nebur Ali Sheikh was a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old boy in 1947. His father, who then was an employee of the Customs Department, and his two brothers who worked in the Public Works Department, decided to migrate to East Pakistan after Partition. Nebur Ali recalled that the Muslim overseer of the PWD department, Asram Hossain, advised his brothers to go to Pakistan. Also, the atmosphere of his locality was communally charged; two Muslims were killed near the railway station during that time. They migrated to Bagura in East Bengal. But life was no better there. Nebur Ali did not get admission to any school. His father too did not manage to do much. They rented a house there. But his father had not left his job when he left India. He did not come as an optee, he came on leave. After six months of their stay in Bagura, his father decided to return and join his office.<sup>51</sup> Since the passport system was yet to be implemented, return was relatively easy for Ali. Being a Muslim with a job in India was preferable to him than being an unemployed refugee in East Pakistan. In East Bengal, if he had got a job, his sons had got admission to schools and colleges and his family had settled down, he perhaps would not think of returning. But leaving a stable job and the homeland for an uncertain future seemed too much of a risk to take. Also, the fact that their locality was by then more or less peaceful and free from communal violence gave them the courage to come back.<sup>52</sup>

Another example is the case of Ahmad Ilias who migrated to Dhaka in 1950, but a few days later he had to return to Calcutta.<sup>53</sup> In March 1950, after receiving a letter from his friend, he left Calcutta for Dhaka. His friend wrote to him to come to Dhaka “because you are a Muslim and Pakistan is a Muslim country. So, there will be no problem to get education free here.”<sup>54</sup> He came to Dhaka after the riots of 1950, but at that time the registration of refugees in Dhaka had stopped. So, he stayed for three days in a refugee camp with his friend. The incharge of the camp then told him that he could not stay there any longer as he had no refugee card. He then decided to return to Calcutta again. If he had got a refugee card, he perhaps would not think of

returning. After returning to Calcutta, he continued his studies. However, three years later he moved to Dhaka again and settled there. Thus, the decisions to migrate and to return were often shaped by mundane needs and everyday realities of individuals rather than larger ideological concerns. Moreover, Partition did not mean one single border crossing and many of them shuttled between two countries in search of better opportunities, a safer environment, and relative stability.

### **The Temporary Returnees**

Molla Basirul Haque, a resident of a village named Ichapur in the district of Burdwan, West Bengal, decided to migrate to East Pakistan during the riots of 1950. After arriving in East Pakistan, his family stayed on the platform of the Shantahar railway station, Bogra for three days. Later, a gentleman gave them shelter in his house in Sherpur, Bogra. For some time, he and his family lived as refugees in East Pakistan. He then rented a house in that village and started living there. He returned to West Bengal in 1951 after the Evacuee Property Act was passed. But his return was temporary. The main purpose of his return was to settle the immovable property that his family had in Burdwan. On his return, he gave his land and property to his two daughters who had remained in West Bengal and then migrated permanently in 1953. In this context, his son Molla Fazlul Haq said,

Indian government has enacted a law that if those who had left their property and moved to East Pakistan did not return to India within a specified time, the government would acquire that property. Then my father decided that he would return back to West Bengal because if he did not return, their land would be gone.<sup>55</sup>

Some of the returnees also returned to India to complete their education. For example, Syed Anwarul Hafiz, who migrated from Calcutta to Barisal in 1947 with his father,<sup>56</sup> returned to Calcutta and was admitted to Calcutta Medical College. He then moved back to East Pakistan during the riots of 1950 and returned to Calcutta after the Nehru-Liaquat Pact was signed. Migration had been an emergency and temporary measure for him. He needed to remain in Calcutta to complete his education. After completing his medical studies, he practiced at Calcutta Medical College for three years. In 1953, Syed Anwarul Hafiz went to England for higher studies with an Indian passport, and in 1961 he surrendered his Indian passport and took a British passport. Then in 1962, he went to Dhaka and there he surrendered his British passport and took Pakistani citizenship. By then India and Pakistan had become further acrimonious to each other. Therefore, it was difficult for an Indian citizen to acquire Pakistani citizenship. Being a British passport holder made it easier for Hafiz to become a Pakistani. Thus, Partition did not mean a linear trajectory of migration for many. Individual stories help us to complicate the idea of migration and return in the context of Partition.

### The Returning Exchangers

After Partition, a large number of Muslims from the border districts of West Bengal exchanged their properties with Hindus and migrated to East Pakistan. Between 1950–57, large-scale exchanges and subsequent migrations took place from the border villages of the undivided 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. Many Muslim families who had migrated returned to their homeland subsequently. A few border villages in 24 Parganas witnessed large-scale migration of Muslims and a significant rate of return.<sup>57</sup> For instance, Alimuddin Gazi’s father Dhamo Gazi migrated to Kalipur in East Pakistan after having exchanged his property with that of Dhiraj Ghose. After four years in East Pakistan, Alimuddin Gazi returned to West Bengal. But his father remained in East Pakistan. His father had sold part of his land in 24 Parganas to his uncle for Rs.1,200 but it was not registered. After he came back, Alimuddin paid Rs.1,200 to his uncle’s son and reclaimed that land. The family house of Alimuddin was originally near a local school in one of the villages, but now they were residing in a more developed area of the adjacent village. He said, “now we have to work hard unlike earlier, my father had twenty bighas of farmland which produced good crops. Those days were very different.”<sup>58</sup> Alimuddin Gazi said that the reason for his return to West Bengal was that his father repeatedly asked him to return. But while talking to him a few other factors came up. Before going to East Pakistan, he got married and his in-laws had not migrated to East Pakistan. Alimuddin Gazi returned and took accommodation at his in-law’s house. Though he did not mention this, one reason for returning seemed to be his wife and his in-law’s desire. Alimuddin Gazi was the only one of his eight brothers who returned with his family to West Bengal. His parents and seven brothers stayed back in East Pakistan. Partition not only divided the land but also broke up families. Alimuddin Gazi said, “if we had not gone then with our eight brothers and their children, we had been a *para* (locality) by ourselves.” Even after returning to West Bengal, Alimuddin crossed the border every year to visit his family member. Later, he could no longer visit them as he did not have a passport. His brothers, who had passports, visited him a number of times. At present three of his brothers are still alive while his parents and four other brothers are no more.

Another such returnee was Shovan Gazi. In early 1957, he migrated to East Pakistan with his father and family due to fear of future riots. Before they migrated, his home was at Madaskati village in the Hingalganj block near Jogeshganj Bazar. Shovan Gazi’s father Meher Ali Gazi, and his three brothers had exchanged their family property with the family property of Jyoti Doctor, a resident of Fulbari in Satkhira district of East Pakistan. Meher Ali Gazi’s family property had an area of 200 bighas of agricultural land and a residential house. On the other hand, Fulbari resident Jyoti Doctor’s family property had 180 bighas of farmland and 15 bighas of residential property. After staying at

Fulbari village for almost a year, Shovan Gazi returned to West Bengal with his brother and sister. They came back because they could not adapt to the environment of the new and unknown places. Currently, one brother stays in Sarberia in the South 24 Parganas district. His father, mother, two younger sisters. And younger brother stayed back in East Pakistan. After returning to West Bengal, Shovan Gazi had to take shelter at a relative’s house. This was because his family had already exchanged their home and property. Partition not only divided his family but its far-reaching impact can be observed in the present condition of Shovan Gazi. He lives in a house made of mud and cultivates land with an area of one bigha. Shovan Gazi lamented that,

over there (Fulbari, East Pakistan currently Bangladesh) our residential property had an area of 15 bighas, and you can see the condition of my house here. I came back because this is my birthplace and that has a different kind of attachment.<sup>59</sup>

Mian Ghazi moved with his family to Paranpur in East Pakistan from 24 Parganas district in 1964 because of communal riots. Mian Gazi sold 12 bighas of his land in 24 Parganas to his brothers and bought 18 bighas of land in East Pakistan. The land that he bought, however, was a contested property. When he went to pay the tax, he realized he was paying taxes in the name of some Pandit who was the original landowner. As a result of which he did not get possession of it. After staying there for two years, he returned to West Bengal primarily because he could not get proprietary rights to the land to which he was entitled.<sup>60</sup> The younger brother of Mian Gazi said,

I was in class seven when my brother migrated to East Pakistan. He sold his land in West Bengal to his other brothers and bought 18 bighas of land in East Pakistan, but unfortunately, the land he bought was already in the name someone else so he could claim nothing. When my brother tried to claim the land, he and his family had to face many tortures and so he returned to West Bengal.<sup>61</sup>

Once again, we can see that migration or return was not always determined by grand-national events or national loyalties. Everyday insecurities and needs often shaped their decision to migrate.

## Conclusion

The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) under its provisions on the right to freedom of movement (Article 12.4) says that *No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to enter his own country*. India became a party to this covenant in April 1979 and Bangladesh did the same in December 2000. But, as the paper shows, the right to return to one’s own country was recognised in Partitioned India from the beginning for the people who were displaced by the communal violence of the time. The Indian and Pakistani governments ensured, at least theoretically, the rights of minorities in their respective countries as well as the right to return of the refugees who had left the country. This context was highlighted in the Nehru-Liaquat Pact

and after it came into effect many Muslim refugees returned to West Bengal from East Pakistan. But encouraging the refugees to return was often limited to speeches and reports. The government failed or was unwilling to ensure an atmosphere conducive to return migration and therefore return remained an unfinished project. In other words, recognising the right of the migrants and the refugees to return in a way go hand in hand with safeguarding the rights of the minorities to live in their homeland with their own religion, language, culture, and habits. It is equivalent to recognising their right to be different yet to be able to share the same territorial space. Neither India nor Pakistan was able nor willing to ensure equality of their citizens irrespective of their caste, creed, and religion. The riots of 1964 in East Bengal and in eastern India among other cases attest to this fact.

As a result, return remained a very limited process. The governments of India and West Bengal wanted the refugees to go back but were not too keen about the Muslim returnees. Same was the attitude of the Pakistani government. Partition marginalised everyone who was on the “wrong” side of the border. Whether they chose to stay put or decided to migrate and whether they remained as refugees or chose to return, they were unwanted people everywhere. Nonetheless, the theoretical acceptance of the right to return had some positive implications. By acknowledging the possibility of a return migration, the government discourses in a way tied the refugees to the place they originally belonged to. It recognised the fact that the refugees too had a home and a country to call their own. It also gave them the hope that they could return if nothing worked out for them. Thus, one may say, to approach the refugee issue through the possibility of their return was not inherently faulty in the context of Partition. But when it came to implementation, it failed to address the plight of the people because of the lack of goodwill at various levels of the state machinery and society. Moreover, unfortunately, it gave the provincial and the national governments the space to make only stopgap arrangements for the refugees at least in the initial years after Partition, and the refugees, the minorities, and the returnees remained the nowhere people in this part of the world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kafi Khan, “Fire Chal Apon Ghar/e,” *Jugantar*, May 19, 1950, 1. Kafi Khan *alias* Prafulla Chandra Lahiri born in 1930 was associated with the Barisal College and later became the staff cartoonist with *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* and *Jugantar*.

<sup>2</sup> Prafulla Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (Kolkata, Naya Udyog 1999); Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (New Delhi: SAGE, 1999); Samir Kumar Das, “Refugee Crisis: The Response of the Government of West Bengal,” in *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, eds. Pradip Kumar Bose (Calcutta: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2000), 106–51; Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 32 (August 1996): 2143–51; Kanti B. Pakrasi, *The Uprooted: A Sociological Study of the Refugees of West Bengal* (Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1971); Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, “Exiled to the Andamans: The Refugees from East Pakistan,” in *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, ed. Pradip Kumar Bose (Calcutta: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2000), 130–41; Gyanesh Kudaisya, “Divided Landscapes, Fragmented Identities: East Bengal Refugees and their Rehabilitation in India, 1947–79,” in: D.A. Low and Howard Brasted (eds), *Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence* (New Delhi: SAGE, 1998), 105–31.

<sup>3</sup> H.H. Nomani, Provincial Superintendent of Census East Bengal, “East Bengal: Report & Tables,” *Census of Pakistan 1951*, vol 3 (Karachi: Manager of Publications, Government of Pakistan, n.d), 39; Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, 166.

<sup>4</sup> Joya Chatterji, “Of Graveyards and Ghettos: Muslims in Partitioned West Bengal 1947–67,” in *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics*, eds. Mushirul Hasan, and Asim Roy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 222–49.

<sup>5</sup> Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 115–60; Anwesha Sengupta, “Moveable Migrants, Laboring Lives: Making Refugees ‘Useful’ in Post-Colonial India,” in *Work Out of Place*, ed. Mahua Sarkar (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 2017), 121–47.

<sup>6</sup> Sengupta, “Moveable Migrants, Laboring Lives,” 121–47

<sup>7</sup> “*Choddo Lokkadbik Hindu Udbastu Purb Banga Hoity Pachimbange agomon*,” *Jugantar*, May 25, 1950, 5.

<sup>8</sup> K.N. Katju, “Speech by His Excellency,” *West Bengal Legislative Assembly Debates*, February 8, 1951 (Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1951), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Md. Rafik, Interview by Author, Birbhum, February 16, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> “*Goto Ek Soptababe Purbobanga Hoite Prai Ek Lakho Udbaster Agomon*,” *Jugantar*, October 8, 1952, 1.

<sup>11</sup> “Secret Fortnightly Report for the First Half of November 1957 for West Bengal,” Home (Political) Department, GB IB File No. 1210–48(4), West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>12</sup> *Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates, Part I: Questions and Answers*, Starred Questions and Answers: Oral Answers, August 1, 1948 (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1949), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Purshattam Tikramdas, and I.N. Shroff, *Recurrent Exodus of Minorities from East Pakistan and Disturbances in India: A Report to the Indian Commission of Jurists by its Committee of Enquiry* (New Delhi: Indian Commission of Jurists, 1965), 321–24.

<sup>14</sup> Tikramdas, and Shroff, *Recurrent Exodus*.

<sup>15</sup> “Nehru-Liaquat Agreement,” April 8, 1950, INDIA Bilateral Treaties and Agreements, vol 1, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <https://mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/PA50B1228.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Nehru-Liaquat Agreement, 246.



<sup>17</sup> Nehru-Liaquat Agreement, 244.

<sup>18</sup> Rai Harendra Nath Chaudhuri, *West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings*, vol. III, no. I, February 21, 1951 (Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1951), 257.

<sup>19</sup> Janab Mudassir Hossain, *West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings*, vol. III, no. I, February 21, 1951 (Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1951), 266–67.

<sup>20</sup> *The West Bengal Act V of 1951: The West Bengal Evacuee Property Act 1951 as modified up to the 1st February 1964* (Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1964).

<sup>21</sup> Samir Kumar Das, “State response to the Refugee Crisis: Relief and Rehabilitation in the East,” in *Refugees and the State Practices of Asylum and Care in India, 1947–2000*, ed. Ranbir Samaddar (New Delhi: SAGE, 2003), 118.

<sup>22</sup> *India News Bulletin*, October 16, 1951.

<sup>23</sup> Renuka Ray, *West Bengal Legislative Assembly Debates*, vol. VII, no. I, February 7, 1953 (Alipore: West Bengal Government Press, 1953), 304.

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India, *Annual Report 1956-57* (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1956), 11.

<sup>25</sup> “Restoration of Property to Returning Muslim Migrants in West Bengal,” File No. P(P-IV)-286(1)/65, Pak II section, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, National Archives of India, New Delhi, 1965.

<sup>26</sup> After signing the Delhi Pact in 1951, Dr. Sorfuddin returned to Siliguri from East Pakistan hoping to get back his property. But police arrested him on suspicion of being a Pakistani infiltrator. He was later released on conditional bail. However, the houses left behind by these displaced people and the lands once owned by them were now someone else’s property or were under someone else’s supervision. Getting them back was often difficult, at times impossible. Let us go back to Nebur Ali Sheikh’s experiences once more. When they left India, they asked their relatives to look after their home and other properties. But when they came back, they found that their relatives had registered the properties in their name. They had appealed to the local leaders and had gone to the court, but the matter remained unresolved. See, Tridib Chakraborty, Nirupama Roy Mandal, and Paulami Ghosal, *Dhwangsho o Nirman: Bangyo Udbastu Samajer Swakathito Bibaran* (Kolkata: Seriban, 2007), 87–9.

<sup>27</sup> “Report of D/C Kotwall PS Dt. August 25, 1950,” Home (Political) Department, GB IB File No. 1809-48 (Nadia), West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>28</sup> “Weekly Report by the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation on Relief and Rehabilitation of East Bengal Refugees: Report for the Week Ending 11.06.1950,” Home (Political) Department, GB IB File No. 1838-48, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>29</sup> “Weekly Report by the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation on Relief and Rehabilitation of East Bengal Refugees: Report for the Week Ending 11.06.1950,” GB IB File No. 1838-48.

<sup>30</sup> “Report of D/C Kotwall PS Dt. May 06, 1950,” Home (Political) Department, GB IB File No. 1809-48 (Nadia), West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>31</sup> “Express Letter from Foreign, New Delhi to West Bengal, Calcutta, Dated June 19, 1950,” Home Department, File No. CR 874/50, ‘B’ Proceedings, No.216-226, August 1950, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>32</sup> “Express Letter from Foreign, New Delhi to West Bengal, Calcutta, Dated June 19, 1950,” File No. CR 874/50.

<sup>33</sup> “To The Secretary, MEA, Govt. of India from Deputy Secretary West Bengal, Dated June 19, 1950,” Home Department, File No. CR 874/50, ‘B’ Proceedings, No.216-226, August 1950, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>34</sup> “Letter from MEA, Govt. of India, New Delhi to Foreign, Karachi, Dated August 3, 1950,” Home Department, File No. CR 874/50, ‘B’ Proceedings, No.216-226, August 1950, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>35</sup> “Letter from MEA, Govt. of India, New Delhi to Foreign, Karachi, Dt. August 3, 1950,” File No. CR 874/50, ‘B’ Proceedings, No.216-226, August 1950.

<sup>36</sup> G. Parthasarathi, ed. *Jawaharlal Nehru: Letters to Chief Ministers, 1947–1949*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, Teen Murti Bhavan, and Oxford University Press, 1985), 108.

<sup>37</sup> “Letter from C. N. Chandra, Secretary, Government of India, Ministry of Rehabilitation, to the Chief Secretary, Government of West Bengal, Dated 9 May 1949, GB IB File No. 1210–48(4), in Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, 186.

<sup>38</sup> See Proceedings of the Conference on Influx of Pakistani Muslims held in the Cabinet Room on 12.09.1949, Home (Political) Department, File No-351/49, 1949, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata; GB IB File No. 1686-48, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>39</sup> “Report: Influx of Muslims from East Bengal to West Bengal,” Home (Political) Department, File No-351/49, 1949, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>40</sup> “*Yatrider Namaiya Diya Sunyo Trainer Pakistan Hoitey Bharate Agomon*,” *Jugantar*, October 19, 1952, 1.

<sup>41</sup> “*Passport Byatita Samoyike Gomonagomon Somporke Korakori*,” *Jugantar*, October 16, 1952, 5.

<sup>42</sup> “Secret Fortnightly Report for the first half of November 1957 for West Bengal,” GB IB File No. 1210–48(4).

<sup>43</sup> Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar has shown how the Muslims of North India and West Pakistan were affected by the permit and passport system that was introduced by both countries. She argued that the Indian government started the permit and the passport system to stop the return migration of Muslims from Pakistan to India. She also discussed the importance of the document since the introduction of the permit and passport system and raised questions about the citizenship of Muslims in India. See, Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Interview Ekram Ali, an eminent novelist and columnist with Aajkal Patrika, in Rituparna Datta, *The Quest for Bengali Muslim Identity in the Post-Partition Years* (Unpublished M.Phil diss., University of Calcutta, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Abdul Kasem Fazlul Haque, Interview by Danish Hussain, Nagpur, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, December 17, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Haque, interview.

<sup>47</sup> “Muslims in West Bengal: Their Woes and Apprehensions,” Home (Political) Department, No-File No./ 1948, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

<sup>48</sup> File. No- 3R-3/49, Date: 19/10/1949, Political Branch- Records, Bundle No 2, National Archives of Bangladesh, Dhaka.

<sup>49</sup> File. No- 3R-3/49, Date: 19/10/1949.

<sup>50</sup> After migrating to East Pakistan, many migrant Muslims returned to West Bengal as they could not adapt to the new environment. In 1948, many Muslims from West Bengal migrated to the Rajshahi district of East Pakistan. But after a while many of them returned to West Bengal. Hossnia Ara Begum, a resident of Rajshahi, said, “It took some time for the refugees from India to merge with us (with the people of East Pakistan), many of them returned [to West Bengal].” See, Hossain Ara Begum, Interview by Hasiba Akter Sabnur, Rajshahi, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, April 14, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Chakraborty, Roy Mandal and Ghosal, *Dhwangsho o Nirman*, 87–9.

<sup>52</sup> Chakraborty, Roy Mandal and Ghosal, *Dhwangsho o Nirman*, 87–9.

<sup>53</sup> Ahmad Ilias, Interview by Farhana Afroz, Dhaka, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, January 15, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Ilias, interview.

<sup>55</sup> Dr. Molla Fazlul Haq, Interview by Farhana Afroz, Dhaka, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, November 15, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Syed Anwarul Hafiz, Interview by Farhana Afroz, USA, *The 1947 Partition Archive*, February 4, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> The two border villages of 24 Parganas district (now North 24 Parganas) are in the Basirhat Sub-division. Before 1947 they were dominated by Muslims, but in 1947 after Independence and Partition, many Muslims settled in East Pakistan. Between 1950–57, exchanges of properties and migration took place from these villages. East Pakistan was right across the river and therefore easily accessible. Moreover, one of my respondents mentioned. That exchange was profitable: there were chances of getting more land in Pakistan.

<sup>58</sup> Alimuddin Gazi, Interview by Author, North 24 Parganas, November 5, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Shovan Gazi, Interview by Author, North 24 Pargana, February 18, 2019.

<sup>60</sup> M. Bibi, Interview by Author, North 24 Pargana, February 23, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> K. Gazi, Interview by Author, North 24 Pargana, February 23, 2019.

# **Bazaars of Post-Partition India: Micro Stories of Pain, Courage, and Hope**

By

**Sarabjeet Dhody Natesan \***

The Partition of India in 1947 was a traumatic time for the country. It forcibly uprooted and displaced entirely on the basis of religious identity, roughly 15 million people, almost 4.9 million (49 lakhs) Hindus and Sikhs moved to India from West Punjab (Pakistan), and 2.6 million (26 lakhs) from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The outward movement from India saw 7.15 million (7.15 lakhs) Muslims left through the western and eastern borders. Sadly, half a million people were given up for missing or dead.<sup>1</sup> Using 1931–51 Census data, the total migratory flows in the subcontinent were estimated at 14.49 million (inflows), 16.7 million (outflows), leaving 2.2 million missing. Of the three countries, India, West and East Pakistan, the inflows accounted for 2.04 percent, 20.9 percent, and 1.66 percent of their population respectively.<sup>2</sup> Given such staggering numbers, the government’s first response was to set up a Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation in September 1947. In the aftermath of the Partition, the government broadly outlined the resultant violence, priority was given to relocation of the affected (evacuees), the second step was the “urgency and immediacy of relief to the displaced people,” and third, their eventual rehabilitation.

Lord Mountbatten felt that resettlement should be carried out in three phases: 1. Arrange to receive the refugees on arrival in India and direct them to various destinations. 2. Set up an organisation to assist refugees for first six months.<sup>3</sup>

## **A Land Divided: Refuge Relocation and Rehabilitation**

Largely unanticipated, the post-Partition movement of the population and the subsequent violence took everyone by surprise. The first Prime Minister of

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independent India Jawaharlal Nehru, in a press conference on October 12, 1947, reiterated that there was “no policy with regard to exchange and that there was no talk of it before August 15 . . . .None of us envisaged a major transfer of population at any time.”<sup>4</sup> However, the exchange did happen, unprecedented and violent as it turned out, and forced the government to use all means of transport, i.e., aircraft, trains, and trucks, available at its disposal to facilitate the movement of people out of Pakistan. Though a small number of refugees did find shelter with immediate families, roughly 1,250,000 evacuees were housed and fed in makeshift tented refugee camps, so much so that the “divided Punjab looked like an enormous tent metropolis during the final week of the year.”<sup>5</sup>

Rural rehabilitation of large agriculturists was facilitated by channeling the 4–5 million acres of farmland left behind by the Muslim evacuees. By the end of 1952, most of the rural refugees were resettled on the evacuee agricultural land using graded cuts on a slab system. This presumably took care of their housing needs also. Urban rehabilitation, however, proved a bigger challenge. The requirement for urban rehabilitation was threefold: housing, employment, and education. The total number of urban Hindu and Sikh refugees in India was more than the number of Muslims relocating to Pakistan. Their evacuee properties proved to be inadequate to distribute to the incoming population. The looming housing crisis was met with the government undertaking extensive housing construction and setting up new townships like Faridabad, Nilokeri, Kurukshetra to name a few. Significantly, the urban migrants coming to India were primarily white-collar industrialists and small business owners. By 1951, the employment exchanges found employment to 1,63,000 persons with 15,000 vacancies reserved for displaced persons by the Railways. The displaced Hindu and Sikh refugees had abandoned 51,000 shops in West Punjab, while Muslims in Eastern Punjab, left 17,000 small shops and establishments behind; leaving roughly 34,000 shopkeepers to find alternative work or try to create businesses they left behind. The new Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation had its work cut out, and remarkably, it finished the evacuation of the population by 1948, relief by 1950, and permanent rehabilitation was completed by 1955.

### **The Aftermath: From Refugee Camps to Refugee Resettlement Colonies**

The carelessly drawn Radcliff Line bloodied a land, broke up families, and orphaned children, took away homes and hearths, and created a class hitherto unknown to the sub-continent, the refugees—the largest known band of homeless, landless, and unemployed people of its time. The separation of the country was foretold at the beginning of the twentieth century and frequently came up in many conversations during the anti-colonial movement in India. And yet the faith in the institutions and each other was strong that nobody moved or even planned for such an eventuality. Truth be told, even after the bloody cleave, nobody wanted to move. One fine day, they were asked to

leave everything they had in their homes, their material possessions and their dreams, and move to refugee camps just outside of their villages and cities because the situation could become volatile. They were told that once things became calm, they would be returned home. However, they were evacuated and taken to a newly carved and hemorrhaging India. The long walk towards a new home also witnessed a reverse long walk towards a new home for others too. Fear and fatigue intermingled with blood and tears—sadness worn like a *chaddar* (blanket), comforting and shareable. Pain, loss, and grief, like silent thieves, stole emotions and tears and left nothing behind, except for bewilderment, disbelief, and shock.

Hunger and homelessness were initially mitigated by the generosity of a financially strapped but morally rich government. Yet, there was a life to be lived, and however unprepared they were for the sudden sobriquet of refugees, a start had to be made. Having left almost all things material things behind, in lands so near, yet suddenly so far, with not much education and missing degrees, access to government employment was not possible. In the true spirit of the people who had for many centuries tilled the land, and relentlessly fought invaders and marauders from across the mountains, the resilient and proud refugee community mainly from West Punjab stoically moved on. They found their balance, locked up the trauma of becoming homeless, sharpened their business instincts, and fell back on trading and small retail businesses, which required not much except an ability to work hard. The struggle of this urban refugee group and their efforts to salvage and recreate a life they left behind makes for a study of the Punjabi diaspora. The successful retail markets of Delhi, like Lajpat Nagar and Krishna Market, and many more places, speak volumes of their courage and business acumen.

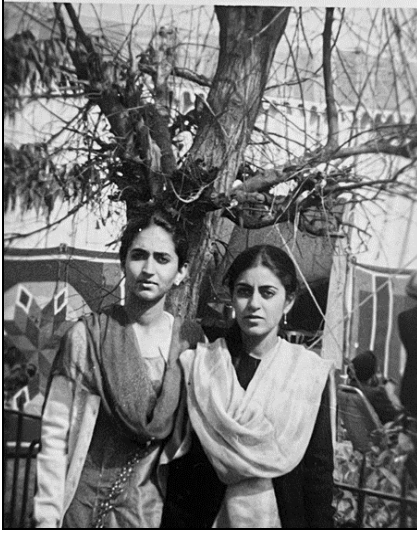
### **Lajpat Nagar: The Beginning**

Along with others, Lajpat Nagar was a Refugee Resettlement Colony, quickly put together in the 1950s to house the refugees that came in gigantic waves, like projectile vomit, out of the newly created Pakistan, suddenly rejected and forcefully thrown out as far as the body could manage. The financially poor but morally rich government created housing on a war scale, literally fashioning small houses in army-style barracks with tin roofs and outstation community toilets. The bathing area was inside the house, but as sewage lines required more time to construct, and hence the toilets were built separately, about a hundred meters away, with separate sections each for men and women. The place was functionally built, and art and aesthetics were given a go-by. Who had the time for adventure when there was a nation to create, a country to set up, and an exiled population to settle? In their functionality and perhaps aspiring freedom in the true sense of the word, the colony (not the colonial one anymore) was planned in square blocks, with rows of houses running perpendicular to each other and access roads provided at the intersections.

The benevolent government or one of its minions, perhaps under the presumption of providing equality to the displaced people who could not

furnish documents of the wealth they left behind, had taken a rectangular cookie cutter and cut out identical rectangular plots all over the large area earmarked to be named after Lala Lajpat Rai, a stalwart of India's freedom struggle. Its uniformly functional houses each had two rooms in a row, followed by a kitchen and a bathroom, giving the appearance of a rail compartment, affording neither privacy nor solitude to the people who lived in them. They somehow had the foresight to leave some empty space at the back, which would later be converted into toilets after the main lines for sewage were laid out. Everyone was thankful for a roof over their head and a place to call home. And in the true spirit of the people who had for many centuries relentlessly faced invaders and marauders from across the mountains, the displaced stoically moved on—the resilient and proud Punjabi community found their balance, locked up the trauma of becoming homeless, sharpened their business instincts, and fell back on the cultural ethics of hard work and diligence. Thus Lajpat Nagar grew into a bustling center of trade, with its iconic Central Market occupying a place of pride in Delhi's retail bazaars. Besides the shelter, the administration gracefully provided open spaces in the middle of the squares. The joy of freedom was subdued with millions becoming homeless and stateless overnight. Unwanted in the land of their birth, swimming in a river of blood, they arrived, in need of a friend and an anchor. Lajpat Nagar turned out to be just that. It helped them gather and reassemble the jigsaw puzzle of their life and lend a hand to rebuild lost pieces, dried moist eyes and hauled and hid their pain in a big trunk. Life was functional. Everyone understood everyone's pain. Gratitude became the new religion, it hung on the clothesline, out under a shining new independent sun. For, what could be more normal than a place where one could hang their meager belongings in public and not be judged?

Someone, perhaps understanding the plight of people being herded into small coops, provided open spaces in every block and these big parks sustained life and balance. Initially, these provided a place to do many things: dry clothes, wash and dry *kanak* wheat before sending it to the *chakki* (machine) for grinding into flour, play cricket, the bat fashioned out of the wooden stick used to pummel the clothes to drive the dirt out of them, put a *charpai* (charpoy/cot) and sit beneath the shade of a tree in the summer and under an earnest and comforting sun in the winters. These open areas were later converted into parks, their boundaries defined by barbed wires initially, later with concrete and iron grill structures. In the absence of courtyards and verandas, these parks became the settings of many weddings under the loud and garish *tamboos* (tents) [Fig.1–4].



**Fig. 1:** The parks also provided large spaces to put up tents and hold weddings. Author's sister's wedding picture with a tent in the background, © Author



**Fig. 2:** The parks provided for spaces for social meetings under shady trees and the gentle winter sun, for floating paper boats in the monsoon. They also provided spaces for drying clothes, and washed wheat, © Author.



**Fig. 3:** Roads going nowhere and yet somewhere, © Author.





**Fig. 4:** The parks also provided a place to get out and breathe as there were many small unventilated homes, and also doubled up as playgrounds to play football and cricket, © Author.

Later, the open spaces provided staid, simple summer adventures, biking around the park, packing our lunch and sometimes having a picnic in the big park. Monsoon brought rains and our leftover notebooks were promptly converted into sloppy paper boats. They floated unconfidently on the rainwater gutters, the penmanship gently smudging, before giving up and getting devoured by the ghouls in the underground sewers, who seemed forever hungry for paper boats. Winters meant eating peanuts and jaggery *moongfalli* (groundnut) and *gur* while sunning ourselves in the gentle afternoon sun. The neighborhood aunties, after finishing lunch, brought out their charpais and strategically moved them over the next hour or two, following the setting sun. Their knitting needles clicked furiously while stories of what was happening in other people's lives came to life.

Meanwhile, post its creation, Lajpat Nagar continued its laborious progress, off track, completely bewildered and confused. It had spaces but not the articulation to define them. The absence of singularity was further reinforced by the presence of plurality; starting with how the houses were numbered. Houses were numbered not in an order of placement, but in an order of sale [Fig. 5]. And one could buy any plot they fancied, so our house number was 117, the next door on the left was 125, 116 however, was not even in the same square block, but in two lanes behind, given company by more misplaced 121 and 103. It was a harrowing experience for a visitor, without the benefit of uniform markings, to get to where they were supposed to be. Only the postman knew the exact location of each house and sorted the mail as per the order of appearance before beginning his route. Lajpat Nagar, however, didn't let this inconvenience anyone in any way, a stranger had to

only ask for directions and whoever was in the vicinity offered them instructions and ways to get there. Everyone just wanted to help others, and those became our values.

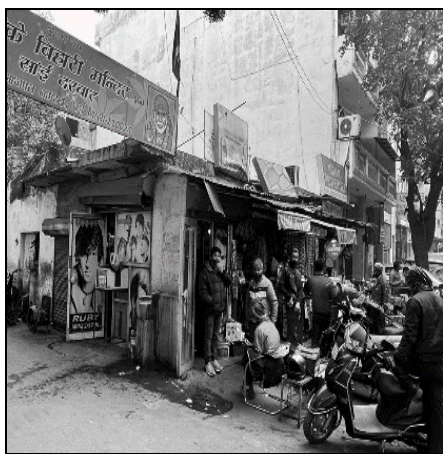


**Fig. 5:** Clothes and misnumbered homes in Lajpat Nagar, © Author

My parents were in their teens when India was Partitioned. They moved into the Kingsway Refugee Camp in Delhi with their families. Each carrying their restlessness and traumas with them. They moved out of the Camp by 1948 and restarted their education and by extension their life. That they may have passed each other at the refugee camp in 1947 was a source of much romanticism for us. It was much later in 1962 after their marriage in 1956 that my parents moved to Lajpat Nagar. Within ten years after the establishment of Lajpat Nagar asbestos sheets were replaced with concrete linter ceilings, water and sewage lines were laid, electricity connections were made available, land documents were provided and there was easy access to schools. Progress was visible and development was happening, although at a very slow pace. Much later, when I was about eight years old, our old one-storey house with barely two and a half rooms was refurbished and in its place came up a three-storey house. With the careful placing of doors in the central spine, my father fashioned privacy for each floor and also created space on the second floor for us. We needed place and space for our experiences and also for our aspirations. The world we faced was still tranquil and safe, and Lajpat Nagar kept us in an aspirational middle-class cocoon. In terms of the inhabitants of Lajpat Nagar, there seemed to be a new face in our colony every two to three weeks. Without the old ones leaving. Lajpat Nagar seemed inviting and enveloping everyone, it took whoever came wandering in the lanes and by-lanes. It didn't turn people away. It did not ask for any references. It reached out and welcomed, it made newcomers feel comfortable without any

airs. Everyone knew everyone else and everyone held everyone's back. It erased and forgave each person their past. It looked only forward and crafted opportunities and helped people who depended on it to never lose hope.

Yet, Lajpat Nagar was a perplexing place to live. Maybe for the inhabitants the confusion added to its charm. Maybe getting lost and finding oneself added to its mystique and drama. But to a young mind, trying to find acceptance in a post-Partition, gentrifying society, refugee resettlement colonies spelled doom and embarrassment. In the Delhi of the seventies, where you lived mattered a lot. Being from Lajpat Nagar became an automatic criterion for self-exclusion—no one really cared for Lajpat Nagar. If you were from there, you also suffered a similar fate. Instead of giving my address to my friends, and giving access to them to see my world, I chose not to meet them. How could I say that to get to my house, you have to get to the main road, pass a *tanki* (water tank) manufacturing unit on the left, a barber, and a *paan* shop on the right [Fig. 6, 7]. You had to turn left into a *galli* (small lane) and pass a motorcycle repair shop, before finally coming to the house next to the temple. For good measure, you will find a cowshed to the right. So, I walked a kilometer to a posh road further away from home, near the elegant Defence Colony, to be picked up and to be dropped back. From the conversations I overheard, all my friends lived fancy lives and I thought we lived beneath everyone else. The fact that my parents, worked hard to provide every kind of comfort for us, leaving no demand of ours ever unmet, seemed irrelevant to my mortification.



**Fig. 6:** The corner turn that led towards my house, © Author



**Fig. 7:** The paan shop, as bereft today as it was then, © Author

Thus we stayed in Lajpat Nagar, our little part of the world, where everyone knew everyone else. We met up in the back lanes of our houses, swept clean very disinterestedly every morning by the corporation cleaners who carelessly left little mounds of trash, which only re-mingled later on the roads. In winter afternoons, a colony resident would sweep the place again and collect the trash and dump it in its rightful place. All this, so that the women could bring out their charpais, sit on them and bask in the warm

afternoon sun. This social activity defined Lajpat Nagar and by extension, us. The women would be in a hurry to finish their household chores, feed their kids, clean the kitchens and then sit together and talk, knit, cut vegetables, have tea, and of course gossip and laugh. As the sun faded and moved westward, the cots would be dragged to catch the vanishing rays of the sun, with my job being to push them to the desired spot. Another job that was entrusted to me without much fanfare was to help cart ration provisions from the store, for I was the one with a cycle. At the beginning of the month, I would make at least ten to fifteen trips to the government-run Public Distribution Shop to carry back wheat, sugar, and rice for the women of the back lane. It was a ritual that I looked forward to and enjoyed, and never minded the trouble of lugging a heavy bag of wheat on my cycle, for every time I dropped something off, I was rewarded with a plate of *gajar halwa* or *pinni laddu*. All I remember and have taken forward of my life in Lajpat Nagar is the love and affection and care of a motley group of people, who were thrown together by destiny, who did not give up, and who willed things to happen against all odds.

### **The Business Houses That Grew in Lajpat Nagar: Some Vanished, Some Survived Bhrawan di Hatti (Brother's Market Place)**

Lalit Arora's father, Shri Kedarnath Arora, and his family moved to India in 1947 from Gujranwala. Like everyone else, they too thought the move to the first refugee camp outside of Gujranwala was temporary and that they will be back home soon. So, all their belongings were left at home, and when orders came to move the populations, they left with nothing. The business started like many others, on the back of an old bicycle, which could not be ridden, given the old tyre tubes and the weight of the cotton fabric resting on the pedestrian seat, wrapped up in a white cloth, deftly tied together to maintain the folds and crease of the fabrics and also save it from the dirt and dust. When the shop opened in 1956, the rate per meter was 14 ½ anna per *gaz* (.90 meter) and the shop earned Rs.2 or 3 daily. They sold only mill-made fabric, power loom had not yet taken over Indian fabrics, and the popular and trustworthy names were Anand Mills, Calico Mills, Delhi Cloth Mills, and Lal Bhai Mills. It was a very simple shop and required Rs.8,000 down payment. Almost impossible for someone with no money to muster up, but somehow they did not give up on the spirit and thus started one more journey. From having no money even to buy utensils to prepare food for the family of refugees, they went on to become successful business owners. The story was the same, the foundation of this business was always provided by the mother, who sold her bangles and a few grams of gold in her *mangal sutra* (sacred wedding necklace) was pawned for. The women were not absent from contributing to the capital for the business or managing the house and the children and at times managing the shops, they were everywhere. The

gratitude that is carried in the hearts of the second and sometimes, even the third-generation family is one of affection and utmost respect.



**Fig. 8:** Shri. Lalit Arora, Bhrawan Di Hatti. Now operating from a smaller shop, © Author

My mother was a woman of many facets, simple, non-ritualistic, loving, smiling, friendly, and a very smart dresser. This realisation dawned on me many years later. Growing up, her simple salwar suits embarrassed me, I would ask her to wear a sari and come to any school function. Many years later, when I moved to study abroad and when she started to get salwar-kameez stitched for me to be sent across to the USA, I realised how refined her taste was. There was not a single time when I did not like the material, the design, and the simple Punjabi-style cut that she send for me or brought with her. She was a teacher and her school was located in Jangpura, Bhogal a thirty minutes walk from Lajpat Nagar. Come summer or winter, she walked to work in the morning and walked back in the afternoon. On her way back, she would stop at *Bhrawan di Hatti* and buy four meters of handloom material to get her simple salwar kameez stitched by another old favourite of hers at Mohan Tailor. On many afternoons, it was my job to take the material, that she had brought and pre-shrunk in a bucket of water and dried on the terrace, to Mohan Tailors and deposit it there. And tell him, “*Mummy da suit bana dayo.*” Most of her dupattas/*chunni* (stoles) were from existing suits but in case the colour was missing from her pallet, she would cut a triangular sliver of the material, take one white chiffon dupatta from her trunk and give it to me and tell me to give it to dyer, opposite to Mohan Tailor’s shop. She was an expert embroiderer and would do a bit of simple *bootis* (embroidery) on her kurta sleeves once in a while. This defined her fashion sense. Later in her life, even when she was unwell, I never saw her in dirty or crushed and unironed clothes ever. The fabric shop, though downsized, is still present, but Mohan Tailor is long gone. The shop used to be a small place, just enough for Mr. Mohan to put a big table to cut the pattern on and a small place for the sewing machine.

To get in, he had to push the table out and do his work on the open road. The table stayed out till it was time for him to close his shop. The space could accommodate one more person beside him. But it closed in the 1990s when the real estate boom made it more profitable for small businesses to shut down and sell their spaces.

In a refugee locality, dominated by the Punjabi diaspora, one sight that would perennially define the women was the salwar-kameez and the dupatta dyed in some colour of the outfit, either matching or contrasting. The Sikh men would also routinely get their turbans dyed and starched by the dyer. That necessitated the presence of a local dyer a *lalari*, a Muslim man, his shop used to be next to the Krishna Market Post Office, and given the reliance on letters and telegrams, it was a busy spot. Posting a letter itself would take about an hour as there were long queues to buy the postage stamp. As postal tickets could be taken off the letter and reused, after one stuck the stamps to the envelope, one had to stand in another long queue to get the stamps defaced and visibly see the letter being deposited in the out tray. And in the time that it took to get the postal errand done, one would very often get the turban or the dupatta dyed to the desired colour. The post office still stands but the dyer's shop shut down in the 1990s when the Delhi government shifted polluting industries and businesses out of residential areas into industrial ones.

Given the sizzling heat of Delhi summers and the humidity of the monsoon and the lack of regular refrigeration of the early 1960s, there was also an Ice House Shop doing brisk business in Krishna Market, Lajpat Nagar. It used to be a dark place and darkened even more by the wet jute bags hanging on the outside, to keep the heat and the light out. Refrigeration has not reached all the homes and in homes such as mine, even though there was one present, it was the non-defrost type which given the uphill battle one had to fight to get ice when needed, it was much easier to make a dash for the ice shop. Given the different drinks we would have with our meals, lassi for breakfast, *Rooh Afza* for lunch, and *shikanjani* (lemonade) during the hot evenings, I as the assigned dasher, cycled back and forth umpteen times to get ice. The shop had big boulders of ice, covered with double and triple layers of wet jute bags to prevent the ice from melting. The owners were an old Sikh couple who started this business in the 1960s and continued it till the late 1980s. In addition to the working class people in Lajpat Nagar, who needed ice there was also a tent and catering business, right next door to the ice shop, that needed huge quantities of ice. Weddings were held in cordoned-off roads or parks and one corner of the space was reserved for the *halwai's* (confectioners), and caterers and they had huge aluminum tubs with large ice bars to keep the bottles of Coca-Cola cold. By night all the ice would have melted and except for a few bottle caps, there would be no evidence left of the ice.

Another lasting ritual of my childhood was to go to the ration shop with my mother twice a month to buy wheat, rice, and sugar at subsidised rates. Being wheat-eaters, there was more of wheat than rice to be bought and so my mother would carry the bags of rice and sugar but the wheat would be

wheeled on the back of my cycle. I duly took it to the terrace and winnowed, washed, and dried it. It took many days to dry and required me to go to the terrace in the middle of the afternoon, spread out the wheat, and then sit for hours somewhere in the shade to keep an eye out for the birds and sparrows that would instantly come to feed on it. Our terrace was very big because we shared it with my grandmother's house on the ground floor; her house had been separated from ours long before. Perhaps I was too lazy to flail my arms at poor unsuspecting birds or felt bad at the idea of denying them their meal, so I used to take a handful of grains and scatter them on the other side of the terrace. This way, I could daydream as the wheat dried in the sun. Once the sun started to set, I was instructed to collect the wheat in one mound and cover it with the thick cloth and push it back to the small shack on the terrace reserved for old charpais, the water hose, cycle tyre tubes, and other implements used for fixing the most unfixable thing of our life, the TV antenna. I would return downstairs almost blind, my eyes were unable to adjust to the cool darkness of the indoors after prolonged exposure to the sunlight. After the ritual of washing and drying the wheat was done, it was then my duty to take it to *Bhagat Ram di Chakki*, a flour mill about 300 meters from home. Loaded again onto my bike, I used to feel the cleaned wheat lighter and easier to push. I told my mother that it was because of washing the dirt away, but truth be told it could very well have been due to me feeding birds and crows and pigeons a big handful of grains for about four to five days that it took for the wheat to dry!

### **Bhagatram di Chakki (Bhagat Ram's Flour Mill)**

Bhagat Ram's journey to India began in 1947 from Peshawar. The family first went to Amritsar but did not quite like it there and moved to Ludhiana. He and his wife, Shrimati Goma Devi, eventually moved to Delhi and established a grocery store at Jhandewalan, before finally moving to Krishna Market. Here the family prospered and set up a flour mill and a *Kirana di Dukan* (grocery store). Given that there were only two mills, it was not much competition but Bhagat Ram's affable and easygoing demeanour won him more customers. Every month, we used to stand in a crowd and my mother would call out the list of items one by one, while a helper packed them ever so slowly. Soon, Bhagat Ram started a home delivery service, and my job was to take my mother's shopping list and give it to him when I took the washed and dried wheat to be turned into flour. I would sit and stare at the strange-looking flour press. It had a big circular-square mouth through which wheat was thrown in. The press juddered and stomped and then the flour fell into a loose cloth tube, eventually to be picked up at its edge and gently emptied into our tin container. Till my mother explained to me that there was no one inside the machine pulverising the wheat, I was too scared to go close to it. When the job was done, I would haul the tin container back home, where it was eventually upturned into a larger container that already contained some flour. My job was to move the leftover flour in the larger container to a *parat* (a large platter to knead dough) so that it could be kneaded for making chapatis.

While my mother waited for my father to come home to turn the smaller tin container into the bigger one, maybe I was looking for mischief, but I remember covering myself with some flour and flouncing around the house, my mother chasing me with a *pauna* (dishcloth) in her hand to wipe it off me.

The *dals* (pulses/lentil), the dried chillies, and masalas were home-delivered then when no one had thought of it. These came wrapped up in newspapers that had been rolled into cones, eco-friendly and easy to dispose of. Having me run to the store to drop off the washed and dried wheat and the delivery man to deliver the other groceries saved my mother a lot of stress. The deliveries also lightened my load, but many other women of the locality begged my time to help them carry their sacks of ration supplies to their homes. And my mother generously agreed to send me to help them.

These were the places where I grew up, a refugee colony, fighting for visibility and relevance. Everything was so different, but so was the world. Lajpat Nagar is nothing if not meditative. From then to now, the pace of my childhood has outpaced life. It has grown in size and also in heart; once a refuge, always a refuge. It does not let you dwell and one has to store what one can in a few blinks of tear-stained eyes, to reflect on it later. And perhaps wonder where it all went.

*This autoethnographic account of growing up in a Refugee Resettlement Colony of Krishna Market, Lajpat Nagar-1 was supported by the Faculty Research Grant, School of Interwoven Arts and Sciences, Krea University, India.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Census of India, 1951, cited in, William Henderson, "The Refugees in India and Pakistan," *Journal of International Affairs* 7, no.1 (1953): 57–65.

<sup>2</sup>Prashant Bharadwaj, Asim Khwaja, and Atif Mian, "The Big March: Migratory Flows After the Partition of India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 35 (August 30–September 5, 2008): 39–49.

<sup>3</sup> Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, CID records, Vth Instalment, File 136/1947, Casual Source Report of September 27, 194; (IOL) Mss Eur F200/52, Minutes of Meeting of Emergency Committee of the Cabinet, September 24, 1947, cited in, Gyanendra Pandey, "Partition and Independence in Delhi: 1947–48," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 36 (September 6–12, 1997): 2261–72.

<sup>4</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru's Speech in Keith R. Sipe, *Karachi's Refugee Crisis: The Political, Economic and Social Consequences of Partition* (PhD diss., Duke University, 1976, 242) cited in Omar Khalidi, "From Torrent to Trickle: Indian Muslim Migration to Pakistan 1947–97," *Islamic Studies* 37, no. 39 (Autumn 1998): 339–40.

<sup>5</sup> Henderson, "The Refugees in India," 62.



# Partition, Politics, and the Quest for Bengali Identity: A Case of Barak Valley in South Assam

By

**Joyati Bhattacharya \***

The Partition of India into two dominions of India and Pakistan in 1947 is unquestionably the most remarkable event of the twentieth century which considerably shaped the destiny of South Asia. The Partition ushered in an era of independence for India and also left the country split into two dominions of India and Pakistan. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, expressed the jubilation of India's Independence in his *Tryst with Destiny* speech at the midnight of August 14, 1947. Thus, the Independence of India was a moment of celebration for majority of the countrymen. But for the people of the two provinces of Bengal and Punjab, the news of Partition was a nightmare. "Mountbatten's formula was to divide India but retain maximum unity. The country would be partitioned but so would Punjab and Bengal so that the limited Pakistan that emerged would meet both the Congress and the League positions to some extent."<sup>1</sup> Such a scheme of Partition undoubtedly exaggerated the misery of the people of these two provinces and their experiences were also discernible from the people of the rest of India. There were large-scale communal riots and an enormous scale of refugee migration which left a painful memory on the surviving generations. It had been estimated that "six to seven million Muslims moved from India to Pakistan and nearly eight million Hindus and Sikhs moved from Pakistan to India."<sup>2</sup> It was one of the largest population migrations in the history of the world. India's Partition historiography is replete with images that show the utter misery of people trekking for miles in bare feet to cross borders or to board overcrowded trains while carrying just a few ordinary belongings.

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## Partition Stalemate and the Case of Assam

It is well known that Lord Mountbatten's Partition scheme envisaged mainly a division of Bengal and Punjab on communal lines. But apart from these two provinces, there were two other areas which were directly affected by this scheme of Partition—Assam and North-Western Frontier Province. But the reference to these two areas is often underrated in Partition literature. With regard to Assam, Partition experience is mainly linked with the Sylhet Referendum. In fact, the Mountbatten Plan of June 3, 1947, clearly stated that “[t]hough Assam is predominantly a non-Muslim province, the district of Sylhet which is contiguous to Bengal is predominantly Muslim...If it is decided that Bengal should be partitioned, a referendum will be held in Sylhet under the aegis of the Governor General and in consultation with the Assam Provincial Government to decide whether the district of Sylhet should continue to form part of Assam province or should be amalgamated with the new province of East Bengal.”<sup>3</sup> Irony lies in the subsequent decision of holding a referendum in Sylhet when it was rather uncalled for. Sylhet was the part of Assam which was not subject of Partition at all. The Cabinet Mission proposed Assam to be included in Part-C territory but at the initiative of a delegation from Assam, Assam was placed in Part-A territory. Besides, Sylhet was the only district where a referendum was held while it was well known for its Muslim majority. But the referendum was made unavoidable. The strategy of the ruling Congress leaders of Assam was to sacrifice Sylhet to retain the demographic balance in favour of the Assamese. Soon “it was announced that Bengal and Punjab would be partitioned and the fortunes of the district of Sylhet in Assam as well as the North Western Frontier Province would be determined by separate referendums on the basis of existing electoral rolls of the Provincial Assemblies. On the pretext of not being sons of the soil, more than one and a half lakh Hindu tea garden labourers were disenfranchised in the electoral roll for the 1946 Assembly elections. Had they been allowed to vote and had only 40 per cent of them turned up for polling they could have turned the scale.”<sup>4</sup> In another study, however, the number of delisted tea garden labourers was reported to be lesser. “All the tea garden labourers were not ‘Hindus’. Many were animists and followers of religions that had few links with ‘Caste-Hindus’...In Sylhet there was one labour constituency and there were 11,449 voters on the electoral roll in 1946.”<sup>5</sup> The truth stands in between. Sylhet had 221 Tea estates with 197,272 tea garden labour population. “Of them only 30,502 living in 31 estates were taken into consideration for enumeration in 1946 and only 11,449 of them were found eligible as voters.”<sup>6</sup> Needless to say that the referendum that followed on July 6 and 7, 1947, mandated the transfer of almost the whole of Sylhet. The Sylhet Referendum thus surely decided the fate of Sylhet but with many unresolved issues and questions that continue to haunt the politics of Assam and underlines a deep-seated division in the demography of the state. It is also true that Sylhet's merger with Pakistan created a void and an existential crisis for the Bengali speaking inhabitants of Barak Valley. Sadly, the impact of this sudden disruption of the history of Barak Valley was not extensively

deliberated upon and documented systematically. Barak Valley continues to be a land often ignored and alienated by the Brahmaputra Valley and the rest of India.

### **Rationale of the Study**

Separation of Sylhet from Assam has a long-term effect on the politics and demography of Assam, particularly of Barak Valley which was an integral part of Surma Valley. In fact, Barak Valley lost its refuge with the disappearance of Sylhet from the map of India. Overnight the ideological, political, and cultural fabric of the region has been disrupted at the dictate of the then colonial masters and the ordinary residents have been compelled to reconcile with a destiny they would have never chosen wilfully. No one questioned the legitimacy of holding a referendum singularly in Sylhet. There was also not enough murmur about various missing links in the process of the referendum. But what is troubling is that there is not enough literature dealing with the impact of the Sylhet Referendum in the politics and socio-cultural life of Barak Valley. Most literature takes a comprehensive view of the impact of the Referendum in the lives of the Bengali population, their identity crisis, the complexities of *Sylheti* identity or the historical backdrop that precipitated the crisis. But no one adequately dealt with the question of the impact of the Sylhet Referendum in Barak Valley. The sudden disruption in the history of the region unquestionably left an unending existential crisis for the people inhabiting the region. How did the people of Barak Valley reconcile with this historical tragedy? What role did the political leadership play in doing damage control? How did Assamese ruling elite react? Did the incident permanently rob Barak Valley of its roots? The present study intends to add up certain disjointed facts and events and find answers to the questions posed. For the purpose of the present study, required data and information were collected primarily from non-archival sources, particularly oral narrations, books, journals, newspaper articles of yesteryears, autobiographies and letters of eminent figures of the then time. Primary sources like Cachar States Reorganisation Committee (CSRC) Report, Census data and inputs from academicians, people delisted in the National Register of Citizens (NRC), activists working for citizenship rights of people in the detention camps in Assam were also taken into account.

Understanding how the Sylhet Referendum has affected people's lives and politics in Assam requires more introspection than a general Partition narrative. This is due to Sylhet's complicated past. Before India was actually divided, Sylhet was going through the pain of separation. Hence, the secession of Sylhet during Partition renewed the fear of the loss of Bengali identity in Barak Valley. People who had to migrate from Sylhet to the Indian side in the aftermath of the Referendum were constantly referring to histories and memories of the lost land. They became the captives of an "imagined" identity. The Bengali residents of Assam took delight in remembering the life they had left behind in Sylhet. More than seven decades have passed since the

loss of Sylhet, yet this yearning is sustained, and it is not constrained by the allegiance to a nation state. The stigma of being an “outsider” inside their own country made the situation further worse for Hindu Bengalis prolonging in them the sense of uprootedness. Thus, when the Partition of Bengal and Punjab was a huge human tragedy which gradually calmed down with the identification with the nation state, the Partition of Sylhet remained an unfinished task in which people still feel that they did not get a fair chance to unite to Bengal due to the Partition of India and had to make peace with their destiny in Assam. The octogenarian Sylheti Hindus frequently reaffirm that the Partition has rendered us “captives” in a foreign land for all time. With a heavy heart and a fear of permanently losing their cultural identity, they felt powerless and had no choice but to stand behind Assam. Thereby, it makes sense to think of the Sylheti Hindus as one of the hyphenated “national” minorities and marginal groups that may or may not be a part of the nation but “never quite.”<sup>7</sup> They have no place to call home, and their search for a “safer” place remains elusive.

Despite being akin to a “hyphenated” community, Sylheti Hindus remained firmly loyal to their national identity. No tribal or ethnic group, regardless of size, has remained untouched by a militant drive for nationhood in northeast India. But these rootless Sylheti Hindus were mostly devoid of such aspiration, with the exception of reiterating their demand for liberation from Assam in the initial years of Partition. This may be one of the reasons why they did not get enough mention in India's overall Partition story. India's Partition narrative is mostly focused on Bengal and Punjab. Their Partition tales fill up the spectrum in an incredibly strange manner while marginalising the narrative of the Sylhet Partition. It is crucial to remember that in Punjab and Bengal, Partition was the culmination of Md. Ali Jinnah's *Two Nation Theory* alongside the conspiracy of colonial masters, but in Assam, this dynamic was used to stir up ethnic and linguistic rivalry. The conspirators were not strangers. The communal divide was used as a perfect opportunity to expel Sylhet. The Hindu population of Sylhet had no choice but to leave the place, never again having the possibility to reunite with Bengal. For them, Partition is a reminder of their marginalisation in an independent nation rather than an actual event that occurred almost two centuries ago.

Nevertheless, the *Sylhetis* are not the lone victims of Partition. The Partition of Bengal/Sylhet has affected the life of many lesser known communities in the northeast of India. Sylhet was surrounded by the lands of Khasi and Jaintia that were partitioned along with Sylhet. The transfer of Mymensing, Comilla, and plains Tripura to Pakistan divided many other tribes of the region, most notably the Garos. Partition disrupted their habitat, their ancestral homes and divided the kinsmen between the two countries. “[T]he process of [P]artition also adversely affected a number of indigenous communities of colonial Assam such as the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Hajong, not to forget the Chakmas and the Reangs, to name a few. That apart, the process of [P]artition of 1947 was surely the last in the series of the colonial project of [P]artition as only about ten years before, in 1937, the process of administrative separation of Burma from India also generated disruptive trails.

The legitimi[s]ation of the borders between the two countries had a terrible destructive impact on cross-border cultural and connectivity linkages as in the case of the Radcliffe boundary.”<sup>8</sup> There is no denying the fact that these communities have endured hardship on par with the Bengali victims of the Sylhet Referendum, but largely free of obstacles that could jeopardise their linguistic and cultural identities. They are not seen as illegal immigrants in the guise of victims. There is no disagreement with regard to their native status regardless of how and when they settled in various parts of northeast of India.

### **On the Question of Bengali Identity**

Although Barak Valley in Assam is home to a number of ethnic and linguistic groups, the Bengali community makes up the majority of the population, accounting for 80.84 per cent of the total population.<sup>9</sup> However, the question of identity of the Bengalis in Barak Valley continues to be a contentious and multifaceted issue that has persisted for decades, from the time of colonial rule to the present day. The demography of the Valley was redefined multiple times owing to the separation of Sylhet and Cahar (1874), Partition of Bengal (1905) and its annulment (1912), Sylhet Referendum (1947) and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971). The Bengalis who settled in Barak Valley and migrated mainly following the Referendum have fought for decades to defend their own language and culture, unlike their brethren who shifted and settled in the Brahmaputra valley and accepted to hold on to their Bengali identity under the dominant Assamese language and culture. This is true of both the Hindu and Muslim Bengalis of Barak Valley, but more so for Hindus. As observed by Nagen Saikia, noted litterateur and General Secretary of Asom Sahitya Sabha, “[m]ost of the Bengalee Hindu settlers in Assam have been living with separate (Bengali) identity since the time of their forefathers in this land.”<sup>10</sup> This struggle for cultural existence is unique to the Bengalis of Barak Valley and distinguishes them from many other communities who arrived earlier and settled in this region. As mentioned, the Bengalis who settled in the Brahmaputra Valley did not exhibit similar resolve and determination to secure their rights to language and culture and more or less reconciled with their situation for obvious reasons. While the Hindu Bengalis, who relocated in the Brahmaputra Valley, did not try to assert their Bengali identity, the Muslim counterpart generally compromised and did not reclaim their identity under the changed political reality of the state. This was evident in the first Census Report of independent India. “There is a striking increase in the percentage of people who speak Assamese in 1951 (56.7), which was only 31.4 per cent in 1931; there is an equally striking decrease in the percentage of people speaking Bengali which is only 16.5 against 26.8 per cent in 1931. With the solitary exception of Assamese, every language and language group in Assam shows a decline in the percentage of the people speaking the same. This entire decline has gone to swell the percentage of the people speaking Assamese in 1951.”<sup>11</sup> The assimilation of Bengali Muslims in the Brahmaputra Valley is now close to near completion. However, Barak Valley

resisted this trend of integration together notwithstanding occasional communal flare-ups that led to disruptions on Hindu-Muslim unity. Barak Valley continues to endure the secular legacy of the Surma Valley. Both the Hindus and Muslims of Barak Valley, in spite of the politics of polarisation, have resisted the forces that aimed to breach their Bengali identity successfully so far. Even today, both Hindus and Muslims continue to have a strong sense of loyalty to their Bengali roots, and they endured the pain of the Sylhet Partition together, albeit in a different way. Though divided by religion, they are not particularly separated in terms of their quest for Bengali identity. Of various linguistic minority groups in Assam, it is Bengali Sylhetis of Barak Valley who resisted and continues to resist the threat to their Bengali identity, although often unheard.

### **A Brief Overview of Barak and Surma Valley**

Barak Valley today is located in the southern part of Assam. The region is named after the Barak River which flows through the states of Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam. The term “Barak Valley” was coined in the late twentieth century. At present, there are three administrative districts in Barak Valley, namely, Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi. Out of these three districts, Karimganj was a sub-division of Sylhet District. Cachar was a Bengali-speaking district of the Bengal Presidency which was annexed to Assam in 1874 simultaneously with Sylhet. Hailakandi district of today was a Muslim majority sub-division of Cachar district before Independence. Sylhet district with Cachar formed the administrative unit called the Surma Valley Division prior to Sylhet Referendum. Following the Referendum and the Partition of the district of Sylhet, on the basis of the Radcliffe Award, a major part of Sylhet district was transferred to East Pakistan and only three and half *thanas* of Karimganj sub-division viz., Patharkandi (277 square miles), Ratabari (240 square miles), a part of Karimganj (145 square miles), and Badarpur (77 square miles) were integrated into Cachar district of Assam. After Independence, Cachar district had four sub-divisions: Silchar, Hailakandi, Karimganj, and North Cachar. In 1951, North Cachar was carved out and merged with the district of United Mikir and North Cachar Hills. Later, two other sub-divisions viz., Karimganj and Hailakandi were also separated from Cachar and declared as districts on July 1, 1983, and September 29, 1989, respectively. The geographical map of the old Cachar district was thus redrawn to give way to the landlocked “Barak Valley.” Historically all three districts of the present Barak Valley were part of the then Surma Valley and were inseparable neighbours of Sylhet.

The districts of Sylhet and Cachar, jointly known as the Surma Valley Division, constituted a Bengali speaking region of southern Assam since 1874. Numerical strength of Muslims was higher in Surma Valley. According to the 1941 Census Report, Cachar (3,862 square miles) had a total population of 641,181 of which 225,816 were Hindus and 232,950 were Muslims. On the other hand, Sylhet (5,478 square miles) had a total

population of 3,116,602 of which there were 1,892,117 Muslims and 1,149,514 Hindus.<sup>12</sup> In Assam “as a whole the Muslims are only 33.73 per cent as against the Hindus who are 41.29 per cent of the population. If we take the districts, then Sylhet is the only district in which the Muslims are 60.71 per cent of the population...The utmost that can be fairly claimed as a Muslim zone is the district of Sylhet, although a majority of 60.71 per cent can hardly be called an overwhelming majority.”<sup>13</sup> Hence, the seed of future discord was latent in the demography of Surma Valley.

### **Referendum in Retrospect**

Sylhet Referendum, although not quite talked about, is perhaps the most intriguing subtext of India's Partition. After 75 years of Independence, the scar of the incident is fresh in the minds of the victims and their kith and kin are still in quest of a homogeneous status in Assam. The sense of estrangement of the people of Barak Valley is also latent in the incident of the Referendum. What did precipitate the separation of culturally rich, economically self-sufficient and politically vibrant “Sylhet” from Assam? As history goes back, Ahom ruled Assam for six hundred years before being briefly subjugated by the Burmese and annexed to British India. Between 1826 and 1832, colonial masters annexed Assam to Bengal Presidency. “The Burmese were finally forced to surrender their claim over Assam under the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826. During the following decade and a half, the kingdoms of Jaintia, Cachar, and Assam along with their dependencies, and all the petty, independent tribal states of the Khasi Hills were annexed.”<sup>14</sup> In 1874, Assam was made a Chief Commissioner's province and to fill its revenue deficit, Bengali dominated Sylhet, Cachar, and Goalpara were separated from Bengal and attached to Assam. “To make it financially viable, the authorities, therefore decided, in September 1874, to incorporate into it the populous Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet, which, historically as well as ethnically, was an integral part of Bengal.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, Sylhet, a prized land of the Bengal Presidency, was truncated from its parent land forever. Thus, the present “Barak Valley” which was an indispensable part of the Surma Valley had undergone the experience of partition twice—once in 1874 when Cachar and later Sylhet district was isolated from Bengal and again in 1947 when the Referendum resulted in the separation of Sylhet. The Sylhet Referendum was not merely one of the unfortunate incidents in human history that faded in time. The incident is a day-to-day reality for Assam's sizable Bengali community and often resurfaces in the politics of Assam as a nightmare for Bengali speaking residents. The incident had a greater effect in Barak Valley since it altered the landscape and history of the region, leaving it landlocked and underdeveloped. There are explanations for the lasting effects of the incident. The genesis of Sylhet Referendum dates back to the late nineteenth century colonial rule. The union of Bengali inhabited Sylhet and Cachar districts to the new province of Assam was perceived with suspicion and angst by either side in Assam and Bengal. The people of the Brahmaputra Valley

staged several protests to express their resentment against Sylhet's amalgamation. There was fear of Bengali domination in jobs and tea plantation establishments. "In 1901, the total number of the population supported by 'professions' in Sylhet alone was 44,573, while the figure for the entire Brahmaputra Valley added up to only 27,517. When the province was re-constituted into a Chief Commissioner-ship in 1912, the number of literate persons in Sylhet alone was 132,495 against 144,584 in the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley. Again, English literates of that valley numbered 18,214 whereas Sylhet alone had 10,980."<sup>16</sup> The intellectual divide between the then Assamese and Sylhetis had become the major bone of contention since the inclusion of Sylhet in Assam. Sylhet Referendum, unlike other areas, was more a matter of ethnic divide than a Hindu-Muslim question. The declaration of Bengali as the major language in schools and courts in Assam in 1836 added fuel to the fire. While Assamese were discontented, residents of Sylhet were also not happy. Sylheti aristocratic class sent a petition to the then Governor General in Council for reunion with Bengal, but their prayer went unheeded. The agitation for reunion with Bengal slowly acquired the character of a constitutional battle with the establishment of the Sylhet Peoples' Association and Sylhet-Bengal Reunion League in the 1920s. "Pamphlets were distributed throughout Sylhet to mobilise mass support. A massive conference was held to strategise and accelerate the pace of reunion. There were ongoing meetings, agitations and representations. Public opinion was mobilised to the hilt. While at Sylhet during this time, the first Governor of Assam, Beatson Bell, wrote to Viceroy Chelmsford pleading with him to retain Sylhet's revenue, education, and judicial system under Bengal [P]residency."<sup>17</sup> The sentiment of the district in this regard was aptly explained by Archdale Earle, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, in the following words: "[t]hey (residents of Sylhet) wished to be spurred to higher things by contact with the advanced Bengalis and they lose by being pitted against the backward races of Assam. Inevitably, the district was convulsed by an unparalleled agitation."<sup>18</sup> Thus, on the one hand, Sylhet was agitating to reunite with Bengal and on the other, the then leadership in Assam was trying to get rid of Sylhet. Lord Wavell, the Viceroy wrote in his Journal in 1946, that "Gopinath Bardoloi, the Congress Premier of Assam gave the Cabinet Mission to understand that Assam would be quite prepared to hand over Sylhet to Eastern Bengal."<sup>19</sup> The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) articulated in its Election Manifesto in 1945 that "[u]nless the province of Assam is organised on the basis of Assamese language and Assamese culture, the survival of the Assamese nationality and culture will become impossible. The inclusion of Bengali speaking Sylhet and Cachar and immigration or importation of lacs of Bengali settlers on wastelands has been threatening to destroy the distinctiveness of Assam and has, in practice, caused many disorders in its administration."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Premier (Chief Minister of Assam) Gopinath Bardoloi was more interested to avoid Assam's grouping with Bengal than surrendering Sylhet. "In his discussions with the Cabinet Mission and Lord Wavell at Delhi, Gopinath Bardoloi had repeatedly emphasise[s] on this aspect of the question and said that Assam should not be included in the grouping with Bengal."<sup>21</sup> In his letter to A.K. Chanda, the then



member of the Assam Legislative Council from Cachar, Bardoloi wrote, "I have become almost crazy with what the British Govt. and the Muslim League have done and I fear what Congress may do in respect of Assam, small and poor province do not seem to count anywhere...I am really in a grave fix not because I am afraid of either the Muslim League or the British Govt. but because of the fear that we might have to break away from the Congress."<sup>22</sup> This letter implies that Bardoloi had been concerned about holding a referendum in Sylhet. In a discussion with Gandhi, Bardoloi somewhat expressed this ambivalence and attributed the divide on the majority attitude of two Valleys.<sup>23</sup> Thus, majority opinion on either side was not in favour of the integration of Sylhet to India. Amidst such a scenario, a referendum in Sylhet and its subsequent union with Pakistan became inevitable.

### **Dynamics of Demography**

The demography of Sylhet also played an important role in its trajectory leading to the Referendum. For majority of the Muslim inhabitants of Sylhet, it was a calculated decision to vote and merge with Pakistan. But for the Hindu population of the district, it was a compulsion to vote against their Muslim counterpart. They were left with no alternative but to cede with Assam thereby giving up their long-sustained yearning to merge with more "advanced" Bengal. "Ironically, when the opportunity for a return to East Bengal (later East Pakistan) came in 1947, the Sylheti Hindus defended their right to remain in Assam/India while many Sylheti Muslims wanted to separate. When the referendum was held on July 6 and 7, the outcome was by and large consistent with the demographic composition of the district where Muslims had a numerical edge: 56.6 per cent of Sylhetis voted for joining East Pakistan and 43.3 per cent voted for remaining in Assam/India. Following this outcome most of the Sylhet district was ceded to East Pakistan."<sup>24</sup> But there was no absolute polarisation of electorates as is claimed often. "The circumstantial evidences suggest that a section of the Muslims must have voted for India...At least 0.74 [per cent] of the Muslims voted for India. It should, therefore, be presumed that 3,135 Muslims had voted for India"<sup>25</sup> It is pertinent to mention that the votes polled for India were 3,135 more than the total votes polled by the non-Muslims. But this minuscule variation in Muslim votes was not enough to turn the verdict in favour of India. Thus, "at the time of [P]artition, the Hindus and the Muslims of Assam were in two opposite camps led by the Congress and the League respectively. The nationalist Muslims, small in number, were hardly capable of influencing the politics of the province in any appreciable manner. In free India, the Sylhet Hindus became a community of refugees though for 73 years they were a major and often a deciding factor in Assam politics. The district became a 'sacrificial lamb' for the third time during the same period in the interests of Assam."<sup>26</sup> Over the next couple of years, large numbers of Sylheti Hindus from the surrendered parts of Sylhet began to move to the northeastern states of India,

especially to southern Assam, where they had established some interpersonal contacts in the period 1874–1947.

### Sylhet Referendum and Unresolved Issues

Unfortunately, the Partition of Sylhet has failed to ease the anxiety of the ruling establishment. The consequence of the Referendum went as per the prophecy of Rohini Kumar Choudhury, the lone member of all-Assamese Bardoloi delegation. “He cautioned Bordoloi and other members not to do this mistake. The problem would persist but not the land.”<sup>27</sup> In no time, the apprehension of the leader became a reality. Large influx of refugees from Eastern Bengal has instead accentuated the fear of marginalisation of Assamese. Subsequent repressive policies of the leadership widened the fissures between the Assamese and the Bengalis. The results were the anti-Bengali riots of 1948, 1950, 1960, 1968, 1972 and 1980. The worst manifestation of the increasing Assamese-Bengali divide was seen during the language movement of 1961. The Bengalis of Barak Valley opposed the imposition of Assamese as the official language throughout Assam and defended their right to language at the cost of eleven martyrs. History repeated sooner than later in 1972 when the people of Barak Valley once again had to oppose the imposition of Assamese language at the College level at the loss of twin lives. The peak was reached with the commencement of the anti-foreigners agitation in Assam in the late’70s, also popularly known as *Bongal Kheda Andolan* (Expel Bengalis). Besides being categorically directed against the Bengali population, the character of the movement was evasive. At the time, the movement was initiated there was no real threat to Assamese identity. Threat was apprehended as the All Assam Student’s Union (AASU) and the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AGP) came up with the magic number of 45 lakhs foreigners in Assam, almost all of them of being Bengali. Agitation started and continued till the signing of the Assam Accord on August 15, 1985. The Accord under Clause 6 guaranteed all possible safeguards to Assamese language and culture. But the unease persisted. The result was the passing of the controversial Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) circular imposing Assamese as a compulsory Language once again in 1986. Circular was withdrawn but at the expense of two more young lives and huge resistance from Barak Valley. Yet the onslaught on Bengali language and culture did not eclipse in Assam. At the end of the 54<sup>th</sup> Convention of *Asam Sahitya Sabha* in Hailakandi district of Barak Valley, Assamese playwright Satya Prasad Barua said, “[t]hey seemed to be convinced when I told them that they did not speak Bengali in their homes and that they actually spoke a language different from Bengali and this was what we might call Baraki language. I told them if they cultivated and developed this language, they would soon find out that it had more affinities with Assamese than Bengali.”<sup>28</sup> Needless to say that the spoken version of any language has many dialects. Just as the people of Barak Valley speak *Sylheti*, slightly dissimilar to elegant Bengali, Assamese also speak different dialects of *Asomiya* language. Thus, the identity crisis of Bengali population is latent in history

itself. For the time being it disappears to resurface with further strength. It is occasionally expressed in the statements of Assam Sahitya Sabha, at times in the pronouncements of AASU and sometimes in government decisions. In fact, the Sylhet Referendum left behind a plethora of issues like illegal immigration, NRC Exercise, identity movements, “D Voter” and citizenship conundrum. These are not isolated affairs rather very much connected with the Partition and its legacies.

### **Barak Valley Post-Referendum**

The incorporation of Sylhet and Cachar in the political structure of Assam was not a natural act of redefining the territory of a state for administrative purposes. It was a conscious decision carried out through clear-cut political imposition. The question of historical, geographical, and cultural affinity of the people of either side was not at all addressed while forging the union of two alien lands. This political decision to combine Cachar and Sylhet with Assam affected the lives of millions of inhabitants and dislocated them from their roots forever. An existential crisis is born for the people of Surma Valley as they were apprehending the loss of their socio-cultural identity in the inhospitable situation of Assam. There was going on relentless agitation for reunion with Bengal in the districts of Sylhet and Cachar. However, the end of the colonial rule put an end to this struggle for the right of self-determination of the people of Surma Valley but at the loss of Sylhet. Sylhet, the darling of Surma Valley, had slipped to East Pakistan. Cachar district which had once been an important part of the Surma Valley became the lone Bengali stronghold in Assam. The Cachar district today with the remains of the then Sylhet constitute the present Barak Valley. Literature suggests that Sylhet and Cachar were closely related throughout the colonial era in terms of their cultural, linguistic, and political ties. The degree of interdependence between Sylhet and Cachar was so profound that all three Cachar leaders unanimously opposed the Assam Legislative Council resolution that recommended the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal in 1926. The reason was the sense of insecurity and the fear of *realized* *zed* *on* that Cachar might encounter without Sylhet. While opposing the said resolution, Maulavi Rashid Ali Laskar, a member of the Council from Cachar said,

As for the people of Cachar, these people have not migrated from the Assam Valley, they have not migrated from the hills, they have not dropped from heaven. The Cachar people are descendants of Sylhet...Their position is that they do not want to go to Bengal, their main object is to remain with Sylhet. If Sylhet remains they want to remain, if Sylhet goes to Bengal they want to go also. That is the opinion of Cachar. I represent not only my own constituency but I represent the opinion of the entire Cachar.<sup>29</sup>

Ali's Observations aptly summarise the dilemma of Cachar. For Sylhet, reunion with Bengal was important but for Cachar concern was to remain

with Sylhet. But in two decades, Sylhet became a territory of East Pakistan. Cachar district lost its brethren and was realized overnight in Assam.

### Quest for Separate Statehood

It was thus obvious that the people of Cachar (later Barak Valley) were unable to reconcile with the separation of Sylhet. They were grappling hard to accept the misery that this historical tragedy unfolded for them. Soon they realized that reunion with Bengal was not a realistic option as geography became the major obstacle after the Partition of Sylhet. To reconcile and live in Assam was also not a practical proposition. This might jeopardise the cultural identity of Bengalis. Hence, in 1948, in a mass convention of Congress, they demanded a separate state for south Assam as *Purbachal*. The idea was initiated in a mass Convention of the Congress party in April 1948. The Congress Working Committee of Cachar accepted the proposal of this separate homeland comprising Tripura, Manipur, and undivided Cachar in September of the same year. But the notion of a refugee idea did not allow the proposal to consolidate, although the Congress High Command theoretically accepted the scheme of *Purbachal*. Few years later, the Cachar States Reorganisation Committee (CSRC) and a few allied organisations submitted a memorandum to the three-member States Reorganization Committee (SRC) named “Purbachal Reconsidered” in April 1954. A note on the report of the CSRC was submitted to the Ministry of Home Affairs on October 28, 1955. This exhaustive document succinctly highlights the angst and agony of Bengalis of Cachar with evidences and also possible substitutes to Purbachal. To make out their case for a separate state, it is observed,

that the policy of Assamisation and, in the pursuit of it, of discrimination by the Government of Assam against the Bengalees, is highly detrimental to their political, economic, cultural and other interests, and creates that kind of estrangement of feeling and resulting conflict as act against the unity of India and its emotional integration, and ultimately, the stability and security of this region...Cachar is 77 [per cent] a Bengali speaking district and forms, with Tripura, a Bengali zone, on this part of [E]ast Pakistan, being formerly a cultural and geographical part of what is now West Bengal...The proposal for a separate State with Manipur, Lushai Hills, Tripura and Cachar, i.e. the smallest possible Purbachal—is the ‘only serious alternative to merger in Assam’ if Manipur agreed...Should Purbachal in any shape or form be thought impracticable or if Manipur and/or Tripura do not change their mind, we, the people of Cachar, will yet like to leave Assam and share the fate of Tripura whatever that may be...As the only surviving Bengali region on this side of East Pakistan, this area should not be surrendered again and made weaker to face a process of slow death, each in its turn, and in isolation.<sup>30</sup>

However, the demand of the CSRC was not accepted by the SRC but the issues raised were carefully examined and while dismissing the claim of Purbachal, the SRC observed that,

the CSRC, itself recognises that this new State will be financially in deficit for quite some time. The proposed Purbachal will have an international boundary on three sides...Hence, substantial minorities speaking languages other than Bengali will be found in it, with the result that it will provide no real solution of the existing difficulties...It has been represented to us that the activities of the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha and the policies of the local government have not only not reconciled the Bengalis in this part of Assam, but have had quite the opposite result...It is difficult for us to believe that the arrangements which have been made adequately meet the needs of the Bengali-speaking population in this district, and in particular the problem of primary education in this area should receive early attention.<sup>31</sup>

Although the SRC did not recommend the creation of Purbachal, the movement for separate statehood continued. When the Bill for the adoption of Assamese as the official language was approved in the Assam Assembly on October 24, 1960, the district of Cachar exploded in agitation. "On January 15, 1961, in a joint conference of Congress Committees of Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi, demand for a separate administrative arrangement for Barak Valley was resonated once again. In 1967, Janamangal Parishad, a civil society organi[s]ation was created in Cachar to plead for separation from Assam. A memorandum for the Union Territory status of Barak Valley was submitted to the Union Government. A delegation of important political leaders and residents went to Delhi...When the then Home Minister K.C. Panth declared Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh as union territories, the Union Territory Demand Committee (U.T.D.C) was constituted in Cachar in December 1970."<sup>32</sup> A Number of memorandums were submitted to the Government of India. Multiple visits were made by the delegation of the U.T.D.C to New Delhi. Talks were held but without any concrete result. "The union territory movement which was all along led primarily by the Bengali Hindu leadership of Cachar continued till the 1980s when it finally petered out. It was in July 1986 that the last memorandum on the issue was submitted to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the Union Territory Demand Committee."<sup>33</sup> After that sporadic demands for statehood were heard before it fizzled out completely. A number of factors have contributed to the failure of Cachar statehood/union territory movement. The most important one was the lack of political support. The movement was primarily steered by civil society organisations at various stages. Demand for separate statehood never became an electoral issue in Barak Valley, and thus failed to pave the way for the birth of a regional political group. But this does not undermine the cause for which the demand was repeatedly made. The birth of a political party in the name of Barak Democratic Front (BDF) in a mass convention in Silchar on November 28, 2020, is evidence of the void that the movement's failure left behind. BDF is considered as the first regional party in Barak Valley and the primary goal of the party is to ensure a fair deal for Barak Valley. BDF is a political platform to protest against the "constant deprivation and discrimination that the people of Barak Valley are being subjected to by the Brahmaputra Valley."<sup>34</sup>

## Politics of Subversion

After Sylhet seceded and the idea of the “Surma Valley” was dissolved, political developments were much quicker and more unexpected in Cachar/Barak Valley. As long as Cachar was with Sylhet, the leadership in Assam was not in a position to meddle in the politics of this region. The Politics of “Surma Valley” had a distinctive character and was focussed mostly on All-India issues and separating Sylhet and Cachar from Assam. However, as soon as Sylhet separated, the political leadership in Assam became anxious to undermine the thriving political legacy of Surma Valley in Cachar. As a first move toward realising their plan, they decided to seize the Cachar District Congress Committee (DCC) and sever its link with the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (BPCC). It is important to note that the District Congress Committees in Sylhet and Cachar had been affiliated with the BPCC since 1919. On September 2, 1947, less than one month after India attained independence, the APCC convened an emergent meeting in Shillong and intimated that the DCC send a representative. Mahitosh Purkayastha, Assistant General Secretary of the DCC travelled to Shillong. About his interaction with the then General Secretary of the APCC, he writes,

Next day I met Shri Siddinath Sharma, the General Secretary of the A.P.C.C. He told me that they intended to move a resolution in the meeting of the A.P.C.C for the inclusion of Cachar District within A.P.C.C as they had received representation from many persons of Cachar District in this respect. I replied that we had no knowledge of any such representation and if any Congressmen of our district sent a copy of it to us...I wanted to see the copy of the representation they received but he replied that these were not in the file.<sup>35</sup>

In light of this worrying development, the DCC, Cachar led by Upendra Shankar Dutta, held a meeting on September 13 to clarify their stand on the pitch of the APCC. It was observed in the meeting that,

[t]he Cachar DCC as also the people of the district has always been anxious to continue connection with the BPCC and the DCC or BPCC was never been consulted to express their views by the APCC and as such resolution dated 2.9.47 of the APCC on the subject was uncalled for and unconstitutional...hence be it resolved that this committee do hereby strongly protest against the resolution of the APCC and reiterate their views that the district of Cachar along with the part of Karimganj retained in Assam should remain incorporated with the BPCC as a separate zone.<sup>36</sup>

But before the leaders of Cachar Congress could act accordingly, the Brahmaputra Valley leaders moved quickly to alter the leadership of Cachar Congress. In the next two years, nationalist Congress leaders of Cachar were sidelined to be replaced by the APCC’s nominated members. Many of them were the erstwhile leaders of the Muslim League. For example, Moinul Haque Chowdhury, who is considered the pioneer of modern Barak Valley, was the General Secretary of the Youth Front of Muslim League. “In 1950, he joined

Indian National Congress and became a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1952 and later Cabinet Minister in 1962.<sup>237</sup> This was not a unique case. Many with no background in Congress were encouraged and appointed to various posts in Cachar Congress. It was thus obvious that the leadership in Cachar in the years following the Partition was not really competent to manage the difficult issues like rehabilitation of refugees, providing livelihood to millions of homeless, combating the imperialistic design of the Assam Government or guiding the dislodged people in the right direction. Leadership crisis that was seeded in the politics of Barak Valley at the onset of Independence had an enduring impact on the future of this region. The backwardness of the place lends credence to this claim. The lead for any movement or initiative to meet the aspirations of the people of Barak Valley was always provided by a non-political forum, be it the movement to preserve Bengali language or culture or the call for a separate state or the demand for a central university. There are many instances to show how political leadership has fallen apart when the needs of the people were at their worst. Following the failure of the Congress leadership to lead the language movement of 1961, the *Cachar Gana Sangram Parishad* took the lead. In 1972, when Gauhati and Dibrugarh universities decided to switch over to Assamese language at the college, the students and teachers of Barak Valley took the lead to build pressure on the government to roll back their decision. The Movement for the establishment of a central university was also initiated and led by *Cachar Shiksha Sangrakshan Samiti* and later by All Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi Students' Union (ACKSHA). The issue of backwardness or ongoing attacks on the language and culture of the people of Barak Valley did not find a suitable political voice until the founding of the BDF. However, the BDF since its formation as a political party is trying to lay out its political base on issues of deprivation and existential crisis of the region. So far, Partition has neither allowed the politics of this place to assimilate with Assamese political culture nor to retain the legacy of pre-Partition days.

## Conclusion

The preceding exercise was not intended to invoke the bitter memory of the past. Instead, it aims to provide the complex historical trajectory that has shaped the relations between Barak Valley and Brahmaputra Valley. Both the regions remained juxtaposed in their contrast histories of anguish and struggle. The history of Bengali domination in Assam, followed by their subsequent marginalisation has remained to be the major source of contention between Bengalis and Assamese. As a result, until now the tale of two valleys has evolved in two different directions, without one being the counterpart of the other. But there have been overt attempts to bridge the gap under the current and the preceding political regime of Assam. This may be because the present political establishment in Assam is attempting to redefine the state's long-standing ethnolinguistic nationalism with religious nationalism. Regardless of the underlying dynamics, under the current regime of Chief

Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the development of Barak Valley was given priority. He also visited the region a number of times after assuming the office of the Chief Minister in May 2021. In September 2021, Assam Chief Minister started his Durga Puja celebration by offering prayers in the famous Kachakanti temple of Silchar in Barak Valley. During the devastating flood of June 2022, the current Chief Minister visited Barak Valley a number of times. Under his Chairmanship, the first-ever three-day meeting of the Assam Cabinet was held in Barak Valley in Silchar in November 2022. He was also very magnanimous in acknowledging the significant contribution of Bengalis to the growth of language, culture and literature in Assam and recalled Tagore's visit to Assam in a recent conference of the Assam Bengali Youth Students' Federation in Silapathar in Dhemaji district. Such initiatives and statements are designed to strengthen the togetherness of the two Valleys. However, the language of unity needs to be echoed not just in political dispensation but also outside of it. After all, a certain degree of disassociation from the past and identification with the present is imperative for a stable and peaceful Assam.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Anuradha Kumar, "Partition, Congress Secularism and Hindu Communalism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 31 (July 29–August 4, 2000): 2731.
- <sup>2</sup> Myron Weiner, "Rejected Peoples and Unwanted Migrants in South Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 34 (August 21, 1993): 1737.
- <sup>3</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, "The 'Hut' and the 'Axe': The 1947 Sylhet Referendum," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 39, no. 4 (2002): 319.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Roy, "Notes on Sylhet Referendum," in *Politics of Subversion: The Untold Story of Sylhet*, ed. Sujit K. Ghosh (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2000), 23.
- <sup>5</sup> Ashfaque Hossain, "The Making and Unmaking of Assam-Bengal Borders and the Sylhet Referendum," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 1 (January 2013): 273.
- <sup>6</sup> J.B. Bhattacharjee, "The Sylhet Referendum (1947): Myth of a Communal Voting," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 51 (1990): 484.
- <sup>7</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition, Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152.
- <sup>8</sup> "Negotiating with Multiple Histories," *Partition Studies Quarterly*, Issue .2 (July 11, 2020), <https://partitionstudiesquarterly.org/article/editorial-issue-02/>.
- <sup>9</sup> Census of India 2011, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, "C-16: Population by Mother Tongue—2011," Census Tables 2011, PC11\_C16-18, last modified July 4, 2022, <https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/10195>.
- <sup>10</sup> Bijit Bhattacharya, *Surakshita Bandishbala* (Hailakandi: Sahiya Prakashani, 1993), 93.
- <sup>11</sup> R.B. Vaghaiwalla, *Census of India, 1951*, vol XII, *Assam, Manipur and Tripura, Part I-A Report* (Bombay: Municipal Printing Press, 1954), 414.
- <sup>12</sup> K.W.P. Marar, *Census of India 1941: Assam Tables*, vol IX (Simla: Government of Indian Press, and Manager of Publication, Delhi, 1942): 2, 24, [http://lsi.gov.in:8081/jspui/bitstream/123456789/3139/1/140417\\_1941.pdf](http://lsi.gov.in:8081/jspui/bitstream/123456789/3139/1/140417_1941.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> Rajendra Prasad, *India Divided* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010), 251.
- <sup>14</sup> Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 1977), 1.



<sup>15</sup> Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Anindita Dasgupta, "Denial and Resistance: Sylheti Partition Refugees in Assam," *Contemporary South Asia* 10, no. 3 (2001): 346.

<sup>17</sup> B.N. Chowdhury, *Smriti o Pratiti* (Kolkata: Shreebhumi Press, 1960), 133.

<sup>18</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *Political History of Assam 1826–1919*, vol 1 (Guwahati: Government of Assam, 1977), 205.

<sup>19</sup> Sujit Chaudhuri, "A 'God-Sent' Opportunity," *Seminar* (February 2002): 1, <https://www.india-seminar.com/2002/510/510%20sujit%20chaudhuri.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Chaudhuri, "A 'God-Sent'," 1.

<sup>21</sup> J. Hazarika, and D.P. Sharma, *Administrative History of Undivided Assam (1826–1947): An Account of British Administration in Assam* (Guwahati: Assam Regional Branch, IIPA, and Anwasha Publications, 2021), 138.

<sup>22</sup> Sanjib Deb Laskar, ed., *Jananeta Arunkumar Chanda* (Silchar: Barak Upatakya Banga Sahitya o Sanskriti Sammelan, Cachar Zilla Samiti, 2021), 176–78.

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<sup>24</sup> Udayan Misra, *Burden of History: Assam and the Partition-Unresolved Issues* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 116.

<sup>25</sup> J.B. Bhattacharjee, "The Sylhet Referendum (1947): Myth of a Communal Voting," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 51 (1990): 482–83.

<sup>26</sup> M. Kar, *Muslims in Assam Politics* (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing, 1997), 40.

<sup>27</sup> S.K. Das, *Spotlight on Assam* (Chandernagore: Maharashtra: Premiere Book Service, 1989), viii.

<sup>28</sup> S.P. Barua, "The Sabha in Retrospect," *The Assam Tribune*, 1988, 6.

<sup>29</sup> J.B. Bhattacharjee, "The Sylhet Resolution of 1926: Why Did the Cachar Leaders Vote Against," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 52 (1991): 564.

<sup>30</sup> The Case for Cachar, A Note on the Report of the States Re-organisation Commission with special reference to Cachar and Tripura submitted to the Ministry of Home Affairs on 28.10.1955 (Silchar: Cachar States Re-organisation Committee, 1955), 1-10.

<sup>31</sup> "Report of the States Reorganisation Commission 1955," Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 191,

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<sup>32</sup> Paritosh Paul Choudhury, *Prithak Cachar: Ek Onibarjya Satyo*, (Silchar: U.T.D.C., 1989), 10–12.

<sup>33</sup> Misra, *Burden of History*, 130.

<sup>34</sup> "New Political Party Formed in Silchar," *Eastern Chronicle*, November 29, 2020, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Sujit Chaudhuri, *Barak Upatakya Samaj o Rajniti* (Karimganj: Jugasakti Prakashan, 2007), 51.

<sup>36</sup> Chaudhuri, *Barak Upatakya Samaj*, 69–70.

<sup>37</sup> S.B. Parveen, "Socio-Political Awakening of the Muslims of Assam: 1871 to 1980" (PhD diss., Centre of Advanced Study, Aligarh Muslim University, 2010), 212–13.

# **Partition, Migration, and Identity Formation: Narratives from Southern Assam**

By

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Partition related migration in Southern Assam comprising the districts of Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi, Dima Hasao, and Karbi Anglong has been characteristically different from the migration processes and experiences in the western border of India where migration often was the result of abject violence and was mostly a temporally limited affair. It is also experientially different from post-Partition migrations to West Bengal. Migrations across this northeastern border of India started long before Partition and continue, albeit in very insignificant numbers, till date with various peaks and troughs across the decades relating to national and international developments. The narratives/memories of these migrations vary significantly depending on when, from where, or from which part of East Pakistan/Bangladesh they migrated and why, as well as the class, caste, and gender of the individual migrant concerned. Early (often upper class/ upper caste) migrations from Sylhet (the immediate bordering district of this region), for instance, where the Sylhet Referendum, which took place on July 6, 1947, acted as a sort of premonition and which historically did not witness much communal violence, is starkly different from later migrations (often lower class/ lower caste) migrations from Noakhali or Comilla. Narratives of Partition and migration in Southern Assam go beyond the usual trope of violence to include economic, strategic, ideological, and even emotional accounts as the rationale behind migration. This multiplicity of narratives, among other factors, is perhaps one

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of the reasons for the failure of the development of a collective post-Partition identity in the region. The Bhasha Andolon in 1961 and the Assam Movement during the '70s and '80s added some impetus to the growth of a collective Bengali identity, yet there seems to be constant flux in the way people in the region identify themselves. Identity formation process in this region, therefore, hinges on a form of strategic essentialism where people choose those identities which they deem fit for political and cultural recognition as and when needed. Rather than a stable identity category based on language or ethnicity, we find people straddling a multiplicity of identities based on linguistic variations, religion, caste, the memory of migration, distance from the chosen centre, etc. Thus, rather like Bakhtin's theorisations about language, on the one hand, we have centralising forces trying to unite the population in the name of a pan-Bengali identity, or a pan-Indian identity; and decentralising forces that are bringing to the forefront distances from the centres (Guwahati, Kolkata, Delhi) or linguistic variations (Sylheti) or religion (Hindu/Muslim) and thereby fracturing the identity formation process. This paper analyses and assess the different, alternative (and often divisive) narratives/ memories of migration that form the foundation of the Bengali identity politics in Southern Assam and theorises this complex identity formation—at times reactionary, at times opportunistic, and at times progressive—process among the migrant population of Southern Assam. To understand the interlinkages of "*Partition and India's North-East: Issues of Migration and Identity (Special Focus: Southern Assam)*" interviews were conducted among the Bengali-speaking population who migrated from present-day Bangladesh and settled in the five districts of Southern Assam viz. Cachar, Hailakandi, Karimganj, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. More than two-hundred interviews were taken over a period of one year in 2019. An admixture of purposive sampling and convenience sampling was used to reach out to people who either themselves or their forefathers migrated from East Pakistan/Bangladesh during or after Indian independence. The interviewees were from both urban and rural areas having varied backgrounds of class, caste, education, and professions, and the stories of migration thus collected temporally spread out across the decades since independence helps to analyse understand how the context of migration changed over time.

## Background

Whenever the history of India's Partition is revisited and retold in the twenty-first century, the story of Southern Assam tends to go missing. The "mainland bias" in the Partition narrative where the stories of Punjab and Bengal dominate the discourse marginalising the experience of this distant northeast region of India, and yet, the story of the Partition of Southern Assam is important because it follows a rather unique trajectory, different from both Bengal and Punjab and adds to the diversity of discourses surrounding Partition. Southern Assam, usually referred to as Barak Valley comprising the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi experienced not one but two Partitions.<sup>1</sup> The first Partition happened in 1874, when the entire Sylhet

region was removed from Bengal Presidency and added to the newly formed Assam Province with a view of economic and administrative convenience. The valleys of the Surma and Barak were economically productive regions and their addition to the Assam province served to rationalise the formation of the province economically. This was also the time when migration and settlement of the population from Sylhet and other districts of Bengal into Assam began in large numbers aided and encouraged by the British administration. The British administration needed an educated class to govern the province. This was sourced from Bengal. Also, Assam had fertile but unused land, and skilled farmers from Sylhet, Comilla, Noakhali regions were brought in with the promise of the same. Often rewards were announced by the British Raj for clearing forests and wildernesses, killing poisonous snakes, tigers, and other wild animals to transform these lands into productive farms thereby adding to the British coffers.<sup>2</sup> This was primarily the process through which the Barak Valley region became a space dominated by a Bengali/Sylheti speaking population. Portions of the plains in Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong also witnessed these planned migrations and settlements. Demands of reuniting the greater Sylhet region with Bengal continued across the decades but with much infighting among the leadership and leading to no positive results. Thus, when the second Partition came in 1947 Southern Assam had a sizable Bengali/Sylheti speaking population. Secondly, the Partition of this region is technically different from those in other borders because in 1947 there was an actual Referendum held in this region.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the Referendum, while the Cachar region, presently comprising of four districts of Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi, and Dima Hasao, was left with India, a major portion of Sylhet including portions of present-day Karimganj went to East Pakistan, thereby giving birth to an international border in an erstwhile undivided region. The story of the Referendum is more complex than usually perceived. For one, a huge chunk of the population residing in these areas referred to as the Tea Tribes and considered Hindus were not allowed to vote because they were considered to be a “floating” populace,<sup>4</sup> and this strategic exclusion undoubtedly affected the final result of the Referendum. Secondly, the results of the Referendum were often not followed in letter and spirit (portions of Karimganj, for instance, voted in favour of Pakistan, while the region in Bangladesh currently known as Moulavi Bazaar voted in favour of India) and were later manipulated with and the region reorganised in keeping with conveniences of drawing borders. However, unlike other places, the Referendum played a very important role in this region, dividing the population along ideological lines and acting as a precursor, a premonition for the coming divide. It also kick-started the strategic migrations in the sense that those in Sylhet who had voted to remain a part of India often took a conscious decision to move to India. Thirdly, Partition related migration into Southern Assam has been characteristically different from that in the western border where migration was often a consequence of violence and was mostly a temporally limited affair. Instead of mass migrations immediately following Partition (which is the story of the Punjab frontier) migrations and settlements across this northeastern border started long before Partition and continues

(albeit in very insignificant numbers) till date. Across the decades, there have been multiple peaks and troughs in the process relating to National and International developments. The narratives/memories (both primary and secondary) of these migrations vary significantly depending on when the migration is happening, from where (which part of East Pakistan/Bangladesh) it is happening, and why. It also depends on the class, caste, and gender of the subject concerned. Early (often upper class/upper caste) migrations from Sylhet (the immediate bordering district of this region), for instance, where the Sylhet Referendum, which took place on July 6, 1947, acted as a sort of premonition and which historically did not witness much communal violence, is starkly different from later migrations (often lower class/ lower caste) migrations from Noakhali or Comilla. Personal interviews with refugees and their families across Southern Assam who migrated at different points in time have revealed an array of narratives that go beyond the usual trope of violence to include migrations motivated by economic, strategic, ideological, and even emotional reasons.

In other words, there is no uniformity in the experience of migration in this region which makes it impossible to categorise them into any monologic narrative. This lack of uniformity in the experience of migration resulted in the failure of forming a stable migration related identity in the region despite the heavy presence of a migrant population. In fact, across the decades, the population of this region has straddled multiple identities based on class, caste, history of migration, language and dialect, original home, and of course religion rarely coalescing into any one dominant identity. The diversity in experiences of migration appears to be the primary reason behind the multifaceted, multidimensional play of identity that marks the politics in the region. If the evidence gathered in the interviews is to be trusted, the early migrations, immediately preceding and succeeding the Referendum seem to be mostly strategic, or ideological, often choice and convenience based. Sylhet, as a region, did not experience communal violence immediately in the aftermath of the Partition. Multiple interviews conducted across different parts of the Barak Valley stand as testimonials to this. For instance, there were quite a few service-related migrations in the early years. Reena Roy, a resident of the Vivekananda Road area of Silchar, said that she and her family consisting of her mother and two other siblings came to India because her elder brother, the sole breadwinner of the family served with the Indian Air Force and hence migrating to India was their chosen option.<sup>4</sup> Another respondent spoke of his grandfather who worked in the Indian Railways and decided to come to India after the Partition because the rail network was more extensive in India and there was scope for growth. It may be noted here that the Railways played a big part as a motivating factor when it came to migrating to India in the initial years after the Partition and people from certain other districts also came to seek their luck through the Railways. Ratan Chakraborty, a resident of Diphu in Karbi Anglong district, is one such person. His father and his uncle both came to Diphu in 1954 from Mymensingh in East Pakistan in order to start a vending business with the Railways as it provided great scope for earning money. Both his father and his uncle were later able to establish a successful

business and relocated the family to Diphu eventually in the next five-six years.<sup>5</sup> Ajay Majumdar, a senior resident of Lumding spoke about his father who had come to Lumding from Comilla in 1952 because his elder brother was already working in the Railways and earning well. He took up a job with the Railways and both the brothers eventually relocated the entire Majumdar family to India in the next few years.<sup>6</sup> The stories of migration discussed here are mostly choice based and strategic.

On the other hand, migration narratives from these years also bear evidence of ideologically motivated migration, especially from Sylhet where the Referendum actually imposed an ideological or religious bias. Naru Chakraborty said that his father, a *purohit* (priest), decided to leave East Pakistan immediately after the announcement of Partition because, as an upper caste Hindu, he did not want to live in a Muslim country anymore.<sup>7</sup> There are multiple instances where the respondent or their forefather migrated as the establishment of an Islamic country implied major social upheaval catapulting the henceforth subaltern into relative positions of power and disturbing the master-servant relationship to some extent. The study recorded respondents saying that the fact that post-Partition they had to offer chairs to people, those who in an earlier era would not even dare to enter the premises, was enough for them to perceive the radically changed social equation motivating them to migrate. Reena Choudhury, a resident of Ramkrishna Nagar in Karimganj district noted that she had come to India in 1950 with her parents. It was only her father who decided to migrate to India after the Partition while the rest of the family stayed back. Her father purchased land in Patherkandi. The rest of her family followed suit eventually. However, the last person to migrate from her family was her youngest uncle who came to India in 1971 fleeing the violence that preceded the Liberation War in 1971.<sup>8</sup> Sridam Chakraborty came to India in 1950 due to financial reasons. In Sylhet, his family lived on meagre means. Having come to know of the better economic prospects at railway heads like Lumding, Dimapur, etc., Chakraborty migrated and settled in Dimapur where he did all kinds of business and eventually resettled his entire family in India. He has now retired and lives a life of contentment in Karimganj.<sup>9</sup> These strategic post-Partition migrations, based on convenience or ideological choices, did not translate into a refugee population as such. The migrants were often privileged, having social, economic, and educational capital, with connections in this region. Kabindra Purkayastha, ex-MP from Silchar and a BJP veteran corroborated this observation and remarked that “*Partition er bhir tob 50s er pore jomse. Sylhet e oto maramari o asil na, jeta asil ita ghuje ghufe* (There was no rush to migrate immediately after the Partition. The rush only gathered after the ’50s. There was hardly any instance of violence in Sylhet apart from a few sporadic incidents that happened in the fringes).”<sup>10</sup> Strategic migration was not just service or ideology related, and often the government policies to accommodate people from the other side of the border played a significant role. Even during the early years of the ’50s, many families migrated with the aim of settling down in Barak Valley because of the availability of land and the government’s policies of land distribution to migrants from across the border.

Paresh Bhattacharjee, a retired schoolteacher, mentioned that the entire village where he lived migrated together and came to India to finally settle down in a tea garden area. There was no particular threat that prompted the people of his village to migrate. Most of the time, these migrations were casual and unplanned.<sup>11</sup> Prabhat Chowdhury, for instance, spoke of his father who had come to visit a cousin in Silchar in 1952 and upon the insistence of the cousin, decided to leave his employment as a lab technician in M.C. College, Sylhet, to take up the work of a technician in one of the colleges in Silchar.<sup>12</sup> The newly established international borders were thoroughly porous and such casual or planned migration in search of better opportunities was quite normal. Sajal Nag observed that in the years that immediately followed the Partition, migration to Barak Valley was motivated by a certain kind of lure—of land, government assistance, and a better shot at life—rather than any specific necessity. Movement across borders was easy, and cases like that of Prabhat Chowdhury show that there were often casual relocations rather than displacement or dislocation.

However, this situation did not last long. The Anderson Bridge massacre, infamously known as the Bhairabpool incident in 1950 cast a long shadow of fright and anxiety that subsequently metamorphosed into fear psychosis prompting people to live under a constant feeling of trepidation.<sup>13</sup> Even though the incident took place in the Kishoreganj district, its ripple effect was markedly felt in Sylhet as many took it as a premonition of impending turmoil and decided to leave Sylhet in a hurry. Khana Biswas is one such person who came to India with her family out of fear right after the news of the massacre spread widely. Biswas's father, a practicing doctor in Brahmanbaria immediately made arrangements for his family to shift to India. The Biswas family did not face any violence but relocated out of fear.<sup>14</sup> Monorama Chakraborty too shares a similar experience. As the news of Bhairabpool spread far and wide, she, along with her family and many others from their village in Beanibazar left and came to settle down in Barak Valley.<sup>15</sup> The incident of Bhairabpool continued to resonate in the '50s alongside the increasing dominance of Muslims in social spheres of life. Sylhet, which was noticeably devoid of violence, also began to feel the anxiety associated with Partition as incidents of soft threats to life and property became more common. These soft threats did not necessarily involve any actual violence, however. The most common examples of soft threat included Muslim men barging into Hindu homes at odd hours and asking for food or tea, engaging in casual conversations with Hindus and telling them that their land and property will perhaps eventually belong to the Muslims or that they will probably marry Hindu women, etc. An elderly couple from Ramkrishna Nagar narrated the story of their migration citing one such incident when a group of Muslim men came to their house, stayed for dinner, and then went to sleep in their house before leaving in the morning. The couple left their home in Sylhet in the next two days and came to India. Another respondent remarked that his family left their village in Sylhet because their pond, from which nearby houses also drew drinking water, was *defiled* with the carcass of a cow. Rather, they treated them as outcasts. So, when individuals from the Muslim

community started entering Hindu homes, the Hindus took it as a violation of their privacy, cultural practices, and beliefs thus deciding to leave the country.

Women were the easiest targets of such soft threats. Pratima Das from Ramkrishna Nagar, Karimganj district, narrated that one day, when her parents, both schoolteachers in Baniachang, Sylhet, were returning home from school, a group of Muslim men passed lewd remarks about her mother. This happened just a few days after the Bhairabpool incident. Her father did not lose time to decide about relocating to India after this incident. Rangabala Paul of Dudhpatil village near Silchar came to India in 1964 along with her husband and children said that her husband, a sweet maker, one day had gone to Sylhet town for some work where he heard stories of women being taken away from their homes at the dead of the night to be married to Muslim men the following day. This made her husband worried, and he immediately returned to their village and asked Rangabala to pack some essentials and the few valuable things they had in their possession. The family left their home that very night and came to India via the Sutarkandi border. They finally settled down having got a land grant of 7 bighas of land.<sup>16</sup> These stories go on to highlight the desperation that gripped people during the late '50s and through the '60s. While some encountered soft threats and then decided to leave, there were many others who did so simply because they heard word-of-mouth stories of violence. Maya Dey, a resident of Silchar came to India as a fourteen-year-old girl in 1962 with her maternal grandmother, who went to Habiganj in Sylhet all by herself to bring her young granddaughters to the safety of India.<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, Maya Dey's grandmother's arduous journey of travelling alone, which is also something very unusual for a woman at that time, speaks of the prevailing situation. Safety of women was at stake and the news of the abduction of women—young and married alike, forced marriages, rapes, etc., could be heard everywhere. Sajal Nag narrated an instance from his own family where one of his aunts was abducted by a Muslim man who later married her.<sup>18</sup> Several such instances came up during the course of the interviews where respondents spoke about families which had completely severed relationships with those women who were forcibly married to Muslim men.

While migration was a result of indirect threat, at the same time, international developments were also affecting the condition of the minority Hindu community in the Muslim majority regions. The situation, for instance, took a turn for the worse immediately after the Hazratbal shrine theft incident in 1963. Ripples of the incident in Kashmir, India, reached the shores of East Pakistan in no time and the soft threats turned to full-blown violent assaults. The '60s thus saw a significant influx of people who fled violence in East Pakistan and took refuge in this part of the border. Kamaljeet Paul, a resident of Ramkrishna Nagar, told that his family's relocation was prompted by, to quote Paul's words, "100 per cent violence."<sup>19</sup> An interesting development in this regard was the establishment of clustered settlements like Ramkrishna Nagar, a municipality town in Karimganj district. Basanta Nath, a native of Ramkrishna Nagar, now in his nineties, recollecting the settlement process said that the government facilitated the settlement procedure by setting up



camps, hosting the refugees, providing them with food, and also allotting land to many of them to set up houses. But not everyone received land grants and had to depend on their own hard work to make it in the new country.<sup>20</sup> Borbil in Karbi Anglong district is another example of such a settlement. People inhabiting this area are mostly migrants from Noakhali and Chittagong districts (now in Bangladesh) and the process of their settlement is akin to a project that has been diligently executed by individuals who made it the mission of their life to find out a safe place for their families and the community. Nemai Das, a senior resident of Borbil and one of the original settlers, narrated the story of the establishment of Borbil by recounting that it was constant violence that made the elders of his village think of a concrete plan of escape. So, during the '60s, young men of his village in Noakhali set out for Assam in search of pristine uninhabited land where a large number of people could settle without getting into trouble. Their search led them to Nagaon district first, but they realised that the place already had a substantial number of refugees and hence they ventured deeper until they came to their present place of settlement in Karbi Anglong. After zeroing upon the place, the team returned to their ancestral village, and after discussions with elders finally started the process of relocation. They divided themselves into small groups and each group was led by a man who had prior experience of crossing the border. The groups entered India through registered check posts mainly in Karimganj district, to ensure that each person got their refugee card made (a move that has subsequently proved to be of great value) and finally moved to Borbil. Das added that they had deliberately chosen the densely forested, tiger and other wild animals infested area of Borbil to avoid any kind of disturbances; they had nothing to lose—they were poor and they faced regular violence—their only shot at life was in risking it, and after a lot of struggles, which included fighting off wild herds of elephants, tigers, insects, and dearth of food, they could finally build a settlement there. As word of their settlement reached far and wide, refugees, who had settled elsewhere but could not really make a good living also joined them and gradually, Borbil expanded to become home to a good number of refugee families who now faced newer challenges to deal with.<sup>21</sup> Another example of clustered settlement is Katlichhera in Hailakandi district. This settlement also developed during the '60s when real time violence became rampant. Conversation with families in Katlichhera revealed that almost all the families had faced violence of some form which prompted their migration. These clustered settlements were almost mirror images of the settlements that the migrants had left behind in their ancestral land.

### **Identity Formation Process**

The settlement process in a new land while keeping or trying to recreate the essence of the lost/left behind land is an essential part of the identity formation process in the Barak Valley. Icons, for instance, Tagore, Netaji, and Swami Vivekananda became an important part of this identity formation. In all these settlements, birth anniversaries of such Bengali icons are celebrated

with pride and political intent. Leaders of religious communities hailing originally from across the border like Swarupananda, Anukul Thakur, Ram Thakur, and their institutions play a crucial role as well. Setting up institutions like schools with Bengali as the medium of instruction, clubs etc. provide a means of identity assertions. It goes without saying that all such institutions, organisations, and even streets, lanes and by-lanes in these settlements carry the name of Bengali luminaries as a standard practice. When the interviews with the migrant/refugee families from East Bengal/East Pakistan to Barak Valley were being conducted, Assam was going through the project of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). However, what is significant is that at no point in time, before, during, or after the NRC process, or even during the time when the rest of India erupted in civil protests against NRC, did Southern Assam witness any major resistance against the same. Many people from this region narrated their extraordinary trials and tribulations with the NRC process. There are trauma narratives from people identified as “D Voters” (the process that preceded the NRC in Assam), summarily arrested and thrown into detention camps with the mere suspicion of being a foreigner with hardly any access to legal aid. The process of NRC targeted the entire population of the region, rich-poor, privileged-unprivileged, educated-uneducated, Hindu-Muslim, upper caste-lower caste. But, at a time when a cross-section of the country’s population spoke out against the processes of NRC and CAA, in Barak Valley, the civil society, the human rights defendants, and the social activists engaged in measures like trying to provide legal aid to prisoners at the detention camps, and clerical assistance to civilians struggling with forms and documents of the NRC process. The lack of any kind of protest or mobilisation against NRC seem to primarily lie in the identity formation processes and the identity politics that has dominated the region since Partition.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his works, theorises about two forces that act on language simultaneously: 1) a centralising force that tends to uniformise, institutionalise, and standardise language into a stable, static entity, and; 2) a decentralising force that tends to destabilise, carnivalise, diversify language against standardisation.<sup>22</sup> A similar idea can be applied to identity formation processes too. At any point in time, we have in society, forces that attempt to form and build upon a stable identity category and forces that lead towards diversification, dissipation, of that standardised, centralised identity category, leading towards the formation of smaller and more diverse identity units. Southern Assam in general and Barak Valley in particular, are a veritable treasure house for seeing these identity formation processes in action with the centralising and the decentralising forces constantly militating against each other, resisting the formation of an identity that can cut across class, caste, religion, regionalism, language dialects, etc. The key to this lack of a unified identity lies in the fact that it could be used as a centre to mobilise against or resist oppression that lies partially in the history of migration in Barak Valley. In other words, the huge diversity and disparity in the experience of migration and settlement resulted in the failure of the formation of any singular umbrella identity category—political, linguistic, or social—that could

be used as a rallying call. Thus, although there was and still is an attempt to assert a central “Bengali” identity, other diverse smaller decentralising identity categories stand in the way of such an assertion resulting in a fractured and fragmented population in the region.

This disaggregated identity formation processes in Barak Valley can be attributed to various causes. Firstly, the experience of migration into this region is hardly uniform and varies greatly depending on the time of migration, the reason for migration, the place from where migration is happening, and last but not least, caste, class, and educational background of the migrant. This huge diversity, and disparity, ranging from strategic migrations in search of a better opportunity, migrations of convenience, ideologically and politically motivated migrations, to actual displacements due to violence and eviction were not conducive to the construction of any singular grand narrative that could give birth to an overarching identity based on migration. In fact, as the interviewees said there were divisions even within those who migrated out of compulsion based on class and caste. For instance, those from Sylhet who already had either settled relatives or social/community networks on this side of the border or economic and educational capital would often proudly proclaim that they did not have to stay in a camp even for one day, veritably looking down upon and distancing themselves from those who had to bear the indignity of living in a refugee camp. It is perhaps needless to mention that the first group belonged to a privileged class compared to the second group. Similarly, migrants belonging to the Scheduled Castes, the Kaibartas for instance, who were literally the last to leave East Pakistan/Bangladesh and arrive in Barak Valley often as a result of direct communal attacks, have very little in common with the early migrants in terms of experience, class, education, money, or even point of origin. Moreover, these micro-communities (the Kaibartas for instance) within the refugee community tend to stick together, resisting intermingling. They tend to ghettoise, and settle down often in an organised manner, in clustered settlements. This ghettoisation and resistance towards intermingling was also a resistance against being appropriated wholly by a larger identity category like a displaced population, Bengali, or Hindu. Secondly, the lack of development of Left politics in the region played an important role in the lack of development of a unifying identity. Historically, Left politics have prioritised the class identity of the oppressed over any local, regional, caste, or dialect based affinities, and thus could have provided a common platform and thereby empowering the displaced migrants. Barak Valley, with its disparate migrant population, did not see much of any working-class movement that could bridge the politics of smaller identity categories. Left politics among the refugee population, much like the politics surrounding the Language Martyrs of 1961,<sup>23</sup> remained limited to the educated elite of the region and never reached the grassroots, as it did, for instance, for a while in West Bengal. Thirdly, the settlement process in Barak Valley was comparatively easier than migrating and settling in West Bengal primarily due to the ample availability of unused land (forest lands, lowlands, excess land owned by tea gardens, unutilised land belonging to various tribes). While in Bengal, in the absence of

sufficient land to settle refugees, they had to be sent to Dandakaranya, or to the Andaman and Nicobar, or the refugees had to find space in the Sundarbans. The easiest way to understand this is through the population density of Assam vis-à-vis that of West Bengal. While the population density of West Bengal stood at 394 per sq. km. in 1961,<sup>24</sup> Assam's was 138 per sq. km.,<sup>25</sup> whereas as per the 2011 Census records West Bengal's population density stands at 1,028, per sq. km.<sup>26</sup> and Assam's stands at 398 per sq. km..<sup>27</sup> In fact, compared to a perhaps overpopulated state like West Bengal, Assam still has ample land which is evidenced in the village formation processes in place in the region even today. New settlements and new villages can still be seen coming up on tea garden lands or reformed lowland areas in the Barak Valley region. The settlement packages in Assam immediately after the Partition were rather attractive and a considerable number of interviews show migration happening strategically motivated by these opportunities available across the border. At times, especially during the early days, families often ended up with more land than they had left behind. Many, while narrating their migration experience claimed that Partition was good for him/her for the prosperity that he/she is enjoying today would have been unimaginable in the previous life (the story of Rangabala Paul for instance). Politicians and political parties in power played critical roles in settling migrants in vast tracts of unused government land, for instance, the settlements in Malinibeel, or as was often the case with the Kaibartas. These people have truly been displaced, evicted, and had to flee their homes leaving everything behind. However, this region did offer them the opportunity to resettle, to restart life. Stories of strategic migration even in the late '60s, at the height of the violence, when scouting groups would come over searching for suitable land to settle in, mark an uninhabited area commensurate with their profession, talk with local politicians to make arrangements, and then go back to return again with the entire village in tow was common in the context of Partition induced migration over the decades in the region. Indeed, the interviewees from detailed a similar process behind the establishment of the refugee settlement in *char* of Sonbeel, Asia's second largest waterbody located in Barak Valley in the '60s and the '70s. Land became more and more sparse as the days passed and the demand for the same increased, but it is evident from these narratives that the experience was considerably different from migrating to Calcutta, for instance, and finding a headspace in a slum, or a refugee colony, or a railway station where the migrants had to face serious and severe resistance in order to even get a foothold despite an apparently sympathetic government in place. This experiential difference played a crucial role in the identity formation process and is responsible for the failure of the creation of a strategic refugee identity in the region.

Multiple identity categories remain in contestation with each other including linguistic identities like Bengali, Sylheti, and a variety of other local dialects originating from both sides of the border; caste identities that refuse to be subsumed under any bigger identity category; regional identities primarily based on place of origin which constitute a barrier against unification; class, education and profession-based identities that limit empathy

and any universal political narrative; and of course, a religious identity that resists larger identities like language and other experiential identity categories like migration/displacement. As a result, the population struggles with and straddles multiple identity categories that are often contradictory, but since each identity category is struggling for domination and exclusivity, the assertion of each is also loud and clear even in their contradictions. One overarching and aspirational identity category is that of being Bengali, an identity that hails back to the memory of once belonging to an undivided Bengal; that finds expression in monikers like *Barakbanga* and *Ishan Bangla* and *Bangabbavan*. It finds expression in the nostalgia surrounding the Language Movement of 1961 and in the innumerable *Bhasha Shahid* memorials and *Bhasha-Matrika*<sup>28</sup> sculptures that dot every street corner and arcade across the region. The oft-repeated demand of rechristening the Silchar railway station as Bhasha Shahid station also bears evidence of the same. It finds resonance in the practice of naming highways and streets, and lanes and by-lanes after Bengali icons from Rabindranath Tagore to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and Amartya Sen. The limitations of this pan-Bengali identity category are many. For one, it is deeply contested by another more grassroots, more essential linguistic identity category of a vast majority of the population: that of being Sylheti or Sylheti-speaking. It is true that Sylheti is usually considered to be a dialect but claims being an independent language at times. Claims also emerge that Sylheti has had an independent and unique script (*Nagori*) that predates the dialect's assimilation under the Bengali language. From this perspective, Calcutta-centred normative Bengali is perceived to be an imposition on the natural tongue of the land and gets associated with the educated elite who look towards Calcutta for legitimacy. A sizable population of other identities based on dialect and region like the migrant population from Comilla, Mymensingh, and Noakhali origin also settled in the region. These are mostly later migrations and constitute a minority of the population. They either form settlements of their own or get subsumed under the more dominant Sylheti linguistic identity. People identified on the basis of caste, like the Kaibartas, also tend to live in colonies, often maintaining distance and offering resistance to be absorbed into either the pan-Bengali or the pan-Sylheti identity categories. These caste-based groups often share a homogeneity of experience related to Partition and migration. This homogeneity of experience provides them with a stronger centre to rally around and assert their identity. As opposed to the diverse nature of migration experience among the Bengali/Sylheti community, this homogeneity of experience provides a means of unifying this populace with a bond much stronger than what is available to larger identity categories.

## Conclusion

Southern Assam, especially Barak Valley, had a complex trajectory of identity politics. It is a space where identity formation processes that one otherwise reads about as theoretical discourses can be seen happening as a part of lived experience. On the one hand, while the Partition and the consequent

migration continue to be a major determining influence in these identity formation processes, on the other, the diversity of the Partition experience also stops the population of the region from developing a unified narrative and thereby a stable uncontested identity category. Consequently, what one has is a variety of fragmented identities competing for dominance. The assumption is that when a population experiences oppression and discrimination for a long time, the experience of oppression and injustice usually gives birth to what Spivak refers to as a kind of strategic essentialism.<sup>29</sup> The common narrative of the injustice has a centralising effect helping people to unite in resistance by forgetting the minor differences in other contesting identity categories. For the migrated population of Southern Assam, both the experience of Partition and consequent migration as well as the experience of persecution and discrimination in the form of D Voters, detention camps, NRC, etc., could have, theoretically served as, or provided such a central identity category. The reality, however, is rather different as highlighted above. The region's population remains divided into a variety of other sub-identities that act as forces of decentralisation making unified resistance an impossibility. It is our contention that the failure of Partition and migration to provide an identity category for successful strategic essentialism emanates from the diverse nature of the experience of the migration into this region, a diversity that refuses to be essentialised into any singular monologic narrative.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tanmay Bhattacharjee, *The Sylhet Referendum and The Story of a Lost Territory* (Silchar: Batayan, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Bhattacharjee, *The Sylhet Referendum*.

<sup>3</sup> The Sylhet Referendum was held on July 6, 1947, to determine the division of Sylhet province (in erstwhile East Bengal). The decision to hold a Referendum in Sylhet was

part of the larger plan of partitioning the subcontinent. The Hindu and Muslim communities in the region voted in the Referendum in order to come to a consensus as to which country the Sylhet province should become a part of after the Partition.

<sup>4</sup> Reena Roy, Resident, Silchar, in discussion with the Authors, July 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Ratan Chakraborty, Resident, Diphu, Karbi Anglong, in discussion with Anindya Sen and Debashree Chakraborty, August 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Ajay Majumdar, Resident, Lumding, in discussion with the same authors, August 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Naru Chakraborty, Resident, Silchar, in discussion with Debashree Chakraborty, March 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Reena Choudhury, Resident, Ramkrishnanagar, Assam, in discussion with Debashree Chakraborty, July 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Sridam Chakraborty, Resident, Lumding, Assam in discussion with the Anindya Sen and Debashree Chakraborty, August 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Kabindra Purkayastha, Ex-MP, Silchar and a Resident of Silchar, Assam in discussion with Dipendu Das and Anindya Sen, May 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Pares Bhattacharjee, Resident, Silchar, in discussion with Debashree Chakraborty, May 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Prabhat Chowdhury, Resident, Silchar in discussion with the Debashree Chakraborty, May 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Tathagata Roy, “Nothing New in Persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh: This Time we are Talking About it Openly and Firmly.” *FirstPost*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/nothing-new-in-bangladesh-this-time-we-are-talking-about-it-openly-and-firmly-10064361.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Khana Biswas, Resident, Silchar, in discussion with Debashree Chakraborty, March 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Monorama Chakraborty from Silchar, in conversation with Debashree Chakraborty, February 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Rangabala Paul, in discussion with Debashree Chakraborty, March 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Maya Dey, in discussion with Anindya Sen, May 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Sajal Nag, Silchar, in discussion with Anindya Sen and Dipendu Das, February 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Kamaljeet Paul, in discussion with Anindya Sen, May 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Basanta Nath, in discussion with Debashree Chakraborty, April 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Nema Das, in discussion with Dipendu Das and Anindya Sen, April 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Carnival and Carnavalesque,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed., John Storey. (India: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Assam Government, under the Chief Ministership of Bimala Prasad Chaliha, introduced the Assamese Official Language Bill in 1960. This Bill recognised Assamese as the only official language in the Assam. Ever since the Bill was introduced, protests broke out in Barak Valley opposing it as an imposition of Assamese language on the Bengali speakers of the state in general and Barak Valley in particular. This Bill became an Act in the month of October in the same year and the protests against it also accelerated. On May 19, 1961, a massive sit-in protest was organised at the Silchar railway station but due to an unfortunate turn of events, police opened fire at a group of protestors and eleven people died. Following this incident, the Assam Government repealed the Act and recognised Bengali as one of the official languages in Assam. These eleven people who received mortal injuries were recognised as “martyrs” by the people of Barak Valley and to this day and May

19 is observed as “Bhasa Sahid Dibas” by various socio-cultural groups and organisations in the Valley.

<sup>24</sup> “Table I.7: Density since 1911 for West Bengal and the Districts,” Health & Family Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal, accessed February 7, 2023, [https://www.wbhealth.gov.in/other\\_files/2007/1\\_7.html](https://www.wbhealth.gov.in/other_files/2007/1_7.html).

<sup>25</sup> “Table 1.1- Population Trends in Assam during 1901 -2011,” Transformation and Development, Government and Development, accessed February 7, 2023, [https://transdev.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf\\_utility\\_folder/departments/pn\\_dd\\_medhassu\\_in\\_oid\\_2/portlet/level\\_2/chapter1\\_1.pdf](https://transdev.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/pn_dd_medhassu_in_oid_2/portlet/level_2/chapter1_1.pdf)

[https://transdev.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf\\_utility\\_folder/departments/pn\\_dd\\_medhassu\\_in\\_oid\\_2/portlet/level\\_2/chapter1\\_1.pdf](https://transdev.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/pn_dd_medhassu_in_oid_2/portlet/level_2/chapter1_1.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Prasad Nichenameta, “Population Density: Bihar, West Bengal among World's Most Crowded,” *Hindustan Times*, May 6, 2013,

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/population-density-bihar-west-bengal-among-world-s-most-crowded/story-A7DSe1oWI5cYxBrnWPn6VP.html>

<sup>27</sup> “State Profile of Assam,” Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, accessed February 7, 2023, <https://des.assam.gov.in/information-services/state-profile-of-assam>.

<sup>28</sup> A Sculpture designed to mark the observance of May 19 or *Bhasa Sahid Dibas*. Known as the *Bhasa-matrika*, his sculpture can be found at a lot of places across Barak Valley and stands as a symbol of May 19.

<sup>29</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds., Larry Grossberg, and Carl Nelson. (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1988), 66.



# Roots of Ethnic Politics in Tripura: Power Relations Between Communities and State Policies

By

**Anindita Ghoshal\***

Migration and related policies and politics were often contradictory, confusing, and complex in the case of post-Partition northeast India. Likewise, the Indian state of Tripura, despite being a princely state and outside the Indian political processes could not remain unaffected by the subcontinental decolonisation process. It lost its territory to Partition and was burdened with a huge refugee population. The Partition of the subcontinent into two nation-states in 1947 displaced a massive number of people who migrated from one side to the other in search of security. After 1947, the whole region became a part of the Indian confederacy, the idea of linguistically drawn state and refugee policy imposed upon it by the Centre. The case of Tripura was different in every sense, as the crisis arose from the political and cultural hegemony of the Bengali refugees over the original tribal inhabitants. The tribal population not only lost its majority status but also its hegemonic power structure in their own state. Interestingly enough the political context of sheltering those refugees was unique in Tripura, among other princely states. The state administration tried to accommodate migrants first within the pre-independent political structure, but after some decades of Partition, the whole scenario changed as the Bengali refugees became the dominant community in every sense, gradually earning separate spaces for themselves within the socio-cultural milieu of the state and situated themselves in a new post-Partition political framework, which eventually again gave birth to a political structure different from other two major refugee absorbent states of eastern and northeastern India, viz., West Bengal and Assam.

Thus, keeping Partition refugees as the “largest population flow” in the background, this article tries to trace the historical process of demographic

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change and alteration of the socio-economic, political, and cultural equation between the major two communities i.e., tribals and Bengalis. With the influx of Bengali refugees and the distribution of land in the form of providing permanent or economic rehabilitation to the refugees, the conflict as well as the inherent crisis between the Bengalis and tribals became far more complicated. The ownership over a piece of land and recreation of their identity in a new land became the primary motive of the Partition displaced Bengali refugees. The domicile tribals and Muslims were gradually uprooted for different reasons in the 1950s. From the early 1960s, tribals became more organised and vocal about their rights, chiefly to secure prominent political whip in the state. They formed political parties and organised political platforms, fought for their socio-economic rights, and urged to make Kokborok one of the state's languages which can be primarily considered as weapons to fight their marginality. This is a narrative of the emergence of identity politics in post-Partition Tripura within the so-called democratic structure of India. Though the relevant undercurrents and nature of politics changed in every decade, yet the 1970s was more crucial in a way, as it finally designed and confirmed the future of Tripura. The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 changed the demography, and the Bengalis were no more the sole opponents of the tribal extremist groups. Interestingly, the immigrant and uprooted Chakma tribals from the Chittagong Hill Tracts were the targets of the tribals on the issues of rights of using natural resources, mobile-immobile properties, jobs, and proprietary lands in Tripura. It may be said that historical events like Partition contributed to the growth of a certain type of identity politics in Tripura and it was the state policy that finally decided the final fate of these communities. The Bengalis proved to be the lucky ones in comparison to the ethnic tribals for getting hold on power, property, and state politics.

### **Geographical Entity of a Monarchical State**

Tripura, the smallest but one of the major northeastern states of India remained situated chiefly in the migration routes from ancient times. Many mythological texts, like *Bishnupuran*, categorically mentioned that the ancient name of this particular region was *Kirat-Desh*.<sup>1</sup> The indigenous tribal people or the domiciliary residents of the princely state of Tripura called this territory *Twipra*, which literally means "land beside water." Maharaja Bijay Manikya is said to have "taken bath in several rivers in Bengal."<sup>2</sup> The strategic location of Tripura was such that it necessitated constant interaction between the rulers of adjacent Bengal and the Maharajas, which began almost simultaneously with the establishment of the Manikya dynasty in 1280 AD. The monarchical state of Tripura was always divided into two separate parts: the hills and plains. The hill area was popularly described as *Parbotyo Tripura* in contemporary sources. The plains chiefly consisted of parts of Sylhet and Chittagong, Comilla, Noakhali, and Dacca divisions of East Bengal. The Manikya Maharajas had control over large tracts of East Bengal, and they ruled over the Bengali subjects in these regions.<sup>3</sup> Dense jungles and hilly areas

covered the then East Bengal.<sup>4</sup> The existing historical materials, folklores, and other literary sources support the idea that Tripura became a centre of power from the fifteenth century onwards. Since the plains were economically more viable, the Muslim rulers of neighbouring Bengal had an eye on it, and they began to convert thousands of lower caste Hindus to Islam in East Bengal from the early 1520s. The Manikya Maharajas had to continue regular warfare against the Sultans of Bengal, to keep control over a small portion of East Bengal and the Chittagong-Sylhet region with the help of Hindus there.<sup>5</sup>

In the sixteenth century, the prestige and status of this princely state reached to such a height that the territory of the state of Tripura extended from Sundarbans in the West, Burma in the southeast and Kamrup in the north. Abul Fazal mentioned in his *Ain-i-Akbari* that Tripura was a free state near the *Bhati-Pradesb*. But the prosperity of the state was effected by the external attacks from the seventeenth century, as the hill portion was famous for its elephants. Tripura had to resist several Mughal expeditions with the help of tribal chieftaincies.<sup>6</sup> But in 1658, they occupied a portion of hill Tripura that entered into the Mughal rent roll as *Sarkar Udaipur*, which was recorded as revenue paying centre. They gave the state a status named *Udaypur Rajosyo Pargana* and it was decided that the state would be liable to give Rs.99,860 as yearly tax. The taxes had to be collected from the produce of plain Tripura and not the hill portion, as they had not yet explored the potential of these lands. Though they captured the hill portion, they were not familiar with the misty climate and humid environment. They decided to shift the base from Udaypur to plain Tripura to make their soldiers comfortable. Meherkul of Comilla, situated in the western plain of East Bengal became the centre for the Mughal soldiers.<sup>7</sup> The division between plain and hill Tripura started from that time onwards. The Mughal land settlement policies, their assumption about the probable produce had given birth to a kind of internal politics between the two portions as well as, its communities. The European traveller Peter Hales had also mentioned in his travel diary written in 1652 that the hilly areas were used as a defence by the respective native Maharajas.<sup>8</sup>

It was during the first half of the eighteenth century that the plain region was included into the Bengal *Suba*, excluding the Hill region of the state.<sup>9</sup> A *faujdar* was appointed in Comilla to collect revenues and for maintaining security of the Maharaja. The Nawab of Bengal Murshid Quli Khan divided Bengal into many *Chaklas*, and named the Mughal occupied plain areas as *Roshanabad* or “the land of lights.”<sup>10</sup> The word Chakla indicates its geographical coverage of three or four districts. Since then, the Maharajas of Tripura has been in possession of Roshanabad area just as *zamindar*. He separated the Hill section from the Plains and finally agreed to run the administration of the Roshanabad area as a zamindari under the Nawab of Murshidabad on a nominal *jama* of Rs.5,000 a year.<sup>11</sup> In 1761, the East India Company first came into contact with the state when the territory of Tripura was clearly divided into two separate parts.<sup>12</sup> The Company officials did not pay attention at all to the less productive jungle or marshy area that was indeed economically not viable. Thus, the Maharajas at least could retain an independent status in the hills.<sup>13</sup>

The Company took control of whole of Bengal in 1764 and the state became a British protectorate in 1809 and in 1838. The Maharajas were recognised as sovereigns by the British. They mapped, framed the landscape and reshaped it and Tripura became a princely state. The British Indian Government however appointed an agent to assist the Maharaja in the administration in 1871. In colonial discourses, the hill areas designated as Hill Tipperah. The alluvial plain that was under the Manikyas was known as British Tipperah or Plain Tipperah.<sup>14</sup> But, they were basically mere zamindars in the Chakla Roshanabad area. Alexander Mackenzie wrote that the Maharajas of Tripura “who is an ordinary zamindar on the plains regions as an independent prince over 3000 square miles of upland, and was for many years a more absolute monarch...owing no law but his sovereign will, bound by no treaty, subject to no control, safe in his obscurity from criticism and reform.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, an official change of name took place in 1920, and the Hill Tipperah was renamed as Tripura State, when the Government of India had accepted a special proposal made by the His Highness.

### **Migration of Communities: Creation of Space and Land**

The princely state of Tripura had some unique features. The land question, increase of the revenue to make the state economically viable, related other issues around the technique of cultivation and volume of production was always crucial for the state. Thus, the Maharajas continued inviting other tribal communities as well as Bengalis, chiefly who were culturally rich or could contribute to the general growth of this tiny state.<sup>16</sup> As an open geographical territory, Tripura had always encouraged migrant populace, both tribals and non-tribals. Tripuri community considered as the original inhabitant of Tripura, and other major tribes were Moghs, Halams, Chakmas, Garos, Lusais, and Reangs.<sup>17</sup> The immigrant tribals added to the demographic variety of Tripura. Out of the nineteen enlisted tribes settled in Tripura, eight namely, Tripura, Reang, Noatia, Jamatia, Halam, Kuki, Chaimal, and Uchai were regarded as original settlers of Tripura. The other migrant immigrant tribes were Chakma, Mog, Garo, Khasi, Lushai, Bhutia, Lepcha, Bhil, Munda, Oraon, and Santal.<sup>18</sup> They tried preserving customs and beliefs, religion and culture that they inherited from their predecessors.<sup>19</sup> Some communities like Debbarma, Reang, Tripura, Jamatia, Uchoi, Noatia and Koloï used to converse in different dialects of Kokborok.<sup>20</sup> Thus, later it accepted as their language.<sup>21</sup> Kakbarak (Kokborok) was a unique mixture of Tibetan and Burmese language. But, it did not have a script.<sup>22</sup> W.W. Hunter described the Tipperah tribes as Mrung. T.H. Lewin wrote “Vocabulary of the Tipperah and of the Lushai or Kuki Languages”.<sup>23</sup> Irrespective of the class and other differences, the tribals constituted a homogeneous category.

Interestingly, the Maharajas of Tripura encouraged the immigration of tribals from other communities in the state much earlier than they invited the Bengalis.<sup>24</sup> The major tribal groups residing in Tripura did not fall in the category of domiciles, in a way. The Chakmas, a culturally rich group, started migrating and settling down in Hill Tripura during the reign of Dharma

Manikya. W.W. Hunter mentioned that in 1872 “about 400 Chakmas migrated to settle down in Tripura.”<sup>25</sup> According to the 1901 Census Report Tripura had a total of 4,501 Chakmas.<sup>26</sup> Like the Chakmas, the Mogs also migrated to Tripura from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Arakan not earlier than the eighteenth century. But “while *jhum* cultivation was the predominant form of economic activities among the Chakmas, a good number of Mogs took to plough cultivation as the main occupation retaining *jhum* cultivation as the subsidiary occupation.”<sup>27</sup> In 1931, their population was 8,730 and 5,748 respectively. The population pressure on land, internal feud, and demand for land in the countryside attracted them to Tripura. Indeed, easy availability of *Ital* or plain land and Princely patronage through an extension of facilities to immigrant settlers were important factors responsible for Chakma and Mog immigrations.<sup>28</sup>

The Manipuris were the next numerically significant group. “In 1931 Manipuri population was 19,200 of whom agriculture (plough cultivation) was the main occupation of 4,171, and subsidiary occupation of 2,640 persons.”<sup>29</sup> Garo, Khasi, and Lushai tribes migrated in many waves, “[t]he immigration of these people (the Lushais) into Tripura took place long back and as they also lived in the Lushai Hills, there had been a constant movement of these people within this area in course of their economic pursuits, that is practicing shifting cultivation.”<sup>30</sup> The Garos came much earlier than the Khasis. In 1931, the population of Garo and Khasi tribes were 2,143 and 1,023 respectively. Both these groups migrated in search of *jhum* lands,<sup>31</sup> though, there were some cases of temporary migration too. Despite different encouragements and incentives, immigration was not on a large-scale. Some tribals stayed back, who did not have economic and other compulsions. *Jhum* cultivation was the method and technique of the production system of these tribal communities.<sup>32</sup> Shifting cultivation was not only a traditional agricultural practice for the tribals, but also intrinsically related to their culture and identity.<sup>33</sup> But, it was a primitive form of agriculture, and *jhuming* upsets the balance of nature<sup>34</sup> Moreover, *jhuming* involves labour-intensive operations and could fit in only in the format of a self-sufficient economy.<sup>35</sup>

Shifting cultivation practiced in all hilly terrain of Tripura was mainly concentrated in nine blocks of Teliamura, Mohanpur and Khowai of West District, Setchand, Amarpur and Dumburnagar of South District, Kanchanpur, Chamanu and Salema of North District.<sup>36</sup> With the development of the institution of kingship, the question of surplus production arose. Shifting cultivation did not yield much surplus, which was needed for the maintenance of the ruling class, as well as, for the stability of the state.<sup>37</sup> Economy had played a major role in treatment of communities with definite socio-cultural aspects in Tripura. The Maharajas invited Bengali Muslim peasants to increase revenue collection for the state exchequer through expansion of wet rice cultivation.<sup>38</sup> The rulers were so desperate to bring the land under tillage that they even introduced the *jungal-abadi* system in a land-abundant and thinly populated state like Tripura.<sup>39</sup> It aggravated the feudal economy as well. But later, like Assam, there was a steady inflow of Bengali

professional classes, which consisted of clerks, lawyers, teachers, and bureaucrats. Predominating in the population, they started controlling general choices and leading cultural patterns and thus, finally becoming the majority community, after the Partition.<sup>40</sup>

The fiscal and land management history of Tripura was a bit confusing because of inadequate sources. Stray mentions in *Rajmala* and other financial documents from the *Durbar* or a few declarations reveal that there were conflict and frequent clutches over the dominance in the plain part of Tripura, subsequently known as Nurnagar or Chakla Roshanabad between the Mughals and respective kings. The Mughals, though, were indifferent towards the Hill Tipperah territory because of fewer revenue resources.<sup>41</sup> In fact, written laws on land management came to force only in the second half of the nineteenth century, to be more specific, from the time of Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya (1862–96). In 1880, an act called *Rajoswo Samondhijo Niyomabali* (Rules Relating to Land Revenue) was first implemented in Tripura, with the purpose of collecting revenue from *Kayemi Taluk* (perpetually settled estate), *Khas Mahals* (Government owned lands), and *Karsha Praja* (cultivating tenants) etc. Subsequently, another law entitled *Praja Bhumyadhikari* (Tenant Landowners Act) was introduced in 1886. The third important Act came into force in 1899, which was called *Jaripi Bandababasto Samondhijo Niyomabali* (Rules and Regulations on Survey and Settlement). Although *Gharchutki* (family tax) was already in vogue, a comprehensive Act designed later on the regulation of house tax was enforced only in 1919.

### **Bengali Migration: Pre-Partition Tripura**

Though Tripura was a princely state headed by a Maharaja, the real power was vested in the hands of political agents and *Darbar* or the administration. W.W. Hunter mentioned giving land grants to the upper-class Bengalis on fixed rentals.<sup>42</sup> Similar grants were also given to Muslim peasants of lower strata from nearby areas like Comilla, Sylhet, and Chittagong of Bengal on nominal rentals. They sponsored large-scale immigration of middle class educated Hindus including professionals, who started controlling the civil, police, judicial, education, and engineering that created an economic surplus in Tripura.<sup>43</sup> The state administration was initially in favour of Bengali settlement for its socio-political and economic interests. The intervention of the British in the state administration created a genuine pressure to design an administrative structure capable of implementing modernisation plans and programs. Land settlement was given encouragement and so was the overall expansion of agricultural activities. The objective behind all these was to raise land revenue collection to meet the cost of modernisation.<sup>44</sup> In 1818, 45 per cent of Tripura's total population was non-tribals. A resolution signed by B.K. Burman, the Private Secretary to the Maharaja on September 13, 1909, "We should, by all means, encourage immigration and discourage emigration. Systematic efforts may be made to establish colonies of cultivators in the interior."<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, immigration of Brahmins and upper castes was encouraged and sustained to enhance the status of the state and to man its administration, and the peasant class for reclaiming fallow lands that would help to multiply revenue. It was a one-sided demographic flow for better employment opportunities. Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishor Manikya (1923–47) followed decentralisation and democratisation of power. He carried the processes of modernisation initiated first by Bir Chandra Manikya.<sup>46</sup> He reserved half of the entire state territory to safeguard the interests of the five major tribes, Tripuris, Noatias, Jamatias, Reangs, and Halams. Transfer of lands to a non-tribal without prior permission of the government was prohibited. He set up councils and committees to advise him in administration. He introduced *Grama Mandali* on an elected basis.<sup>47</sup> But, the Manikyas depended on their Bengali employees to collect revenues from the tribal *Sardars* or *Khajanchis* (*Binondia* in Kokborok) to run the administration.<sup>48</sup>

The educated Hindu upper caste Bengalis were getting invitations from the Manikyas as early as 1280 AD to meet up administrative purposes.<sup>49</sup> *Rajmala* (official chronicles of the Kings) stated that Ratna Manikya (1464 AD) first encouraged settlement of the non-tribe Bengalis and introduced the tradition of inviting them, not for offering jobs in fields of education and administration but to promote plain land cultivation, which would provide them with a stable source of revenue.<sup>50</sup> They adopted Bengali as *Raj-bhasa* or state language in 1850. The *Maharajas* of Tripura issued postal stamps bearing legends in Bengali. In this particular context, one should mention the long association of Rabindra Nath Tagore with *Maharajas* of Tripura, which reflects the royal patronage towards Bengali art and culture.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the realistic explanation might be, that it was introduced chiefly for economic reasons. It was not just love for the Bengali culture and language, they tried to utilise its potential as a *lingua franca*, while several tribes used to converse in their own different dialects.<sup>52</sup> Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya was proficient in Bengali, he translated many texts and literature written in Bengali but did not know either Tripuri or Kokborok.

The immigration of non-tribals in Tripura dates back to the fourteenth century. Maharaja Ratna Manikya first settled 4,000 Bengali in four places.<sup>53</sup> Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the immigration of Bengalis in Tripura increased.<sup>54</sup> Tripura's popularity as "open geography," and the portrayal of Bengali Hindu migrants as "insider" by the Manikyas introduced a complex process of redefining Tripura and situating the Bengali migrants both as insiders and outsiders. Tripura became the key supplier of raw materials in 1920s and 1930s to adjacent areas from the zamindari of Chakla Roshanabad. Partition altered all old equations over this small stretch of geographical terrain.<sup>55</sup> The Manikyan discourse of "my land" changed in the post-Partition collective discourse of "our land." It also represented a shift from the merging of hill-ness and plain-ness towards modern identity formation.<sup>56</sup> Tripura first experienced Bengali refugee migration during the Raipur (Dhaka) riot of 1941.<sup>57</sup> Almost 15,000 refugees arrived in Tripura due to the communal conflicts. Maharaja Bir Bikram Manikya organised an administrative wing named "Pritibordhok Samiti" to safeguard communal

harmony and peace.<sup>58</sup> The royal administration provided relief, planned rehabilitation measures, and sheltered them in four camps around Arundhatinagar, and other places near Agartala. They also offered permanent rehabilitation in the form of employment or settlement on freehold lands.<sup>59</sup> Agartala became an important urban space from that time onward. The agricultural immigrant classes subsequently converted into professional classes because of the liberal attitude of the administration and the acceptance of the masses.<sup>60</sup> The major influx started in 1946 due to the communal riot in Noakhali district, Chandpur subdivision of Tipperah District of Comilla.<sup>61</sup>

The Maharaja formed an official Immigration and Reclamation Department with a Relief Committee. He spared some royal buildings, arranged six shelters for refugees, and created a specific fund for relief purposes.<sup>62</sup> A medical camp was also opened in Agartala. Few voluntary groups started working with the administration, especially in district towns. They joined the Dharmanagar Hitasadhini Sabha, which was working primarily for Hindu-Muslim unity and distributing relief materials to the refugees.<sup>63</sup> About 4,000 refugees were accommodated in college buildings, 60 families in Narsinghar Tea Garden, and 1700 refugees were sheltered in Ranir Bazar area. Besides, there were almost 6,000 unofficial immigrants in private houses of old Agartala, reported in a census carried out by relief committees.<sup>64</sup> The Maharaja was sensitive, generous, and sympathetic towards his subjects from different religious faiths in both of his territories. Tripura was not carried away by communal frenzy, it rather remained insulated. Though, the territory consisted of mostly Hindus (either tribals or Bengalis), the majority of *jiratia prajas* in Chakla Roshanabad estate were Muslims. The administration also initiated immediate repatriation of the refugees and requested the East Bengal Government accordingly.

### **Migration Scenario: Post-Partition Times**

The paramountcy of Tripura state lapsed when Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya entered into a Standstill Agreement with the Government of India. The Partition of India was designed in a way that it left the princely states with no other choice but to join one of the two postcolonial South Asian nation states, India or Pakistan. Tripura's merger with India appeared to be the only plausible way to restore traditional links with greater India.<sup>65</sup> The last Maharaja of the Tripura, Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya, was a distinguished member of the Chamber of Princes and was subsequently elected as President of the Council of Rulers for Eastern States. His premature death on May 17, 1947, just three months ahead of the formal transfer of power had changed the situation.<sup>66</sup> In a stroke of fate, the Tripura territory of Chakla Roshanabad went to East Pakistan. Confusions were at every front, even on the question of succession within the royal family. After much palace intrigue and political flurry, the Regent Maharani Kanchan Prava Devi, on behalf of her minor son, Kiriti Bikram Kishore Manikya Bahadur decided to join India by exercising the Instrument of Accession on August 13, 1947.<sup>67</sup> She declared that "in accordance with the wishes of the late Maharaja



Manikya Bahadur, Tripura will have a full democratic constitution and the popular representations will be associated with the Government.”<sup>68</sup> The Regent Maharani decided to sign the Agreement of Merger on September 9, 1949. Tripura became a part of the Indian Union after its Administration was taken over by the Chief Commissioner on October 15, 1949.<sup>69</sup> The Constitution of India came into force in 1950, and Tripura became a Part-C States, under Part- C States Act, 1950.<sup>70</sup>

Partition opened the floodgates of Bengali migration from East Pakistan that changed the demography of the erstwhile princely state. It led to a fierce ethnic conflict that ravaged the tiny state for more than three decades. It was the only state in which the immigrants outnumbered the original inhabitants. After Partition, confusions were at every front, even on the question of succession within the royal family.<sup>71</sup> The process of negotiations initiated on issues like ethnic tensions, political conflicts, regional disparities, social imbalances, and ideological differences within communities.<sup>72</sup> In a stroke of fate, the Tripura territory of Chakla Roshanabad went to East Pakistan. Even though the state was integrated with India, it was cut off from the rest of India as its north, south, and western boundaries were suddenly blocked by the newly formed East Pakistan. four-fifths i.e., 83 per cent of Tripura’s 1,001 km-long frontier constituted the political border touching Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla, and Sylhet districts. The boundary line drawn by Lord Cyril Radcliffe divided the territory between Tripura and East Pakistan, but the frontier was open and unguarded till the early 1980s.

In the post-1947 era, Assam and Tripura became major refugee absorbent northeastern states. The Bengali Hindu refugees from the neighbouring areas started crossing the notional borders for settling down in Cachar districts of Assam, and in the princely state of Tripura in large numbers. But the first few batches had taken shelter in relatives/ neighbours place; most of them had extended families in Cachar.<sup>73</sup> The refugees who migrated to Tripura were treated as “real subjects” and *jiratia prajas* of the Chakla Roshanabad estate.<sup>74</sup> Thus for them, it was more like an internal migration from “plain Tripura” to “Tripura State,” where they had some legitimate right to get security and shelter. The shift in the status of those migrants was also unique, as, after the Partition, they were officially identified as “refugees,” but treated in the same way in Tripura. The burden of refugeehood could not touch them until 1950s when the influx was voluminous. The domiciled Assamese were afraid of the nature of cultural superiority of the Bengalis. In Tripura, the nature of the migration pattern, and the status of the settlers changed after 1947. It was not easy to term them the same as “economic migrants” or “refugees.”

After Partition, the princely state of Tripura became geographically bordered by the Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla, and Sylhet districts of East Pakistan, and Tripura became a borderland. Prior to the Partition, Tripura had access to any part by a rail route through eastern Bengal. Partition made it absolutely a landlocked state. The north, west, and south sides bounded by East Bengal. On the east, Mizoram and the Cachar district of Assam bordered the state internally. A chain of hills obstructed the road link with Assam

across the eastern boundary.<sup>75</sup> Thus, Tripura was suffering from an economic blockade imposed by the Pakistani Police and National Guards and faced problems with the export and import of goods, affecting internal communication connecting the capital, Agartala, and all other divisional towns.<sup>76</sup> All consumer goods and other necessities, even newspapers from Calcutta were not allowed to enter the Tripura State by Railway Police at Akhaura. Khowai Maharajanj Bazar which was an important business center. Pakistani authorities announced opening a *bazaar* in Asampara in Pakistan and compelled the sellers not to sell their goods in Khowai Bazaar. Dharmanagar, and Kamalpur were also suffering because of the lack of internal communication, and Pakistan's ban on exports and imports from August 15, 1947.<sup>77</sup> The depth of the problem was more acute in Tripura as Bengalis outnumbered the tribals. The hegemonic tendency of the Bengali refugees made the domiciles insecure, and they considered it threatening to their existence.<sup>78</sup> The state stressed making policies for beneficiaries to jhumia settlements. "King Bir Bikram had earmarked 1,950 sq. miles as tribal reserve, but in 1948, the Regent Maharani's Dewan A. B. Chatterji vide order no. 325 dated 10<sup>th</sup> Aswin, 1358, Tripura era threw upon 300 sq. miles of this reserve for refugee settlement. Later more of these areas would be opened to these refugees."<sup>79</sup> In the first phase (1947–50), due to the cause incurred in the relief and rehabilitation of refugees, the state government had a debt which was equivalent to 80 per cent of its annual income. K. C. Neogy, the Union Relief and Rehabilitation Minister met Sri Hari Ganga Basak and Anil Chandra Chakraborty, Secretaries of the State Congress Relief and Rehabilitation Committee, in 1948. They placed a memorandum on "miserable pecuniary conditions of the refugee numbering about 113,950 who have settled different parts of the Tripura State since October 1946."<sup>80</sup> Following the policies of West Bengal and Assam, the Tripura government introduced rehabilitation schemes of four categories in the late 1950s as suggested by the Central Directorate of Rehabilitation.<sup>81</sup>

### **The Attitude of the Tribals Towards "Others"**

The tribal experience of having refugees in their lands, was a little complex, as the whole idea of enduring peaceful life, suddenly faced a wrangle through the prism of how the Bengalis perceived their preferences, and initially, from the government front, it got continuously held up.<sup>82</sup> The hilly terrains of Tripura, which seemed to be the tribals' "own territory" by birth, became the first choice of the state rehabilitation department to provide lands under various schemes proposed by the Centre for the permanent resettlement of refugees. Nevertheless, refugee colonies were constructed using natural resources available in the hilly areas which were previously considered the sole source of survival and basis of the economy for the indigenous tribals. Again, with the building up of refugee colonies, the concept of "private property" first emerged in "Hill Tripura," and it led to the curtailing of the complete freedom of choosing portions of hills for jhum cultivations by the tribals. The scientific measures taken by the state to protect the environment and the logical

restrictions imposed gradually on the tribals to give up jhum posed a challenge to their entity for the first time in Tripura.<sup>83</sup> The intensity of coherence on the part of the state authorities had widened the undercurrent more. The officials recruited for these assignments, in particular, did not bother to explain or share their ideas with either of the communities.<sup>84</sup> Thus, a number of related decisions, especially the policy-making fronts, concerning the construction of roads, and establishment of markets in the hilly refugee settlement areas, were meant for a completely new-fangled community called “refugees,” and started creating tension in the society, value system and customs of the indigenous tribals.

The interaction of the tribals with the local Bengali residents of Tripura was very little from the beginning; as the tribal communities often preferred to reside at ease, within their groups or sub-groups. Sudhanya Debbarma in *Hakuch- Khurich* (the first novel written in Kokborok) portrayed this crisis and chiefly stressed on the psychological impact of these rapid changes on the tribals.<sup>85</sup> He focused on how these communities suffered enormously from the imposition of the ban on jhum cultivation, their traditional agricultural practice. He aptly described the manner in which the government made necessary arrangements to adopt the practice of plough cultivation in plain lands by the tribals and provided them with all the necessary equipment so that instead of staying in *tong-ghor* on *tillas* for months for enough return from a particular jhum cycle, they could opt for a better method of survival. He argued, by and large, it hampered their natural practice of livelihood and forced them into a vulnerable existence.<sup>86</sup> He described how the tribals were compelled to accept this new system of cultivation primarily because of their poverty-ridden condition. The emergence of the Bengali *Mahajan* class (for giving *dadan* or advance on high interests), along with other ancillary forms of exploitation finally pushed the tribals into a dead-end, and their existence and livelihood were at stake. Initially, the government policies for jhumia rehabilitation were not enough as, back then, most of the tribal communities were not open to ideas of changes and possibilities, especially about giving up jhum and concentrating on the practices of plough cultivation only.<sup>87</sup> The tribals treated it as “unauthorized interference” by the state government (represented by the Bengalis mostly) in their daily lives, who were imposing different and strange policies (from the tribal perspectives) or implementing various guidelines in regular intervals for so-called “betterment plans” for them.<sup>88</sup> The tribal groups, however, counter-argued, that it had completely wiped out some of the vital tribal community practices. The state of Tripura had opted to make a homogeneous society by confronting heterogeneity, chiefly intended for simplification in the administration that lastly led to a bifurcation between communities and individual priorities.<sup>89</sup>

The aggression of the Bengali refugees scared the tribals in such a manner that they sold off their old houses and properties at comparatively cheap rates and settled down in jhumia colonies in places like Gabuchhora (Udaypur subdivision), Mograbari, Shilagachhira, and Tutabari just to be together. However, they were not getting the settlement rights there. Over and above that, whereas the refugees were surviving in such areas depending

on the forest resources, the tribals were seen forbidden by the forest department to practice *jhum*.<sup>90</sup> Manindra Chandra Deb Burma mentioned “refugee tribal areas” like Kanchalmala, Champabon, and Madhubon, where 5,000 Scheduled Caste refugees and tribal *jhumias* were rehabilitated. But both the Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribe communities were suffering because of the government policies. They were not getting any kind of loans and professional or economic rehabilitations, except *khichri* as a relief. But *khichri* was never a staple food for the tribals, and the Bengali refugees were keener on getting fish at least once/twice a week. The children were suffering from malnutrition. These “weaker sections of the society” were actually needed housing loans from the government.<sup>91</sup>

Nripen Chakrabarty in his *Longtorai Amar Ghor* (The Hill Longtarai is My Home) depicted a similar picture, though he stressed the impact of refugee settlements of hilly areas on the tribal societies and economy. Being a politician and a student of history, he not only expressed the negative effects of such transformations or alteration of methods on them but also analysed how the initiatives of Tripura Jana Siksha Samiti (a Leftist political organisation worked for both Bengali refugees/tribals) essentially played the role of “renaissance” in the tribal societies and on the primitive economy of Tripura. Though his conviction laid down the fact that a very small section of tribals actually got benefitted positively, through the coming up of refugees and their settlement pattern in hilly areas, he unhesitatingly revealed that the entire funding was from the Central government.<sup>92</sup> Only some basic schools and hospitals had been established, in which fewer staffs were employed on ad hoc basis. He affirmed that the tribal *Sardars* (headed many groups) became interested in adopting education—they learned about sanitation, gathered knowledge of modern medicines by comparing themselves with their Bengali counterparts, and looking at the benefits they were enjoying. The worsening of rotation in *jhum* cultivation first required them to look out for privileges like getting dole, loans, or services similar to the Bengali refugees. He voiced against the Tripura government for their contradictory policies and strongly argued that few seats in boarding schools for tribal students with scholarships, and a diminutive number of job offerings, or adopting some beneficiary policies for *jhumia* rehabilitation could not, in reality, solve the enormous problem of their social and economic crisis. Furthermore, the forest department had started the de-reservation of the *kehas* lands by the instruction of policymakers and had enforced control over jungles and hills.<sup>93</sup> Besides, Tripura government planned for the construction of a dam over the Manu River to ensure enough electric supply in Tripura, but they did not bother about the fact that, by doing this, at least three hundred acres of land would be under water. Thus, aspiration for acquiring political power and getting privilege from every front drew closer through these vacuums and the tribals finally comprehended that representation from the tribal communities might be the only option left to uplift their status and save them from their half-sink condition in their own lands.

### **Conflicts: Domicile vs. Immigrant Tribals**

Ethnic conflict or trouble between communities in Tripura started in the early 1960s and was not confined between tribal communities and Bengali refugees only. The aggression of the Chakma refugees from Chittagong Hill Tract (around 1970) was like a catastrophe for the domicile tribals, in every way. The first phase of migration of the Chakma refugees started in the early 1970s, essentially after the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971.<sup>94</sup> The Awami League government initiated an insurgency operation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts with the help of the Bangladeshi Army against *Shanti Bahini* founded by Manabendra Narayan Larma. This led to a huge exodus of the Chakmas and other tribal clans to the neighbouring areas of Tripura.<sup>95</sup> From 1978 onwards the Central Government started providing them with shelters in Mizoram besides Tripura. In 1986, the Bangladeshi Security Forces attacked hundreds of tribal villages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts causing the relocation of at least 70,000 jhumia people to Tripura. This incident, however, compelled the Centre to open six camps in places like Kathalchari, Karbook, Pancharampara, Silachari, Tukumbari, Lebachari in the Amarapur and Subroom sub-division of the state.<sup>96</sup> The series of massacres between 1988–93 aggravated the problem and once again a massive, uprooted population fled to Tripura. Both the Central and State Governments arranged temporary relief for them, but at that point in time, the question of their rehabilitation was non-existent. The conditions of the camps were not impressive, and the government grants were also not adequate. It compelled the migrant tribals to engage in small business in those localities, with the permission of the camp officers. The products they used to grow inside the camp were traded to the locals, against which they used to receive some remuneration.

But, despite the regular grants and aid from the Central Government, the state government started considering the Chakma migrants as their burden. Their presence had created demographic problems and environmental concerns in South Tripura. The steady rise in the birth rate within these camps threatened and strained state resources. The surrounding area of the camps underwent deforestation and local people started facing an acute shortage of natural resources viz., firewood, wild vegetables, bamboo shoots, and wild potatoes, which used to constitute a primary source of livelihood for them. Moreover, the Government of India had spent Rs. 13.5 million on this migrant community.<sup>97</sup> It became a source of major discontent among the locals. They felt marginalized and harbored resentment for treating the migrants as privileged.<sup>98</sup> This generated further conflicts of interest between the locals and migrants. But the local populace was actually poor and their condition and standard of living was also miserable. A larger section of the local population had another grievance about their means of livelihood. The tribal migrants used to provide labour to local businessman and agriculturists at cheap rates in comparison to the locals. Hence, they gradually started to resent against the presence of the Chakmas whose living standard is often little higher, since they were receiving daily rations and earning wages from the local businesses.<sup>99</sup>

The local populace resented vehemently against the presence of the Chakma migrants and the Government of Tripura was keen to secure their repatriation. The chief concern of the State government was the presence of such large number of migrants might be detrimental for both to the State administration and growing socio-economic problems. There were regular incidents of missing inmates from the camps who managed to escape, settling down themselves in a different region of Tripura. It became a trend from the second half of 1980s, to give up the camp life and enjoy the facilities of a normal citizen. The physical look of the domicile and migrant tribals was so similar; it was difficult to make a distinction between them. The number of missing inmates from camps became 21,380 by December 31, 1996.<sup>100</sup> It caused another sort of tension between the locals and migrated Chakmas. The local tribal groups highlighted the gradual deforestation or use of local resources in those particular localities, over and above the steady Central aid and State patronage for them. The local political parties were also vocal against their stay in Tripura from the early 1990s.<sup>101</sup> *The Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti* (TUJS), a dominant political party mainly based on Amarpur and Subroom sub-divisions, agitated regarding the issue of staying on of these Chakma migrants from the neighbouring CHT, in their central committee meeting on January 1990.<sup>102</sup> Actually with the incessant support from the vast majority of domicile Chakmas and other ethnic tribal communities, the TUJS was no longer in a position to ignore respective demands from the grass-root level of their organisation.<sup>103</sup>

The gradual resentment about these Chakma migrants compelled the Tripura Government to take a two-fold policy concerning their permanent rehabilitation and the question of citizenship. It became crucial for the State Government to pressurize the Government of India regarding a permanent way out of this problem. The process of repatriation started by both the Governments of India and Bangladesh from 1992 with the formulation of a "Joint Action Plan". Yet, the Government of Bangladesh had offered a 16-point programme in 1994 and the whole procedure got some remarkable progress. But according to the Government report, around 55,000 Chakma migrants remained in the relief camp.<sup>104</sup> The significant shift in the geo-political and economic relationship between the two countries caused significant change towards the attitude of the migrants. There were allegations from the Bangladeshi Government's part that the Indian Government had pressurise migrants to return to the CHT, as they had denied food to the Chakmas in the temporary relief camps.<sup>105</sup> However, it was to a great extent true that the Tripura government had to undertake some major decisions or measures for those tribal camp refugees because of the internal pressure, without prior authority or knowledge of the Government of India.

## Conclusion

From mid-1960s, both the refugees and the tribals became the marginal communities. The economic conditions of both the communities were almost same. The leftists were constantly pressurized the government to pay

compensation to the domiciles for the tribal land acquisition made by them. The TLR & LR Act of 1960 was never actually implemented to save the interest of the tribals in Tripura. In most cases, the land transformation was possible by exchange of unregistered deeds, about which the Survey Settlement Department was not even aware. The government was also well aware about these happenings or actual scenario of implementation part of the TLR & LR Act of 1960. The Land Reforms Act became eyewash and government issued a “General Circular” against such illegal transfer of land. It was mentioned categorically in the Land Reforms Act. But in spite of the fact there was many cases where lands have been transferred through unregistered deeds. There were incidents like planning to open dispensaries in the tribal colonies of Brajapur, Bishramganj, Borokanthal and Chha-Monu. Government had allotted funds for it too, but it never got materialized. The government did not follow a uniform policy in the distribution of lands to the jhumias. Some were allotted 2 acres of *tilla* land, whereas few of them could manage to get a small piece of *lunga* lands.

After the Liberation War of 1971, the Government of Tripura was firm on the idea of issuing citizenship card to all. The domicile tribals used to enjoy a quick procedure to get a citizenship card. But, from this time onwards, the Chief Minister Sukhamoy Sengupta, on behalf of the state government had given responsibility to all Panchayet offices to perform some mandatory enquiries including a certificate, stating one’s place of birth. The tribal communities became upset and kind of worried because of such complicated procedure and later started protesting against the idea of providing them citizenship in their own land. The attitude of the state and condition of the two marginal communities was quite evident from the topic of discussion in the Legislative Assembly, which stated, “Large scale displacement of tribals and refugees of Bogafa, near the Block area in Belonia Sub division due to acquisition of land for public purposes and absence of any re-settlement schemes for the displaced persons”. Yet, the domicile tribals treated the whole issue as if, both these refugee communities (Bengalis and tribal *Chakmas* from CHT, in particular) were intervening in their private spaces. It was a parallel fight of the Bengali migrants and tribals to establish their claims in the same lands, in which the insurgency of the 1980s was a final blow on the contesting relationship of two marginal groups. Yet, the state continued to use both the communities in different phases especially for the vote bank politics.

*This publication is part of the authors ongoing research on identity politics in India’s North-East and draws and develops on previously published works in, Asmita Bhattacharya, and Sudeep Basu, eds., Marginalities in India: Themes and Perspectives (Singapore: Springer, 2018); Anindita Ghosal, Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights Habitat in East and Northeast India (London, and New York: Routledge, 2021).*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In *Bishnupurana*, it is clearly mentioned that ‘Purbadike Kirater Bas’ (the *Kiratas* resides in the eastern region). See, Bibhas Kanti Kilikdar, *Tripura of the Eighteenth Century with*

*Samsber Gazi Against Feudalism: A Historical Study* (Tripura: Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute and Museum, Government of Tripura, 1995), 2.

<sup>2</sup>Subir Bhaumik, "Tripura: Ethnic Conflict, Militancy and Counterinsurgency," Policies and Practices, No. 52, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2012, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Pannalal Roy, *Tripurar Bharat Antarbhukti o Chakla Roshanabad* (Agartala: Tripura Darpan, 2003), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Jitendra Chandra Pal (2003): *Rajmalar Tripura: Kichhu Tothyo, Kichhu Bitarko* (Agartala: Saikat, 2003), 15–17.

<sup>5</sup> Dinesh Chandra Saha, *Adbunik Tripura* (Agartala: Writer's Publications, 2008), 18–21.

<sup>6</sup> M. Parwez, "The Eighteenth Century Eastern Frontier of India: Crisis in Tripuri State," *Indian Journal of Research: Paripex* 1, no. II (2012): 2–3.

<sup>7</sup> This phase was short-lived due to the spread of plague epidemic in both Hill and Plain Tripura. It then became a compulsion for the Mughal soldiers to leave the Hill territory. See, Pannalal Roy, *Tripurar Raj Amole Praja Bidroho* (Agartala: Tripura Bani Prakashani, 2008), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Roy, *Tripurar Raj Amole*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> The *sanad* of Indra Manikya issued to the farmers in 1743 provides most valuable information about the land system obtaining in the Maharaja's zamindari in Chakla Roshanabad contiguous to Hill Tipperah. From that particular *sanad* and some other contemporary declarations, it is quite evident that the chief sources of income of the state were mainly revenue from the plains.

<sup>10</sup> Mahadev Chakravarty, ed., *Administrative Reports of the Tripura State*, vol IV (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1994), vi–vii.

<sup>11</sup> Debabrata Goswami, *Military History of Tripura, 1490–1947* (Agartala: Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute and Museum, Government of Tripura), 21.

<sup>12</sup> Jagadish Gan Choudhury, *A Constitutional History of Tripura* (Agartala: Parul Prakashani, 2004), 191.

<sup>13</sup> Dipak K. Chaudhuri ed., *Administration Report of the Political Agency, Hill Tipperah (1878-79 to 1889-1890)* vol. II (Agartala: Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute and Museum, Government of Tripura, 1996), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Political Department, File no. B/1920, Tripura State Archives, Agartala.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1981), 272.

<sup>16</sup> N.R. Roy Choudhury, *Tripura through the Ages* (Agartala: Published by the Author, 1977), 127.

<sup>17</sup> Suren Debbarma, *A Look into Tripura* (Agartala: Reena Printing Works, 2002), 2.

<sup>18</sup> O.S. Adhikari, *Four Immigrant Tribes of Tripura: Their Life and Culture*, (Agartala: Directorate of Research, Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Tripura, 1988), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Projit Kumar Palit, *History of Religion in Tripura* (Delhi: Kaveri Books, 2004), 21.

<sup>20</sup> Niranjan Debbarma, ed., *Jansiksba Andolan: Itibas o Mulyayan* (Agartala: Poulomi Prakashani, 2013), 14.

<sup>21</sup> Radha Mohan Dev Varman Thakur, *Kakbarak-ma: A Grammar of the Tripur Language from Comilla*, 1900.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Manju Das taken on December 23, 2012, in Agartala, Tripura

<sup>23</sup> Malabika Das Gupta, *Class Formation among the Mogs of Tripura* (Calcutta: Sujan Publications, 2017), 1–2.

<sup>24</sup> *Agricultural Census 1970–71, State Report* (Agartala: Government of Tripura, 1975), 3.



<sup>25</sup> The tribes exhausted lands fit for *jhum* cultivation and were tempted to migrate to Hill Tripura, as splendid opportunities for *jhuming* were available there. See, W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal: Hill Tipparah* vol. VI (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, Smith, Elder & Co., 1874), 492–93.

<sup>26</sup> Jayanta Sarkar, and B. Dutta Ray, *Social and Political Institutions of the Hill People of North-East India* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, Government of India, 1990), 17.

<sup>27</sup> J.B. Ganguli, *The Bengal Hills: A Study of Tripura's Population Growth and Problems* (Agartala: Tripura Darpan, 1983), 16–31.

<sup>28</sup> B.P. Misra, *Socio-Economic Adjustments of Tribals* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1976), 18.

<sup>29</sup> Ganguli, *The Bengal Hills*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> Ganguli, *The Bengal Hills*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> Misra, *Socio-Economic Adjustments*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> *Jhum* cultivation is based on clearing a forest area in a particular season. The community used to shift from a plot of cultivated land after a cycle and return to the same plot after many years. The number of years it took to come back to the same area is called a “*jhum* cycle.” Thus, the term *jhum* is most frequently used for shifting cultivation and *jhumias* were shifting cultivators of Tripura. However, all tribal communities including personnel of the administration were closely acquainted with the culture of *jhum*, as a production system and source of a self-sufficient economy. It was also a part of tribal identity. For details, see, S.B.K. Dev Barman, *A Study over the Jhum and Jhumia Rehabilitation in the Union Territory of Tripura*,” (Agartala: Directorate of Research, Department of Welfare for Schedule Tribes and Scheduled Castes Government of Tripura, 1999), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Mayuri Sengupta, “The Shifting Cultivation and the Reang Tribe in Tripura,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 40 (October 2013): 59.

<sup>34</sup> *Jhum* cultivation without resorting to conservation measures causes erosion of fertile topsoil, exposing subsoil and parent rocks, making it unfit for further cultivation. See, A.K. Agarwal, *North-East India: An Economic Perspective* (Allahabad: Chugh Publications, 1985), 128.

<sup>35</sup> Birendra Chandra Dutta, ed., *Tripura Rajyer Katha* (in Bengali), 45<sup>th</sup> Edition, Second Year, (1358 Tripura Era), 3.

<sup>36</sup> This system is practiced by Reangs, Chakmas, Mogs, Noatias, Jamatias, Tripuris, and Lushais (Mizo). It appears that the per capita availability of *jhum* land in a year varies from 0.02–0.37 hectares. It is lowest in the West District where people have scope for settled cultivation and plantations. In the South District per capita of *jhum* land is highest because of its larger dependency on shifting cultivation.

<sup>37</sup> Amitava Sinha, and Kiransankar Chakraborty, *Reflections on Economy and Society of Tripura* (New Delhi/Guwahati/Visakhapatnam: Akansha Publishing House, 2012), 99–100.

<sup>38</sup> “*Tripura Affairs*,” File No. L/PS/13/1035, India Office Library and Records

<sup>39</sup> As declared by the Tripura *Durbar*, a tenant who accepted for reclamation of hilly lands by clearing jungles got a remission of rent at least for three years from the date of the lease is called *jangal-abadi* system. File No. ID/1-21, Year-1948, Home (ID Department), Tripura State Archives, Agartala.

<sup>40</sup> Bhaumik (2005), 146

<sup>41</sup> N.C. Deb Barma, *History of the Land System and Land Management in Tripura 1872–2000 AD* (Agartala: self-pub., 2005), 18–23.

<sup>42</sup> Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal: Hill Tipparah*, 509.

- <sup>43</sup> Malaya Banerjee, "State Formation Process of Tripura: The Economic Roots," in *Proceedings of North-East India History Association (NEIHA)*, Eighteenth Session, Agartala, 1998, p. 337
- <sup>44</sup> J.B. Ganguli, *Economic Problem of the Jhumias of Tripura: A Socio-economic Problem of the System of Shifting Cultivation in Transition* (Calcutta: Bookland, 1983), 4.
- <sup>45</sup> Manos Paul, *The Eyewitness: Tales from Tripura's Ethnic Conflict* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2009), 27.
- <sup>46</sup> Jana Jodh Bir Jong believes that the *Maharajas* had encouraged the settlement of Bengalis in the land-abundant, less skilled, and thinly populated state of Tripura, for the collection of land tax and to yield more revenues from the state exchequer. Interview with Jana Jodh Bir Jong, (niece of Rana Bodh Jong, Chief Minister and President, Mantri Parishad, 1937–46) taken on December 25, 2012, in Agartala, Tripura.
- <sup>47</sup> *A Study of The Land System of Tripura* (Guwahati: Law Research Institute, Eastern Region, Gauhati High Court, Guwahati, 1990), 9.
- <sup>48</sup> These *Khajanchis* or *Binondia* class was very corrupted. They often used to charge extra amounts as due revenues from the tribals. Hence, their presence was always depicted in a derogatory sense in tribal societies. See, Naresh Chandra Debburma, *Kokborok Bhasa Sahityer Kromobikash* (Agartala: Naba Chandana Prakashan, 2010), 40.
- <sup>49</sup> "In 1280 AD, following the submission of Ratna Fa to Mughisuddin Tughril, the Tripura Kings first invited many Bengalis of high caste. Many of them were related to Boro Bhuiyans or the twelve warlords of Bengal." *Tripura Review*, August 15, 1972. Though, there was another opinion that Rajdhar Manikya II owned the territory since 1793 (permanent settlement). Kilikdar, *Tripura of the Eighteenth Century*, 5.
- <sup>50</sup> Sree Kaliprasanna Sen Vidyabhusan, ed., *Srinajmala*, Bango-Uponibesh, Prathom Lohor (Agartala: Tribal Research Institute, 2013), 2–13.
- <sup>51</sup> *Tripura Ties with Tagore* (Agartala: Directorate of Education, Government of Tripura, 1969), 17.
- <sup>52</sup> "Tripurar Rabindranath: Rajtantra o Ak Ruddho Bhasa," *Korok Sahitya Patrika*, Sharod 1417, 46.
- <sup>53</sup> Misra, *Socio-Economic Adjustments*, 20.
- <sup>54</sup> Ganguli, *The Bengal Hills*, 14.
- <sup>55</sup> Ranjit Kr. Dey, ed., *The Statistical Account of Tripura* (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 2000), 3–4.
- <sup>56</sup> R.K. Debbarma, *Heroes and Histories: Making of Rival Geographies of Tripura*, Occasional Paper, History and Society, No. 34 (2013), Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 10.
- <sup>57</sup> Bhismadeb Bhattacharyya, *Sekaler Agartala* (Agartala: Tripura Darpan, 1989), 8.
- <sup>58</sup> It was in function during the time of Raipur (Dacca) riot till the Noakhali carnation. For details, see, Bratati Dasgupta, *History of Tripura: from Monarchy to Democracy* (Kolkata: Avenel Press, 2015), 54.
- <sup>59</sup> Jiten Pal, Interview with Author, Agartala, February 24, 2012.
- <sup>60</sup> Debasis Lodh, *Ei Sbohor Agartala* (Agartala: Akshar Publications, 2002), 18–19.
- <sup>61</sup> B.G. Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996), 167–69.
- <sup>62</sup> Tripur Chandra Sen, *Tripura in Transition (1923–57)* (Agartala: Published by the Author, 1970), 25.
- <sup>63</sup> Nalini Ranjan Roychoudhury, *Tripura through the Ages: A Short History of Tripura from Earlier Times to 1947 AD* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1983), 59.
- <sup>64</sup> File No. R. 19-1/ 46-P, 1946, Political Department, I.B. Report, Secretariat Record Room, Agartala.

<sup>65</sup> In 1947, the directly ruled territories of British India, which covers three-fifth of the subcontinent, got Partitioned. The rest of the portions subdivided into 565 Princely States including Tripura (also called Native and Indian states) was neither partitioned nor given independence. The only option for them was to join India or Pakistan.

<sup>66</sup> A notice published in *Tripura Historical Documents* stated that “It is hereby notified that the late colonel His Highness Maharaja Manikya Sir Bir Bikram Kishore Deb Burman Bahadur, G.B.E., K.C.S.I, Ruler of Tripura State, having decided to join the existing, Constituent Assembly, nominated on the 28<sup>th</sup> April 1947, Mr. G.S. Guha, M.A.B.L. Bar-at-Law, Minister, Government of Tripura, as the representative of Tripura State to the said Constituent Assembly, which was duly communicated to the Secretary, Constituent Assembly, New Delhi, by a telegram on the same date.”; Roy, *Tripurar Bharat Antarbhukti*, 68; Willem Van Schendel, “Stateless in South Asia: The Making of India- Bangladesh Enclaves,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 1 (2002): 119.

<sup>67</sup> The Regent Maharani demanded, “A strong well-organised internal security force has to be built up, the finances of the State have to be rehabilitated, a scheme of road construction to provide internal communications as well as direct link with the Indian Union has to be put into effect, supplies of essential commodities of which there is an acute shortage have to be made available to the people, and the machinery of the Government has to be generally tightened up. All energies, for the present, must be directed to the above ends.” *Tripura State Gazette Sankalan*, 319.

<sup>68</sup> *Sardar Patel's Correspondence* vol V (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Press, 1973), 434–35

<sup>69</sup> Samiron Ray, ed., *Tothyopani o Nirdeshika* (Agartala: Tripura Darpan, 2009), 12.

<sup>70</sup> In 1956, Tripura was converted to into a Central Territory with an elected Territorial Council and an administrator (in place of Chief Commissioner) appointed by the President of India. The next change came in 1963. The Union Territories Act was passed, and Tripura became one of the Union Territories of India. The process of independent state formation started with the appointment of a Lieutenant Governor on January 31, 1970. Finally, the full-fledged statehood was conferred on January 21, 1972, under provisions of the North-Eastern (Reorganization) Act, 1971. B.B. Kumar *Re-Organization of North-East India: Facts and Documents* (New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1996), 68–70.

<sup>71</sup> Aribum Indubala Devi, ed., *Amazing North-East: Tripura* (New Delhi: Vij Books, 2010), 178.

<sup>72</sup> Jagadis Gan-Chaudhuri, *The Political History of Tripura*, New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1985), 52.

<sup>73</sup> Bodhrong Deb Burma, Interview with Author in Agartala, December 25, 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Landless laborers used to work in khas lands, owned by the royal family of Tripura in the Zamindari of Chakla Roshanabad for decades. Professionally, they were sharecroppers, but *Maharajas* of Tripura often treated them as their own subjects, whom they could not evict. *The Law of Landlord and Tenant in the Independent State of Tripura (as Amended by Act 1 of 1296 T. E.)*, Drafted by Mohini Mohan Bardhan, Minister under Orders His Highness Maharaja Bir Chandra Deb Barma Manikya Bahadur (Agartala: Bir Press, Independent Tripura, nd), 1.

<sup>75</sup> There were disputes regarding the boundary between Assam and Tripura from 1938. The Darbar agreed with suggestions made by the Assam Government at that point of time.

<sup>76</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, April 14, 1948.

<sup>77</sup> Arun Ghosh, *The Moments of Bengal Partition: Selections from the Amrita Bazar Patrika, 1947-1948* (Kolkata: Seriban, 2010), 235–36.

<sup>78</sup> Syamacharan Tripura, "Tripurae Ugrapantha, Karon o Samadhan," in *Tripurae Samaj Sanskriti Santrashbad*, eds., Saroj Chanda, and Satyabrata Chakraborty (Agartala: Tripura Darpan, 1999), 45–6.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Ritonkar Mukhopadhyay, "Onya Ak Udbastu Upakhyan," in Charbaka, ed., Sudipta Bandyapadhyay, *Popular Culture* 3, vol 2 (2015): 54.

<sup>80</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, April 14, 1948.

<sup>81</sup> *Janakabhan*, May 4, 1951.

<sup>82</sup> File No. F.8 (15)-GA/53, Home-General Administrative Department, Tripura State Archive, Agartala.

<sup>83</sup> Deb Barma, *History of the Land System*, 127.

<sup>84</sup> B.K. Roy Burman, "Tribal Demography: A Preliminary Appraisal," in *The Tribal Situation in India*, ed., K. Suresh Singh (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, and Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1972), 39.

<sup>85</sup> Sudhanya Deb Burma, *Hakuch Khurich* (Agartala: Akshar Publication, 2004), 165–66.

<sup>86</sup> File no. F. 1(48)- P/57, Political Department, Tripura State Archive.

<sup>87</sup> Suchintya Bhattachayya, *Genesis of Tribal Extremism in Tripura* (New Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1991), 130–31.

<sup>88</sup> "Report of the Assistant Central Intelligence Officer, Tripura State, to the Joint Secretary, Rehabilitation Department, Government of India," File No. 20-R/50 II (Secret), Rehabilitation Branch, Ministry of States, National Archives of India.

<sup>89</sup> *A Leaflet*, signed by Nibarana Chandra Ghosh, President, Tripura Central Refugee and Rehabilitation Organization, and Convener, All Tripura Refugee Convention, January 4, 1951

<sup>90</sup> *Proceedings of the Tripura Legislative Assembly*, Official Report, First Session, Series- VI, Vol. III–IV (Agartala: Tripura Government Press, 1974), 26–30.

<sup>91</sup> *Proceedings of the Tripura Legislative Assembly*, Official Report, First Session, Series- VI, Vol. III–IV, 37.

<sup>92</sup> Nripen Chakrabarty, *Longtorai Amar Ghor* (Agartala: Tripura Darpan, 1996), 6–7.

<sup>93</sup> O.S. Adhikari, *The Problems of Indebtedness Among the Tribals in Sadar Sub-Division of Tripura* (Agartala: Directorate of Research, Department of Welfare for Schedule Tribes, Government of Tripura, 1982) 5–6.

<sup>94</sup> Bikach Kumar Choudhury, *Genesis of Chakma Movement (1772–1989): Historical Background* (Agartala: Tripura Darpan, 1991), 10.

<sup>95</sup> Awami League Government was not sympathetic towards the ethnic communities. Also, the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh did not include any provision of recognising the distinct identity of the indigenous populace living in the CHT. Though Manabendra Narayan Larma, the elected member of the Parliament pleaded in support of a position for Chakmas in the new nation's political agenda but failed to acquire so. Larma was the actual brain behind the establishment of the *Parbotyo Chhattagram Jana Sanghatan Samiti* (popularly known as PCJSS) as a political group and later its arm wing, the *Shanti Bahini* to fight for the rights of the tribals of CHT. See, Chandan Nandy, "Unwanted Migrants," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 40 (October 1993): 2102.

<sup>96</sup> Chandrika Basu Majumder, *Genesis of Chakma Movement in Chittagong Hill Tracts* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2003), 93.

<sup>97</sup> "Document on Population State of Refugee Inmates: As on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1996," District Administration Office, South Tripura.

<sup>98</sup> *The Chakma Profile*, Government of Tripura, Agartala, 1999, 18

<sup>99</sup> *Annual Report of Voluntary Health Association of Tripura*, Agartala, Tripura, 1996

<sup>100</sup> Chandrika Basu Majumder, *Genesis of Chakma Movement in Chittagong Hill Tract* (Kolkata: Progressive Publisher, 2003), 96.

<sup>101</sup> *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, January 18, 1990

<sup>102</sup> *The Dainik Sambad*, January 25, 1990

<sup>103</sup> Bhattachayya, *Genesis of Tribal Extremism*, 130–31.

<sup>104</sup> Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity*, 179.

<sup>105</sup> “No Secure Refugees,” South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre, February 14, 1994.

# Fleeing and Staying: A Nuanced View of the Bangladesh Refugee Crisis

By

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The reason I chose this title was to actually go behind the predominance of the visual that comes across in mainstream reporting of a refugee crisis. It usually consists, though not limited to the people on march crossing borders, huddled together in the squalor of camps, railway stations, and marketplaces, dismal scenes of the day-to-day miseries perilously close to disease and death. But also projected are scenes of mass atrocities as root causes which make them flee in the first instance. Retaliation or resistance of the victimised people also captures headlines. But stories that are not told are those that blur the lines between fleeing or staying behind, between attaining refugee status and remaining displaced within one's own homeland. Resilience and resistance, the day-to-day stories of survival both inside the camps, as well as outside, and the varied dynamics of return or multiple returns are the ones that drew my attention. The enormity of the refugee influx into West Bengal in 1971 is portrayed by the following statistics. As per the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department of the Government of West Bengal, the Census figures show the number of refugees from East Pakistan in 1971 was nearly 6 million or 60 lakhs. But in most reports, it is estimated that around 10 million East Bengali refugees entered India during the early months of the War, of whom 1.5 million may have stayed back after Bangladesh became independent. Julian Francis, then based in West Bengal and in charge of operations for Oxfam, and conferred citizenship of Bangladesh for his contribution to the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, wrote that 10 million Bangladeshis fled to India as refugees and as estimated 20 million were internally displaced in Bangladesh, i.e., about 40 per cent of the population. He remembers, "some days we saw 50,000 Bangladeshis a day cross the many border crossings to India, 20,000 or 30,000 a day was normal." The largest refugee camp in 1971 was in Salt Lake, Calcutta, which had about 250,000

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people. A district-wise breakup in 1971, shows the main thrust of the refugee influx was 24 Parganas with 22.3 per cent of the total refugees, Nadia, 20.3 per cent, Bankura 19.1 per cent, and Calcutta 12.9 per cent. But having said all these figures, I will not only be giving facts and figures. Rather as I have not studied the Bangladesh refugee crisis as a scholar or an academic, I will use several personal narratives through which to elaborate the intricate complexity of the crisis from different perspectives. The narratives are my own, as a member of a war affected family belonging to a minority community, a family originating in West Bengal, whose migratory trend I traced in my studies on family histories of the Partition; and the other narratives of observers and actors in the crisis like Julian Francis of Oxfam, Frieda Brown of the Australian Communist Party and K.K. Sinha a radical humanist who died in a motor accident while returning from relief work in the camps and true stories from scenes in films like *Jibondhuli* directed researched by Tanvir Mokammel. All these are rather unknown stories, that have touched my life as well as the lives around me or have been reflected in the testimonies of the Liberation War.

First, I would like to talk about the fleeing and staying narratives of displacement and refugeehood, and also within it are embedded legacies of the past and present complexities of Bengali society. First my own story. I Meghna Guhathakurta in 1971 was living with my father who was then Provost of Jagannath Hall at Dhaka University and teacher of English literature, and my mother who was a Headmistress of a girls' high school in the old town. I was about fifteen years-of-age in '71 and in class 10. My father was one of those many who were sacrificed on the altar of Independence, on the very first night when Operation Searchlight was launched. The Pakistan army led operations targeting Dhaka University and all Hindu settlements in the old town and the Rajarbagh police headquarters in Dhaka. My father was taken out of our apartment on campus and asked for his name and his religion and then shot and killed. He was injured by the bullets and still conscious. But we could not take him to a hospital right then because of the curfew. On the 27<sup>th</sup> morning only could we take him to the hospital which was by then full of injured people with bullet wounds and dead bodies and basically the whole city of Dhaka was turned into turmoil bearing the resemblance of a killing field. My father died of his bullet wounds on March 30, 1971. We could not take his body, because the ambulance that was being brought to the hospital to take his body was then surrounded by army officials and not allowed to come into the premises of the Medical College We had to, therefore, leave him there in the bed and flee for our lives. My mother and I. from then on took shelter in different places of friends. One of the very first places we went to was Dr. Tajul Hossain, who had come with the ambulance to pick up the dead body of my father but was not able to do it. Dr. Tajul Hossain was a humanist like my father, a follower of M.N. Roy's ideas, and he was very close to the Awami League at that time, so he knew what was happening. H The first night, I remember my mother being asked by Dr. Tajul Hossain whether she wanted to go to India because he had the means of taking us to India, and possibly because all our relatives were there, and he felt we would be more

protected. But my mother refused. She did not want to go, knowing that my father was killed, and she had to protect me, a teenage daughter. So, we lived in Dhaka, in many strange houses, and in many capacities, in many disguises. One could say that we had to live a displaced life. But I always wondered why she did not leave. The explanation was given to me when she went and tried to get the death certificate of my father from the hospital because it was needed to draw money from our bank account for our sustenance. Although she was a Headmistress and she was getting some salary, but it was difficult to sustain ourselves by that alone and we needed money. In order to get the provident fund from the university and other things, she needed a death certificate. But when she went to get that death certificate, the doctor told her we can only give you this certificate which states the fact that my father died of pneumonia or a rather lungs having of respiratory attack. And my mother said came to me and said that “look Dola (my nickname), if I take this then we will never be able to prove the death of your father, that he was killed. So, what do you think if we stay?” I was not in a position to understand what I should do for myself and so my mother and I stayed on. And that staying on took us to various places. Every month we would be staying at a new place. Not that we wanted to. But something happened which forced us to flee again and again. For example, the first place we stayed, the husband of the elder daughter who was taking shelter, there. (Every house was a refugee camp at that time a displacee camp one could say, where all the relatives from all places came and huddled together in one place where they thought they would be protected, or they would be safe). But when the call came from the Pakistan government that everyone should join work or else they would be punished, the husband of that elder daughter who was an engineer went to join work He took a bus and as they were going to the northern districts where he was posted, they passed through the Mirpur area which was peopled by Urdu speaking community or Bihari camps as we call them now. Their bus was attacked, and their bodies was never found. His father-in-law went through every manhole and searched for the body of his son-in-law but to no avail. So, we had to go away to another place, the residence of another unknown student of my father. And there too they had non-Bengalis living around that area. After a month they got suspicious about who we were and so they told my mother that she was a well-known person because she was a Headmistress of a school and more than that she was the wife of a person who was executed by the Pakistan army, so in that sense, it was not safe to keep my mother. They said that they were ready to keep Dola which was my nickname but not her. Then my mother had to look around for another place to hide. At that time, I was studying at the Holy Cross School, a convent run by the Catholic Church, and the Sisters’ there came to help us and give us support. The headmistress of my school then told my mother that we will enter you into a Holy Family Hospital which was run by the Sisters at that time and under the name of Barbara Gomez so that no one would be able to guess our identity. We will not have a Hindu name. I was going to enter into an orphanage with the name Monica Rozario. So, that's how we spent the next few months, one after the other, and I think we stayed at six different



places in all these nine months, sometimes separately from my mother sometimes together. What I wanted to emphasise was the notion of “staying” even though displaced. We were not only displaced in terms of the places that we were living in but displaced by way of losing our identity. My mother took whatever she could from our belongings. We couldn't take much with us, but you know what she did take? She took albums of our family. In there were written the name of my mother and my father under some of the photographs. And we were told to erase those names and so I had to write “my daddy” or “my mummy”. Much later in life, I was awakened to the fact that these meant a total erasure of our identity. The fact that we had to take Christian names also meant a deliberate displacement of our identity.

I will now talk about how another friend of my father, Kalyan Kumar Sinha, who was the Director of the Institute of Political and Social Studies in Calcutta and who like my father was also a follower of Roy and had known my father for a long time. Sinha at that time had been hearing news about my father, and of another of Roy's followers called Habibur Rahman who was a Mathematics Professor at Rajshahi University and was also killed. Sinha even in '71 was writing tributes to them from Calcutta and also working with his wife going to the camps in Kharagpur and tending to the needs of the refugees there. Unfortunately, one day while returning from a refugee camp in Kharagpur, he was in a car accident. His wife was injured, and he somehow drove his wife to a hospital where his wife got better but he collapsed in a heart attack and died. But before that, he had written a book called the *Bangladesh Revolution for Liberation* which spelled out clearly her reason for staying. She was carrying the past legacies of 1947 when she and my father had refused to leave East Pakistan for India. The action of staying was not new to my family and it was rooted in the ideological of my father's belief in M.N. Roy's philosophy of Radical Humanism and how because of that philosophy Roy had advised my father during 1947 not to come to India but to stay on in the land of his birth because he an intellectual leader who should not be contributing to the panic of the Partition but rather give leadership to those who stayed behind. K.K. Sinha wrote on how he met him in London when he was doing his PhD from 1963–67, and when during this time the Indo-Pakistan war took place: “so how many times did I force him to come to India, instead of returning to Dhaka after his study was over, but he never faltered to say no. I wondered why was he so adamant and what gave him such confidence. We went into the virility and growth of the intellectual scene in Dhaka sometimes mentioning names of young scholars as well as old and he always ended by saying that the intellectual horizon of young Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan was undergoing a revolution. A new generation was rising, and it was that which sustained his confidence. A new intellectual that was arising was much more virile, much more creative, and self-reliant, and much more open-minded and flexible and he felt that he was sharing the joy of this emergence of this new rising sun. How right he was.”

I now go on to talk about another family, whom I have mentioned in my “Family Histories of Bengal Partition.”<sup>1</sup> It is a Muslim family from Barasat, and I still happen to be in touch with them. Minhaj, I called him in

my past Partition stories, but now he has agreed to be called by his real name which is Mobarok Hossain. He is the spouse of my friend Suraiya Begum. His story is that of fleeing, and displacement, and then fleeing again. He came from West Bengal to East Pakistan hardly four or five years before '71. He was a young person who barely got into college in his first year in university. He was living with his elder brother and his family, and he then went to study Economics in Rajshahi University. Then came March 1971. After March 7, 1971, speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman everything closed down. So, he took a cargo wagon back to Jessore because hardly anyone could get any form of transport then after Mujib's call for a non-cooperation movement against the Pakistan state. After that, his family faced a lot of hostility from the neighbours who were mostly non-Bengalis, and after March 25 their aggression grew so much that they decided not to stay in their house but go somewhere nearby to friends, relatives, etc., who were around in the Jessore rural areas or the outskirts Jessore. After being displaced, they decided to go and stay in another house, but suddenly they came to know from someone that the person of that house has had written his name in the book of *Razakars* or collaborators with the Pakistan army. So, it was not safe for them to stay there. Then they decided that they should go towards the border. They were joined by 25 persons in a group of relatives, extended relatives, and distant relatives. They walked and walked for 24 hours towards the border areas, and they crossed the border near Bongaon. As their father was already living in Barasat, they went straight to their father's house. Their father was very happy to see them. He also made welcome all the refugees who came with them, and they settled all around their household, their homestead, in their lands. He described to me what the refugee situation was like as he saw it at that time. He said all the marketplaces, railway stations, and bus stations were full of refugees from East Pakistan. At first, mostly the Hindu refugees came because they were the first to face the assault and feared being targeted by the Pakistan army. The Muslims also came in masses but slightly later because at first, they spent days in a displaced situation like Mobarok's family thinking that maybe things would get better, and they would be able to gravitate back towards their home. But when that did not seem likely, then they also joined the bands of Hindu refugees en masse. At first, the refugees were scattered all across the border districts, Barasat, and also the outskirts of Calcutta. But when the real surge of refugees came, and especially Muslim refugees, they felt more protected in gravitating towards Calcutta because it was a metropolis. All along the way, Mobarok noticed the welcoming signs of the host community, which was people from West Bengal. They were addressed as the *Joy Bangla people*. They did not say people came from East Pakistan or Bangladesh. And that slogan became the core of the whole struggle. In and around October '71 there was the spread of the eye disease that was also called the Joy Bangla. So, everything became Joy Bangla. When they used to board the trains, the ride was free for Joy Bangla people, and even in buses when the refugees could not afford the ticket, the ticket sellers would say "give us whatever you can or if you can't, it's okay." It was a cordial relationship at first but of course later on there were issues that were raised as

in any other refugee situation. There were issues of hostility, but they were few as Mobarok Hossain said.

So, did the family return? Of course, the family returned, and interestingly the hostility that he met with was from his own family who were not allowing them to stay. Ideologically the Muslims of Barasat and his father included were more Congress oriented and they believed that Pakistan was a destination for the Muslims at the time of Partition. That is why urged his own family members to move forward. But he also believed that people in East Pakistan, the Bengalis of East Pakistan did not give proper allegiance to Pakistan, and they were partly responsible for the fall of Pakistan or destabilising it. However, Mobarok Hossain who went as a young person to East Pakistan along with his family, said that on the very first instance, he knew by going towards Rajshahi that this Pakistan dream was destined to be a total failure. There was no dream in Ayub Khan's Pakistan which proved to be far from the fictional paradise for all Muslims. As a young person, his friends were getting into the War and into the *Mukti Bahini*. As a young person, with very few friends, and who at that time had spent very few years in Pakistan, he felt estranged. He felt estranged as an Indian but still could not identify himself totally with Bengalis fighting for an independent state. He had this dilemma within himself about: What does he fight for? What does he stand for? And he was still searching when Jessore fell around December 6–7, 1971, Tajuddin Ahmed who was then based in Calcutta was supposed to lead in a sort of convoy to give a speech in Jessore as the first Prime Minister of the Provisional Government. This whole convoy passed Jessore Road across Barasat, and Mobarok got onto it and went to Jessore with that convoy, heard the speech, and tried to get in touch with his elder brother. His elder brother and his wife had by that time had already gone back to Bangladesh like many people when Yahya Khan gave the declaration of forgiveness for those who had gone to India and welcomed them back with land and property. They listened to it and said or wondered perhaps that after all their lives and occupation, their livelihood was all in East Pakistan and that they should go back to their jobs because here in West Bengal and India they were just refugees. So, they had already returned but when Mobarok tried to look for them, he could not find them. He even went to Khulna but came back because of the dangers he faced. The Indian army was already there in Khulna and warned him of land mines and other things. So, he left a message in charcoal in the dilapidated house that they lived in Jessore saying "I had come. I could not find you. Please write back to my father because he is worried about you." Then he went back to Barasat. He finally left Barasat for East Pakistan around either the end of December or January and went back to his student days. But we see that there have been multiple returns and multiple journeys back and forth. Those in the border area could do that but not those in Dhaka. Those in Dhaka or in the central part of Bangladesh could not go back so easily. In contrast to Mobarok's story of return, is the true story of a Hindu doctor which we find in the feature film *Jibondhuli*<sup>2</sup> written and directed by Tanvir Mokammel. The scene depicts how a dedicated doctor survives and escapes from the gruesome Chuknagar massacre in Khulna but just as he

crosses over a villager comes to tell him the news of the dire situation back in his village and how the freedom fighters need him there. The doctor returns to fulfil his oath as a doctor and eventually perishes in the hands of the Pakistan Army and their collaborators.

It is now important to relate something from Julian Francis's writing because he was based in the camps of West Bengal and had a first-hand experience of how dismal it was in the camps and this picture which we get is not of one single person or of a personal experience, I quote from his writings,

[s]o international NGOs like Oxfam were finding it hard to accept the reports that were coming to their offices from Calcutta. In the field, we were witnessing death and disease on a scale that was unimaginable. I still have nightmares about the deaths of children in refugee camps in India. I still remember as though it was yesterday the wounds of men who had managed to arrive to safety after being attacked by machetes, by the collaborators of the Pakistani authorities. Some of the wounds had become septic during the painful journeys. Sometimes, in my nightmares, I see the body of a dead child lying in the rain, its arms and legs gnawed off by dogs, its eyes pecked out by crows. I will never forget the babies with their skin hanging loosely in folds from their tiny bones, lacking the strength even to lift their heads. The children with legs and feet swollen with edema and malnutrition limp in the arms of their mothers. Babies going blind for a lack of vitamin, or covered with sores that will not heal. Seeing in the eyes of their parents the despair, wondering if they will ever have their children well again. Seeing the corpse of the child who died the night before. It was only when cholera swept through the camps towards Calcutta that the conscience of the world was alerted, but even this killer came and went. It left behind what was there before, suffering and despair—no homes, little or no food, insufficient medical supplies and worst of all, no hope.<sup>3</sup>

So, it was in search of this hope that I look back on the refugee crisis not only as a humanitarian crisis, but it is very important to remember that 1971 refugees in India were not only about humanitarian crisis, it was a story of resilience and resistance, narratives which are there but are there as wholly separate from the discourse of the refugees. This should not be the case. I will now try to elaborate on this aspect here. I bring on the testimony of my father's friend who had tried to get the ambulance to the hospital, Dr. Tajul Hossain. He was in fact the first Health Secretary of Bangladesh Government and he was part of the Provisional Government. He had a very interesting story that he told me about the Provisional Government members who had to meet Indira Gandhi because they needed permission to have a Provisional Government in Exile on Indian soil. So, he mentioned that Barrister Amirul Islam was also there along with Tajuddin Ahmed. Indira Gandhi asked them "why should I allow you to do that? You are after all in West Bengal and West Bengal has borders with East Pakistan. So how am I to know you will not be leading a struggle for united people?" And there at that time, Tajuddin Ahmed gave the answer. He said to Indira Gandhi to look at the flag that was the symbol of Bangladesh at that time and there is a map in

there that denotes the territory which “we are fighting for so we cannot be at one with West Bengal or with any other states that are bordering India because this is the only territory that we are fighting for. We are calling this territory Bangladesh.”



**Fig. 1:** Map of Bangladesh in the flag used during the Liberation War of 1971,  
© Wikimedia Commons,  
[https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag\\_of\\_Bangladesh\\_\(1971\).svg](https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Bangladesh_(1971).svg)

I came across another very interesting letter that was given to me by an oral historian Heather Goodall from Australia. It was the letter of Freda Brown of the Australian Communist Party, later the Socialist Party, and the only woman awardee of the Lenin Peace Prize, who had visited the camps. In that letter she had written back to her colleagues in Australia, “I visited the training camps and talked to the National Awami Party” and she talked of the resilience of the Indian people as well “even after they suffered losses from the cyclone in Orissa which I do not think any other country could have faced especially with 10 million refugees.” In her reports, she also mentioned the resilience of the refugees. She met young doctors from East Pakistan refugees who were giving medical services from camp to camp. So, there were all these elements of self-help even amidst the squalor of the camps and this was basically the bearer of hope. Another bearer of hope we learned from the written testimony of Sharmeen Murshid whose whole family had then crossed over to India, and she was a member of the singing troupe that was formed in the camps which had been made famous with the film entitled *Muktir Gaan* directed by Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud. The movie was based on the cinematography of eleven years representing the time of the Liberation War. We also have to take into account Tapan Bose’s *Nine Months to Freedom*

which also has pictures and visuals of the singing troupes which sang from camp to camp. Also, in the *Mukta Elaka* or the areas freed from Pakistani occupation in East Bengal where they sang to raise the consciousness of the people as well as to raise their hopes. Sharmeen relates how they cross the border. Her father was in fact my (author's) father's senior colleague and a very well-respected scholar who had come to see my father in the hospital. He had not wanted to leave but Sharmeen's mother was a Parliamentary leader of East Pakistan. She was elected in 1954 and re-elected again in 1970. She was basically a parliamentary leader even when she was a refugee. So, they and her two sisters and two elder brothers crossed the border. There were many deliberations before deciding to cross the border because again her father did not want to leave but the mother said that it was for the protection of the people and once on the other side, the whole family became involved in the War. Her brother served as the Sector Command of Sector Nine and later Sector Two as a *Mukti Bahini*. Her elder sister Tazeen worked in the hospitals in Kalyani, as well as had contributed to an archive of '71, and also worked in the News Section of Bangladesh Betar. Bangladesh Betar was of course named as almost another sector in this struggle because they were broadcasting from Calcutta, but their broadcast was projected everywhere in Bangladesh. They raised the hopes of the people. So, when Nurjahan Murshid, her mother, later a Parliamentary member of Bangladesh, became part of the diplomatic campaign, a roving ambassador representing the Provisional Government to win support for it. The Foreign Ministry formed a special parliamentary team where her mother became a member along with Phani Bhushan Majumder and S. Hussein. This special parliamentary team made a sensational address at the Joint Session of both Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha in the Central Hall of the Indian Parliament where they were given a standing ovation. The result was that Yahya Khan tried Nurjahan Murshid in absentia and served her a fourteen-year sentence declaring all her property confiscated and bringing out a warrant against her. Sharmeen Murshid writes, "that day we knew we could not return home without freedom." This is a crucial part of the refugee situation. So, would you call Nurjahan Murshid a refugee or a freedom fighter? Freedom fighters rose from the refugee situation, and it is very interesting that we learn from another work by Ameena Mohsin, who wrote about her family experience as well as the experience of other people who were in the Pakistan army in Pakistan at that time who were interned by Pakistan and how they, both ideologically as well as practically, and fought for the struggle of Bangladesh. Once Ameena Mohsin spoke about this at a conference and asked the same question and one of the scholars replied that it should be called another sector of the Bangladesh Liberation War. So, there were not only eleven sectors but there is also this sector, and I believe that the refugee situation in Calcutta which was the seat of the High Command for the Liberation Struggle formed another one. There were so many training plans for the refugees in the camps alongside the refugees who lived outside the camps, and this should also be called another sector of the Liberation War. So, we see these nuances interject into the political discourse and tried to transform the harmful stereotypes

which were there even in the policies of Bangladesh. When the refugees returned from India, there was a division made which stated that those who stayed inside the borders of East Pakistan were collaborators and those who went to India were the *Mukti Bahinis*. These very strong notions have filtered into the policies of our country and similarly also global politics. The global scene has completely changed i.e., how one looks at '71 refugees from the present perspective of refugees that the world now faces and the refugee policies that the world now upholds. But before going into that, let me again quote Julian Francis on something that we should all remember. On World Refugee Day, Julian Francis writes, "it is very right to celebrate Bangladesh's remarkable development successes and progress over the years. But we must never forget the pain and suffering that was invested into the foundation of this beautiful country. I will never forget. My recurring nightmares will not allow me to do so. Remembering the birth of Bangladesh should help us to redouble our efforts to see that the world shows more kindness to all the refugees being displaced, and to see that the politicians work more seriously and concertedly to overcome all these problems which create the movement of people as refugees." When Bangladesh has reached fifty, we are now facing the Rohingya as a refugee problem. This is almost the same dimension as India faced but although the world has changed and globally, we seem to be forgetting the '71 refugee crisis it has been there in the bridging of the discourse between the UN and the Bangladesh government. For a long time, like the Indian government, the Bangladesh government has not signed the UN Refugee Convention and treats refugees still in a piecemeal way i.e., the differential treatment based on its national concerns about sovereignty. When Bangladesh was involved with the Rohingyas long before the present influx, we saw how Bangladesh brought up time and again the instance of how Bengalis across the border fed their country and the cordial reception they received in India, how they were sheltered for nine months with food and clothes and shelter, and how it enabled us to live through the Liberation War and emerged as a part of our struggle for nationhood. This was put forward time and again through exhibitions, through writings, and finally I think the State did realise but still under certain circumstances and under political considerations they opened the border to Rohingyas. It was interesting when a comment was made by a young person who had never seen '71 and was basically born in the '90s, who was serving the IOM during the Rohingya crisis. She had seen pictures of the Salt Lake camps that have been in our conscious and subconscious memorialisation of refugees and stated, "I have seen this before." Through this exclamation, she reiterated the fact that we have legacies of the past that are of strength and which we can draw upon in order to face what can happen in our own future.

*This article is a transcript of an online lecture by Meghan Gubathakurta on "Fleeing and Staying: A Nuanced View of the Bangladesh Refugee Crisis of 1971" on August 3, 1971. The webinar was organised by Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, and several other institutes. The lecture can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pk5Y7uaBPH0>.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Meghna Guhathakurta, “Family Histories of the Bengal Partition,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 126–43.

<sup>2</sup> *Jibondhuli*, also known as *The Drummer*, is a 2014 Bangladeshi Bengali-language drama film written and directed by Tanvir Mokammel, produced under Kino-Eye Films

<sup>3</sup> Julian Francis, “Remembering the 1971 Refugees,” *Dhaka Tribune*, June 20, 2016, <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/opinion/2016/06/20/remembering-1971-refugees>.



# The Politics of Space: Refugees, Displaced and Stranded

By

**Amena Mohsin \***

My first encounter with the notion of space was in the concentration camps of Pakistan from early 1972 to December 1973; when I was interned with my family members and the families of other Bengali military officials in the various camps in Pakistan. In the aftermath of Bangladesh's liberation on December 16, 1971, Bengali military officers and soldiers who were in Pakistan and had opted to come to Bangladesh were interned in their homes and later taken to different camps. My first camp experience was in Kohat and then Mandi Bahauddin. Much later, I learnt that we were the "Stranded Bengalis in Pakistan." The word "stranded" has an unsettledness attached to it, where one is left wandering with no specific direction or rootedness. Indeed, those were days of extreme unsettledness; yet within that unsettledness, the Bengalis known as "stranded" tried to find or rather create for themselves a "settledness" for themselves. While states and nations create their own divides and identities often attached to land and territory, human minds have their own agentive capacity, which is broader and often more empowering; and this I link to the cognitive "space" created or constructed within the confines of the restricted physical space. The latter for me was more cognitive than the actual. As a young girl, living within the confines of fenced electric wires, my young mind created a space and land of freedom, a land without fear; to which one day we will return. Our parents used the camp space to give us the semblance of a "normal" life by setting up open sky schools and celebrating the different Bengali festivals while the Pakistani soldiers guarding the camps watched us with their rifles. In those days in my cognitive space, I learnt the meaning of freedom, culture, and identity.

It, however, took me many more years well into the mid-90s to understand the "politics and the internal dynamics of space and space creation," as opposed to the positivist statist notion of territory or the

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frontiers. The notion of space that I am alluding to is not necessarily spatial; it is more in cognition, linked to memories, beliefs, myths, yearnings, or a future that one longs for. In other words, territory or territoriality has a fluidity to it, which is often lost to the eyes or minds unless experienced so; the latter however is a multiplex and multi-layered process with state, nation, community, and the everydayness embedded in it.

My first attempts to ink down or even think back and write about my days in the camps in Pakistan, which were known as the concentration camps were extremely difficult; this is not to suggest that I find it easy today. Quite interestingly I have observed that “we”—the children— who were in the camps don’t talk about those days much even in our conversations, except as passing references. Personally for me, since I have been trying to pen down those days for quite some time, and in fact, the monograph, *The Other Side of the Fence: Stranded Bengalis in Pakistan*,<sup>1</sup> published by the Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka, has a collection of a few narratives, but it was a very difficult journey as people were not willing either to talk or write about their days in the camps.

I too have been trying to ink down those days for quite sometime now; but find myself either lost, scattered, my mind somehow refuses to recall those days; yet those were very critical and formative years of my life and in a way shaped my ideas, my passion and love for my homeland, Bangladesh, a land with which I had very scant familiarity at that stage of my life. Despite this unfamiliarity with the objective in my subjective realm I had indeed created a Bangladesh of my own, which I carried through my camp days. I waited eagerly along with the other stranded Bengalis to come back to Bangladesh, for me it was the land of freedom after all! I have been wondering why this inertia; is it because of the present state of politics, my own frustrations with the state of affairs, the oft-repeated allegations of “Pakistani mentality” of the repatriated military personnel; or is it the person within me which does not want to talk about it. It is a long journey that one has to take down the memory lane, when many of those, my parent’s generation, who took the major brunt of those days are no more there. I believe it is both. My mind is battling with two levels of politics, both very personal and emotion-laden; the challenge is to wrest myself out of this battle within.

When the liberation war of Bangladesh started, it did not take me long to realize that the Bengalis stationed in the then West Pakistan had become ‘aliens’ and objects of suspicion. We could see that people in civilian dresses were guarding our houses, my parents would get alerted at any knock on the door; those were very fearful days indeed, my parents had instructed us not to talk to strangers! In the school things changed, my class mates started asking me when we are going back, and I had no answer to their queries. With the wisdom of time, I now realise that what my young mind had thought to be “sudden” was not sudden alienness; but I had lived as an alien in a land whose foundations were based on a myth of religion constituting the basis of a nation! My contention would be the alienness was in-built. I will come back to this later. However, while carrying on this work, I discovered that looking

back turned out to be very difficult for my family and friends, who were stranded or interned in Pakistan. I was more puzzled and surprised and to some extent saddened by the realisation that the unwillingness had a bitterness to it as well. A sense prevailed that things would go wrong for them if they were identified as returnees from Pakistan. Many of them asked me not to go ahead with this write-up, they expressed their anxiousness that it might hurt me, A cousin of mine who was studying engineering in Lahore and was interned in camp with a Bengali family said to me that he does not want to talk or write about his post-'71 days in Pakistan in this political situation when there is always the fear of being misinterpreted or misunderstood. He went on to add, "who else would know it better than you." It then dawned on me that for many of us, the personal remains political, more so when it comes to recording people's narratives if you are or were on the "other" side of the fence, just spatially and circumstantially not ideologically and cognitively.

At this point let me dwell a little on the alienness between the two wings of Pakistan, that I alluded to earlier.

### **Pakistan: The Myth of a Nation**

The two wings of Pakistan, East and West Pakistan were indeed historical anomalies and a political puzzle. The politics of Bengal preceding the Partition of 1947 witnessed divides and differences existing between the then Muslim leadership on the question of the Partition of Bengal. On the one hand, one sees differences between Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, who was the organisational genius and the builder of the Muslim League in Bengal. Then there were differences between Suhrawardy, Jinnah and Fazlul Huq who was the leader of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP), the most popular party in Bengal. Fazlul Huq was also the mover of the Lahore Resolution, later popularly known as the Pakistan Resolution. It must be remembered that in order to establish Pakistan it was important and critical for Jinnah, whom Ayesha Jalal<sup>2</sup> argues had appeared as the "sole spokesman" of the Muslims to control the support of the Muslim majority provinces, the Punjab and Bengal, of the two the latter was more critical since one-third of the total Muslim population of India lived in Bengal. Though Jalal forcefully makes the case for Jinnah being the sole spokesman, but one does observe challenges to Jinnah emanating from Bengal, and Jinnah too appeared to be cognisant of it. He deliberately tried to side track Suhrawardy, who regarded the latter to be unpredictable and not the kind of person who would ever remain loyal to the boss.<sup>3</sup>

The relations between Fazlul Huq and Jinnah were also tense, though despite being a Praja Party man he was agreeable to the League organisation in Bengal. Huq had formally rejoined the Muslim League at its Lucknow session in October 1937 and played a decisive role in winning the support of the Muslims and establishing the prestige of the party, yet Jinnah removed him from membership of the League Parliamentary Board on charges of insubordination and disloyalty. Jinnah sought an explanation from Huq, to which he responded sharply in the following manner,

You have had the impertinence to ask for an explanation from me ... You are not working for Muslim solidarity at all but seem to be playing a deep game ... Your conduct in Bengal has surprised everyone ... I call upon to explain your conduct<sup>4</sup>

Pakistan was based on the Two-Nation theory of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. The theory claimed that the Hindus and Muslims of India constitute two separate nations based on religion. The course of the Indian nationalist movement had engulfed the Muslims of Bengal within its fold. During that period, their Muslim identity took precedence over their Bengali identity, though the latter was never lost. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan adopted an assimilative policy in line with its understanding of the nation state. Language, more specifically a common language for the entire population of the state was considered to be an essential part of nation-building; and not surprisingly this language had to be reflective of Islamic traditions. In this context, Urdu written in the Arabic-Persian script was considered to be the product of Hindu-Muslim and the attendant Persian-Hindu contact during the days of Muslim rule. It had become exclusively associated with Muslims and their culture in India. Accordingly, Jinnah declared (in English) in Dhaka in March 1948,

Let me make it very clear to you that the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language ... without one language no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function.<sup>5</sup>

A religious orientation was given to the same by Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan. He stated that “the defence of Bengali language in front of Urdu, is against the laws of Islam.”<sup>6</sup> In 1949 the Central Minister for Education openly proposed the introduction of Arabic script for Bengali. It was argued that,

[n]ot only Bengali literature, even the Bengali alphabet is full of idolatry. Each Bengali letter is associated with this or that god or goddess of Hindu pantheon...to ensure a bright and great future for the Bengali language it must be linked with the Holy Quran....Hence the necessity and importance of Arabic script.<sup>7</sup>

To resist the imposition of an alien language and cultural identity upon themselves, the Bengalis counterpoised it by a secular nationalism with language and culture as its core. Thus, Bengali language was adopted as a counter-weapon to fight the hegemony of the Pakistan state. Language thus acquired an immensely political and emotive connotation for the Bengalis. On February 21, 1952, the police opened fire in Dhaka on students who were protesting the imposition of the Urdu language, resulting in the death of four. They instantly became national heroes of the Bengalis. The day henceforward became a day of national glory and celebration for the Bengalis. It is

celebrated as a day of martyrdom as well as victory. Bengali language thus became the basis as well as the symbol of Bengali nationalism. From the demands of linguistic and cultural autonomy, the Bengalis later moved to economic and political autonomy culminating in the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.

## The Stranded

Following the liberation of Bangladesh, many Bengalis found themselves on the “other” side of the fence. This “otherness” and “alienness” perhaps was always there at the political level which was later substantiated by the genocide of 1971. But for the Bengalis, after the liberation of Bangladesh who were stranded in Pakistan and had wanted and later opted for Bangladesh, the state of Pakistan became the “other” in a political and conceptual sense. The Bengali military officers were given the option of choosing their allegiance, those who opted for Bangladesh were put under surveillance and their movements were restricted. Later on, they along with their families were taken to camps, which my young mind had conceived that we were prisoners of war (POW). I do not know why my generation had thought so. Though as Brigadier General (Retd.) Shakhawat Hossain who was also interned in one of the camps stated to me that, there was no line up for the stranded and detained Bengalis, which made it more dangerous, since one did not know about one’s location within the realm of rights.

Content analyses of newspapers, *Pakistan Observer* later *Bangladesh Observer*, and *Dainik Purbodesh* during the period of March 1971 to June 1974 show no discussions regarding the fate of the stranded Bengalis in Pakistan. A few reports, however, appeared in the international media, for e.g., the *New York Times* on April 13, 1972, reported, “Official Reports 2,000 Bengalis Held in Pakistani Jails”; again, on November 12, 1972, the *New York Times* reported, “Wave of Bengalis Fleeing Pakistan.” On May 29, 1973, the *New York Times* reported, “Bhutto Threatens to Try Bengalis Held in Pakistan.” The silence on the issue in the public domain in Bangladesh may be explained by the exigencies and trauma that Bangladesh was going through, not to mention the day-to-day administrative disorder.<sup>8</sup> However, at the political level, the issue of POWs loomed large for India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Bangladesh was eager to get the Bengalis stranded in Pakistan back. In March 1973, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh wrote to the UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim seeking his assistance for the repatriation of the stranded people. The matter could only be resolved through the involvement of the three nations, but the issue was complicated due to the non-recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan. The Simla Agreement between India and Pakistan paved the way for reconciliation in the subcontinent. Following the Simla Agreement, which was welcomed by Bangladesh, on August 28, 1973, the Delhi Agreement was signed between India and Pakistan with the consent of Bangladesh. According to this agreement, it was agreed that the three countries would exchange all POWs except the 195 war criminals wanted by Bangladesh. Once this repatriation

was complete, Bangladesh and Pakistan would negotiate directly regarding the 195. Two weeks later, on September 13, 1973, Delhi began the repatriation of the Pakistan POWs in exchange for stranded Bengalis and Indian nationals. This exchange also involved a substantial number of “non-Bengalis” in Bangladesh who had opted for repatriation to Pakistan.

By the end of October 1973, huge air repatriation was underway with aircraft loaned by East Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom. There were six planes on mission duty carrying an average of 1,200 people per day. By late January 1974, some 90,000 people had been transported from Pakistan to Bangladesh, and over 44,000 from Bangladesh to Pakistan. By mid-February 1974 over 200,000 people had been repatriated under the terms of the New Delhi agreement. By September 1974, some 9,000 people had been transported by sea between Bangladesh and Pakistan and some 231,000 people had been airlifted across the sub-continent. Those airlifted included some 116,000 Bengalis who went from Pakistan to Bangladesh, some 104,000 non-Bengalis who went from Bangladesh to Pakistan, and some 11,000 Pakistanis who were airlifted from Nepal to Pakistan. They had fled from Bangladesh. It was at that time the largest emergency airlift of civilians ever organised.<sup>9</sup>

Following the recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan in February 1974, a Tripartite Agreement was signed between India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan for the normalisation of relations in the subcontinent in New Delhi on April 9, 1974, which endorsed and acknowledged the Simla and the Delhi Agreements. Some important provisions of the “Agreement on the Repatriation of Prisoners War and Civilian Internees” are,

3. The humanitarian problems arising in the wake of the tragic events of 1971 constituted a major obstacle in the way of reconciliation and normalisation among the countries of the sub-continent. In the absence of recognition, it was not possible to have tripartite talks to settle the humanitarian problems, as Bangladesh could not participate in such a meeting except on the basis of sovereign equality.

4. On April 17, 1973, India and Bangladesh took a major step forward to break the deadlock on the humanitarian issues by setting aside the political problem of recognition. In a Declaration issued on that date they said that they “are resolved to continue their efforts to reduce tension, promote friendly and harmonious relationship in the subcontinent and work together towards the establishment of a durable peace.” Inspired by this vision and “in the larger interests of reconciliation, peace and stability in the sub-continent” they jointly proposed that the problem of the detained and stranded persons should be resolved on humanitarian considerations through simultaneous repatriation of all such persons except those Pakistani prisoners of war who might be required by the Government of Bangladesh for trial on certain charges.

5. Following the Declaration there were a series of talks between India and Bangladesh, and India and Pakistan. These talks resulted in an agreement at Delhi on August 28, 1973, between India and Pakistan with the concurrence of Bangladesh, which provided for a solution of the outstanding humanitarian problems.

6. In pursuance of this Agreement, the process of three-way repatriation commenced on September 19, 1973. So far nearly 300,000 persons have been repatriated which has generated an atmosphere of reconciliation and paved the way for normalisation of relations in the sub-continent.<sup>10</sup>

## **The Stranded; The Space**

I did not realise looking back or talking about a period of one's life would be so difficult and there would be so much reluctance and resistance to talk or write about those days of uncertainties. As a young girl growing up in West Pakistan, I was aware of the political fervours taking place in the then East Pakistan. My father was then posted in Sialkot. He was a senior Major in the Army Medical Core (AMC) and was the second in command of a Field regiment. If memory serves me right it was the 6 Field Ambulance, but to be honest, I don't remember it and my parents are no more there to tell me. Strangely after our repatriation from Pakistan, we never much talked about our camp days and whenever we did talk about our childhood it was about the fun times that we have had in our pre-1970 days and our drives to Swat, Murree, and all other places. My father was fond of travelling and he drove us all in our small Austin car to the remotest parts of West Pakistan for sightseeing; these were the things that we talked of, NOT the camp days. Those definitely were not happy times and looking back I realise my parents did not want us to remain disturbed; as our post-repatriated lives too were full of struggles of settling down.

But importantly for me and perhaps for many of my generation, those days were and remain very critical. During the 1971 wartime, the Bengali military officers came under heavy surveillance. My father's promotion was due well before 1970 but it was stopped just because he was a Bengali. I recall how our parents started instructing us to remain guarded in schools. Some of our West Pakistani schoolmates started taunting us as "traitors." I still remember our English teacher telling the class that as a people Bengalis cannot be trusted. Yet there were friends who were very helpful. Those were very uncomfortable and uncertain times. I could see the greying hairlines of my parents. When the war started on a full scale on the Western front, the members of the Bengali families were sent to the Mangla Dam city. There we found that the family members of the West Pakistani military officials were also there, but they were kept in separate places. There was no intermingling between the two—the Bengalis and the West Pakistanis. I remember, how the "Bengaliness" started taking shape in my mind in the dark rooms in Mangla Dam city. The windowpanes were painted dark, and trenches were dug in front of our houses as warning sirens were often heard and we all ran into the trenches. It was difficult to keep my little sister who was only four years old from crying. We had another Bengali family with us, whose daughter was only six months old; her cryings would also not stop in those dark trenches. My father was alone in Sialkot and all the Bengali military personnel were grounded.

On December 16, 1971, victory came to us. We heard on the radio about the surrender of the Pakistan army. We were overjoyed but were scared to death, as our houses were strictly guarded, and we were worried about my father. Finally, we came back to Sialkot. I don't recall the month, but only remember how I had embraced my father! We started hearing that we will be sent to prisons or interned in camps. I watched my parents selling off our furnishes and the small car that had carried us all to the different parts of the country, that we considered once to be our own. Our houses were being guarded and our fates were uncertain. Bengali military officials were given the option to stay either in Pakistan or to opt for Bangladesh. My father, along with a majority of the Bengali military officials had opted for Bangladesh. Those were very intense times, I had mixed feelings, I was scared because we felt like prisoners, it was like being stranded in a "no man's land"; but I was also filled with a sense of patriotism for my homeland, with which I had little familiarity. I guess the human capacity to hope for and dream never dies off; and it is cognitive states like this that create empowering spaces that allow people to carry on under adverse circumstances. In March of 1972, the Bengali military personnel stationed in Sialkot were sent in packed trains to Kohat Camp. The mental state of feeling like prisoners had become very much physically real. Kohat was primarily used as army training barracks. The camp was surrounded by barbed electrical wires and sentries were on guard 24/7. There were no houses, but instead, there were rows and rows of single-room units. Each family was given two rooms. There were common-use bathrooms for which the septic systems and sanitation were terrible. Salaries for all the officers were reduced to subsistence allowance, and we had to learn to live with even lesser resources.

My father had a passion for education. Under no circumstances he was willing to give up and let our studies be stopped. He took special permission from the Camp commander to allow me and my younger brother to be admitted to school so that our education might continue. He cited from what I understand now, the Geneva Convention on the Rights of POWs. My brother and I were admitted to Kohat Convent school. I recall we were taken to school by a guarded *tonga*. However, it was not to last for more than a week; as one of the interned Bengali military officers tried to escape and was electrocuted in his attempts, the fences had electricity passing through them all the while. I don't recall his name now, but remember he left behind his wife and a small 6–7-month baby in the camp. The school going stopped but I was very happy about it. By then I had drawn my lines and felt awkward in school, as the other students knew that I was coming from the camp.

Soon we were moved to Mandi Bahauddin Camp. It must have been late 1972 since it was wintertime. Mandi Bahauddin Camp was a huge and centralised camp designated for Bengali officers and their families. There were bungalow houses in the camp and each house, which would normally accommodate one family, was made to accommodate three families. In Mandi Bahauddin, the Bengali officers were becoming very restless. There was uncertainty about our fates, we had little access to news. During this period of moving from one camp to another, we had no communication with our



extended families back home. In Mandi Bahauddin, things began to take a more formalised shape. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was involved, and I recall how my mother used to write very censored letters to her sister in Manchester, UK. The letters were collected by the ICRC and then posted to the UK. Through the ICRC officials, we would receive replies from our family members in UK and Bangladesh. Through those letters, we came to know that both our maternal and paternal houses had been burnt down by the Pakistani military. My mother was inconsolable!

The Bengali military officials in the camp decided to take matters into their hands and bring some semblance of “normalcy” in our otherwise “prisoned” lives. They set up schools in the rooms and verandas of the bungalows. Schools were also set up under the open sky. There was a canteen in the camp, and writing copies and pencils were bought from there. If I remember correctly, the thrust was to teach Bangla, Maths, English, and other subjects. Since the future had become uncertain, the parents did not want the children’s future to be disrupted. This now makes me realise how important the *right to education* is. The officers, their wives, and the elder children were the teachers in that school. It needs to be noted that the school and the classes created an empowering space for the inmates of the camp. The children had academic as well as physical activities. The homeworks were done diligently, and monthly tests were held. My elder sister and father too taught in that school. Classes were held from nursery up to class VIII. Children growing up in West Pakistan had little knowledge of Bangla, so Bangla was a major area of emphasis, with the recitation of Bangla poems and learning of Bangla alphabets, young Bangladeshi citizens were being born imbued with Bengaliness and Bangla culture.

Bengali cultural activities held in the camp area was another major arena of this nation crafting process within the barbed electric fences of Pakistan territory. We observed the *Rabindra Jayanti*, held Bengali cultural festivals, Bengali dramas, and poems were performed. After every program, we sang the national anthem of Bangladesh, “*Amar Sonar Bangla, Ami Tomae Bhalobashi*.” We observed all these programs right in front of the eyes of the Pakistani soldiers with their guns on their shoulders. I now realise that all our parents were doing, was to create a Bangladesh in our imagination; create a space that would empower us, keep us going, and instil into us the belief that we have a home and land to come back to; an identity, a culture and above all a language of our own. And to this homeland, we will one day return, so life needed to go on. Spaces, as Foucault observes are sites of oppression as well as resistance and sites of identity formation;<sup>11</sup> and for us, the camp space was a site of resistance and identity formation. While the states have their “high politics,” the individuals through the everydayness of their lives, communications, education, and cultural activities create a “high politics” of their own. The “Realist” conception of drawing lines between “high” and “low” or “hard” and “soft” politics, indeed is a hegemonic one, which prioritises the state over the people, yet interestingly, the modern state premises itself upon the “nation” or people.

As for my story, my father never knew how to give up. He wrote to the ICRC again and sought permission for me to sit for my matriculation. I just could not make my father understand that I had been out of the formal education system for quite some time by then and had no clue of the curriculum. Through the ICRC, he made me get in touch with one of my childhood friends from Rawalpindi whose father was a very high-ranking military official in the Pakistan Army Medical Core. Aqduş Rashid, my childhood friend was more than happy to send me the syllabus and the books. I got permission to sit for the exams in early February 1973, and the exams for the Sargodha Board were scheduled for April 1973. In the confines of one little room which I shared with six other girls, including my elder sister, I self-educated myself. I used to pray that something would happen or miraculously we would be repatriated, and I would not have to sit for the exams. However, that was not to happen, and then the exams started. Three other Bengali students also got permission to sit for the exams along with me.

We were taken to the examination centres, which was a public school, in an army-guarded vehicle. I still remember, how while leaving the camp premises, I had to fill up a register copy, which read, *Prisoner's name, Time of going out, Time of coming in*. My father stood by the fence and waved at me and would wait there till my return. In the exam hall it was awkward since we were under the watchful eyes of the military guards who had accompanied us. I came to know about my results from Aqduş, all of us had come out with flying colours. The day the results were announced by the camp authorities, the entire camp celebrated, my father embraced me and burst into tears. I had done exceptionally well. I could not believe it and kept on thinking that there were some errors and that soon the actual results would be published. Aqduş sent me my marksheet and a box full of chocolates and some trinkets; this was handed over to me by the camp authorities. Till date, my only proof of my matriculation is that marksheet that my friend had sent to me. I could never get my matric certificate.

We were repatriated in December 1973. In the camps I received my lessons of life, that space gave me the power to dream, to look beyond tomorrow, and more importantly shaped my life, my mind, and education. Indeed, in the confines of the camp life I had dreamt of freedom, of rights as a free citizen, a homeland, and a Bangladesh of my own.

## The Displaced

I hated my mother. She used to force me to talk to the military officials who visited our house frequently. I was very young and quite beautiful. The military personnel loved to talk to me, my mother knew what their intentions were, yet she would force me to go and talk with them. The military had taken away my father; my mother hoped that if I befriended the military, they would release my father.<sup>12</sup>

This is how Kabita Chakma, former President of Hill Women's Federation (HWF) narrated her childhood experience to me. But Kabita no longer blames

her mother; she now understands that all her mother was doing was trying to protect her 'family', their 'home' and hoping to get the release of Kabita's father who was in army captivity. Being grown up now and having experienced a political movement, Kabita not only understands the helplessness of her mother; but also understands the dynamics of state politics. Kabita blames the state today, which, according to her forced her mother to do what she did. At this point, one needs a serious introspection on the nature of state, the 'given' notion of state as a guarantor of citizen's rights and the issue of citizenship. How equal we are as citizens? The attempt to change people's lives through state power in the name of law and national interest takes away people's lives from them. The resistances take varied forms. In the above instance, Kabita's mother, a homemaker tried to protect the family by appeasing the military. In other words, in this instance, the military derived its impunity socially from the family concerned by creating fear within the family.<sup>13</sup>

The above is not an isolated incident in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh. The CHT situated in the southwestern region of Bangladesh comprises of three districts: Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. It is populated by eleven ethnic groups who are culturally, and linguistically different from the Bengalis. The topography of the region is mainly hilly, which is different from the rest of the districts of Bangladesh. The region comprises almost ten per cent of the total land area of Bangladesh. The CHT had its own administrative system, largely administered by three circle chiefs, known as the Rajas. The three circles are: the Chakma circle, the Mong circle, and the Bohmong circle. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulations, 1900 popularly called the CHT Manual 1900 promulgated by the British colonial power constitutes the benchmark for administration for the Hill people, as they consider the Manual to be protective of their identity, rights, and privileges. The intrusion of the modern state has seen the erosion of their rights, and changes brought about in the name of "development" led to a widespread displacement of the Hill people and loss of their traditional land.

The first major blow and displacement of the Hill people came through the development endeavour in the CHT undertaken by the state of Pakistan through the construction of the Kaptai Dam. In order to accelerate the industrialisation process of East Pakistan, the Pakistan government undertook the project to harness the water resources of CHT. A hydroelectric project was constructed on the Karnafuly river in Rangamati. A huge lake was created to the north and east of a barrage at Kaptai village between 1957–62 with US financial and technical assistance. The construction of the dam had far-reaching implications for the Hill people. No social impact study was made prior to the construction of the dam. The dam submerged an area of about 400 sq. mi. including about 54,000 acres of cultivable land making up 40 per cent of the district's total acreage. Almost 90 miles of government road and 10 sq. mi. of Reserved Forest (RF) also went under water. It made more than 100,000 Chakma persons landless and homeless. The Hill people regard the Kaptai dam as their teardrop, and very symbolically for them, a large chunk of the Royal palace had also submerged under water, which can still be seen on

moonlit nights. Quite ironically, this is projected as a tourist attraction by the state-run *Porjaton*, or tourism department.

A section of the Hill people, however, regard the Kaptai dam as a watershed in the political awakening of the Hill people. Being deprived of land resources, since the Hill people were mostly dependent on agriculture; they took recourse to education. It was a period of intense political movements in East Pakistan, but the Hill people had never been incorporated within the fold of those movements; moreover, the Kaptai dam was constructed for the development of East Pakistan, and it facilitated the migration of the Bengalis into the region. The Pakistan government also withdrew the Special Status of the region in 1964. These incidents gave rise to political consciousness among the Hill people. The seeds of a “nation” distinct from the Bengalis began to germinate. The Rangamati Communist Party (RCP) was formed with Manobendra Narayan Larma as its leader. This was the beginning of the growth of nationalism among the Hill people; though there is abundant scope to debate on this issue, but in a post-colonial setting the idea of a separate identity in a political sense saw its birth in the CHT with the creation of Kaptai. One may argue that it was the politics of development which created the displacements and the displaced; the loss of land which for the Hill people is sacrosanct and is considered as the abode of their ancestors; the displacements gave birth to a new form of politics, which was more vocal and formal in nature in the CHT.

The formation of the Parbattya Chottogram Jonoshonghoti Samity (PCJSS) in 1972 in independent Bangladesh was a continuation of the same process. The PCJSS’s demand for cultural recognition and autonomy for CHT within the state of Bangladesh saw the onset of an insurgency, which began in 1975 and concluded with the signing of an accord in December 1997. Over two decades of insurgency saw the full militarisation of the CHT; and the settlement of Bengalis in the region as a counter-insurgency measure. The settlements were made in the name of “development”; and the claim that there were empty spaces and vast tracts of idle land in the CHT. The latter claim was indeed incorrect since most of the land in CHT was not fit for cultivation; and the entire region being hilly and sloppy constitutes a fragile ecological zone. The government claimed that Bengalis were being settled in *kebas* or government-owned land. However, the Hill people claimed these as communal land. The settlements not only had economic consequences, but it also made 100,000 Hill people homeless. About half of them crossed over to Tripura and Mizoram as refugees, and the rest became internally displaced persons (IDPs). The settlements also changed the demographic composition of the region.<sup>14</sup>

The land and the Bengali settlers’ issue are the major bones of contention between the Hill people and the Bangladesh state. The autonomy movement saw the birth of “*Jumma*” nationalism of the Hill people. The movement witnessed the active participation of women and the general people; one can discern the rise of indigenous women’s rights and human rights movements during the period. These movements developed national, regional, and international networks. Though ironic, yet the CHT crisis saw

the birth of an indigenous people's movement within the state of Bangladesh. The Bangladesh state does not recognise the existence of indigenous people within Bangladesh. There are many stories in the CHT like Kabita Chakma, her mother was later forced to dismantle their house by the Bangladesh military personnel; as it was regarded as a shelter place for *Shanti Babini*, the armed wing of the PCJSS by the Bangladesh military. The homelessness and displacement strengthened the resolve of Kabita Chakma. Till date, Kabita Chakma remains an activist for Hill people's rights and women's rights. The displacements and loss of land made the Hill people more conscious of their rights and more importantly, the notion of land ownership also marked a change from communal to private. Land, thus became a "property." This was a displacement of their identity too, known as *Jhumiyas* or people who do *jhum* (slash and burn) cultivation, they either became landless or took to plough cultivation. It is no surprise then, that the nomenclature Jumma was taken as their collective identity marker by the PCJSS. The Hill people had been looked down since the colonial period because of the *jhum* mode of cultivation; the adoption of the jumma identity was a reassertion of their selfhood, a move to give the Hill people their pride back in their tradition. The latter indeed has immense empowering effects, both in the physical and cognitive sense, and cuts across the temporal scale.

## The Refugees

Bangladesh today hosts more than 1.1 million Rohingyas in Bangladesh, officially they are known as forcibly displaced persons from Myanmar. The Rohingya influx into Bangladesh began in the late '70s, and the second wave came in the '90s, the latest being the massive influx in August 2017; the latter has been described as a classic case of ethnic cleansing by the UN Secretary General. The Rohingyas are victims of genocide committed by the Myanmar state. They are stateless and one of the most persecuted people in the world. Today, the Rohingyas who took shelter in Bangladesh are housed in 34 camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf *upa-zillas* in the district of Cox's Bazar and over 30,000 of them have been relocated in Bhasan Char.

As part of collecting the testimonies of the victims/survivors of the genocidal violence, I have been going to the camps and talking mostly with women to document the nature of gender-based violence (GBV). It was revealing to observe that, women irrespective of their arrival periods in Bangladesh, whether in 1992 or in 2017–18; and their age were very vocal about the atrocities committed against them. Their daughters who have been born and raised in Bangladesh also knew of the stories and talked about the sufferings of their mothers, aunts, and relatives. The memories are being transmitted within the confines of the camps. These inter-generational stories of suffering have created a bond, a living history/herstory among the Rohingya women. The stories came live as women talked of men in olive green uniforms, some had masks on their faces and had long hair. As they spoke, I could see that they had gone back in time; their body language and the tone of their voice changed. There was anger, at times helplessness about

the present, and deep concerns for the future of their children. But in no unequal terms, they wanted justice.

Women also said that age was not a factor for the “Burmese.” They raped old women and young girls and killed the men in the family. Apart from torture at personal levels, women in general talked of the lack of freedom in Myanmar. They had no freedom of movement or education. They needed permission to move from one locality to another and had to constantly bribe the Chairman of their respective areas to get the minimum requirements. They had no access to medical facilities and hospitals. The new arrivals said that they send their children, meaning sons to madrasas, for if they learn the Holy Quran then at least they will get some job in the mosques. There is no other employment opportunity for them. The newly arrived women also said that it was a sin for girls to acquire education, so the girls receive only religious education. It is interesting to note that, despite the extreme conservativeness and patriarchal nature of the Rohingya society, the Rohingya women were very vocal about the violations and atrocities committed against them.

“We are not ashamed of telling the world that we have been raped, we are not ashamed.” These words were said by many women, and quite fiercely. Even the Rohingya men showed me to the tents where women who had been violated were staying. This assertion, that too coming from a deeply conservative and patriarchal society where most of the women I talked to were clad in burkha and many had their faces covered, might appear to be at odds with the conventional understanding of shame and honour. Being violated or raped is generally equated with the loss of shame and honour for a girl and the community.

These people, otherwise very conservative, who even consider girl education to be a sin, bring forth not only their anger but also the determination to expose the perpetrators. Underlying these claims and assertions is the reflection of a deep-felt scar of being violated as a people and the demand for justice. The assertion that they were not ashamed does factor in that it is a matter of shame, but they through their assertions are crossing the traditional boundaries of shame and honour; purity and pollution; and establishing a norm were speaking out and holding the perpetrator accountable is no longer silenced. The notions of purity and pollution so integral to conventional constructs of womanhood and honour of a community/nation are also crossed and challenged in order to attain their rights as human beings. These assertions, it is argued here are major challenges to the world community on its normative principles and standards; and also, the social constructs of norms and practices supposedly regulating the society. This might be seen as an act of desperation under desperate conditions, but there is no denying that traditional boundaries are being crossed by very “traditional” communities and women who belong to those communities, which the world labels as “backward.”<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note the contributions of various international and national non-governmental NGOs in the process of space creation for the refugees. The Rohingya camps are dotted with friendly/safe spaces, namely, Women Friendly Space, Child Friendly Space, Men Friendly Space, Elderly

Friendly Space, Orphan Friendly Space. During the focused group discussions (FGDs) with the refugee women in the camp, they said that in Myanmar their movements were restricted by their family. Security concerns and religion were major factors behind this. Parents often kept their daughters inside the house, protected from any contact with males. In the camp, the creation of women and girls' safe spaces (WGSS) have emerged as a key strategy for the protection and empowerment of women and girls affected by the conflict. According to UNFPA, the idea of a safe space is a space where women and girls feel physically and emotionally safe.<sup>16</sup> The term "safe," in the present context, refers to the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence (or fear of violence), or abuse. It is a space where women and girls, being the intended beneficiaries, feel comfortable and enjoy the freedom to express themselves without the fear of judgment or harm.<sup>17</sup>

During FGDs with the women, the participants stated that they enjoyed the space. This meeting place has created a bonding between them. They sing songs, chant rhymes and gossip about things. This is a space where they also come to dispense tensions. They sometimes discussed about the issues and problems that they face in their camp lives. Physical security and safety are major issues for them. Women talk about domestic violence and try to create bonding among themselves. It was observed that over the period of time, due to external interventions by the INGOs and NGOs, women have been sensitised about their rights. They speak out against domestic violence and console each other. Women speak of polygamy and assert that it is wrong; though polygamy is quite common among the Rohingyas. Child marriage is common among the Rohingyas. Rohingya women now speak out against child marriage. They also want their children to be educated, both male and female. The ideas of Friendly and Safe spaces have their strong limitations. These may be looked upon as tools to "manage" people, an NGO, and INGO device to carry on their assistance; but in the process the key concerns and issues remain unaddressed, and the perpetrators go free while the global powers appear as the defenders of humanitarian laws and rules. The geo-economics and geopolitics surrounding the refugees is often lost sight of. In the instance of the Rohingyas, one observes a kind of complacency and acceptance of things, as they feel that at least they are safe in Bangladesh.

The Rohingya women are well aware of citizenship and its entitlements. Very frankly they stated that citizenship entails, equality of opportunities and freedom. They talked of their deprivations and lack of freedom, education, religion, movement, basic services, and so on. They felt that they need to have their own "kings" in the decision-making processes and institutions in order to vocalise their voices. They look towards a future where their children will get opportunities for education and decent jobs. They will be free to practice their religion and move around without fear and will be able to sleep in peace in their homes. One can observe the process of selfhood and political identities being created within them. The spectre of fear haunts them but the fearless soul within them looks towards a future without fear. Years of persecution, disenfranchisement, and the stripping off their citizenship have instilled fear, an absolute lack of trust on the Myanmar state,

and a bonding among the Rohingyas. The physical space of the camp has exposed them to INGO, NGO, and Bangladesh government's interventions at multiple levels. The Rohingyas also remain virtually connected with their relatives still living in Myanmar and their relatives who are part of the Rohingya diaspora. The physical and virtual space has created a bonding of trust and the sense of a community, a people; as the Rohingya women stated, that they are persecuted because they are Rohingyas and Muslims. Many Rohingyas stated that while fleeing Burma, they felt relieved as they approached a "Muslim" country. It is plausible to argue that the religious identity is being flagged to consolidate their bonding with the Bangladesh people, and the local host community, the majority of whom are Muslims. This suggests the role that religion continues to play in the lives of people and how it is adopted as a negotiating strategy. Indeed, there are Hindus and Christians also among the Rohingyas, who have taken refuge in Bangladesh; they constitute a minority within a minority.

Life in the camps is a restricted one. People live on rations. Camps are not homes. The need for belonging and being tied to a land, which gives one a sense of ownership is eternal in human beings. With the passage of time, the yearning for one's roots and the desire to go back to one's own home is understandable. The Rohingya women realise that Bangladesh is not their home, this land can provide them shelter in camps but not "home." Clifford Geertz pointed out that it is the collective memory of suffering that builds a nation.<sup>18</sup> There indeed is a collective memory of persecution, atrocities, and torture that prevails among the Rohingya people. History, as experienced as common history, has been cited by Deutsch as a major ingredient in nation-making.<sup>19</sup> The Rohingya community has experienced a common history of collective suffering, which binds the community together. Their lack of trust in the state of Myanmar and the assertion that they would return if members of their community assure them of safety back home is an articulation of faith and bonding of the community. The Rohingya women claimed themselves as Rohingya Muslims. They argued that they are being persecuted because of their religious identity; this one can argue is being used as an identity marker to negate the negativity that had been associated with it in Myanmar. Ashis Nandy's observation that a nation is born out of the sins of another nation,<sup>20</sup> perhaps is applicable here to suggest that a Rohingya nation is being born out of the sins committed by the Myanmar state.

## Conclusion

This write-up is an attempt to traverse a personal journey at different phases of my life as an individual and a researcher. Though the three scenarios are different, but a common thread weaves them together, and this is the *modern state*. The situation of being "stranded," "displaced," and "refugee" or "forcibly displaced" are the consequences and creations of a state's oppressive policies. However, land/territory and borders too are integral to these creations. Here I would juxtapose the concept of "space" to "territory," which is otherwise a space as well; however, I would contend that space acquires a



different and larger connotation in situations like this. While having a physical realm, it extends beyond the spatial and penetrates the cognitive. The latter becomes a site of defiance, empowerment, and identity formation at the individual and community levels. To take the cue from Nandy, I would argue the politics of territoriality and bordered spaces gives birth to the politics of cognitive spaces which are borderless, and have a timelessness about them, which makes it a much more powerful tool of resistance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Amena Mohsin, *The Other Side of the Fence: Stranded Bengalis in Pakistan* (Dhaka: Centre for Genocide Studies, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *Inside Bengal Politics 1936–1947: Unpublished Correspondence of Partition Leader* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2003), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Fazlul Huq to Jinnah, October 30, 1936, in Rashid, *Inside Bengal Politics*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Jamiluddin Ahmad, ed., *Speeches and Writings of Mr Jinnah*, vol. 2 (Lahore: Ashraf publications, 1964), 490.

<sup>6</sup> Safiqul Islam, "Failure in State-Building: The Case of Pakistan," *Asian Profile* 12, no.6 (December 1984): 585.

<sup>7</sup> Anisuzzaman, *Creativity, Reality and Identity* (Dhaka: International Centre for Bengal Studies, 1993), 107.

<sup>8</sup> A.K. Khondokar, Moidul Hasan, and S.R. Mirza, *Muktijuddher purbapor: Kothopokothbon* (Dhaka: Prothoma, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Mark Cutts, *The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Actions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 74.

<sup>10</sup> "Bangladesh—India—Pakistan: Agreement on The Repatriation of Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees [Done at New Delhi, April 9, 1974]," *International Legal Materials* 13, no. 3 (1974): 501–5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20691263>.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. I, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage 1990); Jeremy W. Crampton, and Stuart Elden, eds. *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, (Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Kabita Chakma (former President of Hill Women's Federation), in discussion with the author in Dhaka, February 18, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Amena Mohsin, The History of Sexual Violence, Impunity and Conflict The Bangladesh Context, in *Of The Nation Born, The Bangladesh Papers*, ed. Hameeda Hossain & Amena Mohsin (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2016), 55–56.

<sup>14</sup> Amena Mohsin, *The Politics of Nationalism: The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Amena Mohsin, Caught between the nation and the state: Voices of the Rohingya refugee women in Bangladesh, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, Volume 5 Number 2, June 2020, pp. 144-157

<sup>16</sup> UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub, *Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Guidance Note Based on Lesson Learned from the Syrian Crisis*, March 2015, <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/women-girls-safe-spaces-guidance-note-based-lessons-learned-syrian-crisis>.

<sup>17</sup> UNFPA, *Women and Girls Safe Spaces*.

<sup>18</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Primordial and Civic Ties," in *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson, and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 29–33.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Deutsch, "Nationalism and Social Communication," in *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson, and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 26–28.

<sup>20</sup> Ashish Nandy made the statement in his Valedictory Speech on, In *Revisiting International Relations (IR): Critical Reflections on 100 Years* (Conference), Dhaka, January 21, 2019.

## Book Review

# Victims of Partition and Caste: The Saga of Dalit Refugees of Bengal

By

Mohana Chatterjee \*

*Caste and Partition in Bengal: The Story of Dalit Refugees, 1946–1961*, by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhary; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022; pp. 288; ₹1495; ISBN: 987-0192859723 (Hardcover)

Grand narratives of political parties, their leaders, and an unending search for the “guilty men” responsible behind the 1947 Partition of India, had been the dominant trends in the Partition history for a long time. However, the recent studies on Partition focus more on a human dimension, where trauma and sufferings of the displaced persons take the central stage pushing aside the “High Politics” in the background. Keeping up with this contemporary trend, the book *Caste and Partition in Bengal: The Story of Dalit Refugees, 1946–1961* by eminent historians Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhary, presents caste as an analytical category in the historiography of the 1947 Partition of India. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay is known for addressing the caste question through his popular works like *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*; *The Namasudra Movement*; and *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*. Anasua Basu Ray Choudhary specialises in refugees, forced migration, and women in conflict zones, her distinguished works being *Women in Indian Borderlands* and *The State of Being Stateless: An Account of South Asia*.

The book begins by questioning the general practice of categorising different religions as a homogeneous unit, ignoring the inherent differences of caste, class, and gender present among them. This book successfully

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connected the two popular strands of Indian historiography—the history of Partition and the history of Dalit movements. It takes up the question of the disappearance of the Dalit from the Partition history and thereby attempts to fill in the lacuna. Though the caste dimension of Partition has already been studied by various scholars and hence it is not something that is completely new, and yet the novelty of this book lies in its central focus on the caste question and the Dalit refugees in the discussion of Partition politics, migration, and rehabilitation in West Bengal. This book presents pragmatic evidence to argue that the Dalits in Bengal, were neither passive onlookers nor accidental victims of Partition politics and violence. In fact, the unity of the Dalit movement was ruptured, and they ultimately lost their political autonomy because of their participation in Partition politics. The book vividly portrayed the differences present between the Dalit leaders of the Refugee camps and the middle-class *Bhadralok* leaders of the mainstream political parties. The latter tried to suppress the caste question in the interest of a larger refugee unity, but this ultimately let down the Dalit refugee movement in Bengal. Structured in five chapters, along with an introduction, conclusion, and an epilogue, the book depicts the journey of East Pakistani Dalit refugees after their displacement from their homeland. The introductory chapter briefly discusses the existing literature on Partition and refugees in Bengal. Subsequently drawing our attention to the existing research gaps, which this book attempts to cover. The authors at this point made it fairly clear that, through this book, they do not propose any kind of “revisionist” view, rather they used both theoretical insights and empirical information from the research of previous scholars who have written on the same subject.

The first chapter “Caste and Partition,” critically analyse the question of Dalit identity on the eve of the 1947 Partition. It describes how Dalit responses to Partition politics were actually the result of a very complex interaction between numerous factors like their subalternity, religious beliefs, sense of identity, the idea of space, and political mobilisation. The second chapter “The Great Exodus” focuses on the diaspora of the Dalit refugees. By challenging the official theory of “economic migration,” it argues that the Dalit peasants choose to migrate not because of any economic reason, rather they were driven by a profound sense of insecurity created by a persistent situation of low-intensity violence, critically examines the Delhi Pact of 1950 and looks into what it actually offered the Dalit refugees of Bengal. It argues that Delhi Pact was bound to fail because of Nehru’s basic assumption—that migration would stop if overt communal violence could somehow be contained—was absolutely wrong. The third chapter “Camps and Borderlands” talks about the resistance by the Dalit leaders in refugee camps, who ultimately organised themselves into *Bastubara Samitis*. This chapter presented camps as political spaces and also talked about the leadership provided by refugee women like Maya Saha of Dhubulia Camp, Saraju Bala Bal of Bhadrakali Women’s Camp, Kamala Tanti of Titagarh No.1 Women’s Camp, Sisubala Das and Sumati Mali of the Ratibati Camp in Bardhaman district, etc. It further narrated the struggles of those Dalit refugees who settled in the border districts of Nadia and 24 Parganas by their self-

rehabilitation endeavours. Chapter four “State and Rehabilitation” looks into the evolution of the West Bengal state policy of rehabilitation for those Dalit peasant refugees, who came after 1950. It critically examines the policy of rehabilitating the Bengali Dalit refugees outside Bengal, along with analysing the politics associated with it. These refugees were sent to places like Bihar, Andaman, and Dandakaranya. The fifth chapter “Politics and Resistance” looks into the roles of the political parties behind the popular refugee Satyagraha of 1958. Simultaneously, it also examines the contradictions between different layers of political leadership in this refugee movement. This Satyagraha was mainly a resistance attempt against the highly unpopular Dandakaranya Project, which was created for the rehabilitation of the Dalit Refugees in the Dandakaranya region of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh (present-day Chhattisgarh). Finally, this chapter tries to explain why the Bengali Dalit refugees were ultimately discarded by the middle class political elite, thereby leaving these refugees with no option rather than going to Dandakaranya.

Caste and Partition are the constants that connect all the chapters of this book, thereby aptly justifying the title of the book. The concluding section of the book looks into how Partition politics severely affected and disrupted the Dalit movements in Bengal. The period of study of this book ends in 1961 when the refugee movement against the dispersal policy was ultimately withdrawn and the first phase of the Dandakaranya Project was completed. But the struggles of the Bengali Dalit refugees for their survival and the search for a home did not end there. The epilogue segment briefly narrates two events related to the dispersion of Dalit refugees, that took place in the post-1961 period. The first one is the Hazratbal Riot of 1964, while the second one is the Marichjhanpi massacre of 1978–79. These two events firmly showcase the continuing injustice being committed against the Dalit refugees. Lastly, the epilogue briefly refers to the recent developments in the recovery of Dalit selfhood by the Bengali refugees. The book presents a complex multi-layered story of Partition, migration, camp life, refugee resistance, rehabilitation politics, and the role of caste in that space. This book is a very significant contribution to the genre of Partition studies and is an essential read for any scholar who aspires to understand the 1947 Partition and the complexities associated with it. Simultaneously, it is equally relevant for those who are interested in studying Dalit history, as the book very consciously introduces caste as a discursive category of discussion in the 1947 Partition, thereby depicting the convergence of both the Dalit and Refugee identity. It strongly argues that the Dalit refugees were the most unfortunate and they ultimately failed to get a fair deal from any established political parties. Through this book, the authors attempted to reconstruct the narratives of extreme discrimination and injustice, committed against the Dalit refugees of Bengal, along with the story of their resistance and protest.

## Book Review

# The Aftermath of Partition: Vulnerabilities, Remembrance, and Fractured Identities

By

Debasree Sarkar \*

**Revisiting Partition: Contestation, Narratives and Memories**, ed. by Anindita Ghosal; New Delhi: Primus, 2022; pp. 494+xvii; Rs. 1695; ISBN: 978-93-5572-147-1 (Hardcover)

*Revisiting Partition: Contestation, Narratives and Memories* trace the causes of designating the migrant communities as “others” that developed right from the post-Partition period. The aftermath of Partition affected both the geopolitics of the Indian subcontinent and permanently changed the psychological and cultural matrix of the partitioned states. The simple act of drawing “line” to mark territories for different nations created “artificial” borders demarcating new nation states that had political repercussions but also created the endless struggle of finding the “neverland” called “home” or “*desb*” whose address was forever changed and whose reality was endlessly altered. As the power to draw and divide territories or homes-hearths-habitats was not vested with the people living on those land, their will/desire never got reflected in the grand narrative of Partition. After the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, people living on those lands which were partitioned, especially those living on/around the borders faced multiple dilemmas. This book tries to map the dilemmas of these people who suddenly became refugees in official documents and were not received well in the host countries, at least not the way they had imagined. It also talks about the lack of sensitivity among policymakers in acknowledging the distinct socio-cultural

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Refugee Watch, 61 & 62, June & December 2023.

differences, and linguistics and community identities of the refugees that often got merged. Refugee and rehabilitation policies were supposed to be the same for all displaced persons, but, in reality, different categories of refugees received different treatments, like the officers and staff members dealing with the refugee crises were inclined to provide their “own” people with immediate relief and subsequently viable rehabilitating measures. The book is divided into five parts: 1) Partition’s Long Shadow: Community Relations, Belongingness and “Others”; 2) Partition in India’s North-East: Marginality vs. Marginalisation; 3) Pakistan and Bangladesh: Partition in Narratives, Words and Images; 4) Partition and West Bengal: Borders, Refugees and Political Movements; 5) In Conversation with Tanvir Mokammel. The compendium of seventeen articles and one interview looks into the enduring effects of Partition and the complications that came with it, making the refugee movements a protracted process. It reflects on the common life experiences of the people whose lives changed forever after the Radcliff Line was drawn, and the ongoing influence on the national, provincial, regional, and local undercurrents.

The first section of the book deals with the politics of identity and categorisation of the refugees and points out the gap in opportunities available to the refugees according to their refugee status. At the time of the Partition of 1947 and the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, new borders were created between India and East Pakistan/Bangladesh, and a huge populace, both Hindus and Muslims, migrated on either side of the borders. Both the Indian and the Pakistani, and later the Bangladeshi administrative forms and bureaucratic systems magnified the refugees as foreigners, simultaneously constructing the idea of citizens as opposed to the former. The narratives of infiltration created psycho-social alienation. By including the 1971 refugees, India was disengaging itself from the notion of citizen refugees. Thus, 1971 marks a clear break in distinguishing a citizen from an illegal infiltrator who is always a doubtful citizen who has dodged the barbed wire, infecting the “purity” of the nation. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay talks about the marginalisation of the refugees, the majority being Dalit peasants who came after 1950, dispersed over a wide region spread across central and western India and found no place in the new province of West Bengal. The intersectionality of caste and class, and the regional cultural identities of East Bengal versus West Bengal made it almost impossible to have a united front of Dalit resistance against Brahminical hierarchical dominance. Hence, Partition not only created new identities such as refugees, but in the context of Bengal, it also affected the social and cultural relations between communities—divided by various social praxis. Sipra Mukherjee traces the voices of the Namashudra community who were compelled to move from Faridpur in East Bengal/Pakistan to West Bengal, from refugee camps to exiled lands of Dandakaranya-Andaman Islands-Marichjhapi, and in these normative structures of power, the opinions or preferences of the people of the lower strata of society never mattered. Thus, the only avenue of gaining/achieving power remained in the reiteration of their community identity in the literature. Pallavi Chakravarty points out that refugeehood is not a homogenous block

with a unilinear pattern of mobility and struggle. Focusing on the Bengal context, she shows that terms like refugee and displaced persons were used interchangeably by the Indian state. The former was used in times of political propitiousness, as there was a provision of funds specifically allotted to the people who were displaced from their homes by communal disturbances, whereas the latter was used more frequently for official purposes. The migrants felt humiliated to be termed and seen as refugees as they thought of their sacrifices as crucial to the birth of the new nations. But some of them continued to use the term refugee so that they could get rehabilitation aid from the Indian government. There are people who use it to this day, and there are those who have found other alternatives like *udbastu* or *bastubara* to define their status. Migrants from West Pakistan preferred *purushbarthi* (self-reliant) instead of the term *sharanarathi* (seeking shelter/refugee). Thus, Chakravarty suggests that the term “Partition-refugee” could be used for all these people to distinguish them from the refugees in Europe and to address the concerns specific to their situation. Tista Das tells the tale of the Partition’s truant children in West Bengal, who refused to be satisfied with the State’s mode of charity, and the refugees who tried to be on the “good side” of the State by staying on the earmarked accommodations but later came to be clubbed with the vagrants as the government failed to rehabilitate them either. Das shows how the need to avail governmental aid fixed one’s identity as a refugee and perpetually homeless. The United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) and the leaders of the refugees formulated their own counterstrategies while the government categorised the refugees based on their dependence upon the State, the date of their migration, etc., and carried out its own rehabilitation programme accordingly. As land was crucial in the rehabilitation process, Leftist politics became relevant to the refugees and the landless peasants. Thus, common problems created class consciousness among them, and many refused to abide by the dictates of the State and fought for “actual rehabilitation” which was never seriously taken into consideration by the authorities. Nandini Bhattacharya portrays the aspirations and challenges faced by the people who crossed the border and came from East Bengal to maintain their foothold in the land they now inhabit, while always thinking about the left behind vignettes of their homeland—the dialect, the characteristics of the land, the flavour of the food—which created a connectedness among themselves with a reminiscing nostalgia regarding their past. This collective recollection is often passed on as a family heirloom to the next generation who have no physical connection with the land but inherited the memory of loss and pain of their parents/grandparents, which created a loosely bound cultural entity. Thus, the address of their *desh* still lingers as the starting point of their conversation.

In the second section of the book, Sajal Nag focuses on how Partition changed the entire geographical region of the northeast and the lives of the marginalised group including the tribal clans of the hills, and how problematic governmentality was regarding the conditions of the uprooted populace creating “floating communities”. Binayak Dutta shows how the reconstruction of the history of the Sylhet Referendum of 1947



accommodated the cultural aspects of the event, through the narratives of songs and poems. With the aid of the official narratives, it weaves recollection into the archives to construct the events of 1947 into a tapestry. Dutta explores the popular and subaltern unorganised participation through slogans, songs, and graffiti, which reflected the complex interplay of myriad issues in a colloquial form. This method of examining a specific historical moment or event critiques the colonial dominant traditions of the narrative in addition to the field itself. Gorky Chakraborty traces the post-Partition refugee settlements in the *chars* of the river Brahmaputra in Assam and explores the ongoing effects of Partition on the lives of the vulnerable, the minorities, specifically the Muslims, and how it led to their further marginalisation and ghettoisation by simultaneously constituting “citizens” as subjects of the nation. By using diverse source materials, Chakraborty establishes Partition as a continuing process that regulates the State practices and psyche of the postcolonial communities at large. The necessity of proving the validity of their identity as citizens, labour market discrimination towards them, and the denial of their land rights, all point to the othering of the char dwellers, proving the unfinished nature of the Partition. Focusing on the Barak Valley in Assam, Suranjana Choudhury attempts to explicate how fictional narratives on Partition unfold a complex mesh of layered tales and engages with the perennially displaced lives and fragmented belongings living with the remnants of the sustained loss and sufferings of their displacement and struggles of their mobility.

The third section shows how the dream of *a land of one's own*, especially in the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh, turned into disillusionment for the refugees when many of them were uprooted multiple times in the course of less than three decades from the Partition of 1947 to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. The articles deal with the Bengali and non-Bengali Muslim returnees, the Bihari refugees, and the fate of the *muhajirs* which has not been settled even after all these years of Partition. Sayeed Ferdous looks beyond the naturalisation of the Punjab bias in Partition studies and explores why the East Bengal episode has mostly remained absent in the field of research. Drawing experiences and voices from East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh, Ferdous traces the different trends of ideologies—the extremists versus the moderates, the Islamists versus the secularists, the elite versus the subaltern—in the contemporary politics of Bangladesh and suggests their root in 1947 and its aftermath, whereas a trend in Bangladeshi nationalism considers 1952 and 1971 as the foundational moments in its rupture from Pakistan and retains its sympathy for India. At the same time, their Muslim identity and related leaning towards Pakistan could not undo the spirit of the Liberation War of 1971. In order to understand this “double burden” and contemporary Bangladeshi politics with its polarised and entangled positions, it is necessary to understand the interconnectedness of the meta events of 1947 and those of 1971. Anindita Ghoshal explores how Pakistan's two halves, the East and the West, could not remain unified for very long under the banner of Islam. She argues that the inherent disparities in policies on the socio-cultural and economic fronts led to the emergence of

mental barriers in the psyche of the East Pakistanis, which ultimately culminated in the War of Liberation of 1971. From ignoring the popular/cultural sentiments of the Bengali population of East Bengal and renaming it East Pakistan in the Constitution of 1956 to declaring conditions for availing the fundamental human rights of citizens in the Constitution of 1962, it was clear that the Bengali nationalism that emerged from the language movement was a constant threat to the integrity of Pakistan along with its political economy. Thus, the Bengali Muslims, colonised in their own country, embarked upon a journey of formulating their own narratives and a sense of shared feeling of historical, intellectual, and cultural superiority, which eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh. Rituparna Datta suggests that, through the mental regimes of emotional economies of remembering the home within the homeland for the returnees from East Pakistan, the inherited memories and lived realities within the crux of shifting family relations and contested cartographies are also altered. Datta contends that this finally became the means of traditional linkages of patriliney and geographical congruity, where the local becomes the global for the returnees whose existence and ideologies challenge the idea of a homogenised nation state. For the ghettoised, internally displaced, and returnee Muslims, erasing the memory of the time leading up to and immediately following the Partition became a method of survival. The need to adjust to the newfound reality and the preoccupation of a gaze directed backward to the natal or habitual home created the possibility of multiple identities in a human being. Thus, citizenship fails to prevent people from identifying themselves with a piece of land lying outside the fence and jurisdiction of the nation they are part of. Urvi Mukhopadhyay focuses on the Punjab film industry. After the Partition, Pakistan wanted an alternative film production center in Lahore and lured Muslim artists and resources in Bombay to come and settle in the promised Lollywood. But it could never establish an alternative institute of culture, nor could challenge the South Asian monopoly of Bollywood. Inquiring about the cross-border migration of those working in the film industry, Mukhopadhyay demonstrates how cinematic enjoyment, which was formerly a shared form of cultural expression, became muddled up as a result of the social, political, and economic repercussions of Partition.

The political movements organised by refugees and others living in “Adverse Possessions” are the topic of the fourth section of the book. Rup Kumar Barman notes that the movement of Berubari, one of the five police stations that were excluded from West Bengal as a result of the Radcliffe Award, aided in the development of political movements that resulted in an amendment to the Indian Constitution. By using pertinent sources, Barman demonstrates how Berubari was connected to the idea of “Adverse Possession” or Bangladeshi land possessed by India. Debdata Chowdhury demonstrates how the Partition's ethno-religious demands became a constant presence in stories about national identity, citizenship, and belonging, where territoriality serves as the foundation. This article traces the ideological structure of the organisations like the Amra Bangali, Nikhil Banga Nagarik Sangha, Banga Sena, who demanded a separate homeland for the Bengalis,

consisting of parts of West Bengal and East Pakistan, and tries to understand how the border was being used by these organisations. It also examines the relationship between the religious extremism of these organisations and the nationalist agenda of the relevant states, particularly India, and its current right-wing politics and border management mindset. Chowdhury showcases the tropes of territoriality, how the call for a *Hindu India* and a *Muslim Pakistan* fed the ideals of self-determinism for a specific politico-religious community during the Partition, but later evolved into demands for a Hindu Bengal by later organisations, which became a dystopic threat to those who indulged in the earlier demands. Subhasri Ghosh draws attention to the agitations that rocked the camp life in Nadia in the early years of Partition, caused by the inefficiency and corruption that characterised government-run relief camps. She argues that the role of the Communist Party of India (CPI), UCRC, and the smaller factions of Leftist parties at the district level, was crucial in shaping the political landscape of the refugee camps. She also emphasises how, despite eventually fading away into obscurity, other Leftist groups like the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and others served as the foundation upon which the CPI could establish its position. Kakali Mukherjee explores the migration of refugees to Burdwan, a location far from the border, and examines the role that refugee movements played in the establishment of a Leftist party stronghold in Burdwan, later dubbed the “red bastion” of West Bengal. Group of workers, peasants, and the middle class were pulled together by ongoing hikes in prices, food shortages, unemployment, retrenchment, pro-zamindar land policies, and government monitoring. Women were not left behind. Refugee women were organised for the actual rehabilitation under the direction of Bibha Konar, Bina Sen, and other members of the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti. The hostile attitude of the government turned the refugees antagonistic toward Congress. The appalling condition at the camps in Burdwan was ignored by government officials. In the post-Partition scenario, the refugee population became the foundation of the Communist-led political mobilisation and social programmes in Burdwan, as the Left linked all these issues together and demonstrated how the demands of the refugees were connected to the needs of other marginal people.

The last section of the book is Ghoshal’s intimate interview with Tanvir Mokammel, a reputed writer and renowned filmmaker of Bangladesh. Mokammel’s films on the plights of the Partition revolve around the changing meaning of marginality change with time. Hence it is pointless to classify someone in a particular framework because neither society nor its institutions are static. He notes that the mass migration of the Hindu population to the other side of the newly established border during the 1947 Partition resulted in a significant demographic change in East Bengal and had a cataclysmic impact on its cultural life. The abandoned houses, the departing friends, the destitute villages, all of these constituted a sense of loss in the psyche of a generation of people, which was passed down to succeeding generations, and that is why, according to Mokammel, the theme of Partition always creeps into his creative expressions.

This book shows how the narratives of the refugees, and their issues of belongingness were altered and ignored by the state to enable the process of smoothing out the edges of dissent. The idea of Partition refugees, “citizen refugees”, and illegal migrants were tactfully mixed, which eventually jeopardised many lives even after 75 years of “*Azadi*” of India that we know of. Similarly, from the very beginning, the rehabilitation process and the vision of rights and citizenship according to the perspectives of the refugees have remained a contested terrain. Instead of using the same old method of going through chronological events, it examines Partition with a fresh approach where memory is fused with text and incorporates oral sources into official narratives, mixing songs, stories, and films with newspaper reports and journals written in vernacular languages. Focusing on the hitherto less exploited fields – like rural Burdwan and Nadia or the *Char* areas, the book also considers the regional variety in the effects of Partition. Focusing on how the phenomenon of Partition is alluded to in the rhetorical and social remembrance of the population most affected by it, it tells the story of loss, the dream of reunification, and the conflicts between various ideological stances. Showing how territoriality creates different aspirations among people suffering from a shared event with multiple layers attached to it, the volume has developed like a *nakshi kantha* woven by revisiting the alleys of contestation, narratives, and memories that the Partition has left behind.

## Book Review

# Inheriting Partition: The Search for a Culture of Remembrance

By

Ashmita Saha \*

*Inherited Memories: Third Generation Perspectives on Partition in the East, Introduction by Firdous Azim*; New Delhi: Zubaan, Goethe Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata, and Goethe Institut Dhaka, 2020; pp. 324; ₹645; ISBN 978-93-85932-25-0 (Hardcover)

The 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent, engendered along religious lines, quickly took on a different dimension, one of linguistic and cultural identity. This was the case for both the Bengalis, East and West, and the Northeastern states like Assam and Tripura. Moreover, the Bengal province, having lived through two Partitions, once in 1905 and then again in 1947, has been relegated to the background owing to the magnitude and scale of violence which marked the Partition of the western part of the country. *Inherited Memories: Third Generation Perspectives on Partition in the East* takes a close look at this often overlooked aspect of Partition and its memorialisation.

“Memory is the only paradise from where we cannot be expelled.” Beginning with this quote, *Inherited Memories* takes a different approach to memorialising Partition. In its efforts to locate a culture of remembering or a culture of remembrance, the “Erinnerungskultur” in Germany, the Goethe-Instituts’ in Kolkata and Dhaka launched a collaborative project in 2015 called “Inherited Memories” where they set out to interview children and grandchildren of Partition survivors. By shifting the focus from first-hand narratives to intergenerational memory, or what Marianne Hirsch calls “Postmemory,” this book examines how memories can also be inherited,

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“how it is owned and shared by subsequent generations,” and how they both facilitate and impede the construction of the self and the other.

Marianne Hirsch defines "Postmemory" as the connection that the "generation after" has to the culturally and personally traumatic experiences of their ancestors, to the experiences which they "remember" owing to the stories and images that surrounded them as children. However, these events were communicated to them so vividly that they appear to be memories in and of themselves. Postmemory, therefore, functions not by an act of recall, but rather through imaginative investment with the past and its reconstruction that might overwhelm one and even overpower one's own memories. Herein, lies the risk of having one's own life stories superseded by those of their ancestors. As a result, the individual and their consciousness are continually shaped by the traumatic experiences of the past, which however still escape narrativisation. The past, thus, continues to affect the present.

This continuation of the effects of Partition into the present, which is brought to the fore through the memories of third-generation descendants of migrants, is laced with complexities, where differences prevail not only within religious communities but also within ethnic and linguistic communities. Divided into two sections which follow Partition-induced migration from India to East Bengal/Bangladesh and vice versa, *Inherited Memories* traces these complexities and looks into the ethnic and linguistic dimensions of Partition which ultimately culminated with the formation of Bangladesh. Here, two categories come into prominence—the Urdu speaking Bihari migrant from India to East Bengal, whose nomenclature owed more to their linguistic identity than their geographical location, and the lowered-caste labourers, and artisans who migrated from East Bengal/Bangladesh to India. The existence of these categories “reveal a fault line in two nation-states, pointing to the inability of the state to find a place and position for its citizens, as well as the problems they face in defining citizenship and in the granting of citizenship rights.” This is delineated through the interviews of the Bihari migrants who are still leading precarious lives in refugee camps. The differences between the refugee experiences of the Urdu speaking Bihari migrant and the Bangla speaking Hindu migrant are perceptible. For the East Bengali migrant, a larger Bengali national identity could subsume all other differences in terms of rituals, habits, and cultures, even while the “Bangaal-Ghoti” divide persisted. For the Urdu speaking migrant, however, it was an altogether different case. Caught in the crossfire between West Pakistan's imposition of Urdu as the national language of East Pakistan and the *muktijoddhas'* retaliation against this decision, the Bihari migrant's is a tale of dispossession and alienation. In a way, this book works against the dominant Bangladeshi national discourse which equates Biharis with anti-liberation forces.

While some of the interviewees dwell mostly on nostalgic memories inherited from their parents or grandparents, a number of interviewees also capture the sense of loss and dispossession which has plagued them through generations. Among this is the case of Khaled Hussain, a lawyer and human rights advocate who worked towards ensuring the citizenship rights of Bihari

migrants. A former resident of the Geneva Camp in Dhaka, Hussain talks about his family which is divided between Bangladesh and Pakistan, life back at the camp, and his desire to belong to Bangladesh which finally drove him to fight for the rights of the Urdu speaking community. However, this desire for inclusion within the host community is also marred by a kind of apprehension, the idea that such assimilation and acculturation would engender the loss of their own culture. This issue is also raised by a number of interviewees in the first part of the text. The search for a fixed identity, a motherland, and a mother tongue is a prime concern for most of the interviewees and it is interesting to note that this search persists even within the third generation so many years after Partition as they try to navigate through the terms Bihari, Indian, and Bangladeshi. This lack of fixed identities is again materialised through the lack of strict border controls between India and Bangladesh which has enabled movements between generations and borders to become free-flowing and easy. This porous border comes up again and again over the course of the interviews as the interviewees talk about how they could easily slip through the border to meet their families who lived on the other side.

The book is divided into two parts, each containing twenty interviews of descendants of Partition survivors who migrated from either side of the borders between India and East Pakistan (Bangladesh). The tone and texture of the interviews differ from each other, and this is a commendable job on the part of the editors who have said that they kept in mind the gender and social strata distribution while finalising the list of interviewees. The interviews themselves consist of several sections, namely Family Stories, Culture and Rituals, Sharing Stories, etc., which nevertheless flow into each other and provide us with a glimpse into the inner lives of the interviewees, the minute and at times mundane details of their existence, and present us with an alternate history of Partition, one of lived experiences and memories of these experiences. In doing so, they create the culture of remembrance surrounding Partition which the book had set out to discover. The chapters titled "From Bihar and West Bengal to Bangladesh" and "From Bangladesh to West Bengal" by Meghna Guhathakurta and Manas Ray respectively, which act as introductions to the two parts of the book, help the readers familiarise themselves with the historical and socio-cultural realities of the time and provide contexts against which the interviews are to be read. The Introduction by Firdous Azim aims a critical eye at the interviews and identifies certain gaps and slippages. Azim points out that the interviews seem to conform to the traditional concept of gender roles since the female family members find a place in the stories only when customs, rituals, or culinary traditions are brought up. According to Azim, "The struggle that women underwent in the process of resettling is subsumed in the family story, where patriachs in the form of grandfathers and fathers dominate. Women are shown as upholders of custom and tradition, as protectors of patriarchal family structures." Azim is also critical of the fact that although stories of violence and bloodshed like the Noakhali Riots, the Great Calcutta Killings, and the 1946 Patna Riots come up over the course of the interviews, there is

little to no reference to violence perpetrated against women during Partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War. Moreover, Azim reminds the reader that a large part of this remembering is intended to highlight how the family managed to overcome the dire circumstances and rebuild itself while holding on to all of its hierarchies, especially the hierarchy of gender. The last chapters of both sections titled “The Search for Roots” and “Down Memory Lane” respectively, trace the journeys of two of the interviewees back to their native lands and ancestral homes on either side of the border. This literal and metaphorical journey down memory lane, a journey back to her ancestral land where she is treated warmly by strangers, convinces an interviewee of the truth of something her grandmother used to say, “*Manush ke emniyi bhalobasha jay.*” (One can love people just like that).



# NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Articles submitted for consideration of publication in REFUGEE WATCH should be around 5,500 -7,500 words. Book reviews can be around 1000 words and review articles can be around 2000 words. Articles will have endnotes and not footnotes. Endnotes should be restricted to the minimum. Please refer to [www.mcrg.ac.in](http://www.mcrg.ac.in) for a details style sheet. Roundtables can also be proposed for publication. Enquiries about possible submissions are welcome.

For submission of articles and all other matters, correspondence should be addressed to the Editor, Refugee Watch, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, IA-48, Ground Floor, Sector-III, Salt Lake, Kolkata – 700 097 or [editor@mcrg.ac.in](mailto:editor@mcrg.ac.in). For book review and review-articles correspondence to be addressed to Samata Biswas, Review Editor, Refugee Watch, at the same address or at [bsamata@gmail.com](mailto:bsamata@gmail.com).

Authors will have to submit articles both hard and soft copies (in MS Word). All articles are peer reviewed and it may take 3 to 4 months before a decision is reached on the proposed publication. Contributors will get 2 copies of the journal.

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