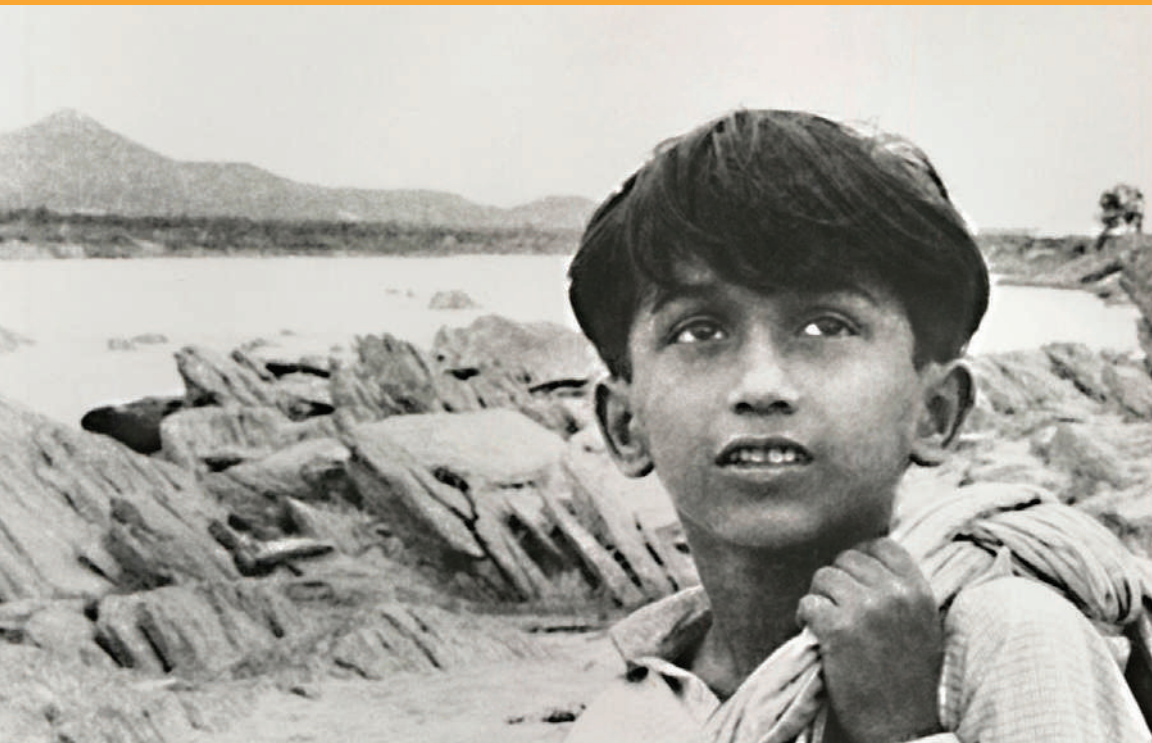
The Partition of Bengal

Fragile Borders and New Identities

Debjani Sengupta



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The trauma of India's partition in 1947 played out differently in Bengal than in Punjab. The division of Punjab in the west happened at one go and was sudden, cataclysmic and violent. On the other hand, the partition of Bengal was a slower process, the displacement happened in waves and the trauma took a metaphysical and psychological turn, though no less violent than in Punjab.

This book contends that the vast trove of literature that partition has produced amongst the Bangla-speaking peoples of West Bengal, the Northeast and Bangladesh has not been studied together in an organic manner. This study lays bare how whole communities felt, remembered and tried to resist the horrifying division and growth of sectarian hatred over a period of time. The narrative takes the reader through the continued migrations and resettlements over cycles of time and their affective impact on cultural practices. The text is woven with rich literary archives of the 1947 partition in the Bangla language across generations and borders that interrogate the absences in our memories and in our national histories in the subcontinent.

From the Calcutta riots and the Noakhali communal carnage to post-partition refugee settlements in Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi and the enclaves in the Indo-Bangladesh border, the partition of 1947 in Bengal has played out over diverse geographical sites that render diverse meanings to the movements of people. This study contends that there is not one partition but many smaller ones, each with its own variegated texture of pain, guilt and violence faced by different people flecked by caste, gender and religion.

Debjani Sengupta teaches at the Department of English at Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi. She has been reading and working on the1947 partition in Bengal for some years now and this is her first full-length study on the subject. Sengupta completed her doctoral work from Jawaharlal Nehru University. She has contributed translations from Bangla to various anthologies like the *Essential Tagore* and the *Oxford Anthology of Bengali Literature* and her publications also include an anthology of partition short fiction titled *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals* (2004) and articles on Bangla science fiction, Bangla theatre and the partition of 1947 in various scholarly volumes.

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To Ma and Baba

and

To Ritwik, chroniclers past and present

Contents

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Like many fortuitous events in our lives, I began work on this book as a matter of chance, since nothing but chance can explain the way India's partition has shaped my life. My intimacy with the accounts of East Bengali refugees began early: both my parents, Neelima and Ashutosh Sengupta, were exiles to Calcutta and I grew up witnessing their small disappointments and smaller victories that shadowed so much of their negotiations with the metropolis. This work is dedicated to their memory and is an affirmation of their continued presence in my life. This book is also for Ritwik, who, like his Namesake, provides the illumination and sustenance to carry on.

Introduction

Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one… Then our coming was expected on earth.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*

The memorable is that which can be dreamed about a place.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

The 1947 partition of Bengal is significantly different in its aftermath than the sudden cataclysmic division of Punjab because of several historical, social and political reasons. Bangla literature, that is based on the partition's experiences, is therefore also varied and multifarious in its responses to 1947 not simply as an event, but as a metaphor or a trauma or a site of enunciation for thousands of people living through and resisting communal polarization, migration, rehabilitation and resettlement.[1] Taking a cue from the *Annales* historians, one can surmise that the partition in the East is the *longue durée* rather than the short time of political event/s, where the structures and pluralities of social life under its shadow can be unearthed only through a study of the particular and the local.[2] Even after all these years after Independence, the partition of the Eastern part of the subcontinent has been a neglected area, although some recent historiography has drawn our attention to the economic, political and historical issues of decolonization in the region.[3] Unlike the sudden and catastrophic violence that shook Punjab, enunciated through the tropes of madness, rape and murder, the Bengal region has seen a slower, although no less violent, effect of the vivisection with the trauma taking a more elliptical and metaphysical turn.[4] This is evident when we study the enormously rich and varied literature that partition has produced amongst

the Bangla speaking people of West Bengal, the Northeast and Bangladesh – one that has not been studied together in an organic manner. This literature deserves our critical attention because it destabilizes certain assumptions about 1947 just as it demarcates the way geographical areas, not always contiguous, become the theatres of recuperation, mythmaking and sustainability that give rise to different kinds of representations.[5] After 1947, the issues of gender, livelihood and labour have had different momentum in Bangla fiction although the subject of status and independence amongst the refugees may be common to narratives both in the East and in the Punjab. Literary imagination plays a vital role in a process of recovery where Hindus and Muslims attempt to map the contours of the mutilated land in a bid to create a site of belonging, habitation and memory while changing the dynamics of fiction, particularly the form and content of the novel in Bangla that has responded to 1947 in heterogeneous ways. When colonialism and the partition destroyed a sense of belonging to the land, these texts offered a renewed sense of place that contributed to the processes of decolonization and reinstated the 'human subject' at a time when it was most dehumanized. As Lacan (and Freud before him) has reminded people, the event of trauma, by its very ambiguous nature, recedes to the background while fantasies based on it overpower individual and collective psyches.[6] The initial trauma of the partition is now distant but its 'fantasy aspect' has taken over the subcontinent through a legacy of violence and bigotry. The spectacular dance of death that began in the partition years has intensified to those in recent times like the violence that erupted between the Bodos and Muslims (2012) in Assam or the Muzaffarnagar riots (2013) in UP. The nation/state that came out of colonial violence continues to be a site of buried trauma and fear that plays out intermittently. There are numerous studies that have looked at the history of conflicts in India so going back to 1947 may seem pointless but this work contends that not enough has been written about the ways whole communities of people felt, remembered and tried to resist in nonviolent oblique ways the tragic separations and the growth of sectarian hatred over a period of time. Even a cursory glance at Bengal's partition literature lays bare how the vivisection has shaped and moulded the land and its people, spanning generations and several geographical spaces, through the processes of resettlement, migration, border-crossings and rehabilitation that must be understood as sites of meaning making for the region and in the long run, the postcolonial nation. In this study, I take up a wide variety of literary texts that form a series of testimonials or memory texts (Alexander Kluge once remarked that books are the byproducts of history) that deal with the Calcutta and Noakhali riots,the construction of Muslim subjectivities in times of the division of the country, the arrival of the Hindu refugees in West Bengal, the

questions around relief and rehabilitation especially among lower caste Namasudra refugees and the partition's afterlife in the Northeast of India (Assam and Tripura), Bangladesh and the enclaves in India's borderlands. Literature that deals with these wide ranging issues, written over a long period of time, try to reconstruct the lives of individuals and communities, marginal or elite, whose memories of trauma and displacement had dissociated them from their own life stories. Bangla partition fiction captures the diffusion, through a great degree of self-consciousness, of the *longue durée* of continuous migrations and counter-migrations that give refugee-hood a different complexity in Bengal. Reading these imaginative renderings of the diverse facets of the partition becomes therefore an act of creating a literary historiography that is alert to the silences of history, and aware of the ways in which individual and collective memories can be brought into play with each other by studying the micro-history of localities and particular communities. This literary history may not have all the facticity of history but the questions of voice, temporality, lack of narrative closure may tell us something about the ways in which the partition is remembered by diverse kinds of people. Rather than making a point about the un-representation of partition violence (and there was a great deal of violence in Bengal) these texts seem to look at the little histories of people in the margins and use strategies of refraction rather than a simple reflection of conventional realism. Many of them foreground minority (in terms of class and religion) subjectivity, and use fragmentation to index the fracturing of narrative representation that the partition brought in its wake. The less visible and delayed effects of displacement and violence are seen in the family and community spaces that these texts foreground. They give an added dimension to a set of micro-events, often unspeakable, within the partition and lay bare the processes of how literature transforms the actual into the apocryphal and the mythical. The starting point of this study then is a literary archive that gives a more nuanced view of history and culture of a people; one may learn something useful about the contours of the partition in the East through these texts that memorialize and actualize a literary culture and history that would otherwise remain inarticulate.

The partition of 1947 meant a redrawn map, new borders and borderlands and massive population migrations across these borders of the independent nation states of India and Pakistan. Millions of people, Hindus and Muslims, crossed the newly defined boundaries; in West Bengal alone an estimated 30 lakh Hindu refugees entered by 1960 while 7 lakh Muslims left for East Pakistan. Over a million people died in various communal encounters that involved Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. For more than 80 thousand women, independence came accompanied with abduction and sexual assault. It is strange that the dominant structures of

public memory of the partition have never commemorated these voices through any memorial. However, in the last decade, some shifts in partition studies can be discerned although as Joya Chatterji warns everyone,there is a 'gaping void at the heart of the subject' because one still does not know 'why people who had lived cheek by jowl for so long fell upon each other in 1947 and its aftermath, with a ferocity that has few parallels in history.'[7] In the late 90s, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin commented on the abundance of political histories of the events equalled by a 'paucity of social histories of it'.[8] They also noted an absence of feminist historiography of the partition. Around the same time, Urvashi Butalia began to retrieve through interviews and oral narratives the stories of the smaller, invisible players of the events: the women and the children and the scheduled castes. Butalia's contention was that one cannot begin to understand what partition is about 'unless we look at how people remember it'.[9] These works, as well as others like Kathinka Sinha Kerkhoff's study of the Momins in Jharkhand, Sarah Ansari's study of the Muslim refugees in Sind, Shail Mayaram's study of the Meos in Rajasthan and Papiya Ghosh's work on the Biharis in Bangladesh, question the homogeneity of nationalist discourses and have marked a significant break from an exclusive concentration on high politics.[10] Other studies that look at the 'unfinished agenda' of nation-building, especially the participation of the Dalits and minorities in the formation of the nation state as well as issues of social mobilization, have opened up the complexities of the partition, for example, the discourse on Pakistan as disseminated among Bengali East Pakistani intellectuals and writers in the decades leading up to 1947.[11] On one hand, these studies have recognized and documented violence to see the importance of personal memory to demonstrate the plurality of how one remembers the partition (or how one forgets it) even within the same community just as they demonstrate that gender, caste and class variegate the memories of a community as the communities in turn undergo a process of self-fashioning at particular moments in their history.[12]

Historian Mushirul Hasan sees this shift in focus as being animated by the intellectual resources made available to people by creative writers as 'they expose the inadequacy of numerous narratives on independence and partition, and compel us to explore fresh themes and adopt new approaches.'[13] This has meant that partition studies have undergone a new and critical sensitivity that now take literary representations more seriously than before. A call for new resources for remembering and representing the partition means that social relations, locality as well as memory that makes up subjectivity, come under the historian's scrutiny. Although any search for genealogy can be intensely messy, it is also imperative that one reconstructs the partition as a historical representation in the framework

'of the self-referentiality of the historical text', and by accepting 'the propositional nature of historical writing.'[14] As anthropologist Clifford Geertz puts it succinctly:

> The capacity of language to construct, if not reality "as such" (whatever that is) at least reality as everyone engages it in actual practice - named, pictured, catalogued, measured - makes of the question of who describes whom, and in what terms, a far from indifferent business…depiction is power.[15]

Historical representations are contingent and disputable tools, like language in general, that help people understand how community and culture are constructed in certain ways than others. Both are interconnected. Poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists have demonstrated history's own constructed narratives about the past and the textuality of all past evidences. This textuality is in some ways similar to the textuality of a cultural product of a novel or a short story, in that they both 'read.'[16] This understanding of a dialectical relationship between literary representation and history carries within it enormous possibilities because one begins to look at literary texts as a kind of 'source', analogous to other sources that may be found in the archives, to ask specific questions related to the 'experience' of the partition: of living as a refugee in a camp or the experience of an eye witness to a riot. Yet because these narrative texts use specific modes of emplotment, it weakens the direct connection between representation and reality. In the 1990s, the debates carried out in the pages of *History and Theory* questioned the traditional understanding of the relationship between 'fact', 'representation' and 'reality.' This study takes cognizance of the inter-textual resonance between a 'fictive history' and a 'textualized history' because it throws a long shadow over the literary discourse in Bengal, on both sides of the border. Thus, we need to investigate how both the ideological force of the present/past relationship as well as the tension with which the author, reader and text are held together as historical variables have produced the partition literature in the region. In the subcontinent, the after-effects of the partition have created the semiotics that has fed into the multifarious discourses and strategies of narrative prose. This study is just a small endeavour to see how the partition of 1947 has darkened the post-national realities in the Eastern border and borderlands.

The question that comes up is this: what is so special about Bengali partition texts? After all, some would say enough has been written about 1947 and its traumatic memories couched in nostalgia and terror! This study infers that we can never have 'enough' because the brutalization that partition has bequeathed to us

darkens our lives of daily dehumanization in the subcontinent. We have 'banished the memories of partition and with that…had banished the genocidal fury and exterminatory fantasies that had devastated large part of British India.' Silence or may be an inaudible murmur became the only ways we have ever looked back at our past; as it happens this shield of 'anti-memories' have not sufficed to shield us. 'The disowned part of the self regularly returns to haunt us as fantasies of orgiastic violence that would exorcise old enemies once and for all.'[17] Therefore, we need to go back to our violent past to expiate our silences and our guilt, to articulate the wrongs and to explore the multiple markers of our identities. Literature has an important function especially in societies that have faced unendurable violence and where reconciliation and truth telling are not advocated because victims and perpetrators are often the same people. In the absence of public testimonials, literature compels us to take stock, through which we come face to face with the 'Other/Self' so that ideas of justice and freedom that are contained in the discourse of law and political theory are given shape through stories of lives far removed from our own. Modern fiction in Bengal, both the novel and the short story, has been the most amenable to this task. As Walter Benjamin says,

> The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.[18]

Partition's fictions, from Punjab or Bengal, 'contain all that is locally contingent and truthfully remembered, capricious and anecdotal, contradictory and mythically given' and therefore constitute an important means of our self-making.[19] It also becomes a way in which social amnesia about the partition can be negotiated and a foundation of trust can be built between communities that had fallen apart. Reading partition's literature is not just an archival retrieval but a way in which the past can be understood to make it signify in the present.

How does literary imagination cope with the violence and genocide to reconstitute human subjectivity, 'enabled by the land'? How do narrations create us and our communities? How do they help us recognize a decolonized people's search for justice, neither retributive nor restorative, but an exemplary one that allows them lives of fulfillment and mutuality through territories divided by political caprice and contingency? How can imaginative fiction or a memoir possibly articulate the gigantic social churning and bodily hurt that partition brought to so many women, children and the aged? Is there then not one partition but many

smaller ones, each with its own variegated texture of pain, guilt and violence faced by different people flecked by caste, gender and religion? If 1947 brought about a distinct sense of communal identity, what does literature tell us about the lives of people, belonging to different religions and class,who have lived in the same region for centuries without killing each other? Can literary aesthetics throw some light (through a different optic) when we seek answers to some of these questions? Living in a globalized world, where dissemination of information with its 'prompt verifiability' (to use Benjamin's phrase) claims our attention to a greater extent, can we turn to the storyteller's art to gather once again the strands that ties our past to our present? Through questions like this and many more, this book tries to see how memory and history interact to represent our past (certainly not dead and buried) whose throbbing afterlife colours our discourses and our imaginations even after so many decades of the country's vivisection. Many of these texts under discussion create a symbiotic relationship between individual/collective memory and the playing out of history. As Ranabir Samaddar states,

> In fact similar to the structure of historical explanation, memory too shows a structure to it – leading to explanation, more importantly amenable to being a part of history. Just as earlier memories fed into history, similarly these memories born of the event will feed into the subsequent history this event will create. This is precisely what critical studies on partition are showing.[20]

How then should one study the years before and after 1947? That originary division, so far removed in time, has left scars in our politics and our memories; they can now only be studied through the 'tropes' where a 'space' is created by the displacement of a word from its original meaning and in which 'all forms of rhetoric come to life.'[21] The materiality of literature on the partition encapsulates these rhetorical gestures towards the past, a looking back to make sense of the present, and in a study of their forms and themes we may understand aspects of our postcolonial modernities and our postcolonial forms of exploitation, gender violence and subject formations especially the creation of 'minorities' in India.

The partition of India in 1947 has generated extensive literatures ranging from scholarly works, historical monographs, memoirs, novels and bestsellers that look at the complex political mosaic of a pluralistic society, the growth and acceleration of the nationalist struggle, the changes in Hindu-Muslim relations, popular protests, and British imperial policies. Certainly, a more nuanced view of the events leading to the partition is now possible with access to new material available in *The Transfer of Power* (1942–47) series edited by Nicholas Mansergh

and Penderel Moon and the Muslim League documents (1906–47) compiled by Syed Shafiruddin Pirzada while the *Towards Freedom* volumes are invaluable for archival materials from India.[22] The diaries of British Governor-Generals like Lord Archibald Wavell and the accounts of British historians, describing the last 20 years of the British rule in India, are also available. On the Indian side, the multi-volume *Collected Works of M.K. Gandhi*, *Selected Works* of Nehru, and correspondences and private papers of public figures like Sardar Patel, S.P. Mookerjee, Meghnad Saha, Renuka Ray, and Ashoka Gupta are valuable source materials. The writings by Nirmal Kumar Bose, Saroj Mukhopadhyay, Abani Lahiri, Hiranmay Bandopadhyay, Manikuntala Sen, Soofia Kemal and Renu Chakravartty provide rich details, particularly about Bengal. Institutional papers like the government reports and the assembly proceedings also contribute to our understanding of the partition not only as a division on the map but a division on the ground – the uprooting and the looting, the rape and recovery operations, the riots and their fallouts that mark these moments of uncertainty in the political and social life of the people in the subcontinent. Recent anthropological and sociological studies of partition's violence have enumerated the complex ways gendered subjectivities have remembered and have been constituted by communal violence that resulted in changed kinship ties.[23] In the last few decades we have seen a fresh awareness in historiography as historians turn to newer reading practices, and like literary critics, have begun to pay great attention to rhetorical strategies of 'texts' although differing generic texts employ differing strategies. In this study, the emphasis on narrative prose and thematic concerns has meant that novels, memoirs and short stories are my chosen forms, leaving out a good deal of poetry, drama and films that have engaged with the partition in the East. The choice of the texts has also meant a capriciously subjective (and arbitrary!) assembly, where I have left out many important writers from both sides of the Eastern border. However, keeping in mind that the historical period under review is vast (1946 till 2010) the process of literary production is also varied and eclectic and impossible to deal within the scope of a single study.

The complex body of texts that I study, originally written in Bangla and its dialects, lays bare the various responses to 1947 through varieties of subjectivities where one scrutinizes cultural works other than those written in the metropolitan language (and in metropolitan spaces) to see how politics and aesthetics are aligned in fascinating ways in them. The Bangla texts, from India and Bangladesh, go beyond the question of survival, accompanied by trauma and nostalgia, to critiques of political leadership and nationality to reinforce questions of justice in our social and political lives. In the context of the formation of our nation that was born

with such potential for transformation, they ask important questions regarding the nature of freedom through the rubric of gender and caste, explore refugeehood not through trauma and nostalgia but through agency and reformulate the question of communal relationship in the subcontinent by articulating difference and plurality as constitutive of the nation itself. They undertake the onerous task of representing the collective suffering of people, whether Hindus, Muslims, women or children, lower castes or peasants, to articulate how 'even among the oppressed there were victors and losers.' [24]

My study is situated in a particular locality and time (without claiming indigeneity) to seek out some of the ways in which Bengal's postcolonial moments configured literary activities, with a special emphasis on the social and cultural fallouts of the partition through an extensive period of the region's history. The texts that form the bulwark of this book are grouped together because they perform a certain epistemological task of translation within the concerns of language. They decipher the partition trauma and 'soft violence'[25] through aspects of class, gender and caste formations that critique the hegemonic patterns of the nation-state. Hindu and Muslim subjectivities that have suffered the agonies of the partition encapsulate certain actions that enable them to translate themselves into citizens of the new state or ones marginal to it. The texts that I study make a 'public use of history' in substituting the absent past with literary texts, which use that history. Therefore they perform an action of legitimizing questions of identity, communal or individual, and search out ways culture can be seen as power. These texts do not take us closer to the hidden truths of the partition nor do they offer a picture of how things really were. We must be aware that their representations are a mode of meaning production, contingent and capricious, depending upon who is reading them. The historical reality they represent may be a representation itself, a construction of reality rather than a mirror of it.[26] The narrative prose pieces that I have studied, especially the novels, have been grouped according to their formal and thematic content and I want to indicate a commonality that we may discern in their aesthetic forms. Although written at various points of time, they explore the partition's aftermath, its legacy of violence and dislocations, through a certain formal trope: the epic-mythic vision. Given the scale and magnitude of the themes, many of the novelists employ certain narrative coda for coherence that are diverse and historically contingent yet situated in a specific locale and geography. We see in these texts 'the epic strain', to use Tillyard's phrase, that suffuses their topography.[27] According to Paul Ricoeur, an authentic epical mode is that which encompasses the totality of a world; these novels are more than that: they explore the totality of a world *after colonization* where the epic focus is not a hero's exploits but the heroic

exploits and sufferings of communities of people who are bound by a history of colonization. We can see a mapping out of this idea of an epic in the words of one of Bengal's most influential novelist Tarashankar Bandopadhyay. In a prose piece called 'Amar Katha' (My Life) that he published in 1964, Bandopadhyay explains what he considers the true objective of postcolonial Indian writing in the context of the country's independence. He begins by comparing India's independence struggle with the Kurukshetra war fought between the Pandavas and Kauravas immortalized in the epic *Mahabharata*, only the former is more noble and lofty. Then he asserts,

> I had imagined a New Mahabharata (*nabamahabharata)* about this vast war. However, this is not just the work of any one writer, nor is it possible: this ought to be a united effort. From all the provinces of India, all the powerful writers must come together to write this epic. Writers from each corner and in each of the languages must thread together the incidents and happenings of their regions and create each *parva:* as many *parvas* as there are languages and as there are writers. When all the *parvas* are written, the writers will come together to string them together in one compendium within a framework. It will be named the New Mahabharata. Among all the themes that they look at, the main exploration will be of the theory (*tattva*) that humans are journeying from violence to non-violence.[28]

Gandhi's influence on Tarashankar's majestic dream of a 'pan-Indian' literature is clearly discernable; so are the radical ideals of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) whose aesthetic search for social and political justice as a distinct template for Indian writers can be seen in the famous Hindi novelist Premchand's inaugural speech at its first session in 1936.[29] Tarashankar was an enthusiastic member of PWA in his early years as a writer and he wanted to overturn the canonical ideals of literature and transform it into an instrument for the masses to challenge existing hegemonic structures of caste, class and gender. Therefore, this vision of a 'national', 'Indian' (not one but many Indian) literature with each language on an equal footing, brought together on a single platform, encapsulates a cultural memorialization of the events around independence in the lives of people and is an important ingredient of Tarashankar's own fiction and of his contemporaries in West Bengal. It is also a theory for the historical-epic impetus of writing in West Bengal in the post-partition years that talks of the nation's psychological progress from violence to non-violence. This thrust to transform the individual life of the people into the component of an epic, to transform personal destiny

into the community's destiny, is a vital way in which Bangla novel becomes 'the autobiography of the secular self.'[30] We see this epic (and historical) width in many novels on the aftermath of the partition that follow, consciously or unconsciously, Tarashankar's vision. The project of postcolonial Bangla partition novels was to construct a national cultural mission of a secular non-violent Indian-ness through an understanding of the violent vivisection of the country and by rejecting the bigotry of past hatred. This radical move that had begun in the 1940s and interrupted with the partition, is taken up by later novelists who depict the birth pangs of the new nations yet continue to address 'the complex question of plural heritage – both local and derived from other cultures' that made the modern novel in Bangla (and in India) a cultural product of 'a tangled process.'[31] Even if 'literature is a limited category that cannot ever reach up to its aspiration of being a national category' because it is 'limited by culture, and above all, by language' and shaped by the historical variables as well as spatial and cultural geography, literature can still be true to itself and to its people.[32]

Walter Benjamin had said that:

> To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" …. It means to seize hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger….The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.[33]

In the Indian subcontinent, the storyteller's art from ancient times had aligned with the epic and the oral tradition and had spoken directly to its audience. In the modern age, the epic has given way to the novel, because when fiction fuses with history, it carries people back to their common origin: the epic.[34] Paul Ricoeur calls fiction a 'negative epic' because if the epic had spoken of the admirable then it is fiction alone that 'gives eyes to the horrified narrator' who can memorialize the dead and the scale of suffering that people's struggles have brought about:

> As soon as the story is well known…as well as for those national chronicles reporting the founding events of a given community - to follow the story is not so much to enclose its surprises or discoveries within our recognition of the meaning attached to the story, as to apprehend the episodes which are themselves well known as leading to this end. A new quality of time emerges from this understanding…[35]

Fiction thus allows us to follow the synchronic and the diachronic layers of history by taking us back to the event and to its memory because it is not a mode of recording but constructing a reality for a heterogeneous set of people. In Bangla partition fiction, the issues of exile, belonging, labour and resettlement are differently inflected realities that will demand a different set of interpretative strategies from its readers.

The generic honour of the first Bengali historical novel may be given to Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's *Oitihashik Uponyash* that came out probably in 1857. It was constructed of two stories separated by theme and treatment and was to start a trend of historical romance that would be later taken up by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay whose novels were to serve 'as productive sites for studying the complex, and often contradictory, configurations of the colonial mind, as also for understanding the emergent notion of national identity constructed through fictional rewritings of history.'[36] Bangla prose had made an auspicious start with the Vernacular Literature Society (1851) that had aimed to spread the language among the upper caste and educated populace with translations of English writings. Colonial rulers had an interest in spreading English education but an added emphasis on native languages helped to administer the country. So, young officers at Fort William College were encouraged to read Bengali through easily available textbooks printed at the Baptist missionary press at Serampore. The second half of the nineteenth century saw a rapid spread of Western education in Bengal and a commensurate growth in nationalist political ideology among upper caste Bengalis. The advent of Western education was consolidated in the nineteenth century in Calcutta with the establishment of the Hindu College in 1817 and the School Book Society the same year that published a number of texts in Bengali that were either translations of English or Persian texts or composed under their influences. The first Bengali dictionary was out in 1839 and already the language had begun to assume its modern characteristics though still heavily dependent on Sanskrit vocabulary. The economic factors and technological progress of British colonialism interacted and interpenetrated in a variety of ways especially in book publishing and printing presses that began doing business in and around the city of Calcutta, the capital of British India at the time. The rapid spread of newspapers and periodicals created a reading public. The interface between education, technology and culture would soon be evident in literature that reflected a complicated process of borrowings and intermingling between elite and popular modes of Bangla, both written and oral. The relationship between written Bengali, the community, and the circulation of literary texts and tastes in the nineteenth century is a complex topic and beyond the scope of this introduction, but the rise of the genre of the novel is in a sense a

facet of this relationship both in terms of production and consumption. The growth and popularity of novels in Bengal was an important aspect of this burgeoning self-awareness of educated Bengali Hindus within the space of a metropolitan culture and growth of nationalism. It was also indicative of a communal politics of language that increasingly became identified with a communitarian identity and ideology of culture. Initially, the Victorian narrative model to which English education had exposed them influenced the early novelists like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the novel was used predominately by an elite upper caste, oftenWestern-educated, group of writers. The extravagance and intensity of romances were the preferred modes of a large number of novels till the end of the nineteenth century when more socially attuned representations began to appear. The earlier modes of colonial modernity in the Bangla novel used a few common tropes for example the clash of tradition and modernity in education and social mores and manners. Classic realism, as a representational tool in Victorian novels, had its followers in Bengal and we see this trend blending with social realism in depicting the woman's life both inside and outside the home. Rabindranath Tagore's novels *Ghare Baire* (1916) and *Chokher Bali*(1902) continued with this trend of depiction of women's lives at the cusp of two centuries and the complex pull of modernity and tradition in their lives. An important component of colonial modernity in the sphere of gender was this double mode of its performance in the strict binaries of the home and the world.[37] Early twentieth century Bengali novels, both by Hindu and Muslim writers, attempted to convey the opposition of these two spatial sites through which women had to negotiate the underlying societal codes by which they had to live. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's fantasy narrative 'Sultana's Dream' (1905) is a brilliant example of this sense of confinement and helplessness that Muslim women felt in a society marred by religious and patriarchal rules exercised by the family and the community. The range of novels by Muslim authors varied from the historical/religious (Mir Mosarraf Hossain who began his three part historical novel based on the Prophet's life, *Bishadshindhu* in 1885) to social issues like Mojjamel Haq's *Zohra* (1935) that constructed a critique of contemporary Muslim life at the turn of the century, especially the crippling lack of education and advancement.[38]

Many nineteenth century novels based on a glorious Indian pre-colonial past represented the formation of a 'hard Hindu identity, defined in and by its conflicts with the Muslim' as a marker of rising nationalism.[39] Rangalal Bandopadhyay's long *kavya, Padmini Upakhyan* (1858) and Bankimchandra's novel *Anandamath* (1882) are early examples of this burgeoning sense of difference that we see in that phase of nationalism although the plot of Hindu-Muslim animosity, in the hands of later writers, assumed substantial complexity. The 1880s saw a paradigmatic shift

in Bankimchandra's oeuvre because he began to assert the importance of religion, especially in his *Krishnacharitra* (1884) where he placed 'religion and literature in an analogous relationship giving the latter a subordinate position.'[40] This was an important phase in Bengal's literary sphere when one can see a conscious turn along political/cultural lines. Soon after, Tagore's writings began to oppose the neo-orthodox dogmas that were the critical/literary parameters of the times and advocated a liberal universalism and a trenchant critique of Hindu nationalism. In 1894, in a lecture to Bangiya Sahityo Parishad, he reiterated this new ideology of literature in an essay titled 'Bangla Jatiyo Sahityo' (Bengali National Literature):

> The word *sahityo* (literature) originates from the word *sahit* [from the Sanskrit root meaning to be together, *author*]. If we take its etymological meaning, then the word *sahityo* carries within it the idea of unity. This unity is not just between ideas and expression, between languages, with one text and another; it is the coming together of man and man, between past and present, between the far and the near: a veritable intimacy of connection that is only possible through literature and through nothing else. In a country where literature is scant, the people are not united in a lively bond but separated from each other.[41]

By 1930s we see modern Bangla literature assume a socio-historic literary aesthetic that encapsulates the possibility of secular toleration and an eclectic culture/language against an articulation of a narrow sectarian, neo-orthodox Hindu upper caste identity. This change occurs a decade earlier when, under the influence of the Bolshevik Revolution and Marxism, Bengali literature's paradigm shift rearticulated these earlier modes of identity, literature and culture. The quarrel that broke out between two groups of writers: one who contributed to the monthly literary journal *Kallol* (1924, edited by Gokulchandra Nag and Dineshranjan Das) and those who wrote in weekly *Shonibarer Chithi* (1924, founder-editor Sajanikanta Das) was to a large extent symptomatic of this division within the microcosm of Bengali intelligentsia.[42] The more radical *Kallol* writers, influenced by Marxist ideas and railing against the literary hegemony of Tagore, began to write politically charged poetry and prose about the downtrodden masses and against the increasing communal polarization in Bengal's politics. Nazrul Islam, the fiery iconoclast, began his illustrious career with a series of poems extolling the deprived lives of the peasants and fishermen of the Bengal countryside. A member of the Workers and Peasant's Party of Bengal, his collection of poems titled *Shamyobad* (Socialism) was published in the party magazine *Langol* in 1925. Sajanikanta Das attacked Nazrul and Muzzafar Ahmed (who later became an

important ideologue of the undivided Communist Party of India) by lampooning their writings against communal frenzy. In August 1927, Das wrote a satire *Kochi O Kancha* (The Unripe and the Green) parodying Ahmed, Soumen Tagore and Nazrul through the figures of Marx, Trotsky and Byron.[43] This account of the aesthetics of eclectic tolerance in Bengal's literary life does not capture the complex and fuzzy formation of identity discourse (because identities are never homogenous blocks but are constantly created and shaped by politics and circumstances) in early twentieth century Bengal yet the attacks and counterattacks between the two groups constituted an important aspect of Bengali public sphere (I am using the word in the Habermasian sense) that influenced future literary production in an ideological sense. Secular ideals in the domains of literary language were seen to be not just the purview of politics but also of aesthetics, a way of engagement with the world that many writers saw as an important and fundamental aspect of what and how they wrote. The standardization of Bengali literary forms, particularly the novel, in the hands of writers like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore, was accomplished with a simultaneous growth of a politically radicalized Hindu identity that sought expression in a Sanskritized Bangla, bolstered by the colonial administration, in direct opposition to a Bangla that had seen a flowering in Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hutumpenchar Naksha* (Vignettes from the Barn Owl, 1861) that had brought in aspects of both the spoken and the written elements (in terms of *langue* and *parole)* that were a democratic critique of a hegemonic idea of language and society.[44] Nazrul embodied some of this crisis within Bengali literature. Deeply influenced by a mystical form of Islam, he borrowed profusely from Hindu literary and religious traditions to launch a scathing attack against Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist ideology of language and literature that tried to separate the two communities in terms of religion.[45] Nazrul was an exemplar in that he fused a heterogeneous identity that was not monadic but compounded various streams of complex influences. As a poet he was someone who saw his secular ideology as a cultural project that was also a 'rational critique, especially in order to be able to dissent from established religious orthodoxies and dogmas' without giving up on the folk and mystical markers of his poetry.[46] The Marxist political ideology of the 1920s and 30s in Bengal shaped its literature particularly in the growth of an idea of India as a pluralistic and multi-religious nation where real 'freedom' was not just political but also social and economic. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and the PWA, active in the 1940s, was to a large extent responsible for the growth of a new aesthetic value of literary radicalism that drew into its fold an art that was dedicated to people, a mode of 'radical humanism' that saw subjective emancipation as central to its political and aesthetic project.[47]

This search for a new 'national realism' to use Aamir Mufti's phrase, was to see the nation's transition from colonialism to independence. In Bengal, the novel was to use this new form of realism to highlight the legacies of British rule that had resulted in a fracturing old solidarities between communities and an economic destitution of the masses. Simultaneously, in the 1940s we see the critique of Hindu cultural elitism from people like Abul Mansur Ahmad who 'set out to ground the political autonomy of Muslim Bengal in a vision of cultural autonomy' through the concept of Pakistan.[48] As the idea of partition gained ground among the two communities, it became commonplace amongst Muslim literati, as it had been earlier among Hindu writers, to think that that although there was a cohesion of language between Muslim and Hindu cultures in Bengal, there was a qualitative difference in terms of religion. The stage was set, in the literary arena as well, for the division of the country.

Even before the partition of 1947, the politics of communalism complicated the nationalist dream of freeing the country. 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' politics had begun muddying the course of Indian political advance from 1905 onward in Bengal (Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* reveals to what extent) and although secular nationalists took up in earnest the task of combating communalism, by 1930s its tentacles could be seen in all aspects of the province's politics, including literature. In the 1930s and 40s, peasant resistance movements, under the leadership of the Communists, were widespread in the Bengal countryside and the Famine of 1943 that decimated more than 3 million had a great impact on the politics as well as the collective life of the province. Therefore, an examination of the period before the 1940s is important to gain an understanding of the agrarian and economic situation of Bengal between the two World Wars and the rise of nationalist-sectarian ideologies and its resistance both among the educated and the peasantry (while the Civil Disobedience and the revolutionary terrorist movements played out) to understand the ways in which factional quarrels took their toll on the Hindu-Muslim political and literary unity. The history of communalism and the history of the reproduction of the 'majorities' and 'minorities' in literature is enigmatic, but it may be instructive to see how in times of nation-building, a central tenet of social realism was the order of the day 'to forge an interpretative relation with the audience' as evinced in the subversively anti-colonial dramatic performances by IPTA.[49] Nazrul's Left liberal legacy that had fed into the antecedents of the PWA with its sizeable number of Muslim writers were an important part of Bengal's radical aesthetics that remained strong even in the face of a rising demand for a separate homeland for Muslims. Roushan Ijdani's poem 'Jagibe Abar Mahabharat' published in 1947 list both Hindu and Muslim reference points like Yudhistir, Arjun, Mortaza Ali and Haidari and a galaxy of

Hindu and Muslim historical figures as ideals who fought against oppression.[50] Sufi Julfikar Haidar's *Bhanga Talwar* (1945) equated Islam to equality (*Islam samyabadir dharma/shakaler tare shakale amra/ mora shobai jano bhai bhai*) carried on Nazrul's *Samyobadi* themes formulated 20 years earlier.[51] However, in 1947 the unity of Bengal's geography would be torn asunder; it seemed literature would also go that way with intellectuals in East Pakistan rejecting Hindu Bengali writers who had never depicted Muslim life and ethos and were therefore to be discarded from the literary canon of East Pakistan.[52]

The output of literary works around and after the partition in West Bengal and Bangladesh (earlier East Pakistan) has been varied and eclectic, uneven in thematic and artistic contents. As the country was being partitioned, authors like Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay and Manik Bandopadhyay were already established novelists in West Bengal. Tarashankar's *Hanshulibanker Upokatha* was published in 1947, Manik wrote *Ahimsa* in 1941 and Satinath Bhaduri's *Jagori* came out in 1945. There was enough talent, intelligence and wisdom to tackle the issues attendant on the division of the country. All these writers were politically conscious, directly or indirectly advocating socialist causes and had written a number of short stories or novels about communal disturbances, the 1943 Famine or about important historical events like the Naval Revolt or the Gandhian influence on the nationalist movement. Yet, at the moment of partitioning the country, they did not write about it in any epic detail: they failed to see partition either as a completion of a series of traumatic events in the province's history or the birth of the nation that needed to be marked with fanfare. Certainly, they responded to the partition, but over time and in other elliptical ways. The discernment of these ways is a question that confronts any serious reader of literature in Bangla and this is what I explore at some length in this study.

Immediately in the first few years after 1947, a few novels look at other larger questions rather than the *event* of the partition. Manik Bandopadhyay abandons his search of existential questions (in his novel *Ahimsa,* Nonviolence) to explore the essence of freedom in his 1951 novel *Swadhinatar Swad* (The Taste of Freedom). For him, the newly arrived Independence appears as a 'freedom' that is 'adulterated.' His diary entries through 1950–52, the years when he composed some of his most political novels like *Swadhinatar Swad*, *Shonar Cheye Daami* and *Sarbojonin* (all written in this period), testify to his anxieties about the new Constitution of India that he terms 'anti-working class' just as it does his perceptions of the newly acquired freedom.[53] Throughout this time, he comes under attack from within the Communist Party of India, through some members of the PWA, for supporting 'reforms' and being 'treacherous' to party ideals. In his novel *Swadhinatar Swad*

one gets a sense of an increasingly palpable tension between the debates around freedom as if he is constantly trying to emancipate his fiction from the narrow limits of individual concerns to the wider world of the polity. In the novel, the industrial working class of Calcutta, the middle class housewife and the political worker debate, in their day-to-day language, about their expectations of the coming sovereignty, their dissents and their compromises. Manik's fiction, even with the obligatory Left visions of progress and class struggles that run through it, encompasses those moments of anxiety and tension as the country gains Independence through the explorations of the contours of our independence and its perceptions in the private and public domains. Both Ashapurna Devi and Manik Bandopadhyay's novels (Chapter 1), pay particular attention to the perceptions of people, especially the gendered understanding of freedom, in the early days of the country's independence. Their works of fiction explore not only the changes in the political and social spheres that Independence brings about but articulates the anxieties associated with it, inside the home and outside it. Ashapurna's novel *Mittirbari* (The House of the Mitras, 1947) is a study of the changes that decolonization brings in the private, domestic sphere of the characters, although the larger political questions throw long shadows over them through the riot that rages in the city outside. Ashapurna has noted in many interviews that her narrative interest is focused on Bengal's middle class man-woman relationships; the constricted domesticity of her times did not allow her the scope or the experience to write large-scale political novels. Her trilogy *Prothom Pratishruti* (1964) *Subarnalata* (1966)and *Bokulkatha* (1973)explore the changes in the familial and social relationships and the historical situations of three generations of women from the turn of the century to the twentieth in Bengal through characters like Satyabati, Subarnalata and Bokul. In her fiction, though, the personal becomes the political in the choices men and women make in their lives and in *Mittirbari* too the novelist shows that freedom means different things to various people as it is implicated in a wider web of personal conflicts and contradictions.

The second phase in Bangla partition fiction between the 1960s to 1970s in West Bengal moves away from these concerns to focus on the implications of the large influx of refugees that arrive in the state and to explore in detail the relationship between the two halves of Bengal now divided yet united through the Language Movement raging in East Pakistan. There is a surge of novels that come out in the late 1960s that take a relook at the partition. The reason for this is obvious. West Bengal's volatile political situation (the Naxal Movement) and the ongoing Language Movement across the border (that results in the birth of Bangladesh) create the atmosphere for many writers, themselves migrants to the province, to

go back to the past and explore the connections between nationalism, identity and memory. The short stories of Narendranath Mitra (1916–75) explore the anxieties of pre-partition days, the daily labouring life of the East Bengali Muslim peasantry, and the rise of separatist politics in Bengal through his short fiction like 'Palonko', 'Headmaster' and 'Kathgolap.' Ateen Bandopadhyay creates a similar oppositional narrative world through his novel *Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey* (1969–71); so does Sunil Gangopadhyay in his novel *Arjun* (Chapters 2 and 3). These novels, written as a national liberation war wages across the border, see the time ripe for a fresh evaluation of the partition. Not surprisingly, *Arjun* is dedicated to the 'freedom fighters' of Bangladesh's war. Sunil Gangopadhyay's later magnum opus on the partition, *Purbo Paschim* (East and West, 1988) spans the joint life of Hindus and Muslims from 1935 to 1980 and begins exactly where Ateen Bandopadhyay's novel ends, at the historical moment of Jinnah's arrival in Dhaka; then loops backward and forward to explore 50 years of Bengali life and literature, both Hindu and Muslim, in the subcontinent and beyond. The exigencies of partition, its two nation theory, is subverted through the linguistic nationalism of Bangladesh and both Sunil Gangopadhyay and Ateen Bandopadhyay's fictions implicitly point our attention to a different aesthetic impulse that tries to go back to issues of geography and nationality. The growth of Bengali linguistic nationalism and the birth of Bangladesh (in 1971) on its basis gives Bengal's 1947 partition a closure that has tremendous political significance in the literature of West Bengal; if Bangladesh did not happen, this exploration of a linguistic, literary and 'secular' commonality (unlike religious identity) would have remained unmapped. In their novels the writers of these years articulate a particular time and space, a pre-partition universe that takes form and shape under the aura of Bangladesh. The new nation of Bangladesh, and all that it stands for, makes it possible for the writers in West Bengal to articulate their own memories and anxieties of the vivisection that had torn asunder a whole people and a way of life. In the 1960s novels we also come across issues of rehabilitation, the opening up of the labour market to a large section of the women refugees and the expanding city as markers of newer aesthetic impulses in contemporary fiction. The social and political aspects of the province's life, marked by uncertainty in employment, housing, students' unrest and popular protests against price rise create a sense of impending doom, of a metropolis heading towards catastrophe, so that writers like Narayan Sanyal, Amiyabhushan Majumdar and Prafulla Roy look at aspects of rootlessness in the larger context of the partition to explore social and political fallouts of the Hindu refugees' arrival into the state. Ateen Bandopadhyay and Prafulla Roy, who both belong to East Bengal and are migrants to Calcutta, explore the angst of the middle

class Hindu refugees' displacement through tropes of nostalgia and remembrance of a lost homeland while Amiyabhushan Majumdar and Narayan Sanyal's fiction looks at refugees in liability camps, mired in government relief procedures and trapped within discourses of apathy and negligence. There is a definite shift in the narrative modes of these writers in increased realism, a reliance on linear narration and use of melodrama as a device. Shaktipada Rajguru's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and Sabitri Roy's *Bwadwip* (Chapter 3) use some of these formulations to look at the gendered responses to partition. Rajguru's novel focuses on the life of a refugee woman who becomes part of the metropolitan labour market, while Roy explores the increasing participation of them in political processes both within and outside the refugee colony through a realistic but fragmented narrative. In spite of living with ill health and remaining unacknowledged by her readers, Roy's political understanding of how the Left movement in West Bengal gets a boost through the participation of people from refugee backgrounds is unparalleled in Bengali fiction. If the 1960s is a time of looking back into the effects of the partition, it is also a time of consolidation of the new nation and debates about citizenship. Prafulla Roy and Ateen Bandopadhyay both implicate the emergence of the autonomous male subject as one of the young nation's seminal concerns. On the other hand, Pratibha Basu sees this question as fractured and subverted through the mutilated life story of her protagonist Sulekha in her novel *Shamudro Hridoy* (Chapter 2).

'One wishes, of course, to look hard at the politics of places used as settings in the novels…..'[54] The novels that I have looked at use their settings as part of what they aim to say. Therefore the 'politics of places', to borrow Boyers' phrase, is a good way to enter these narratives of the partition. The place becomes the context insofar as the narrative seeks to be itself. The landscapes, through which the refugees pass or in which they try to build a new life change as do the refugees themselves. It acts upon them just as they act upon the land. The pieces of wastelands on which they build their colonies become incorporated parts of a city's postcolonial landscape, just as the arid lands of Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi change under their tutelage. The novels based on the rise and growth of these colonies attest to the growth of urban spaces as a result of refugee influx and show how these landscapes then become *unstable* symbols for the refugee's original place of sojourn. When we look at the way geographical markers are used by all the writers that I have studied, this point becomes poignantly clear: a tree or a city space or a barren island becomes the markers of locality and memory. This vision of a place is not the 'panoramic' vision of Western art that represents modernity, rather, the geophysical markers of these texts posit the image of an 'active' epic-mythical landscape that exerts its own influence on the people who are embedded in it.[55] However there are immense

differences in the way locality and community are used in some of these texts. Akhtaruzzaman Elias's novel *Khowabnama* as well as the stories from the Northeast of India point to the porous and flexible borders between the nation-states and articulate the way resistances have been shaped by foregrounding the impulses of a revolutionary movement around land like the Tehbhaga Andolon. The use of the tropes of community and locality is very different in Elias as compared to Ateen Bandopadhyay or Prafulla Roy. Elias's community consists of the marginalized Muslim fishermen and peasants of a particular region in East Pakistan while Roy and Bandopadhyay's protagonists are mainly landowning Hindus. The narrative point of view thus shifts in these texts as do memory that is shaped by locality. In Roy's novel, nostalgia is the dominant focus that shapes Binu's memory of his abandoned village whereas Elias sees locality as sites of both politics and memory. Elias shows the fixed and arrested discourses of Muslim League's demand and attainment of Pakistan in the context of the radical revolutionary ideology of Tehbhaga: the resistance to a forcible extraction of surplus value of the harvest is a process of anti-colonialism that is *prior* to a demand for self-determination. The poor and landless peasants rise against an exploitative and oppressive landed gentry and then support the Muslim League's demand for an egalitarian Pakistan. This Marxist dialectical-logical approach to the events of the partition of Bengal is markedly different from Ateen Bandopadhyay's *Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey* that shows taboos of touch and class dissatisfactions of the Muslims as the cause for the birth of Pakistan. Both Bandopadhyay and Elias, separated by a generation and national boundary, are critical of the national liberation model, particularly in the context of Bangladesh's struggle for freedom. Although there are similarities in the theme of Elias and Bandopadhyay's texts, there are some major differences regarding questions of aesthetics and language. Ateen Bandopadhyay, through the morphology of his landscape, talks of property and class, but his depiction of East Bengal remains bound within the ethos of a lost Arcadia. Akhtaruzzaman's novel, on the other hand, with its thick descriptions, the dialects, and the dream metaphor achieves a different effect through his use of space:

> The task of the novel is to flesh out the life-world and the history of an erased location, to produce a different idea of people and geography that pushes against the impersonal narrative of nation and the abstract locality in our conception.[56]

Elias's topography then comes to resemble an archeological site, where narrative layers cover deeper sediments of memory and history that can only be unearthed through careful inspection/introspection. Ateen Bandopadhyay, in comparison,

shows an awareness of history that unfolds in East Bengal through the class aspirations of the Muslim League and slow decline in Hindu political and social power, but he uses language in less radical ways. The realist mode of Bandopadhyay, with its locus on the individual, is a great contrast to Elias's mythical mode of storytelling based on a community that absorbs within it the revolutionary praxis of Tehbhaga.

As we come to the fictions written later both in and outside West Bengal, from the 1980s till the present, we see a different narrative preoccupation that encompasses the new political realities of the nation state. The silences surrounding the complexities of the partition is articulated in the peasant utopia of Rajguru's depiction of lower caste refugees in Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi (Chapter 4). This exploration is very different from Narayan Sanyal's novel *Bokultala P.L. Camp*, especially in the implications of rehabilitation that are explored in the individual texts. In *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi*, the efforts of the Namasudra refugees to change their status and their lives are a contrast to the abject dependence of the middleclass inmates at Bokultala's liability camp. In some ways, Sanyal replicates the Rehabilitation Ministry discourses about the *purbo bongiyo* refugees stuck in apathy and dejection while Rajguru's lower caste refugees, through their political will, transform their places of sojourn. This can be attributed to the difference in the time of compositions of the novels: Rajguru's text, written in 1980, is composed exactly after a decade of the traumatically tragic Naxalbari uprising that took the young of Calcutta by storm, many of them from refugee backgrounds. By the time Emergency was proclaimed in 1975 by Indira Gandhi, the Naxal movement had petered out. When the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M) comes back to power to form the Left Front, euphoria is high, but then in the small island of Marichjhapi, hundreds of refugee settlers are shot dead by the state police. Rajguru's novel is written at a time of assessment, after the violence is over: it takes stock of not only the tragic happenings at Marichjhapi but goes even further beyond to search out the violence that lives at the heart of the nation-state and within the processes of decolonization. Like Rajguru, Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Hasan Azizul Huq and Selina Hossain (Chapters 5 and 6) in Bangladesh explore the partition through the vernacular history of Tehbhaga's peasant uprising and how the radical mood of the Muslim masses is changed into communal activism. Hossain explores life in the enclaves that dot the borders of the postcolonial nations of India and Bangladesh to understand the way politics has played with communities and continues to do so in the subcontinent. The narrative modes employed by Rajguru, Huq and Elias, though widely different, have one commonality. They use various dialects located in a particular place and a new

understanding of the geopolitics of the subcontinent that lies not in the majoritarian discourses of state formation but in the smaller histories, the forgotten histories of the people that have been pushed out from a centralized 'national' narrative. These novels bring back the specific histories of a region or a place, and can be seen as counter-voices to the processes of decolonization through partition. They also set up complex responses to the partition with newer awareness of issues like borders and identities. Living in an increasingly globalized, fractured world, they bring an urgency to the longstanding issues of the partition by 'scouring alternative sources, reviving forgotten (or abandoned) histories' that mirror and converse with each other.[57] They constitute, in my opinion, some of the most radical uses of history in literature that has originated from the subcontinent.

Moushumi Bhowmick, a composer and a singer, while discussing her project *Travelling Archive*, recently confessed that she was 'still in the Ritwik Ghatak mode.'[58] From 2003, she has been engaged, with Sukanta Majumdar, in recording the folk songs, women's songs, panchali, baul and other musical forms to create an archive of Bangla songs. This is to unearth a rich tradition of musical renderings that map the various musical genres in the diverse regions where Bangla and its dialects are spoken. If we remember Benjamin's words that 'Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back' then Bhowmick's archive is a storyteller's archive.[59] What Benjamin means by natural history is the lived experience, the quotidian and the mundane practices of a people living in a community and talking to each other about their traditions, language and reality of their lives. To many, before the partition, Bengal was a vast land, a diverse region filled with a wide variety of people of numerous faiths and practices yet living a natural history that was shaded and shadowed by the language in which they conversed, sang songs or told each other stories. One may say that Bengal had existed before it was created(to borrow Braudel's phrase about France). In one fell swoop the partition brought an end to this shared life that cannot be expressed through the word 'culture.' We know the storyteller takes his sanction from death because in his/her stories death is defeated every time the story or song travels from one set of people to another: in the tug and pull of memory, in the small histories of love and longing, in the ways in which the visitations and revisits across borders are seamlessly intertwined. The life of a people after the colonial empire ended constitutes the postcolonial and as Aniket Jaaware postulates

> for our understanding of postcoloniality, and its social practice in postcolonial societies…… while the most significant contributions have been made to 'theory' it must not be forgotten that postcoloniality is

> a social practice. It is found in the area of affects, as well as the area of concepts, and in the area of actions (and that includes speech acts and performatives) as well.[60]

Postcolonial literature in Bengal is made up of a search for that expansive, spread-eagled life that colonialism brought to an end: not a poetic going back to the roots and to an undifferentiated and un-problematized past but to unearth its contours, to make the differences speak, to listen to the voices that talk of another world and yet that which can be revived, re-contextualized and remembered. Postcolonial then is not just a search but also the recognition of the varied stories that a language (and its tributaries) spoke and enunciated. It is an active digging into a people's history, that Ranajit Guha calls the 'small voices of history': this history is not necessarily entwined with the history of the nation but in a curious way ricochets off it. Following Heidegger, Guha suggests that one must think of another historicality that would recall the past 'in the phenomenology of everyday life.' He also suggests that the historian's subject should necessarily be that of the poet and the fiction writer's to see how they represent in language the everyday life of the ordinary and the mundane.[61] The 'Ritwik Ghatak mode' is a conscious turning back, in our minds and intellectual pursuits, to an engagement with the past and to see partition understood, questioned and dismantled through the very practice of one's aesthetics. The postcolonial then is not just a *time* (after the colonial) but encompasses a reinvented *praxis*: a search to unearth the synchronic and diachronic span of a people's existence in a land where they had lived and died. This book is not about the high history of the nation but an attempt to understand ordinary people's lives and deaths in the formation of that history; the small people and the ordinary people whose stories cry out to be read and understood not because they are untold but because the storyteller's task is to elucidate a profound and transcendental homelessness and melancholy. In his essay on storytellers, Benjamin quotes Pascal who once said that no one 'dies so poor that he does not leave something behind.' Benjamin adds, 'Surely it is the same with memories too – although these do not always find an heir. The novelist takes charge of this bequest, and seldom without profound melancholy,'[62] The novels in Bangla have been heir to collective memories of homelessness and exile and the trauma of thousands whose lives were torn asunder by Radcliffe's jottings on the map.The boundaries then say different stories just as they shut out some; just as literature catches the nuances and gaps of lives lived at the margins or at the epicentre depending on where one stands. This work is an attempt to focus on the hidden aspects of a land torn asunder by the machinations to divide and rule it: first by the British and then by a class of political elites who tried to script

their stories and block out those that did not fit their agendas. Early on, the British were aware that the Bengal presidency was an unwieldy phenomenon.[63] Just a quick glance at the map of undivided Bengal would enable one to see that the area comprised a great diversity of people and geography and the subsequent borders that would carve up contiguous territory would be at once arbitrary and artificial. One does not have to be a geographical determinist to understand that geography was and is a vitally important factor in Bengal's past and will be in its future history, not because it implicates the choices people make but also because it has played and continues to play a role in people's existence on either side of the border. In Bengal's partition literature, place has infinite meanings and morphologies. It may be defined geographically, historically and phenomenologically: the narratives use landscapes figuratively, literally or allegorically to connect suffering bodies to place and space (I think of de Certeau's distinction between the two) to interrogate the quest for a national identity or a trajectory of progress. 'Place encodes time, suggesting that histories embedded in the land…have always provided vital and dynamic methodologies for understanding the transformative impact of empire and the anticolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress.'[64]

I am keenly aware that this book will focus on a specific region with its own localized customs, habit, cultures and its own historical processes. In the last few years, academic studies foregrounding a particular region have thrown up important issues and debates, particularly in social anthropology, cultural studies as well as in history, especially because a regional perspective acts as a counterpoint to a macro-history of the nation-state. In the process of accretion that is the 'Nation', regional perspectives may get erased in many vital ways. The partition narratives from Punjab have smothered the representational spaces of other histories of the partition, particularly from the Bengal borderlands and the Northeast of India. One is also aware that the shadow-lines of states and boundaries have constructed national archives and created gaps in what we choose to remember. Many literary critics believe that works of literature in Bengal deliberately turned away from depicting the partition because for the people of Bengal, their history and life together were marked with a communal/religious marker; so the writers did not want to depict the partition in its brutality because they felt the true forms of literature are dependent on humanism and morality instead. Any depiction of the horrors of the partition would have given life and sustenance to this communal divide.[65] The impetus to maintain the secular space in literature may or may not have been true, but it is misleading to claim that Bengali literature have not engaged with the realities of the partition even within the format of the short story that displays a wide range of narratives. Stories of the partition from West Bengal and East

Pakistan had differed in the way the partition was represented: many early writers in Pakistan celebrated the birth of the new nation while those in West Bengal explored the themes of the loss of a homeland, the new life of a refugee and the continuities and disruptions of memory. The responses varied with time and with place so that the stories from the Northeast, for example, create a different template of affective responses. Lukaćs considered the short story the most artistic of the narrative forms because 'it expresses the ultimate meaning of all artistic creation as *mood*, as the very essence and content of the creative process, but it is rendered abstract for that very reason.'[66] The unadorned vitality of the story's form has been used with great felicity by postcolonial writers both in the Northeast of India and Bangladesh and I analyse a few to assess their impact and structure (Chapter 5). The last chapter (Chapter 6) takes up some recent literatures on the partition, written in the last decade, to see the nuanced yet direct ways in which authors on both sides of the borders are attentive to what may be the *aporias* of our history of vivisection: by exploring the lives of those who did not move or those who are marked as 'divided bodies' through the continued presence of borders in their lives.

Even when I am detailing the themes that I shall look into, I am also particularly keen that in this book I want to go beyond trauma, violence and nostalgia. I want to capture, even if fleetingly, the complex ways in which the division of Bengal has affected people's lives and their sense of who they are. I am deeply indebted to recent studies on these issues especially with a focus on gender (Jill Didur's work comes to mind) but Bengal's case is singular because in spite of the division, the two sides share a culture in terms of language and ways of life. This commonality of language and life has enabled a new kind of writing in Bangla that places an enormous significance on land, space, territory and place. In South Asia, the map is powerful and has transformed land into territory. The birth of the nation states of India and Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, created borders that also represent 'hatred, disunity, informal connections and voluminous informal trade…heavy paramilitary presence, communal discord, humanitarian crisis, human rights abuses and enormous suspicions yet informal cooperation' as one commentator sums up.[67] The flexibility of the borders have created enclaves, locally known as *chhitmohols*, that came into being due to this unstable border, where people of a nation live surrounded by the territory of another. Currently there are 123 Indian and 74 Bangladeshi enclaves where an estimated 51 thousand people live uncertain lives as 'stateless' *chhitmoholia* (enclave inhabitants). Territoriality has thus meant that *space* becomes an element of politics and can be used to classify people into 'citizens' or 'aliens'. Ranabir Samaddar sees space as a significant element of politics because 'the political and

cultural geography' changes at the cost of collective identities.[68] India's Northeast was created by the partition and the region's history of sectarian oppression has roots that goes back to 1947.

The most enduring image in my mind of 1947 is one from a film: a scene in Ritwik Ghatak's *Komalgandhar* (1961, the second film in his partition trilogy) where the protagonists, Bhrigu and Anasuya, travel to the last railhead that separates India and East Pakistan. They stand at the barricade that closes off the railway line, gazing out at the river Padma, to a land where they had once lived and where they would now be aliens. This is a moment of epiphany and has symbolized for me the intense expressive mood of a landscape that brings together subjectivity and spatiality. I realize now that the scene is given its power because Ghatak explores the spatial parameters of the partition experience: he unearths a history of the partition through *landscapes* in his films. Anasuya and Bhrigu's rootless lives touch the countryside that lies in front of them and render it visible to us: the land becomes a marker of their lives, and through them, the lives of thousands who are just as rootless. All the texts that I read through this book have reaffirmed this idea within me: partition, I reiterate, is not just an event, or a date but a *longue durée* that lives within each of us; we can acknowledge its existence by going back again and again in our memory and through others' memories, not to consolidate what Ranajit Guha calls the 'cult of mourning' but to understand the trajectories of the many lives that had lived through it. It is through the land that we are allowed to mourn the past and be vigilant about the future: that the geography of belonging is not divisive but can be inclusive. In the texts that I explore, this acknowledgement is made through the landscape, the setting through which the characters move. The landscape is given meaning by the suffering subjectivity and the landscape, in turn, is expressive of that suffering. Each works upon the other to construct the meaning and power of the narrative. Michael Shapiro's contention that 'it is a propitious time to rethink the ethical and political history of space' because cartography and identity are closely linked is an idea that informs much of this work.[69]

However, the topography of Bengal is not a stage upon which actors enact significant historical events: rather the very topography of the land, bound by mighty rivers like the Padma and the Brahmaputra, is significant and alive – throwing up rich spatial representations through which the memories and experiences of partitioned people find expressions. The imprint of the partition on these landscapes – demographic, social and cultural – are profound and long term. In this study I try to understand how partition transforms places and spaces through memory and labour. What sediments does the partition leave behind in

the physical topography of these places? In what ways are landscapes 'memorials' of traumatic events and construct the mythic-epic experiences of homeless people? Is landscape an adequate way in which we can gauge and map out some of the hidden histories of partition? If 'narration created humanity' then the land did too in especial ways in Bengal. As Michel de Certeau has shown us (although in the context of a modern city), 'the genealogies of places, legends about territories' mark our resistance to oppressive systems of power.[70] The works of literatures that I read therefore are just not texts, but a way of unearthing the sediments of history that lie hidden in the topography through which the people travel; they are the logos making geography through which partition's history can be mapped in a new way because different geographies throw up various ways of representation and resistance to dominant discourses. Although there is a mirroring of themes and motifs, each landscape has a different story to tell and recreates a space that is in direct contradiction to the territoriality of the new nation state and is in mirroring embrace with another. Exile is a kind of recompense that tries to restore the original place of sojourn that is now lost. Thus a novel set in the forests of Dandakaranya tells a different story than the one set in the banks of the Jamuna though both the texts talk of the marginalized farmers and peasants of the lower castes whose stories have never gained prominence in partition debates. In this book I do not see the landscape as a sign system that brings to life some meanings of the past but rather the landscape as integral to the message that the author/writer is hoping to convey. His/her understanding of the network of linkages between people and the land on which they choose or not choose to reside forms the central theme of many of the literatures that I study. The 'sedimenting of history' and 'sentiment in the landscape' therefore form two overarching themes in the partition narratives that I take up for study.[71] I am also aware that the experience of the partition cannot be mapped in trite formulations: it was too vast, too complex and too heartrending to be put into neat theories of identity, habitations or modernity. But I do try to make sense of the cultural representations that have been brought forth by suffering and rootlessness by situating them in their particular spaces where partition's victims and victors play out their life stories. In turn, the literatures, which use these places as settings, do so deliberately: by questioning the validity of boundaries and by demonstrating the impossibility of separating memory and geography in the way partition is remembered, especially in Bengal. Therefore, in this work I have tried to look at the partition of Bengal not just as a set of historical events but have placed it as 'historical trauma within the problem of language' by looking at its representations, in particular the representations of violence, loss, resistance and agency by diverse people from different regions on

both sides of the Eastern border.[72] Naturally, these testimonies and memoirs are negotiated through time, space and subject positions. Sometimes there is a major gap between the records in archives and events represented in fictions. Marichjhapi has left little and scattered archival material but fiction's recollection of the momentous happenings at the small Sundarban island is complex and expansive. But here again, the relationship between memory and archive is richly problematic: the methods through which we gain access to our pasts are never simple and linear; all we can hope is to discover newer sources that will enable us to arrive at a nuanced account of it.

The literary text is the primary object of my attention because literature remains an extraordinarily sensitive index of the historical and cultural changes in society. By training and inclination, I have spent more time with literary texts than with historical archives and therefore my anxieties on that score remain with me. Bangla is the language that has shaped my imagination, so my small, localized effort is to set out the difficulties of recreating and constructing the past without trying to provide answers to some of the questions that I raise. I can only hope that my gentle readers will be indulgent in their assessments of this work. There remains also the question of language through which the literature I study can be received and communicated. The texts that I explore often use dialects of Bengali that are impossible to translate (as if the writers are showcasing the different domains of languages and its different registers to mark their speakers). Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Mihir Sengupta and Selina Hossain use the dialects of Bangla to insert their characters into the body of the nation in a subversive act of linguistic flagging. This is essentially a political aspect of their novels that at the same time carry their texts beyond simplistic formulations of syncretism and secular ideals. They manage to complicate these questions to show, how on the ground, languages and literatures have complex indices that can sometimes go against the message of the archive. They enable us to read against the grain and to demand a different sensibility and reading practice. As Shahid Amin asks, 'What linguistic and cultural communication must precede the work of the historian? ...In other words, what must readers know beforehand in order to empathize with this shifting tale of an…event with a long afterlife?'[73] I translate selected passages or lines from the texts that I study, not to erase the differences between languages but simply to give my readers a sense of the import of the words used. After all, even the anonymity of the speakers (or the generality of the English that I use) does not belie the utterances they make: their words draw blood, even after so many years after the partitioning of their homeland.

Endnotes

1 The word partition is spelt in the lower case because I am inclined to place it as part of the quotidian experience of the people along the Eastern border and not simply as a historical 'event' that has taken place a long time ago and that requires no critical engagement from us.

2 The *Annales* historian who coined this phrase was Fernand Braudel in his *La Méditerranéeet le monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949, 1966) who used it to distinguish it from the short time (episodic history or events) and the medium time of economic cycles.

3 The recent historiography on the partition in the East has been diverse. I mention some of them here: Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, 2007; Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London, 2005, some articles in the two volumes of Sukanta Chaudhuri,(ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City*, Delhi, 1990, and Tai Yong Tan and G. Kudaisya, (eds.), *Partition and Postcolonial South Asia: A Reader*, London, 2008 are illuminating. Sankar Ghosh, *The Disinherited State: A Study of West Bengal, 1967–70*, Bombay, 1971, Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal, Essays in Political Criticism*, Delhi, 1997 and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of Freedom in post-independence West Bengal*, London, 2009 are studies of post-partition West Bengal. Explorations on the partition's refugees like Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal*, Delhi, 2005 and Pradip Bose, (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Practices and Contested Identities*, Calcutta, 2000, have inspired me profoundly. Kanti B. Pakrashi, *The Uprooted: A Sociological Study of the Refugees of West Bengal,* Calcutta, 1971 and Ranabir Samaddar, (ed.), *Reflections on the Partition in the East*, Calcutta, 1994, Prafulla Chakraborty, *Prantik Manob*, Calcutta, 1997 and Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay, *Udvastu*, Calcutta, 1970, Tushar Sinha, *Moronjoyee Sangramey Bastuhara,* Calcutta, 1999 continue to remain invaluable. Sandip Bandopadhyay's *Deshbhag: Smriti Aar Satta,* Calcutta, 2001 is important.Literature and the Bengal partition have been discussed in Shemonti Ghosh, (ed.), *Deshbhag: Smriti O Swobdhota*, Calcutta, 2008.The two volumes by Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, (eds.), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Calcutta, 2003 and 2009 also contain interesting materials.The micro-history of Bengal's partition and post-partition years is seen in many articles that have come out through the years. Some of them are: Annu Jalais, 'Dwelling on Marichjhapi', *The Economic and Political Weekly* (henceforth *EPW*), 23 April 2005, Ross Mallick, 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves and Marichjhapi Massacre', *Journal of Asian Studies,* 58:1, 1999; W. van Schendel, 'I am not a Refugee', *Modern Asian Studies*, 37:3, 2003; M. K. A. Siddiqui, 'Life in the Slums of Calcutta,' *EPW*, 13 December 1969; Pabitra Giri, 'Urbanisation in West Bengal 1951–1991', *EPW*, 21 November 1998 and the more recent by Uditi Sen, 'The Myths Refugees Live by', in *Modern Asian Studies*, 48:1, 2014.

4 See 'Afterword' in Debjani Sengupta (ed.), *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals,* 2011 for a discussion of this point.

5 The literary canon dealing with the partition in Bengal is comparatively well nourished than its historiography. However, many authors who have written on the partition and its effect have remained unknown outside Bengal, leading to fallacies of perception that no sizeable partition literature exists in Bangla. Also, some authors remain uncanonized and

unread even by a discerning Bangla reader. Shaktipada Rajguru's novel on Dandakaranya and Dulalendu Chatterjee's two novels (that I discuss in Chapter 4) are examples that come to mind. Porimal Goswami is another author who seems almost forgotten. I have not found a single discussion on them in notable books of Bangla literary history including one exclusively on partition's literature like Asrukumar Shikdar, *Bhanga Bangla O Bangla Sahityo,* Calcutta, 2005.

Short stories, dealing with partition's themes like riots, displacement, refugee-hood, are many and varied. For a list of notable short stories see Sanjida Akhtar, *Bangla Choto Golpey Deshbibhag, 1947–1970*, Dhaka, 2002. For a discussion of partition novels see Sahida Akhtar, *Purbo O Paschim Banglar Uponyash: 1947–1971*, Dhaka, 1992. For a discussion on some partition plays, see Jayanti Chattopadhyay, 'Representing the Holocaust: The Partition in Two Bengali Plays' in S. Settar and Indira B. Gupta, (eds.), *Pangs of Partition: The Human Dimension*, vol., 2, 301–12.

6 Jaques Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan*, Book 1, (Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–54), pp. 35 onwords states: 'trauma is an extremely ambiguous concept, since it would seem that, according to all the clinical evidence, its fantasy aspect is infinitely more important than its event–aspect. Whence, the event shifts into the background in the order of subjective references.'

7 Joya Chatterji, 'Partition Studies: Prospects and Pitfalls', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2014, 73(2): 311.

8 Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, New Delhi, 1998, 6–9. For an emphasis on social issues like abduction, displacement and communal violence see D.A. Low and Howard Brasted, (eds.), *Freedom, Trauma, Discontinuities: Northern India and Independence,* New Delhi, 1998.

9 Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, New Delhi, 1998, 18. See also Kuldip Nayar and Asif Noorani, *Tales of Two Cities*, Delhi, 2008 for personal accounts of the trauma that transformed the subcontinent.

10 Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, *Tyranny of Partition: Hindus in Bangladesh and Muslims in India*, New Delhi, 2006. See also Sarah Ansari, 'The movement of Indian Muslims to West Pakistan after 1947: partition-related migration and its consequences for the Pakistani province of Sind' and Papiya Ghosh, 'Partition's Biharis' both in Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, (eds.), *Partition and Postcolonial South Asia: A Reader*, vol. 1, London, 2008, 241–58 and 144–69.

11 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj, Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta University Monograph 5, 1990 and 'Mobilizing For A Hindu Homeland' in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato, (eds.), *The Unfinished Agenda: Nation Building In South Asia*, Delhi, 2001,151–95, provide an understanding of the lower caste identity formation in Bengal. A recent essay by Neilesh Bose, 'Purba Pakistan Zindabad: Bengali Visions of Pakistan, 1940-1947' in *Modern Asian Studies,* 48:1, 2014, covers an important aspect of 'Pak-Bangla' cultural nationalism.

12 Shahid Amin, *Event,Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992*, interrogates the construction of people into a nation by questioning the nationalist master narrative in relation to the events in Chauri Chaura, 1922. Also Veena Das, 'Composition of the Personal Voice: Violence and Migration,' *Studies in History*, 7:1, 1991.

[13] Mushirul Hasan, 'Memories of a Fragmented Nation: Rewriting the Histories of India's Partition' in Mushirul Hasan, (ed.), *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India,* 39–40.

[14] Robert Braun, 'The Holocaust and the Problems of Historical Representation', *History and Theory*, 33(3):172, 1994.

[15] Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*, 130.

[16] Hayden V. White, *The Context of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, began the debate between history and literature with far reaching effects. White stated that 'we experience the 'fictionaliztion' of history as an 'explanation' for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably.'(99)

[17] Ashis Nandy, 'The Days of the Hyaena: A Foreword' in *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals*, xii.

[18] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' in *Illuminations,* 101.

[19] Alok Bhalla, 'Memory, History and Fictional Representation of the Partition,' in *Narrating India,* 89.

[20] Ranabir Samaddar, 'The Historiographical operation: Memory and History', *EPW*, 2237.

[21] Ranabir Samaddar, 'The Historiographical operation: Memory and History', 2240.

[22] Syed Shafiruddin Pirzada, ed., *Foundations of Pakistan: All India Muslim League Documents, 1906-47*, 1969–70 and P. N. S. Mansergh et al., *Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power, 1942-47*, 1970–83. See also Sumit Sarkar, (ed.), *Towards Freedom,* vol., I (1946), Delhi, 2007.

[23] The partition's legacy of violence and communalism has been studied in some detail by A. A. Engineer, (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict in South Asia,* New Delhi, 1987; Veena Das, (ed.), *Communities, Riots, Survivors: The South Asian Experience,* Delhi, 1990 and Veena Das, *Violence and Subjectivity,* London, 2000. *Selected Writings on Communalism*, Delhi, 1994 brings together a selection of essays on the subject by Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra and K. N. Pannikar. Ravinder Kaur, (ed.), *Religion, Violence and Political Mobilisation in South Asia,* New Delhi, 2005 looks at the construction of 'communal' and seeks to open up the term through the complicity of state and religious mobilization. Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*, Delhi, 2006 is concerned with the 'routine violence of our history and politics' and seeks to study the conditions, whether it is history writing or the construction of minorities and majorities, as shot through with violence. For West Bengal, Sajol Basu, *Politics of Violence: A Case Study of West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1982 remains important. Another study that I personally found helpful is G. G. Deschaumes and R. Ivekovic, (eds.), *Divided Countries, Separated Cities: the Modern Legacy of Partition*, Delhi, 2003 to understand questions of the partition's diasporas. An introduction to communalism in colonial India is Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Delhi, 1992 and Mushirul Hasan, (ed.), *Communal and Pan–Islamic Trends in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1981.

[24] Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 41.

[25] Jayanti Basu, *Reconstructing the Bengal Partition: The Psyche under a Different Violence,* xxiii uses this term to distinguish between the 'hard' violence in Punjab with that in Bengal that was 'relentless, insidious and disorienting' accompanied with gossip, innuendo and uncertainty, which had a long term implications for the politics and social history of West Bengal.

[26] Robert Braun, 'The Holocaust and the Problems of Historical Representation,' 172–73.

[27] E. M.W. Tillyard, *The Epic Strain in the English Novel*, 9.

[28] The memoir was published in the journal *Shonibarer Chithi*, 1964. Quoted in Bhishmadeb Bandopadhyay, *Tarashankar Bandopadhyayer Uponyash: Shomaj O Rajniti,* 309.

[29] Carlo Coppola, 'Premchand's address to the first meeting of the All India Progressive Writers' Association: Some Speculations,' *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 21:2, 1986, 26, where Premchand states: 'it could be said that he [the writer] is wedded to humanness, virtue and nobility. To support and plead for the oppressed, suffering, destitute, whether an individual or a group, is his duty. Society is his court and he submits his plea to this country and deems his efforts successful if it arouses a sense of the aesthetic and a sense of justice.'

[30] The phrase is by Vivek Dhareshwar, quoted in Shivarama Padikkal, 'Colonial Modernity and the Social Reformist Novel' in Meenakshi Mukherjee, (ed.), *Early Novels in India,* 213.

[31] Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'Introduction' in *Early Novels in India,*viii.

[32] Aniket Jaaware, 'The Myth of Indian Literature' in K. Satchidanandan, (ed.), *Myth in Contemporary Indian Literature*, 136.

[33] Walter Benjamin,'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations,* 255.

[34] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 189.

[35] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* vol. 1, 67.

[36] Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'Afterword' to Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife*, 136.

[37] Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar have both looked at, although in differing ways, at the process in which the Hindu nation tried to construct the woman as the site of tradition. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragm*ents and Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*.

[38] Afroza Khatun, *Muslim Uponyashey Antwopur,* Chapters 1 and 3.

[39] P. K. Datta, *Heterogeneities: Identity Formation in Modern India*, 61.

[40] P. K. Datta, *Heterogeneities,* 68.

[41] Rabindranath Tagore, 'Bangiya Jatiyo Sahityo,' *Complete Works of Rabindranath Tago*re, Centenary vol. 13, 793. Translation mine.

[42] For an account of this quarrel see Priti Kumar Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul: Islam, Poetry and History,* 280 onwards.

[43] Priti Kumar Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul: Islam, Poetry and History,* 285.

[44] Sumanta Banerji, *The Parlour and the Street: Elite and Popular Culture in nineteenth Century Calcutta,* 178–79.

[45] Priti Kumar Mitra, *The Dissent of Nazrul: Islam, Poetry and History,* 298.

[46] Priya Kumar, *Limiting Secularism*, 11.

[47] See Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India*, 2005 for an insightful history of the Association.

[48] Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital*, 220.

[49] Nandi Bhatia, 'Staging Resistance: The Indian People's Theatre Association,' in Lisa Lowe and David Llyod, (eds.), *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, 451.

[50] Neilesh Bose, 'Purba Pakistan Zindabad: Bengali Visions of Pakistan 1940-1947,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 48:1, 26.

[51] Neilesh Bose, 27.

[52] An animated discussion around a national literature of Pakistan took place in journals like *Mahe Nau*. See Syed Ali Ahsan, 'Purbo Pakistaner Bangla Sahityer Dhara,' *Mahe Nau,* 3(5): 49–54, August 1951, who propounded to discard Tagore for Pakistan's national unity.

[53] Jugantar Chakraborty, ed. *Aprokashito Manik Bandopadhyay,*133.

[54] Robert Boyers, *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel since 1945*, Oxford, 1985, 6. Boyers' remark is in the context of novels by V. S. Naipaul and Nadine Godimer.

[55] Rashmi Doraiswamy, 'The Panoramic Vision and the Descent of Darkness: Issues in Contra Modernity', in Manu Jain, (ed.), *Narratives of Indian Cinema*, Delhi, 2009, 79.

[56] Rajarshi Dasgupta, *The Lie of Freedom: Justice in a Landscape of Trees*, unpublished article, n.p.

[57] Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual,* xviii.

[58] Moushumi Bhowmik in a seminar titled *Vernaculars Underground* organized by Marg Humanities, at Teen Murti Library (NMML), 8 March 2014.

[59] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations*, 94.

[60] Aniket Jaaware, 'Of demons and angels and historical humans: some events and questions in translation and postcolonial theory,' in Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri, (eds.), *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader,* 187.

[61] Ranajit Guha, *The Small Voices of History*, 6.

[62] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations,* 98.

[63] Comprised into five divisions made up of the districts, which lay within the divisional boundaries, Bengal was made up of the Presidency division (24 Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad, Jessore and Khulna), the Burdwan division (Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura,Midnapore, Hoogly and Howrah), Dacca division (Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur and Bakargunj), Chittagong division (Chittagong, Tippera and Noakhali) and Rajshahi division (Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Bogura, Pabna and Malda).

[64] Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (eds.), *Postcolonial Ecologies,* 4.

[65] Asrukumar Shikdar, *Bhanga Bangla O Bangla Shahityo,* 23–24.

[66] Lukaćs, *Theory of the Novel*, 51.

[67] Paula Banerjee, 'Humanitarian Aspects of Borders in the East and the North East,' in Paula Banerjee, (ed.), *Unstable Populations, Anxious States: Mixed and Massive Population Flows in South Asia*, 158.

[68] Ranabir Samaddar, *The Biography of a Nation: 1947-1997*, 276–81.

[69] Michael Shapiro, 'History, Politics, Space: Unmapping the Imperium' in S. P. Udaykumar (ed.), *Handcuffed to History*: *Narratives, Pathologies and Violence in South Asia*, 29.

[70] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 122.

[71] I borrow the two phrases from Howard Morphy, 'Landscape and the Reproduction of the Ancestral Past' in Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon, (eds.), *The Anthropology of Landscapes: Perspectives of Place and Space*, 186, where he argues about the Yolngu speaking people in Aboriginal Australia who carry a conception of land that is central to their relationship between individual and ancestral past. Donald Wesling in his *Wordsworth and the Adequacy of the Landscape* (1970) describes the Romantic poet's understanding, derived from Kant and Schiller, about the moral dimensions of topography.

[72] Jennifer Yusin and Deepika Bahri, 'Writing Partition: Trauma and Testimony in Bapsi Sidwa's *Cracking India*' in Anjali Gera–Roy and Nandi Bhatia, (eds.), *Partitioned Lives: Narratives of Home, Displacement and Resettlement,* 85.

[73] Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*, 5.

1

The Calcutta Riots in Representations and Testimonies

> *When I now read descriptions of troubled parts of the world, in which violence appears primordial and inevitable, a fate to which masses of people are largely resigned, I find myself asking, Is that all there was to it? Or is it possible that the authors of these descriptions failed to find a form – or a style or a voice or a plot – that could accommodate both violence* and *the civilized willed response to it?*
>
> Amitav Ghosh, *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*

I

In 1946, Gopal Pantha, a notorious *mastaan* (goon) of north Calcutta, was 33 years old. Everybody called him by the nickname Pantha, a goat, because he ran a meat shop in College Street (in the Boubazar area). Although he was the leader of a gang of neighbourhood thugs, Gopal did not belong to any criminal underclass of the city. His Brahmin upper caste family (his patrilineal name was Mukherjee) had links to the Congress party and had contributed their share to the militant nationalist movements of the 1930s. On the morning of 16 August 1946, he left for his shop as usual but when he heard about the trouble he came back to his locality.

> Muslim League volunteers were marching with long sticks in their hands. From Boubazar More to Harrison Road you could hear their slogans, 'Larke lenge Pakistan.' Then I heard that two goalas (dairymen) had been killed in Beliaghata and riots have started in Boubazar.

He organized his 'boys' because he thought 'it was a very critical time for the country; the country had to be saved. If we become a part of Pakistan we will be oppressed… so I called all my boys and said this is the time we have to retaliate, and you have to answer brutality with brutality….[1]

They armed themselves with small knives, swords, meat-choppers, sticks and

rods, while Gopal had two American pistols tucked at his waist. He had procured these as well as some grenades from the American soldiers quartered in Calcutta in 1945. 'If you paid two hundred and fifty rupees or bought them a bottle of whiskey the soldiers would give you a .45 and a hundred cartridges.' As soon as the news of rioting spread his group of vigilantes swelled. They were joined by the Hindustani *goalas* or dairy-men from the Janbajar area who came armed with *lathis*. 'We were fighting those who attacked us… we fought and killed them… So if we heard one murder has taken place we committed ten more… the ratio should be one to ten, that was the order to my boys.'[2]

Like Gopal Pantha, Jugal Chandra Ghosh also belonged to the city's middle classes and had some men at his disposal. He ran a wrestling club at Beliaghata, an *akhara,* and his followers carried out retaliatory attacks in Beliaghata area and the Miabagan *busti* (slum). Jugal Chandra raised money from the neighbourhood sawmills, factories and *khatals* (dairy sheds) and distributed it among the attackers. 'One murder would fetch ten rupees and a wounding would bring five.' He had links to certain political leaders of the city and knew the Hindu Mahasabha secretary Bidhubhusan Sarkar as well as the Congress-affiliated trade union – Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) leader Suresh Chandra Bannerjee. Ghosh's anger against the Muslim League flared when he saw the dead bodies from the first days of rioting. 'I saw four trucks standing, all with dead bodies, piled at least three feet high; like molasses in a sack … that sight had a tremendous effect on me.'[3] The riot that erupted on 16 August came to an end on 19 August, but sporadic outbursts continued throughout 1946 and in the months leading to Independence.[4] The long unending days of rioting made certain that Calcutta was never to be the same again.

The picture that emerges from the interviews of these men, active during those rioting days, also underlines the character of the mob that had gone on rampage in the by-lanes and streets of Calcutta. It often comprised of men working in a city not their own – the *goalas* (the dairy men) the *darwans* (doormen), the coachmen, the *garoyans* (drivers) from the coal depots, the tailors, boatmen and petty traders who were 'up-countrymen', migrant men who lived in the city for their livelihood.[5] The city, with its bustling bazaars, sprawling garden houses of the rich merchants, and clusters of slums standing cheek by jowl to them provided job opportunities and residence to a large labour force drawn from the neighbouring districts of Bihar, Orissa and the United Provinces. Although Calcutta, as British India's largest metropolis, had started on its downward slump when the capital was transferred to Delhi and the number of migrant labourers slowly declined after 1918, in the middle of the twentieth century only three-tenth of the population of the city was

born there and the working class of the city continued to come from outside. In 1931, the total percentage of people living in Calcutta but born in other states of India made up 31.70 per cent of the population while those who were born in other districts of the state were just .30 per cent.[6] A large percentage of this workforce was employed as unskilled labour in jute and cotton mills as well as in railway workshops, glass and pottery works and leather tanning industries. It constituted a highly volatile social group. Living in close contact with other immigrant workers, with strong ties of language and religion, they led a precarious existence of squalor and poverty in an alien city. The new immigrants tried to find accommodation close to people they already knew and the bonds of kinship helped in the process of accretion. They depended to a large extent on the *sardar* or foreman of the mill or factory they worked in who often belonged to their own religious and village community. This group of 'labouring poor' thus came to assume a strong notion of communal identity based on religion, language and habitat. 'Calcutta developed as a city of lone men, and it was the single up-countrymen, Hindus and Muslims alike, who were most active in the Calcutta riots' before 1946 and after.[7] A large number of Muslim rioters were *kasais* or butchers from north and central Calcutta, as well as *khalasis* or dockworkers, masons and hackney carriage drivers. Some Muslim mill hands who came to join the Direct Action Day rally called by the ruling Muslim League government in Bengal also took part in the looting and arson. Among the Hindus, contemporary accounts mention the large presence of up-countrymen as rioters. The *goalas*, sweepers, *darwans* (doormen) took part in the riots as did the local thugs. An editorial in a city newspaper reports on a 'battle royal between the League hooligans and the *Doshads* (low class Hindus trading in pigs) at the South Eastern corner of Tirettabazar.'[8] The rioters were armed with bricks, crackers, burning cloth soaked in petrol, acid bulbs, bombs, soda water bottles and petrol filled bottles. The slums with a large number of working poor became easy targets and many perpetrators came from there as well. The dwellers of Kasai *busti* and Kalabagan *busti*, as well as the slums in Belgachia, Ultadanga, Raja Bazar, Entally, Narkeldanga, Bakulbagan formed armed gangs to set upon each other. Apart from north Calcutta, the roads and areas severely affected by rioting were mostly in the western dock areas and parts of north and south Calcutta like Mechuabazar and College Street, Bowbazar and Chittaranjan Avenue, Chitpur Road, Canning Street, Amratolla Street, Ekbalpur Lane, Khidderpore and Garden Reach, Park Circus and Watgunj. The regions most affected by violence were the densely populated areas of the metropolis: the sector bound on the south by Boubazar Street, on the east by Upper Circular Road and

on the west by Strand Road. The industrial belt of Howrah that had a number of factories and warehouses with a large population of labourers and workers also witnessed widespread murder and mayhem.[9]

It is well documented that Hindu and Muslim identities in Indian institutional politics had hardened from 1920s onwards. In a Public and Judicial Department report covering the first half of 1940, the British government noted the alarming rise of Volunteer Corps or 'private armies' of the political parties, a sure indicator of the increased communal tensions. 'The militant volunteer corps formed by communal and political organizations subscribing to conflicting objectives and ideologies have grave potentialities for mischief in the event of an organized movement to create communal disorder or to subvert the administration' stated the report.[10] With this political army as standby, the Direct Action Day riots in Calcutta also saw, for the first time, a large scale participation of the upper and middle classes of the population. The conjunction of 'elite' and 'popular' communalism had never before been manifest to such a vivid extent. This reason makes the Calcutta Riot of August 1946 important in partition history. The unprecedented scale of violence and the participation of even ordinary people in looting and arson were the notable features of this riot. Certainly 1946 and 1947 were

> the penultimate and worst phase of communal violence in pre-independent Bengal. The Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 followed by the violence in Noakhali seven weeks later introduced the spate of partition riots that plagued the country and helped to prepare for a truncated settlement.[11]

The rise of the Muslim political identity in institutional politics was matched by a rising communal consciousness amongst Hindus particularly after the Government of India Act (1935) that provided provincial autonomy based on separate electorates. This was yet another turning point in the communal politics of Bengal. Similarly, the Bengal Secondary Education Bill (1940) that proposed to increase Muslim representation in secondary education was seen by many Hindus as an attempt to curb their influence. Therefore, in the years between 1935 and 1947 'communal relations in Calcutta and Bengal deteriorated tragically. The communal unity exhibited by the Muslims of Calcutta in the municipal dispute of 1935 was symptomatic of a new found communal consciousness and confidence' especially as the hitherto leaderless Muslim community at the national level, plagued by factionalism, had found an articulate spokesman in Jinnah who proposed a national

communal policy for the first time for his community.[12] In the early months of 1946, differences between the Congress and the Muslim League emerged on the question of whether to join the interim government. On 10 July Nehru declared in a press conference that although the Congress would join the Constituent Assembly, it was free to modify the Cabinet Mission Plan.[13] The Muslim League reacted immediately. In a resolution passed by the National Muslim Parliament held in Bombay on 29 July it stated its resolve to reject the Cabinet Proposals.[14] 16 August was marked as Direct Action Day when Muslims throughout the country were to observe a *hartal* (strike). In Bengal, with a Muslim League ministry in power, a special effort would be made to demonstrate the strength of Muslim convictions about Pakistan. Even before the Muslim League National Council could work out the details of the day, the H. S. Suhrawardy ministry in Bengal declared 16 August a public holiday against the opposition Congress's wish. A mass rally was planned at the foot of the Ochterlony Monument near Dalhousie Square where Suhrawardy, Khwaja Nazimuddin and other League leaders were scheduled to speak. Many of them apprehended trouble and knew the communal fire was waiting to be ignited. On 4 August, Premier Suhrawardy addressed the Muslim National Guard Convention where he passionately urged preparation for the great fight ahead. A joint conference of the Executive Committee of the Calcutta branch of the Muslim League took place with representatives of the Branch League, Mohalla Sardars and Muslim workers of Calcutta, Howrah, Hoogly, Matiabruz and 24 Parganas.[15] On the other hand, the Hindu Mahasabha began a propaganda war through pamphlets and the Bengal Provincial Hindu Students' Federation stated clearly that to join the *hartal* was to support the demand for Pakistan. Both sides indulged in propaganda and rumours to harden communal ideology and the time was ripe for a confrontation.[16]

The rioters were, however, not confined only to the lower social strata. Prominent Muslim League leaders spent a great deal of time in police control rooms directing operations and the role of Suhrawardy in obstructing police duties is documented.[17] The notorious criminal Bombaiya, living in the New Market area, had links with the League and participated in riots as did other goons like Mina Punjabi of Cornwallis *busti* and Munna Chowdhuri in the Harrison Road area. The direct links with institutional politics naturally made the outbreaks highly organized in nature. Hindu businessmen, prominent merchants as well as politicians of the Hindu Mahasabha and some sections of the Congress provided leadership to the mob.[18] A number of Indian National Army (INA) men who came to the city to celebrate INA Day on 18 August were involved in rioting.[19] Even

the minority sections of the population like the Anglo-Indians took part in the rioting.[20] Rumours doing the rounds in the city a few days before Direct Action Day also added to the anxiety and tension in the city streets but the rumours were just that, no Hindu or Muslim families had tried to remove themselves to safer areas and if the Muslim League government was involved then government officials had no inkling of that.[21] As the riots raged on, at the end of the first 48 hours, the hot, muggy and rainy days were marked by an air of death and desolation that hung over Calcutta.

The conflagration raged on till 19 August. An eye witness evokes the horror of those days:

> In Kalighat tram depot I found some bodies stacked like this, like gunny bags…bodies…hundreds of bodies, people killed on the roadside; instead of being in the road, they were dragged inside the tram depot and they were stacked like that… I can't describe how the bodies were scattered and then stacked, it was terrible.[22]

This account of the dead is corroborated by another account, chilling in its details, of a vivid description of a necrophiliac city ravaged and destroyed by its own citizens. Phillips Talbot, an American journalist present in Calcutta in the riot-torn days, described the city in a letter to Walter Rogers of the Institute of Current World Affairs.

> It would be impossible to describe everything that we saw. A sense of desolation hung over the native bazaars. In street after street rows of shops had been stripped to the walls. Tenements and business buildings were burnt out, and their unconsumed innards strewn over the pavements. Smashed furniture cluttered the roads, along with concrete blocks, brick, glass, iron rods, machine tools – anything that the mob had been able to tear loose but did not want to carry off. Fountains gushed from broken water remains. Burned out automobiles stood across traffic lanes. A pall of smoke hung over many blocks, and buzzards sailed in great, leisurely circles. Most overwhelming, however, were the neglected human casualties: fresh bodies, bodies grotesquely bloated in the tropical heat, slashed bodies, bodies bludgeoned to death, bodies piled on push carts, bodies caught in drains, bodies stacked high in vacant lots, bodies, bodies.

Talbot concluded that

> watching a city feed on its own flesh is a disturbing experience. In spite of our war heritage of callousness, I know that I was not alone in sensing profound horror this last week as Calcutta, India's largest metropolis and the second city of the Empire, resolutely set at work to cannibalize itself.[23]

Talbot was an outsider and a witness whose impassivity and compassion were severely tested as he witnessed the carnage around him. [24] The Calcutta riots were to leave its mark for days to come. Ordinary people began to arm themselves and incidents of arson, looting and murder continued sporadically throughout the coming months. For example, on 28 October 1946, the inmates of Khaitan House of 42–44 Zakaria Street gave a statement that showed the condition of the city even two months after Direct Action Day:

> On the morning of the 28 October, 1946 about 4000 (?) persons collected together near Khaitan House…started throwing brickbats and set fire to one of the rooms in the North Western side. When crowd started breaking open gate one of the guards in self defence opened fire….The above incident was followed by searches of a number of other Hindu houses in the whole locality and seizure of arms.[25]

The count of the injured, the looted and the homeless kept mounting and harrowing tales of the riots appeared in newspapers till the news from Noakhali would take centre-stage a few months later.

II

The Great Calcutta Killing (August 1946) and the subsequent unrest in the city are not just events in history that manifest crowd behaviour serving particular political agendas; rather it is a *longue durée* in the life of the city whose shadows spread far and wide over time and space. As communal conflagrations enveloped the city streets, they brought in their wake many other kinds of upheavals within the middle class Hindu family. Richly captured in two novels set in the backdrop of the rioting city, Ashapurna Devi's *Mittirbari* (1947) and Manik Bandopadhyay's *Swadhinatar Swad* (1951) explore the issues thrown up by the deteriorating communal situation and the impending independence of the country. Both the novels, set in Calcutta

in the grip of a violent riot, go beyond the chaos and disorder by exploring and articulating issues of freedom within the 'modern' family and of citizenship in the new nation. The two novels juxtapose the external communal turmoil with the turbulences in the social/personal spheres to bring to one's attention that the 1940s were a period of profound crisis not only in Bengal's politics but also within the domestic and the private spaces encompassing postcolonial subjectivity. The narratives throw up other aspects of the times apart from the violence and the mayhem on the city streets. They look at the communal disturbances as an arena to represent certain social and political workings of power by setting up an opposition between the private and public spheres of the protagonists. Both the writers privilege the family and use the genre of the novel to explore ways in which it can be seen as the site within which questions of freedom and citizenship are debated and contested. In these texts the centrality of gendered voice/s, the shifts in language, open-ended and fragmented narratives raise questions regarding the homogeneity of identity that the communal riots were violently laying bare. They also distinctly complicate the template of macabre violence and destruction by positing another view of the city where men and women live, love and labour at livelihoods. The persistence of the human subject within the narrative, at a time when humanity is most terribly debased, makes theses texts profoundly *moral* in tone.[26]

Literary representations help bring out some of the ways in which history's closures can be addressed: through the form, its ambivalences and shifts one can see the diverse manner in which literature probes the manifested sites of violence and communalism by exposing locations of resistance and humanity. The narratives under study exemplify the muted crisis that marked the culture and society of Bengal before the partition took place in 1947. The Famine of 1943, the Second World War and the ongoing nationalist struggle mark the 1940s as a decade of crisis both within the middle class home and outside. The anxieties and privations of those years are best caught in the literatures of the times that accomplish something altogether unusual: memory and temporality, lack of closure and a questioning of form and language give one a sense of how the disturbed city spaces become a metaphor for other predicaments plaguing the shared life of its denizens. In this decade and the next, novels based on the city, primarily Calcutta, become the new sub-genre in West Bengal's literature. They explore the themes of growing urban modernity, social and political unrest and the intangibility of progress in the aftermath of the country's independence. Novelists like Santoshkumar Ghosh (1920–85), Narendranath Mitra (1917–75), Jyotirindranath Nandi (1912–83), Ashim Roy (1927–86) and Samaresh Basu (1924–88) begin to unearth the

alienation, despair and failure of the social and political systems that are ushered in with the freedom of the country. The postcolonial city space becomes a powerful marker of their syntax and a 'spatial practice' (to use Michel de Certeau's phrase) of explorations of violence. These novels bear testimony to the fractured times that the city was passing through: the appalling burden of homelessness and exile that ordinary people bore as the country was partitioned, the communal backlashes and the pressures of poverty on social classes fighting to regain a foothold in the city. The texts extend those years of deprivation and anxiety by repeating and representing them within the site of the novel/short story to query the ambivalent nature of freedom, agency and complicity in communal violence as well as resistance to it. Many of these texts have an epistemological function: by depicting the riots they do not presume to be cathartic in their effect; instead, by focusing on the riots they create a literary space where certain legitimate and moral questionings can take place through a revelation of the different registers of human experiences. Some of them eschew the realist novel's linear format and are fragmentary and episodic in structure – an important precondition to create the sense of anxiety that facilitates the questions they seek to pose but sometimes fail to answer. They create a momentary pause in the seamless template of violence and counter-violence to recover and rediscover the human subject; so abused and lost in the communal conflagration that gripped Calcutta's civic life in the months before the country's vivisection. Both Manik Bandopadhay (1908–56) and Ashapurna Devi's (1909–95) works underline how the violence in the city and the breakdown of personal relationships and family structures add to one's understanding of a city in crisis and a nation in the making. Through the many forays that their characters undertake, both spatially and psychologically, the writers complicate the family saga to explore the relation between form and matter.

The fictional representations of the riots, written in the months that followed, stress that communities are not undifferentiated or homogenous blocks and restore

> the subject-hood of subaltern social groups, including women, in the making of history, while noting that even their active agency cannot always prevent them from becoming tragic, though not passive, victims of the games of power played by claimants, makers and managers of colonial and postcolonial states.[27]

The eyewitness accounts are set off, as if in a cameo, by the literary narratives with the Calcutta riots as their backdrop. Some of these 'fictive testimony' often self-consciously indicates the limits of such a testimonial even as they recreate and

remember the riots through language. At other times, they give an ironic, subtle and self-reflexive account of the carnage that is allegorical. The political and physical violence and their *moral/psychological* fallouts create the teleological vocabulary of the two novels that are under discussion. Written between 1947 and 1951, they are in some ways trying to interrogate the nature of violence, watching/witnessing the horrors unfold, and probe the pall of gloom as it tightens its hold on people's minds and hearts. The violence on the streets was of such horrifying magnitude that human vocabulary was incapable of representing it; yet it had to be talked about or else how would one learn about the past that all share? It is this dilemma of representation of the riots that is at the heart of Manik Bandopadhyay's novel *Swadhinatar Swad*. As a Marxist, Bandopadhyay was aware of the continuum of violence that originated with colonial rule. In the novel he sees the Calcutta Riots as a symptom of a malaise that had plagued colonial India: a low grade communal conflict that had accompanied British electoral politics. Yet the riots also enable the characters in his novel to ask fundamental questions not only of themselves but also of each other. Motives and desires come under scrutiny to be examined, not as elements of casual conversations but as philosophical and political perambulations of one's quotidian lives. In this way, Manik Bandopadhyay ushers in a richly dialectical novel that is both urban and modern.

The narrative of *Swadhinatar Swad* (The Taste of Freedom, 1951) [28] is set in Calcutta, immediately after the August riots, and ends after the riots in Noakhali and the Independence in 1947. The imaginative impulses that transform pain and terror into art are impossible to chart but Bandopadhyay's hitherto unpublished diaries testify to the ways the Direct Action Day had been an instructive moment in his life as an active member of the Communist Party of India and as a writer:

> Today is *hartal* – Direct Action Day. When I heard the news of rioting, I felt depressed. We had known riots will happen, still I thought – what a pity! What a pity! Rumours were rife everywhere –there was a sense of anxiety all around. Heard there has been a big clash between Sikhs and Muslims in the Kalighat area…..Went out and saw a big crowd in front of the mosque….At around ten, two young men from the Party came. They were trying to form a peace committee…. After talking to them the state of my mind changed. However bad the situation may be there was no need to give up.[29]

Manik Bandopadhyay's ideological dedication to Marxism permits him to be optimistic about the ways in which people resist communal stereotypes and continue to coexist. He does not hesitate to portray this in his novel by creating a discursive

text of many layers, articulating disparate and even conflicting arguments. As with the impending political transition, his novel marks the originary moment of India's Independence through intense polemical debates. The processes of discussion and argument also encompass gender and the autonomous subjectivity of women. While mainstream society continued to marginalize them, Manik Bandopadhyay makes his women characters articulate their desires and dreams, while at the same time refusing to willfully dismiss the riots as events by reconstituting them as moments of great historical crisis. The novel's narrative focus is the riot's effect both on the human psyche and on the political life of the city. The writer's Marxist aesthetic praxis involves the exposure and revelation of historical situations and the human agency involved in shaping and influencing them. Therefore, this novel is an exploration of the transitory phase between colonialism and independence as it is also a compendium of responses and adjustments of different characters to the newly acquired freedom, both political and social. Along with the experiences and perceptions of political freedom, the novel explores the changing relationship of the sexes, all seen in the context of the riots in Calcutta.

The narrative opens with an unusual description of the city under the grip of arson, loot and stabbing. A shroud of fear chokes ordinary life and the atmosphere is of uncertainty and death.

> It was a stifling monsoon afternoon; the lowering sky was like a force bearing down on the breast of the city and the wind, deathlike, did not stir. Like a cremation ground, the city streets were silent, empty, lifeless and quiet. Sometimes a few cars went past, like mobile anxiety, in a rush of sound. On the footpaths, there were a few pedestrians, looking around with fear and walking quickly. Everywhere there was a palpable, artificial terror. From afar, the sound of many voices came to the ear. (265)

The heightened perception of fear and anxiety threatens the ordered urban structural space of the city so that even the familiar objects of urbanity, the car and the streets, are tarred with fear. Manik Bandopadhay's narrative, spare and controlled, tries to understand the transformation of the familiar city space into a site of fratricidal violence. In this city, Promotho comes looking for his niece Monimala in north Calcutta where riots have broken out like a contagion. As he gets off a taxi, he is attacked and killed.

> Armed with iron rods and daggers, two men came upon them, quietly, without uttering a single sound of either animosity or

> recognition, simply to kill…. They had not seen the other two men ever, except their clothes that proclaimed them as enemies…….. In the recent life of the city, incidents like this happened daily, a saga of day and night – the clash of the two men with two others were an insignificant part of the larger happenings all around. (267)

The description of Promotho's death is through language that is at once stark and minimalist. Without turning it into a spectacle, Bandopadhyay manages yet to infuse the scene with latent horror. The brutal killing's banal insignificance is part of a 'saga' of violence that is not abstract and unreal. Deeply aware of the forces of history, Bandopadhyay tries to give shape through his words to the experiences of the contradictory processes of an anti-colonial liberation that will bring in freedom – in politics, economics and society but is accompanied by unbelievable brutality. By opening his narrative with the riots on the eve of Independence, he seems to set out an ominous sign of impending doom. His ambivalence about the freedom that lay just round the corner is expressed through this juxtaposition.

Monimala, Promotho's niece, has taken shelter in her husband's ancestral home. The house is crammed with terrified relatives and friends and the rooms are partitioned off to hold couples and their children. This temporary shelter is a microcosm of the world outside where the psychopathology of violence has robbed people of their humanity. Yet the quotidian life lived within, with its hardships and collusions and strange alliances also makes it possible to contain and minimize the effects of violence on the human psyche. Pranab, Monimala's brother-in-law, tries to bring a semblance of order into the chaotic lives. Lack of rations and black-marketeering has ensured that there is always a sense of precariousness to their existence yet the occupants, brought together in a common concern for safety, ensure that they work together to survive. An abundance of fear and despair make their daily lives seem to be on the verge of disintegration, but they gather every night to discuss the situation in the city or to help each other out in distress. The rioting city is a physical presence in the novel and works as a metonymy for the partisan disorder unleashed by political expediencies. As the city limps back to normalcy after days of bloody destruction, murder and mayhem, the novelist's omnipresent voice paints a bleak portrayal of the riot's aftermath:

> Tram-cars roll on, buses too ply infrequently. In some sections of the city, they stop after some trouble, maybe for half a day, sometimes for a day or two, but then again the drivers take out the trams, the conductors give out tickets. In some terribly sensitive areas, a uniformed guard is also seen next to the driver, much to the

> amusement of the city-dwellers. On the roundabouts, uniformed police with rifles can be seen, sometimes even military uniforms; the armoured trucks pass through the streets in sombre reverberations, yet in other parts of the city the festival of knives, daggers, acid bombs, murder-mutilation, looting, and arson keep increasing. Security lessens, anxieties increase, there is no end to lawlessness. ….This is the playfulness of the creators of rioting and murder, their servants are now employed to patrol the city to quell the flames. What a farce! (288)

In an atmosphere of anger and hatred, the daily lives of the poor go on because they have to survive, like the old woman of the area who sells cow dung cakes for a living: She is an aberration in the riot torn city:

> She is like a slap on the face of the English, the League, the Congress, the black-marketeer, the goonda: a symbol of eternal humanity, with her wrinkled skin, her bent back, her white fleecy hair set like a crown……What does it matter who is a Hindu and who a Muslim! (291)

Manik Bandopadhyay's vision, influenced by dialectical Marxism, perceives human history as made up of opposing forces, like the riots that necessarily give rise to its opposite.

> When there is a riot there is also an attempt to stop it. We can't have one without the other [because] in spite of savagery, man is not so, he is civilized. But these definite and clear words like civilization and humanity have become such playthings of those inhuman men that their meanings have become unclear to common people. (300–01)

Pranab, the author's spokesman, believes that the workers don't contribute to riots; they are victims of the political machinations of the middle and upper classes. The power of humans to change the course of events is an essential part of the novel that deals with a time when humanity is degraded every moment. The novel is an attempt on Manik Bandopadhyay's part not only to understand how human beings are not playthings of history but how their determination can change the course of events. So the efforts of a few men like Pranab and Girin who try to stop the madness of riots is right and natural.

> All the people who are workers are one, their unity is their biggest strength – still riots happen. Why do riots happen? Why do riots take place that make victims of the poor who are both Hindus and

> Muslims?....We have lots of examples of the unity of the working men and women. The trams and buses you ride in the city are plying with the help of Hindu and Muslim workers. But on this side we have Noakhali, on the other side we have Bihar, who knows when the conflagration will stop! We have to remember this riot is imposed from the top, for the benefit of those who rule over us. …Keep your belief intact on the downtrodden.

The above lines indicate the writer's political belief that 'revolution happens within the rules and parameters of human happiness and human sorrow.' (304) Manik Bandopadhyay believes that even when the riots stop 'the Hindu Muslim problem will remain unsolved; the problem of Independence will remain. We will have to strive against both these problems.' (310) The social revolution that national liberation promises is a constant preoccupation of the writers of Bandopadhyay's generation, even when they are aware of the existing contradictions in social relations. Therefore, the novel makes clear that the postcolonial moment of freedom is also a time of growing capitalism and opportunism. The riots are the results of 'compromises and barters' of politicians with the government, 'a homely compromise with the English Emperor to get as much as possible.'(348) In this political barter of power, the domestic and the private spheres undergo massive transformations as well. When Sushil laments that his family life is ruined because his children, under Monimala's guidance, want to join a political demonstration, the poet Gokul tells him, 'Why do you think it is only your family? Everyone's family is breaking up: the old kind of family. They are making way for a new kind of family. Don't lament the change.' The transformation of private spaces is seen in Monimala's realization that in that house

> she is worried about things that had never bothered her before – Congress, League, Communist Party, freedom, the rich, the worker, the peasant and revolution. She is now so carried away by these that she sometimes forgets the children, whether they are alive or dead. (366)

Monimala's change parallels the changes in the nation that is undergoing great social and political commotions. Within the family, as well as in society, she has, like thousand other women, 'studied till second class, after marriage have surrendered to the husband's caresses, cooked and eaten, given birth, raised children' and whose entry to the 'world of light' is not at all easy (324). Yet, the busy city, trying to recover after the War and the devastating famine, sets new paradigms of labour as women come out to participate in the public sphere or to work in

factories and shops. The partition of the country brings in unprecedented changes in the polity; not least are the changes that are fashioned in gender relations, in the questions of economics and labour. All these upheavals are explored within the ambit of the underlying debate in the novel: the meaning of freedom in the context of a truncated settlement. Bandopadhyay's critique of the paradigm of national liberation/nationhood is made through the concept of freedom, *swadhinata*. Freedom on the personal level is qualified by the meaning of freedom in the political and social levels. In this debate the Hindu/Muslim question is also implicated. 'The Congress and League coming together is not the same as the unity of Hindus and Muslims,' says Gokul. 'Even if the two unite it will be a union of the upper class interests. Real unity is only possible amongst the poor and the downtrodden, amongst the ordinary people.' So the Independence people are getting is 'adulterated' because it comes through compromises and keeping intact the possibilities of power for the powerful. 'The effort is to give us explicit freedom so that indirectly we can still be slaves.' (364) Therefore, the question remains 'if the foreign powers leave the country have we truly achieved freedom? Even when thousands of problems beset us through an artificial partition?' (383)

In the novel, the narrative flow is often impeded by impassioned discussions between the characters; so does the obligatory belief that the system can be changed (and secular idealism and social equality established) that is a part of the writer's political commitment. Yet this is not just an ideological gesture on the writer's part. In 1951, when the Communists returned to electoral politics, they had learnt the chastening effects of Congress repression and this novel becomes a site for the articulation of the anxieties of the age that underlies a desire to understand the extent and meaning of liberty that had come with the Independence. The difference between the artist's political optimism and the novel's questioning stance creates a fragmented modernist narrative free from the linear structure of the Bangla realist novel. It coalesces various layers of the private and the political in a way that is part of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) vision that endorsed realism in arts to promote social change.[30] The discussions about violence, gender and the autonomous subjectivity of women in this novel encompasses yet resists the ideology of what Aamir Mufti calls 'national realism' of the 1940s that showcases the secular citizen's relationship to the newly emergent nation.[31] The Marxist progressive ideology, often embedded in categories of Nehruvian ethics like secularism and economic justice, tries to reexamine the fragmentation of the domestic and social spheres by explaining the continued communal disturbances as economic conflicts. Manik Bandopadhyay's aesthetic-political praxis is more

complicated with a larger scope, as he tries to explain the sustained presence of religion within the progressive secular ethics of liberal modernity and whose manifestation is the sectarian politics of the Calcutta Riots. His questions about the magnitude of freedom, as seen in the moment of national liberation, bring into its fold gender and communalism, explaining how religious and class identities are inextricably enmeshed within the polity. The novel's depiction of decolonization especially through the debates and engagement with the question of freedom illuminates the ways in which a post-independent modernity is being shaped and articulated in Bengal's public sphere, especially in its literary representations explaining the role that religion continues to play even when secular idealism tries to marginalize or trivialize it.[32] The expression of momentous changes that partition brings in its wake is felt most radically in Manik Bandopadhyay's impassioned exploration that takes in all the contours of the new nation: the familial, the social, the economic and the political. The riots, woven seamlessly into the narrative, point the way to a topsy-turvy situation where the country is divided into two: into *sthan* (place) and *stan* (land, as in Pakistan) that hide within it the appalling question: 'The terrible self-destruction through which the two sections are born, will this separation be the end or a beginning?' (387) To this last and dreadful question the answer seems to lie in the subcontinent's postcolonial reality.

III

An exception to the common accusation that Bangla writers of the 1940s were silent about the impending Independence is Ashapurna Devi's novel *Mittirbari* (The House of the Mitras, 1947).[33] The novel is set in north Calcutta within a joint family that lives in a huge sprawling building, driven by petty quarrels and heartaches. A symbol of the decadent middle class life in undivided Bengal, the house is situated in a small street

> that has quite a modern name. It had an older name, but recently, in anticipation of the independence of the country, some eager neighbourhood boys have rejected that old-fashioned name and renamed it after a certain popular leader to make sure that India's freedom struggle was helped a few steps of the way. (233)

The family home is spacious,

> yet its inmates did not live comfortably, and did not have space even to feel a sense of comfort. This house was once more than

> adequate for a family – but now after two generations, the space was insufficient for the requirements of so many members.

The ongoing clash of old and new values is symptomatic of the changing times. The lives of the many inhabitants of Mittirbari revolve around an endless cycle of eating, sleeping and quarrelling. In such a family, the act of widowed Umashoshi drinking tea during mandatory fasting is seen as a monstrous crime. Orthodox rituals permeate every nook and cranny of this Hindu family and stifle natural growth, but the novel represents much more than the clash of tradition and modernity. Set in 1946, when the Cabinet Mission is making headlines, the narrative revolves around how the joint family structure receives an onslaught from historical forces that are sometimes incomprehensible to its members. In so many ways, Ashapurna Devi's novel is a look at the times when momentous changes take place in the social, economic and political life of Bengal. All these changes reverberate in the private lives of the characters, caught up in the agonizing forces of history.

In the novel, both men and women encounter these changing times with bewilderment or unexpected strength. The joint family system clashes with a new individualistic sensibility: when the newly married Surekha decides to attend a political meeting with her husband Manoj, her transgression creates consternation in the family and she is seen as utterly 'shameless'. Yet, the changes of the new age are too powerful to be ignored. In a violently rioting city, the very house of the Mitras, symbolic of an older way of life, is under attack by a mob. This brings unexpected saviours to the forefront, people who show a reserve of strength and fortitude that nobody knew they possessed. Shuddho, the wastrel of the family, who has hitherto spent all his time flying kites and pigeons, takes up a bamboo staff to guard the main door.

> Who knew he had so much in him? He took up two staffs in his hands and stood guard at the door. The long rods flew about like saucers, Borda and Mejda were busy trying to remove all the women to safety but Shuddho said angrily, 'Nobody will go away. Why should women be different? God has given them arms and legs…. bring out your knives and scissors, your *boti* and your pestle, and stand here.' (362)

The belief that both men and women are to be the new citizens, marked by new responsibilities, make the novel an exploration of the possibilities of freedom in the new nation state. Yet this allegory of freedom is both incomplete and unfinished

as far as the women of the novel are concerned. Ashapurna Devi's ironic depiction of domestic life in *Mittirbari* is not based on the large political upheavals of the 1940s but on their incidental and subtle effects on the lives of the characters: the riots are the outward manifestations of far deeper changes taking place in society. Postcolonial modernity blows away the cobwebs of tradition-bound lives and profoundly changes gender relations. Apart from Surekha, who is the new woman, other characters like the schoolteachers Meena and Tatini, Aloka, the distressed housewife, Hemlata, the matriarch – all of them realize the churnings of their times. The new age is acknowledged in the way the women respond to some of its pressures: to the new sexual, political and familial norms that seek to bind or enable them. The daughter of the house, Umashoshi, who works in the household for food and shelter, also searches for the meaning of freedom.

> Did Umashoshi know the meaning of freedom? Yes, she knew it with certainty. It was the availability of food and clothes; when you spent money, that is, a reasonable sum of money, you would be able to buy things at the market….. Sugar would become easy to procure so she would be able to have a few stolen cups of tea without receiving humiliating insults from her elderly aunt. (257)

The advent of the coming Independence of the country creates ripples in the social and economic fabric of society. Prices rise, rules change, and so do the norms that govern relationships. Meena's love affair with the married Arunendu is a case in point. She is abandoned by her lover and as she wanders through the burning city she thinks it has

> over a few nights, changed into a dense jungle where no other living things existed but tigers and lions…..Humans existed though, he always would. Otherwise who was capable of taking away the hungry fang marks from the body of the world? (358)

Meena's quest brings her to Sagar who loves her but she refuses to be his helpmate to bring succour to the riot victims, unable to set herself free from the idealized domestic roles that society imposes on women. This encounter, in the midst of the burning city, is symbolic of a failure to form a closure and goes against the grain of the larger message in the novel. In this rupture and unformed ending to Meena's probing self-explorations, the novel brings about a new aesthetic of experience and affect by eschewing the novel's traditional temporality to present singularities of character and time through episodic encounters.[34] By foregrounding the individual female body, Ashapurna Devi probes how the trauma of the times are re-inscribed

into their selves, both physical and psychic. The novel's colloquial language, its fragmented narrative strands and its questing characters make it a modern narrative, profoundly interrogating the meaning and range of freedom in the context of women's subjectivities in a society that sees them as harbingers of change yet exploits them sexually and psychologically. Although the text looks at the momentous years of partition as a time of a new beginning and tries to give a final definition to what that may be, the novel is ultimately not prescriptive. Ashapurna's text places the political reverberations as seismic changes in the social and familial life of the city; the times may be out of joint but it will bring in a new order, both in the world outside and within the family. Yet this vision is constantly negated and fragmented by the failure of the characters to achieve any kind of stability within or without, nor achieve any closure to their quest for self-independence.

The riots bring life in the city to a standstill; Calcutta is no longer recognizable. Hemlata, the matriarch of Mittirbari, while travelling back to the city, realizes the implications of what she sees:

> What is that on the main thoroughfares? Have a thousand lightening struck the city? No, not from the sky – from the caverns of hell have come thousands of monsters! Mad, hungry from ages and aeons ago! It seemed a thousand-headed serpent was walking about, biting, spewing venom, and splitting the dry earth into pieces. Its poisoned breath was evident everywhere! In its black fumes, hungry monsters are taking birth, ready to devour everything. They will not be satisfied only with flesh and blood offerings but they want much, much more. Their sharp claws and teeth will tear asunder all – civilization, beauty, self-control, society and family as well tradition, family name and culture. They will shake the very roots of human life to send us back to prehistoric times.
>
> There is another name for that – a communal riot. Did human hearts ever know love and trust? Or will these words disappear forever from the human vocabulary? Will humans have different definitions, like the word 'mob'? The strange contorted dead bodies, piled here and there like fallen leaves, will soon disappear into dust or like flotsam and jetsam swirl away into a stream. The curious reader in faraway future may glance back at this dark, primitive moment in time in silent wonder, speechless. (351)

The violence on the city streets has an important casualty: language and human

discourse through which one knows the world. The relationship of the dead 'like leaves' on the streets and language that Ashapurna Devi brings out in the passage is reminiscent of the writings of another author, Sa'adat Hasan Manto who is constantly troubled by the limitations of language to memorialize the dead. This novel does not stop at the depiction of the breakdown of human society through violence; the riots give rise to its opposite. In language that almost becomes allegorical, the riot is used as a discursive tool to explore a momentous time when all that the violence destroys will have to be created anew. When Surekha refuses to go back to the old conservative household where she has met only derision, her father tells her that human society is marked by creative effort:

> Nothing is impossible to man. Men who built the pyramid were the same who destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The question is how we are using force….you have to go back Surekha, to those who have hurt you, who constantly hurt themselves…. Because destruction has taken place, it has also opened the way for creation. We must realize the truth of that one day. (358)

The onus of human intervention, resting on an ideology of collective progress, whether inside a home or in a new nation, is strongly articulated. Although the narrative dismisses partition's violence as an aberration, Ashapurna Devi's novel encapsulates a primacy of desire and affect in the gendered voice that allows her to take a critical look at the idealizations of the belief of freedom that had so permeated the social and political discourses of her times.

It is interesting to note that Ashapurna Devi had once stated that her writings depict the small private world of middle class domesticity, and that she does not take cognizance of the turmoil outside the domestic sphere:

> I could not write (political/nationalistic novels) because I had little real experience. In our times we had to stay indoors. There was little opportunity to go out, so with what little I heard, it was not possible (to write such novels).[35]

In *Mittirbari,* Ashapurna Devi makes the personal enmesh with the political. In her short story *Mahagodyo* (The Prose Epic, 1951) the protagonist jokingly suggests to a young writer that the subject of his epic can be the great famine, food scarcity and the independence struggle of the country, for 'where else would you find such a huge subject' for an epic?[36] The story, however, is an ironic one as the epic is never written. This short story draws attention to the problem that

writers of Ashapurna Devi's generation faced. How can one write of riots, death, and destitution of millions: in what language and using what form and style? Ashapurna Devi's irony and black humour, a relentless and clinical analysis of men and women's deepest fantasies and a refusal to give clichéd formulations to people's relation to the world outside make her an exceptional writer of her generation. She knew how the World War II, the 1943 Famine, and the approaching Independence of the country had changed the Bengali middle class family and values irrevocably; the foundations of the joint family system had become vulnerable in turbulent times. Her fiction records the stormiest phases in Bengal's postcolonial history by investigating the family to unearth middle class desires and fantasies to give a new significance to the notion that the personal is also the political. She brings the questions of affect and desire to the centre-stage by re-inscribing the family as not only the site of trauma and loss but also of regeneration. Like the nation, the family too can be reconstructed and rebuilt through forgotten possibilities.

The rise of the modern nuclear family, indicated in both the novels, sets the connection between the individual and society at large but with different epistemological functions. Bandopadhyay's novel creates a dialogic space where the riots are its primary focus: to be discussed, dissected, understood and repudiated for a vision of a new working class unity in the postcolonial nation state. Ashapurna Devi's novel has a more circuitous scheme: the riots are evoked as an aberration yet their effects are far-reaching. The violence of the riots is anticipated by another violence that lives at the heart of the Hindu joint family: a gendered violence that is the result of a deep-seated psychopathological patriarchy drunk on power. The riots are a manifestation of this desire for power over the other: once this is recognized, the violence can be sublimated and channelized to constructive purposes. In *Mittirbari* there is a palpable absence: the riot is not present in its horrifying immediacy; rather it is an *aporia*, an absence that provokes one to ask questions about the world we live in and the ways in which it can be represented. Both the novels, however, are important aesthetic interventions to understand contemporary history's pressing epistemological questions: how does social freedom relate to political freedom and what is the role of violence in it? Both the novels examine the family as sites of ideology formation and identity construction that enable it to be a metaphor for the community and nation. The 'need to redefine power constructions' within and outside it becomes the most important aesthetic impulse of the novel in a free India that will also construct a secular space of freedom for all people. [37]

IV

The Calcutta Riots of August 1946 were a moment of profound crisis not only in the communal relations in Bengal's politics but also in the literature of the era especially in the genre of the short story that asks reflective questions regarding violence, responsibility and representation. The short story, although a 'minor' form compared to the novel has had an illustrious history in Bangla with famous practitioners. Virtually all the famous novelists in Bengal have tried their hand at the short story and the form's triumphant progress elaborates the ways in which it became an important literary vehicle from the early years of the twentieth century. Although Bangla novel establishes a richer psychological and literary intervention in terms of language and form, the short story had its own loyalists particularly through the growth of numerous literary journals and magazines that showcased them in the 1950s and 60s. The growth of an ever-burgeoning reading public in Bengal meant that publishing houses looked for newer authors and anthologies, often pushing many established authors to try the form to reach a wider audience more quickly. Many of the short stories of these years are the products of writers already established in literary circles and their choice of the short story form reveals an interest in experimentation in the realist mode of representation within a limited space. This limitation is often used effectively in some stories of this period that unearth the extent of violence that has an elaborate presence in displaced locations that the narrator traverses: the railway, the steamer, the city street or even the family home that is not free from the canker of its presence. Employing some common formal strategies, these stories could form a body of work that configures a discursive field of recognizable tropes regarding the Calcutta Riots in particular and partition in general. In the stories of writers like Rameshchandra Sen (*Shada Ghora,* The White Horse, 1949), Somen Chanda (*Danga,* The Riot, 1945), Manik Bandopadhyay (*Sthaney O Staney*, This Place or That, 1948) and Tarashankar Bandopadhyay (*Kolkatar Danga O Ami*, The Calcutta Riots and I, 1946) the catalytic moment is the pre-partition communal riots that broke out in many parts of Bengal (especially in Calcutta in August 1946) and make these stories a coherent corpus. The writers look at particular historical moments of communal conflagration and try to make sense of how trauma and violence mark the limits of community by exploring the emerging new textures of civility and human experiences: they become early signposts of the 'mourning work' as a wider and more complete articulation surrounding the riots remain inaccessible. These stories seem to be the launching pad to formulate questions of self, responsibility and representations by trying to

articulate the 'affect' (as opposed to the named emotions) regarding the riots, to seize its fleeting presence and capture it in language. This pervasive presence of a symbolic melancholy enables these stories not to tell (récit) but to show through the body of either the narrator or the protagonist not only a resistance of affect to language but a task to 'seize its fleeting essence and to force its recognition.'[38] The radical distinction between naming and representing allows these writers to move into a new treatment of time, not as temporality but as a singularity of experience in which 'each infinitesimal moment differentiates itself from the last by a modification of tone and an increase or diminution of intensity.'[39] Both Manik Bandopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandopadhyay discover a style that captures the nuances and affects of the suffering body in all its complications and all its dimensions not through a language that is from outside but one that is centred on the body and its sensations.

In both the stories of Manik Bandopadhyay (*Sthaney O Staney*) and Tarashankar Bandopadhyay (*Kolkatar Danga O Ami*),[40] the artists create a world of trauma and uncertainty. Although the stories begin with a linear temporality in representing the city laid waste by violence, there are moments in the stories when that gives way to a *symboliste* impulse of suggestion that seeks to capture the 'structures of feelings' inherent in them.[41] This disjuncture creates gaps in the narrative that poses certain questions of representing psychological and other forms of violence through language. Literature cannot be direct historical truth: rather it is a world of affect, of responses to historical events and its 'reality effect' as Roland Barthes stated, is dependent on the rhetorical sign.[42] Literature sheds light on the unspoken and the untold moments of horror, guilt and desolation that may lie submerged in the collective psyche though a different kind of language that sometimes does not name but suggests. Symbols, metaphors and allegories are all parts of this act of suggestion where the language releases a host of sensory heterogeneous descriptions that bring a nuanced and affective play of the real.

Manik Bandopadhyay's stories represent one of the earliest and most well formulated utterances about the violence that accompanied the country's freedom. He ushered in a mode of writing based on a certain ideological mooring and a rational understanding of human motifs and impulses. Deeply influenced by Freudian psychology on one hand and Marxism on the other, his creative impulses found their truest calling in his novels, although his many short stories set a new aesthetic standard in Bangla narratives. His short story *Sthaney O Staney* depicts Narahari who comes to Calcutta to take his wife back to Dhaka where he works and where he decides to stay back while others flee fearing riots around 15 August,

the declared day of the partition. As he crosses over in the steamer from Dhaka, Narahari realizes how things have changed lately:

> The steamer was packed. Some were fleeing, while others were not. This steamer had always been crowded, for livelihood, for keeping in touch with far-spread lives….. There had been peace and discipline in those crossings, in keeping with the wide expanse of the generous river. Today, in every face and gesture, in the hum of the conversations there was a quiet agitation, expectation and fear, victory and arrogance, a ripple of anxiety….. It was as if an artificial consciousness has been imposed to create this new sense of friction and conflict.

This psychopathology of fear is palpable not only in the affected bodies around him but in the very spaces that symbolize Narahari's being in the world. As he gets off at Sealdah station and recollects the Calcutta killings, the violence decontextualizes the city from his memories. It is no longer a city where he had studied and had got married; it is now 'a den of snakes,' a city that no longer speaks to him with intimacy and warmth. He gets a taste of the communal atmosphere raging in the city when his brothers-in-law tell him that in their locality they are now taking revenge on people from Orissa because 'here the goondas were falling on Bengali women, there the Oriyas have started pestering them.' Their expostulations of bravado signify a breakdown of the urban community of the city where people from faraway places had always lived and worked together. The responses of Narahari indicate how various people experience the riots differently and there can never be a homogeneous straightforward schema of affective experiences. The story is deeply pessimistic in tone and creates a quotidian world of dark despair, in contrast to many other writings of Bandopadhyay where the obligatory belief in the Communist Progressive ideals have made the writings utopic in tenor.[43] Narahari's wife refuses to accompany her husband and as he looks at her, 'sadly and with despair', he hears a small infant's wail. Somewhere a child is crying for its mother. The endless cycle of violence and counter-violence that the story depicts masks a deeper malfunctioning of society where the very relationships that one takes for granted collapses in the face of indiscriminate violence and death. Bandopadhyay refuses to say what happens to the protagonist: by rejecting a closure to his narrative, he seems to refuse all kinds of transformative knowledge that can redeem the spiraling moments of pain and terror. The fragmentation of spaces into the violent city outside and Sumitra's home where Narahari takes shelter is a

way in which the writer shows us the physical and moral implication of the riots. This fragmentation echoes in the ironic title of the story, impossible to translate into English, with its resonance of *sthan* and *stan*. The story that revolves around the dilemmas of Narahari, his anxiety to go back to a place where he belongs and where he can never feel truly safe, echoes the division of inside and outside throughout the story. The dichotomy of home and nationality, which is hinted at in the title, is a poignant reminder that Narahari's home and his nation are at odds with each other: Calcutta and Dhaka now belong to different nations. Although Manik Bandopadhyay's commitment to Marxism has tended many to take him as a literary realist, this story and many other works by him, present a new mode of affective representation that complicates the realist mode of representation that writers of his generation were employing. Narahari's journey from Dhaka to Calcutta is not an unambiguous journey in that he has a purpose to it yet this journey foreshadows other journeys he may have to undertake in the future. When he reaches the city, the communally charged atmosphere creates in him a deep anxiety not only of the self but all that he had hitherto taken for granted, including his relationships to his extended and immediate family and the nation to which he would lay his claim. The social and psychological fragmentation that surrounds Narahari makes him deeply apprehensive about what the impending independence of the country will ultimately bring. The attempt to render and register this anxiety makes this story phenomenological in its narrative impulse.

Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's (1898–1971) wonderful short story, *Kolkatar Danga O Ami* stands quite apart from the narratives of communal conflagration that one encounters in Bangla fiction. Written in the immediate aftermath of a riot, the story raises forceful questions about guilt and responsibility not only in the storyteller but also his readers. Tarashankar's short story is more complex and self-reflexive than the story by Manik Bandopadhyay where the questions of guilt are addressed in more elliptical ways. Unlike stories where the characters are the tellers of their tales, in *Kolkatar Danga*, the author is present in an uncompromising way within the narrative, both as witness and as chronicler of the riots. The questions of guilt and responsibility assume sharper emphasis as they are not dispersed through fictional characters. The focus on interiority through the journey of the self makes starker the web of relationships, both symbolic and real, that the author/self is bound in. The burning city is a real as well as a mythic presence in Tarashankar's story. Both Tarashankar and Manik situate their stories in the rioting city, a colonial site of modernity and development, to stretch the semantic meanings of such a

space as it explodes with hatred and bloodshed. If the city is a trope of modernity (as seen in many short stories in Bangla) it is also the 'poisoned' site: a mythic place where the synchronic and diachronic time can be compressed in the imagination through the metaphor of a journey. The fleeting experiences of a communal riot can then assume symbolic proportions seen in the context of a moral journey of the self who also undertakes a real journey either into or out of the city.[44]

The very opening paragraph of Tarashankar's story presents the narrator's inability to describe or to name what he witnesses. His literary tools seem totally inadequate in the face of the horror: 'Black Kolkata – Bloodied Kolkata – Hellish Kolkata all these names do not satisfy the mind; the wordsmith's stock is depleted; I do not know how to mark these days and nights with proper names.'[7] The inadequacy of words, the dispossession of language, however cannot be a permanent state: words are the very tools, actually the only tools that can possibly stand witness to the indescribable dark days of gruesome murders. The writer is profoundly moved by the desolation of the scene before him and the words pour out:

> Kolkata's sky had become black with smoke – petrol burnt the brick houses; goods-laden shops were looted, rich wooden furniture turned to cinders: not a grey or white ash but a dark black one that were the burnt remains of rich and valuable wood. The heartrending cries of stricken men and women filled the atmosphere of the city – in the waves of ether that represents eternity, those cries formed a full stop.

The description of the black cinders and the cries of the riot affected are not just markers in the list of what the riot does to us: it brings together the seemingly visible with the invisible 'ether' to create a metaphysical aura of pain and destruction that lies at the heart of the universe.

The second section of the story begins when the narrator debates whether it is possible to apportion blame either to Hindus or Muslims; instead his tired and defeated mind can only look up to one figure whose towering presence and personal courage is a new beacon in the darkness. Gandhi's words inspire him but all around he sees no one who has truly followed the Mahatma's exhortations. He decides to leave Calcutta for his native village, still unsullied unlike the modern city. Like many other stories that contrast the village to the city, Tarashankar is not nostalgic for the pre-modern. He deliberately contrasts the two spaces to foreshadow congruencies of representing violence in unlikely places: the town may be sullied but the village is not untainted either. However, the village holds

out the possibilities of redemption that can exist when one owns responsibility and the line dividing the victim and the perpetrator is erased, even if only momentarily.

A train takes the author away from the burning city. Inside the compartment he sees

> men, women and children: pale faced, fear in their eyes. Some are crying, some others have lost everything they owned. Everyone was sighing and calling upon the poor man's only shelter: God. The faces of the middleclass passengers carried unmistakable signs of terror along with the fake excitement of self-deception; on their tongues the poisonous fumes of clever speeches….there was no difference between them and I. They were cowards; but I was a bigger coward than them because in their lives there was no ostentatious declaration of a concentrated pursuit of knowledge; there had been in mine; so my defeat was much more than theirs.

The ubiquitous train, a symbol of the 'epistemic changes in the means of acquiring and legitimating social knowledge'[8] becomes a site where knowledge of the self is also to be realized for it is only that knowledge that will allow the narrator to understand the human costs and dimensions of the riots.

The final section of the story is emblematic of the moral journey that the narrator is undertaking along with his real one. Alighting from the train, he travels through the night in a horse drawn carriage, assailed with fear that he has trusted himself to a Muslim coachman, although the situation can surely be material for a story, proclaiming Hindu-Muslim unity. The narrator begins to imagine situations that he can construct to show this unity; but his thoughts are interrupted when the carriage is stopped by Nitai Das, a mendicant *baul* singer, whom the narrator knows from childhood. His songs of love and devotion bring the narrator a calm peace when suddenly the sky is rent with a storm and they seek shelter under a banyan tree. Nitai tells him the story of the banyan whose big trunk is holding captive an unlikely prisoner – sin. The only way one can escape its evil influence is to confess one's evilest acts of transgressions, keeping the birds, insects and others as witnesses. The *baul* urges the narrator to do so for their safety but he is unable to bring himself to confess his sins.

> I am a habitual liar – I earn my bread by writing stories of poverty, often hiding the truth in them. I profess to love poverty; I declare that I look upon Hindus, Muslims and Christians as the same. I

> am a coward, for I write of valour only to hide my own cowardice. I have pride but I pretend to be modest. In Kolkata, in the midst of such a bloodbath, I have only sat at home with regret, and have shed a few drops of tears; I have done nothing to save the wounded or to confront the mad: for fear of reprisal or loss of prestige…..Is there such a banyan tree also in Kolkata? Under whose shade every one of the citizens can confess his or her sins? Not a description of what they have seen but their own sins?

The inability to unburden himself underlines the tension within the narrative: it is a story without a powerful sense of redemption even though it makes a plea for one.

Tarashankar's story is a text that overturns the narrative logic of stories of riots as bloodbaths or acts of heroism/despair with an impersonal narrator or a manifestation of a crowd disorder. The story does not employ the conventional tropes of community or politics to explore the 'rhetoric of power' where the text becomes 'a strategy of containment whereby the real conditions of disempowerment and disorder are restricted to an imagined and controlled world.'[45] Instead, this narrative turns inwards, into the workings of the author's mind. The text seems to suggest that in the deadly days of rioting, there are no innocents, only degrees of responsibility. The author does not seek to apportion blame but to unearth how each and every self is implicated in the violence that has torn through the city, beginning with himself. It is a short story that works at various levels: social, spiritual and psychological. As the story moves away from the city to the village, the questions the author/narrator asks resound with greater urgency. The canker of the city seems to travel outward; and sin becomes terrifyingly banal and brutal. Yet in the end, unlike others of its kind, the story is not a pessimistic one. The text ends with the hope that 'man will be able to confess his sins one day' and be redeemed. The narrative, therefore, goes beyond witnessing violent acts. It asks larger questions about the implications of brutality on the psyche of the one who witnesses that brutality and writes about it. Is the writer then akin to the historian, whose methods of going back to a violent past are never uncomplicated? Tarashankar's short story seems to suggest that if the riots in Calcutta mark the originating moment of the partition, then that moment is replicated with each succeeding act of representing or writing about it. We are never free from guilt, however far we may travel.

Endnotes

1 The oral testimony of Gopal Pantha Mukherjee and others used in the essay are from interviews conducted by Andrew Whitehead and Anuradha Awasthi for a BBC programme on 50 years of India's independence. The tapes are available in the SOAS Archives, London. Subsequently, they will be referred to as Partition Tapes, with relevant number – the Gopal Pantha interviews, Partition Tapes,1997, 74.

2 Partition Tapes, 74.

3 Partition Tapes, 72.

4 *S.P. Mookerjee, Papers and Correspondences*, 1946, II–IV Installment, Subject File 148, 35, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi contains a statement made by Baidyanath Mullick as late as October 1946, that showed that the city was still in the grip of fear: 'In Benia Pukur Sub area there were disturbances last night (on 28.10.46) in the following lanes: Gobra Gorasthan Lane, Rai Charan Pal Lane, Mahendra Rai Lane, Hingaon Jamadar Lane. The most disturbed area was Rai Charan Pal Lane. The Muslim mob set a number of houses on fire. The police came but could not help.'

5 Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal: 1905–1947*, 182.

6 M. Ghosh *et al.*, *A Study in Urban Growth Dynamics,* 103.

7 Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots*, 20.

8 Editorial, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 26 August 1946.

9 Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots,* 172.

10 Secret communications from the Secretariat of the Governor General to the Under Secretary for India, prepared by the Intelligence Bureau, *Public and Judicial Department Reports covering the first half of 1940,* L/PJ/8/678, India Office Library and Records, London.

11 Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots*, 6.

12 Kenneth Mcpherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta: 1918 to 1935*, 141–44. Also Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-47*, 73, where she sees the political polarizations in terms of complete division between Hindus and Muslims, apparent as early as the 1935 municipal elections in Calcutta. Also, Patricia A. Gossman, *Riots and Victims: Violence and the Construction of Communal Identity Among Bengali Muslims 1905-47*, 1–17.

13 See Penderel Moon, (ed.), *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal*, 334–35, especially the entry on 16 August 1946 where Wavell remarked, in characteristic understatements, on the breakdown of this important negotiation: 'Rather a depressing sort of day. Jinnah and Nehru have failed to agree about the interim government; Nehru has held a Press conference and as usual has made some stupid remarks and there has been some violent rioting in Calcutta.'

14 Text of Resolution passed in a meeting of the Muslim League Council at Bombay, 29 July 1946, quoted in Sumit Sarkar, (ed.), *Towards Freedom,* vol I, 408.

15 *S.P. Mookerjee Papers and Correspondences*, Installments II–IV, File 147, 15–16, NMML.

16 Suranjan Das, 'Propaganda and the Legitimisation of Communal Ideology: Patterns and Trends in Bengal, 1905-1947', in Suranjan Das and Shekhar Bandopadhyay (eds,) *Caste and Communal Politics in South Asia*, 191–210. An editorial in *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 23 August 1946 stated that 'the distrust which has now flared up in active hostility must, however,

be removed. But men of goodwill of both communities are finding it difficult to carry on their mission…On the Hindu side there are the gossips who create panic and resentment by exaggerations and inventions. On the Muslim side the gossips' part is taken by the *moulvis* and political partisans who, it is reported, have even now been inflaming the worst mob passions by telling them that they have the government and the police behind them.'

17 Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots*, 178. For an opposite view, see Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah's account of Premier Suhrawardy's role, *From Purdah to Parliament*, 153–55.

18 See Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bangalnama*, 155–56, for an eye witness account of Hindu involvement in the riots, especially of *bhadralok* students of his Beadon Street hostel who had actively participated in attacking the Muslim *busti* in Upper Circular Road. See by the same author, *Romonthon Othoba Bhimrotipraptor Porochoritchorcha*, 94–96.

19 The military ingredient of communal violence was also a feature of the Punjab where ex-INA men were noticed as leaders of the mob. See Indivar Kamtekar, 'The Military Ingredient of Communal Violence in Punjab, 1947' in Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, (eds.), *Partition and Post-Colonial South Asia: A Reader,* vol 2, 197.

20 Syed Nazimuddin Hashim, a student at Presidency College in August 1946, bore testimony to the unrestrained rioting in Calcutta as well as the fatalities of the massacre. 'The first victim I saw was a poor Oriya porter…he hadn't a clue what was happening… he had a basket and had just come into the side street… a Muslim in a *lungi* broke away from the procession and hit him on the head with an iron rod. The fellow was absolutely startled, the blow broke open his ear….. All the food shops had closed, New Market had closed, three days of unrestrained rioting and looting, in which the Anglo Indians took full part; pick-up trucks were used to loot a music and radio shop; departmental shops were looted in Wellington Square and Chowringhee Road, all the liquor shops were looted as well….' The Partition Tapes, 71. This is corroborated by the following interview: 'Anglo Indian Sergeants and Pathan soldiers raided the above-mentioned houses (4, Jugipara Bylane and 232, 234A A and B, Vivekananada Road) at 2.30 pm. Assaulted not only the male members of those houses but the female members were also assaulted and molested.' Entry (probably 2.4.47) in a meticulously kept news diary, of one Haricharan Ghosh, *S.P. Mookerjee Miscellaneous Papers*, 24, NMML.

21 Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bangalnama*, 150–51 states: 'If the Muslim League had planned to start widespread rioting, then it was unknown to even people who were politically important. Kiranshankar Roy's elder daughter and her husband lived in a house in Christofer Lane. All around lived poor Muslims, mostly non-Bengali. My uncle went to look up his daughter after the riot started and found that the assailants had entered the house. His son-in-law had been stabbed and his little son was being abducted. If he had the slightest inkling that there was a possibility of such an event, he would not have left his daughter in the midst of such danger.' (Translation mine)

22 Partition Tapes, 68, SOAS. Testimony of Kalim Sharafi, who was a medical student in 1946 as well as an Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) activist.

23 Phillips Talbot, 'Calcutta Riots' in *An American Witness to India's Partition*, 191 onwards.

24 Phillips Talbot, *An American Witness*, 192: 'In human terms, estimated casualties ran from the Provincial governments absurdly report of 750 dead to military guesses that 7000 to 10,000 people might have been killed. Already more than 3,500 bodies have been collected

and counted, and no one will ever know how many persons were swept down the Hoogly, caught in the clogged sewers, burned up in the 1,200 fires, or taken away by relatives who disposed of their bodies privately. A reasonable guess, I think, is that more than 4,000 people died and 11,000 people were injured in what is already being called The Great Calcutta Killing or The Week of the Long Knives.' See also Nitish Sengupta, *Bengal Divided: The Unmaking of a Nation: 1905–1971*, 122 for a similar account by Kim Kristen.

25 *S.P. Mookerjee Papers and Correspondences,* Installment II–IV, File 147, 29, NMML. See also the testimony of one Mulkraj Arora of 119/3 Upper Circular Road on 4.4.47: 'Came to see Dr S.P.M. He informed that…one Hindu was stabbed this morning at the junction of Beadon Street and Upper Circular Road. After this the Hindus set fire to the Muslim Basti in front of Chitra Cinema and hurled 3 crackers.' *S.P. Mookerjee Papers*, Installment II–IV, File 153, 31–32, NMML.

26 See Frank B. Farrell, *Why Does Literature Matter?,* 2004, 11. He postulates that literature 'can make visible significant patterns of how the world is arranged that cannot be had by any other means' and thus literature is 'truth revealing.'

27 Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy,* 165.

28 Manik Bandopadhyay, *Swadhinatar Swad*, in *Manik Bandopadhyay Rochonashomogro*, vol,7, 265–392. All translations from the text are mine.

29 Jugantar Chakraborty, (ed.), *Aprokashito Manik Bandopadhyay*, 88–89. Translation mine.

30 PWA and the IPTA, with links to the Communist Party of India, were two organizations Manik Bandopadhyay was closely associated with. Artists affiliated to them believed that the objective representation of reality would expose the underlying contradictions in social relations and pave the way for revolutionary change. Within the two organizations there were broad differences to the question of realism in the arts. Ritwik Ghatak for example used an epic and melodramatic mode of narration to portray the terrible ravages of the partition in his three films namely *Meghe Dhaka Tara, Komolgandhar* and *Subarnarekha*. See Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*, 47–168.

31 Aamir R. Mufti, 'A Greater Story-writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India', in Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (eds.), *Subaltern Studies* XI, 11.

32 Shekhar Bandopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of Freedom in Post-independence West Bengal*. Also Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation*.

33 Ashapurna Devi, *Mittirbari*, 1947, rpt. *Ashapurna Devir Rachona Shombhar*, 227–366. All translations from the novel are mine.

34 I use the term 'affect' after Jameson who sees this in opposition to emotion as a structure that validates intensity over generalized objects and singularity over traditional temporality. Although Jameson uses this term in the context of the nineteenth century novel, I find them useful to see how early twentieth century cultural works were responding to a changing historical moment, the Independence of the country. See Frederick Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 43–44.

35 Ashapurna Devi, interview in *Dainik Bosumoti*, 25 January 1983 quoted in Upasana Ghosh, *Ashapurna Devi*, Calcutta: Paschimbongo Bangla Academy, 2004, 24. Translation mine.

[36] Ashapurna Devi, *Mahagodyo*, (1951) in *Golpo Shongroho*, vol 3., Calcutta: Mitra O Ghosh, 1995, 284–95. Translation mine. This is similar to some of Manto's words: 'When I sat down to write, I found my mind in a confused state. However much I tried, I could not separate India from Pakistan or Pakistan from India.' Quoted in Muhammad Umar Memon, 'Partition Literature: A Study of Intizar Husain', *Modern Asian Studies*, 1980, 14(3): 29.

[37] Jasbir Jain, 'Imaging a Future: The Narratives in Search of a Secular Space', paper delivered at a conference *The Novel in Search of the Nation*, Sahitya Akademi, 26–28 February 1999. The essay has been anthologized in E.V. Ramakrishnan, (ed.), *Narrating India: The Novel in Search of the Nation,* 51–71.

[38] Fredrick Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*, 31.

[39] Fredrick Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism,* 42.

[40] Manik Bandopadhyay, 'Sthaney O Staney', in Manobendra Bandopadhyay, (ed.), *Bhed Bibhed*, vol 1, 139–45. Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, 'Kolkatar Danga O Ami', in *Tarashankarer Golpoguchcho*, vol. 3, 13–26. This story was first published in the journal *Bosumoti* in 1946. The story has received scant critical attention and has been dismissed as 'sentimental'. See Nitai Basu, *Tarashankarer Shilpimanosh*, 102.

[41] Structures of feelings' after Raymond Williams where he uses the term to denote the specific aspects of a culture 'in one sense…(the) structure of feeling is the culture of a period; it s the particular living result of all elements in the general organization' (*The Long Revolution*, 48) against which he posits the structure of experience, specially what he calls the 'affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.' (*Marxism and Literature*, 132)

[42] Roland Barthes sees realism as one of the signs given off by the 'realist' text. After Jameson, I see the novels and stories under discussion go beyond conventional realism because of the limitations of realism's treatment of affect.

[43] Another example of how Manik Bandopadhyay transforms an historical event into art is his short story 'Choto Bakulpurer Jatri' that he wrote on the Tebhaga Andolon on police repression in Hoogly's Bora-Kamlapur. See Malini Bhattacharya, *Manik Bandopadhyay: A Biography*, 102.

[44] Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*, in *A Very Popular Exile*, 8–10.

[45] David Bell and Gerald Porter, (eds.), *Riots in Literature*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, vii–viii.

2

Noakhali and After: History, Memory and Representations

Only the poisoned tree will bear fruit, till generations last.

Noakhali survivor[1]

Memory and History have a long but ambiguous relationship. History reduces memory to a status of a source, a means to civilized existence. Materialized, externalized and archived, living memory is not valued as an art to a civilized existence…It is assumed that history begins where memory ends…However today…the relationship between memory and history appears to have taken a dramatic turn in the reversal of fortune. When history ceases to be an art of memory it loses its meaning and purpose, though reconciled with memory history can draw on the wellspring of imagination, discover 'lost worlds' by a reconnection with the memories of groups excluded from the consciousness of historians.

Then perhaps we will realize that memory begins where history ends.[2]

Literature and history serve the same God and have a close interdependence on each other in that they both 'narrate' events. The empiricist and the constructionist theories of history have come under challenge and there is now an increased recognition that history's invented, discursive narratives have a close relationship with the figurative codes of literature as both depend on language and narrative forms. Both are, in particular ways, creations of the human imagination, although with differing objectives. Nowhere is this closeness revealed more than in the historically embedded women's autobiographical mode of writing where the author is both a narrator and a witness to her times. A memoir or an autobiography then becomes a valuable form of historical testimony especially as it intertwines personal experiences with political and cultural contexts and underlines the autonomous struggles by women for themselves and for others. Although an autobiography depicts a world of interiority, it is also a self-reflexive appraisal of the past and a

testimonial to the subject's self-fashioning. In many cases, an autobiographical narration centred within a historical 'event' can come into play with certain aspects of memory to configure such an event as a 'myth' just as it may see its own relationship to that event as creating, in turn, the self. A myth, independent of space and time, can carry traces of the teleological crack between event and meaning and allow one to interpret certain facets of the past not as a search for authenticity but as a way to read it in a more complex way. For example the communal conflagration that took place in a remote corner of undivided Bengal named Noakhali shows how an event that comprised a set of violent incidents may have turned 'abduction' of women into a myth/metaphor to become a part of the larger discourse of violence that marked India's struggle for Independence. The trope's relationship to the Hindu-Muslim question assumes increasing importance when we understand how Noakhali's name became a mythological marker to function as a set of formulations regarding women as the subject of the nation. In 1946 Bengal, the Noakhali communal carnage formed the narrative core of an autobiography, Ashoka Gupta's *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney*, which is an example of a nationalist feminist narrative in Bengal that creates a discursive field within which women's experiences of rape and abduction critique the nation's incorporation of her as subject. This question of the subject-hood of the violated women is ambivalently connected to Gupta's own distinct voice as an activist and a Gandhian who worked to bring relief to the victims of the communal carnage. This memoir underlines, to a certain extent, how political participation was in essence 'a special form of sacrifice in an essentially religious process' where it 'remained steeped in tradition and religion as self conscious alternatives to alien western norms.'[3] The Gandhian intervention in Noakhali can be seen as a 'subtle symbiosis' of religion and politics that enabled women like Gupta to join his anti-communal efforts as a part of nationalist duty and mission to eradicate that canker from the polity. However, Gupta's memoir of the tumultuous (another translation may be calamitous) days in Noakhali shows no passive acceptance of dominant ideologies: she exhibits both an ability to negotiate dangerous communal situations and a critical agency that brings into play the ordinary and the extraordinary worlds of the personal and the political to fashion a self that in extension radicalizes other spheres of her life. Second, the affective and ethical gendered responses to the communal carnage help us assess how Noakhali was talked about, disseminated and written about in contemporary eye witness accounts and assume a critical energy that makes visible the power of representation that resides at the heart of national imaginings and histories. The metaphor of Noakhali performed multiple functions and was used by writers and activists to explore subjectivity, gender and citizenship in the

postcolonial nation. As history, Noakhali is governed by norms of temporality and space but in many representations, it is also a temporality marked by disjuncture (the partition) and replication (other communal violences). In history, Noakhali is 'event', in memory, it has been enshrined as a 'myth'. Memory and myth thus become the underbelly of history.

Ashoka Gupta's testimony of the riots in Noakhali renders a time marked by brutality and violence to become 'human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode' and because our lives are 'enacted narratives'.[4] Other memoirs by women political activists of the period throw up the many dualities of their participation in public life that seek to strike a balance between the personal and the social/political, between the home and the world.[5] Gupta's memoir, which is a voluntary witness account of Noakhali, is different from the other autobiographies of women political workers of the times. Instead of raising questions about women's survival in the essential duality of 'home' and the 'world' she sets out a form of what can be seen as a 'participatory' mode of nationalist feminist praxis and ideology, a form of do or die ideal in the face of communal carnage. Born to the well-known novelist Jyotirmoyee Devi (of the novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* fame) in 1912, Ashoka Gupta was the wife of Saibal Kumar Gupta, a respected Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer whose social orientation and philanthropic interests symbiotically marked her own involvement as an active member of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC, founded in 1927). As an AIWC worker, Gupta was part of the rapid changes that nationalist modernity brought to women's lives. The choices she made in her own life were also part of the new formulations of class subjectivities opening up for women in India. Ashoka Gupta learnt many things in Noakhali that she later honed as the chairperson of the State Welfare Board. Her 'people skills' and organizational abilities found supportive soil in Noakhali and that period of her life enabled her to assume later responsibilities as President of AIWC or carry on other welfare work among women and children. The memoir based on Noakhali thus assumes an importance not only as a part of her life of social service and of her efforts to rehabilitate and rescue abducted women under the close supervision of Gandhi but also as a text that indirectly records her own self-fashioning and evolution. It is both a social and historical document as well as a testimony to her self-realization. This memoir should be read along with her hitherto unpublished diary where she gives detailed descriptions of her tour in Noakhali villages and lists several victims of sexual assault by name. Although the diary has no date it can be assumed that the entries were done just after the riots broke out in October 1946. This difference in representation begs the question about what this information had symbolized for someone working for and with

women. The discussions and representations of the assault, abduction and recovery of women, especially in the diary, can be read as documents that 'are charged with constructing an imagined community and sculpting the new citizen' just as they engage 'with the elusive nature of an identity that emerges at the margins' both vis-à-vis the writer and the subject of her scrutiny, the abducted woman.[6] At the very least, they document the ways in which the emergent nation ventriloquized women's experiences both as victims and as witnesses by writing them into the nation, although the 'notion of voice is fraught with epistemological, ethical and literary problems.'[7] By masking these names in her memoir, Gupta's 'class selected act' of emplotting her memoir, displaced the violated women (through their anonymity), choosing not to insert them into the historiography of the nation. Noakhali gained notoriety because of the large scale reportage of abductions of Hindu women and forced conversions of Hindu villagers of various castes. The ugly face of religious oppression made these riots leave a peculiar trace in writings on and about it where the question of 'abducted' women became a singular prism through which a national imaginary could be constructed. This memoir as well as some literary texts, though written later, take up the leitmotif of 'abduction' and use it to explore the relationship of the centre to the periphery in displacing the figure of the abducted woman from the hailing aura of the nation/citizen ideology. Writings on Noakhali that took up the question of 'abducted women' engaged in rewriting the nation's history by prefiguring the 'absent-present' abducted women as the centre of their narrative ideology by retrieving their experiences through memoirs left by activists and social workers. Benedict Anderson suggests that literature serves a major function in the idealization and contestation of the nation; it can be useful to see how these writings play upon women's experiences as part of national imaginations to create or negate margins in the concepts of citizenship and belonging. The middle class women activists who write about other women (who had faced sexual violence) are thus engaged in an uncertain project of retrieval and disremembering the silence of the violated women.

Noakhali is situated in an inaccessible far-flung part of Bengal, geographically marginal to the metropolitan centres of Calcutta or Dhaka. Yet when its name became a household word, it also metamorphosed into a symbol and came to occupy a place in Bengal's collective imagination. The name Noakhali evoked tales of Muslim atrocity on hapless Hindus and had a cascading effect elsewhere in India resulting in the communal clashes in Bihar on the eve of the country's Independence. The writings on and about that time show us that Noakhali was not just a series of communal clashes with reported violence against women, but a *longue durée*, not just of the events but the larger shadows of them that soured

the already worsening relationship between the two communities.[8] Gandhi's well-documented interventions in Noakhali also contributed to this mythification of Noakhali: the riot-torn place was to be a living laboratory where an experiment could be carried out to see how Gandhi's physical presence could act as a deterrence to communal/religious bigotry. Given that Noakhali gained such emotional and political currency amongst not only famous political figures but also among the ordinary activists on the ground, it is important to configure how the practice of self-conscious narrations and lived experiences became sites of meaning productions and refigured popular ways of remembrance tinged with new emotions. As the author juxtaposes the memoir written around Noakhali with a few literary texts, it clearly emerges how the literary production in and around Noakhali focuses on an unprecedented fracturing of intercommunity relations because at the centre of this memoir as well as the imaginative texts we have 'a historically evolved self consciousness' that interlocks 'larger events in political history and micro events from the everyday' to question and refigure the secular nation.[9] Evidence of this interlocking can be seen in the way many of these texts are engaged in structures of representation that offers a continuous engagement with the trope of 'abduction' seen in the wider context of Hindu-Muslim relationship. The accounts of rape and abduction that followed in the wake of the Noakhali riots create a force-field in which the later literary narratives move and take shape. If the memoirs are important instruments of recuperation, a moment of representation of the past as well as of self-making a new feminine national identity, then the literary texts focus on moments of rupture, especially in the figure of abducted women, to show how memory survives not in monolithic ways but through heterogonous fluid avatars, through myths, metaphors and testimonies. Literary texts then become narratives of resistance because they become declarations of the un-accommodated subject, the abducted woman who cannot be contained into the folds of community or nation.

The Noakhali communal violence began on 10 October 1946 and can be seen as an indirect fall-out of the Calcutta Riots. At that time, Ashoka Gupta, an active member of AIWC, and her husband Saibal Kumar Gupta were living in Chittagong where he was posted in governmental service. When the news of the 'riots'[10] were reported in the local newspapers from 17 October onwards,[11] the AIWC workers, under the leadership of Nellie Sengupta, the Chittagong member of legislative assembly (MLA), started relief operations among the abducted Hindu women. East Bengal had a number of women's political organizations that had significant grassroots presence during the 1943 famine and notable among them were the MARS (*Mahila Atmaraksha Samity*) that was established in 1942 (affiliated to the Communist Party of India) and the AIWC (affiliated to the Indian National

Congress). In Noakhali, Jyoti Debi, called Kakima by all, ran relief operations on behalf of MARS during the famine.[12]

One such activist was Ashoka Gupta whose book *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney* (Those Tumultuous Days in Noakhali, 1999) and some other writings give an account of riot-torn Noakhali. They are an important historical source of how we may contextualize Noakhali. Most accounts of the Noakhali riots have looked at communal relations or seen it in terms of economic and social configurations.[13] Few have seen this as an ideological arena where important aspects of nationalist feminist ideologies had a free play and a certain recreation of the women's question in terms of the emerging secular nation took place. Recent questions raised by historians, about how 'such events are recorded and by whom'[14] bring up important issues about the place of eye witness account, where memory of a tragedy can present an alternative construction of an event although that may be necessarily incomplete and indirect. The memoirs around Noakhali are not predictable eye witness accounts of actual riot violence; rather they are accounts of the aftermath and therefore go beyond the act of witnessing. The riots are experienced (at a later duration of time) through the lens of relief to the victims and recovery of abducted women and the writers were not just passive witnesses but active participants who intervened either directly or indirectly that left markers on themselves and those around them. In turn, these narrativizations also shape and reconfigure certain aspects of Gandhian *sewa* or service that enabled the activists, a large number of them women, to construct a nationalist discourse through 'repetition' (of a metaphor) and 'displacement' (silence displaces speech) especially as the activists themselves 'have been the *silent* spectators to the brutal events that are taking place all over the country over the past decades (italics mine).'[15] The memoirs then are attempts to 'recover' violated women and the 'speaking self' in more ways than one: by placing both at the heart of the narrative the attempt is at once to question women's marginality in the nationalist discourse; yet the memoir is also an act of 'silence' because it can speak of only some things that have happened and not others. For instance, it can remain silent to the fates of women who were raped, abducted and molested at the hands of their neighbours and acquaintances. Thus the phenomenological association of a time of violence and a re-figuration of the women's question within the nation is very apparent in Gupta's writings that oscillate between nationalist agency (constituted) and subaltern agency (lost).[16] Although Gupta's memoir begins with the rejoinder that her text does not provide 'any solution, any advice, or any other inner gesture towards meaning: it is what I have done and seen, a dairy of everyday events' it does talk of a history not as a 'history of explanations' but simply recollects things by being and memory:

> Maybe the memoir contains some errors, I have not been able to organize my thoughts. Maybe because in those tumultuous riot filled days, the neat sites of family, society and our history was turning into a messy untidy reality; our familiar country was becoming unfamiliar and strange. I have only tried to say my words in my own way in these pages.[17]

The memoir provides a complex understanding of the manner in which the conflagration were playing out as a 'political phenomenon (with economic underpinnings and cultural consequences)' with far-reaching consequences on the gendered spheres of experience.[18] Apart from Gupta, the witnesses to the devastation of the riots (which is already an 'after') in Noakhali and Tippera were many: from Mahatma Gandhi to the grassroots workers of MARS, the women workers of the undivided Communist Party of India, the Indian Red Cross and the AIWC were engaged in relief operations. Many of them have left accounts of what they saw and the circumstances in which they worked. Ashoka Gupta's memoir, for example, is an important testimony not only because it is the reminiscence of someone who was present in the area, but because she worked under the close supervision of Gandhi. I juxtapose the writings of a notable public figure (Mahatma Gandhi) with the writings and other unpublished materials of Ashoka Gupta and Renu Chakravartty (Communist Party of India member of parliament or MP and author of *Communists in Indian Women's Movements,* 1980). The 'truth' of what they saw and heard and recorded are certainly coloured by their class and gender as well as their political ideologies as an AIWC or Communist party worker yet their accounts testify to the actual material fallout of the riots and document a well-known historical event as they saw, experienced and lived it. Their accounts show how communalism was a process of long antagonistic sets of identity formation and how it was implicated in the economic imperatives of two different social locations of Hindus and Muslims. Lastly, they construct a 'political history of partition' by throwing light on a specific historical practice of recovery of memory. They bring to the surface a certain subterranean politics of refiguring the 'woman' as an activist/political worker within the nation just as it historicizes that discourse in a certain socio-historical context of a 'riot' seeped with gender violence. The figure of the abducted woman so prominent in these accounts suggests why Noakhali is accorded a special place in the 'last era of armed and organized communal hostilities'[19] that marked the years before the country was partitioned in 1947. Apart from these first person accounts, three literary texts, Ateen Bandopadhyay's *Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey* (1967–71), Prafulla Roy's

Keyapatar Nouka (1965), Pratibha Basu's *Shamudro Hridoy* (1970) investigate the remembered texture of culture in pre-partition Bengal and the representation of Hindu-Muslim relation in the modern Bangla novel. The trope of 'abduction' in these texts helps us see how the two communities created boundaries in reality and how they broke them within these representations. In the background, Noakhali's carnage provides the historical meta-code to the narratives.

The place

Noakhali (1,658 sq. miles) and Tippera (2,531 sq. miles) were both in the Chittagong Division; Tippera had 3 towns and 4,007 villages while Noakhali had 2 towns and 1,738 villages. Thus, the area under consideration was largely rural, with a population predominantly Muslim.[20] The Noakhali District Gazetteer found the Hindu population divided into different castes and sub-castes like Brahman, Kayastha, Sudra, Sunri, Sutradhar, Teli, Jugi, Barui, Kumhar, Napit, Kaibartta, Namasudra and Bhuimali while the Muslims were divided into Sheikhs, Pathans, Saiyads with Nikari (fishdealers), Nagarchi (drummers) and Dai who were all Sunnis of the Hanafi sect. Apart from these main divisions there were some Christians, Jains and Buddhists, as well as tribal people in the two areas.[21] The region was 'a vast rice plain dotted over with numerous villages, where rich groves of areca-nut and coconut palms rising out from a dense undergrowth of *Mandar* trees and other shrubs, make every village look like a forest' while south of the mainland lay a number of sandbank islands or *chars* 'that are constantly changing their positions and boundaries.'[22]

Studies of this part of agrarian Bengal have indicated some significant reasons why the two districts were engulfed in riots: high prices of food-grains in the post-war years, the demobilization of military men and the abandonment of the rationing system were some economic features that formed the background to a rapidly deteriorating communal situation.[23] The emergence of communalism became a pervasive political force, especially for the dominating Muslim cultivating families in East Bengal who wanted to wrest control of local administrative boards from high caste Hindus who had customarily dominated them. The economic interests of foreign colonial capital had long ruled out the development of healthy democratic institutions in Bengal. Educated Bengali Hindus were in the throes of an economic discontent due to rising prices and falling standard of living that in turn increased racial antipathy and dislike of foreign rule. They distrusted the cooperation of Muslim politicians with the government that had brought about

a rapid expansion of their social bases and a greater Muslim share in services and professions ate into their traditional privileges. Long before the onset of the economic crisis brought about by the Inter-War depression, Hindus and Muslims had become aware of their communal identities and often found themselves in opposite camps over questions like the earlier partition of Bengal (1905), the foundation of the University at Dhaka, the Bengal Pact, the Tenancy Amendment Bill of 1928 and a host of other issues.[24] This dimension of social conflict went on expanding and the 'politics of the province came to be increasingly vitiated by racism, communalism, casteism, provincialism and factionalism.'[25] In the 1940s, the hardening of Muslim communal identity largely came about during the battle for the control of the predominantly Muslim peasantry of East Bengal by the Bengal Provincial Muslim League (BPML) who aggressively used Muslim symbols to win peasant support for the Pakistan movement. Rather than challenging the League by taking up the agrarian cause, the Bengal Congress mirrored the League by identifying itself with Hindu landed interests.[26] Within the violent episodes of communal aggression, the various actors would play out their fears and anxieties. The image of Hindu women, abducted and raped by an external enemy, was often deployed in political mobilization through the early years of India's freedom struggle. Earlier, it was deployed against British managers of tea gardens and jute mills. Later, an anti-Muslim strain crept in, especially in 1873, when it was used against the *raiyat* uprising in Pabna where the anti-landlord movement was projected as an anti-Hindu one. The campaign swept Bengal in the 1920s leading to a negation of the Bengal Pact and reports of abductions became points of mobilization for Hindu communalists.[27] From the 1920s, the running campaign by the Women's Protection League (WPL) (involving prominent Hindu *bhadralok* figures) against abductions by Muslims vitiated the communal atmosphere and although this tapered off temporarily after 1926, the mutual distrust between the two communities remained and was aggravated after the proposals of the Nehru Report of 1928 which Hindu communalists saw as granting concessions to Muslims.[28] From 1939, the Hindu Mahasabha launched its campaign towards the mobilization of the scheduled castes in Bengal. In eastern Bengal, in the districts of Mymensingh, Barisal and Noakhali, mobilization drives were carried out that led to heightened communal feelings as lower caste peasants were inflamed particularly during the 1941 census operations. Both the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha traded charges of trying to influence enumeration by swelling their respective numbers against each other. The situation was particularly sensitive in the two Noakhali villages of Dattapara and Raipur that were later to witness horrific violence in 1946.[29] Apart from these underlying frictions and tensions that

marked the social and political life in Bengal, the immediate cause of the Noakhali riots was an outcome of the August carnage in Calcutta. Ashoka Gupta stated in an interview in 1997 that the riots started in Noakhali as a result of rumours brought by 'the people who had come from Calcutta and told the stories…that had infuriated the Muslims…there was a lot of arson and loot and abduction and conversion…when it started it snowballed….'[30] Unlike previous instances of Hindu/ Muslim aggressions in East Bengal that had pitted each other over Muslim's 'religious rights' versus the Hindus 'civil rights' in the case of playing of music in front of mosques, the Noakhali riots had distinct linkages to organized politics with underpinings of economic and class aspirations.[31] Its manifestations were religious intolerance and conversion.

The mahatma

The riots began at Noakhali's Sahapur Bazar and engulfed the most inaccessible villages in the district. Almost soon after, it spread to the adjoining areas of Chandpur and Tiperra.[32] The scale of violence was unprecedented and took everyone by surprise. By 22 October, *The Times* in London was reporting 30,000 refugees in government relief camps and *The Daily Mail* on 18 October stated that 'Eastern Bengal was aflame…with the worst Hindu-Muslim riots India has ever known.' *Hindustan Standard* first reported the riots on 17 October and the headline announced that the Calcutta riots paled into insignificance beside the carnage in Noakhali. On 30 October, in a secret letter from Lord Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, the former expressed anxiety about the situation in Bengal:

> The events in Eastern Bengal could not have been more unfortunate….I see no prospect of securing a return of confidence in Eastern Bengal for a very long time, and I doubt whether many Hindus will be prepared to remain in their homes there.[33]

Mahatma Gandhi had seen in the Calcutta riots a potential for greater violence; when the Noakhali riots broke out he decided that the East Bengal conflagration needed his personal touch. He was repeatedly questioned about why he was coming to Bengal when riots in Bombay and neighbouring Bihar were killing many more; and even after he arrived in East Bengal, he faced hostile queries from Muslim League functionaries about his presence there.[34] None of his close associates could predict what, if any good, would come of his trip to Noakhali. 'All that I know', Gandhi admitted, 'is that I won't be at peace unless I go.'[35] He arrived on 7 November to that part of East Bengal, which required many days

of travel and was 'one of the least accessible flatlands of India,' but it was a land green and enticing:

> All around us I find huge coconut and betel-nut palms, and a large variety of greens grow in their shade. The rivers are all [big] like the Indus, the Ganges, the Jumna and the Brahmaputra. They empty their waters into the Bay of Bengal.[36]

It was a land in which the writer of these lines was to find 'indescribable peace in the natural scenery around him' but that peace was 'missing on the faces of men and women.'[37] The lovely verdant landscape and the horrors that unfolded all around was brought together in a contemporary perception of Noakhali: the place that was hitherto the periphery had suddenly come centre-stage:

> I had been ashamed of the insignificance of Noakhali…in the newspapers I often saw Dhaka, Barisal, Bankura, Shilchar being discussed…..but Noakhali – was that a place and was it ever newsworthy?...But now Noakhali had taken its revenge, a terrible revenge. Its name is now known all over in big bold letters, not only in Bengal or in India but everywhere else, in the newspapers of London and New York; its name is etched in blood in the heartbeats of women, in the pulse of mothers…..God knows, one can't feel envy for this fortune. Gandhi is living there now, and in today's world what can be more necessary than Gandhi?[38]

Gandhi's sojourn in Noakhali was accompanied by much public attention and his frugal way of life was a cynosure of many eyes:

> The house where we had put up consisted of a few detached huts made of wooden frames, with walls as well as thatches of galvanized iron sheets. The floor was mud….Gandhiji occupied a spacious hut in the centre of a courtyard, surrounded on all sides by thick groves of areca and coconut. There were other huts nearby, only one having been completely destroyed and burnt during disturbances. Several large ponds also existed within the compound of the houses… During the disturbances, most of the inmates had taken refuge elsewhere; but when Gandhiji came and settled down in their home, they began to return in small numbers. Suspicion and a feeling of insecurity had gone too deep ….to be eradicated at one stroke even it were under the magic spell of Gandhiji's presence.[39]

At great personal risk, Gandhi lived in Noakhali for seven weeks (from 7 November 1946 to 2 March 1947), often walking miles to villages affected by the riots, driven by a sense of a possible failure of his teachings of *ahimsa*. Noakhali was to be an acid test of his principles because Gandhi wanted to search and find new ways of applying the principles he knew were true. This unfamiliar part of Bengal was the ground where his ideas of non-violence and *ahimsa* were to be tried and tested under the most difficult circumstances. Historians see these last months of his life as Gandhi's 'finest hour' when he displayed 'his passionate anti-communalism' that was in many ways shaped by his unique personal qualities.[40] Phillips Talbot, an American reporter who met Gandhi in Noakhali, gives a few answers as to why Gandhi chose to stay in East Bengal.

> Politically, Gandhi has concluded that Hindu-Muslim bitterness threatens to postpone Indian freedom, and perhaps undercuts the role India might otherwise play in Asia. Having failed to bring the two communities together through high-level negotiation, he is testing his nonviolence and seeking a solution at the familiar village level. As a Hindu, moreover, he is incapable of ignoring the threat to his culture that arises from forced conversions. Wherever they occur, he must stamp them out. The first objective, obviously, can be attained, only by winning the support of Muslims. As the primary step, he is working to lift Hindu-Muslim relations from a religious to a political plane.[41]

Gandhi was not simply interested in providing temporary relief to people; he had resolved to find a more permanent solution to the communal tensions that had rent the fabric of social and political life of the country at the fag end of his life.[42] Noakhali was a test case for him: if he failed there, all his teachings would be a lie. Obstinately, in the face of all opposition, Gandhiji refused to leave Noakhali.

How did Gandhi choose to give form to his teachings in Noakhali? To bring about a turnaround to what he saw as India's most pressing political and social problem he used himself and his band of *satyagrahis* as 'exemplars,' who by choosing the non-violent way, would instill in the fear stricken victims and their aggressors the courage to act differently. He impressed by simply being there, by being authentic he hoped to find a solution to communalism with practical urgency.[43] He directed the workers to disperse to every village and live there without fear for 'we must live in these villages with our small children and be prepared to face

any situation even if it is dangerous. If you are not prepared for this, then you cannot ask the villagers to return.'[44] Gandhi's idea was to test, in a spontaneous way because the riots presented him an opportunity to do so, his vision of a 'moral man' in a political and cultural circumstance that was most inimical to his philosophy: communal violence and religious intolerance. This notion, of being physical exemplars, to bring hope to the oppressed and the aggressive alike and to set an example through one's action, was part of Gandhi's larger philosophical and political method of keeping open, at all cost, a dialogue between Hindus and Muslims, even in the face of communal rioting. For that end, he proposed to establish peace committees in each of the affected villages where one good man, from each community, would work selflessly towards that goal. He also exhorted his workers to 'go to villages where the inhabitants are all Harijans. They are still living there with broken spirits. You will have to save them from fear and despair that has enveloped their lives.'

Gandhi's arrival electrified the relief workers who were living among the affected people; Ashoka Gupta was one of them. Driven by an urge that she could scarcely understand, she went to meet the Mahatma.

> At the news of Gandhiji's arrival in Noakhali, I was excited and reached Chandpur. Before that we had been engaged in relief work from 20 October. At Chandpur station, we received the news that Gandhiji had arrived on 7 November by special steamer but it won't dock and will remain midstream. I had my son and daughter with me as well as 2–3 colleagues. Even now I wonder what attraction made me take a small boat and row to the steamer. There, among the faces peering over the railings, I recognized an acquaintance Arunangshubabu who, after obtaining permission from Satish Dasgupta, allowed me to board the steamer and take part in the prayer meeting with my son Partho. [45]

When Gandhi arrived in Choumuhani, many others came from all over the countryside to see him and take his advice: Sucheta Kripalini from Dattapara, Renuka Ray from Calcutta and other workers from many districts of Bengal.[46] On 13 November, early in the morning, Gandhi announced to his party the important decision that he would live alone in a village to instill in its terror-stricken inhabitants the courage to return to their homes. By this act he also wanted to inspire other workers in his party to go and live in riot affected places so that their examples would inspire confidence and drive away fear. He decided to disperse each member, including the women, to settle down in one affected

village and hold himself /herself hostage for the safety and security of the Hindu minority of that village. He insisted that they must pledge to protect with their lives, if necessary, the Hindu population of that village. Creating a field of praxis whereby his disciples would endorse through their bodies Gandhi's own preparation of living among the riot victims, he announced that he was going to bury himself in East Bengal till the warring Hindus and Muslims learnt to live together in harmony and peace. He was distraught and confused but also determined to do right:

> I find myself in the midst of exaggeration and falsity. I am unable to discover the truth. There is terrible mutual distrust. Oldest friendships have snapped. Truth and ahimsa by which I swear, and which have, to my knowledge, sustained me for sixty years, seem to fail to show the attributes I have ascribed to them.
>
> To test them, or better to test myself, I am going to a village called Srirampur, cutting myself away from those who have been with me all these years, and who have made life easy for me.
>
> ….How long this suspense will last is more than I can say. This much, however, I can say. I do not propose to leave East Bengal till I am satisfied that mutual trust has been established between the two communities and the two have resumed the even tenor of their life in their villages. Without this there is neither Pakistan or Hindustan – only slavery awaits India, torn asunder by mutual strife and engrossed in barbarity.[47]

The presence of Gandhi, his exhortations for passive resistance to violence and constructive approach to mend Hindu-Muslim relations were embodied in the way he walked through the villages, meeting people in their homes, visiting the ailing and the poor. For many, it was an incredible sight to see the frail old man putting his body to danger walking through places that had seen such terrible violation of bodies:

> The Gandhi march is an astonishing sight. With a staff in one hand and the other on his granddaughter's shoulder, the old man briskly takes the lead as the sun breaks over the horizon. He usually wraps himself in a hand-woven shawl, as the January mornings are cold enough for him to see his breadth. But he walks barefooted despite chilblains…. As the sun begins to climb, villagers from places along the way join the trek. They come by twos and fours or by dozens and

> scores, swelling the crowd as the snows swell India's rivers in spring. They press in on the old man, while their children dance around the edges of the moving body. Here, if I ever saw one, is a pilgrimage. [48]

Walking for Gandhi embodied his protest at the most elemental level: at one stroke he could get to know the affected people as well as the aggressors and draw them into dialogue with himself as an interlocutor; in another way he wanted to bring to light the innate configuration between locality and walking because 'walking creates the spirit of Swadeshi as caring'.[49] Innumerable eye witnesses to Gandhi's stay in Noakhali described the absolute ease with which he interacted with people he met, just as he remembered the children ill in the neighbourhood and prescribed remedies for common diseases. In the months that he lived in Noakhali, Gandhi covered 49 villages, walking barefoot, trying to wean the people of both communities away from violence and hatred. Gandhi's appeal for peace in Bengal was totally self-abnegating. He went there as a servant of the people and he met Hindus and Muslims alike and appealed for unity.[50] To borrow Vinoba Bhave's term, Gandhi's work in Noakhali was 'an experiment in applied *ahimsa*.'

Nirmal Kumar Bose, an anthropologist and Gandhi's Bangla interpreter who stayed with him in Noakhali, testifies to the extent Bapu tried to come to the heart of the problem in Noakhali. Gandhi ascribed the forcible conversions as a 'sin' and held the Muslim leadership as responsible for the conflagration. Bose describes a conversation between Gandhiji and Sarat Bose when

> Saratbabu … spoke about the panic from which Hindus were suffering, and described some of the things he had learnt…the crime against women as well as the monstrous cruelty to which people had degraded themselves. Gandhiji corrected him by saying that we must look at the original fault and need not be concerned so much about consequential developments. These lay, firstly, in the declaration of the 16 August 1946 as a holiday, and secondly, in the forcible conversion of non-Muslims. Forcible conversion was the worst thing imaginable; and all that had taken place in Noakhali could be traced to this original sin.[51]

That the deteriorating Hindu-Muslim relation had wider economic causes, Gandhi was well aware. To quote Bose again, one evening while on a walk, they begin talking…

> Gandhiji enquired about the local economic situation. I told him

> how the Hindus are financially the stronger community. In course of the Second World War, the Muslim peasant had earned some money, while a new Muslim middle class had also come into being under the patronage of the Muslim League government. The latter were trying to step into the shoes of the Hindu middle class. It was not a simple case of an exploited class trying to oust another, through an alliance with the exploited on the score of religious and cultural unity. If the Hindus have to live here, the fundamental economic relation has to be set right. Gandhiji agreed….[52]

Gandhi's work in Noakhali was unimaginably brave but it also contained the seeds of failure: the communal distrust between the two warring factions had cut too deep; the resurgent Muslim self identity necessitated a sea change from the existing economic and political dominance of the upper caste Hindus and partition was visualized as the only possible way out by influential sections within both the factions. Gandhi knew that the carnage at Noakhali 'has surpassed…. imagination' and only a miracle would achieve the desired stability and communal harmony but he was filled with hope that 'this terrifying situation will change soon.' It was a formidable task but he was determined to carry on and do the best he could. As Mushirul Hasan states:

> In Noakhali, a weary Mahatma, leaning against his *lathi* that had stood him in good stead in his political journeys, had to prove to the world that personal courage, moral fervour, and commitment, more than formalistic ideologies, could sooth violent tempers…. Never before had a political leader taken so bold an initiative to provide the healing touch not just to the people of Noakhali but to the warring groups across the vast subcontinent. And yet, never before did so earnest an effort achieve so little.[53]

The workers

Gandhi's presence in Noakhali and his heroic anti-communal efforts bestow 'epic' dimensions to any representation of 1946.[54] Unlike the epic hero though, Gandhi's lone yet mammoth efforts were buttressed both by individuals and organizations. The Communist party workers undertook anti-communal as well as relief operations in Noakhali. *People's Age* reported (on 27 October 1946) that on receipt of the news of the outbreak, the veteran Communist leader Muzaffar Ahmed

left for Noakhali accompanied by other party workers. The Bengal Committee of the Communist Party of India issued an urgent directive to party members in the affected districts to help in rescue and relief works. The directive also urged party workers in every locality to 'form united Hindu-Muslim volunteer corps for peace and defence of the villages.'[55] In these dark times of lawlessness and despair, Muzaffar Ahmed, in an appeal to the people of the riot affected villages, stated that he was convinced that there were hundreds of ordinary Muslim peasants 'who have the courage and the eagerness to render help to their Hindu brothers and to rescue all men and women in distress.' His words seemed to have united some Hindu and Muslim hearts amidst the conflagration. *People's Age* reported on 3 November 1946 that in a belt of villages, stretching round Hasnabad, Barura and Galimpur in Tippera district, 80,000 Hindu and Muslim *kisans* were united 'under the Red Flag,' to give shelter to fleeing villagers who arrived from Noakhali. They organized relief kitchens and fed and sheltered 5000 people.[56] Abani Lahiri, a member of the Communist Party of India, recorded in his memoirs that hundreds of volunteers, under the Communist-led Kisan Sabhas had by blocking the road between Noakhali and Comilla stopped the riot from spreading, while Muslim volunteers looked after Hindu riot victims who came from Raigunj and Lakshmipur.[57] These anti-communal efforts however remained disparate and scattered while reports of daily harassments of Hindus continued to make headlines. For his part, Gandhi was clear that the anti-communal efforts in Noakhali could have far reaching repercussions in the rest of India. In a letter from Srirampur (27 December 1946) to Shri Hamiduddin Chaudhury, (Parliamentary Secretary of the Muslim League Ministry), he indicated this belief: 'Believe me, I have not come to East Bengal for the purpose of finding fault with the League….. For I believe that if you and I can produce in Bengal the right atmosphere, the whole of India will follow.'[58] Gandhi was determined to give the League government another chance to prove that they were honourable men who would not remain silent witnesses to shameful deeds. This was part of his ideological appeal to Muslims. On the other hand, to his own band of women workers Gandhi laid down an uncompromisingly strict line of action couched in openly religious terms of sacrifice and duty. He often addressed the women relief workers to urge them on: 'If your minds are turned towards your homes, then you must return there. The work that you have chosen demands your dedication and love….Like the love that Meera had for her Lord, Giridharilal….All you women should be like Meera… .' The exhortation to be like Meera elided a deeper truth: Meera's spiritual *bhakti* was to be transformed into political *nishtha* or commitment to a cause, the power of womenhood, *stri shakti* evoked to augment and strengthen national work. The fashioning of a nationalist

feminine self can only be possible if like the devotee Meera, the notion of service can be attributed to the every day life to forge a new social order with true equality and development for all (*sarvodaya*). It was also a call for middle class women to show the way through *satyagraha* to work for communal harmony even if their menfolk were averse to it. Emancipation of women was to be the emancipation of the nation. This attempt to broaden the traditional role of women was factored in through Gandhi's ideal of *sacrifice* (to remain in the world and act in it) and the comment that Gandhi's idealization of the image of woman as the 'embodiment of sacrifice and extolling the strength that comes from suffering helped strengthen the prevailing oppressive stereotypes of woman as selfless companions and contributors to a social cause' is a trifle unfair.[59] Gandhi's exhortation was to concretize and interweave individual development and social action, both in the private and public domains. He therefore advised his workers to turn themselves into 'sevaks' or servants rather than protectors, both to the riot affected and their aggressors. Gupta's memoir echoes Gandhi's idea but gives it an added twist: she reiterates that Gandhi had taken Indian women out from the narrow self-centred world of family and domestic obligations to the outer world of service to the people and showed

> us women how our responsibility to our family and duty to our society can work together…and if there were a conflict between the two then on the path to duty we must remain true to our duty and win over the obstacles to leave a real mark of our commitment.[60]

The rejection of a compromise between the public/political role and the private role of a woman marks this memoir as a radical departure from other autobiographies of the times. It can also be seen as an effort to negotiate and reformulate the ideology and institution of the family not as a site of oppression but as personal growth and bound integrally to the community.

These ideals of duty and service were widespread markers of a socially oriented feminine self during the nationalist era when questions regarding women's rights were sometimes subsumed within their political work. Yet another memoir of a young Communist Party of India worker named Renu Chakravartty, just like Ashoka Gupta's memoir, shows how women had to refashion and negotiate their 'natural' roles as mothers or wives to their political roles as party grassroots workers.[61] Chakravartty had a one year old child whom she had to leave behind when riots broke out but 'although I felt the wrench, the call of Noakhali's suffering sisters would not let me sit back at home. Manikunatala Sen, Kamala Chatterjee, Bela Lahiri, Maya Lahiri, Ira Sanyal, Manorama Bose, Biva Sen and myself went for relief work.'[62] An untitled, unpublished article amongst Chakravartty's private

papers (written on the occasion of the fiftieth year of the Communist Party of India) gives some ideas of these ground realities and the desire to serve the riot affected that enabled them to overcome factionalism and animosity even within the grassroots workers:

> The steadfastness of purpose was strong in our hearts, but our resources for relief were scarce. A group of us went to Choumuhani, Noakhali and another group went through South Calcutta branch of the AIWC to the Chandpur branch of AIWC, whose secretary was Pankajini Singha Roy. I was in the latter group. Pankajinidi put us up in her house, but it soon became clear that our presence and work were not very much to their liking. After waiting for a few days, I and another decided to take some packages of milk to the interior areas which were badly affected…..[63]

Early on, Chakravartty realized that the relief and rehabilitation work needed government help or 'it had to be coordinated work with the Congress organization of which Sucheta Kripalini was the officer commanding. Even government relief was being distributed through her. The Muslim League government hardly gave any direct help.' (106) The tension between Congress workers and Communists working in Noakhali often erupted in strange ways. In her biography *Shediner Katha* (About Those Days, 1982), Manikuntala Sen who was in Chandpur working in a camp for women described an accident where Renuka Ray, a prominent AIWC member, was injured in a jeep accident. Sen nursed her for three days and 'Renuka Ray saw what I was doing and became a little softer in her attitude to me. Probably she was surprised that Communist women could also nurse Congress workers so selflessly.'[64]

Ashoka Gupta's private papers are a rich source for a glimpse into the life of a relief worker in Noakhali, along with Renu Chakravartty and Manikuntala Sen's accounts although with substantial differences in emphasis. Gupta's memoir demonstrates how the semantics of action is transformed into narrative with comic details (in one such incident she describes how she accompanied two goats along a long country road so that Gandhi could have his milk) and her travails to touch Hindu and Muslim hearts for reconciliation. The numerous villages she visits, warm recollections of her co-workers, as well as the official efforts that the AIWC undertook for communal harmony, create a mood of a narrated story. Her choice of events is couched in a journalistic spare style, detached and unsentimental. However, the objectivity of her discourse is often destabilized by ruminations and

questions about the effectiveness of the relief efforts and the attempts towards recovery of abducted women. Thus Gupta's voice as an AIWC worker and her consciousness of the gendered experience of violence often interplays to create a heterogenous history of the self at a time that is both 'tumultuous' and subjectively temporal. This interplay of the suffering that she saw all around her and her own commitment to the ideals of *sewa* mark her memoir: it makes the text uneven and creates gaps in an otherwise poised rendering of everyday experiences. The larger force field of Gandhian ideals of democracy and humanity are severely tested by what she saw all around her; at the same time her own personal trajectory as an activist allowed her to put rescued, molested, and abducted women at the centre-stage in her memoir.

> Dr Phulrenu Guha, Mrs Phullarani Das and myself of the AIWC, Calcutta and Chittagong Branches did seven days of intensive touring from 7th to 13th instant (November 1946) with headquarters at Lakhimpur, visiting Bejoynagar, Ahladinagar, Ahmedpur, Parbatinagar, Jahanabad, some portions of Ramchandi, Hasnabad, Hasandi, Hetampur, DalalBazar, Char Mandal, Tumchar, Charruhita, Kalirchar, Abdullapur, Piyarapur, Banchanagar, Charlamchi, Sanaurabad and Lamchari all inhabitated mostly by Namasudras, Jugis and….(indecipherable). Everywhere we saw a large number of houses including handlooms belonging to the Jugis burnt to ashes, and houses that escaped destruction by fire were thoroughly and efficiently pillaged. Many have left the villages, but those who could not do so lived under improvised sheds constructed with burnt C.I. sheets. In Tumchar alone fifty families have been rendered homeless by arson……. We collected statistics of crimes committed against women from the women victims themselves. We saw more than twenty forcibly married girls whose parents brought them back after the disturbances was (sic) over. Some are far too young to be married at all and their parents do not consider such forcible marriages as valid though they are afraid of the future. We came across a number of women who were raped or molested……[65]

Gandhi was clear that the girls forcibly abducted had committed no wrong, 'nor incurred any odium. They deserve the pity and active help of every right-minded man. Such girls should be received back in their homes with open arms and affection, and should have no difficulty in being suitably matched.'[66] The

rehabilitation and recuperation of women raped, molested and kidnapped was therefore not simply a political act by the state but a social act of sympathy and pity by every man and woman. In setting out this parameter of acceptance, Gandhi was again acting in character: his attempt to reform the practice of unacceptability of abducted women was to enable a simultaneous effacement and recuperation of women's experiences that one has seen in Gupta's autobiography. This discourse around abductions enabled both Gandhi and his workers to focus once again on the dynamics of Hindu upper caste monopoly over local resources that had resulted in Muslim class and communal aggression. Gandhi's directions to the workers to keep in mind that their work was not only to help rehabilitate Hindus but remain in close contact with the Muslim villagers is a recognition of this idea:

> While on our work we had felt that the first requirement of rehabilitation of the two communities – the re-establishment of communal harmony – was indeed an impossible task. If some of us, for some time, lived with the villagers may be then…. the refugee Hindus may get back their self-confidence and trust. Our first task will be to eradicate terror from the minds of the Hindus and banish the desire to attack or torture from among the Muslims.[67]

Both Gandhi and workers like Ashoka Gupta saw clearly the internal undercurrents between the oppressor and the oppressed. They were linked together in a vicious cycle for it was a chain of social and economic injustices that made communalism an easy alternative.

> Gandhiji's advice to the Hindus uniformly was that they should purify their own hearts of fear and prejudice, and also set right their social and economic relations with others; for only could this internal purification give them adequate courage, as well as the moral right, to live amidst a people who now considered them to be their exploiters and enemies.[68]

Even for affected women who were scared to join his prayer meetings for fear of violence, Gandhi's advice was to be fearless. When certain instances of abductions were brought to his notice he said that a written complaint must be made with names of the women so that he could send it to Premier Suhrawardy immediately.[69]

From the many bits of papers that Ashoka Gupta has left behind, one can piece together the enormous relief efforts that lay before the workers, the huge odds they worked against as well as the daily obstacles and acts of faith they had to perform.[70] Years later, Gupta remembered that the most pressing needs

in her mind at that time were to organize search parties for abducted women and to form volunteer corps for patrolling the area along with the military. She was not loathe to take the help of the colonial government either through the Royal Women's Auxiliary Corps (RWAC), the army or the Red Cross. In this she differed from what Gandhi had been advocating in his prayer meetings. In Madhupur, Gandhi had said

> that he for one was not enamoured of the police or the military and that he (the Prime Minister) could withdraw it at any time. The Hindus and Muslims should be free to break each other's heads if they wanted to. He would put up with that. But if they continued to look to the police and the military for help, they would remain slaves forever to their fear.[71]

Later on, Gupta would remember those months in Noakhali as

> the most rewarding and memorable period of my working life… this was memorable for me not because we were providing relief, or setting up hospitals and schools or helping in the planning and construction of roads. The work was fulfilling because we were trying to bring human beings closer to each other. We were trying to build bridges between people, between communities.[72]

However the clash between the ideal and the real is all too palpable in Gupta's writings and brings out how her 'time' in Noakhali is both a continuity and a disruption: 'Between November 1946 to 14 June 1947, I stayed in Noakhali villages; saw what happened and had first hand knowledge of the psychology both of the oppressed minority and the aggressive majority and the reasons for it.'[73] In another earlier tour undertaken from 30 October to 4 November 1946 through Noakhali and some portion of Tippera, Ashoka Gupta saw indescribable suffering but some instances of love amongst Hindu and Muslim neighbours: In Raipur,

> the market, which is very big, was almost deserted, as a high percentage of shops and stalls belonged to Hindus….Two huge dwellings consisting of several semi-detached houses, within a few yards of the police station, have been completely burnt down. One of these families was given shelter by a Muslim neighbour at the risk of their own safety for three days…..[74]

In a later interview she gave to Andrew Whitehead, a BBC correspondent in

1997, she expressed the horror of what she saw especially in regard to the women:

> I personally feel that raping was done more afterwards than at the time of the riots…. Cold-blooded rapes took place after the riots were over….I found that Hindu men were cowards, and Muslims, who were raping and torturing, they were bigger cowards than these Hindus…taking advantage of a woman who is so helpless, so terribly helpless, and so terribly scared; she couldn't protect herself, she had to give in…that is where I felt that we were ineffective.[75]

As a witness and as a social worker, Gupta's memoir moves between these two aspects of her self-hood: the helplessness she felt in bringing about any real change and Gandhi's ideal that permeated so much of her work:

> People did not trust each other, they had no confidence (*bharsha korto na)* on their neighbours. All these were so true that in the face of so much distrust all our noises for communal harmony and united prayer meetings seemed useless.[76]

This residual guilt, that as exemplars they were sometimes ineffective, is also present in Nirmal Bose's writings.[77] Ashoka Gupta in *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney,* noted the limitations of the relief workers' efforts to save people from daily harassment and also touched upon her own sense of futility. This creates a fissure in her memoir between the perceived and the ideal, a conscious effort to serve but an unconscious and terrifying realization that all had come to naught. It is also a gap between 'narrating' an event and 'intervening in the social processes' that oscillates between incomprehension and impotence. [78] She particularly remembers a painful incident where the intervention of relief workers had absolutely no impact:

> I had, after great persuasion, taken a husband and wife to file a first information report (FIR) in the police station. In front of me, with the sari end covering her face, the wife had said that even two months after the riots 2-3 men forcibly took her away every night and returned her in the morning. This has been happening daily but her husband nor his family has come forward to complain out of fear. I brought them to Lakshmipur police station after giving them courage. But the woman did not give her name, or any other details. The Officer-in-Charge said that the FIR had to be signed. The husband said that they would be killed if they did that. It was better if they left the country. And, truly, that family left one day. I

> was powerless to save the victim and punish the guilty. We remained mute spectators.[79]

Gupta's perception of Noakhali was from within as well as without. Like other workers, she came to Noakhali to help the victims and bring back the vestige of a life lived together. Her experience of *la longue durée* of Noakhali was through relief and rehabilitation, just as Gandhi's was through the lens of non-violence and prayer. 62 years later in another interview (she gave to the author) she recounted again what she had seen in the affected villages and all the details were absolutely fresh in her mind's eye: rape of women, forcible conversions, destruction of implements of livelihood like looms and ransacking coconut and other fruit trees. In the Namasudra villages she had seen widespread conversion, including slaughter of cows; but in the upper caste Hindu villages there was looting, murder and arson. The riot-affected were mostly agriculturists, *kobiraj* and daily labourers who worked in rice husking (*dhanbhana*) or as barbers and masons (*mistri*). Her papers also contain a list of people who headed the relief camps.[80] When the partition happened, her involvement with Noakhali came to an abrupt end. Gupta came back to Calcutta while Gandhi had already left for Bihar. Later in her biography, Ashoka Gupta would talk again of these months of uncertainty and agony where her actions in Noakhali with its synchronic time and its relationship between ends, means and agents suddenly changes to another order of discourse, which Paul Ricoeur calls the 'diachronic character of every narrated story'.

> The two communities were now divided by tremendous suspicion, hatred and mistrust. Relationships between the two had gone terribly wrong, and there was no meaningful communication between ordinary people on both sides. Now that partition had taken place would anything change? What would be the political ramification? In the villages of Noakhali I had mixed with everybody, talked to everyone, and the actual nature of the divide had not been clear. I had no way of knowing that I would be shocked and deeply grieved by the subsequent events. That lay in the future. It was not quite so evident then. Those of us who had lived in East Bengal faced absolute, devastating changes after partition, which was such an overwhelming phenomenon that it could not quite be grasped, let alone analyzed. We simply floundered and groped in the dark. We were not really prepared for partition, though it was not as if we were caught unawares. We knew partition would happen, that changes would occur. What we did not know was what form it would take

> – we could not conceptualize what life would now turn out to be. It was a time of panic and of paralysis.[81]

Gupta's memoir gives an indication of the daunting tasks ahead of workers like her. Her description of accessing the women's inner quarters often made her come face to face with the realization that although they had tried to work irrespective of community or religion 'they had not received true acceptance' especially amongst the Muslims.[82] All through her book on Noakhali one gets the impression of a woman who works assailed with fleeting despair, yet whose determination sometimes made her take unorthodox means to procure relief materials. For example, she did not hesitate to use her social status to cajole medicines for the affected people.[83] In many respect, Ashoka Gupta is the representative of other women AIWC workers who were engaged in relief work at Noakhali: they were urban educated, well connected, had spread out family networks or friends yet who turned away from their comfortable lives to live and work amidst poor and downtrodden men and women who needed their help. In her text there is some indication of class or caste barriers between the relief workers and the villagers; a rather self reflexive understanding of what separated the workers from the recipients of relief: in one instance she describes how she and a co-worker had taken up the challenge of a *moulvi* to study the Koran. Every morning they went to his home to read the religious text. After a week, a woman of the household told them that they should cover their heads when they read the holy book.

> Even now I think how easily an illiterate village woman had shown us that whatever we do we must do it with respect…there was a way to read the holy texts – not just to gain knowledge but to accept with respect. We were at fault. We had paid more attention to doing relief, we had not respectfully judged the problem through the view of the other. For this reason, many times the work of so many of our workers remained unsuccessful.[84]

It is obvious that for her, as well as for Manikuntala Sen, Renuka Ray, Renu Chakravartty and others like them, social service was part of the political ethos in which they worked and lived. In all their writings one sees that the idea of *sewa* was not just a methodological tool of politics but a deeply held belief of personal integrity: as political workers and as women. They understood only too well how humanitarian work could be 'intoxicating' and 'it is only natural that the approval one earns from oneself and from others would nudge one to exert oneself even more.'[85] However, the women worker's self-fashioning in this era in Indian nationalism is accompanied by greater participation in public causes. Reading their

narratives, one begins to see how Gandhi's ideologies regarding *satyagrahis* did not just create a homogenous category of women as activists but underlined the ways in which the women themselves mediated, received and worked upon his ideas. Their emergence as subjects and agents in the public space is an invitation, in the words of Ranabir Samaddar to 'examine much more rigorously the unsettling effects that the emergence' brings on those who are not fashioned as 'subjects': the figure of the homeless violated woman and the 'politics of the unhomely' that redefines the question of citizenship. The abducted woman, a trope in some modern Bangla fiction, helps one see how this politics is played out in literature.[86]

If large-scale violence shaped or 'constituted'[87] our partition of 1947, then in our histories we have said little about that shaping force and have discussed little their effects on our collective psyche. The Noakhali riots, like other pre-partition riots, are still in many ways suppressed in the modern historiography of the partition partly because we have no 'means of representing such tragic loss, nor of pinning down – or rather, owning responsibility for it.'[88] The writings I have looked at do not provide a 'total' and 'objective' and 'comprehensive' knowledge of what happened in Noakhali; they are in most cases fragmentary in nature. They are tentative, bounded by the subject's own immediate personal understanding of events, their own subject positions as well as a certain historical context. Yet they have their importance in enriching our understanding by providing a perspective on the political and civic fault-lines of religion and gender and class that still run through the subcontinent's history. These texts can be used to see how the discursive intersections and disjunctions between reminiscences and imagination complicate the representation of the fissured tableau of Hindu-Muslim relationship in Bengal. If Noakhali was the symbol of how Bengal imploded into strife and fratricide, the rumblings of the language movement in East Pakistan through the 1960s was a time when writers in West Bengal began to revisit the vivisection of the country. The possibility of an independent Bangladesh was a negation and a rejection of the communal violence that had accompanied the partition: Bangla language was now the thread that connected all Bengalis, whether Hindus or Muslims, this side or that side of the border. The three texts that I now discuss were all written in quick succession (between 1967–70), and it is not a coincidence that all of them are by writers originally from East Bengal who take up the theme of Hindu-Muslim relationship as their central novelistic concern. Ateen Bandopadhayay came to West Bengal when he was still in school, while Prafulla Ray came in his early youth. Pratibha Basu came to Calcutta permanently after her marriage to her litterateur husband Buddhadev in 1933.[89] All the three texts use the realistic novel as their chosen form, set at a time before the partition, in undivided Bengal,

two in places that have close geographical resemblance to Noakhali. They are also narratives that use the trope of 'abducted' woman to raise certain questions about the communal mobilization that elicited diverse responses from various social groups. Abduction represents a multiplicity of anxieties both among Hindus and Muslims and these texts carefully consider the formation of communal identities in pre-partition Bengal along caste and religious lines. They are thus in the form of recapitulated memories narrated by characters who lived within the social and cultural milieu where communal conflagrations and abductions took place. These provide us a way to understand how the 'metaphor' of Noakhali may have worked its way into the narrative texture of these novels in order to take a re-look at the partition in the context of Bangladesh. Abduction of women was a large scale feature of Noakhali and the treatment of this contentious subject, in the way the writers elide or reformulate the identity of the abducted women in the domestic/social sphere, throws insight into the grand narratives of 'citizenship' and the nation state in the context of the birth of Bangladesh.[90] Abductions, real and imagined, were a communal preoccupation in the 1920s Bengal and aligned not only to the question of gender but also interlocked with caste, class and political movements:

> in general, the multiple operations of the abduction theme, goes to show…the paradoxical operations of the communal common-sense ideology - the fact that their surface simplicity, in fact banality, conceals the awesome range and complexity of social relations and contexts they problematize and seek to recreate.[91]

Therefore, the theme of abduction performs many actions in the above mentioned Bengali novels and address a number of anxieties and preoccupations including the issue of communal co-existence that Bangladesh would later signify.

Set in undivided Bengal, these narratives also share a commonality in the depiction of people and land, seen through a mist of time. The landscape is codified into symbols that allegorize a lost culture and a way of life that are characteristics of close-knit village communities of Hindus and Muslims, living peacefully. Thus their remembrance of a pre-partition life is 'almost invariably cast in nostalgic terms.'[92] Some critics have remarked that

> when the Indian subcontinent was divided, the tolerant way in which ordinary people in urban areas and villages conducted their life was violated…….They forgot their shared life-worlds and became Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs – merely ideological and self-serving. And as the violence increased, their imaginative resources became

> narrower and meaner; they ignored their holy books and became nastier.[93]

This linear description of cause and effect becomes complicated when one looks at the texts a little more closely and evaluate aspects of a tolerant syncretism that are projected in all of them.[94] Dipesh Chakraborty has theorized that the Hindu-Muslim relationship is an example of 'proximity' where one relates to difference 'in which difference is neither reified nor erased but negotiated.'[95] In the texts, the Hindu-Muslim relationship displays both 'proximity' and 'identity' but it has another dimension: the texts are a testimony to 'affect' where the emotional and psychological responses of this relationship is set out in vivid detail. The syncretic culture is seen in terms of how an individual responds to it in terms of class, gender and caste. In all three texts, the individuation of both the religions and communities is done meticulously in a way that suggests that communal identity is closely bound with class, although the Muslims are not depicted as a homogenous peasant community who suffer under Hindu landowners. The texts lay bare the long, intimate and close relationship of the two communities not only in terms of land but also through social practices to suggest that Hindus and Muslims are a part of the language and the history of a land. The Indian anti-colonial resistance encapsulates within it a strong religious identity and paves the way for a newly emerging Muslim class and political consciousness that becomes the basis for Pakistan. Yet religious nationalism is ultimately found wanting. That is why Noakhali eventually gives way to independent Bangladesh.[96] Both these novels take up this history of Bengal to reinterpret and redeploy it to chart out a new understanding of the relations between Hindus and Muslims in the context of linguistic nationalism. To map this new beginning, they both go back to the past and carefully craft their novels by using structures of location and geography to indicate the cultural and linguistic relationship of the two communities. Simultaneously, in doing this the novels also unearth the processes of 'Othering' that had created the Muslim or Hindu communal identity. The two novels by Bandopadhyay and Ray seem to be in dialogue with each other (and us) in setting out to map the lost habitation, the lost land: it constructs the 'Other': the Muslim who will abduct and pillage but who will also restore and nurture. By playing these two aspects of their relationship, the texts seem to formulate, produce and circulate an ideological and civilizational rejection of Noakhali and an acceptance of Bangladesh.

Ateen Bandopadhyay (b. 1934), a well-known name in Bangla modern literary canon, is the author of a number of stories and novels on the partition of which

Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey (In Search of the Roller Bird, 1967)[97] is the classic that has been translated into 12 other Indian languages. This is a three part sprawling epic narrative that begins in the 1920s in East Bengal and ends in depicting refugee life in West Bengal in the 1970s. The first part, *Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey*, is concerned with the lives of Hindus and Muslims both rich and poor, who live in a small village named Barodi, entwined to nature's cycle, following its rhythms. The text attempts a reconstruction of Hindu and Muslim identities by a narrow focus on the locality and community history of the people. Partition comes stealthily upon them almost without their knowing and the less visible and delayed causes and effects of displacement and violence are seen in the family and community spaces that this text foregrounds. Without slipping into parody or distortion, nostalgia plays an important role in this text of remembrance. Here, the 'home/land' is remembered through a language that is not pathological but erotic and sublime. The surfeit of memory, instead, constitutes the 'affective' dimension of loss of the everyday markers of lived experience that partition brings in its wake. The novel talks of geography (not as borders that will bind the new nation state) but as a sacralizing space that carries within it the markers of past struggles and future hopes. Thus, in this novel, place/space is not a passive container for social action or events but a vital and living presence whose mysterious and subtle properties transform the lives of people who live on them. The novel's historical/linear time has its corollary in the natural time of the seasons; again and again, the physical topos is transformed into the mysterious and subtle chora and the pastoral into 'home':

> As soon as the monsoon arrived here, the *shaluk* flowers began to bloom……there was water everywhere, the whole land got submerged … the rice and jute fields….all of it went under water. Beneath the crystal water, small and big silver fish frolicked….once Shona had captured a wonderful insect, golden in colour, it did not look like any earthly insect. It had a pearl body with golden edges and a black border. It had no legs and it was ideal to be used on the forehead as an adornment. He had kept it inside a small jar for Fatima. When she came back he would give it to her.

Similarly Isham Khan labours in his watermelon patch that was once just a piece of fallow land and that he has transformed into verdant green. He keeps an eye open for the coming and goings of Thakurbari, the big Hindu household that employs him. The chronicle of the big house is one strand of the narrative that is entwined with other narrative strands. If according to Lukács, the novel is the epic

of the modern world, then Bandopadhyay sketches in loving details Barodi's rural life and its people in epic realistic mode, drawing in minute details the various characters who live and work and die on that fertile land, their subjectivities and the changes that come to their lives: Joton, the Muslim girl who marries a Fakir, Madhobi a widow who lives with her brother, the women of Thakurbari, Dhonbou and Borobou, the Muslim League member Shamsuddin, Jalali, the peasant Muslim girl who suffers from hunger and dies searching for *shaluk,* Felu Sheikh who believes Pakistan will be a country for the poor, and Shona the child protagonist through whose eyes one sees the unfolding of the events. The novel uses the protocols of social realism and its epic span begins with the Non-Cooperation Movement and ends with the division of the country. In keeping with its epic/realistic mode of narration it is both the quotidian lives of the characters and the larger life of the community. Without a single narrator and many points of view, the novel has a beginning typical of epics: the birth story of the child Shona whose growing up years in rural Bengal, with its unique traditions and rituals, its festivals and people that form the foundational impulse of the novel. In many ways the novel is a palimpsest of a civilization, where the complex relationship between Hindus and Muslims is an integral aspect of it, pointing to the larger complex figuration of it in the emergence of a nation. Bandopadhyay shows the closeness of life between the two communities just as he depicts the taboos of touch and ideas of pollution that act as invisible boundaries between the two: Shona's playmate Fatima knows that he cannot touch her when he hands her a captured butterfly as he has to bathe and purify himself if he does. These interdictions of the upper caste Hindus humiliate the Muslims who are dependent on them economically; these are one of the many reasons why the two communities distrust each other. The growing clout of the Muslim League is another. The control of local economic resources by the upper caste Hindus is a major cause of resentment amongst the Muslims who are politically aware, like Shamsuddin (Shamu). In the village there are a few well-to-do Muslims like him and Hajisaheb, but the rest are 'all like cattle. Hindus have jobs, land, education, everything.'(31) And during natural calamities, the 'Muslim villages suffer much more.'(101) Even the lower caste Hindus are better off as they own cattle. This relationship of the Hindu-Muslim to the larger question of nationhood is the defining characteristic of this novel. In the context of Bangladesh, one can understand why.

The Bengal countryside that Bandopadhyay depicts is a land of love (Shamu/Maloti), of childhood fairytales (Shona/Fatima) as well as the land where Pakistan will be born and then rejuvenated in a different avatar of Bengali linguistic aspiration in Bangladesh. This land is most closely realized through its variegated

seasons and its changing flora and fauna: the rhythms of nature, the harvesting of crops, the rivers, people's hunger and satiation.

> In winter, there would be many kinds of food: *payesh* and *pitha* in every household. The large households would have their *bastupujo*: sacrificing lambs, *kadma* and *teel ambol*. Fish like *kalibaush*, lobsters and milk. The markets would be flooded with big *pabda* fish: large in size and golden hued. As soon as winter arrived, the cows in the village gave milk in plenty, and poverty, that stayed hidden the rest of the year in all the villages, abated a little. Things became cheaper; all daily wage earners got jobs and households became festive.(96)

The summer-end rains also bring a promise of good life:

> All around one saw a verdant green, and in people's faces a hope of good times…..in times like this the unfortunate and the poor could live on the greens available…the tender jute leaf *shak* or some *shukto:* a whole *shanki* of rice could be eaten with that. (63)

The novel's landscape is at once real and imagined: a place where the idea of 'home' is 'played out in the shifting invocations of a territory', often a contested terrain of politics as well as an 'elemental and enigmatic site of nature.'[98] Shona's ancestral village, whose morphology is intimately described with references to caste and class structures, have other referents that make it a landscape of belonging: its evocative symbolism resides in many objects both real and metaphorical like the Indian Roller bird (*neelkontho pakhi*) that is mentioned in the title but is never seen. Shona imagines its existence and likens it to his uncle who had fallen in love with an Englishwoman; just as Isham Khan knows the real and symbolic importance of the *beel*, the water-body where he gets lost and the truth about the *shimul* tree on its bank:

> The light at the top of the *shimul* tree kept flickering. Was it the will o' wisp? At the far distance, the light strayed from one corner of the lake to another…..Now he saw that the *shimul* tree was walking towards him. He saw the light on top of the tree and in every branch the hanging dead from the last epidemic. (14)

The tree is a geographical marker to his memory, a signposting of the 'history of an erased location' that is at once suggestive and symbolic. The landscape that Bandopadhyay evokes is thus a different kind of an 'archive' that cannot be found in the census or administrative data. This archive creates lists of plants, animals, trees

and other natural objects that relate differently to our senses; representing them entails a different kind of response from us as readers.[99] Just so does Buddhadev Bose describe the Noakhali of his adolescence:

> The most beautiful road was lined with casurinas, its branches filled with deep sussurations, the whole day and the whole night. Crowds of coconut and casurinas, underneath them flickering circle of shadows made up of light and darkness …where ponds and streams and waterways lay anywhere and everywhere, the gum from the *gaab* trees, the thorns of *maadar,* the fear of snakes….there was no path in Noakhali that I had not walked in, no field that I had not played in, in places far and near……[100]

Both Bandopadhyay and Bose are imaginative cartographers, creators of an fictional map that will construct a meaningful microcosm of belonging and exile. This microcosm is the specific historicity of the landscape that they describe. The verbal and representational landscape becomes a repository of political values, for it is this landscape that will host a dance of death and also result in the birth of a new nation.[101]

In the novel Hindus and Muslims are not isolated and cut off from each other. Their lives are intricately and intimately bound with each other. Throughout the text, the physical *proximity* of the two communities is shown in great detail. In the summer months, when the water in the wells dry up, the Namasudra and the Muslim women gather by the river to make holes in the sand and dig for water (57). Maloti and Shamu share a deep and lasting friendship, as do Shona and Fatima. Isham Khan protects the child Shona in a riot. This intimacy of the two communities is circumscribed by land and labour; certainly Thakurbari's benevolence to the Muslims is the benevolence of a landowning class to its dependents, but there is also genuine compassion and care. Bound within this relationship of labour and reliance, the demand for Pakistan becomes inevitable to the Bengali Muslims as the novelist unfolds the intricately woven pattern of the personal and the political strands through Shamu's life, the lives of the labouring peasants and their attachment to the land. This land has different meaning to different people: to Shamu and Maloti it is a land of love and loss, to Shona and Fatima it is the cradle of childhood fairytales and to Felu Sheikh it is the land where Pakistan will be born. In this variegated and changing landscape, the Hindu-Muslim relationship is the low melody that sways between dependence and dread: a 'fear of the self' where the dominant self 'evokes another self' in a quasi-schizoid split.[102] It is a secret grammar of the psyche that is based on memory and longing.

Shamu's relationship with Maloti is an example of this: it is a relationship where a historical difference (of religion) is not erased but negotiated. Shamu, the Muslim League bigwig, pastes pamphlets on trees and dreams of a new Pakistan; but his moral universe is constituted by the suffering of widowed Maloti who lost her husband in a Dhaka riot. The text presents Maloti's sexuality not as a 'problem' but as an extension of her rich and evocative awareness of the poetry of the earth. The widowed Maloti is not a symbolic female form divested of individuality: she is a woman of flesh and blood whose sexuality cannot be contained by the rigid laws of Hindu society. Like the land, she is an enigma who draws powerfully both Shamu and Ranjit, her childhood playmates. Her desire's liminal play around Ranjit and Shamu's proximity is part of a 'land bound by human tears that have established an impartial circle of love from a time immemorial.' Maloti's abduction and rape by two Muslim Leaguers, Jabbar and Karim dramatizes the way her consent is blanketed out and 'the utter repudiation of her choices and personhood.'[103] However, she is rescued by two Muslims, Joton and Fakirsaheb and nursed back to health:

> Joton wanted to wash off all dirt from Maloti's body and make her once more the widowed Maloti….She did not know why but again and again the image of a handsome man appeared in her mind's eye, a man fit for Maloti. For how long this body has not been worked as Khudah has decreed: the body was hungry….Slowly Joton poured water over Maloti's body that had been ravaged by barbaric men; her hands patted and brushed away all the torture from Maloti's limbs.(178)

Joton refuses to attach any signification to Maloti's abduction and by imagining the violated body as a desiring body, Joton re-inscribes both herself and Maloti into self-hood. Both Joton and Maloti will be the twin thrust of the new womanhood and the new nation: violated, abused but pristinely healed through love and longing. Are they then symbols of Bangladesh where two religions will be united?

Shamsuddin's moral universe is constructed both through Maloti and Jalali's sufferings. In an allegorical passage where Maloti looses her pet duck to Jalali's hunger and theft, Shamu goes looking for the bird that leads him to Jalali's hut. As he is about to call her name, he sees her at *namaz* her face cleansed of the stigma of theft, hands held aloft at prayer. Shamu feels the weight of her poverty and realizes 'in this long journey…he was mad about the illusory division of a kingdom.' Muslim communalism is intrinsically bound to class and Shamu's realization that poverty takes away self esteem feed his political desire to have a

separate nation for Muslims. But this separatism is ultimately 'illusory' for Pakistan will continue with divisive politics: religion and language will once again be used to draw boundaries. Shamu is the new postcolonial Muslim self who is capable of compassion and identification with Hindus: he is agonized at Maloti's abduction and he leaves the village forever to settle in Dhaka:

> Shamsuddin was disturbed within his self; he knew he was helpless but he felt her dishonour. He was trying to bring back a measure of self-confidence amongst Muslims; he had pointed out that all they had accepted so long as fate was not so, it was humiliation….. to build the confidence of a new nation he had to make a number of harsh statements but this action of Jabbar was vile. Inside him, Shamsuddin burned with anger and hurt. (230)

Shamu never really forgets Maloti, his *priyo kafer*:

> Shamu became sad when he spoke about Maloti. It was one woman, one woman alone, who took him back again and again to some other place – perhaps his childhood and the act of going to look for *bakul* flowers, crossing the rice and jute fields. When he went home these days, he felt there was an absence next to him: the Hindu houses were all empty, desolate. (385)

The invocation of the oppressive, lustful Muslim man, widespread in Hindu communal imagination, is negated by Shamu's deep sense of guilt and pain. Bandopadhyay does not allow his text to subscribe to this negative Muslim image available in popular Hindu communal discourse. Also, in refusing to generalize Maloti's abduction and consequent fate, he negates the overarching Hindu patriarchal values by upholding the rhetoric of abduction as 'initiated' by widows who are sexually vulnerable.[104]

On a realistic level, therefore, Bandopadhyay's text does not elide over the fate of Maloti. She returns to her family but is not accepted into the community. She is made to live in a separate hut and when her pregnancy becomes apparent, she is forced to seek the help of Ranjit, a revolutionary terrorist who brings her back to Joton's shelter. Partition creates another upheaval and Maloti ends up a smuggler, carrying rice across the border, a casualty of the country's division. The postcolonial nation's incentive that seeks to refashion abducted and recovered women to 'become useful and purposeful citizens'[105] is undermined by Maloti's fate. In the primordial landscape of natural cycles, abduction is then an act of unnatural hostility, a plucking out of a life from its innate and human environ.

Abduction then becomes a trope used by both Ateen Bandopadhyay and Prafulla Roy to denote a sundering and an ending: of a way of life lived in a land that can only be reconstructed now at the level of fiction and imagination. Perhaps the birth of Bangladesh will recreate that lost home?

Stylistically and thematically, Bandopadhyay's novel has a number of similarities with Prafulla Roy's *Keyapatar Nouka* (The Boat Made of Keya Leaves, 1968).[106] Like Bandopadhyay, Roy (b.1934) has written prolifically on the exigencies of partition: the dislocation and uprooting of thousands of people from a land they had loved and his short stories depict the effects of division on both Hindu and Muslim lives. Both Bandopadhyay and Roy's novels are postcolonial *buildungsroman* of a particular kind: the larger social and political events are seen through the eyes of a child whose growth parallels that of the new nation. The eponymous figure of the child hero personifies a diasporic self who is exiled from the land of his birth and has to take up residence in the metropolitan city. Ashis Nandy has shown how this journey to the city is never simple and contains within it a dream of return with a 'tacit realization that (the dream) had to remain unfulfilled.'[107] Shona in *Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey* and Binu in *Keyapatar Nouka* spend their childhoods in a land that endowed them with intense aural, tactile and sensory impressions that they recollect later like a moving tableau. This landscape is what they are immersed in, totally. Within it, they are clad in the civilizational fabric, the tissue of a culture that is seen through their relationships to both Hindus and Muslims. When they leave this land, their journey to the city encapsulates both an endorsement of the land left behind and a participation in the metropolitan city's postcolonial promise of freedom and advance. These contradictory affective responses are held in a balance in the figure of the exiled refugee persona in both the novels. According to Said, the important parameters of the modern novel are its ability to historicize the past through an appropriation of history.[108] Both these impulses can be seen in the two novels where the shared past of Bengali Hindus and Muslims are put into context in terms of religion and nationalism.

In Roy's novel, Binu's family decides to make their home in Rajdia, a small village in Dhaka district because the plenitude and magnificence of the green land is a contrast to the city they happily leave behind. This contrast between the city and the idealized country, 'gram Bangla,' is a familiar trope in modern Bengali writings. The playing out of this trope is to contrast the ugliness and violence of the city to the eternally romantic loveliness of Bengal's villages.[109] In undivided Bengal, before the partition, the city of Calcutta had offered education and jobs for the middle classes from East Bengal. Well-known city colleges like the Hindu College, Ripon College, and the Scottish Church College were filled with middle

class Hindu students from the East while the merchant and trading houses, the government departments had many workers who hailed from East Bengal. Living in cramped mess *bari*, or rented rooms, they dreamt of making it big in the city. Even though they lived and worked in Calcutta, it was never 'home'; in their minds there always existed a division of culture, of landscapes, of food and flora and fauna. Calcutta, claustrophobic in its interiors, the mess room, the restaurants, the cinema halls were places of isolation.[110] Placed against this, they dreamt of the community left behind, their 'desher bari', the primordial place where they belonged. This contrast in landscape and actuality is seen brilliantly in a story, also by Prafulla Roy, titled 'Swapner Train' (The Train of Dreams):

> Twelve or fourteen years ago, Ashok used to have a dream very often, early at dawn. It was a strange dream – in it he was sitting on a train. On both sides of the tracks were immense rice and wheat fields interspersed with shrubs of *bet, shonal* and jungles of *pithkhira, hijal, bounya*. As far as the eye went, the land was bathed in golden light. And drenched in that golden light, hundreds of birds flew about in the sky. So many kinds of birds – *shalikh, sidhiguru, bulbul, kanibok, haldibona, patibok* and wild parrots. They looked as if someone has strewn thousands of colored paper in the sky. Overhead, the clouds floated like cotton wool and from within their folds peeped the bright blue sky.
>
> … Ashok used to wake up suddenly. In his sleepy state, he often forgot where he was. A little later when the dream train … faded from his consciousness, he would see he was sitting on a three-legged bed, overspread with ragged, oily bedding, in a rundown room at the end of a suffocating lane in North Kolkata. The room had no plastered wall, no whitewash and cobwebs hung from the corners. On one side was the bed, on the other a clotheshorse, next to which were piled trunks, broken suitcases, tin boxes. Under the bed was another pile of pots and pans, cane boxes and broken water jugs.

The city room in its confined interiority and the wide, open space of the dream landscape (set obviously in East Bengal as the vegetation suggests) is a contrast between what is real and what is distant. The dream landscape is characterized by a kind of abundance and saturation; an archiving of memory before they are completely forgotten and the evocative symbolism is all too palpable. It is also a landscape of non-utility, where the beauty of the land exists without being constricted by utilitarian or worldly values: it exists for its own sake. It is symbolic

that the protagonist sees the landscape from a train, a symbol of progress and trade, very different from what the landscape stands for. In the two novels, this meant a re-appropriation of a land divided by partition, even if only in imagination.

The village of Rajdia wakes up during the autumn months, when the festival of goddess Durga begins: 'From the day of *Mahalaya,* Rajdia changed colours. Like the new waters of the monsoon, the children who lived far away all came home.' Roy gives Rajdia a nostalgic glow: his lower caste characters like Jugal and Pakhi, the Christian preacher Larmore who is more East Bengali than Irish, Binu's family, the Muslim neighbours like Majid Mian, the landless labourers, Taher and Bachir are enmeshed in a web of life that is intensely connected to the land. Binu's grandfather Hemnath is an exception who refuses to follow taboos of touch between Hindus and Muslims; the children love him and accompany him when he visits his Muslim friends. In the novel, the relationship between Muslims and Hindus is complex and long but it is not of fear or prejudice. This relationship is idealized to a large extent through the figure of Binu.

Unlike Shona, Binu is symbolic of the larger society that comprises Bengali speaking people: his very body comprises the two Bengals: his father Abonimohun belongs to West Bengal, his mother Suroma is an East Bengali. 'His bloodstream comprised of two channels: one of Padma and the other Ganga.' (414) Keeping with his symbolic function, Binu's recapitulation of the East Bengal that he leaves after the partition comprises all shades of people, of all religions:

> At that moment he remembered so many things. Larmore, Majid Mian, Rojboli Shikdar, Patitopabon, Motahar Hosain Saheb, the man named Taleb who collected the grain from rat holes after harvest, the landless peasants of the sandbanks, even the golden monitor lizard that crossed the earthen path gliding on his chest – everything came back to him. And he remembered the bright blue autumn sky, the white clouds that wandered aimlessly, the misty days of *Kartik*. The intimate loveliness of *jolsechi saak*, the bushes of *bet, mutra*, lotus leaves, *kau* and *hijal* forests, the cry of gulls, egrets, cormorant, bulbul, fishes like *bacha*, *tyangra,bajali, bojuri* – he remembered all of that. They have drawn him by hand to usher him to maturity from adolescence. (414)

The idealized landscape is remembered in terms of what Ashis Nandy calls the 'psycho-geography' to mark the abandoned village as a radical site of social intervention: a new configuration of Hindu-Muslim relations that is abruptly brought to an end by the partition. But this land of diversity is now shattered:

Binu's journey to Calcutta marks the collective Hindu experience of uprooting and exodus symbolized in the figure of the abducted and violated Jhinuk, who is 'East Bengal's humiliated and shamed soul'.

The character of Jhinuk is central to the text especially in the last two sections of the novel and also symbolically signifies the breakdown of Hindu-Muslim relationship in Bengal encapsulated in the partition.[111] Abduction becomes a common trope in both these literary texts that carries the resonance of love and fear: the abducted woman is both a lover and a violated self. The trope is often used in a dual way: either as an account of violent control, a sign of humiliation or breakdown of relation between communities; or as a space where potential lovers can meet. The two novels that I have so far discussed represent abduction in the former light. Jhinuk is raped and abducted in a riot, but she is seen as a passive victim who is a burden on Binu, her protector and escort to their journey to Calcutta. Her hopelessness and despair make her weak, so that the treacherous journey back to the city is made more dangerous because of her passivity. In Calcutta too she is an untouchable because she has been 'polluted' by coming in contact with Muslims. She gets no shelter in Binu's sister's house and even when Binu comes to his father Abanimohun to ask for help, he turns her away. What can Binu do with Jhinuk? He can marry her or he can put her in a home for abducted women. However, the problem is soon solved. Shaking off her earlier apathy, Jhinuk decides to disappear in the crowded metropolis, leaving the solution to her fate unanswered.

If abduction defines the foundational notion of community antagonism and a breakdown of nature's rhythms, then the abducted women present a new social question. The two novels then seem to be saying two different things. Bandopadhyay's text gives the abduction a metaphysical scope: if Maloti is violated by a Muslim, she is also nurtured back to health by another Muslim. On the other hand, Jhinuk is a symbol of *Muslim* aggression, so she has no place in the new structure of national/urban modern life that awaits Binu in Calcutta. In the new nation, the abducted and violated woman is marginalized and silenced. The difference between the two women can also be seen in the aftermath of the abduction, when the two perform different roles after they return to the society from where they have been forcibly taken away. Feminist historiographers have noted the stigma attached to abducted women who come back or are recovered, as well as the 'silence' that is imposed on them by their families and communities. Maloti is an exception to this idea, Jhinuk is not. After Maloti returns home, she is someone 'who loved the darkness now; but she did not want to live any more like an animal in the zoo' (240). She talks to Ranjit, who gives her sympathy and understanding that she does not get

from her own family. She decides to tell him of her experiences and the two forge an unusual bond that enables her to seek love again. Maloti's desire to speak is just not her desire to be absolved of her 'sins', or to gain Ranjit's sympathy. It is a violent foreclosure of the ambivalence of her position as an abducted woman: 'If only you had given me the knife' she tells Ranjit and when she is molested by the border official, she catches him around his throat to draw blood. In contrast, Jhinuk is shrouded in silence. She never speaks of her experiences of trauma and violence, and the few times she does speak, it is as a passive victim. The masculine and protective role that Binu plays is a re-constitution of the inequitable power relations that encourages her patriarchal patronage and that sees her as essentially a 'victim.' The abducted Jhinuk's reconstructed identity is not therefore as a girl who loves Binu but as a woman who lacks the ability or agency to act in her own self-interest. The ending of the novel however belies this lack. The text brings out a gap between desire and action in the construction of gender formation in the postcolonial state. When Jhinuk chooses to disappear in the crowds, freeing Binu from her responsibility, the novelist seems to be pointing to the possibility that she is able to renegotiate the terms of patriarchal patronage that had so far stifled her speech. But this renegotiation is done in silence: we do not see her again. This rupture in the text, a gap that is created, gives a more problematic interpretation to the theme of abduction as far as the woman's agency goes. If that agency is at all possible, and it is possible, as the text seems to suggest, then the new nation state still does not have the space where it can be formulated or articulated.

Pratibha Basu's (1915–2005) novel *Shamudro Hridoy* (The Heart is an Ocean, 1970) [112] uses the trope of abduction in a different way, not as sexual humiliation and degradation, but as a space where potential lovers from different communities meet and choose each other. Bankimchandra's 1865 novel *Durgeshnandini* is a famous example of intercommunity love. However, in Pratibha Basu's novel, this notion has a more social orientation as the love story now begins to address the problem of Hindu-Muslim antagonism, a major impetus of communal politics in the years leading up to the partition. The novel tells the story of Sultan Ahmed, the Nawab of Dhaka, who falls in love with Sulekha, the granddaughter of his father's lawyer. The two grow up as bitter communal foes, obsessed with each other's culpability in fanning the communal conflagration in the city. The Nawab's hatred of the Hindus comes from a recollection of his childhood experience in Sulekha's house when he was stopped from entering a room because he was a Muslim. For Sulekha, her commitment to revolutionary terrorism makes her determined to kill the Nawab because she believes him to be an ally of the British. Sulekha attempts to assassinate him but fails; she is abducted by the Nawab who reveals

to her gradually his double personality: he hates Hindus yet cannot demonize them, a duality that is reflected in his love for Sulekha and his desire to destroy and humiliate her. However, when serious Hindu-Muslim riots break out as the country is partitioned, the Nawab is forced to realize the fallout of this duality. He decides to release Sulekha and brings her back to Calcutta, risking his life. On an avowal of trust, he places his life in her hands in riot torn Calcutta. By now Sulekha is in love with him and she decides to go back to Dhaka with him. But this wish remains unfulfilled as Hindu goons attack her house and drag the Nawab to his death.

As anti-abduction campaigns played out in the years before the partition to harden the elements of boundary making between the two communities, this novel's treatment of the trope of abduction is different. Abduction is reconstituted as an enabling literary convention that permits Basu to represent an intercommunity love story. Given the gulf that separated Sulekha from the Nawab, the notion of abduction clearly does away with implausibility of a love story between a Hindu and a Muslim. The Nawab is aware of that:

> Would he have been able to bring this dark skinned granddaughter of Bhuban Talukdar to his home? Why not? Because he was born a Muslim, that's why. However much he had the ability to be her equal, however much heartfelt love he may have possessed for her, however much wealth, power, health, prestige and beauty he may have had, he would never have got her. It was race and race alone that separated them….He was a Muslim, a Muslim. That was an obstacle, a terrible obstacle. (145)

The pressure of this obstacle never disappears so that the Nawab has to take recourse to abduction to allow a full elaboration of his attraction for Sulekha. It is when Sulekha is abducted that she gets to see him at close quarters, to get to know him and to finally love him. This is because communal antagonism is shown as an inherent part of the lovers' milieu that will not allow their love to flower naturally. This is shown in the schizoid conflict in the personality of the Nawab who confesses to Sulekha:

> There have been two beings within me, side by side, who have nothing in common within them. I have tried earlier to abduct you but I was unable to do so….I had promised myself that if ever I laid my hands on you I would destroy all Hindu traits in you. I would humiliate, torture, and wound you and throw you away (146).

Given this internal conflict, Sulekha's decision to go back to Dhaka with the Nawab introduces a new element of the woman's agency. This is certainly a different agency that is constituted through speech and action: Sulekha closely approximates the figure of a woman promoted by anti-abduction campaigns: a woman who is empowered through violence. She is an expert in *lathi* and sword combat and fights off a Muslim mob that attacks her home. But Sulekha is much more than a prototype of a woman who is at the centre of the anti-abduction campaigns in Bengal. Her decision to return to Dhaka can be seen to question and to subvert the social and political boundaries of the new nation state and the hard logic of separation based on religion. She wants to return to Dhaka not only because it is her '*desh*' but because people like the Nawab can be found there. Her decision originates in love and it resonates 'beyond the doom that overcomes the lovers.'[113]

All these texts revolve around questions of subjectivity, memory and history set within the lush verdant fecundity of a landscape that relooks at economic and labour relations between communities but also posits the tearing apart of these relations through abduction and rape. The nostalgic portrayal of the primordial village (where abduction and rape are situated) is opposite to the moment of postcolonial modernity symbolized in the cities that the male characters later come to inhabit. This village of the imagination is however not false: when Bandopadhyay or Roy choose to depict East Bengal through a 'creative nostalgia' (to use Ashis Nandy's phrase) their works are ultimately a repudiation and rejection of sectarian and communal processes of identity formation that began with the pre-partition riots like the one at Noakhali. At the level of literary form, these novels place at the centre the figure of the abducted woman, a figure that is 'sexually and morally displaced.'[114] They show how a utilization of such a gendered semiotics can destabilize the given paradigms of national-allegorical ideology of citizenship and belonging.

Endnotes

1 Quoted in Ashoka Gupta, *A Fighting Spirit: Selected Writings*, 72.

2 Pradip Bose, 'Partition – Memory Begins Where History Ends' in Ranabir Samaddar, (ed.), *Reflections on Partition in the East*, 85.

3 Tanika Sarkar, 'Politics and women in Bengal – the conditions and meaning of participation' in J. Krishnamurty, (ed.), *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State*, 241.

4 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.1,52. Also, Geoffrey Roberts, (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader,* Introduction.

[5] Ranabir Samaddar, *A Biography of the Indian Nation 1947-1997*, discusses the autobiographical writings of Sarala Choudhurani, Manikuntala Sen and Hena Das as examples of women writing themselves into the nation.

[6] Susie Tharu and K Lalitha eds. *Women Writing in India*, vol. 1, xix.

[7] Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*, Delhi, 2006, 11.

[8] The fallout from Noakhali was immediate as well as long term. In Bihar, 'Noakhali Day' was observed on 26 October and riots broke out in Patna, Chapra and Jehanabad districts. See, Papiya Ghosh, *Community and Nation,* Delhi, 2008, Chapter 7. Also, Sanjay Verma, *Communalism and Electoral Politics in Bihar, 1937-47*, unpublished M.Phil dissertation, Delhi University, 1991, that show the fallout of Noakhali on Bihar politics.

[9] Udaya Kumar, 'Subjects of New Lives: Reform, Self-Making and the Discourse of Autobiography,' in *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, Vol XIV, Part 4, Bharati Ray, (ed.), New Delhi: Pearson, 2009, 323.

[10] The gap in time between the disturbances and the newspaper reports were because of the inaccessibility of the region. There was also a kind of silencing as the district administration was caught unawares about the extent of rioting.

[11] Phillips Talbot, an American reporter, describes the inaccessibility of the place thus: 'To reach his (Gandhi's) party, I traveled by air, rail, steamer, and bicycle, and on foot….Hardly a wheel turns in this teeming jute and rice growing delta. I saw no motorable roads….The civilization is amphibious, as fields are always flooded between April and October.' See Talbot, 'With Gandhi in Noakhali' in *An American Witness to India's Partition,* 201–202.

[12] MARS had branches in Jessore (headed by Charubala Roy), Khulna (Bhanu Debi), Barisal (Bina Sen), Faridpur (Uma Ghosh), Dhaka (Hiranyaprobha Bannerjee), Mymensingh (Jyotsna Niyogi), Kumilla (Bina Bannerjee), Pabna (Maya Sanyal), Bagura (Renuka Ganguly), Rangpur (Reba Roy)and Dinajpur (Asha Chakraborty). See Kamal Chaudhury, (ed.), *Banglay Gono Andoloner Chhoy Dashak 1930-1950*, 338–39.

[13] The Noakhali riot is discussed within the dynamics of the development of Pakistan consciousness and its interplay with a radical agrarian consciousness (the 'no rent' demand in the districts of Tippera and Noakhali) in Rakesh Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal: From Famine to Noakhali, 1943-47*, 295–332 but he does not discuss how the former succeeded in co–opting and silencing the latter. Another view sees the riots as 'class-based'. See Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850*, 498.

[14] Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, 'Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: The Indian State and the Abduction of Women During Partition,' in Mushirul Hasan, (ed.), *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India*, 209.

[15] Ashoka Gupta, 'Reminiscences of a former President', in *A Fighting Spirit*, 131.

[16] Kamala Visweswaran, 'Small Speeches: Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Its Historiography', *Subaltern Studies IX*, Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakraborty, (eds.), 124.

[17] Introduction to *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney.*

[18] See Akeel Bilgrami, 'Two Concepts of Secularism,' in Sudipta Kaviraj, (ed.), *Politics in India,* 360.

[19] Report, Kanpur Riots Enquiry Committee, *The Communal Problem*, 1933, 148.

[20] *The Census of India*, 1941, IV (Bengal), Shimla, 1942, 2. The Census stated that in Noakhali

the total population was 2,217,402 of which Muslims numbered 1,803,937, Scheduled Castes 81,817, Others 273,130 and Caste not returned 57,314. In Tippera, out of a total population of 3, 860,139, Muslims numbered 2,975,901, Scheduled Castes were 227,643, Others 480,539 and Caste not returned was 171,778, 9 (44–45).

21 J.E. Webster, *Noakhali District Gazetteer*, 35–39. See also *Tippera District Gazetteer*, 1910 by the same author.

22 Webster, *Noakhali District Gazetteer*,1–2.

23 Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, 223–24. Renu Chakravartty also stressed the economic reasons when in 1946 rice was selling for ₹ 30 a maund in Noakhali. See Renu Chakravartty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement,* 103.

24 For an assessment of the economic situation during the inter-war years see M. Mufakharul Islam, 'Bengal Agriculture during the Inter-War Depression' in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato, (eds.), *The Unfinished Agenda: Nation Building In South Asia*, 509–34.

25 Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal: 1875-1927,* 369.

26 See Patricia A. Gossman, *Riots and Victims: Violence and the Construction of Communal Identity Among Bengali Muslims: 1905-1947,* 136–55.

27 P.K. Datta, 'Abductions and the constellation of a Hindu communal bloc in Bengal of the 1920's,' *Studies in History*, 14:1, 1998, 37–39.

28 P.K. Datta*, Questionable Boundaries: Abduction, Love and Hindu Muslim Relations in Modern Bengal*, unpublished paper, 2–6. Datta also gives a detailed survey of the antagonism between the two communities, Hindus and Muslims, as reflected in literature beginning with Rangalal Bandopadhyay's *Padmini Upakhyan* (1858) in another article, 'Hindu-Muslim Love and Its Prohibition: The Social Importance of Literature in Early Modern Bengal,' *Studies in History*, 18(2): 323–33.

29 See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Mobilizing for a Hindu Homeland: Dalits, Hindu Nationalism and Partition in Bengal (1947)' in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato, (eds.), *The Unfinished Agenda*, 161.

30 Ashoka Gupta, *Partition Tapes*, Number 74.

31 Partha Chatterjee, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism, 1926-35', *Subaltern Studies*, vol.1, 9–38 states the various patterns of the linkages between peasant communal politics and organized political parties or factions especially within a process of differentiation among the peasantry i.e., a process of breakdown of peasant communities in times of scarcity.

32 Letter from Sudhir Ghosh, Assistant Secretary, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (while forwarding a report by Kalipada Mukherji, Secretary, BPCC) to the District Magistrate, 31 October 1946, *AICC Papers*, File 53/1946, NMML, 53. See also *Hindustan Times,* 18 October 1946.

33 File on Bengal Riots, L/I/1/425, India Office Library and Records.

34 *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* Vol. LXXXVI, Publications Division, 469: 'In a prayer meeting at Raipura, Gandhi referred briefly to the speech reported to have been made by the ex-Premier Maulvi Fazlul Haq. He was reported to have said that as a non-Muslim Gandhi should not preach the teachings of Islam, that instead of Hindu-Muslim unity he was creating bitterness between the two communities…' See also Phillips Talbot, *An*

American Witness To India's Partition, New Delhi, 2007, 204: 'To test the applicability of his faith, therefore, he went to the heart of the trouble. He chose East Bengal, and when people asked why he had not gone to Bihar province where the damage was greater and the culprits were Hindus, he replied that the people of Bihar had repented. Besides, he could control the government and people of Bihar from Noakhali, but had no special powers over the people of Noakhali.' Gandhi himself asserted why Noakhali was so important to him: 'If Hindus and Muslims cannot live side by side in brotherly love in Noakhali, they will not be able to do so over the whole of India, and Pakistan will be the inevitable result. India will be divided, and if India is divided she will be lost forever. Therefore, I say that if India is to remain undivided, Hindus and Muslims must live together in brotherly love, not in hostile camps organized either for defensive action or retaliation. I am, therefore, opposed to the policy of segregation in pockets. There is only one way of solving the problem and that is by non-violence. I know today mine is a cry in the wilderness. But I repeat that there is no salvation for India except through the way of truth, non-violence, courage and love. To demonstrate the efficacy of that way I have come here. If Noakhali is lost, India is lost.' *Talk with Friends*, Srirampur, 31 December 1946, (*Collected Works*, 294). As late as November 1946, Gandhi was receiving threatening letters asking him to leave. See *Hindustan Standard*, 21 November 1946.

35 Quoted in Peter Ruhe*, Gandhi*, 240.

36 M.K. Gandhi*, Collected Works*, LXXXVI, 21 October 1946-20 February 1947, 263.

37 Gandhi, *Collected Works,* 121.

38 Buddhadev Bose, *Noakhali* (1946) in Debesh Roy, (ed.), *Raktomonir Harey: Deshbhag–Swadhinatar Golpo Shonkalon*, 66–67.

39 Nirmal Kumar Bose, *My Days With Gandhi*, 56.

40 Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885-1947*, 437–38. See also David Arnold, *Gandhi: Profiles in Pow*er, London: Pearson, 2001, 222–23. The other view seems to be that Gandhi's sojourn in Noakhali was in a way escapism in which he had left the important political decisions to others in New Delhi: 'While he was moving in the villages of Noakhali and then of Bihar, the fate of India was being decided by the leaders in New Delhi.' See Bimal Prasad, 'Gandhi and India's Partition,' in Amit Kumar Gupta, ed., *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47*, 112–13.

41 Phillips Talbot, *An American Witness*, 207. See also Nirmal Bose, *My Days*, 100: ' Gandhiji dealt with the problem as a whole and explained that we should proceed in such a manner that the government might be put in the wrong and the struggle lifted to the necessary political plane…..The whole struggle had to be lifted to the political plane: mere humanitarian relief was not enough, for it would fail to touch the root of the problem.'

42 Interview taken by the author in Calcutta, 21 June 2008. This is, in all probability, the last interview of her life. Ashoka Gupta passed away in August.

43 I am using this word 'examplar' after Akeel Bilgrami who sees in the figure of the 'examplar' an effort of Gandhi's integration of an epistemological and methodological commitment to the concept of non–violence and truth. Akeel Bilgrami, 'Gandhi's Integrity,*' Raritan*, 2001, 21(2): 48–67. Towards the end of his life, Gandhi was urgently trying to test his vision of a 'moral man' in a political and cultural circumstance that was most inimical to his philosophy: communal violence and religious intolerance. I am grateful to Rimli Bhattacharya for this reference. See also, Rajeswari Sundar Rajan, 'Postcolonial reactions: Gandhi, Nehru and the ethical imperatives of the national-popular' in Elleke Boehmer and R. Chaudhuri, (eds.), *The*

Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader, 245 who sees his authenticity as a non-contradiction between practice and preaching.

44 Ashoka Gupta, *A Fighting Spirit*, 64–5.

45 Ashoka Gupta*, Noakhalir Durjoger Diney*, Calcutta, 1999, 8. Translations mine.

46 Renuka Ray, a member of Dr. B.C. Ray's cabinet and one time Rehabilitation Minister was also a part of the AIWC team who went to Noakhali with Gandhi: 'On his arrival in Noakhali, Gandhiji visited some some of the villages and made his headquarters at Chaumahoni…..We stayed for a few days at Chaumahoni and then left for Haimchar. The char lands are a very special feature of East Bengal; they are a gift of the river and emerge after erosion has worn down the land upstream or downstream…..Haimchar was an old established char and had once been a big village that had turned into a small township. As I had come earlier…and remembered what a flourishing village it was, I was unprepared for the scene of destruction that lay before us. It was as if an earthquake or an explosion had taken place. All thatched houses were wrecked and the township was in ruins.' See Renuka Ray, *My Reminiscences: Social Development During Gandhian Era and After*, 118–19. See also *AIWC Papers*, Microfilm Reel 25 (398), 1946, NMML, for accounts of funds collected for relief work in Noakhali by Congress workers like her.

47 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 138–39.

48 Gandhi, *Collected Works,*138–39.

49 Shiv Viswanathan, 'In Praise of Walking', *The Hindu*, 23 April 2014.

50 Deshbandhu Tyagi, 'Gandhian Alternatives of Communal Disharmony', in *Facets of Mahatma Gandhi: Ethics, Religion and Culture*, eds Subrata Mukherjee and Sushila Ramaswamy, 306.

51 Nirmal K. Bose, *My Days*, 68–69.

52 Nirmal K. Bose, *My Days,* 59.

53 Mushirul Hasan, 'The Partition Debate I', *The Hindu*, 2 January 2002.

54 Sumit Sarkar uses this term while describing the Mahatma's presence in Noakhali in his introduction to the section on Communalism in Sumit Sarkar, (ed.), *Towards Freedom*, 667.

55 See Sumit Sarkar, *Towards Freedom,* 712.

56 Sumit Sarkar, *Towards Freedom,* 719–20.

57 Abani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist Activist*, 64. Lahiri mentions 'Hasnabad Day' on 12 February to commemorate the unity of Muslim and Hindu activists in Noakhali/Comilla border areas when Muslim volunteers arranged shelter for Hindu refugees for weeks on end and states that the 'influence of our Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party of India and the movements led by them had prevented the riots from spreading into the countryside at the time of Partition.' Lahiri's statement clearly points to an important reason why the partition in Bengal was accompanied by less bloodshed than in Punjab. The strong presence of Communist workers at the grassroots level surely influenced sectarian politics. See also A. Ruud, 'Marxist Conquest Of Rural Bengal,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 1994, 28(2): 357–80.

58 Nirmal K. Bose, *My Days*, 125. See Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 312. Also Rakesh Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal*, 340.

[59] Madhu Kishwar, 'Gandhi on Women' in *Debating Gandhi: A Reader*, ed. A. Raghuramaraju, 317.

[60] Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney*, 22.

[61] A MARS leaflet (2 April 1953) stated that 'in undivided Bengal's 28 districts, 40 thousand women members' had 'helped in relief work in 1946 Noakhali riots.' West Bengal Police Files, S Series, File 565/52. I am grateful to Gargi Chakravartty for this reference.

[62] Renu Chakravartty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*, 105.

[63] Renu Chakravartty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement,*106. Elsewhere in the book she states, 'The All India Women's Conference through Ashoka Gupta who was the wife of the commissioner of Chittagong and a social worker, got help and recognition for doing relief work' (p.104). In the untitled article among her private papers she states: 'AIWC did not pay much heed to us. We were putting up at Pankajini Singha Roy's house; but I was hesitant because she was not too welcoming of the Communist women. Sucheta Kripalini and others had started (relief) work and they were receiving official and unofficial aid. But we were determined. We collected some relief and started for the villages.'(7–8). The dissimilarity between the different groups working in Noakhali was not simply of perception but also of politics: 'We returned to Chandpur. There was no doubt we had given enough proof of courage and guts. In the face of the rather cold reception we received from the AIWC it was necessary to discuss how to proceed next.' (106) In another handwritten article amongst Renu Chakravartty's papers (probably written by Bela Lahiri?) the writer states: 'It was not possible to go to Noakhali without military help, but Communist women, with great courage, went to the affected villages along with the Red Cross and helped give courage to the victims.' I am grateful to Gargi Chakravartty for letting me read these unpublished articles both dated May 1973 amongst Renu Chakravartty's private papers.

[64] Manikunatala Sen, *Shediner Katha*, 177. Manikuntala Sen's autobiography, like Ashoka Gupta's, stressed on social aspects and issues of the nationalist struggle, an echo of an orientation where politics was an important part of society. See Ranabir Samaddar, *The Biography of a Nation, 1947-1997,* 245–54 for a discussion of Sen's autobiography.

[65] Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub. File 1, 302–06.

[66] Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. LXXXVI, 23.

[67] Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub File 1, 433. This letter is printed in parts in *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney*, 61–62. This complete trust in the rightness of Gandhiji's advice was evident even after more than 60 years of his death. In the interview to me she said: 'I was in Noakhali from October 1946 to May 1947. Gandhiji was in Ramgunj village. I was there with my youngest daughter Kasturi.' When I asked her if she had been afraid for her personal safety, she said that Gandhiji had told her that it was important to go and live in the villages among the affected people. 'It was not enough to save my own child, but one should try to save everybody's child.'

[68] Nirmal Bose, *My Days*, 140.

[69] Kanai Basu, ed., *Noakhalir Potobhumikaye Gandhiji*, Calcutta, 1947,130.

[70] Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub. File 1, 215. We catch a glimpse of the task at hand from a handwritten page by Ashoka Gupta in which she notes the methods that relief workers used in the camps that were under Sucheta Kripalini's stewardship. The note states that 'the workers have to visit every village, every households, both Hindus and Muslims and organize meetings frequently to increase communal harmony, enhance village

developmental work with individual and collective efforts, work in close coordination with village headmen and inspire villagers to work for their own welfare to undertake census work within all communities.'

71 Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 132.

72 Ashoka Gupta, 'The Joys of Social Service', in *A Fighting Spirit*, 31.

73 Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences pertaining to Refugee Rehabilitation Work in Noakhali 1946-47*, Sub File 1, 98. Gupta's testimony is directly contradictory to a government report that stated that only 2 women were abducted in Noakhali. This government report is quoted in a memorandum by the Indian Association, *AICC Papers*, File No. G53/1946.

74 Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub. File 1, 342–45. Also Ashoka Gupta, *A Fighting Spirit*, 68.

75 Partition Tapes, Number 74. Testimony of Ashoka Gupta.

76 Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney*, 31.

77 Nirmal K. Bose, *My Days*, 147. Bose was deeply influenced by Gandhi's physical and moral courage yet he understood that the message of the Mahatma was a cry in the wilderness: 'Gandhiji's call for courage for the sake of reordering one's life as a preliminary step in the practice of non-violence, did not seem to bear much fruit. Perhaps the time at the disposal of the sufferers was too short, perhaps the claim upon their courage, whether physical or moral, was too great.'

78 Ashis Nandy, 'The Journey to the Village as a Journey to the Self' in *A Very Popular Exile*, 90.

79 Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney,* 31.

80 In January 1947, Ashoka Gupta was in charge of the Tumchar camp while other camps were headed by: Labanyalata Chanda (Dattapara), Sucheta Kripalini (Baralia), Arun Dutta (Nandigram), Kamala Dasgupta (Bijoynagar), Bina Das (Noakhola), Ramapada Mitra (Lakshmipur), Probhat Acharjee (Majupur). See Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, 1946–47, Sub File No. 1, 310–11.

81 Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century*, 116–17.

82 Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney*, 31.

83 Ashoka Gupta, *Papers and Correspondences*, Sub File 1, 295–96, where in a letter dated 26.12.46 she writes to the Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner, Chittagong Division, reminding him that they had met in Jessore in 1940 where 'my husband was District Judge' and asking his help in providing medicines and equipment for two medical camps at Charmandal and Dalalbazar.

84 Ashoka Gupta, *Noakhalir Durjoger Diney*, 14.

85 Saibal Kumar Gupta's letter to his wife, *A Fighting Spirit*, 93.

86 Indrani Chatterjee, quoted in Ranabir Samaddar, *The Biography of a Nation*, 263.

87 Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Prose of Otherness,' in David Arnold and David Hardiman, (eds.), *Subaltern Studies, VIII*, 189: 'Perhaps the most obvious sign of the Partition of India in 1947 was the massive violence that surrounded, accompanied or as I would argue, constituted it.' The constitutive element of violence that signified Noakhali is also seen in the communal conflagrations of later years. See the account of Nilima Sen of Lamchar in Noakhali who fled to India in 1950's in an article by Monmoyee Basu, 'Unknown Victims of a Major Holocaust' in S. Settar and Indira B. Gupta, eds, *Pangs of Partition: The Human Dimension*, 158.

[88] Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today' in Ranajit Guha, ed., *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*, 8.

[89] Pratibha Basu, *Jiboner Jolchobi*, 102–05.

[90] Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*, 66.

[91] P.K. Datta, *Hindu Muslim Relations in Bengal in the 1920's*, PhD Thesis, University of Delhi, 1995, 210.

[92] Alok Bhalla, (ed.), *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home*, 10. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling' in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies,* 115–20 for an explanation of the way nostalgia is used to create and recreate the idea of 'home.'

[93] Alok Bhalla, *Partition Dialogues,*14.

[94] The idea of a syncretic culture that diffuses Alok Bhalla's *Partition Dialogues,* is contested by the very writers whom he interviews. For example, Krishna Baldev Vaid says: 'Much as I think that the society in which I grew up was very rich, and had all the complexities of a composite culture, I also think that one could appreciate its beauty only if one also closed one's eyes to its economic and social realities. It was a culture that hurt the average, the intelligent Muslim. It hurt him to know that the Hindus would not eat with him, whereas he had no objection to buying sweets from a Hindu *halwai*. The Muslim had no food taboos. It was the one-sidedness of the taboo that hurt him…..There were very few interreligious marriages and love affairs. This was because there was very little interaction between the two communities, except in certain classes….These barriers were not new. I think they existed even in the past,' Alok Bhalla, ed., *Partition Dialogues*, 177. Ateen Bandopadhyay too fails to show an effort by the Hindu characters to remove the taboos of touch. On the other hand, his depictions of Muslim characters are remarkably intricate in this novel as well as his short stories, particularly in a short story titled '*Kafer*' in D. Sengupta, (ed.), *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals*, 87–104.

[95] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The In-Human and the Ethical in Communal Violence' in *Habitations of Modernity*, 140 where he states: 'By *identity,* I mean a mode of relating to difference in which difference is either congealed or concealed. That is to say, either it is frozen, fixed, or it is erased by some claim of being identical or the same. By *proximity,* I mean the opposite mode, one of relating to difference in which (historical and contingent) difference is neither reified nor erased but negotiated.' The Hindus and Muslims in Bengal lived in proximity rather than intimacy with each other, in a situation of passive mutual tolerance, maintaining a safe socio-cultural distance. But the novels show much more than proximity; they set out to describe *affect*: how an individual *responds* to this proximity through his or her class, gender and caste.

[96] Gandhi's words are relevant in this context: 'The Hindus and Muslims should remember that they are nourished by the same corn and live under the same sky, quench their thirst by the same water, in a calamities that overtake the country are afflicted in the same way, irrespective of their religious beliefs.' *Collected Works*, vol. LXXXVI, 348.

[97] Ateen Bandopadhyay*, Neelkontho Pakhir Khojey* (1967–71) rpt., 2008. The other parts of this three section novels are *Oloukik Jolojaan* and *Ishwarer Bagan*. All translations from the novel are mine.

[98] See Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'The Lie of Freedom: Justice in a Landscape of Trees' unpublished paper, no date. Also his essay 'Mourning the Mother, After Midnight' delivered at the

'Revisiting Partition Programme', International Seminar Consultation, organized by the Centre for Refugee Studies (Jadavpur University) in collaboration with International Institute for Mediation and Historic Conciliation (Boston), Delhi, 24–26 August 2005.

99 Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'The Lie of Freedom', no pagination.

100 Buddhadev Bose, *Noakhali,* 64–65. Translation mine.

101 The idea of the writer or the poet as the imagined cartographer mapping a locale with the contours of his art is particularly resonant in Romantic poetry. See Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth*, 62.

102 This idea of the schizoid self is a model used by Ashis Nandy to explain the communal relationship in South Asia, which he describes as a 'controlled split.' The author refers specially to his lecture 'The Fear of the Self' delivered at Hans Raj College, Delhi on 9 February 2010. Various instances of this tension can be seen in Bangla literary texts. See also the interview with Intizar Husain in Alok Bhalla, ed., *Partition Dialogues*, 103: 'I can…say with some degree of confidence that I am a Shia Muslim who thinks that there is a Hindu sitting inside me because I was born in this land'.

103 P.K. Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 201.

104 P.K. Datta, *Carving Blocks*, 199.

105 Renuka Ray, *Speech in the West Bengal Assembly regarding Abduction of Women and their Rehabilitation*, 12 March 1948, quoted in Jashodhara Bagchi *et al.*, eds, *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India,* vol. 2, 251–52.

106 Prafulla Roy, *Keyapatar Nouka*, rpt., Calcutta, 2003. All translations from the novel are mine.

107 Ashis Nandy, 'The Journey to the Village as a Journey to the Centre of the Self: Mrinal Sen's Search for a Radical Cinema', in *A Very Popular Exile*, 73.

108 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 93.

109 Tarashankar and Bibhutibhushan are the two writers who have immortalized Bengal's villages as settings in their works like *Gonodebota* and *Pather Panchali*, yet their depictions are never romantic idealizations. The conflicts of caste and class make their villages a living critique of economic and social relations in early decades of twentieth century Bengal.

110 Boddhisattva Kar and Subhalakshmi Roy, *Messing with the Bhadraloks: Towards a Social History of the 'Mess Houses' in Calcutta*, where they show that in the mess houses, caste and locality surfaced as two distinct paradigms for the segregation of the inmates. See also Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's short story 'Sitanather Bari Phera' in *Golpo Shomogro*, vol. 2, 291–97.

111 Rajinder Singh Bedi's famous Urdu story 'Lajwanti' also shares some of these concerns. For a discussion on Bedi's short story see Jill Didur, *Unsettling Partition*, 58–66.

112 Pratibha Basu, *Shamudro Hridoy*, Calcutta, 1970. All translations from the text are mine.

113 P.K. Datta, *Questionable Boundaries*, 59.

114 Aamir R. Mufti, 'A Greater Story-writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India' in *Subaltern Studies, XI,* 13.

3

Colony Fiction: Displacement and Belonging in Post-Partition Bangla Fiction

Tahader Katha: Refugee city, city's refugees

In Calcutta, the arrival of the East Bengali Hindu refugee, culturally and psychologically, was a one-way journey, for they came to the city never to go back. Even before the vivisection of the country, the last years of colonial rule were marked by a worsening communal situation in Bengal that meant both Hindus and Muslims often left their homes in search of safer places to live. In the early months of 1947, when the partition was fast becoming a reality, people's places of sojourn and status changed dramatically as they left to congregate in areas that harboured co-religionists or decided to cross the borders. The ways in which they moved did not have a set pattern but depended on many factors like immoveable/moveable assets and particular skills or employability. However, one can safely assume that Hindu and Muslim movements across the borders had a similar trajectory, in that the exodus was over 'a period of many years, sometimes in trickles and sometimes in big waves.' [1] The Muslim inhabitants in and around Calcutta fearing intimidation after the Calcutta Riots either left for East Pakistan or began to crowd at the border and the census of 1951 discovered 130,000 fewer Muslims in the city than expected.[2] The void left by this large number especially in Calcutta and Nadia, that saw an exodus of almost one-third of its Muslim population, was filled by the wave of Hindu refugees entering West Bengal especially after 1950. India and Pakistan had signed the Evacuee Properties Act that allowed a migrant Muslim family to reoccupy their home if they came back by 31 March 1951 but in many instances these deserted properties were grabbed by Hindus who had entered the state from East Bengal or their local allies. There was no systematic attempt to record the actual number of fleeing Muslims and even the government assessment of Hindus entering the state was sometimes way off the mark. According to a government estimate, in 1961, the Hindu refugee migrants to the city comprised 18 per cent of the total population of the city of 29.27 lakh and the conservative estimate is that 'on the whole, the net inflow of refugees to West Bengal is estimated at about 6 million up to

1973.'[3] The influx of refugees in huge numbers, crowding the city pavements and parks created unprecedented social, economic and cultural problems in the state, now one-third its original size. The geographical and cultural proximity of West Bengal to East Pakistan meant that the state became the recipient of a large Hindu minority population who perceived, at different stages of time, threats to their lives and property and chose to leave East Pakistan. The Hindu refugees did not come in one go: The 'old migrants' were white collar workers who came in without requiring any governmental aid.[4] However, in later years, between 1958 and 1964, the agriculturists and artisans with close ties to their land also decided to uproot themselves to seek safety in West Bengal. Calcutta had attracted a huge number of the landless (who had earlier crowded government relief camps) but after 1958 when the camps were slowly reduced in their number and people sent for rehabilitation outside the state, the migrants decided to take up rehabilitation on their own through *jobor dokhol* (forcible occupation) of land and establishing colonies. Some of the vacant land in and around the city was government land that was used during the World War II to put up army barracks while others were owned by big landowners or evacuee property but in either case the refugee migrants, sometimes through government help or through their own efforts, began to settle down in these areas. The mushrooming of these squatter colonies was a significant part of Calcutta's landscape in the 1950s to the 1970s and created a number of socially and historically significant interventions in the life of the metropolis.[5] The state's economy had faced a severe jolt with the partition especially the jute industry that suffered from a lack of raw materials coming from East Pakistan. The refugees coming from across the border stretched the state's resources to an unbelievable degree.[6]

This chapter looks at the process of refugee absorption in the metropolis of Calcutta, particularly in the establishment of refugee colonies in and around the city and attempts to investigate some literary representations where the refugee colony becomes a central trope to understand the ways in which the refugee crisis was received and perceived by authors living in the city. The process of refugee rehabilitation in the metropolis of Calcutta, particularly in the establishment of refugee colonies in and around the city was a fraught series of negotiations and settlements, often resulting in failure. The profound crisis within the city and its suburbs of sustaining wave upon wave of destitute and hungry men, women and children thus informs a body of work, both fiction and non-fiction, in Bangla that have remained inconspicuous and marginal in the literary history of the period. They encompass the teleology and affective dimensions of being a refugee that needs to be retold. But first, we need to understant the enigma of their arrival.

Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty in his book *Prantik Manob* (The Marginal Men, 1997) writes about those early days of the refugees' arrival at the Sealdah station:

> The refugees in Sealdah station had come away leaving behind all to live here with self-respect. They could never guess what death in life awaited them in West Bengal. They got their first poisonous taste in Sealdah station… What did this merciless city give them? The stone and brick city stared at them with deep contempt. I doubt if the thousands of commuters who came to Kolkata everyday ever glanced at these ragged dirty human faces…[7]

His book describes in detail the suffering and degradation of the thousands who made the railway platforms their homes:

> The refugees have come by train to Sealdah. As long as they are not sent elsewhere, they will continue to live here. As soon as they arrive they will stand in a queue to be inoculated against cholera and other diseases. Then, along with all family members, they will have to stand in front of the office of the relief and rehabilitation department where they will be given a certificate stating they are eligible for shelter in relief camps. When all this is over, only then will they spread whatever bedding they have on the South platform and wait for transportation to the camps. Someone has divided up a portion of the platform by a rope. Until they get a place in the relief camps, the refugees consider this roped area as their homes. Can you imagine how, within this barely manageable space, five to six thousand people are packed, spending their days with their sons, daughters and wives! The drinking water for so many people comes from three taps; women have two lavatories while the men have twelve…. Imagine young girls bathing in front of hundred commuters in open spaces, people sleeping under the sky a few feet away from overflowing lavatories, cooking their meals in roadside ovens made with three bricks and lit by the refuse collected from streets.[8]

How long does this condition last? How many refugees come into West Bengal before government rehabilitation processes kick started after the 1950s?

It is well documented that after the partition, the new government of West Bengal did its utmost to discourage migration and its lack of sympathy towards the refugees was one of the many charges brought against the Congress government of

Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy.[9] Indeed the early migrants were encouraged to return to their homes as far as possible as there was no possibility of a large scale exchange of population as in Punjab.[10]

The figures of the new migrants, that arrived after the communal riots in 1950 in Barisal and Dhaka, were in real terms too large for the camp facilities in the state. Throughout the years immediately after the partition, newspapers reports had pointed to the overcrowding, the unsanitary conditions, high death rates, corruption among camp officials and the dispiriting delays in dispersal in the relief camps. In the early days of 1950, the city itself seemed like a huge relief camp with front page pictures in newspapers of destitute families living on footpaths or in the city parks. But as the migrations continued, the government was forced to realize that those who came to West Bengal were unlikely to return. Consequently, the debates in the legislative assembly shifted from the question of extending relief to the larger problem of rehabilitation.[11] In government circles, the number of displaced persons in the state for whom the relief was to be earmarked remained a contentious issue. Renuka Ray, the Relief and Rehabilitation Minister in the B.C. Roy government stated that 'the total number of refugees in the eastern region was estimated in 1956 at the colossal figure of 4.1 millions.'[12] Ashoka Gupta, member of the AIWC and the Central Social Welfare Board, put the figure at 6.9 million by the end of 1956. [13] By the end of the next year, the government was discussing sealing the border and disbanding relief camps by July.[13] The influx, however, continued with people crossing the border with migration certificates till 1963. In January 1964, after communal riots in parts of East Pakistan, there was another wave of refugees who arrived in West Bengal (the number was estimated to be 8 lakh by the end of 1966) out of which 2.5 lakh were sent to Dandakaranya, the biggest rehabilitation project outside West Bengal.

In the years immediately after 1947, the government agencies roughly divided the refugees who were present in the city into three categories. The first group had no place to stay but was otherwise fairly well-off and whose problem was finding suitable accommodation. The second group was completely dependent on government aid for livelihood as well as for accommodation. The third section was the largest in number whose rehabilitation could not be taken up at all and who resorted to establishing squatter colonies in and around the city. In the initial years immediately after the partition, the refugee camps were also classified according to the types of refugees they hosted. The first category was Relief Camps where families liable to be rehabilitated were kept before they were sent to other places. Coopers camp and the camp at Dhubulia were in this class. Dhubulia was the largest in the state with a capacity of 60,000 while Coopers

camp was for refugees to be rehabilitated outside the state. Transit camps were also opened in and around Calcutta in the jute go-downs of Ultadanga, Kashipur, Ghusuri and Babughat. The permanent liability camps for old and infirm refugees were established at Chandmari and Rupashree Palli. Women's camps for single women with children were to be found at Titagarh, Bansberia and Bhadrakali. Vocational training was imparted to orphans and adolescents at vocational training centres for destitute boys and girls at Titagarh and Andul.[14] As is evident, these classifications were made according to need and not according to class or caste. In most relief camps, the castes intermingled in a fairly regular manner. The rural refugees, comprising agriculturists/tillers, *barujibi* (*paan* cultivators, also a caste) and horticulturists needed thorough rehabilitation especially with cultivable land. The urban refugees were either sponsored through government aid to build homesteads and start a trade while a large percentage received no aid towards rehabilitation and who managed to find shelter and jobs through their own efforts.[15] Among the urban refugees were the government-sponsored families who were initially housed in camps as well as in abandoned army barracks near the Dhakuria Lakes in the southern part of the city. Later, other abandoned World War II barracks in New Alipore and Bijoygarh areas were also taken over to house the newer arrivals. Among the urban refugees were the squatters whose numbers continued to swell in the early years of 1950s. Agriculturists, who were deserters from camps outside West Bengal joined their ranks and by 1955, squatter colonies were mushrooming in and around Calcutta at a tremendous pace with refugees forcibly occupying wastelands, abandoned orchards or evacuee lands to build colonies.[16] The government's failure to rehabilitate this gigantic number of migrants and the refugees' own desire to get a foothold in the city were primarily the two most important reasons for the development of squatter colonies in and around Calcutta. By 1967, there were 503 government-sponsored colonies and 756 non-government sponsored squatter colonies in West Bengal, emerging over different points of time. A great deal of rapid suburban growth of the core city over the past few decades of the 1960s was therefore the result of the continuous influx of refugees from East Pakistan. Municipalities like North Dum Dum, Barasat and Kamarhati saw great urban growth while the Calcutta Metropolitan District also registered around 510 refugee colonies. In terms of the physical impact on the city landscape, the refugee migration played an important role in extending the horizon of urban living beyond the limits of the city and brought the outlying suburban areas within the ambit of the metropolitan space. [17]

Immediately after the partition, the government did not contemplate any policy intervention for the colony areas. However in 1951, with a fresh and larger

influx of refugees in West Bengal, the West Bengal Act XV came into being under which the squatters were given protection from eviction and the government recognized a large number of squatter colonies through the Act that grouped them as pre-1950 and post-1950 colonies.[18] The Displaced Persons' Resettlement Policy was often criticized by opposition Left parties as well as government surveys conducted by government agencies. On 11 June 1958 *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported on a Government Statistical Bureau finding that stated nearly 50 per cent of the 21 lakh refugees in the colonies and rural areas of the state were yet to be properly rehabilitated.[19] Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay who worked as a government rehabilitation commissioner, gives detailed descriptions in his book *Udvastu* (The Uprooted) of the efforts made to establish colonies by the refugees themselves and the government's efforts to recognize and sustain them. In it, he states that the central government saw the second wave of refugees in a different light, as they distinguished it from the first wave that came to India for political reasons. The second wave arrived after the communal riots in Dhaka, Barisal and other places in 1950, so the government policy was of repatriation: as soon as the situation in East Pakistan became normal they should be encouraged to go back. The state governments and the central government provided temporary relief to them but no permanent rehabilitation.[20] From February 1950, the number of refugees entering West Bengal became a deluge. By rail or walking barefoot, a large number of people crossed into West Bengal. One arm of this multitude crossed the rail station at Darshana and entered the state where they were temporarily sheltered at the camp in Banpur. The second arm, coming from the South Western areas of East Pakistan, ended at the camp at Bongaon. On 2 March 1950, the Central Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation, Meherchand Khanna called a meeting of all the states of Tripura, Assam, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal and a new policy was set out to tackle this fresh influx.[21] Throughout 1950–51, as the rehabilitation and relief programmes of the state government buckled under a crisis of great magnitude, the refugees decided to take matters into their own hands. They undertook forcible land acquisitions, often occupying lands and orchards left behind by Muslim families, and began to establish squatter colonies. Jadavpur, Tollygunj, Dhakuria, Behala, Dum Dum, Belgachia, Belghoria, Baranagar, Kamarhati, Sodepur, Khardah, Panihati, Barrackpur, Titagarh, Shyamnagar, Icchapur, Jagaddal, Naihati, Kachrapara, Srirampur and Mahesh – the wave spread from the epicentre Calcutta to the suburbs.[22] The government was alarmed, as were the landowners whose hired goons went around breaking down the makeshift huts erected by the refugees. Those in government camps were also living under inhuman conditions. In such a situation the need was felt to unite the refugees into a cohesive political force

to demand their rights and to plan for their rehabilitation. The United Central Refugee Council under the leadership of Ambika Chakraborty, Anil Sinha and Gopal Bannerjee worked tirelessly to bring together the refugee committees and representations from all the Left parties. Later the Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council was formed with major Left parties like the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Krishak Majdoor Party, the Forward Bloc (Lila Roy faction), the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (Soumen Thakur faction) and others. Although the agendas of both these organizations were the same, internal bickering and factionalism drew them apart. United, they would have been able to wrest huge concessions from the government but the refugee movement was weakened and made directionless with fighting over trivial issues.

In official parlance the term squatter colony indicated those unplanned colonies 'situated within the limits of an existing Corporation or Municipality or close to the limits of such a body.'[23] Inside the city limits, squatter colonies sprung up besides railway tracks, in marshy lands, and in abandoned World War II army barracks. The refugees erected *dorma* walls and roofs overnight in small plots. The colonies, consisting of shacks and shanties, 'were grossly lacking in civic services,' even though they were always named after great nationalists leaders like Netaji or Gandhi or C.R. Das. In 1954, the Deputy Mayor of Calcutta P.S. Basu rued publicly that 'the refugees living at Sealdah Station and on pavements nearby and on Strand Road and its vicinity constituted a great strain on the administration and seriously threatened the city's health.'[24] The 'Basic Development Plan for the Calcutta Metropolitan District: 1966-86' recorded their dissatisfaction especially considering the crisis in housing:

> The results of the present failure to provide for adequate and sanitary housing even at minimum standards to keep pace with population expansion are visible throughout the cities of Calcutta and Haora. ….. Everywhere there is a great deal of illegal occupation and squatting on public and private lands - whether of refugee colonies built out of necessity on the vacant lands of absentee landlords, or the pathetic clusters of squatting in tattered and impoverished shelters on public pavements, on the municipal refuse dumps, and indeed on any vacant site.[25]

The Basic Development Plan's (BDP) concern found expression in its description of Calcutta as a 'metropolis in crisis.' The definition of the squatter colony to being close to a municipal body would lead one to expect a certain amount of civic amenities. Nothing was further from the truth. On a deputation consisting

of N. C. Chatterjee, Meghnad Saha and Tridib Chowdhury to the Prime Minister (on 21 May 1954) to acquaint him with the problems of refugee rehabilitation in the Eastern regions, the members alleged great differences in rehabilitation in the western and eastern parts of the country.

> In Delhi, the Western refugees are living in brick houses with macadamized roads, electricity and water supply and have schools and colleges in their areas. The refugee colonies round about Calcutta and other cities consists of miserable huts without roads, water supply or municipal amenities. It has not yet been realized by the West Bengal Government that urbanization of these colonies is of vital importance to Calcutta.[26]

Dr Meghnad Saha called these urban colonies of West Bengal 'the slums of the suburbs'.[27]

A publication by the Department of Publicity, Government of West Bengal in 1949 carried a picture of well-anticipated gloom about the refugee crisis in the state while over the years as the numbers of refugees swelled in the state the fear was rampant that these unprecedented numbers would stretch West Bengal's economy and create dents in the social fabric of its cities and towns.[28] This was especially visible in the capital city of the state where the early official and public benevolence for the hapless refugees changed to resentment and even anger against the new entrants who filled it to capacity, overcrowded its streets, occupied empty lands and introduced a 'new element of recklessness' in Calcutta's urban life.[29] The refugees extended the city's limits, crowded its slums and occupied its vacant lands. Sociologist Benoy Ghosh wrote in 1967:

> The New Suburbia has expanded in the last twenty-five or thirty years. The old boundaries of the city suburbs has expanded to accommodate wave after wave of population – abandoned land, fertile land, rice field, marshy lands, ponds, lakes, jungle and gardens all took in the rising tidal waves of population.[30]

Contemporary literature, films and theatre seemed to grasp these new changes in the city much more sensitively than city planners did, so that 'the theme of an overall moral crisis generated by a violent uprooting and the compulsions of survival appeared often in contemporary literature.'[31] In the poems of Samar Sen, Bishnu Dey, Sankho Ghosh and Buddhadev Bose, in the stories by Jyotirindra Nandy, Subodh Ghosh, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Premendra Mitra, Ashpurna Devi, in the novels by Sabitri Ray, Shaktipada Rajguru, Sunil Gangopadhyay and

Kamalkumar Majumdar one sees the relentless portrayal of a city in decline, of people struggling to survive, of colonies and their inhabitants and, then, the union and rise of refugees as a political force in the city in the 50s and 60s. The colonies created the city in a way that was impossible to imagine a few decades back but they also added to the dereliction and decay that characterized the city now: it was to assume the duality of a postcolonial existence: 'that life and imagination could hover most palpably over decay and dereliction.'[32] The struggle and failures of a whole generation of people was metamorphosed into something vital and illuminating by the Bengali literary imagination.

Calcutta's cityscape was in many ways different from the landscape of East Bengal with its paddy fields, wide waterways and bamboo groves that the Hindus had left behind. The stark difference is seen in the film *Chhinnamul* (The Uprooted, directed by Nimai Ghosh, 1950) a film that is often seen as one of the

> first Indian films to show a political consciousness of the reality of the metropolis. In it the country-city dualism is cast in a mould unknown to Indian cinema till then. As we are invited by the film to witness the city of Calcutta, we are made aware in a quite unfamiliar and urgent way that we are in the presence of an intractable present, a present that cannot be escaped from because it has a special status of reality validated in the film…Moreover, as the film invites us to witness what can be called 'present as the city' it invokes a gaze that belongs to the country that has come to invade it, to lay claim to the reality and the time in question.[33]

In the film, a group of uprooted people from Naldanga, East Bengal comes to the city and tries to live as they had in the abandoned village – with ties of clan and community intact. However that is impossible. In their efforts to establish themselves in the city, the refugee camp or the colony becomes the space that links the abandoned village to the present city. The refugee families tried to recreate not only a homestead but also a familiar community of schools and markets. Porimol Home was 28 when the country was divided. His family was in East Bengal while he lived in Calcutta from 1936 as a student in Ripon College and had then gone to Shantiniketan to study music. His family came to Bijoygarh Colony in the early years of 1950s and bought a plot to build a small house.

> In Bijoygarh Colony, the majority of refugees were government servants. Initially, Congress politicians like Purna Das, Santosh Dutta helped the refugees here and they established the Jadavpur Refugee

> Association….. The Association membership was two rupees and three *kathas* of land were distributed per family. In the beginning, the houses were tin roofed, bamboo fenced (*darma*). Bijoygarh Colony had four High schools, a college (a first in a refugee colony). The schools had a morning section for girls and afternoons were meant for boys.[34]

A refugee never forgot that he was, to quote Ashis Nandy's words, 'in the city by default and under duress. Home has to have a touch of the pastoral, even when a poisoned village has caused the homelessness.'[35] The colony and its environs were thus made to recreate and re-invoke a remembered village under different guises.

> Stories upon stories – the sense of place took a nostalgic aura, a nostalgia for the present. The landscape was a landscape of nostalgia. The shadowy *hijal* tree next to the water-hyacinth pond was the *hijal* of *desher bari*, the village home on the other side of the border. It offered a telos, a meaning beyond the play of the merely accidental. The displacement was bearable.[36]

Often the invocation of an abandoned place was accomplished through ghettoization – people from Barisal lived in a particular colony while those from Faridpur or Pabna in another. The frustrations and passions often hardened around real crises facing the refugee families – food shortage or equitable land distribution and the colony became a site of political battles, while the refugee leaders tried to 'mobilize collective passions to configure its community life in an atomizing steamrolling metropolis.'[37]

Claiming the city: Refugee women, labour and the metropolis of Kolkata in post-partition years

> *Office returning babus look out of tram windows*
> *On the crowded Maidan*
> *A meeting takes place.*
> *Women watch, braiding hair, from second floors,*
> *Refugee mothers walking*
> *On the road ….*
>
> Monindra Roy, *Ekhoni Ekhane* (Here and Now) [38]

The four lines quoted above from a contemporary poet's recapitulation of Calcutta in the 1960s lay bare the narrative of how refugee women claimed the public space

of the metropolis by visibly inserting their physical bodies in locations hitherto barred from them: the city streets became the battleground for demanding legislations in favour of refugee rights like legitimization of refugee colonies or for the Food Movement (1959). The poem juxtaposes the women marching on the streets with another group of women watching them from balconies next to the street, obviously householders who are not refugees and who occupy a domestic space of activity and leisure. The immediate calibration of the two spaces, outer and inner, the home and the street, alerts one to the various ramifications of claiming the city by the migrant population that created an unprecedented crisis of housing and employment in the metropolis and its obvious social and political fallouts. The poem underlines the location of the refugee women in the patriarchal scheme of Bengali modernity by directing a gaze to the public and private spaces they come to occupy. Keeping in mind that their access to these spaces were marked by differences in class and caste, this section looks at the city of Kolkata in the post-partition years and investigates the social, economic and political repercussions of the advent of a large number of refugee families in the city, especially women, who were forced to come out of their homes in search of work during those years of hardship and deprivation. In the early 1950s as waves of more impoverished refugees entered the state, the crisis in housing assumed horrific proportions and squatter colonies began to spring up in various localities and suburbs of Kolkata. This has already been mapped in the previous section. In the absence of sustained and long-term governmental rehabilitation, economic hardships faced by the migrants increased manifold and refugee women had perforce to take up employment to support their families. This economic mobility in an unknown city terrain necessarily brought in its wake gender mobility, a refashioning of what it meant to be a 'modern' woman who had to earn her own livelihood, often competing with men for jobs in factories, mills and offices. This mobility interrogated and complicated the earlier nationalist/colonial notions of 'modernity' in the metropolitan space. Some of these questions had been supposedly solved during the late nineteenth century, in Indian nationalism's success in 'situating the 'women's question' in an inner domain of sovereignity.'[39] If the resonance of this early modernity was set in terms of binary opposition between tradition and reform, imperialism and nationalism, then during the postcolonial years of 1950s and 60s, the economic and political activities of the refugee women in the city set newer indices to measure the complexity of their engagements with practices of labour and domesticity. In a way they changed the ideas both of 'home' and 'outside' by blurring the differences between the private and public spaces they came occupy just as they interrogated the contours of the public spheres and public spaces that

were an integral part of their experiences of being migrants in the metropolitan city.[40] The Hindu refugee women who arrived in Calcutta in the aftermath of the vivisection of the province reopened the issues of self-fashioning by constantly interrogating notions of labour and family, through their roles as breadwinners of their families, validated by their gender identities as well as their displacement and not through any cultural difference with any perceived forms of Western modernity unlike that in the nineteenth century. However, it was not easy to be out earning one's living, fighting against the control exercised by family or community. The continuous processes through which the refugees carved out identities for themselves as women and as workers rather than as displaced individuals at the mercy of government benefactions is a remarkable story of grit and perseverance just as it is a tale of emergence of newer forms of patriarchal control. In this history one can see how the women gained physical access to public spaces and yet were denied complete access to the public sphere so that their 'coming out' remained necessarily incomplete or partial.[41] The refugee women had to contend with the 'maleness and class bias of the discourse on public-ness and modernity' and their stepping out must be seen in terms of both a continuation and fracturing of the nationalist discourse of patriarchy.[42] The public sphere of governmentality, law and reform in the 1950s Calcutta thus came to reflect the various conflict ridden relationship and practices of the refugee community with the imagined community of the nation just as the private and public spaces came to articulate the carefully negotiated desires and aspirations of a new underclass of refugee men and women who made claims to the city as their own.

In the 1960s and 70s, in popular Calcutta parlance the sobriquet, *colonir meye* (a colony girl) was often used derogatorily, sometimes by older middle class refugees, to mark a distinction of class and locality while in contemporary literary or cinematic imagination colony girls were easy preys. The poem that I have quoted above does not show the shadowy coexistence of the figure of the 'colony girl' along with the 'mother' when *bhadralok* Kolkata spoke of refugees. This twofold mother/prostitute figuration, operative in the nationalist imaginary allowed the 'interpellation of the (male) subject as a national subject' in the imaginative discourse of citizenship and the nation.[43] In years after the partition, this binary figuration of gender became more complex with the refugee women's increased presence in marches and protest meetings that created a public sphere of articulating the concerns of thousands of migrants like themselves just as it laid bare the changes that happened in the private domestic spaces. The patriarchal practices within the family that displayed the contradictions of modernity, especially in the development of a modern gendered subject, came to be re-formulated by

the refugee women's economic and social mobility. Similarly, in the world outside, they left a mark. The growth of the Left political movements in the city during these years is a direct result of the involvement, to a large extent, of refugee women workers in and outside their workplaces. The participation of women refugees through *mahila samitis* and the Communist Party of India-led by MARS to wrest legitimate demands like water and sanitation in colonies were important aspects of the women's movement in West Bengal. As Gargi Chakravartty remarks, 'more than the mere physical visibility of women in the public domain, the transformation marked the emergence of a new woman, who had become self reliant, independent, and who could challenge the rigidity of patriarchal domination,' both inside the home and outside.[44] Partition thus plays an important role in the traditions of political activity among refugee women and brought about small but significant changes in their life experiences, in apparel, vocabulary and speech as she came to reside in the city. Fiction plays a crucial role in telling the stories of this mobility and transformation of women during these years by complicating the period's most salient epistemological questions: what were the social and political fallouts of transformations in the women's domestic and public roles? In what ways could one explore the lived realities of the refugee women's lives by discovering the particular historical instances of displacement and resistance inside and outside the home? To all these and many more questions the imaginative literature of the period create a 'knowledge system' by privileging the experiences of women within the colony and outside it.[45] By telling their stories, the texts play a role in constructing a specific history and locality of displacement as gender complicates much of the distribution of power both within and outside the refugee families. Significantly, these texts foreground the differences in mobility between women variegated by class, caste and educational abilities within the refugee colony just as they show a specificity of context in which dislocation can be understood. The gendered experiences of dislocation create a historical imaginary that critiques postcolonial modernity through the twin optics of family and labour.

The colony, sometimes built overnight, came to signify a space where refugee families, particularly the women, began a new journey that would significantly refashion notions of labour and domesticity. The creation of these colonies meant a transition of living spaces for women. In East Bengal, even an ordinary Hindu middle class woman had enjoyed a *bastubhita* with separate living quarters from the men. There was no dearth of space with an inner courtyard, a well-demarcated kitchen area and a *khirki pukur* where the women could bathe in seclusion. That was now replaced with a colony hut, one or two-roomed, with *hogla* roof and tin walls. In these small areas there was no inner sanctum, *andarmahal,* and very little

privacy as family members of both sexes jostled for space. Public spaces, until now off-limits to many of them, were now places where a woman had to venture out. The colony bazaar, the colony school, the offices of the Refugee Councils or even government offices where one had to stand in queues for dole now became places of familiarity and movement for refugee women. On the one hand, there was a squeezing out of her private space while on the other there was an expansion of public spaces that she gradually came to inhabit. Naturally, the change 'involved a reorganization of space' and 'with this reorganization of space came a refiguring of gender' and of women's connection to labour.[46] The changing relationship of refugee women to the metropolitan spaces often involved increased economic activities outside the home and a greater participation in political causes: going on marches against government policies of rehabilitation, attending meetings involving the refugee organizations as well as protecting the colony that was often under siege by landlords and their hired goons. Refugee women soon became a significant percentage of West Bengal's workforce that had a far-reaching impact on the social and economic fabric of the state.[47] In the words of an eye witness who saw and participated in this struggle, the changes in fortune that displacement brought about were also marked by other significant changes in gender relations even between women who were the original inhabitants of the state and the new entrants:

> The women who had lost their parents, sons and husbands and who arrived here in Bengal with only their lives, had to face many travails: begging on the streets, shelter in refugee camps, working at odd jobs or simply disappearing in darkness. Many who came over with half or broken families took shelter in railway platforms, besides railway tracks, under trees or if they were lucky, in government run refugee camps. That was a terrible change but even better, surprisingly better was what they achieved through their desperate struggles…fifty years ago that was a source of wonder to the women in West Bengal. Literate or half literate women working as fourth grade employees in offices, as sales girls in shops, as traveling sales girls hawking goods from door to door, in those days were completely unknown.[48]

The relentless influx of the East Bengali refugees left a mark on 'the public cultures' of especially the cities' that 'have never been the same again.' In an essay titled 'Take A Girl Like Her' (1968) Ashok Mitra writes poignantly about migrant women who were forced by circumstances to come out for work to support a family now reduced to destitution. It was a common enough story: the father

ill, the brothers young, so the burden of the family fell on the girl who became a breadwinner:

> Take a girl like her. Take just any girl like her, for there are several thousands….Does the tragedy of her existence – or even her withering – count for anything at all? When we talk of a total transformation of society, do we include the import of her frail being in our calculations? She cannot recollect her childhood; mercifully she does not react at all when the mother, all wistfulness, whines about her grandfather's suzerainty over eleven and a half mouzas in the district of Dacca, or Faridpur, or Buckergunj…..The uprooting of the existing class base will perhaps come one day, but it would be sheer cussedness to suggest that meanwhile she must wait. Her stepping out itself will be a blow for social transformation…. Something has to be done, now, with a girl like her. She must not be wasted.[49]

The creative new life of the refugee woman in the city of Kolkata, her linguistic skills in learning the 'Kolkataiya' language, different from her own East Bengali dialect, her efforts to find a suitable job to support her family are all smaller parts of the sum total of her transformation. The opportunity to change, sometimes jobs, sometimes a whole way of life, was one of the effects of the partition through which the Hindu refugee woman made Kolkata her home. This makeover negates the trope of a helpless victim of circumstances and validates her choices and agency both within and outside the home. What made the East Bengali refugee women more proactive in terms of a transformation was that for the middle class women in Barisal or Dhaka, education and social interaction with the world outside was a part of their lives already. Many memoirs about the pre-partitioned Bengal testify to the education that was imparted to girls as a matter of course particularly during the nationalist era.[50] The East Bengali refugee women's journey across the border, through untold hardships, often walking barefoot through hostile border terrains, certainly made them psychologically stronger to withstand pressures of poverty and destitution and to look for alternatives. In Kolkata, many of them underwent a political radicalization, an opportunity to fight for her own and others' rights, while she participated in economic activities in both organized and unorganized sectors. Ironically, all these were possible only because she had been displaced in the first place. Many literary representations in post-partition Bangla fiction mapped the imaginaries and experiences of displacement that changed women's lives, both rural and urban. Shaktipada Rajguru's *Meghey Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud

Covered Star, 1958) and Sabitri Roy's novel *Bwadwip* (The Delta, 1972) help one understand both the crisis and the revolution that takes place among the lives of numerous refugee women by changing the terms of the debate about the 'mobile woman' and the binary divisions of the home and the world.

Sabitri Roy's novel is a brilliant social documentary of the changes the refugee women were undergoing in the post-partition years in the city and its suburbs within the contested terrain of a colony as well as the city as it maps the ways refugee women improvised upon and challenged social-spatial norms of *bhadralok* value systems and patriarchy. The Left Movement in West Bengal, fed by the anger and united passions of the displaced Hindus of East Pakistan, is the underlying theme of Roy's text. Like her earlier novel *Swaralipi* (The Notations, 1952) where Roy depicted gender oppression within a political party's hierarchy (subsequently the novel was banned by the Communist Party of India) this novel too is an intrepid exploration of West Bengal's politics in the 50s and 60s. Set in one of the mushrooming colonies in the city suburb, *Bwadwip's* epic span revolves around a refugee family – Dhiman, his wife Khona, their son Jishu and Dhiman's sister Dhruba and the lives of many like them who inhabit the colony houses built on fallow and marshy lands in the eastern part of the city. Dhiman had managed to scrape together some money to buy a small asbestos-lined house from a Muslim farmer named Kalu Mian. The two-roomed house, built next to a railway line, reminds Khona of the home she had left behind: the 'foundational home', 'desher bari' that sets up the paradigm of evaluating all subsequent experiences of home for her.[51] This oscillation between her old home in Kusumpur and the new one resounds not only through Khona but Dhiman's mind: 'the touch of the clayey soil' of Kusumpur sleeps in his blood.[52] The new space of the colony gestures towards a new beginning but it is also the death of all that the East Bengali Hindu has left behind. Part village and part city, the construction of the colony signifies a leap of faith for many families like Dhiman's just as it lays out the archeology of a new habitation, tied in history to all other habitations man has founded through the ages:

> Partly a village, part town, what will this refugee colony be like in the future? The rootless people of East Bengal: the last radices of their lives seek a comforting soil in the fallow land of the city's suburbs. They are the people who had lived on the banks of Meghna and Padma… Baro Bhuiyan's people from Bangladesh whose Mohen-jo-daro will perhaps one day be laid bare, inch by inch, deep in this fallow land by their inheritors? (19)

The journey from the mighty river banks to the fallow land of East Kolkata is to change the direction and alignment of one's life: from a river one becomes a delta, crisscrossed by other lives, similar yet separate, that can be forged into a new collective of occupation and resistance that are the structures of an exiled life. Dhiman is aware that the formation of the colony habitation would mark the death of the culture and a way of life that they had carried from East Bengal and that would have to be buried in the new soil. Every new beginning was also the death of an old: their very displacement results in an opportunity to forge a collective of resistance and to understand that a common history of suffering unites all postcolonial societies like India and Algeria. So when the Algerian student delegate Yusuf comes to visit the colony, Dhiman feels the coursing of the same blood as in the bodies of two siblings: both he and Yusuf share the same dreams of working to cleanse 'the world of rubbish heaps.' (23) However, the novel is not just a depiction of the refugee family finding shelter but it is an exploration of the larger affective dimension of displacement, the varied responses to that and an affirmation of humanity in the face of poverty and destitution the families face. Roy's narrative focuses on the world both *inside* and *outside* the home by creating many interweaving characters and stories that give an epic dimension to the refugee's struggles. The many themes of her novel – the possibilities of self as well as the realities of the collective struggle of the refugees – make this novel profoundly political. Dhruba and Dhiman are members of a certain Left party and they work among the refugee families in organizing meetings and encouraging others to raise a voice against injustice. 'In this land we will hear a new music, a music of politics' states Dhruba. Khona and Dhruba are situated on two opposite imaginaries of displacement – Khona daydreams about her lost home while Dhruba works as a teacher and is involved with political organization inside the colony. Roy is clear to show the difference in mobility between members of the same family through the differences in their response to their displacement. Khona's colony home is however altered through her own indirect yet significant participation of the turbulence outside: as her son and husband engage with the Food Movement, the teacher's strike and police brutality unleashed by the Congress government, she picks up her forgotten brushes to paint again. Jishu sees one of the pictures titled 'Brute' and realizes that his mother has 'left her kitchen utensils, her pots and pans, to come and stand by them. The pictures elaborated the curse of a benevolent mother against the cruelest tyrants of the world.' (341) Roy subtly reworks the image of the compassionate mother, identified with the motherland that had a wide circulation during the nationalist era.[53] This mother is a refugee mother or a mother incarcerated in an East Pakistani jail like Tara's Communist

Party of India worker mother, Sita Devi. Sita Devi's radical subjectivity and enterprise in the political sphere finds a true successor in her daughter who 'has a deep relationship with meetings, speeches and the red flag.' (270) Both Khona and Dhruba participate in this model of the radical feminine, in direct opposition to Indian nationalism's ideal woman, modern yet embedded in tradition. Roy's reconstruction of aspects of femininity uses some of the older tropes but with a new twist. The novel not only explores the colony women's creative use of public spaces but also the idea of 'home' that is described through the imaginaries of a public sphere where people congregate and discuss ideas. Roy's women characters occupy many different kinds of home, most marked by poverty. Sarbani, who teaches at the colony school, marries Arjo, a Communist Party of India worker. Their small home barely has any necessities and their kitchen 'resembles the makeshift arrangements of a picnic with a few utensils' yet their home is filled with debates and discussions, with songs and laughter. Khona's colony home is a site of political transformation for the refugee residents of the colony where Jishu writes: 'Another name for revolution is the domestic life (*biplober arek naam grihasthya jibon*).' (353) If the Habermasian idea of the conjunction of private and public spheres can be seen through the site of the 'conjugal' home, then Jishu's statement carries within it the shades of an important difference. Unlike Habermas's bourgeois home that is a result of 'exertions and relations of dependence involved in social labour', this home is a refugee home, shakily clinging on under the onslaught of the elements, yet re-visioned as a site of revolution.[54] Roy's Marxist political alignments help her construct this new site of postcolonial transformation: the colony and the makeshift homes within it become the spatial marker of a new political praxis where the personal and the political enmesh in fluid ways. However Roy's characters who occupy both the private and the public spheres are not a series of exemplars. They are individuated in a manner that allow the novelist to explore the ethical dimensions of women's access and improvisation of public spaces through their domestic spaces, 'a privateness that…(is) oriented towards the public.'[55] Apart from their homes, one sees the women occupy the

> various spatial sites at which colony identity was produced and reproduced – the colony market, the colony committee meeting, the cultural association, political party meetings within the colony, political demonstrations in which refugees participated, the by-lanes in the colony where a distinctive public culture of colony–specific social interaction evolved, and the sphere of decision making within the refugee household.[56]

It is this unity of various spaces that the refugee women straddle easily that enables Roy to make the private and the public spaces intermingle fluidly in her text.

> [The] vast repertoire of the typical activities that marked the public sphere in the colonies – defending the colony, clearing the jungles for further settlement, helping establish the colony school and the colony market, organizing youth festivals, arranging cultural programmes, holding party meetings and mobilizing support for general strikes, hosting zonal meetings of the United Central Refugee Council, negotiating with the authorities for a post office in the locality[57]

Is interspersed with the activities in the social, emotional and psychological sphere of her characters. The contingencies of colony formation demanded active participation by men and women. 'The Kalibari, the post-office, the market, the school….all had been established with the colony inhabitants with their own efforts, with the sweat of their brows.' (141) In the process of building the colony, the novel foregrounds the women who actively participate in many of the community related work or seek out other employments in the city to bolster family income. The young refugee women who begin to earn their own livelihoods gain a new sense of independence and freedom from the stifling patriarchal norms of family and domesticity.[58] Characters like Dhruba, Khona, Pushpo, Sarbani, Tara, Sahara, Rukmini and Ambadevi represent a changed gender relation in this new world where the earlier taboos have been swept away: 'In this colony all the taboos have come swirling down. One would not speak to an unknown man in their previous homes.' (234) The daily grind of poverty pushes women to earn money in the easiest way. The rickshaw puller Chandi's wife tells him the married woman next door has got a job in a jelly factory, but sometimes she does not return home at night: 'The jelly factory is a lie. She works in a factory where men are caught. Just watch her made up face; the fragrance of snow and powder all around her!' (241) This social churning is reflected in political choices. In the general election, the colony women stand in the winter sun, their enthusiasm apparent in their faces and in the resolute lines of their postures. (250) Throughout the novel, Roy shows their agency that is significant because the colony women create a constant discourse of participatory democracy that is endearing if utopic; certainly they are no 'victims' in the statistical demographic paradigms of the nation state, but fashioned as players in the political and social life of the city. The novel celebrates their struggles just as it explores the new modern city dweller's mobility they come to inhabit through their labour. In an unforgettable image Roy depicts a group

of women of the colony, working at odd jobs, who go to watch a film on the first Saturday of the month, 'their salaries in their vanity bags' who glance at themselves in the large mirrors of the cinema hall's lobby and whose bodies are newly decked in the accessories of modern life:

> The snow–powder, the high heeled slippers, the plastic vanity bag, the fake stone ear–rings, the Madras turmeric *bindi* on their foreheads… all bought with their own earnings. On the cinema screen they see their own hidden desires; their sari ends flutter in the wind … every banknote folded in their vanity bag savoured of a new life's beginning. However this pleasure was just for an evening. From Monday it was again the ten to five slavery.(310)

The joyous celebration of their sexuality is founded on the reality of refugee-hood that forces them to participate in the labour market to become key agents of visible change both inside and outside their homes. The tradition bound housewife, the unlettered grandmother, the once school-going daughter leave their domestic and limited spheres and come out in the streets, literally. Uneducated women sewed clothes, made *thongas* or paper bags at home or worked as maid servants to supplement family incomes while their educated counterparts taught in colony schools or as nurses and telephone operators/receptionists in private or government offices.[59] In *Bwadwip*, the women who infuse the text with energy, determination and vision are numerous and their presence changes the dynamics of this novel in subtle but sure ways as they insert themselves into the public spaces of the colony and the city.

> In the trams and buses, there were so many girls from the city. Some were on their way to Esplanade, others to offices, colleges or schools. Some in plaits, others in their hair in buns, loose or tight in the Santiniketan style. Eyebrows painted black, lips glowing with colour. On thin wrists were strapped wristwatches that kept time with the sun's progress. So many of them in art silk, real silk, in Bombay, Madras colours – green, yellow, blue, turquoise, purple, foreign-lavendar, mauve-eve so many hues–all of them were on their way to work. (173)

The wristwatches mark the circular time that labour entails and signifies a relation between clocks and watches and 'critical points in the transition to capitalist production relations'.[60] The long line of women workers navigating the city and the colony bring this point home:

> The widows of the colony were coming home after their shift at Shipra Glass Factory. Most of the girls from Madhudanga worked in Usha factory. One by one, they return from work: from the Food Department, or the Ration Office….In their tired dragging footsteps the tinge of weariness. (239)

Roy's novel explores the postcolonial creation of a gendered labour force that forged new loyalties with an expansion of capitalist modes of production in the new nation. Their transition from a secluded protected life of domesticity to the public role of a bread-earner and a worker is fraught with challenges and ambiguities both inside and outside the home.

The creative memory of a lost home transfixes on an object and transforms it. The colony and in an extension, the city, becomes this site of transformation and renewal. Yet at the same time, Roy is aware that this transformation comes with its own inherent contradictions. The colony is able to expand when original Muslim inhabitants are systematically pushed out so that their lands could be grabbed by unscrupulous player/politicians just as the colony traditionally segregated the lower castes as a matter of routine.[61] When a communal riot breaks out in the city, the colony feels the heat: some of the original Muslim settlers are killed and many others evacuated under the watchful eye of the neighbour hood Peace Committee. Many houses are looted and Jishu's love Sahara dies in the conflagration. Roy's novel makes an important intervention in what Veena Das calls 'that particular moment of recognition within the flux in which notions of life and notions of law…continually pass from one to another. This is the flux we might name as the everyday.'[62] The novel's expansive canvas captures the turbulent times of change from India's first general election in 1952 to the first few years of 1960s and explores the seeds of an idealist struggle within the Communist Party of India, which in 1964 would split into two. The 1950s refugees' struggle to intervene and change the laws regulating the squatter colonies, reforming the feudal structure of land ownership, the Food Movement and general strikes by teachers and factory workers to raise basic minimum wages were part of the expansion and consolidation of Left beliefs in the city. The novel elaborates on the refugee participation as well as the clash of the two main political ideologies: the Indian National Congress who align themselves with semi-feudal forces and silently tolerate Hindu Mahasabha sloganeering against Muslim residents of the city and the Communist Party of India workers who try to bring together the rootless refugees and align their demands with those of the landless and *barga* peasants who work for landowners for a pittance. Yet the Left too is not undifferentiated and homogenous as Roy

underlines a utopian and idealistic strain within the party through aspects of gender and communal equality. This idealism results in a continual movement between the quotidian lives and the outer realm of the law that the refugees contest and intervene in. Roy's own political life as a member of the Communist Party of India allows this fluidity because she does not view the legal and political spheres as something that impinges on human lives from outside: instead she understands the characters of her novel as social actors and the notion of 'rights' are invoked in a manner that is urgent yet temporal. It is this question of 'right to life' that enables the novelist to address the communal question. Even if one assumes that the Jishu-Sahara love story acts as an allegory in the novel of the possibility of Hindu-Muslim union, that possibility remains in the realm of the ideal and Sahara's death in the riot thwarts it from ever becoming real. Yet the narrative intertwines lines of verses from the Koran, the *jumma* prayers, the fasting of *roja*, the daily struggle of the Muslim farmers of the area who work to make ends meet to create an awareness of another Self that stands close to us: a common history of suffering unites Hindus and Muslims and Jishu ponders 'when will he and Sahara walk the road side by side, holding on to each other a deathless promise?.....But when? When will that holy moment come?' (361) Roy encapsulates the everyday within these larger questions of community and the self that makes the novel deeply axiomatic. It is as if the space of the novel creates a unity of all workers, whether Hindus or Muslims, and a gender equality that is at once idealistic, yet, because unrealized, forever tempting.

> The heart that resides in the human breast is neither Hindu nor Muslim heart, it is a human heart. The youthful vigour of the muscles is not a Hindu nor Muslim. Who can dare to tame this wild tumultuous sea? (270)

The truth remains that even in the midst of a terrible riot in Narayangunj, Muslim students die to protect the girl's hostel in Dhaka and Shimanto and his friends help save the lives of Muslim men and women in the colony. (264) By laying bare the strands of contemporary ideologies on the lives of those who live in the squatter colonies, Roy's novel recreates a history of the partition that now brings to light how issues of displacement and belonging became important aspects of West Bengal's political culture and how the figure of the activist/worker complicates one's understanding of the historical trajectories of gender and communal politics in the state.

The image of a refugee woman dressed in a sari, a cloth bag hanging from her thin shoulder, her feet in worn out slippers is an image made memorable in Ritwik

Ghatak's partition film *Meghey Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-covered Star). That figure, navigating the city, forlornly yet creatively, is the central theme of Shaktipada Rajguru's novel that was the basis of Ghatak's 1960 film. Ritwik Ghatak was eloquent on the way the partition of Bengal had framed his work.

> I have tackled the refugee problem…not as a refugee problem. To me it was the division of culture and I was shocked. During partition, I hated those pretentious people who clamoured about our independence, our freedom. You kids are finished; you have not seen the Bengal of mine.[63]

The Bengal that Ghatak talked about, a Bengal lost in the mist of time and history, is personified in Neeta, the central character of Rajguru's novel, initially called *Chena Mukh* (A Face Known, 1960). The novel is a compassionate recreation of the life of a refugee family, intricately detailed and astonishing in a novelist born in West Bengal. Rajguru was candid about his understanding of the complexities of refugee-hood:

> I was born in Bankura but my early years were spent in a small village in Murshidabad. Around 1937, when I was a young boy, my father was transferred. The wrench of leaving something that I loved, have always remained dormant in my mind. After the partition, when I saw thousands crowd on the Sealdah platform, I knew what these people were going through. I often told writers who were writing on this issue that perhaps I knew more than them; I knew what it meant to be a *bastuhara*, a refugee.[64]

Rajguru's profound interest in a refugee's life made him live in transit camps in the years from1959–60 and those experiences resulted in a number of works where he etched about the tragic lives of the displaced, notable among them *Keu Pherey Nai, Tobu Bihango* (1960–61), *Dandak Thekey Morichjhapi* (1972–73) and later, the much acclaimed *Desh Kaal Patro*.

The novel as well as the film opens with an image of the colony.

> A few days ago this area was empty fields, marshy wasteland. Bamboo groves, shrubs of *jolkochu* hung low over the canal that flowed through it. In that uninhabited suburb, thousands of homeless people have come from Pakistan to build new homes. Next to the railway track the leaves of mango trees shone in the faint light, on the coconut fronds the moonlit breeze shivered gently. A few lights glimmered in the distance.[65]

The whistle from the train piercing the darkness, a darkness shattered with its headlights stands as a symbol of modernity and of the struggle that Neeta is immersed in everyday as she takes the last train back:

> The night train was choked with the passengers of the suburbs. The clerk returning from the grinding ten to six duties, the shopkeeper closing his shutters, the girls returning from the city. Most of them worked in offices, went either to evening colleges or to tuitions and after the day's work, were returning with tired minds and bodies. Some had come to the city to apply and cajole for a job; they were returning home, unsuccessful. Snatches of their conversations came to her ears. The histories of their struggles were clearly audible.(22)

As a critic remarks, for Ritwik Ghatak,

> the initial question of the split of Bengal was to become for him a larger quest – an attempt at portraying the relationships between the new classes formed by the process of urbanization and the machine revolution, and their old traditions. It led him to take a look at the whole issue of rootlessness afresh –the search for a refugee for a new identity.[66]

Rajguru's novel was in that sense brilliantly tailored for Ghatak's purpose; in its pages he found all the contradictions of a displaced life intertwined with the myths and allegories of a postcolonial modernity. The necessity to push a once sheltered daughter to become a cog in the machine of labour and progress is seen in the larger context of rootlessness. It is a necessity born out of the contingencies of being *bastuhara*, homeless, but it also results in a transformation. Neeta's colony home can become a brick house; her family can move slowly away from the brink of starvation and claw its way up to prosperity. As Neeta devotes herself to the well-being of her family, her dreams slip away: Her younger sister marries Neeta's lover (with active encouragement of her mother, who does not want Neeta's earnings to stop in the event of a marriage) and her brother Shankar, who empathized with her, goes off to train as a singer. Very soon Neeta is detected with tuberculosis and she is sent off to a sanatorium with Shankar's help from where she will not return.

Rajguru's novel, as well as Ghatak's film, is committed to the concurrent worlds Neeta inhabits – the human, the historical and the moral. Their images are drawn from the soil and life of partition's victims – both text and film are efforts to recreate, before it is too late, the experiences and failures of an entire generation. Girls like Neeta, subaltern by class and gender, navigate the city

and chart out their journey through it: the suburban train, the colony streets, the alien, bustling city all become the topography of their struggle to survive. If melodrama as a 'literary/theatrical genre (is) associated with…the onset of the crisis of modernity' what does Rajguru's use of melodrama signify for the form of the novel?[67] To answer this question one can turn to Lukács' use of 'memory' in the modern novel:

> Everything that happens may be meaningless, fragmentary and sad, but it is always irradiated by hope or memory….. memory transforms the continual struggle into a process which is full of mystery and interest and yet is tied with indestructible threads to the present, the unexplained instant…And so, by a strange and melancholy paradox, the moment of failure is the moment of value; the comprehending and experiencing of life's refusals is the source from which the fullness of life seems to flow….herein lies the essentially epic quality of memory.[68]

Therefore, it is greatly appropriate that the novel and the film both foreground in their narratives that final realization – a last image that stays with one – of an unending line of girls like Neeta, on their way to work, who were truly rootless, for whom there was no going back. In the grim backdrop of the partition and its memories, Neeta's struggles and failures achieve an epic dimension – the story of a whole generation whose refugee-hood meant a cultural rootlessness, an alienation of a class from its own traditions. It meant simply the death of a way of life, a final closure, and an even final forgetting.

> They have forgotten her, completely. It was inevitable. Shankar slowly walked towards the station. A few people were about on the colony road.
>
> He remembered someone – Neeta! Large dark eyes, dark skinned, tired, wrapped in a not too clean sari, who would walk through the colony roads on her way to office and tuitions.
>
> He was walking absentmindedly when suddenly he stopped – who was that? Just like her, walking hurriedly ahead? Just like Neeta, her mind and body suffused with an unbearable pain. Under the fierce sun the pale listless face was covered in sweat. Shankar quickly gathered pace. No, it was not Neeta. But someone of her class, certainly. On the roads, on buses, trams, offices you could see them easily…. Silently Shankar walked towards the station. The girl was walking hurriedly, dragging her torn sandals. The train was due to

> arrive any moment. If she failed to catch that one, she'd be late for work. Shankar remembered Neeta. She had also returned empty–handed, a failure. (128)

Neeta's life and death is a recognition of the way in which a woman is subjected to familial or community control along with her displacement. Her vulnerability at being sacrificed so that her family can survive makes her tragic struggle seem eponymous to partition's inner contradictions: Neeta's very homelessness allows her to work outside so that her colony home can be rebuilt. Her mobility and death are not mutually exclusive; rather they exist in a simultaneity of movement within the home and outside it. The question that remains is this: does Neeta's access to public space translate to a wider access to the public sphere? Only in a limited way, through her education, does one see her participating in the city's public-ness; yet her generosity to her family and her sympathy for the refugees in her colony establishes her sovereignty as a subject. Her death in far away Shillong affirms this lack of agency in the public domain; yet her image comes to haunt the public space of the colony and the city in the long line of girls, 'just like her' in trams and buses rushing off to work. Even in death, Neeta's body/image proliferates in the many other bodies that follow her and leave a mark in the spatial locality of the colony and the city. The presence of these other women, so similar to her yet different in temporality, splits the unity and universality of postcolonial modernity. Shankar's moment of mourning is also a recognition of Neeta's existence and her corporeality that was so denied in life. It is a moment when memory usurps history and the

> scene of the everyday is itself then a scene of mourning…unlike the idea of women as the natural barriers against the onslaught of modernity, it is they who become most vulnerable to the violence of a modernity under which tradition is turned inside out.[69]

Kolkata's Arjun: A myth and storytelling of belonging

Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934–2012) was a post-Tagorean poet and writer much celebrated in Bengal and his novel *Arjun* (1971),[70] written during the Bangladesh War of liberation and dedicated to the 'freedom fighters of Bangladesh', is an imaginative looking back to the aftermath of 1947 to understand the present history of West Bengal and the emergence of a linguistic nationalism across the border. Arjun, the protagonist, is a refugee who arrives in Calcutta from Faridpur after the death of his father. He is too young to understand the 'the stupidity of the insane rage' between India and Pakistan that made the Hindus in East Pakistan,

so 'overcome with terror, that they did not even have the guts to ask for fair play' but he does understand what partition has meant for him and his boyhood: 'The partition of India meant many losses for many people. Some lost their lives, some everything they possessed……I lost the red and blue and silver dreams of my childhood.' (40) This decimation of his youth is marked by the rape and murder of Amaladi, a widow of the Dutta household, whose body is discovered by Arjun in the jute fields. The canker of fear and injustice, indirect yet insidious, force their neighbours to flee and the Hindu houses become surrounded by 'encroaching weeds and bushes, the lair of jackals and civet cats.' Soon after, Arjun, his brother Somnath and mother Shantilata decide to leave as well. They arrive in Kolkata and learn to live in the platform of the Sealdah station and to beg on the streets. Later, they team up with a group of refugees to forcibly occupy an abandoned orchard in Dum Dum where they establish a colony. The colony is the new space that provides them uncharted urban opportunities:

> I set foot in this city not knowing which way to turn, and now it has become familiar territory, my own pasture. I do not have a moment's hesitation in thinking of it as my own city. Everyone in the colony has succeeded in finding his or her own means of livelihood. In the beginning some of us worked as porters in the market, waiters in the teashops and rickshaw pullers. Some even went out begging. But look at us now. Some run their own business, a few have found jobs in bakeries and plywood factories…. There is also a school-teacher and a couple of clerks. (64–65)

The refugees translate the social mobility of the new city through physical labour, their 'only weapon to ensure victory.' Arjun electrifies the colony by ranking second in his school leaving exams while his friend Labonya dreams of becoming a schoolteacher. The refugee's perilous journeys turns Arjun's brother Somnath insane because 'the forcible transition from open fields and wide-flowing rivers to this dingy, urban life had been bad for him.' (33) His mad ramblings often evoke the logic of Sa'adat Hasan Manto's famous story on the partition *Toba Tek Singh:* 'Look, it's in the headlines here, that India and Pakistan have been re-united….Do let's go back home. Let's not stay in this horrible place any longer.' (28) Arjun, the refugee boy, follows the same trajectory of destiny as the epic hero of the *Mahabharata*, and like his mythical namesake, he is an exile who fights for survival against odds that he cannot even begin to imagine. From Bongaon they had walked to Sealdah station where 'our days were plagued by….squalor, dirt, noise and the inevitable scramble for food.' In the refugee colony the struggle does not end. Arjun wants

to undertake research after his Master of Science (M.Sc), but he is aware that 'it was not realistic for inhabitants of colonies like these to have any ambition. Survival itself was an achievement. After all, how much more was there left to ask, for people who had eluded death and traversed grim distances?' (76) Living in the colony also meant that age-old rituals and social customs were overturned. Haran, a son of a priest, now earned greater respect because he drove a taxi and made a decent living. Grandfather Nishikanto, who was a freedom fighter, no longer got the attention and respect that he used to command. Yet 'by any standards, we were better off here than we ever were in our homes in East Bengal. There is no doubt about that' states Arjun. But this social and economic transformation does not build a carapace over the deep sense of regret that haunts the refugee's life, a regret that originates from the realization that they can never go back to where they once belonged. The text draws historical parallels to other migrations but in an important way the experience of the East Bengali Hindu is unique:

> In history you read about many races leaving one country and going to another…..but you cannot compare their lot with ours. They have acquired some rights. It is hard enough to forget the sorrow of forcible eviction and not being able to return. Over and above, there is another sorrow, of being treated like beggars and destitutes here in the city. No one showed us any kinship, any closeness. (103)

Arjun wondered 'how much of this extraordinary irresponsibility will be recorded in history.' (49)

The epic implication of such a history never being recorded is immeasurably vast for a novel that looks at the daily struggle of the colony inmates to lead a life of dignity and humanity. If the epic has been replaced by the novel in the modern times, then *Arjun* is both the history of the struggle of the novel's hero as it is the history of a community: it is both an *akhyan* (narrative) and an *itihasa* (history). As a narrative it represents human activity and as a history it is a text that shows 'a continuum of past, present, future'.[71] The narrative of the refugee's struggle to gain a foothold in the city is interspersed with the failure of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal. The morally ambiguous situations that confront the namesake of the *Mahabharata* are reminiscent of how the new epic is constructed on the old: Arjun's abandonment of Labonyo and his distance from his co–migrants are situations that parallel the ambiguity of the mythic hero's life. As he watches a bunch of refugees on the Sealdah station platform, he realizes that he no longer cares for them because he has now been saved. The contiguity that Bandopadhyay sets up between the epic hero and the modern day Arjun raises certain questions

that confront one about responsibility and belonging in the postcolonial nation state just as it charts a narratorial relationship between the epic of antiquity and the new epic of refugee-hood:

> Gangopadhyay draws upon the epic past to narrate the history of the present. By setting his scene in the aftermath of the partition he insists that the new is both supremely modern and yet wholly dominated by an unmastered past.[72]

The refugee's struggles both in the private and public spheres assume a complex dimension when one looks at the women of the colony: the housewife, the girl who sells herself to the rapacious city, the deprivation and the ambition to rise above it all. Shantilata, for example, 'had to leave home a helpless, young widow. But she was no longer like that and had acquired the ability to take control of situations with a firm hand.' Labonyo too knows that only education can raise her above the circumstances of a refugee's life but her ambitions are cruelly thwarted when she becomes a pawn in the tussle between a local businessman ready to encroach on colony land and the residents who are equally determined not to give an inch. She is abducted and raped by some colony boys who have joined forces with the businessman. The assault turns Labonyo mute: 'As if she had suddenly lost her speech. Not a word did she have for anybody.' (171) This silence allows Arjun to emerge as the new citizen/saviour of the colony. Unlike his epic counterpart, Arjun's battle site is not Kurushetra, but the colony, but like his namesake, the modern day Arjun must occupy a morally ambiguous position.[73] This Arjun's battle, situated in the world outside, allows him little time for sympathy for the violated refugee woman. The exigencies of that manly battle involve a denial of guilt and sympathy, just like his mythical namesake:

> Arjun felt really depressed about Labonyo…(but) she kept looking at Arjun with burning reproach in her eyes. As if it was Arjun who had done her some grievous wrong. Arjun finally made up his mind that he was not going to let all these things bother him. It was not in his power to help. What good was he to poor Labonyo?(172)

So, Arjun, the man of peace and an intellectual, is roused to fight a battle that will save the colony because, like his mythical counterpart, he too is a saviour and a survivor: 'From childhood onwards, death has come to me many times. ….but….I will survive. Yes, certainly I shall.'(204) Arjun's will to live is a desire to emerge as the autonomous subject of the new nation state, to become a *nagorik,* a citizen of the new metropolitan space of the colony and to lay claim to the city's middle-class desires of masculinity and action. It is another matter that the violated Labonyo

has no place in his scheme of things. The new world of citizenship is constructed upon an implicit contract of silence about and by the violated woman.

In the refugee's journey through the terrain of the city that I have tried to chart out through the literary texts of the times, we are left with a sense of longing and anxiety, of disappointments and desires intertwined, enmeshed. Their journeys alter the place of origin and memory alters not only the idea of home, but also identities and selfhood. The enigma of arrival includes 'an opportunity to reconstitute the journey.'[74] After all, there is no going back and no country to go back to. The journey forward is a way to consign the past to oblivion and to bury the ghosts, once and for all. But one question remains: what are the ways in which these literary representations grapple with the upheaval they witness? Aamir Mufti's theorization about the 1950s Urdu and Hindi writings where the 'narrative becoming the staging ground for a vision of national life as secular social landscape: the psychosexual tensions and crises of middle class home, the multilayered energy and movement of modern cities'[75] can be taken as a workable description of the post-partition novel in Bangla yet these tropes are manifestly re-worked in the colony fictions the author has discussed above. Certainly, the violent uprooting of a whole people engenders newer ways of representations, when the form of the literary text or the visual text of the cinema constitutes not just a reenactment of the past but a mode of meaning production with playful inscriptions of myth and memory. Sabitri Roy makes a new and radical departure in the accepted narrative ideology of the 60s Bangla novel. Her novel is episodic and fragmented, with the main narrative (*akhyan*) broken into other smaller narratives (*upakhyan*) that constantly stress that the characters live in a more complex age different from the world they have known earlier. If the novel is the story of an individual with a focalization on the point of view of a particular character, then Roy creates a novel that is the story of a whole community where simultaneous voices and points of views create a complex interweaving of personal insights, ethical and political discourses and descriptions of the colony that at once create a rich 'epic-lyric' text.[76] The interiority of the characters in the ruminations and symbolizations of the experiencing subject, a feature of the modern novel, is interwoven with the political: the Krishak Samiti's demand for the landless and *barga* peasants, the women refugee workers slogans for minimum wages and the colony's demand for communal peace and harmony. The novel is structured through multiple viewpoints to allow differing opinions and subjectivities, both Hindus and Muslims, entangle with larger questions that haunt the decade: agency and citizenship in the new nation and the communal question. Her novel then allows a different treatment of time, not as a time of progression or development

but a time of consciousness and recuperation that is at once a radical departure from the linear structure of the realist novel.

Both Gangopadhyay and Rajguru posit the refugee colony at the heart of their narrative structures. The colony thus becomes not only the imagined 'loci' of the East Bengal villages left behind but also sites of transformations, both of the self and the community. The relationship of the colony to the larger metropolitan space is constantly negotiated and recreated to mirror the fraught relationship of the refugee to the various sites they come to occupy, private and public. On the other hand, the ghettoized colony space emerges as the new site of patriarchal oppression in the modern postcolonial state, a site of silencing of the violated woman or turning her into a worker in the newly expanding labour markets. In this emphasis of locality in these texts, one sees a new kind of spatial and temporal coordinates that now come to suffuse Bangla novels. Both Labonyo and Neeta's life exemplify the exploitative patriarchal structure of post-partition Bengali society. While Rajguru uses melodrama to thwart Neeta's expectations, Gangopadhyay uses linear realist narrative to depict Labonyo's struggles against a patriarchal society's constricting folds. Neeta's death both incorporates and challenges melodrama's conventions and is different from Roy's 'epic-lyric' mode of presentation that connects the compulsions of the self to the larger collective struggle. For Rajguru, political resolutions do not reflect the trauma and human predicament of the partition while Roy is constantly striving to achieve a connection between the two. Roy's construction of a participatory public sphere for the refugee woman is negated by both Gangopadhyay and Rajguru; yet all the texts are dominated by the figure of the refugee women and the enunciation of their failures and successes. The implied readership of their novels, their own locality and gender as well as their political affiliations or lack of them may have contributed to such different representations of women and labour in the colonies. Yet they are all united in revealing the human cost of partition's upheaval. That is the realization too in the responses of women who have survived partition's trauma and achieved a life. Homelessness is now complete. Usharani Saha, a 62 year-old resident of Bapuji Colony, no longer remembers her village in Barisal.

> We are Calcuttans now. My father had learnt to walk through the city. I learnt from him. I was only a child then. I no longer want to remember those days of struggle – the early days of the colony, living in tin roofed houses. During the rains the culvert would flood and big fishes swam into our courtyard. Bapuji Nagar Colony was full of tamarind trees, home to many ghosts. Those were the days, but they are gone…thank goodness.[77]

In the complex reformulations of their living and working spaces, the women often form a community (Roy) or disintegrate through death or silence (Rajguru, Gangopadhyay). These narratives complicate the universalist categories of *progress* and *nation building* that has marked Bengali literature in the aftermath of the partition.[78] Terms such as these oversimplify the struggle the refugee women undergo and present a simplified and distorted picture of the contribution they make to that struggle. Ritwik Ghatak is able to address the transformation as well as the predicament of Neeta in the mythic way by showing it in the material context of rootlessness. His film, for example, adds other dimensions to the question of modernism with the layered soundtrack, the *agomoni* songs, as well as the visual symbol of the colony hutment in the frames of his film. The refugee woman's historical predicament is also implicated in the question of what one remembers and what one chooses to forget. Neeta's wild cry, 'I want to live' that rip through the film is a moment of epiphany as it echoes the desire of all the rootless and displaced people not only of the subcontinent but through all times: in that instant, the particular becomes the universal. The long line of girls that walk the colony roads, on way to work is thus not a symbol of failure, but of the enduring human spirit. These colony fictions as well as the film by Ghatak, playfully reinstates memory in the form of myths; narrative and memory intertwine to turn people's minds to the past, to what one has left behind, and recreate, in a sublimely nostalgic way, what Ashis Nandy calls 'a sense of loss' that modernity is devoid of. The texts resist the 'objectification of suffering and sufferers' not by exiling emotions but by refusing to do away with human emotions.[79] By focusing on memory and counter-memory and not on the event of the partition, these texts create mythic figures of refugee women who are uniquely 'contra–modern.'[80] If postcolonialism is to be found not only in theory but also in 'the area of affects' and 'in the area of actions (and that includes speech acts and performatives)' then surely the above texts teach one both the 'singular' and the 'unverifiable'.[81] Therein lies their ephemeral circuitous success.

Endnotes

1 Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967,* 166.

2 Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, 167. The problem of occupation of Muslim properties come out in a report on an Assembly debate of Janab Muhammed Khuda Bukshi's comment on the Governor's address that regretted the lack of government policy 'in regard to the land (owned by Muslims) forcibly occupied by East Bengali refugees.' *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27 September 1950.

3 Pranati Chaudhuri, 'Refugees in West Bengal: A Study of the Growth and Distribution of Refugee Settlements Within the CMD', 4.

4 The term old migrants denoted those refugees who came to West Bengal between October 1946 and March 1958. See Anasua Basu Raychaudhury, *Life After Partition*: *A Study on the Reconstruction of Lives in West Bengal, www.sasnet.lu.se/EASAS.papers/33.anasuaBasuray.pdf* accessed on 11 April 2014.

5 We see this history meticulously documented in numerous testaments like Anil Sinha's memoir *Paschimbonger Udvastu Uponibesh* (The Refugee Colonies of West Bengal, 1995), Indubaran Ganguly's *Colonysmriti* (Memories of a Colony, 1997), Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay's *Udvastu* (The Uprooted, 1970) and Manas Ray's *Growing up Refugee* (2002) that bring out the struggles faced by the displaced Hindus in West Bengal.

6 Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, 'Problems of West Bengal after the Partition,' in *Two Years Since Independence*, 11–12 states that 'the magnitude of the problems, which confront West Bengal will be apparent when one cares to look into the terrible legacies, which we have inherited from the partition. Partition, itself, is a tortuous process; and when a country is partitioned, its political, administrative and economic consequences cannot but be far-reaching....According to the 1941 census, the density of population per square mile is 751; this figure has since gone up [to] 950 (approx). Even without taking into account the refugees from East Bengal, West Bengal was the most densely populated province in India. It must be remembered that large number of refugees have migrated and more of the10 million Hindus in East Bengal may move in some day.'

7 Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty, *Prantik Manob (The Marginal Men)*, 18-19. Translation mine.

8 Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty, *Marginal Men,* 19.

9 See the report (no date probably 1951) of the Bengal Rehabilitation Organisation (President S.P. Mookerjee) titled 'The tragedy of East Bengal Hindus and how to resettle and rehabilitate them' that alleged the 'Muslims have found a real ally in the Government of West Bengal who in their zeal to show off the secular character of the state are going to the other extreme of giving preferential treatment to the Muslims, while their attitude towards the Hindu refugees has been marked by a callous disregard.' Published by Charu Chandra Roy who was a member of East Bengal Relief Committee from 91, Dharmatolla Street.

10 H. Alexander, *New Citizens of India*, 74–82.

11 See West Bengal *Assembly Proceedings*, vols, II and III, Second and Third Sessions, 1950–51. Also, Samir Kumar Das, 'Refugee Crisis: Responses of the Government of West Bengal' in Pradip Kumar Bose, ed., *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Processes and Contested Identities*, 13–14.

12 Renuka Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 156. Also her article 'Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons', *Renuka Ray: Speeches and Writings by Her (1957–67)*, Serial Number 34, 2, in which she lists the process by which rehabilitation finance was allotted to the state: 'The entire finance had to come from the Central Government and the State Government's Rehabilitation Department acts as an agency for executing the work. The procedure adopted has been for the Central Rehabilitation Ministry to examine in detail each individual scheme for rehabilitation, however small the expenditure incurred, before these are sanctioned….. The sanction for schemes over a given limit has again to have the approval of the Standing Expenditure Committee of the Finance Ministry. This involved procedure has meant long

delays, even the drastic curtailment or dropping of schemes. The lack of knowledge of actual conditions obtaining in the locality by Central sanctioning authorities led to voluminous correspondence while refugees waited for rehabilitation.'

13 Ashoka Gupta, 'A Note on Rehabilitation of Refugees From East Pakistan' (1964), *Ashoka Gupta Papers/Correspondences exchanged with Rehabilitation Ministry and Others regarding Relief and Rehabilitation*, Sub File 1, 194–96: 'Starting with the Noakhali riots in October 1946, the influx of refugees from East Pakistan continued in spurts and by the end of 1951, 28 lakh Hindus had crossed the border and entered West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. By the end of 1956, the total figure came up to 39.84 lakh. In addition to this number, a large number of persons, approximately, another 30 lakh had also crossed the border within this period but did not register themselves as refugees. Therefore the total figure comes up to 69 lakh even on moderate estimation.' The government estimate at the end of 1956 was 35–36 lakh. See *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 9, May 1955 about M.C. Khanna's statement under the headline 'Resettlement Problem of East Bengal D.P.'s very Difficult.'

14 This classification is from Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay, *Udvastu*, 22. See also *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 25 March 1950: 'A new scheme for speedy dispersal of refugees from station platforms has been put into operation by the government. According to this scheme, the refugees on arrival are divided into three classes: those who have nowhere to go are given white tickets and become charges of the government, those with relatives and friends in Calcutta and adjoining areas needing temporary relief are given blue tickets while others who can go places of their choice are given red tickets.' However, the colour ticket scheme was impossible to maintain as the number of refugees swelled in 1952, with the introduction of passports between India and East Pakistan.

15 *Memorandum on the Rehabilitation of Refugees from Eastern Bengal*: issued by The East Bengal Relief Committee, Booklet, 1953, *Meghnad Saha: Papers and Correspondences received by M.N. Saha during his tenure as Member of Parliament regarding East Bengal Refugee Rehabilitation*, Instalment VII, Sub File 6, 328. The first statistical data of displaced people with earlier occupations is only made in 1951. The data included one lakh families of cultivators (5 lakh people), 2.5 lakh families of about 10 lakh whose occupations were in industries or services, about 50,000 families of nearly 2,50,000 persons were in miscellaneous occupations while there were about 50,000 families or near 2,50,000 persons who had no occupation in East Bengal. See *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 16 March 1951.

16 Hiranmay Bandopadhyay, *Udvastu*, 97–98.

17 Pranati Chaudhuri, *Refugees in West Bengal*, 35–36.

18 On 21 March 1951, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported Dr B.C. Roy's speech in the West Bengal Assembly on the Eviction Bill where he stated: 'The refugees were found in occupation of four types of lands. They were found, for instance, in occupying plots of land, the market price of which ranged between two to seven thousand per cottah. Secondly, they were occupying lands which either belonged to other refugees or poor men who themselves wanted to build on these plots their own houses for living. Thirdly, they were also found in occupying lands which were the main source of income of their original owners. The land either was a kitchen garden or had a tank in the area. Fourthly, they were also in occupation of lands which were lying fallow or were wastelands, the valuation of which ordinarily not exceed more than Rs 150 per cottah.'

19 Regularization of squatter colonies was steeped in problems. See Press Statement, *Meghnad*

Saha: Papers and Correspondences received by M.N. Saha during his tenure as Member of Parliament regarding East Bengal Refugee Rehabilitation, Installment VII, Sub File 6, 1952–55, 31: 'The way in which the work of regularization has been undertaken will, we are afraid, defeat its own purpose. Firstly, no decision has been taken with regard to the price of the land on which the refugees have constructed their houses. Moreover, no provision has been made for land occupied by public institutions, public places of worship or for land by roads and public thoroughfares in these colonies. The scheme prepared by the government now compels an individual refugee household to pay for more land than they have actually occupied.' Various central governmental reports like the Report of the Fact Finding Committee (1953) and by the Committee of Ministers (1954) looked at the residual problems of rehabilitation in the state as did the Report and Recommendations of the Government of West Bengal (1967). Squatter colonies were categorized as government-sponsored colonies, Pre-1951 squatter colonies, Approved Post-1950 squatter colonies, Pre-1971 squatter colonies, and Post-1971 squatter colonies according to land acquisition/ land transfer proceedings. See, *Manual of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation*, vol., I, Government of West Bengal, 1998, 156.

20 Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay gives the following numbers in government camps in the first few months of 1950, Hiranmay Bandopadhyay, *Udvastu*, 92–93:

January 1950 - 1150 people
February - 1,002
March - 75,596
April - 14,960
May - 27,440

21 Government estimates of refugee influx over time from East Bengal are:

1946 to 1952	25.18 lakh
1953	0.16 lakh
1954	1.04 lakh
1955	2.12 lakh
1956	2.47 lakh
1957	0.04 lakh
Up to 31 March 1958	0.01 lakh.

Figures from *Report of the Working Group on the Residual Problem of Rehabilitation in West Bengal*, Ministry of Supply and Rehabilitation, March 1976.

22 Anil Sinha, *Paschimbonger Udvastu Uponibesh*, 10–11.

23 Report and Recommendations on the work of rehabilitation in the eastern zone, *Meghnad Saha: Papers and Correspondences received by M. N. Saha during his tenure as MP regarding East Bengal Refugee Rehabilitation, 1952–55*, Installment VII, Sub File 6, 236.

24 *The Statesman*, 31 October 1954. See also *Jugantar*, 18 October 1954 for an appalling incident of refugees with valid migration certificates in Sealdah railway station being evicted from the platforms as well as from the passenger waiting rooms.

25 Quoted in M.S. Moitra, 'Shelter: Slums and Squatter Settlements' in *Calcutta's Urban Future: Agonies From the Past and Prospects for the Future*, 207.

26 Press Statement by parliamentarians Meghnad Saha and Tridib Chowdhury on the question

of Refugee Rehabilitation in the Eastern Regions, no date, *Meghnad Saha: Papers and Correspondences*, Installment VII, Sub File 6, 1952–55, 303. See also Renuka Ray's article, 'And Still They Come', *The Statesman*, 23, January 23 1958, xi, in which she states: 'In West Bengal about 2 million displaced persons have been given assistance to the tune of about 40 crore….whereas in Punjab and in the western region the amount is about 350 crore.' The difference in government response to the refugee crisis in the West and the East is indirectly borne out by a publication of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, titled *Millions On the Move: The Aftermath of Partition,* n.d. which stated that cooked food was dropped by RIAF planes over Lyallpur, Dhabhasinghwala, Balloki headworks and Bhai Pheru (5) while medicines, doctors and vaccines were rushed by air and motor transport. About 673 refugee trains were run between 27 August to 6 November 1947 and they were responsible for the movement of over 2,300,000 refugees inside India and across the border. 'Out of a total area of 4,500,000 acres abandoned by Muslims in East Punjab, 3,300,000 acres are cultivable, of these 1,250,000 acres have been allotted and over 177,000 families have been settled' on them by the end of 1947. (2) What is remarkable in this was the speed with which such huge operations were undertaken. In contrast, the relief and rehabilitation work in West Bengal operated in fits and starts; in many instances allotted funds were sent back, corruption was rampant and rehabilitation promises remained unfulfilled.

27 Report and Recommendations on the work of Rehabilitation in the Eastern Zone, probably 14 June 1954, *Meghnad Saha: Papers and Correspondences*, Installment VII, Sub File 6, 1952–55, 43.

28 Throughout the months of 1950s we see reports in Calcutta newspapers of major clashes between refugees and government personnel in various camps about lack of ration, for instance at the camp in Sodepur, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 October 1950.

29 Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'The East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson in Survival' in Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed., *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. II, 74.

30 Benoy Ghosh, 'Metropolitan Mon' (1963), *Metropolitan Mon O Modhyobityo Bidroho* (The Metropolitan Mind and Middle Class Rebellion), 67. Translation mine. Also Pabitra Giri, 'Urbanisation of West Bengal, 1951-1991', *EPW,* 21 November 1998, 3033–34 that states that the neighbouring districts of Calcutta namely 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hoogly, Burdwan and Darjeeling showed high percentages of urbanization as a result of refugee concentration.

31 Moinak Biswas, 'The City and The Real: *Chinnamul* and the Left Cultural Movement in the 1940's' in Preben Kaarsholm, ed., *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience*, 53.

32 Amit Chaudhuri, *Calcutta: Two Years in the City*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013, 80.

33 Moinak Biswas, 'The City and the Real', 40. See Shobha Sen's reminiscences about the film in her autobiography, *Smaraney, Bismaraney: Nabanno Theke Lal Durgo*, 28–29.

34 Interview given by Porimal Home to the author, Bijoygarh Colony, Calcutta, 5 June 2006.

35 Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*, 27.

36 Manas Ray, 'Growing Up Refugee', *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 53, 152. A modified version of this article can be found in Anjali Gera-Roy and Nandi Bhatia eds. *Partitioned Lives: Narratives of Home, Displacement and Resettlement*, 116–45.

[37] Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey*, 20.

[38] Monindro Roy, 'Ekhoni Ekhane' in Arun Sen ed. *Kobitar Kolkata*, 57. Translation mine. Poets like Buddhadev Bose, Samar Sen, Bishnu Dey, Premendra Mitra, Subhash Mukhopadhyay Biren Chattopadhyay and Monindro Roy were the new generation poets who, though deeply influenced by Tagore, directly revolted against his legacy. Their poems can be seen as a body of urban, neo–realist poetry.

[39] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, 117

[40] Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism and the Colonial Uncanny*, 227, defines 'public space' in the context of colonial modernity as a space that 'does not simply refer to residual space outside home, but to this 'outside' as a carefully mediated physical and social construction. Calcutta's public spaces were produced at the cross section of several discourses and social practices that brought together, in conflictual relationship questions of the immediate community and the imagined community of the nation.'

[41] Rachel Weber, 'Re (creating) the Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 2:2, 75. I agree with Weber that a rigid demarcation of space and power does not quite catch the complex ways refugee women negotiated domesticity and patriarchal norms.

[42] Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*, 18.

[43] Aamir R. Mufti, 'A Greater Story-writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India', in Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan (eds.), *Subaltern Studies* XI, 5.

[44] Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal*, 91.

[45] See Introduction to Yota Batsaki, *Fictions of Knowledge: Fact, Evidence, Doubt*, 2.

[46] Rachel Weber, 'Re(creating) the Home', 203.

[47] See Introduction to 'Unemployment Among Women in West Bengal', Government of West Bengal, 1, which states: 'In 1953, the average number of monthly women registrants with the employment exchange of India was 4,256 per month. While in 1957 it rose to 8,563 per month, i.e., there was a 100 per cent increase during the last five years.' In the 1950 and 60, West Bengal witnessed rapid political polarization and popular protests involving students, industrial workers and women. Participants in marches criticized the Congress government for price rise or tram fares or for a hike in teachers' salaries.

[48] Interview of Rani Dasgupta in Chitrita Bandopadhyay, ed., *Shomoyer Upokoron: Meyeder Smritikatha*, 129. Translation mine.

[49] Ashok Mitra, 'Take A Girl Like Her,' *Calcutta Diary*, 20.

[50] See Sunanda Shikdar, *Dayamoyeer Katha*, 27–29. Also the Census Report of 1951 stated that the women migrants had a high rate of literacy. In the Calcutta Industrial Region, women born in East Bengal were: 5.5 per cent (Above Degree), 8.1 per cent (Below Degree), 26.1 per cent (Below Matric) and 60.3 per cent illiterate. This is comparable to women born in the city, who had 1.2 per cent (Above Degree), 3.6 per cent (Below Degree), 13.3 per cent (Below Matric) and 81.9 per cent illiterate, Census of India (Bengal), Paper 6 (1955), *Working Population in Calcutta Industrial Region: Distribution by Industry, Place of Birth and Educational Attainment*, Calcutta, 1958, ii. See also Recollections of Renuka Ray, *Renuka*

Ray: Speeches and Writings by Her (1957–67), Serial number 74, 7, where she recollects her early childhood in East Bengal: 'My parents lived in district towns where girls' schools did not exist. My sister Neeta and I were taught at home for the first few years and then as I was older I was sent away to boarding school at the Loreto Convent at Calcutta.' Education was also not uncommon among the middle and upper class Muslim women. See, Soofia Kemal, 'Ekaley Amader Kaal,' in *Soofia Kemal Rochonasongroho*, vol.1, 580–82.

51 Dipesh Chakraborty, 'Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling' in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, 120.

52 Sabitri Roy, *Bwadwip*, 17. All translated portions of the text are mine.

53 Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, considered Bengal's first modern novelist, uses the trope of the nation as mother in *Anandamath* (1882). Tagore uses similar imageries in his Swadeshi (1905) era songs and critiques it in his later novels like *Gora* (1910) and *Ghare Baire* (1916).

54 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*: *An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962) where he says, in the context of eighteenth and nineteenth century European writings, that the line between private and public sphere extended right through the 'conjugal family's intimate domain', which he calls *intimsphäre* (28). Habermas makes a distinction between the private realm, the public sphere in the political realm (that includes the world of letters and market of culture productions/ 'towns') and lastly, the sphere of public authority. I am using his idea of the public sphere as expressed in the social and economic relations of a city. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*: *An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 28, a pdf text available at pages.uoregon.edu accessed on 25 July 2014. A critique of Habermas's notion can be found in Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*, to contextualize colonial modernity in the nineteenth century.

55 Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*, 16.

56 Sudeshna Banerjee, 'Displacement within Displacement: The Crisis of Old Age in the Refugee Colonies of Calcutta,' in *Studies in History*, 19: 2, 211. See Adhir Biswas, *Deshbhager Smriti*, 4 vols. for an account of his father as a refugee in old age in the city and the various odd jobs he did that included begging. Also the play *Notun Ihudi* (1953) by Salil Sen.

57 Sudeshna Banerjee, 'Displacement within Displacement', 210–11

58 Gargi Chakravartty, *Coming Out,* 83.

59 Jyotirindranath Nandi, *Baro Ghar Ek Uthon*, 281: 'This is the age of women. It is not possible to think about honour and shame and prestige, to sit back and relax. No girl is able to sit at home. They will have to work, till they get married.' (Translation mine) Manik Bandopadhyay's *Sorbojonin* (1952) and Buddhadev Bose's *Aynar Modhey Eka* (1968) also deal with the Hindu refugee women's experiences in the post-partition years.

60 Sumit Sarkar, 'Colonial Times: Clocks and Kali-yuga' in *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History*, 19.

61 The exodus of Muslims from Calcutta between 1941 and 1951 is an indication of this community cleansing that happened throughout the city. In 1941, there was 32.5 per cent Muslims to a Hindu population of 1,531,512. In 1951, it came down to 14.4 per cent of a Hindu population of 2,125,907. See *Census of India* (1951), vol., VI, Part II: Calcutta City, Calcutta, 1954, xv. See also Manas Ray, 'Growing up Refugee,' where he says of the

colony inhabitants: 'The vast majority of those who came were middle-class people with some urban exposure. Those who did not fall in this bracket – fishermen, carpenters, hut-builders, masons, barbers – tended to concentrate in two adjacent wards lying at one end of the locality….In retrospect, it seems amazing how little I knew of that world, how subtle and comprehensive was the process of normalization of divisions.'

62 Veena Das, 'Citizenship as a Claim or Stories of Dwelling and Belonging among the Urban Poor,' B.R. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture, 2010, 5. Das makes a distinction between custom and law and how underlying these notions there are claims that derive from 'diffused notions about preserving life' that mark the existence of slums and squatter colonies. The fictions I discuss are epitomes of the claim to life by refugees in the city.

63 Ritwik Ghatak, S. Dasgupta et al (eds), *Face to Face: Conversations with the Master 1962-1977*, 111. Haraprashad, a character in Ghatak's film *Subarnarekha* (1962) utters almost identical words.

64 Rajguru's interview to the author, Calcutta, June 2006. Rajguru passed away in the summer of 2014 as I was writing this book.

65 Shaktipada Rajguru, *Meghey Dhaka Tara*, 13–14. All translations from the text are mine.

66 Ashish Rajadhakshya, *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic*, 4.

67 Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Modern Subjects: Egyptian Melodrama and Postcolonial Differences' in ed. Timothy Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity*, 89.

68 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 126.

69 Veena Das, 'The Making Of Modernity: Gender and Time in Indian Cinema' in *Questions of Modernity*, 184.

70 Sunil Gangopadhyay, *Arjun*. English translation by Chitrita Bannerjee.

71 Radhavallabh Tripathi, 'Aesthetics of the Mahabharata: Traditional Interpretations' in *Mahabharata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*, 87–88.

72 Debali Mookerjea-Leonard, 'The Diminished Man: Partition and Transcendental Homelessness' in *Partitioned Lives: Narratives of Home, Displacement, and Resettlement*, 62.

73 The warrior Arjun's ambiguity can be seen in the multifarious disguises and gender roles he assumes as a dancing teacher or as a charioteer during his exile. Athough a warrior, in the battlefield of Kurukshetra he is paralyzed into inaction. He listens to Krishna's discourse and counsel yet forgets it all. See D. Venkat Rao, 'Learning in the Labyrinth: Irony, Contingency and the Question of Responsibility in the Texts of *The Mahabharata*', in *Reflections and Variations on The Mahabharata*, 164.

74 Sam Rohdie, *Promised Lands: Cinema, Geography, Modernism*, 25.

75 Aamir R. Mufti, 'A Greater Story-writer,' 7.

76 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 52.

77 Interview of Usharani Saha at Bapuji Nagar, June 2006 to the author.

78 See the first chapter for a discussion of some of these texts that foregrounded the ideas of progress, although never in straightforward terms.

79 Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey*, 119: 'History lies not by misrepresenting reality but by exiling emotions. Memories, and the myths that enshrine them, stand witness by refusing

to discard human subjectivity. Myths are not people's history or alternative history, their job is to resist history and resist the objectification of suffering and sufferers in the name of objectivity.'

80 The author uses the term after Rashmi Doraiswamy, 'The Panoramic Vision and the Descent of Darkness: Issues of Contra-Modernity' in Manju Jain, ed., *Narratives of Indian Cinema*, 69–84.

81 Aniket Jaaware, 'Of demons and angels and historical humans: some events and questions in translation and post-colonial theory' in *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader*, eds. Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri, London, 2011, 187.

4

From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi: Refugee Rehabilitation in Bangla Partition Fictions

They come to this door: Go away!
They go there: Shoo them away!
Oh queen, oh my queen,
All over your kingdom,
The doomed children
Of menial mothers
Arrive in a swarm.
Oh the shame! The shame!

Subhash Mukhopadhyay, *Thakurmar Jhuli* [1]

I

When India's partition took place in 1947 East Bengal had a sizeable Hindu population. In the first few months about 344,000 refugees came into West Bengal, many of them middle class people who had jobs in West Bengal or some family connections to sustain them.[2] Here, there was no equal exchange of population as in Punjab because many believed that the partition was a temporary affair. However, in the months that followed increasing communal tensions in East Pakistan resulted in a steady arrival of Hindus in West Bengal while some Muslims decided either to leave or to relocate in safer localities where there was a substantial population of co-religionists, especially in the border areas. With every successive migration, there was, therefore, a massive population pressure on the state. To prevent further influx of refugees in the months after the country was divided, a number of government initiatives were undertaken to see that the minorities in East Pakistan remained where they were. In April 1948, an Inter-Dominion conference was held in Calcutta where the Rehabilitation Ministers of West Bengal and Pakistan declared their intention to take possible steps to prevent an exodus. It was decided to establish Minority Boards at the provincial and local levels in both countries to

redress grievances and as a confidence building measure. Another Inter-Dominion conference took place in December 1948 to follow up on these actions.[3]

These measures, however, largely failed to stem the waves of refugees coming into West Bengal. Although their decision to leave was based on a set of complex calculations, a number of reasons, economic and political, made the Hindus apprehensive about living on in East Pakistan. A spokesman of the East Bengal Minority Committee claimed that nearly 2.5 lakh members of minority communities had already left for the Indian Union (*Hindustan Standard*, 28 March 1948) amidst growing allegations of atrocities on Hindu villagers in various districts like Sylhet (*Amrita Bazar Patrika,* 20 November 1949). By August 1949, acute food shortage in large areas of Tippera and some other districts in East Pakistan added to the exodus. Coupled with this was the passage of the East Bengal Evacuees (Administration of Property) Act (1949) that enabled the Pakistan government to confiscate properties of evacuees. This fuelled Hindu apprehension about their security in Pakistan. Despite the risk that their assets would be seized, many left while others tried to exchange their properties with Muslims arriving from India. In the early months of 1950, when serious riots engulfed certain areas of Bagerhat subdivision of Khulna and parts of Rajshahi and Barisal, the Indian Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, made a statement in Parliament about the 'grim East Bengal tragedy.'[4] Throughout February and March, newspapers in Calcutta reported widespread looting and arson in Chittagong and Barisal. Steamers and trains carrying fleeing people were raided and looted by Ansars, a semi official paramilitary Pakistani force that was formed to protect the borders.[5] Photographs began to appear on the front pages of national dailies of worn-out men, women and children walking along railway lines, detained at Darshana (the last outpost before reaching West Bengal) or huddling on the platforms at the Bongaon and Sealdah stations with their meagre belongings piled next to them. By March-end of the same year, over 250,000 refugees had entered West Bengal by air, river and land routes while special steamers were requisitioned by Dr B.C. Ray, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, to bring stranded East Bengal refugees from Khulna, Narayangunj, Chandpur and Barisal (*Hindustan Standard*, 14 April 1950).

The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (23 March 1950) announced that

> people from villages in districts like Dacca, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Bogra and Rangpur say that large scale movement of Hindus have started. Cattle, stacked paddy and corn, plough and the land offer no more lure to them to keep to their village homes…

> village smiths, kavirajs, day-labourers, carpenters, namasudras, santhals – in fact every Hindu in Eastern Pakistan is trying to move out.

In April that year, a pact was signed between the prime ministers of the two countries to create a sense of security among the minorities but the Nehru-Liaquat Pact was unable to stop the attacks on minorities and throughout the early 1950s the exodus continued. On 30 March 1951, A. Mitra, Superintendent of Census Operations, West Bengal, stated that the total number of people who declared themselves as Displaced in the state was 2,117,896. The number was soon to swell with near-famine conditions in parts of East Bengal like Khulna and the introduction of the proposed passport system in October 1952. By November, Renuka Ray, State Relief and Rehabilitation Minister, reported that 27 lakh refugees were living in West Bengal (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 November 1954).

The government's inability to tackle such heavy exodus was openly admitted in official circles[6] especially since 1952 the refugees were the lower caste Namasudras and Poundra-Kshatriyas who were agriculturists and who would require some form of land to be resettled.[7] Refugees who came immediately after the partition could rehabilitate themselves with very little government help. But after 1952, it was mainly the small farmers, traders and artisans who began to migrate. This considerably changed the way the state and union governments looked at rehabilitation. Earlier the effort was to provide relief and rehabilitation to refugees fleeing communal disturbances (especially after the Calcutta and Noakhali riots). Immediately after the country was divided, the middle class and white collared population who came to the state did not require large scale rehabilitation, as they were sufficiently solvent to relocate by their own efforts. After 1952, the demographic and occupational character of the refugees changed and relief now provided by government agencies was more in the context of displacement and not in the context of riots as was the case earlier. This led to a major alteration in the state's relief policies of the 1950s. Classification of refugees was now done more in terms of their occupations since agriculturist refugees with strong ties to land would need land to make a living.[8] In an article titled 'Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons' that Renuka Ray, Rehabilitation Minister in the West Bengal Cabinet wrote in 1958, this idea was repeatedly stressed: '…With the increasing influx, by 1954, it was found that it was no longer possible to fit in the new comers' for West Bengal was a state

> which since partition is 1/3 in its original size with a density of 806 per sq. mile, which is one of the highest in India and the world. It

> must also be remembered that the new comers have come to a state whose economy has suffered even before partition as a consequence of a major famine in 1943 and the impact of the war and turmoil that took place on the eve of Independence.[9]

Muslim evacuee property in West Bengal was negligible as most Muslim migrants were labourers and artisans and numbered much less than in Punjab.[10] Calcutta, the capital city, was stretched to its limits with the sheer numerical strength of the refugees who changed many semi-urban areas into towns.[11] Partition had also disrupted the regional economy, particularly the jute sector, and the West Bengal government claimed that it was unable to take in the burden of the continued influx. The state's food situation was precarious throughout 1957 and 1958. Acute unemployment, rising prices of essential commodities and food shortage were also adding to the perception that the state had taken more than its fair share of burden. So by 1954, the West Bengal government increasingly took the view that the 'refugee problem' was not its sole responsibility and must be shared by the central government as well as by the neighbouring states. The East Bengal Relief Committee, chaired by Dr Meghnad Saha, participating in a conference held at the West Bengal Government Secretariat on 3 December 1953 (presided over by Ajit Prasad Jain) pointed out caustically in a memorandum that 'the Government of India should proclaim with respect to East Bengal refugees the same policy as the case of West Punjab refugees.' In November the next year, Meghnad Saha urged Nehru to take up the State's Rehabilitation portfolio as 'refugee rehabilitation has completely failed in Eastern regions.'[12]

The new Union Relief and Rehabilitation Minister Meher Chand Khanna was soon to announce that the resettlement problem of displaced people in West Bengal was 'far more complex than that of Punjab.'[13] By June 1955, in a meeting of the National Development Council, plans were set out for resettling refugees outside West Bengal with six eastern states accommodating 3 million refugees. But rehabilitation schemes were often ill-conceived and efforts to send refugees outside the state mismanaged. On 13 August 1957, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported 'trenchant' criticisms in the Lok Sabha 'about slow progress of rehabilitation of East Bengal displaced persons……. delays in execution of schemes, [and the] lack of proper planning' by the rehabilitation ministry. By 1957, the Union Minister was to announce that there was no more room for refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal.[14] In spite of opposition by various Left parties to send refugees outside the state, efforts were made to dispatch batches of refugees to Bihar, Orissa and Assam.[15] These, however, were largely unsuccessful and there were a large number

of deserters from camps in Orissa and Bihar.[16] In 1956, families were sent to be resettled in the Andaman Islands and the government promised that soon '20,000 acres of forest land are to be cleared and made available for 4,000 agriculturist families from the mainland.'[17]

The Dandakaranya rehabilitation plan was conceived in early 1956 to resettle the East Pakistani refugees as West Bengal was reeling under the huge burden of refugee influx. At the National Development Council meeting in June 1957, it was formally decided to develop Dandakaranya as a place for permanent resettlement (not rehabilitation) of displaced people.[18] Right from the onset, it was clear that by 'rehabilitation' the government meant resettlement 'in the narrower economic sense' while refugees were termed 'displaced persons', who were categorized into three classes.[19] The authorities were well aware of the magnitude of the task. In a note circulated among members of parliament on the proposed Dandakaranya scheme, it was stated that an autonomous central authority be set up to oversee the project as the area, in large part, was covered by thick primeval forests. An overall development scheme would be necessary before refugees could be rehabilitated. State Minister Renuka Ray was also of the same opinion.'[20] In the Lok Sabha, acrimonious debates about the proposal were common as 'the land in Koraput and Malkangiri area is of very poor quality' and 'the fallow, waste and waterlogged lands available in West Bengal could be profitably developed and distributed.'[21] Left parties saw little merit in the scheme and often termed the plans as 'reckless' and warned the government against wasting much needed funds on it.[22]

Very soon, an aerial survey was undertaken to assess the potentialities of the region that stretched between Koraput and Kalahandi districts in Orissa, Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh and parts of Andhra Pradesh. Although the isolated Dandakaranya, with its self-sufficient tribal population, inaccessible hilly tracts and uneven rainfall was not conducive to resettling large numbers of agriculturists who were used to a riverine land and a wet climate, the area's low population density was a crucial factor in its choice as a site for refugee rehabilitation.[23] The two large refugee organizations, the United Central Refugee Council and Shara Bangla Bastuhara Samiti were vociferous in their protests against the Dandakaranya project, especially at the government's decision to wind up all camps in West Bengal by July 1959 and thereby forcing many refugees to go to there, often against their will.[24] By August end of 1957, the Government of India had decided to entrust the development of the entire Dandakaranya scheme to the Union Rehabilitation Ministry instead of putting it to an autonomous body.

On July 1958, at the Rehabilitation Ministers' Conference, it was decided that displaced families would start going to Dandakaranya from January next

year. However, as opposition to resettlement of refugees outside West Bengal by various Left parties continued, the government decided to give the refugees the options of either going to Dandakaranya or leaving the government-aided camps after taking a lump sum of three months' dole. The strident note on which the Dandakaranya rehabilitation project was promoted by the media as well as in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha debates are noteworthy.[25] The rehabilitation minister urged officials to make the scheme a success because it was the 'greatest national cause to which one and all owe their duty' (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 November 1958). Rehabilitation was now being correlated with the general development of the country and often the government accused the Left parties of undermining this by taking up the refugees' cause. However, regardless of opposition, the rehabilitation process was soon underway and the refugees were sent from camps in West Bengal by train to Raipur. From Raipur, they came to transit camps in a place called Mana and to worksite camps where they worked on land reclamation and road building. From these camps they were finally taken to the villages for permanent settlement.[26]

Saibal Kumar Gupta was the Chairman of the Dandakaranya Development Authority for 10 months in 1963–64. After he quit his post, he wrote a series of articles in *The Economic Weekly* to evaluate the rehabilitation programmes that were undertaken from 1959 onwards when the first batch of refugees arrived. These articles are worth quoting extensively because they are in many respects an important assessment of what happened in Dandakaranya in the name of rehabilitation. Written with facts gleaned from government reports and his own observations, S.K. Gupta's articles have immense importance because they blew the lid off on one of the most prominent rehabilitation projects undertaken in the post–partition years in India. The series of three articles begins on a sombre note:

> The development of Dandakaranya was undertaken to solve an almost intractable human problem – the rehabilitation of a large number of refugees who were uprooted from their homeland in East Pakistan, victims of a political decision to divide the country in which they were not consulted…
>
> Dandakaranya was expected to provide a home for the residuary refugee population in camps or elsewhere for whom there was supposed to be no more room in West Bengal. More than twenty-two crores of rupees have already been spent and further expenditures are in the offing but barely 7,000 families have been given rehabilitation of a sort in the course of five or six years. What is the end result of

> all this expenditure of time and money? What are the prospects? It is time that a proper assessment was made and people saw Dandakaranya without any blinkers.
>
> What I saw myself and learnt on further enquiry caused me profound disquiet. I have decided to share my disquiet with the public, not to cast reflections or start a polemic, but so that if things are what I believe they are, immediate actions may be taken to set things right. Human distress on a large scale is much too serious a matter to be passed over in silence either to feed official complacency or to save reputations. [27]

In Dandakaranya, the scheme was simple: a plot of 6.5 hectares was given to each family and loans were disbursed for building houses and purchase of bullocks and agricultural implements. But it was clear from the start that the refugees had to 'make do with the worst lands, hitherto regarded as uncultivable' and Gupta noted that in Pharasgaon zone, '6% of the plots were basically unfit for agriculture, 32% were poor and sub-marginal, 53% could be of medium quality if their moisture retention capacity could be improved, and only 9% were of good quality.'[28] Lack of sustainable irrigation, cost of manure and shortage of adults working on fields (from each family) were other reasons why agricultural rehabilitation got off to a poor start. Gupta was also clear that the absence of tenancy rights over the plots failed to create a sense of responsibility among the refugees.

> The displaced persons have not yet had tenancy rights secured by the grant of *pattas* because the Ministry is as yet unable to decide whether the cost of reclamation and development of agricultural land should be charged to the settler. It would be a cruel joke if people uprooted from East Bengal who have lost all their assets are made to pay for the development of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.[29]

The small traders and businessmen among the refugees also faced 'an uphill task.' They were offered a business loan of a thousand rupees and a house-building loan of 2000 and a maximum of three months dole. Within that time they had to earn enough, not only to pay off the loans but also to maintain their families.[30] The infrastructure, promised vociferously by the Indian government, also failed to materialize. Electricity was not available over large areas and there was often an acute shortage of drinking water. The lack of medical services and the poor living conditions led to frequent epidemics with a high rate of child mortality that unsettled the refugees. Dandakaranya, the mythological place of the 'dark forests'

where Rama was exiled, appeared to the new settlers less as a land of hope than a place of banishment. It was not surprising that by 1964, incidents of desertion began to appear in local dailies and also reported in the national press. From Dandakaranya, Marichjhapi was just a step away.[31]

II

The partition of India is commonly understood as a violent territorial and political separation of communities as well as forced evictions and migration of people after communal upheavals. However, partition encompasses much more than the creation of distinct political identities of two nations with accompanying communal clashes and mayhem. For a very large number of people it meant a different experiential reality as they left their homes to reconfigure their identities in a new nation as refugees. The exile and migration formulated changes that were 'the basis for long term practices such as identity, work, memory and inspiration' in many lives.[32] Every member of displaced families had their own experiences of partition, and in their life stories one comes across both resistance and accommodation to the loss of a home and livelihood. The affective dimensions of their pain, trauma and nostalgia that has been banished from India's partition history must be unearthed to give a more nuanced picture of the division that took place in the subcontinent.[33] In Punjab, if the originary moment of partition was marked by physical violence like rape and murders, in East Bengal it was displacement and migration, violence of another kind. This displacement of a whole people cutting across class and caste, followed by rehabilitation or resettlement in a new place, forms one of the important social and cultural processes that one sees in the post–partition years in West Bengal and other parts of Eastern India. This trajectory also forms the basis of refugee memories of the partition and the master narrative of partition uprooting and resettlement that discursively dissolves the socially divisive categories of caste, class and labour and seriously challenge the official notion of a refugee as a 'victim' of forces beyond his or her control.[34] Forced to leave their homes in East Bengal and then persuaded to leave for a resettlement site far away from everything familiar was a recurring experiential reality for many Hindu refugee families in the 1950s and 60s. Even if one assumes that the government aid was adequate for resettlement, the questions that remain are how did the refugees manage to restart their lives in sites that were marginally better than undeveloped tracts of lands? How did they begin their economic activities? Did the women of the family take up an equal burden of labour like the men? What did the children

do especially those who were of school-going age? What happened to older men and women and did they contribute in any way to the family's survival? All these questions and more remain suspended in ether as one takes a look at some of these rehabilitation projects because one can find no adequate answer in the historical archive. It seems the only way to get some understanding of these questions is to look elsewhere for answers. One has to turn one's attention to the imaginative literature of rehabilitation that forms a substantial body in the canon of Bangla fiction in the 1960s and later.

Rehabilitation and resettlement, a form of internal displacement that repeats the processes of partition, become the narrativizing principle of a number of novels that were written in Bengal and were woven around the theme of dislocation. This seems to suggest that these kinds of representations, deliberately looking at fall-outs of the partition other than communal tensions and migrations, are not an accident but a deliberate choice: it is a way in which literature aims at foregrounding questions of citizenship, belonging and identity within the exigencies and frameworks of the modern nation state in the post-partition years. The texts are laying claim to notions of agency and livelihood on behalf of specific groups of people whose inarticulate and unspoken experiences were not the stuff of 'national', 'rational' and 'progressive' history of the new nation.[35] These narratives that use rehabilitation as a motif do not simply approximate the 'reality' of their social and historical contexts in mimetic ways; rather they employ a different exploratory and symbolic perspective that radically reframes the lived realities of the refugees' circumstances. Rehabilitation becomes a narrative core of these texts because resettlement creates a different experiential reality for a large body of people. Issues of home, settlement, livelihood, and work create a new set of literary motifs that reconsider the partition and its consequence, the free nation-state, in critical ways. Moreover, in these novels the refugees come across as agents that successfully contest the stereotypes embedded in official discourse that attributes the failure of refugee rehabilitation to the inherent parochialism of the refugees, their unwillingness to settle outside Bengal and their lack of mobility and enterprise. These narratives then undercut in complex ways the 'representations of the Purbo Bangiyo refugee (that) has remained trapped within predictable categories of *shoronarthi* (seeking refuge), *bastuhara* (homeless) and *udvastu* (uprooted): official terms with which refugees were classified.'[36] Terms such as these, classifying people into categories, hide the other complex aspects of being a refugee – the feelings of exile, dislocation and the lived experience of resettlement. The narrative discourse of displacement that one sees in some of the literary texts of the period is different from the discourse of 'rights' that these governmental terms seem to imply. This dichotomy, between the

state's legal machinery and the actual practices in the resettlement of the refugees can be seen in the critical modes of subjectivity that some of these texts employ: Amiyabhushan Majumdar's *Nirbaash* (The Exile, 1959), Narayan Sanyal's *Aranya Dandak* (The Forest Dandak, 1961) and *Bokultala P.L. Camp* (The P.L. Camp at Bokultala, 1960), Shaktipada Rajguru's *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi* (From Dandak to Marichjhapi, written in 1980–81), and Dulalendu Chattopadhyay's *Ora Ajo Udvastu* (They are Still Refugees, 1983) are texts that look at issues of rehabilitation through the optics of fiction and subvert the notion of refugees as 'victims' of a history they fail to understand and control. Since the novels are all written at different times, various contexts are written into the differences in time and narrative settings. For example, the earlier novels are mainly preoccupied with middle or lower middle class refugees seeking government rehabilitation but Rajguru's novel, written a decade later, is about the Namasudra peasants and artisans who trickle in throughout the years of 1960s. The state's response to this later influx is also very different to its earlier handling of the refugees immediately after the partition.

Amiyabhushan Majumdar (1918–2000) has a number of novels that reflect his complex sense of history and society. *Garh Srikhando* (1957)[37] is a novel that is set far from the urban milieu and can belong to a group of novels in Bangla that consciously evoked the locale and ethnography of a rural underdeveloped marginal people and place.[38] The novel is set in an area in North Bengal and describes the struggles of the Sandar tribesmen, the peasants of the area as well as the feudal Sanyal family, on whose lives the wounds of war, famine, peasant struggles against the jotedars and partition throw long shadows. The canvas of the novel is huge, so is the writer's social consciousness of a large epic span of events and happenings that is implicit in the questions of livelihood and labour of the characters. For example, the effects of the 1943 famine make women like Fatema and Surotan paupers who then turn to illegal rice smuggling for livelihood. The elder Communist son of the Sanyal family, Nriponarayan goes to jail as he is charged with sedition while his wife Sumiti is a symbol of rebellion against the age-old feudal practices of his family. The novel's wide canvas describes a changing Bengal through the years of World War II and is reflective of Amiyabhushan's critical yet humanistic aesthetic at work. His later novel *Nirbaash* is smaller in scale where the theme of refugee-hood has a different aesthetic implication and inflects the earlier literary conventions of *Garh Srikhando*. In *Nirbaash*,[39] the referents of rehabilitation in Dandakaranya are not direct but still visible. The novel, set in 1959 around a camp called Holudmohun, revolves around a woman called Bimala, one of the many camp inmates.

> They have used all sorts of materials to build permanent homes for themselves. Hay, tree leaves, terracotta tiles, waved tin pieces, even the brownish barks of trees. There was a plywood factory nearby. One can buy the rejected bits of ply there but nothing better than barks of trees. The camp inmates have used those too. (6)

The tacky huts are a symbol of the new life of pauperization that the inmates face; making do with what they find marks a new phase of post-partition reality. The 'permanent' homes built with impermanent materials point to the vagaries of refugee-hood marked by depressing poverty and desire for stability. Yet this stability is short-lived: the novel opens with the imminent departure of the camp inmates for Dandakaranya. Some inmates resist this idea of going further away from the land they once called their own.

> At the Holudmohun camp, people were living in an atmosphere of decay that destroyed them slowly and inevitably. If one looked at them it would seem that the only solution was to resettle them in another place. But where? Where was that country?....In Holudmohun camp there were many who felt a deep longing for a country where the mighty Padma flowed like an immense vein. Some of them were not fisher-folk whose livelihood depended on the river, nor were they farmers whose plots were made fertile by it. Padma never gave anything, except sometimes it came near like a curse and moved away again. All these people searched for shelter, afraid for their lives, yet they always tried to live near the river. Padma and all the small tributaries that were her children… They belonged to the land where Padma flowed. Outside that land, lay the wide world but it was not home. (50)

The boundaries of the new nation state thus become contingent and unreal; it encircles what is not 'home.' When the order comes to leave for Dandakaranya, a woman named Sodamuni asks Bimala, 'Will it be good or bad?' And Bimala reflects on Dandak:

> There will be plenty of trees in Dandakaranya. Even then – No, there will no longer be any trees. And forests? Trees will be felled mercilessly and towns will be established. Tractors will help cultivate fields. And if that happens, who will object to bulldozers demolishing forests? It was naked virgin fertility. It was a way to start anew, to be born again. (7)

The modern state's progress and development is realized in the Dandakaranya project and Amiyabhushan does not critique this model of development or the rationale for sending the refugees to a faraway site. Despite raising the question of the environmental impact of rehabilitation in a primeval forestland, the novel does not enter the discourse of exile and banishment that are the emotional responses of the inmates in the camp. Rather, the narrative superficially brings together a few characters without exploring the impact of displacement in any great depth in their broken lives. The refusal of Malati to go to Dandakaranya and her organizing other refugees to protest the move is sketched in shadowy lines and their spirit of resistance remains unexamined. The colossal efforts the refugees make to rebuild their lives, in the absence of any integrated plan, certainly meant social adjustments and environmental costs that are only hinted at in the novel. Yet Amiyabhushan's text raises important questions that are relevant to Bangla partition fiction. The idea of 'ethnic' stereotyping that one comes across particularly in the ministry of rehabilitation papers that often depict the Bengali refugee as 'a bundle of apathy' is overturned time and time again in novels like *Nirbaash.* This is a text that pictures the middle class refugees not as victims but as pioneers whose efforts at self-rehabilitation make them agents capable of changing lives and environments. This comes out most clearly in the section where Bimala, along with a few others, raise a few huts in an abandoned land.

> Next morning, everyone will get together to clear the jungle. The women will make fences after gathering twigs and branches. Young boys will help them. And the oldest woman among them, Ma Thakuran, she has a job as well. She will cook for everyone. After sundown they will sit down to eat. Those who have small children must keep *chira* and *muri* handy. Only when the huts are ready will they sit in them to breathe a sigh of relief. Until they are ready, nobody gets to sleep. (65)

The women, except Bimala, are not sketched in any detail yet their presence pervades the novel. Their efforts to reconstruct their homes, or their refusal to move to Dandakaranya, can be seen as the refugee's new efforts at legitimization to become citizens of the new country. Although episodic in structure, *Nirbaash* tentatively brings together a set of tropes that will be taken up by later novelists in far surer and more complex ways.

Dulalendu Chattopadhyay's novels, *Ora Ajo Udvastu* (They are Still Refugees, 1983) and *Shikorheen Manush* (Rootless Humans, 1988), draw on the author's own experiences of growing up in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Calcutta.

The first novel describes the writer's personal experiences in the Dhubulia refugee camp and the latter, his struggles in a refugee colony in Garia, a suburb in South Calcutta. *Ora Ajo Udvastu* is set in 1950 and describes the life of a middle class family. Sumit, the protagonist and his widowed mother Sunanda choose to live in the camp so that his siblings can be educated with government aid. The novel revolves around the daily life in the camp and the family's struggle for survival. The camp spaces that the characters occupy, the bazaars, the schools, the fields and pasture lands are carefully described in the text, signifying how these spaces translate into labour that enrich the refugee's community life:

> When Sumit came, as a refugee, to the camp it was like a desert, dry and arid. But today it was verdant green. Everywhere he looked he saw houses, buildings, movement of people, as if the camp was alive. It could be said that the refugees, in order to stay alive, had given a new lease of life to the camp as well… (196)

The small plot of land next to the house is Sunanda's kitchen garden that supplements her meagre doles. The daily labour of feeding her three children and educating them are given a special status in the text: the mundane and the ordinary are raised to another level of consciousness that forms the basis of Sumit's memory as he prepares to leave the camp at the end of the text to be rehabilitated in a colony in Garia. The novel however shows nothing of the turmoil of Bengali life outside the camp. The 1950s are marked by many popular protests against price rise and unemployment that throw no shadow on the camp inmates. The life within the refugee camp and outside the colony does not intersect except through perfunctory images. Chattopadhyay's narrative fails to give depth and resonance to Sumit's struggle that remains bound by contingencies of individuality and is not charged with the other political and ideological conflicts that the displaced faced in the city. However, the novel lays bare the aftereffects of the partition on the daily lives of the camp inmates: the smuggling across borders is possible with the help of a group of young men living in the camp who are eager to supplement the government doles as well as a new sense of insecurity for women living within its walls. Prostitution is rife and women are often raped and molested by camp officials. The novel discusses the rehabilitation plans of Dandakaranya and its effects on the camp inmates:

> The government decided at this time to rehabilitate refugees in Dandakaranya. The directive was – anyone who refused to go there will no longer receive government help…..will the rootless people continue to face the blows that land on them or will they protest

> against the new rehabilitation plans?.....Soon, the refugees began to speak a language of rebellion – We will not be sent to Dandakaranya. (110–11)

Ora Ajo Udvastu is a *bildungsroman* of a new kind. In the new nation-state, growing up as a refugee in a government camp sets a different paradigm for a novel of realism and this is indicated in the title that has no sense of completion or of an end. Certainly, the novel charts Sumit's journey from childhood to maturity, from innocence to knowledge but the configurations and milestones of that maturity are different. While out with his friends, Sumit sees a woman being dragged into the nearby jute fields. He is too young to understand the import of what he sees, but very soon he realizes the meaning of that experience:

> That day Sumit had not understood why the woman had been dragged into the jute field, why she had screamed so loud, or why very soon her voice had become faint like a sleeping human's. As he grew older, he understood how the scream of that unknown woman had become one with the past wails of many others, hovering through this free world as laments that no one can trace. (68)

It is experiences like these that make Sumit understand the true meaning of a rootless refugee's life. The pain of being a victim assumes metaphorical dimensions; it is incessant and without any succour in sight. Except for a few instances like this, the novel's language is clichéd and unimaginative although it gives a first-hand description of a refugee camp that is not quite available in Bangla fiction. The novelty of theme does not set off an exploration of image and language. This has contributed to the fact that although the writer uses locality and memory to look at the exegesis of partition and his novel is 'an union of history and literature'[40] these novels have been consigned to oblivion.

Narayan Sanyal (b.1924) a popular novelist of the 1960s, penned a number of texts on the refugee rehabilitation notably, *Balmik* (1958), *Aranya Dandak* (1961) and *Bokultala P.L. Camp* (1955).[41] The novels capture the loss of moral values in rootless lives; for people whose existence becomes degrading while living in footpaths, station platforms and slums, morality is a luxury. Of the three novels, the last has a unique place in the Bangla literary canon.[42] It is set in a permanent liability camp around 1954–55, but the protagonist is a camp official and not an inmate. The text is structured as a reconstruction of the diaries and letters of Ritobrata Bose, who comes to work in the Bokultala camp, set somewhere on the border of West Bengal and Bihar. Earlier, the campsite was an army barrack used

duringWorld War II, but the now abandoned barracks are used for a different kind of army:

> A series of trucks unload their passengers in the field in front of the Control building. The guests alight – not army soldiers but death soldiers. They do not wear khaki, but torn and ragged clothes. Their minds are not suffused with thoughts of victories in battles but are shadowed with the humiliation of defeat in life's battle: with the horror of their past and the terror of an unknown future! They came in large numbers. Thousands and thousands of refugee families who were the oldest primal foreign inhabitants of the newest nation state! (9)

The reference to the army barracks string together the World War II experiences with that of the partition, presenting an unbroken continuity of traumatic experiences in Bengal's social and economic life.[43]

In the uneven tenor of camp life, Ritobrata is also a refugee of sorts, exiled from the pleasures of Calcutta, writing love poetry to an absent lover and biding his time before he can leave for the city again. His camp duties force him to understand things that his middle class upbringing had never prepared him for. The refugee's suffering and deprivations give him new insights of what partition has come to mean to these destitute families. The physical environ of the army barracks, its constricted space in which families live with meagre separations of 'fossils of *dorma* walls' leave no space for age old rituals of caste: in the same hall live '*brahmins, kayasthas, baishyas, baidyas* as well as the untouchables.' (12) The eradication of caste lines is just one of the significant instances of social transformation wrought by the partition. The camp is an equalizer: everybody is a refugee here. They are also 'former human beings' who once 'laughed, played, earned their livelihoods, spent, saved just like us.' (18). It is a narrow physical space, 80 feet by 20, occupied by eight families:

> Someone was patting a child to sleep, some others were separating the ration rice from stone chips; in another section, cooking was being done on a small open fire…..darkness engulfed the entire hall and made it eerie. Most windows had no frames…..rotting *dorma*, broken tin sheet, have been piled on the windows. They have to save themselves from the onslaught of rains. But these prevented the entry of light and turned the entire hall into a dark chamber. (36)

The eerie darkness is a reflection of the despair that permeates the refugees' lives, a destruction of their social organization, an inscription of dispossession that

permeates the postcolonial moment of liberation.[44] Inside the camp, Ritobrata's education takes new turns; he is shocked to learn that women from the camp are regularly trafficked; others ply the oldest trade in the nearby rail station. The government doles make the men into a new 'class of perpetual professional legalized beggars' a description Ritobrata hears from the Camp Superintendent (60). Ritobrata discovers that the turpitude of the men who prefer to accept dole than to work is reflected in the ways camp life makes them lose all sense of decency and propriety. One day he is witness to a quarrel that breaks out in L/29 barrack. The swear words and crude language he hears makes him ponder on the stark reality of post-partition Bengali society:

> But these people were not slum dwellers. Among them were educated, civilized people, middleclass and lower middle class….. even some days ago, they belonged to a group in society. They performed *puja,* listened to *kathakatas* and *panchali* songs, sent their children to *pathshalas*….they were perhaps not all well off, but they had a sense of propriety and decency (59).

Ritobrata's assessment of the refugees may be a liberalist's dream but one of the stark effects of the partition on the refugee lives is an erosion of their sense of self and their human values. The corruption rampant in the camp is testimony to that. The camp officials steal, as do the refugees who make false claims for doles.

Although Ritobrata tries his best to perform his duties to eradicate the misery of those under his care, he maintains a distance from them through a sense of superiority. He unwittingly gets involved with a camp inmate, Kamala, but decides never to marry her: 'How can he take a refugee girl as his wife?....He hoped to spend a few more days here before making his escape' (132) As an official, he is not unsympathetic to the refugee's plight but his position allows him to assume a moral high ground through the exercise of power. Ritobrata's middle class sensibilities inform his position as protector/provider to the refugees and replicate a patriarchal power structure of a middle class Bengali family. It is also an indication of what the women inside the camp are up against. Kamala is one of the many women in the camp whose life has been marked forever by the shock of the partition. The traumatic life stories of the refugee women of the camp, Kamala, Kusum and Kamala's mother, are symbolic of a whole generation of women who were killed, maimed, abducted and remained untraced during the horrors of the partition. Their untold stories form a major impetus of this narrative as it tries to unravel the mystery surrounding Kusum or restore Kamala to a life of dignity. Sanyal's narrative thus operates on two planes: the outward life

of the camp is the foundation on which he builds the personal tragedies of the refugee women. They have a stronger presence in the text than the men. Yet the structures of power, patriarchal and economic, are not absent from the internal dynamics of camp life. The novel, however, fails to show a contestation of these structures by the women themselves. If power can be subverted, it can only be done by a man, as Ritobrata's benevolent patriarchal guidance shows. At the same time, rehabilitation is the mode through which this power relation is validated. The daily tasks of giving dole, looking after sick inmates, rebuilding the barracks, that Ritobrata supervises, make one realize the limitations that operate in the very premise of rehabilitation: it is an unequal relationship between the giver and the receiver that replicates and continues existing power structures. Sanyal's working life has been that of a relief official and he had visited Dandakaranya in 1960. The depiction of his protagonist may or may not have something to do with his own life experiences. However, what is interesting is the way he uses the motif of rehabilitation in his text. The vision underlying rehabilitation in the novel is one of benevolent state patronage where the abject dependence of the refugees is used against them without going into the dynamics of support and benefaction.

Shaktipada Rajguru's novel, *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi* (From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi, 1996),[45] set in the 1970s, follows a group of camp refugees who are taken to Malkangiri in the Dandakaranya area. The novel opens in Mana transit camp where the camp inmates are people

> uprooted from far away Bengal and like flotsam and jetsam have stopped at the banks of the infertile Mana's banks. Twenty years ago they had come, like waves, in the hope of rehabilitation in the soil of Dandakaranya. Some among them, the fortunate ones, got homesteads, but a few thousand families were left behind who were still living within the surrounding areas of the Mana camp. (1)

Sarat Das, a camp inmate, says,

> For seven years we have lived on the charity doles….what is the good of reducing us to beggars? Instead of making the entire race beggars, give us land, a little homestead, let us work and earn our keep. In these last years of our lives, let us live as cultivators as we were born. We don't want to live like beggars.

The frustrations and aimlessness of the camp life is demeaning to them, saps their energy and creates a new class of people, born and raised in the camps who live a 'life of charity and joblessness in the tents and sheds, in its incipient darkness

of frustrations and lethargy.' (2) The breakdown of familial ties and moral values throws a shadow on the relationship of father and son: 'The remembrance of those days on the Sealdah platform, living in huts and going hungry, were etched deeply in Potla's psyche. Nobody had saved his life; he had done it himself – by begging, stealing, getting kicked around.' So when his father berates him for stealing and drinking, he growls, 'Don't you dare. What have you done as a father? The government gives me dole and rations. Who are you?' (13) The camp storekeeper Khetubabu cajoles Ketaki to spend time with him in exchange for rice and sugar, she tells him, 'We are like fodder to you all.' (15) This 'rudderless new class' 'who know no ideals, to whom everything has become meaningless' is a significant effect of the partition. Rajguru's novel is remarkable because, unlike many other tales of the partition's trauma and pain from the Punjab where 'women and poor refugee men seldom tell their own stories…..(and) do not author their own history',[46] Rajguru's refugees, pushed out of West Bengal on a chimeral rehabilitation quest, articulate their experiences in their own tongues.[47]

Rajguru's novel encompasses the reality of the Dandakaranya project in its most significant aspects. The larger plan that did not take into account the ground realities is explicated in the very opening lines of the text. The resettlement plan means clearing vast primordial forests, building roads, schools and hospitals and a new life for hundreds of men and women. But it also means a clash between the new arrivals and the local populace: a classic peasant-tribal confrontation over land. The novel is explicit in setting out this simmering discontent.

> The Dandakarnya Development Authority reclaimed some areas and let the camp authority know that they were ready for settlers. The camp authority sent some families and completed their responsibilities ….. and a new set of refugees came to take their place in the Mana camp in the hope of rehabilitation. The wheel was moving in this manner; from transit camp to the new settlement. But meanwhile some people realized the real import of things. A new group of politicians realized that …. Dandakaranya was no longer an inhospitable, difficult mountain terrain. People were living there; schools, hospitals and electric lights have transformed everything. The new arrivals have made the virgin land fruitful. With central grants, Dandakaranya Development Authority has founded new settlements. This created a new feeling amongst the people who have always lived there. They wanted a piece of the pie too, and they have started agitating after inciting a few people…. "Foreigners Out! They have no place in our land!" was a common slogan. In contrast there

> is the official nationalistic discourse of pioneering work, clearing lands, making them fertile, harnessing wild nature to create a 'new Dandakaranya' and a 'a new nation.' (29)

This sudden and abrupt transformation of indigenous tribal land is of course an effect of the official rehabilitation plans, but instead of the clash between the indigenous population and the new arrivals, Rajguru shows instead the clash of man and nature that becomes the wide background on which the novel unfolds its narrative.[48] In their first night in the new settlement amidst mosquito bites and howling of wild animals, the refugees spend a fearful night. 'The night passed sleeplessly…. For centuries the forestland had lived with its dreams intact. Today's humans stake their claim by completely destroying it.' (34) The feelings of despondency and alienation rampant among the refugees vanish as they get to work on their own lands. The men work 8 to 10 hours to make the barren land fertile again. Their relationship to their work and the land they work upon gives a new meaning to their existence, their subjectivity. The novel compels one to ask

> whether it is possible to think about identity and place in more ontological ways, where belonging to a place, to a land, can also be very significant to the ways in which we think and feel our subjectivities, to our own ways of *being* in the world?[49]

Certainly the characters in this novel feel and think that it does. It can be seen in the clash between the older refugees and the young ones who are attracted to an urban way of life. The dichotomy between expectation and reality is made use of by certain politicians who do not want the refugees resettled in the area. They create a fear psychosis among the settlers by setting fire to their huts or cutting down their ripe corn. In a hostile land, with very little irrigation and water, these added provocations, where the 'refugees are made to be pawns in a political game' (74) make Dandakaranya the 'dark forest' of the myths in more ways than one.[50] In the novel, the intrepid refugees pack up and leave Dandakaranya. They come to Hasnabad near the river Ichhamati whose one arm flows towards the Sunderbans and the other, taking the name Raimangal, flows past Bangladesh. However, their euphoria is short-lived as Sarat Das and others realize that the state now considered them as deserters: 'They had no food, no shelter, nobody was responsible for them. No government cared for them. They were citizens of no country, their names had been deleted from humanity's book.' (126) Yet when night falls, 'the air is laden with the smell of paddy fields and the scent of *hasnuhana* flowers…. The smell of Bangla's soil and tune – how long they have been deprived of it.'(137) The dream of building a home on this soil kindles their tired bodies and lightens all

their exhaustions. But when some of them decide to cross into Sunderbans they realize that all means to cross the river is barred to them. Young Girija knows that

> they will never let him go to the Sunderbans. This was a life and a death situation facing them. On one side was a powerful opponent, on the other a few thousand of these helpless unfortunate people. In this wide world there was no space for them.(133)

The young and the old are now all united, determined to start a life where they can live with dignity, close to the soil of Bengal. The estuarine delta of the Sunderbans with its mangrove forests is not easy to cultivate. The forests are thick with tigers and the rivers with crocodiles. Yet nothing can deter these men and women. The administration stops all boats that can carry the refugees but the men snatch a few and set sail.

The narrative comes to an end when the refugee settlement in Marichjhapi is attacked and destroyed by the police in 1979. It ends with a stark message: a true history of what actually happened in Marichjhapi is yet to be written. The lower caste refugees, who die in the police firing are expendable, their names forgotten and their memories erased. History has not taken up the arduous task of writing about them.

> They have no more strength to fight. So much pain, bloody days of hunger and death have depleted all their strength. History has never written this story of facing impossible odds, of fighting to the bitter end with their lifeblood. All the words that would have described their lives will be lost, may be, it will be written one day from another distorted standpoint. But in the eternal story of humankind's struggle this story will be written again and again. The love of life of these refugees and their struggles will remain etched in that history forever….. but today they have been defeated. They have lost their all. (185)

In the history of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal, the name Marichjhapi is almost a forgotten chapter. Few people talk of it, and few historians have written about it.[51] The reason for this is perhaps the presence of a large percentage of marginal communities and lower castes among the refugees who came to Marichjhapi for whom neither the elitist Congress ministers at the Centre nor the urban middle class of Calcutta had much sympathy. The tragedy was that when a Communist government came to power in West Bengal, the characteristic of the nation-state did not change. In 1977, with the Left Front government in

power, the refugees who had been rehabilitated in Dandakaranya became hopeful that the new popular government who had always espoused the refugee cause would now help them come back to West Bengal. The Left Front Minister Ram Chatterjee visited the refugee camps at Dandakaranya and was widely reported to have encouraged the refugees to settle in the Sunderbans, which had been a long held Left demand. So through the months of March and April 1978, families sold their belongings and left Dandakaranya. 'How many days did we eat a full meal in Dandak? We spent twenty years like that. Can't we manage three months more? But I am no longer a refugee, my *bastuhara* title is at an end' said the 55 year old Ratish Mondol who left for Marichjhapi to begin a new life.[52] But Left Front policies had changed under the altered circumstances of governance. It was also acknowledged that the refugees in Dandakaranya, (under the organization of Udvastu Unnyanshil Samiti) had refused to be a part of United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), a Communist Party of India (Marxist) refugee organization, since they felt that the refugee problem was a national problem, so their identity must not be part of any political group. The CPI(M) in turn was miffed at the thought that their dream of getting electoral advantages in states like Orissa and Madhya Pradesh with a large refugee electorate might become redundant. The new Left Front government in West Bengal, that had come to power with the refugee vote, now urged these people to go back to Dandakaranya, refusing to entertain their demand of settling in West Bengal. Many refugees were sent back but around 10,000 Namasudra refugee families under the leadership of Satish Mandal, president of the Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti, set sail and settled in Marichjhapi.[53] Although it was not an island that was strictly under the mangroves, the government was in no mood to relent. It declared Marichjhapi as a reserve forest and the refugees as violating the Forest Acts by destroying 'the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance.'[54] On 26 January 1979, India's Republic Day, the Left Front Chief Minister Jyoti Basu announced an economic blockade of the island to force the settlers to go back. 30 police launches surrounded the island; the refugees were tear-gassed, their huts, fisheries and tube-wells destroyed. Those who tried to cross the river in makeshift boats were shot at. The refugees, armed with carpentry tools and makeshift bows and arrows were no match for the government forces. A conservative estimate gave the dead as several hundreds of men, women and children who died either through starvation or who were shot at and their bodies thrown into the river. Marichjhapi became out of bounds to visiting journalists, opposition politicians and even a Parliamentary Committee who came to investigate police atrocities faced harassment at the hands of the Forest Department officials. The silence surrounding Marichjhapi's

massacres was to continue for some time except stray efforts that tried to expose the lies, deceit and betrayals that came to signify Marichjhapi. Rajguru's novel is the only fictional work that talks of Marichjhapi with such candour. That makes it exceptional given the silence that has surrounded Marichjhapi.[55]

This novel has a large canvas and the incidents and characters cannot be summarized but one can sketch a few of its salient features. In the novel, characters like Nishikanto, Kalu, Girija, Potla as well as the women like Ketaki and Lalita are sharply-etched individuals. Their suffering and hardships are described without sentimentality, without melodrama. Rajguru's novel is extraordinary because, unlike many other tales of partition's trauma and pain from the Punjab where women and poor refugee men seldom tell their own stories and who appear as part of a crowd, this novel tells the refugee's story as one of individuals who exist in their own right. One has, in the text, men and women who speak in their own voices and their voices are those of the marginalized and the poor. Much of Bengal's partition's narratives, except a few, are from the lips of middle class men and women. So Rajguru's text is a departure in the narrative practices of the times. The men and women of his novel are presented as individuals who are capable of changing their status of refugee-hood into meaningful choices of livelihood and places of sojourn. Rajguru's depiction of the refugees in Dandak is very different from Narayan Sanyal's, especially in the implications of rehabilitation they set out in their texts. In *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi*, the efforts of the Namasudra refugees to change their status and their lives are a contrast to the abject dependence of the middle class inmates at Bokultala. The former forcibly take up means to set up a commune in Marichjhapi and transform, through their labour and political will, the discourse of refugee rehabilitation in post-partition India while the latter are shown trapped in apathy. In some ways then, Sanyal replicates the rehabilitation ministry discourses about the *purbo bongiyo* refugees. The difference in the time of composition may be the cause: Rajguru's text, written in 1980, was composed exactly after a decade of the traumatically tragic Naxalbari uprising that took the young of Calcutta by the storm, many of them from refugee backgrounds. For the next few years, Calcutta would turn into a battleground. By the time Emergency was proclaimed in 1975 by Indira Gandhi, the Naxal movement had petered out. When the CPI(M) came back to power to form the Left Front, euphoria was high, but then Marichjhapi happened. Rajguru's novel is written in a time of assessment, after the violence is over: it takes stock of not only the tragic happenings at Marichjhapi but even further beyond to search out the violence that lives at the heart of the nation state.

The question that comes to mind is whether Rajguru's text makes a new and

radical departure in the accepted narrative ideology of Bangla novels not only in his subject matter but also in his treatment? The answer is in the affirmative. Unlike the 1960s Bangla novel of realism, there are no central protagonist/s in this narrative but a host of individuated characters who form a community as they set up homes in the cleared forestlands of Malkangiri. In an important sense, Rajguru's characters are no victims as they are agents of change and his novel captures the processes of transformation of this group from ordinary refugees to inhabitants and locals of Dandakaranya. Their individual experiences condense into a collective experience in a novel where rehabilitation and resettlement form the discursive principles. This novel then, in more ways than one, recovers the lost (his)stories of refugee men and women whose voices have hitherto been absent in any retelling of the partition in Bengal by creating not a narrative of disaster but a narrative of eternal quest. In a significant way, Rajguru's text aligns the refugees' search for a home to a universal quest of mankind: to build and sustain a community that strengthens the foundations of labour and home. The last line of the novel ('the boats floated out to the horizon and were lost to the eye; they were looking for an unknown world where they would build their homes once again') is an indication of that search that this novel undertakes: of a radical reinvention and reconstitution of the Namasudra refugee community within the space of the nation. Rajguru's novel thus becomes a template for an imagined, not real, nation of equality and locality; both flow into each other to critique and question the reality of the postcolonial nation that has come into being.

In all the three narratives I have taken up in this chapter we see a varied range of responses to the cataclysmic failure of rehabilitation in the postcolonial state. S.K. Gupta's intervention may be through civil society reform as he addresses the questions of distributive justice and equity. Sanyals' response is intervention through the law-state combine while Rajguru's is the most radical of them all: an intimate and thorough recognition of the suffering and pain of a group of marginalized lower caste refugees where he uses the narrative as a pivot for a radical return towards justice and affect on our parts as readers. Speaking in context of law and the suffering of widows in colonial Bengal, Dipesh Chakrabarty has laid out the ways in which social intervention can either be through law or through narrative (biography, autobiography and fiction) and suggests that the law-state combine can only have a limited reach to the sufferer whose language of pain is heard at a remove: the law objectifies the victim it seeks to reform.[56] Although we 'cannot ignore the ideas of justice and freedom that are contained in the political theory of rights and citizenship' yet the paradox, he claims, is that these rights cannot benefit all because the colonial (in continuation also the postcolonial) state works

by 'synthesizing identities and do not allow for the radical alterity of the other.'[57] Therefore, Chakrabarty sees narratives working as a political force in a sphere that law or theory can never reach because in a story we come face to face with the sufferer. Narratives also reinstitute the original weight of the term 'justice' at a time when it is debased and degraded. Hence, the threefold responses to the suffering of refugees in camps and elsewhere manages to unearth 'the connection between narrative and social intervention' that has always been 'present in the history of our being modern.' However, this 'eternal history of struggle' of the Namasudra refugees (and Dalits elsewhere within the postcolonial state) complicates the ways in which narratives can encapsulate and shape postcolonial modernity. In the face of continuing atrocities and violence that Dalits face everyday in the liberal arena of the post-partitioned state, the question begs itself: modernity for whom and who are the actual recipients of modernity's promises of equality and justice? The Namasudra refugees in Marichjhapi were cold-bloodedly murdered by the state and 'the apparatus of a liberal democracy…aspiring to constitutional and juridical forms should not distract us from its authoritarian or fascist nature. The experience of the partition and its aftermaths should alert one to the dangers then and now'.[58] The kingdom is besieged by the children of menial mothers; who will pay heed to their wails of pain and trauma? The queen/nation seems oblivious to it all.

Endnotes

1 Subhash Mukhopadhyay, 'Thakurmar Jhuli'(1978), in ed. Madhumay Pal, *Marichjhapi: Chhinno Desh, Chhinno Itihaas*, 72. Translation mine. The poet uses the trope of a popular book of fairy tales in Bengal, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, as he addresses his poem to Suworani, the chief queen. The bounds of the fairy tale seem to ironically underline the presence of the children of menial mothers (*ghuteykurunir chana*) who cannot be given any status within the 'kingdom.' I am grateful to Sumit Sarkar for drawing my attention to this poem.

2 Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'Divided landscapes, fragmented identities,' in Tai Yong Tan and G. Kudaisya, eds, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, 144. Also reprinted in Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, eds, *Partition and Post-Colonial South Asia: A Reader,* vol. II. No one knows for certain how many refugees came to India from East Bengal from 1946 to 1964; the official estimate is just under 5 million. See also Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-67*, 105–06. The largest number, mostly Hindu Bengalis, settled in West Bengal with the districts of 24 Parganas, Calcutta, Howrah and Burdwan taking the largest influx; around 13 per cent went to Assam, while the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, mainly the Chakmas, settled in Arunachal Pradesh. A relatively small number of Hindus from Sylhet went to Assam and Tripura. The Rajbongshis from the districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur came to Coochbihar and Jalpaiguri.

3 Inter-dominion conferences on the ministerial level (that discussed security of minorities)

as well as Boundary Commissions (that discussed disputed boundary lines between India and Pakistan) were some of the unfinished business of partition. The former discussed threadbare the ways in which security could be provided to minorities in both countries but on the ground these promises did not mean much. See Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia,* 98–99: 'The new states of India and Pakistan meant the disarmament of minority communities and their active expulsion. In spite of the lofty promises and intentions expressed by the leaders of India and Pakistan, those who were labeled 'minorities' in either country were often perceived and treated as internal enemies. Thus Muslims on the Indian side and non-Muslims on the Pakistan side were widely assumed to be disloyal to the new state.'

4 *Amrita Bazar Patrika,* 24, February 1950.

5 *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 March 1950. See also Sandip Bandopadhyay, *Deshbhag-Deshtyag*, 60–63, for a discussion of the reasons why Hindus fled East Bengal. Also, Biplab Bala, 'Jey Gach Ruyechi: Jara Thekey Gelam,' in Shemonti Ghosh, (ed.), *Deshbhag: Smriti Aar Swabdhota*, 118–32, for an account of those who refused to leave. Bala's account points to the counter narrative of partition logic: partition did not always mean migration for a large group of people; instead they faced a different sense of insecurity in their very place of sojourn.

6 See Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay, *Udvastu*, 66. See also Tathagata Roy, *A Suppressed Chapter in History: The Exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan and Bangladesh 1947-2006*, especially Chapter 6, where he terms 1950's as 'the great progrom' when the rural masses such as traders, weavers, and cultivators started to flee.

7 *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported that 'an alarming feature of the present exodus is that a large number of Hindu population who are deeply rooted to the soil and never moved out despite grave threat to their way of life are now coming over to West Bengal,' 11 October 1952.

8 Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal 1947–50' in Suvir Kaul, (ed.), *The Partitions Of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India,* 79, points out that West Bengal government decided 31 October 1949 as a cut off date to phase out relief camps. She sees this period as also a time of harsher government policies towards refugees when rehabilitation would only be given to those the state defined as 'refugees.' It is around the first five years of 1950s that relief policies undergo a major shift: it is now that relief in the context of displacement becomes the key discourse over relief in the context of communal riots, as more and more refugees arrive in West Bengal. See Saroj Chakraborty, *With Dr. B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers*, 169–78. See also Hiranmay Bandopadhyay, *Udvastu,* 32, where he states: 'Dr. Roy decided to undertake the work of rehabilitation under a new government department soon to be opened. As of now the old Relief department was looking after the work relating to the refugees…but if importance has to be given to refugee rehabilitation, then it has to be conducted under a separate department…..later when rehabilitation became an even more pressing problem, this measure was immensely beneficial.'

9 Renuka Ray*, Speeches and Writings by Her* (1957–67), Serial No. 34, 2. See also reports about sending refugees outside West Bengal taken in the Rehabilitation Ministers Conference in Calcutta reported in *Jugantar*, 30 January 1956 and *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 30 January 1956.

[10] See Nirmal K. Bose, *Calcutta, 1964: A Social Survey*, 33.

[11] Biplab Dasgupta, 'Urbanization and Rural Change in West Bengal, *Economic and Political Weekly,* 22: 7 and 8, 14 and 21 February 1987, 279 and 340.

[12] *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 26 November 1954. See also Draft of a Press Statement (22.11.54) issued by Dr Meghnad Saha and Tridib Chowdhury after a tour of Cachar refugee camps, *Papers and Correspondences received by M.N. Saha during his tenure as MP regarding East Bengal Refugee Rehabilitation*, 1952–55, Installment VII, Sub. File 6, 122, where Dr Saha stated that 'dichotomy between power and responsibility has been as much responsible in Assam as in West Bengal for the unsatisfactory state of affairs with regard to rehabilitation for displaced persons…..The passage of years has taken away much of the urgency and priority accorded to the problem by those in authority.' He blamed this on the major disagreement of policies between the Union Rehabilitation Ministry and the State Ministry concerned and urged that the 'Prime Minister of India…should take upon himself the Portfolio of Refugee Rehabilitation of the Eastern Zone.'

[13] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 9 May 1955.

[14] *Amrita Bazar Patrika,* 11 May 1957 reports on the press conference in Calcutta held by the Minister: 'Over 40 lakh of Hindus had already come from East Pakistan and of them a little over 30 lakh were in West Bengal alone. During the last two years, 1955 and 1956, the exodus had been the heaviest, the figures being 560,000.'

[15] The Rehabilitation Minister M.C. Khanna's tirade reported in *Amrita Bazar Patrika,* 14 August 1958. See also Phulrenu Guha, 'Rehabilitation: East and West' in Ritu Menon (ed.), *No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh write on the Partition of India*, 196: 'The Communist Party of India never realized the irreparable damage they caused by objecting to the transfer of refugees to these islands – the Andamans could really have emerged as a second East Bengal…As someone who originally hails from East Bengal, I still nurse this grievance against the Communists.' See also Saroj Chakraborty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, 111.

[16] Most of the refugees sent to Orissa, for example, were agriculturists who went to Bushandipur, Ramnagar, Romuna and Chandbali. They complained that 'the lands offered for rehabilitation were unyielding to cultivation and lack in even essential facilities for resettlement. The lands were mostly marshy or waterlogged which were found to be extremely difficult for cultivation.' *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 July 1956. See also *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 12 January 1951 for news on desertion from Rairakhol in Sambalpur district. In Bihar, the Bettiah camp had a large number of deserters. See *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 May 1958 for news of police firing on the refugees in this camp.

[17] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 April 1956. Also *Anandabazar Patrika* and *Jugantar,* 30 January 1956 on the Rehabilitation Ministers' Conference that formalized the need to send East Bengali refugees outside the state. See also Sabyasachi Basu Roy Chaudhury, 'Exiled to the Andamans: The Refugees from East Pakistan' in Pradip K. Bose, (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Processes and Contested Identities*, 130–41.

[18] *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on 4 June 1957 carried a report on this meeting: 'After hearing the report of H.M. Patel, Chairman of the Committee asked to go into the development of the Dandakaranya scheme covering the three states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, the National Development Council decided that an autonomous authority, on the

lines of the D. V. C. should be set up to clear the jungle and develop this area and resettle East Pakistan displaced persons there.' The report was followed by front-page news on 16 June quoting the statement of P. C. Sen, West Bengal Rehabilitation Minister who stated in the assembly that the Dandakaranya project had the 'potentiality of rehabilitating a crore of East Bengal refugees.'

19 The 'displaced persons' were those who were homeless but not registered as refugees, registered refugees who did not live in camps nor received doles, and registered refugees receiving both. In connection with the Dandakaranya project, the DDA was mainly concerned with the third category consisting of lower caste people such as the Namasudras, Kshatriyas and the Poundra-Kshatriyas. See Alok Kumar Ghosh, 'Bengali Refugees at Dandakaranya: A Tragedy Of Rehabilitation,' in Pradip K. Bose, (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal,* 107–08.

20 Renuka Ray, 'And Still They Come', article in *The Statesman*: *West Bengal in the Second Plan Supplement*, 23, January 1958 she wrote: 'As large jungles have to be cleared and swamps reclaimed, it must take time before it [the Dandakaranya scheme] can be implemented in any satisfactory manner.' See also, Renuka Ray, *Speeches and Writings by Her (1957-1967)*, Serial Number 40, xi.

21 Communist MP Renu Chakravartty's remark in the Parliament reported in *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 13 August 1957.

22 See Sadhan Gupta's remarks in *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol. XV, 8–22 April 1958, Lok Sabha Secretariat, 9519–20.

23 *Statesman*, 15 August 1957. The DDA reclaimed land for rehabilitation of which 25 per cent was returned to the state governments to be distributed to landless tribal people of the state. The rest were to be used for refugee rehabilitation. See Pannalal Dasgupta, 'Dandakaranya Ghurey Duti Protibedon', *Jugantar*, 25 July 1978.

24 See H. Bhattacharyya, 'Post Partition Refugees and the Communists: A Comparative Study Of West Bengal and Tripura,' in Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, (eds.), *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Sub-Continent*,' 325, who sees the Communist mobilization of refugees as dictated by two objectives: electoral support and political recruitment. So genuine refugee interests were subordinated to political needs and prospects of real rehabilitation were hampered. This was certainly the case in Dandakaranya and later Marichjhapi. See also *The Statesman*, 23 December 1959 about refugee agitation against Dandakaranya.

25 See *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8, December 1958 as well as *The Statesman*, 11 April 1958. Also see *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol.XV, 1958, Lok Sabha Secretariat, 10781.

26 The situation in Mana was hardly conducive to the welfare of the refugees. Ashoka Gupta, who had traveled frequently to Mana when her husband S. K. Gupta was the Chairman of Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA), testifies to the abysmal condition of the camps. In a report on the 'Present position at Mana and the gravity of the situation' that she prepared for the Central Social Welfare Board (of which she was a member) Ashoka Gupta wrote: 'Mana, once an Army camp and abandoned after the last war, is a large treeless stretch of morrum land, unfit for agricultural purposes. Mana is extremely hot in summer. There is a great dearth of water. The possibilities of subterranean water resources were yet to be explored when the new migrants began to arrive in an endless stream.' Ashoka Gupta,

Papers and Correspondences regarding Rehabilitation Work in Refugee Camps in Dandakaranya, Sub File 3, 1964. This report is also reproduced as an appendix in Saibal Kumar Gupta, *Dandakaranya: A Survey in Rehabilitation*,108–16.

27 S. K. Gupta, 'Dandakaranya: A Survey of Rehabilitation, I: The State of Agriculture,' *The Economic Weekly*, (2, Jan 1965) 15. See also S.K. Gupta, 'Proshongo Dandakaranya' in *Kichu Smriti Kichu Katha*, 121–40. Gupta's three essays are later collected in book form in 1999 and published from Calcutta.

28 S. K. Gupta, *The Economic Weekly,* 16.

29 S. K. Gupta, *The Economic Weekly,* 26.

30 See S. K. Gupta, 'Dandakaranya: A Survey of Rehabilitation II: Industries,' *The Economic Weekly*, 9 January 1965, and 'A Survey of Rehabilitation III: Other Urban and Semi-Urban Employment,' *The Economic Weekly*, 16 January 1965, 89. Rehabilitation Minister M.C. Khanna in the Rajya Sabha stated: 'I am going to see that elaborate arrangements are made for the welfare of the people whom I take there (Dandakaranya). I will have hospitals, I will have schools. I will have Bengali doctors, I will have Bengali teachers and I will have Bengali social workers.' *Rajya Sabha Official Report*, vol. XX, Feb 26-Mar 14 1958, 3148. See also, Renuka Ray's copy of her speech in the Parliament (no date) that is available among her personal papers: '…this picture of promises made and not kept, of excuses made and an extraordinary tendency to shelve blame on others and to find scapegoat for one's own deficiencies seem to be the story of the Ministry of Rehabilitation of recent years.' Renuka Ray, *Papers and Correspondences relating to the activities of the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal, 1954–56,* Serial number 3, 4.

31 Manikuntala Sen, 'Partition: Streams of Refugees' in Ritu Menon, (ed.), *No Woman's Land*: *Women from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh Write on the Partition of India,* 71–72 states: 'A number of peasant families were sent to Dandakaranya…where they were given plots of land to cultivate so that they could resume their lives as farmers. Much of this land was barren and rocky but they poured their life blood into it, made it fertile and succeeded in growing crops…..The skirmish at Marichjhapi is proof enough of the fact that all refugees have not been able to reach such a state of resettlement even now.'

32 Smita Tewari Jassal and Eyal Ben-Ari, *The Partition Motif: Concepts, Comparisons, Considerations*, 21.

33 Priya Kumar, 'Testimonies of Loss and Memory: Partition and the Haunting of a Nation' in Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, (eds.), *Partition and Postcolonial South Asia: A Reader,* vol., II. 326: 'Conventional historiography has been conspicuous for its inability to enunciate collective traumas of the scale and magnitude of partition. Since such painful experiences can only be comprehended by taking their affective dimensions into account – dimensions of pain, shame, guilt, revenge, nostalgia that history has traditionally chosen to excise and exorcise from its telling.'

34 See Joya Chatterji, 'Who is a Refugee? The Case of East Bengalis in India' in Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, (eds.), *Partition and Postcolonial South Asia,* vol. II, 209: 'A second maxim of the 'official mind' is that refugees by definition are victims…. The notion that refugees were not active agents but persons 'displaced' by political forces outside their control has been central to the elaboration of refugee policy.' This was a common stereotype in the

official circles as is evident from Patel's speech at the 55th Congress Session at Gandhinagar. *Hindustan Standard*, 18, December 1948 reported that while speaking about East Bengali Hindus, Patel stated that 'Bengalis were not strong, they only knew how to weep.'

35 I use these terms after Gyanendra Pandey where he makes a distinction between 'national' and 'local' forms of history. See G. Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India,* 119.

36 Anindita Dasgupta, 'Denial and Resistance: Sylheti Partition 'Refugees' in Assam' in Tan and Kudaisya, (eds.), *Partition and Post-colonial South Asia*, vol., II, 194.

37 Amiyabhushan Majumdar, *Garh Srikhando*, in *Amiyobhushon Rochonashomogro*, vol., 1, 21–385. All subsequent translations from the text are mine. .

38 This can be classified as a distinct genre in Bangla fiction: Manoj Basu's *Bon Ketey Boshot* (1961), Satinath Bhaduri's *Dhorai Chorit Manosh* (1950) and Advaita Mallaburman's *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (1956) turn attention to the marginal communities of fisher-folk and peasants whose lives and struggles create new fictional tropes of labour and culture that question the given notions of nationalist literatures. In Bangladesh, similar Marxist literary influences can be seen in the works of Syed Waliullah and Akhtaruzumman Elias.

39 Amiyabhushan Majumdar, *Nirbaash*, Calcutta, 1996.

40 Dulalendu Chattopadhyay, *Ora Ajo Udvastu*, Calcutta, 1983, with a preface by Pranabranjan Ghosh. Translations mine.

41 Narayan Sanyal, *Bokultala P.L. Camp*, Calcutta, rpt., 1978. Other novels are *Aranya Dandak*, Calcutta, 1961 and *Balmik*, Calcutta, rpt.1983. Translations mine.

42 Asrukumar Shikdar, *Bhanga Bangla O Bangla Sahityo*, 36.

43 We recollect the famous scene in Ritwik Ghatak's film *Subarnarekha* (1962), the last of his partition trilogy, where the young children play in an abandoned World War II aerodrome. With the partition serving as a backdrop, the film is 'about relational elements like history, war and its aftermath, mass displacement and loss of an old habitat.' See Somdatta Mandal, 'Constructing Post-Partition Bengali Cultural Identity Through Films,' in Anjali Gera Roy and Nandi Bhatia, (eds.), *Partitioned Lives: Narratives of Home, Displacement and Resettlement,*71.

44 The 'eerieness' that Manto describes in *Toba Tek Singh* is a similar enunciatory site: a destruction of language and social organization as a result of partition's trauma.

45 Shaktipada Rajguru, *Dandak Theke Marichjhapi*, Calcutta, 1996. All translations from Bangla are mine.

46 Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947*, 254.

47 Rajguru is careful to depict his characters as lower caste agriculturists who were the last wave to arrive as refugees after the partition. Ties to their land had kept them in East Pakistan till it became impossible for them to stay. For the enormous number of Namasudra peasants of Barisal, Khulna and Jessore, post partition realities confirmed their inability to shape or influence broader political realities in East Pakistan, so by 1955 trans-border migration of scheduled classes assumed serious proportions. See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Mobilizing for a Hindu Homeland: Dalits, Hindu Nationalism and Partition in Bengal (1947)' in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato (eds.), *The Unfinished Agenda*, 190. In the novel they all speak a dialect that is lost in translation.

[48] The reason for this may be that the novelist is more interested in showing the cultural inability of the refugees to manipulate the unfamiliar ecological terrain. See A.B. Mukherjee, 'A Cultural Ecological Appraisal of Refugee Resettlement in Modern India,' in L.A. Kosinski and K.M. Elahi, (eds.), *Population Redistribution and Development in South Asia*, 102.

[49] Priya Kumar, 'Testimonies of Loss and Memory: Partition and the Haunting of a Nation' in Tan and Kudaisya, (eds.), *Partition and Post Colonial South Asia,* vol., II, 326. The cry 'Amra Kara? Bastuhara' that resounded on the lips of the thousands who came to West Bengal is a cry of identity that is historically contingent, yet Priya Kumar's question is a valid way in which identity and belonging can be read in Rajguru's novel; a way in which, particularly for these agriculturists, belonging to a land was *their* way of being in the world. Land was not just subsistence but it was life itself.

[50] Contemporary newspaper articles went into an overdrive trying to extol the virtues of Dandakaranya, an area associated with Ram's banishment in the epic *Ramayana*. The report of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 June 1957 carried a headline that stated that Dandakaranya was now in 'public attention' because 'the legendary lore's forest fringed soil' would be a new 'Haven for 1.9 million DP's.'

[51] Discussions about Marichjhapi in Indian partition studies are numerically insignificant with the exception of writings by Nilanjana Chatterjee, Ross Mallick and Annu Jalais. In Bangla, there are some writings, newspaper articles as well as essays that have been collected in a recent volume. See Madhumay Pal, (ed.), *Marichjhapi: Chinna Desh, Chinna Itihash* (2009). The debacle of the Left Front government in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls has made Marichjhapi come back in public memory. In Bangla, apart from newspaper reports, the best introduction to the subject is a book by Jagadishchandra Mandal whose *Marichjhapi: Naishabder Antaraley*, (2002) still remains the most inexhaustible account of the massacre.

[52] Interviewed by Jyotirmoy Dutta, reprinted in M. Pal, *Marichjhapi,* 63.

[53] There seems to be some dispute about the exact number of people who managed to settle in Marichjhapi but it can be any where between 4,000 to 10,000 families. See Kalyan Chaudhuri, 'Victims of Their Leaders' Making', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8 July 1978, 1098–99, as well as Ross Mallick, 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and Marichjhapi Massacre', *The Journal Of Asian Studies,* 58: 1, 1999, 104–25. Pannalal Dasgupta, who had covered the Marichjhapi massacre extensively for *Ananda Bazar Patrika* stated in his report that 2713 families were relocated to Dudhkundi camp after the massacre. If each family had three members that made 8139 people alone, apart from those killed in police firing or who died on the island. See Pannalal Dasgupta, 'Operation Marichjhapi,' reprinted in M. Pal, ed., *Marichjhapi*, 168.

[54] Letter from the Deputy Secretary, Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal, quoted in Annu Jalais, 'Dwelling on Marichjhapi: When Tigers became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger-Food', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 April 2005, 1759.

[55] Where history failed, literature has been ample in its act of witnessing. Poets Subhash Mukhopadhaya and Shankho Ghosh have written poems on Dandakaranya. Shonkho Ghosh's 'Tumi Aar Nei Se Tumi' and 'Ultorath' are two memorable poems on the refugees in Dandakaranya. Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel *Purbo Paschim*, Calcutta, 1988, also talks of Marichjhapi but not in such telling details. Hareet Mondol, an underclass partition migrant

travels through various camps like Coopers' Camp; he is then pushed out to a camp in Charbetia and then to Marichjhapi, but his destination following the massacre remains unclear. See also Gangopadhyay's brilliant story 'Puri Expresser Rakkhita' in Debesh Roy, (ed.), *Roktomonir Harey: Deshbhag-Swadhinatar Golpo Shankolon,* 334–52. Amitabh Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*, Delhi, 2004 has given Marichjhapi a representational space in the English-speaking world, so that the other, older narratives are pushed to the background. Rajguru's novel has been out of print for many years and has seen a reprint only in 2008.

56 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Subject of Law and the Subject of Narratives,' in *Habitations of Modernity,* 112.

57 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Subject of Law and the Subject of Narratives,' 110.

58 Himani Bannerjee, 'Wandering Through Different Spaces' in Jashodhara Bagchi *et al.* (eds.), *The Trauma and The Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, vol. 2,130.

5

The Partition's Afterlife: Nation and Narration from the Northeast of India and Bangladesh

It is more difficult to honour the memory of the anonymous than it is to honour the memory of the famous.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*[1]

Even after so many years after the break-up of British India in 1947, a number of false assumptions have remained in place especially in regard to the discussions and writings on the partition that have focused mainly on the Punjab.[2] The Punjab partition was seen as a national crisis because of its sheer scale: millions of people crossed the newly-created border, while still others faced violence, mayhem in their homes. In contrast, the partition on the eastern border did not begin with a mass exodus. In the months following the partition people trickled in and continues to do so even today. The Bengal partition, less dramatically bloody and less talked about,[3] is only now beginning to attract critical attention but people still know very little about other provinces directly involved like Bihar, Assam or Tripura. Literary narratives of the partition have an affiliation with the nation; they offer much material for investigating the workings of the Indian state particularly in the way one remembers or forgets the events of 1947. Any study of the histories and fictions of the partition of Bengal remains incomplete unless some account of the Bangla literature from the Northeast of India and Bangladesh are taken into consideration because the division of the country had a trans-regional impact whose complex contours are slowly coming to light. For example, the Northeast of India was a creation of the partition and the region has experienced all the vagaries and problems that a forced vivisection brings in its wake: the region's economy, social and future political life have been directly affected by partition's shadows.[4] The exigencies of the modern postcolonial state have often hidden these regional and local fallouts of the disruptions and dislocations of the partition, while a rootless and migratory population has journeyed like flotsam and jetsam in search of a livelihood and a place of sojourn. In this chapter, I consider some literary works

written in Bangla that give a perspective on the partition in the East (apart from West Bengal) because they map out the ethical and representational outline of the nation in its far-flung boundaries and in the lives of people who seem to belong to the periphery in direct opposition to a metropolitan centre. The impact of the partition was to create two states of India and Pakistan with East and West Pakistan separated by hundreds of miles of Indian territory. This geographical and social separation of the two halves of Pakistan came with its own set of problems that soon began to manifest itself through the complex formation of Bengali Muslim identity that saw itself in opposition to an Urdu-speaking political elite in terms of culture and a Bengali sub-nationalism based on geography. Critical work on the long contours of the Pakistan ideal through Bengali Muslim literary writings in Calcutta and Dhaka through the 1940s shows one how the ideal of Pakistan as a 'peasant utopia' with its own unique folklore and history and language that was an important trope of Bengali Muslim identity in East Pakistan.[5] This ideal and its betrayal informs one of the best known works of fiction from Bangladesh that is set on the Tehbhaga peasant movement and the partition. This chapter has two sections: the first discusses the historical factors and political implications of the Bengali refugee migration in the Barak valley (Assam) and in Tripura while I discuss some stories from these regions that have direct bearing on the partition. Limited by a lack of language to probe the partition fallouts among the other refugees in the Northeast like the Chakmas, the Hajongs and the Rajbongshis, I discuss only Bangla narratives from the region but this small beginning will, hopefully, point a way for future academic involvements to study the region. In the second section, I discuss two short stories (one each from West Bengal and Bangladesh) and a novel (from Bangladesh) that relook at the partition in terms of Bengali Muslim identity, memory and history.

I

The partitioning of Bengal in 1947 necessitated the migration of large groups of people of different ethnicity, religion, caste and class who crossed the borders at different times and at different places. The causes of these movements varied and were not always communal riots or partition related violence.[6] Sometimes, there was very little migration as in the case of the four *thanas* of the erstwhile Sylhet district that remained in India so the Hindus living there did not have to move. Some of the inhabitants of Sylhet had jobs in the Cachar districts and in the Brahmaputra valley from colonial times and decided to opt for jobs there after the partition.[7] In the case of Tripura, Hindu refugees had come into the state after the Noakhali

riots and had been resettled in various areas under the patronage of the Hindu king who was a lover of Bengali art and culture although local protests against immigrants took an organized form right from 1947 when Seng-krak, the first anti-refugee and anti-Bengali political union was established.[8] Tripura shared 839 kilometres of border with East Pakistan and cross-border migrations had always taken place especially after natural calamities or rising food prices in East Bengal. In Assam, the landless Muslim peasants had emigrated from East Bengal as far back as 1901, while British-run tea gardens had attracted labourers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere.[9] The exodus of people who came to India in 1947 took place in different directions: while one arm crossed into the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys due to its proximity to East Bengal (rail transport had improved considerably between Eastern Bengal and Assam in the first decade of nineteenth century) while another wave went to Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur.[10] The displaced Bengalis who came into India tried at first to settle in the border districts and one can see some patterns in their resettlements. The uprooted people wanted to live in contiguous or close by districts so that geographical features were familiar and not too unsettling. Refugees from Jessore mostly came to Nadia while those from Dinajpur came to Jalpaiguri and West Dinajpur.[11] Tribal communities like the Santhals, the Rajbongshis, the Hajongs and the Garos came to Meghalaya from the northern areas of East Bengal, especially from the districts of Mymensingh, Sylhet and Rangpur to escape religious persecution. On 14 August 1951 *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported that New Delhi had sent a protest note to Pakistan alleging grave violation of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact. The note mentioned that a large number of Garo, Hajong and other tribal people had been dispossessed of their lands and houses on the border of Mymensingh district while Santhals returning to the Nachole police station of the Rajshahi district were not being restored to their lands as a matter of policy. Throughout the 1950s, systematic repression by the Pakistan government forced many tribal people to flee to India. On 23 February 1956, *The Statesman* reported that more than 60,000 tribal people had entered the Garo Hill district. A report by *Hindustan Standard* on 25 April 1950 stated that a party of Santhal, Kurmi and Rajbongshi refugees at Balurghat 'proceeded to their respective homes in the villages of Jahanpur, Jagaddal, Mongolbari etc under Dhamoirhat P.S.' when a band of the Ansars assaulted them and chased them back to India while the edition on 16 March 1959 reported that the Buddhist Chakmas were fleeing the Chittagong Hill Tracts and were flooding Assam, Tripura and other border areas. The Radcliff Line, drawn with such unseemly haste, meant that the administrators and the politicians had to work with a 'notional' idea of where the border would be because it was clear that the final decision would only

be announced after 15 August 1947. The Chakmas for example, a non-Muslim majority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, hoisted the Indian flag thinking their land would be in India. A few days later, the region was transferred to Pakistan. The Chakmas were rejected and marginalized in the new state because of their 'treason' and this marked the beginning of a protracted period of repression and armed rebellion.[12] Immediately after the partition, 40,000 Chakma families fled to India. The Indian government settled them in Arunachal Pradesh with some devastating social and political consequences.[13] The main tribal areas in East Pakistan were also marked out as hotspots by the new nation-state because peasant struggles for reducing rent and a fair share of the crop continued even after the establishment of Pakistan. In some areas of Sylhet, the Nankars, who were Muslims, had a strong movement going from 1948–50 under the leadership of the Communists. The Nankar (from the word 'nan' meaning bread) was a unique system in East Pakistan where they served the landlord in exchange for a piece of land.[14] The non-Muslim Hajongs, who lived in Mymensingh and Sylhet, were oppressed through the mortgage of their lands to moneylenders. Throughout 1946–47, a movement was initiated in the area, again under the Communists, an anti 'tonko' movement (against a fixed rent for the land and procurement of paddy).[15] The Santhals, of some *thanas* of Maldah (Nababganj, Bholahat, Gomasthapur, Shibganj and Nachole) were included in the Rajshahi district after the partition and a new *thana* named Nababganj was formed by the illogical dispensation of the Radcliffe Line. The peasant movements in all these areas were often brutally repressed by the Pakistani police, East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) and Ansars who unleashed terror in these areas that resulted in large scale migrations of the tribal population.[16] A few scholarly studies have focused on the tribal refugees who arrived from East Pakistan to the states in the Northeast of India (especially in the Barak and Brahmaputra Valley) but a major full length study of the effects of partition in these areas is still awaited. Partition refugees in the Northeastern states faced various problems in the aftermath of the vivisection of the country and continue to do so because India is yet to frame transparent policies linking rights and laws regarding them. The view that immigration is in reality infiltration has increasingly taken hold of official discourse from 1962 onwards both in Assam and elsewhere in the region. The issues of identity, language and conflict are too vast and complex to be taken up here but stories from the Northeast are a poignant reminder that partition's afterlife still draws blood.

The geographical spread of the Barak Valley covers three districts of Assam: Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj, the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, the Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailashnagar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura

and four districts of Bangladesh: Sadar Sylhet, Maulavibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj. The three districts of Assam and the four districts of Bangladesh have emerged out of the two districts of Cachar and Sylhet in the British times, together known as the Surma Valley division since the districts became a part of Assam in 1874. During the partition in 1947, a major part of the Sylhet district (leaving only Karimganj to India) was transferred to East Pakistan, so the Indian portion of the valley is called Barak Valley today. The valley is the northern section of the Meghna valley (Dhaka, Mymensingh and Comilla) so that in the absence of natural boundaries, the traditions and culture of East Bengal spread easily to the Sylhet-Cachar region in the ancient and medieval periods.[17] Sylhet was the only region in the east to have undergone a referendum to decide its fate whether to join Pakistan or not and the Muslim League particularly campaigned for the inclusion of Barak Valley in Pakistan. Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, who played an important role in League politics in Assam, made sure that it became a reality.[18] The physical and geographical contiguity of Assam and Tripura meant that refugee migration from East Bengal after the partition was almost a given. The state of the Bengali refugees in Assam in the post-partition years could be gleaned from a Press Statement that Dr. Meghnad Saha issued after his visit to Cachar on the invitation of the Cachar District Refugee Association.[19] On 22 November 1954, in the statement, Dr Saha stated that 'the displaced persons in Assam are called the flee-ers (*Bhagania*) or floaters. The policy of the [Assam] government is not to give them any quarter what-so-ever.' He stated that he had gone 'to visit a number of permanent liability camp or destitute camps at Karimgaung town itself and at Masinpur and Tarapur near Silchar town' and 'on the basis of what we have seen with our own eyes constrains us to say that the policy of rehabilitation of refugees in the district of Cachar as persued (sic) until now has been a complete failure.' The statement specially mentions the Duhalia refugee colony, midway between Karimganj and Hailakandi, 'where about 1150 families were settled on hill tops covered by deep jungles infested by wild animals.' The statement also noted the disputed figure of displaced persons (DPs) in the state . 'The Census report of 1951 states the figure to be 93,177' while 'the Finance Minister puts it at 283,000 in 1951,' he noted.[20] Meanwhile, in Tripura, the East Bengal Relief Committee, of which Dr Saha was the President, had opened a branch at Agartala in April 1950 as 'there was no organised relief work for about 2 lacs of helpless refugees' in the state.[21] After the partitioning of the country, the Hindu middle class refugees were joined by other tribal exiles from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and from Mymensingh and Rangpur, who crossed into Assam and Tripura for a variety of reasons. The migration patterns in the two regions were varied and complex and ranged from

communal persecution, economic reasons (by government servants or optees) or even familial or marriage ties. The resultant tension between native population and the 'intruders' often took the form of linguistic and economic oppression sometimes between the same religious or ethnic groups. This is an instance where one can see that the fallouts of the partition in the region were not always communal conflagration between Hindus and Muslims but often gathered political incentive from geographical claims to habitations or land and from linguistic differences. Apart from the agriculturists and artisans who came as refugees to the Barak valley, there were a large section of Sylheti middle-class economic migrants to the region who were not 'refugees' in the sense meant in partition studies. Their identity had been formed not as a result of rivalry against Muslims but in opposition to the Assamese Hindus who had resented their elite status and government jobs that many had enjoyed from British times. In the late nineteenth century, this rivalry began to assume serious proportion and the new Assamese middle class floated a number of organizations (for example the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha that begun work in 1945–46), expressing alarm at the 'Bengalisation' by Bengali speaking Hindus and Muslims from Sylhet. A major section of the Assamese population was agitated over the 'outsider' issue that could be seen clearly in the Sylhet Referendum.[22] The ideological ramifications of 'infiltration' and the language question in the Barak and Brahmaputra valleys erupted in the 'Bangal Kheda' movement where Bengali settlers were targeted and terrorized. The Assam movement criticized an Indian law of 1950 that openly encouraged free entry into Assam of Hindus who were victims of disturbances in East Pakistan.[23] In their turn, the Bengali settlers' consciousness about language and identity took the shape of an aggressive and defensive linguistic nationalism especially through language movements in the Barak valley. Things came to a pass on 24 October 1960, when the Assam Legislature passed a bill stating that Assamese will henceforth be the only official state language. The bill was to politically deny the existence of a large minority, the Bengali settlers who had made the Cachar region their home after the partition. The Bengali settlers claimed that the Barak valley in lower Assam has always been an important cultural centre of Bangla. Sylhet was a centre of politics, education and cultural activity from medieval times with notable Sanskrit scholars residing in the region. In the fourteenth century, with the conquest of Hazrat Shah Jalal, Persian and Arabic learning also expanded in the region. During the Chaitanya period (end of fifteenth and beginning of seventeenth century) the expansion of Bengali language and literature took place in the neighbouring regions of the Surma-Barak Valley, in Jaintia, Dimasa and Tripura kingdoms particularly under royal patronage. Barak Valley had given birth to poets like Golam Hossain and Krishna Chandra Narayana,

a king in the Cachar region who composed devotional poetry.[24] In the modern age, poets and writers like Ashokbijoy Raha, Nirmalendu Chaudhury, Hemango Biswas, Khaled Chaudhury and Syed Mujtaba Ali were all born in the valley and the region had a flourishing culture of little magazines and literary journals that were often the result of individual efforts and little state funding.[25] Thus when the bill was passed restricting the use of their mother tongue, the Bengali population erupted in anger. On 19 May 1961, a procession of students and writers went on a peaceful march through Silchar town demanding recognition for Bangla as a medium of instruction in schools and colleges. The police fired on the unarmed demonstrators and a 15 year old student Kamala Bhattacharya and 10 others died to become 'language martyrs'.[26]

The Bengalis of this region rue the fact that their language movement has never been seen in historical context of the other language movement across the border, the 21 February *Bhasa Dibosh* or Language Day that is celebrated in Bangladesh as the originary moment of the birth of the new nation state. The writers in Barak Valley and in Tripura have seen 19 May as seminal to the effect of partition in their lives. Their works have flowered in stories of refugee lives and communal tensions while the language question has generated its own creative output.[27] With the partition, the literary isolation of the Northeast was doubly compounded. The geographical and physical distance from the mainland as well as from the literary centre of Calcutta have kept the Bengali writers in these regions cut off in a certain way that has shaped their writings. The existence of the valley as a peripheral region, so far as the geo–physical nature of West Bengal and her culture are concerned, has created a 'third world' in Bangla fiction. This is of course a contentious literary and critical issue.[28] The Bangla writers of Barak Valley and of Tripura have also had a different political trajectory than their counterparts in West Bengal, especially in their ceaseless efforts to preserve their language, given the geographical distance from the literary metropolis of the mainland and their minority status in the hierarchical chain of publishers and the publishing industry.[29] This has resulted in a concerted search for a form that would encapsulate and represent the experiences of instability and exile that is a dominant feature of the many early practitioners of fiction in the region. The short story is foregrounded as the chosen form by so many writers (rather than the novel) in the Northeast because the form is not only an expression of their ambivalence to mainland Bengali literary culture but also an articulation of their location in terms of the Indian nation. These stories then exhibit what Aamir Mufti calls the 'problem of minoritization' as they turn their aesthetic attention to a 'minor' epic form to explore the themes of homelessness, identity and belonging that carved out a different aesthetic impulse from 'mainstream'

canonical Bangla fiction of the 'mainland.'[30] Thus the specificities of region and politics have enabled this corpus of writing to be substantially different from Bangla stories about the partition. The short stories that come out of the partition experience in the region have some distinctive features, both in terms of themes and genre (though not shared uniformly by every writer) that are pronounced and readily recognizable. The particular geography of the region has spawned a hopelessness of exile, an utter despondency that is pronounced in these narratives both in terms of language and emplotment. In them, the partition is just not an event, a deviant forgettable aberration but a traumatic site where an experience of profound homelessness can be configured and articulated. This is to be found in the theme of exile, of the migratory self that has no rest and no sense of peace. Taken together, in many of these stories that refer implicitly or explicity to the partition, one can discern a certain pattern or resonance through them. They assume a phenomenological stance that is enunciated through the description of a physical space and the protagonist's movement through such a space: the small room or the landscape or the hut assume great significance not just as settings to the unfolding of the story but a direct expression of the self's relation to fate and chance, grief and loss through the trauma of the event of the partition. Many of them are 'travel stories', to use Michel de Certeau's words that show the geography of exile: a small, constricted room syntactically gestures towards other stories, either a memory or a past history of plenitude and kinship. By attending to the quotidian movement of the characters through spaces and places, by registering their disillusionment and anxieties, one goes beyond the historical accumulation of data and figures to gain an eloquent affective approach to what one may 'know.' The short stories' contrapuntal juxtaposition of 'Time' alerts one to the ways in which this different knowledge can nudge one to move from a particular historical event to literature's different epistemological and ethical practice. In many of these stories, Time is both synchronic and diachronic where the 'semantics of action is transformed into the syntagmatic order' (diachronic narrative) through the use of decipherable symbolic forms.[31] In these narratives, the trope of exile creates within each story a synchronic time where past and the present intermingle and are constitutive of each other. Yet each of the protagonist's journeys, across borders and terrains, becomes in essence a journey to reformulate the trajectories of history as felt and narrated through a diachronic concept of time. In Paul Ricoeur's words, 'fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to see and to weep….either one counts the cadavers or one tells the story of the victims'.[32] Ricoeur's idea that fiction fuses with history to go back to their common origin in the epic may be usefully explored in novels, but these stories unearth a 'sphere of the horrible'

that inserts the memory of suffering of old men and women, victims of a history, into the scheme of things. Some of these stories then are of great socio-historical significance not only in their act of teleologically re-inscribing the short story back into the canon, an act which then maps the marginalization of the region. The choice of this very form performs an epistemological function in helping one know the hitherto unknowable, the *taedium vitae* of the refugee's life.

Sunanda Bhattacharya's story *Kerech Buri Britanto* (The Narrative of Kerech Buri,1980, Tripura) Swapna Bhattacharya's *Ujaan* (Ebbtide,1994) and Jhumur Pandey's *Mokkhodasundarir Haranoprapti* (Mokkhodasundari's Lost Ones, 2005, both from Barak Valley, Lower Assam) are all written at different times after the partition; yet all respond to 1947 as a new and significant turning towards an actual history of exile that has shaped the Bengali experiences in the Northeast. All three protagonists in the stories are refugees and their banishment from 'home' is both physical and metaphysical. Mokkhodasundari remembers her flight from her village in Sylhet to Karimganj's relief camp. From there she goes to Meherpur (Silchar) camp, her present abode. In *Ujaan*, Kshitimohun is literally on a journey: from Karimganj to Hailakandi to Silchar to see his nephew and sister that parallel his last journey from East Bengal to Cachar. In Sunanda's story, Hemantabala comes from Satgaon to Dharmanagar. All these characters are on the move, physically so. Although they now have roofs over their heads (of sorts) they are exiles in the metaphysical sense as their memories of their lost villages constantly haunt them. This interplay of the past and the present make these stories not only tales in time but also tales about time: how memory and the passing of years refigure who they are just as their state of perpetual exile begins to be configured as a metaphysical human condition that must be seen beyond everyday pathos or ordinary temporality. In their recollections, the home they have lost is marked forever by their youth, a time that seems tainted and gone. They are now separated from that self: so it is not a coincidence that all three protagonists of the stories are old men and women. They try to go back in time, either through remembrances of things past or by a visit to someone they love, but it is impossible to capture what is gone. Their fleeting memories of loss mark them out as perpetual outsiders to the social order: Kerech Buri is taunted by her neighbours for being 'different' while Mokkhoda, once the wife of a well to do man, lives from day to day in a refugee camp with no desire for the future and very little hope. Kerechburi, a Brahmin widow, sells kerosene, Kshitimohun works in a brick kiln, destitute and exiled from a landowning past. The penury of their lives is a direct consequence of the division of the country yet there is more than an impoverished life that is at stake in these stories. The men and women are marked forever by their suffering and

the loss of their homes: they live from day to day, bearing a burden of inexorable melancholy that corrodes their lives and separates them from human society. The use of constricted space, a room in a refugee camp, or a small hut, stands as a symbol of the lack of home in the characters' life. In all the three stories, an implicit phenomenological posture can be seen in the description of a physical space and the characters' movement (or lack of it) through such a space, in the relationship of the body to spatial sites. Their 'mythic experience of space' is through their loss of their homes and a new site in which they find themselves. So their lives are actually scripting a genealogy of spaces they leave and then come to inhabit: Mokkhoda's small room in the refugee camp layers over the memories of her lost home. Hemantabala, disparagingly called Kerech Buri ('old kerosene woman' because she sells 'kerech' or kerosene) is a widow abandoned by her husband's family. She travels to Assam to escape her ruined village and builds a small hut in a plot that she manages to buy:

> Then she came across a small plot of land to be sold cheap – a small hillock between four houses, dry and full of rubble, laden with wild jungles of *bhattgach* and *patli* flowers. There was no separate entry. She would have to walk through the yard of other houses. …Hemantabala did not take too long to make the hut habitable.[33]

Her lonely end, in a constricted hut where she dies of cholera, is symbolic of a squeezing out of her expansive life that she had enjoyed before the partition. The small restricted spaces where the characters live or work is a reminder of what these men and women have lost in the partition: not just family but a veritable loss of social status and an economic downslide; yet their attempts to domesticate these spaces allow them to write themselves back into selfhood. After Hemantabala is found dying in her small hut, her neighbours go through her meagre belongings that contain a 'sign' of her lost life before the partition.

> …other men of the village took down the small tin trunk kept near the head of the bed. The small fragile lock opened easily. From the trunk emerged the post office pass-book, a few withdrawal forms, and a small wooden red box on which, faded green decorations encircled the word 'daughter-in-law' in even fainter letters. Inside it, in tissue paper, was wrapped a thin gold chain. The village people took the responsibility of cremating her. Before that, the dead woman's thumb-print was taken on a few withdrawal forms: the money would come in handy for the funeral expenses. (98)

A journey entitles one to a destination: what all these characters reach is a silence, both real (death) and metaphorical (an emptiness of the 'sign') that signifies their individual destinations are forever at a remove. Their lonely selves, their relation to fate and chance, to grief and loss, are set out through the very space of the text that gesture at this relationship in sparse, often terse language where no word is superfluous. The protagonist's state of exile is a condition of her/his life, a condition of their postcolonial existence. What constitutes the essence of their journeys in search of a 'home,' points to the way in which memory can ultimately betray: the past is irrevocably gone and the present signifies that absence. The short stories reformulate the ideological thrust of fiction that is bound up with history: to free

> certain possibilities that were not actualized in the historical past…the quasi-past of fiction in this way becomes the detector of possibilities buried in the actual past. What "might have been"… includes both the potentialities of the "real" past and the "unreal" possibilities of pure fiction.[34]

Certainly, all three stories play on this aspect of 'what might have been' both in terms of the past and in fictional possibilities by constructing the presence of marginalized suffering voices (both in terms of gender and age) as central to the possibility of the short stories. In this effort to preserve and narrate a history of suffering, the writers release the 'unreal' possibilities of their fictional texts that generate a deeper engagement with their work and their region.

II

Literary critics from Bengal are fond of reiterating that the Bengali language cannot boast of a Bhism Sahni or a Sa'adat Hasan Manto and it is not uncommon to come across a sweepingly generalized lament in articles discussing partition literature in Bengal: 'There are virtually no short story or novels of note that deal with the partition as its main theme.'[35] Stories written by authors in Bangladesh on the events of 1947 are even less discussed and in this section I look at a few narratives (all written after the birth of Bangladesh) to see how they engage with the creation of East Pakistan as well as issues of memory and belonging. The contours of Bengali Muslim identity that was in formation from the 1910s onwards in Bengal was a way to define modernity in the Muslim society that was seen as long suppressed by Hindu intellectual traditions. If one glances at some of the issues regarding Muslim identity formation in the years immediately before the partition especially that enunciated Purba (East) Pakistani autonomy that sought to kick off a literary

cultural renaissance through journals and newspapers like *Azad*, *Mohammadi* and *Sowgat* in the early 1940s, one can see the movement 'reflected a stage of memorialization and historicity' by enunciating the unique culture and language of the Bengali Muslims that was sustained by the land and history of East Bengal. The East Pakistan Renaissance Society, active through 1942–45, was a group that sought the promotion of *swatantrata* or difference in literature and culture of the Bengali Muslim with a special emphasis on a free Pakistan in the Eastern part where a country would be established 'with many *jatis*, as India is a large federation of *jatis*.'[36] In this conception of the Bengali Muslim self-realization, culture was to play a dominant part in self-fashioning and as a site of resistance to British and Hindu hegemonic models. In 1942, a book named *Pakistan*, published by the Mohammadi press, was the first articulation of a Bengali intellectual definition of Pakistan.[37] Bengali Muslim enunciation of the demand for Pakistan came out through various publications like Habibullah Bahar's 1941–42 essays on Pakistan and Nafis Ahmed's *The Basis of Pakistan* (1947). This debate had its detractors as well as supporters like the Communist party member Gangadhar Adhikari's *Pakistan and National Unity* (1943) who saw the rising Muslim identity as an anti-imperialist consciousness of the Muslim masses. Similarly Congressman Rezaul Karim's *Pakistan Examined* (1941) was a 'polemical response to the Pakistan demand' and was deeply critical of it as the ideology formulated a communal viewpoint.[38] The main aspects of the Bengali Muslim identity, positioning itself against the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* as well as the Urdu speaking elite Muslims who looked towards the middle East as a validation of their identity, laid an emphasis on literature and an 'ethnoscape' to create the idea of 'Purba Pakistan.' In the months after 1947, the reactions to Independence were different in East Pakistan for obvious reasons. The newspapers and journals, that supported a Muslim dominated Pakistan, were elated at being free from the domination of caste Hindus and the formation of a new nation was greeted with euphoria. Journals like *Mohammadi* and *Mahe Nau* published articles debating issues like language and cultural identity in the new nation state. The poet Golam Mostafa reiterated that a large part of Nazrul's verses were incompatible with Pakistan's ideology and therefore must be revised in the new Pakistani edition. Syed Ali Ahsan stated in an article that for national unity, the new nation state should be ready to discard even Rabindranath Tagore.[39] The differing responses to the partition are captured in the imaginative literature of the two nations when one compares the first few stories written immediately after 1947 in West Bengal and East Pakistan. In East Bengal, called East Pakistan after the partition, stories published around 1949 are decisively propagandist in tone and are supportive of a nationalist awakening among the Bengali Muslims that results in the birth of

a new nation. The journal *Mahe Nau*, first published in April 1949, printed a series of stories in this vein. Wabayed Ul Haq's short story *Taslima* (May 1949) was euphoric about the new nation and the need to sacrifice personal ambitions for it. Mohammed Modabber's short story *Bastu O Porshi* (Home and Neighbours, November 1949) extolled the virtues of the new homeland. Abu Rushd's story *Mohajer* (The Refugee, 1950) talked of a young man's journey to Dhaka from Calcutta and ended in an euphoric sentence describing Pakistan as a 'country of light.'[40] Some important themes of the partition – the loss of a homeland, the new life of a refugee, the tenuousness of borders in the construction of identities and the continuities and breaks of memory can only be seen in the stories written much later where one finds a more nuanced treatment of the events and effects of 1947. But on both sides of the border there was a feeling of insecurity, anxiety and sense of loss that underlay the experiences of those traumatic years. Abdullah Abu Syed, remembering 14 August 1947, recollected:

> Even now, when I look back at 14 August 1947 I think that as we, the Muslims of Pakistan were celebrating the Independence with the joyous abandon, at that very moment our neighbouring Hindu houses, behind their gaping front doors, were hiding a group of despairing, helpless and sad people standing speechless with the thought of an uncertain future. The same had happened in the lives of almost all the saddened and voiceless Muslim families across India.[41]

The tragedies of partition, played out in Bengal, were less violent and took place over a longer period of time than in Punjab. Hence, literary representations written over a number of years are varied and heterogenous with a perceptibly different treatment of past and memory. The violent exegesis of partition's uprooting and conflict that is so common in the short stories from Punjab is absent in the narratives in Bangla that look at partition through other optics like nostalgia, exile and rehabilitation. Is that why Hasan Azizul Huq, while discussing post-partition literature in East Pakistan has lamented that 'the great literature that ought to have been created around the partition has not happened….no novelist has written about the heartrending human catastrophe of the partition'?[42]

In 1947, in East Pakistan, the civil services were composed mostly of West Pakistanis, optees and refugees from India who were mainly Urdu speaking. Separated by more than a thousand miles, along with linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences, the East and West wings of Pakistan had an ambiguous relationship to begin with. In the months after the partition, the differences became more pronounced. Towards the end of February 1948 the rumblings of the agitation to

make Bangla an official language was beginning to be heard. The new Pakistani state reacted with swift fury and a province wide student demonstration was quelled with great police brutality. Fazlur Rehman, the Central Minister of Education, advocating Urdu script for Bengali, added fuel to the fire by adopting a repressive and intolerant view of the demand to recognize Bangla as one of the official languages of the state.[43] It was from 1950s onwards, in the backdrop to a great deal of social and political tension of the *Bhasa Andolan*, that one sees the emergence of new kinds of partition stories in Bangladesh. Those years were also marked by the rising tensions among Hindus and Muslims in many districts of East Pakistan and resulted in large scale communal upheavals. Long streams of Hindu refugees crossed the borders into India. The disillusionment with the newly created nation was complete with the famine that raged through 1950 to 1951 in various East Pakistan districts when thousands died starving. In a land where 58.6 per cent people spoke Bengali, the imposition of Urdu by the Pakistan government brought things to an explosive head on 21 February 1952. Certainly this was a crucial moment in East Bengal's history; and the resultant birth of Bangladesh in 1971 is well documented. Many Bangladeshi literary critics consider the two events as central to the development of Bangladesh's literature and to a revaluation of the effects and legacy of the partition. Writers like Syed Waliullah, Akhtaruzumman Elias, Hasan Azizul Huq, Imdadul Huq Milan wrote stories that

> looked at life with a realism… they acquired a new awareness of the economic and political reality of the country. As a result what they produced was significantly different – both in content and form – from what their predecessors had offered.[44]

Gone were the triumphant propagandist tone; instead, one finds in the stories a more sombre and more analytical response to the partition. This difference is noted and commented upon by a contemporary critic:

> The language movement was essentially creative…Bengal was divided in 1947 on the basis of the so-called two-nation theory. Communalism was endemic in the very foundation of that partition. The democratic upsurge of February 1962 stood firmly against communalism…People came together, forgetting their communal identity.[42]

These events then,

> rescued us from the communal madness of the forties and helped us to turn our attention to the real men and women of our country…

> their actual situation, their poverty and their helplessness…their hunger and their wailing once more helped us to evaluate the importance of partition and the reality of freedom…[45]

One can safely surmise that the events of the Language Movement and the struggle for Independence are the twin causes that result in a re-evaluation of partition in Bangladesh's literature. Many of these stories portray protagonists belonging to a different religious identity and display an awareness of the multiplicity of ethnic groups of the country.[46] In them, partition is seen as a cosmological occurrence, a loss of a world that has precluded a literary enunciation of selfhood in terms of nationhood and belonging. The creation of Bangladesh enables a new space of rhetoric that formulates the relationship of memory and history as the new realities of Bangladesh's literary life that will now parallel her national life.

Syed Waliullah's *Ekti Tulshi Gacher Kahini* (The Story of a Tulsi Plant, 1965), Hasan Azizul Huq's *Khancha* (The Cage, 1967) and Hasan Hafizur Rehman's *Aro Duti Mrityu* (Two More Deaths, 1970) all take a fresh look at how partition has thrown a shadow on the new nation state's history.[47] In the first short story, a group of young Muslim men come to Dhaka from Calcutta after the partition and occupy an abandoned house. They find a *tulsi* plant in the courtyard, a small and significant reminder of the previous occupants of the house. The story revolves around the responses of these men to the plant. Ranging from disdain to a surreptitious care of this Hindu symbol, the story is a brilliant yet subtle reminder of all that is lost in the trauma of partition. The very absence of the Hindu occupants of the house, an absence that is forcibly made powerful by the symbolic and real presence of the plant, enables the narrative to question the composition of the new nation that was carved out on religious and communal principles. Hasan Azizul Huq's story is about a Hindu family living in a small village in East Bengal. The members of the family dream of an exchange of property that will one day enable them to leave and move to West Bengal. The dysfunctional times is reflected in this dysfunctional family. The patriarch of the family lies ill, while the grandsons live as village goons. The metaphoric cage that the family inhabits is the cage of helplessness, of anxiety and failing to understand the forces of history that so remorselessly shape their lives. The story by Hasan Hafizur Rehman is a remarkable tale of flight and death. The narrator, a middle aged Muslim doctor, is travelling by train from Narayanganj to Bahadurabad when he notices a Hindu man entering the compartment with a woman and a child, obviously fleeing to a safer place. Being a doctor, he notices the woman, pregnant and in labour. Every jerk of the train convulses her body. The narrator waits with breathless anxiety,

unable to do anything, made impotent by guilt. Agonizing moments pass till the woman crawls to the toilet. The narrator waits to hear the wail of a newborn but a deathly silence greets his ears.

A significant thread in many stories of the partition written in the years after 1971 (both in Bangladesh and in West Bengal) is the trope of a journey, across borders into homes or homelessness. Given the makeshift and porous border between India and Bangladesh, it is not surprising that borders continue to exert a special fascination for writers that reveal the fragility and fluidity of identities rather than that of division. This can be seen in the way the idea of separation and borders are used in two evocative stories by Dibyendu Palit (West Bengal) and by Akhtaruzzaman Elias (Bangladesh),[48] where this motif is played out as a symbol not of an event but as *la longue durée*.[49] Both the short stories, written in the late '70s, and separated by a national boundary, have remarkable similarities of theme and tone. In both narratives there is an exploration of the effect of the partition on minority communities who are forced to abandon their homes for a more uncertain future. In both, the violence of partition gives way to reflection – of what it has meant not for the majority but the marginalized and the forgotten. Both these stories are ironic and indirect condemnation of the structures of violence that came packaged with the partition through borders, both real and metaphorical. In many ways they are also reflexive explorations of a self that is not monadic. Palit's protagonist is a Muslim in Calcutta while Elias's is a Hindu in Dhaka yet they are that and also something more. By foregrounding the 'Other', by looking at their lives and their anxieties, the authors seem to stress once again the plurality of existence, a negation of partition along religious and communal lines. An important element in both the stories is the use of formal realism that is deliberately abandoned or subverted through nostalgia that allows an exploration of dreams or desires that in turn questions postcolonial reality of nation and citizenship. Nostalgia, literally homesickness, a seventeenth century medical term, is not simply a longing for the past but a response to conditions in the present. Nostalgia is felt strongly at a time of discontent, yet the times for which nostalgia is felt most keenly are often themselves periods of violence and disturbance. Both the stories bring together feelings and awareness of particular spaces that the characters inhabit, spaces separated through history and nationhood yet brought into a mirroring embrace. A Bangla story from this side of the border reflects *uncannily* the concerns of a story from across the border. In the Heideggerian sense, our respective historical and locational anxieties seem to have transformed the very form of the short story to represent the uncanny: a wonderful way in which literature probes and sometimes overturns the cruel lessons of history.

> Now the Dhaka sky was left behind. The Bangladesh Boeing straightened out, its nose towards Kolkata…Like everything else, there comes a moment of return. When that slips away, it's impossible to ever be back.[50]

In the short story by Dibyendu Palit (b. 1939) *Alamer Nijer Baari* (Alam's Own House, 1976), the protagonist's words that I have just quoted sums up in a distinct way how many partition stories in Bangla, from both sides of the border, deal with the motif of exile. This exile is of course no ordinary one. It is a journey undertaken with an element of hope, a kernel of belief that people will one day return to what they leave behind. But the moment slips away, and one remains forever travelling on a taut, timid road to another city, another life. Palit's story is in many ways a typical story of the partition. Set after many years after that single catastrophic event of 1947, the narrator is on his way to Calcutta from Dhaka, returning to a city that was his home once, to a house where he had been born. Alam's family had moved to Dhaka, exchanging their property with a Hindu family from East Pakistan, but Alam had refused to leave Calcutta. Inviolate in his city, he stays back and falls in love with Raka, the daughter of the family who now owned his home. However, the riot of 1964 demarcates his nation and his nationality and he leaves for Dhaka, which soon becomes the capital of independent Bangladesh. All these years there, Alam had thought of his house back in Calcutta. When he comes to the city, always familiar, unchanged in his memory, he has no trouble recognizing his house. ('But there was no problem recognizing his house; there never would be.') In the story, the present journey back to the city stands as a trope for other journeys, into the past as well as Alam's earlier exile from Calcutta. The journeys are superimposed upon each other, each encircling partially the narrative that evocatively signals the diverse political times in the life of the nation. Alam's arrival in Calcutta, as the Naxal Movement ebbs in the background, is also a passage of initiation into knowledge, at last to acknowledge the truth about himself and Raka:

> In three years Kolkata had changed. He was so busy trying to guess how much Raka had changed that his own transformation had escaped him. When we stand in front of a mirror, our face seems familiar. Our eyes are not accustomed to noticing yesterday's changes. The present vanishes into the past as our minds, too, change course…… Alam realized that the roads in that area had never been so pockmarked, the walls so full of slogans - *Power comes from the barrel of a gun*, faded somewhat on a wall. The black ink on the wall

> seemed to overflow the black holes strewn across the roads. Humans were like roads too – all the comings and goings changed them– it was not possible to know how much, at a glance.

Alam's return to Calcutta is an attempt to reach the 'still centre' of his being. He can come back, but never return. His citizenship of a free Bangladesh is curiously at odds with his birthplace; and history's trajectory is echoed in this journey without an end; a fact signified by the conclusion of the story – the promise of Calcutta and Raka remains unfulfilled and unrealized. Alam's return is echoed by another journey of the past – his father leaving the city many years earlier. That journey was accomplished in despair and fear – the Calcutta they loved was no longer safe, communal riots made it more and more dangerous for this Muslim family to live in a locality surrounded by Hindus. Their beloved house in Park Circus, with the *kanthalichampa* tree near the front gate, thus becomes an evacuee property, to be exchanged for peace and safety. As Alam prepares to leave the house for the last time, he reflects on Raka's letter that makes clear how the journeys will forever remain incomplete yet one's hands stretch out over the walls to touch and to embrace:

> We had to change our addresses – this wall dispossessed us and many others too, before us. At the same time we would never have come to know each other– nor indulged in this love….now I am running away far from your love…keep in touch, if you want to. If you write, I'll write back. We know some things are a lie, but we do go on, don't we?

Akhtaruzzaman Elias's (1943–97) story *Anyo Gharey Anyo Swar* (In Another Room, Another Voice, 1976) is about a journey undertaken from the other side. The protagonist Pradeep goes to his ancestral house in Bangladesh to visit a branch of his family who had opted to stay back after the partition. Pradeep lives in Calcutta, but he is always restless and unable to settle down in one place. His work takes him all over Northeast India and he often crosses over to Bangladesh. Their old house in Narayanganj is now bigger, where his Pishima, his father's sister, lives with her son and his family. Pradeep's journey through the familiar landscape is coloured by his memories and the newness of what he sees. The landscape is both familiar and strange – a merging of remembrance and unfamiliarity:

> The point was the town looked the same. The one road, exactly as it had been thirteen years ago (he was seventeen then). The open spaces between the houses and offices now reeked of slums. Dirty, dark slum children races after rickshaws laden with wheat, a sack bursts and they collect the trickling flour and put it to their voracious

> mouths, the flour sticking to faces dripping snot. One expected to see such things only in big cities. Was it because Dhaka, the apple of their eye, had burst the banks of the rivers Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Dhaleshwari, to surge beyond?

The '71 War of Liberation and the contingency of nationhood have created a different Dhaka, whose expansion has engulfed the outlying districts like Narayangunj. The slowly exploding city is now symbolic of other things – the corruption and power-grabbing that the political underclass indulges in. Pradeep's brother Noni is a small trader, whose life revolves around keeping the political workers of the town happy and to find a way to send his grown-up daughter to India for safety. In this new nation, a *Shonar Bangla,* a land of golden expectations, Pradeep is a disoriented and disquieted traveller. Nothing seems to move him to anger, yet his ironic comments often reveal he is after all now a stranger in the land of his birth.

> Pradeep felt a little light-headed after an afternoon of sleep. A cold wind blew in, the moonlight shone. In their 'Shonar Bangla', did the silver moonlight glitter so, even inside a room?

The house where his father had lived as well as Pishima's presence, his closest link to the past, reminds him of a life irrevocably lost. The predicament of Pradeep is one that is shared by so many other characters in Bengal's partition fiction – while on a visit to a familiar place they try to go back to the past. Pradeep, however, finds that the past is not easy to recover and it slips away in a dream. It can only be captured in a sudden vision, a snatch of a song, a runaway smell. Nostalgia supplies the link between Pishima's recollection of the past that is filled with tenderness and death and Pradeep's perception of how much of that past this new nation has chosen to preserve and to forget. In this intricate relationship of time and history, Pishima's songs are a material reminder of the price Pradeep's family has paid in the upheaval, indeed a whole community has paid in terms of a way of life gone forever.

> The sound of half-ripe *kul* plopping on the sand-bank of the Padma woke him up. As the last bit of sleep and dreaming leaves him, he sees the verandah light and hears Pishima's song… Her voice rises, it falls; sometimes it is so soft that Pradeep can hardly hear. The garland of notes, high and low, fall softly on his eyelids, the notes wet. The eyelids peel off, his eyes come open, taut. Now his body floats lightly, on the waters of the Padma like a pomelo skin, dipping and bobbing on the turgid surface.

In the passage above, the movement of memory, dream and vision, inexorable like the ebb and flow of the river Padma, captures with delicacy the precariousness of rebuilding lives on the ruins of history. Elias creates a rich inter-textual web of *kirtan* songs, snatches of conversations, memory and surreal visions to make the story an unforgettable reading experience. Like 'Alam's Own House,' his story too uses nostalgia as a means of coping with change and loss. If the past is the foundation of individual and collective identity, the protagonists in many of these stories undertake a journey to that past to recover their present selves. Through the nostalgic impulse, they try to adjust to the crisis of partition, of separation and exile, to make meanings of their lives and identities in the present. This is one of the most important differences among stories of partition between Punjab and Bengal. In the Bangla stories the trauma of partition is seen in metaphysical terms and the hurt is not in the body but in the mind and the soul. Madness is not a trope in the Bangla stories (like many of Manto's works) rather it is nostalgia. The Bangla narratives are less violent, less pathological than the narratives from Punjab. The short stories in Bangla also underlie the fact that there were people who went against the tide, who did not move from one place to another or who moved but kept coming back. They testify that different people experienced the partition in various ways: the exigencies of the postcolonial state have swept these stories out of sight. What is also important to recognize in both these stories is the central role played by landscape in the evocation of memory. The roads through which Alam passes or the locales that Pradeep goes through on his way to Pishima's house throws up the resilient linkages between ancestral beings and places.[51] The relationship of what they see around them (in the formations of rivers or streets) and their conception of the world is a central theme of these works of short fiction. Partition disrupts this sense of their being in the world and their world order. Their displacement is now complete. In their formal elements, in both the stories, time has no duration that is significant. Rather, it is measured by an intensity of feelings, where the outside world with its series of incidents is less momentous than what the characters feel at a particular moment and the divisions of space and time become insubstantial, as if in a dream. So the movement of narratives from past to present and vice versa is felt through the language and images of the stories: each moment is infinite as the very form of the stories expresses this infinitude: the narratives remain suspended as if in air without formal closures.

Akhtaruzzaman Elias's large epic structure in his novel *Khowabnama* (The Dream Chronicles, 1996) [52] regarding the partition is reminiscent of Ferdousi's (935–1020) Persian epic *Shahnama*. The novel's political impetus is the exploration of the twin themes of Tehbhaga Andolan and the birth of Pakistan. Set amongst

the peasants and fisher/boatmen of a place between the rivers Jamuna and Kartoya (somewhere between Dinajpur and Bogura) this novel is a unique exploration of subaltern voices and a view of history from below. Elias' aesthetics is deeply implicated in his politics: in a critique of the national liberation paradigm, particularly in the context of Bangladesh's liberation struggle.[53] The novel is a look back at the history of the region to contextualize the social revolutionary aspirations of the poor peasantry and the urban underclass and to situate it within the larger scheme of linguistic nationalism that results in the birth of Bangladesh.[54] It gives an account of the partition that is also at odds with the nationalistic accounts either in India or Pakistan or Bangladesh.[55] This Elias does by showing that the separatist Muslim League's political ideology drew sustenance from the radical politics of Tehbhaga by adopting the rhetoric of the movement. The social revolutionary force of the suppressed sharecroppers' desire to change land relations became the driving force of the Muslim League, which capitalized on the class anger and social disaffection of the poor Muslim peasantry. Though the movement began under the Communist leadership, the League was able to give it a communal-nationalist slant because the movement for Pakistan could gather so much crucial support from the landless labourers and sharecroppers.[56] The rhetoric of a social revolution was used with finesse to advance a communal-nationalist agenda. *Khowabnama* shows how inextricably the two were connected.

> The people of my novel live on the banks of Kartoya river….from the Dibyok and Kaibortyo rebellion of the *Mahabharatas*, Majnu Shah's Fakir rebellion till the 1971 war of Independence, the waters of Kartoya had turned red with human blood. I have heard that even during the spread of Buddha's non-violent religion, a few thousand Jain monks were slaughtered near its banks….I want to stay with the war of 1971 but then can I honour that place?[57]

From these lines that Elias wrote about *Khowabnama* to Mahasweta Devi, it is apparent that he is looking at history in a different way, a way that is reminiscent of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, Amiyabhushan Majumdar, Manik Bandopadhyay and Syed Waliullah who have left their mark on Elias' aesthetic universe. The novel's content is rich in inter-textuality: from a resonance of Bankimchandra's *Anandamath* to the ballads of Sufi mendicants like Lalan Shah, Elias weaves together a rich tapestry of past and present aesthetic impulses through history and landscape.

Khowabnama uses myth in a way that foregrounds it as a kind of 'synchronic' history where existential time gives it little meaning. Instead, Elias envisages myth as a history/knowledge that does not unfold in temporal time but as a structure

that contains all things at the same time: it is like an image that gives rise to other images and so on, ad infinitum.[58] This order of things explains why the legends of Fakir-Sannyasi rebellion (an eighteenth century resistance when Hindu and Muslim mendicants fought side by side against the East India Company) can coexist with Tehbhaga, Munshi's dictates can submerge into the ballads of Cherag Ali, history can coexist with dreams. Elias' representational technique of transforming the fables and legends of rural Bengal into reality is by using the trope of dreams: Tamijer Baap is a dreamer but nobody knows when he is sleeping or waking. His dreams are powerful depictions of what he knows are true: the existence of Munshi, a soldier who fought the British in the Fakir-Sannyasi rebellion of the late eighteenth century along with Bhabani Pathak. But when Munshi was shot, his body was engulfed in mysterious red and blue flames and nobody had dared to come near. The slain Munshi now lives on the *pakur* tree next to the Katlahar *beel* where Tamijer Baap goes sleepwalking. The Munshi makes the egrets fly and he is the one who erupts into the sleepwalking and the dreams of Tamijer Baap, who in turn, gets his supernatural and mystical powers from him (when Shafarat Mondal, the largest *jotedar*, loses his grandson Humayun, the child's mother sees Tamijer Baap in a vision). Dreams have a special place in Elias's narrative: they exist as inter-text both inside and outside it. Tamijeer Baap dreams of the past, but his dreams are also passed on, after his death, to Kulsum and to his granddaughter Sakhina. The dreams are allegories of resistance that are churned up from the memories of oppression that constitute human civilization and that can exist without the corporeal body of men and women.

Elias' creative ability to use the fables and syncretic folklores of rural Bengal is made possible because of his use of history that contains within it, like a kaleidoscope, many patterns and images. The distinction between fable, myth and history is obliterated when Tamijer Baap sleepwalks and utters poems and ballads that bring together myth and reality. The memories of resistance to oppression that are part of his reveries are the foundation on which the present day Tehbhaga Andolan takes root. This bringing together of the past and the present is Elias' vision of history that contains the future and the past in one continuum. The mendicant Cherag Ali, who is a dream reader, and mentor of Tamijer Baap, sings his doggerels and his songs point the way in which the past history and the present reality can be fused to pave the way for things to come.[59] If memory is a construction of meaning then so are the dreams that need to be interpreted. Cherag Ali's readings of dreams therefore see the synchronic as well as diachronic layering within each one: synchronic as the dreams are situated in the self and locality, and diachronic as it recollects the historical circumstances of the Fakir rebellion through which they

are structured and recollected.[60] Elias' tale sustains itself through this archaeology of dreams: dreams that are both real (to the dreamer) and symbolic (that they are portentous): everybody in the villages of Giridanga and Nijogiridanga knows that they are so. Tamijer Baap is the successor of Cherag Ali because he has the book: The Book of Dreams (*Khowabnama*) that Cherag Ali entrusts him with. Keramat Ali will succeed them only when he composes his songs to become a balladeer of Tebhaga, with songs that have the same heady mixture of vision and resistance. In this way, dreams of resistance are passed on, from one to another, from age to age.

Elias' novel has a view of history that is at once eclectic and syncretic. History is not only what happened, when it happened and how it happened but also contains within it the overwriting of other things: folklore, proverbs, doggerels, traditional knowledge of things and places, and sayings. Nothing is outside its purview because the novel shows how history is also a kind of 'deja-vu'.[61] The Fakir-Sannyasi rebellion's act of resistance is now implicated in the fight for Tebhaga. History is thus a form of knowing: through love, labour, instinct, the traces and almost indecipherable markers left by events and happenings. So Tamijer Baap *knows* the exact spot in the Katlahar *beel* where Munshi had made a huge cavern to contain the floodwaters from the Jamuna when it rushed through the river Bangali and almost drowned the nearby villages. He *knows* all the *gojar* fish, who are Munshi's followers, congregate there and can easily be caught. Tamij *knows* the northern end where the *pakur* tree lived before Mondal's brick kiln workers cut it down. Baikuntho *knows* the spot where Bhabani Sannyasi will come to see his people on the day of Poradoho's fair. This knowing is not bookish knowledge, yet it is knowledge that lives on: in the hearts of people who dream of land, of getting a fair share of the produce, and of equality and justice. The boatmen of Giridanga have not read *Anandamath* yet they have other kinds of knowledge that allow them to understand the interplay of history and memory (in a brilliant scene in Chapter 37 the zamindar's *kachari* manager Satish Mokhtar calls a meeting to tell them that he will start the worship of Ma Bhabani in the fair; she is the mother goddess who needs to be worshipped in this moment of imminent partition; when the boatmen protest that the fair commemorates Bhabani Pathak, the learned men ask, 'Have you read *Anandamath*?' The answer 'No Babu' is indicative of this tussle in the text between different kinds of knowing). When Tamijer Baap wanders around searching for Munshi's tree, he realizes 'Mondal's brick kiln has expanded in the north, and has come a long way in the south as well. The *beel* gets filled every year and the brick kiln expands. But where was the *pakur* tree? On this side a whole lot of big trees have been cut and have been eaten by the kiln. But how could the *pakur* be cut?' This decimation of the trees is an important crevice through which

one can journey into the world of *Khowabnama* because this strand of the natural environment in peril is much more than an ecological disaster: it is an eradication of the traces of past events and happenings that constitute a history of its people.[62] The *pakur* tree is a marker in a landscape that is full of these signs: even the fishes in the Katlahar lake follow Munshi's dictates: at night they transform into fleecy-wooled sheep and swim in its waters. The Munshi, Boytulla Shah, a lieutenant of Majnu Shah, travels through land and water, through air and ether, through history and myth.

> At the head of the lake, sitting on the *pakur* tree, he will become the iris of the vulture's eye and will watch the slow journey of the sun through the sky, and then suddenly, transform himself into a ray of sunlight and cuddled within the warmth of the rays, he will touch the cold and clammy bodies of the fishes in the *beel*: the *gojar* and *shol* and *rui* and *katla* and *pabda* and *tangra, kholshey*, and *puti*.

Elias is *absolutely* clear that the landscape is not just a sign system for historical and mythological events, rather it is the landscape that is 'the referent for much of the symbolism.' In this text, landscape is not be seen as the 'intervening sign system that serves the purpose of passing information about the ancestral past' rather it is the 'landscape' that is integral to the message.[63] The landscape *is* the message as it is redolent with memories of other human beings, historical beings, like the Fakir-Sannyasi or Munshi, who are fixed in the land in which they fought and died, and who are now transformed into *place* or a natural object within that place. So in this novel, Space has a more important connotation than Time. To Tamijer Baap, place has precedence over time in the evolution and resistance of the fisherfolk who live on the banks of Katlahar Lake. He can, through the scared object of the Dream Book, describe the events of the past by *reading* the place.

The exile of Munshi from his tree is mirrored in the exile of Tamij from his land, in the countless refugees who crowd the empty Hindu houses in the city, in the exile of Mukundo Saha from Giridanga to India, in the migration of the Hindu teachers from the schools, in the exile of Cherag Ali from his village, in the obliteration of Bhabani Pathak's memories from the community's consciousness. Yet these traces of journeys and counter journey's remain within the earth, to be read by other generations of men and women, who can see through bookish knowledge into the heart of things. In a man's longing for his field is the endless song of the earth. This song cannot be contained within the political paradigm of the nation state that has its own logic of exploitation: even when the movement of Pakistan usurps the rhetoric of Tehbhaga, Elias is clear to show that the new state cannot and will

not have the political will to transform the rhetoric into action. The new nation is a betrayal of the promises made to the landless peasants, and becomes seemingly 'a spectacular palimpsest over a long, long history of oppression.'[64] When Tamij insists on asking Kader, the Muslim League leader about the Tebhaga Legislature that the League had promised in the new state of Pakistan, Kader says, 'Oh you remember too many things.'[65] Remembrance of things past is an act of subversion: it incites one to rebellion, holds one to past promises, keeps alive the memories of past resistance to exploitation and adds energy to the fight that is at the heart of human civilization – the battle against injustice and a battle for humanity. Partition comes slowly but inevitably, almost like a mist, upon Tamij and his people: before they know what has happened, the country has been divided. The shared sense of space and locality that the Hindus, Muslims, Namasudras and Kolus had with each other, in their community memories of the Fakir-Sannyasi Rebellion, in the tug and pull of tide in the Kortoya River, in the turn of the seasons must now be obliterated; yet they are never completely gone. The traces remain: in the signs that are strewn across the landscape, in the dreams of Tamijer Baap and Kulsum, in the ghosts that wander the nooks and crevices of our homes, in the book of dreams that is misplaced, in the trees and bushes that trail their fronds across our faces, in the sun shining on the paddy husks, and in the flight of the egrets that carry the shadows of the setting sun on their wings and spread it across the universe. The signs are apparent to some and mysterious to others: they remain invisible yet accessible in the layers of memory and the unconscious, from one generation to the next, and suddenly and mysteriously flower in the 'paona' *shlokas* and songs of Cherag Ali, take shape in the designs of stars and moons on Nobiton's *kantha*, and become concrete through the explanations of dreams that Tamijer Baap has learnt from his *guru*. *Khowabnama* is not simply an epic narrative of marginal people, with specific histories and regional characteristics. The novel, by bringing together the movement for Pakistan, the Muslim League, the Tehbhaga, the partition and the birth of a new nation, is looking at the present, at the impulses that made that nation. What one sees and understand is just one pattern, one picture; deep within it may lie other pictures and other patterns. The heart of the 'Book of Dreams' is a narrative (*nama*) of humanity's interconnectedness with the natural world and the soil that s/he tills with love. The myths and folklores of rural Bengal hold together these past histories of resistance and oppression, not between kings and kings, but between rulers and tillers, between the poor and the rich. Bookish history does not study the people's struggles, and sometimes the elite and the powerful recreate other myths to nullify the older primeval archaic stories, or to interpret them in a wrong way like Satish Mokhtar does with the myth of Bhabani Pathak.[66]

Ei jaygata bhalo korey kheyal kora darkar/ We must take a good and hard look at this place: this line that occurs at the opening chapter of Elias's novel is an important clue to understand the novelist's aesthetics and politics. The same place that saw the Fakir-Sannyasi rebellion, that nurtured Tehbhaga, that will see the birth of Pakistan will also be an important place for other future rebellions (the rise of Bangladesh). The possibilities of social, linguistic and political revolutions are thus embedded in the soil: the immanent possibilities of insurgency are nurtured by the very soil where Tamij dreams of growing *aush* rice. The dreams of justice may be deferred, Tehbhaga may not have reached its fulfilment but the social revolutionary essence of national liberation is always Elias' preoccupation because it is the unnamed and the unknown men and women like Tamij and Kulsum who carry the dream forward.[67] *Khowabnama* then is a new kind of history writing and a new kind of novel: for it honours the foot soldiers of human civilization who carry forward their dreams of justice. The novel accomplishes this arduous task by using a different sense of time. Elias does not use existential time to set out his epic, although the birth and death and the cycle of seasons form an important rhythm of his novel. Time is also the 200 years of history that exists in songs and in people's consciousness: the boatmen and the peasants who live near the Katlahar *beel* mix up their time and the times of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. In their minds, their lives span 200 years: the exploits of Majnu Shah and Bhabani Pathak are alive just as their own memories of catching fish in the lake. Humans live just for some years, but their lives spread over centuries, through their dreams for justice.[68] Tamijer Baap's search for Munshi on the north bank of the lake is thus continued in another form and in another guise by his granddaughter who stands on the hard soil of its banks and watches a red moon framed by the fireflies. She dreams of a boiling pan of rice 'in the fireflies' kitchen.' '*Bhaat khamo. Bhaat randichchey, bhaat khamo*' (I want to eat. Rice is cooking, I want to eat) – is it Sakhina's *khowab* (dream) or is it a demand? Even when some are happy to state that history has been created, freedom has been achieved and the dream of an equal society is now a reality, Elias shows that in one corner of our land, a little girl awakes: 'with her neck stretched tight, and her eyes sharp' as she looks hard and long at the vision of a flaring oven and a pan of boiling rice floating in the night sky. Her plaintive cry reverberates through the ages, and lives on in signs and in dreams, to be resurrected again and again by humanity's children because somewhere the desire for justice lives on in the centre of the earth:

Anami matir gortey /Gethey achey Tehbhagar atripto langol
(In a hollow of some unnamed soil/ Tehbhaga's plough rests fallow). [69]

Endnotes

1 Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'", *Selected Writings: 1938-1940,* 406.

2 Tai Yong Tan and G. Kudaisya (eds.), *The Aftermath of the Partition in South Asia,* 141, notes that the accounts of India's partition has tended to be Punjab-centric and Bengal has not received the attention it deserves. See also Urvashi Butalia*, Seminar*, February 2000, where she draws our attention to the existence of a 'serious gap…(in) the omission of experiences in Bengal and East Pakistan. Recent works by Joya Chatterji, Jasodhara Bagchi, Uditi Sen and others have addressed this issue but much more needs to be done.

3 Shelley Feldman, 'Feminist Interruptions: The Silence of East Bengal in the Story of Partition' in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 1:2 (1999), 169 states that 'East Bengal serves as a metaphor for a place that, like women, is constructed as other, invisible, different, and silenced in the real politics of time.'

4 Willem van Schendel, 'The dangers of belonging: tribes, indigenous peoples and homelands in South Asia,' in *The Politics of Belonging in India*, 32.

5 Neilesh Bose, 'Purba Pakistan Zindabad: Bengali Visions of Pakistan, 1940-1947', *Modern Asian Studies,* 35–36.

6 Md. Mahbubar Rahman and Willem van Schendel, 'I am NOT a Refugee: Rethinking Partition Migration,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 551–84.

7 Anindita Dasgupta, 'Denial and Resistance: Sylheti partition 'refugees' in Assam' in Tan and Kudaisya, (eds.), *Partition and Postcolonial South Asia*, vol. II, 192.

8 Gayatri Bhattacharya, *Refugee Rehabilitation and Its Impact on Tripura's Economy*, 12. See also Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, 195.

9 M.Sujaud Doullah, *Immigration of East Bengal Farm Settlers and Agricultural Development of the Assam Valley, 1901-1947*, 64. For example, Dhubri, a district in Assam, shares a 135 km international border with Bangladesh and has experienced a very high variation of population before and after the partition. In 1941–51, the population went up by 9.25 per cent, in 1951–61 by 27.62 per cent and during 1961–71 it went up by 40.51 per cent. Dhubri also happens to be the district with the highest Muslim population in Assam. While Muslims constitute 30.9 per cent of the state's population, Dhubri has 74.29 as counted in the 2001 census. See The *Indian Express*, 2, May 2010.

10 No full-length study has been undertaken to trace the movement and settlement of Bengali refugees, Hindus and Muslims, in these regions. Where historiography has lagged behind, literature seems to have filled the void. The vast hinterland of the Northeastern states has rich literary representations of the partition. Memoirs in Bangla from this region are many. See Udayan Ghosh, 'Memoirs of a Pointillist' published serially in the little magazine *Sahityo*, 43(3), 15 January 2009 from the Barak Valley that talk of Bengali settlers in Manipur. See also Joylakshmi Devi, *Cholar Path Aar Chena Mukh*, (2004) that talk of Barak Valley refugees. Anurupa Biswas, *Nana Ronger Dinguli*, (2006) is a reminiscence of a Communist party worker in the Assam valley.

11 Abhijit Dasgupta, 'Refugees as Political Actors: The Displaced Bengalis in West Bengal' in Joshua Thomas, (ed.), *Dimensions of Displaced People in North East India*, 321.

[12] Willem van Schendel, *Bengal Borderland*, 48.

[13] Deepak K. Singh, *Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas Between Bangladesh and India*, 2010. See also Akhtaruzamman Elias, 'Chakma Uponnyash Chai' in Sibaji Bandopadhyay, (ed.), *Sanskritir Bhanga Setu*, 194–200, for an assessment of Chakma migration on their literature.

[14] Badruddin Umar, *The Emergence of Bangladesh: Class Struggles in East Pakistan (1947-58*), vol. 1. 112–21. See also Hena Das, 'Kaloibibi: A Leader of the Nankars' in Jashodhara Bagchi et al, (eds.), *The Trauma and the Triumph*, vol., 2, 143–56. See also Amalendu De, *Bangladesher Janabinyas O Sankhyalogu Samasya*.

[15] A wonderfully rich and evocative novel on the Hajong participation in the Tebhaga Movement is Sabitri Roy's *Paka Dhaner Gaan* now available in English as *Harvest Song*.

[16] Umar, *The Emergence of Bangladesh,* 138–44. For an account of Santhal repression and the torture of Ila Mitra, a Communist leader in Nachole, see Maleka Begum (ed.), *Ila Mitra,* 89–93.

[17] See J.B. Bhattacharjee, 'The Pre-Colonial Political Structure of Barak Valley' in Milton S. Sangma, (ed.)*, Essays on North East India: Presented in Memory of Professor V. Venkata Rao*, 61–63.

[18] Syed Abul Maksud, *Mowlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani*, Dhaka, 1994, 35–43. Bhasani declared 10 March 1947 as 'Assam Day' and was meant to influence the outcome of the Sylhet Referendum.

[19] Press Statement issued by Meghnad Saha after his visit to Cachar with Tridib Chowdhury MP, *Meghnad Saha: Papers and Correspondences*, 1952–55, Installment VII, Sub File 2, 124–27.

[20] Meghnad Saha, Press Statement*,* 126.

[21] Meghnad Saha, 'A Brief Report of the Work of the East Bengal Relief Committee,' *Meghnad Saha: Papers and Correspondences,* Installment VII, Sub File 2,153, no date.

[22] The 1947 Sylhet Referendum, the only one that took place in the eastern part of the country, asked residents to choose between joining India or Pakistan and resulted in the separation of Sylhet from Assam. Sylheti migrants to the Assam Valley speak of it as a 'betrayal' by the Assamese Hindus who wanted Sylhet to go to Pakistan to separate the Bengali speaking districts of Kachar and Sylhet from the administrative unit of Assam. This was meant to reduce the percentage of the Bengali speaking clerks and officers from government offices. The clearest example of the involvement of the Assam Government's attitude to the Sylhetis can be seen in the disenfranchisement of some 1.5 non Muslim tea garden workers who would have nullified the verdict of the Referendum. See Anindita Dasgupta, 'Denial and Resistance', 199–200. On the growth of the Assamese middle class and its oppositional stance to 'Bengal' and 'Bengali' see Abikal Borah, 'Provincializing Bengal: Locating the Cultural Margins in the Nineteenth Century Assamese Literary Imagination,' paper delivered at the International Congress of Bengal Studies, Delhi University, 25–28, February 2010. Also, Anurupa Biswas, *Nana Ronger*, 71. The partition has had a profound effect on the region. Noted filmmaker Jahnu Barua's recent film *Ajeyo* (Invincible, 2014) goes back to 1946 and traces its aftermath on Assamese rural communities.

[23] See S.P. Mookerjee, *Papers relating to Assamese and Bengalee Conflict in Assam*, Installment I and II, Sub File 62, 17 May 1950–10 October 1950, for reports of incidents of violence between the two communities.

[24] Golam Hossain wrote his *Talib Hussan* in Sylheti-accented Bengali that has a different alphabetical system and is called Sylheti-Nagri. See Sahabuddin Ahmed, 'Literary and Cultural Traditions of Medieval Barak–Surma Valley' in Fozail Ahmad Qadri, (ed.), *Society and Economy in North–East India*, 279.

[25] See Bijit Kumar Bhattacharya, *Uttor Purbo Bharotey Bangla Sahityo*, vol., 1, 13–15. Some well–known little magazines of the region are *Purbodesh* and *Sahityo* (Assam), *Podokkhep* and *Mukh* (Tripura), *Shimanter Katha* (Shillong) and *Anish* (Silchar). This politics of difference has spawned stories like Dipankar Kar's *Uddhar Kahini* (The Story of a Rescue, 2001), Bikash Roy's *Aajker Ihudi* (The Jews Of Today, 2001) Dhiraj Chakraborty's *Monsur Mian ke Shomorthon Korben Na* (Don't Support Monsur Mian, 2005) from Assam. From Tripura, Bimal Chaudhury's stories collected in the volume *Manusher Chandro Bijoy ebong Taranath* came out in 1973, of which a special mention must be made of the story *Anubhaab* (The Feelings) set in the midst of a riot in Dhaka that capture the pain of being a refugee. Another important short story writer from Tripura is Kalyanbroto Chakraborty whose story *Abotaroner Bela* (Time to Go Down) is an important statement on the partition. The angst and pain of the refugees have found new and powerful depictions in stories by Debiprasad Singha (*Anonter Sesh Chelebela*, The Last Childhood of Ananta, 2002), Moloykanti Dey (*Ashraf Alir Swadesh,* The Country Of Ashraf Ali), Abhijeet Chakraborty (*Santosh Biswasher Golpo*, The Story of Santosh Biswas, 2005) Tirthankar Chanda (*Aporajito,* The Unvanquished, 2010), Shankarjyoti Deb (*Kirtaner Sur*, The Melody Of a Kirtan, 2008), Sunanda Bhattacharya (*Kerech Buri Britanto*, The Narrative of Kerch Buri, 1980) and Jhumur Pandey (*Mokkhoda Sundarir Haranoprapti*, The Lost Life Of Mokkhoda Sundari, 2000). Swapna Bhattacharya's short story collection, *Shomantoral* (The Parallels, 2005) has a story titled *Ujaan* that unearths the refugee's experience in the valley. Bijoya Deb's autobiographical novel *Srotoshhini* (Floating With the Tide, 2007) show the impact of partition on refugee women who come to Barak valley after the country is divided. Sunanda Bhattacharya's *Chanchtolaye Rond* (1995) is an important collection of partition related stories.

[26] Nandita Basu, 'Ek Anubhobir Kichu Antorongo Katha: Krishnachura Utsab', in *Baraknandini,* Silchar, 2009, 20, where she discusses the significance of Krishnachura Utsab in Barak Valley celebrated every year on 19 and 20 May to remember the language martyrs.

[27] I am grateful to Jyotirmoy Sengupta of Guwahati for his insights on this issue. See Jyotirmoy Sengupta, 'Assamer Shamprotik Bangla Golpo: Ashanto Shomoyer Dalil', paper delivered at the International Congress of Bengal Studies, Department of Modern Indian Languages, Delhi University, 25–28 February 2010.

[28] This term has been coined by Bijit Kumar Bhattacharya in his *Uttor Purbo Bharotey Bangla Sahityo*, vol., 1, 9. The coinage has drawn howls of protest from mainly West Bengali critics who see Bangla literature as a pan-regional phenomenon without specificity of region, politics and identity.

[29] Dulal Ghosh, 'Uttor Purbo Bharoter Bangla Golpo' introduction in Hasan Hafizul Haque et al, (eds.), *Ashimantik*, 402.

[30] Aamir R. Mufti, 'A Greater Story-writer than God,' in *Subaltern Studies X*I, 11.

[31] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 56: 'with regard to the paradigmatic order, all terms relative to action are synchronic…the syntagmatic order of discourse, on the contrary implies the irreducibly diachronic character of every narrated story.'

[32] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative,* vol. 3, 188–89: 'By fusing in this way with history, fiction carries history back to their common origin in the epic. More precisely, what the epic did in the sphere of the admirable, the story of victims does in the sphere of the horrible….In both cases fiction is placed in the service of the unforgettable.'

[33] Sunanda Bhattacharya, 'The Narrative of Kerech Buri' in D. Sengupta (ed.), *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengal,* 95. Translation mine.

[34] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, 191–92.

[35] Tapati Chakravarty, 'The Paradox of a Fleeting Presence: Partition and Bengali Literature' in Settar and Gupta, (eds.), *The Pangs of Partition*, 261.

[36] Neilesh Bose, 'Purba Pakistan Zindabad', 7.

[37] Neilesh Bose, 'Purba Pakistan Zindabad',10.

[38] Neilesh Bose, 'Purba Pakistan Zindabad', 20

[39] Syed Ali Ahsan, 'Purbo Pakistaner Bangla Sahityer Dhara,' *Mahe Nau,* 3:5, August 1951, 49–54.

[40] For a fuller discussions of these stories see, Sanjida Akhtar, *Bangla Choto Golpey Deshbibhag, 1947-1970*, 71–86.

[41] Quoted in Sanjida Akhtar, *Bangla Choto Golpey,* 40. Translation mine.

[42] Hasan Azizul Huq has tried to change this by penning a brilliant narrative on the partition. His novel *Agunpakhi*, (2008) is a first person narration by a Muslim woman in undivided Bengal who witnesses the traumatic passage of famine, World War and partition. See the last chapter for a discussion of this novel.

[43] Badruddin Umar, *Emergence of Bangladesh*, 11. Umar contends that the nascent language movement was the beginning of Bengali Muslim middle class's resistance to West Pakistan, 28–35.

[44] Akhtaruzzaman Elias, 'Ekushey Februaryrir Uttap O Goti' in Sibaji Bandopadhyay, (ed.), *Sanskritir Bhanga Setu*, 187–93. Translation mine.

[45] Serajul Islam Choudhury, 'The Language Movement: Its Political and Cultural Significance' in Syed Manzoorul Islam, (ed.), *Essays on Ekushey: The Language Movement 1952*, 40.

[46] Serajul Islam Choudhury, 'The Language Movement,' 39.

[47] Syed Waliullah, 'Ekti Tulshi Gacher Kahini' in *Syed Waliullah Rochonaboli,* vol., 2, (1987), Hasan Azizul Huq, 'Khancha' in *Hasan Azizul Huquer Nirbachito Golpo*, (1996), and Hasan Hafizur Rehman, 'Aro Duti Mrityu' in a collection with same name (1970).

[48] Both the stories in English translations can be found in *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals*, 59–86 and 133–52. Translations mine. The story by Elias was first published in Dhaka in a collection of the same name. Dibyendu Palit's story was published in 1977.

[49] I use this phrase after the French *Annales* historian Fernand Braudel who in his book *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* uses the term to mean the multiplicities and pluralities of social time structures whose change is imperceptible unlike the short time of episodic history. The *longue durée* can be studied through the lens of the local and the particular.

50 Dibyendu Palit, *Swanirbachito Shrestho Golpo*, 63-79. Translation mine.

51 See Howard Morphy, 'Landscape and the Reproduction of the Ancestral Past' in Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon, (eds.), *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*, 184-209.

52 Akhtaruzzaman Elias, *Khowabnama* (1996) in *Akhtaruzzaman Elias Rochona Shomogro,* vol. 2, 333-693. All translations from the text are mine.

53 Pothik Ghosh, *Akhtaruzzaman Elias: Beyond the Lived Time of Nationhood*, 9–10.

54 Akhtaruzzaman Elias, *Chileykothar Sepai*, (The Soldier in the Attic, 1986) is his first novel where he goes back to the historical and political upheaval of 1969 that resulted in the birth of Bangladesh. Elias' impetus as a novelist is in the large canvas, social and historical, that he connects with questions of history, nationality and citizenship.

55 Harun-ur Rashid, *The Foreshadowing Of Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1936–47*, does not show the Muslim League riding the wave of popularity generated by the Communist Kisan Sabhas who organized the Tehbhaga Andolon. The Muslim League, as well as the Krishak Praja Party, in their post–election alliance in 1937–43, became conscious of class interests and gave the agrarian movement a communal turn. See also, Shubha Srivastava, *The Tebhaga Andolan in Bengal, 1946-47*, unpublished M.Phil dissertation, Delhi, 37–38.

56 See Abani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist Activist,* 63–64 who states that the creation of the Muslim League/Krishak Praja Party coalition government in 1937 created the ideal conditions for spreading of Muslim League ideology far and wide and 'from then on the Muslim peasants began to support the League more and more.' The Communist Party of India withdrew the Tehbhaga Movement in November 1947. Bhabani Sen, the general secretary of the Bengal Provincial Committee made an appeal to the peasants not to initiate any direct action demanding two thirds of the crop in order to enable the new Muslim League government to fulfil their promise of equitable distribution of produce. In fact no promise was ever given to the peasants regarding 'tehbhaga' by the new government in East Pakistan that was tied much more to feudal interests than the previous Muslim League ministry in United Bengal. See also, Badruddin Umar, *Emergence of Bangladesh*, 37–38. Also, Bhabani Sen, 'The Tehbhaga Movement in Bengal', *The Communist*, 1: 3, September 1947.

57 Quoted in Hayat Mahmud, 'Katlahar Rohoshyokatha O Bhugol Paromporjyo' in *Akhtaruzzaman Elias: Phirey Dekha Sharajibon*, 56. See also *Akhtaruzzaman Elias: Churno Bhabna O Churna Shongroho*, Allauddin Mondol (ed.), 212.

58 Pothik Ghosh, *Akhtaruzzaman Elias,* 24.

59 Hayat Mahmud, 'Katlahar Rohoshyokatha O Bhugol Paromporjyo,' 57.

60 Dreams as allegories are common tropes in literature particularly in the Middle Ages both in Europe and in Asia. Dreams are a favourite mode that makes it easy to accept the fantastic and the bizarre world of symbolic objects. The uncertainty and vagueness of a dream also enables it to become a vehicle for the writer's own structures of meanings. Walter Benjamin had lamented that we don't yet have a history of dreams. Elias's text is not only about specific dreams but about the broken dreams of a land and its people.

61 Sibaji Bandopadhyay, 'Khowaber Raatdin' in *Bangla Uponyashey Ora*, 151 sees Elias as stretching the lexical meaning of the word 'History.'

62 Sibaji Bandopadhyay, *Bangla Uponashey,* 146–47.

63 Howard Morphy,'Landscape and the Reproduction of the Ancestral Past' 186.

64 Jaidev, 'Caste, Class and Gender in Mahasweta: Douloti as a National Allegory' in *Narrating India: The Novel in Search of the Nation*, 368.

65 Elias's understanding of the failure of the Tehbhaga Movement is historically quite sound. This united peasant movement was betrayed by the rich and middle class leaders when the country was divided. See Sudhir Mukherjee, 'Rangpurer Communist Party O Krishak Andolon' in Dhananjoy Roy, ed., *Tebhaga Andolon*, 132–33, that quotes a Muslim Krishak Sabha supporter as saying: 'We fought against those who are now kings. The jotedars who were ousted from the country are now back as kings.'

66 Kavita Punjabi, 'Between Testimony and History: Interpreting Oral Narratives of Tebhaga Women,' in Supriya Chaudhuri and Sajni Mukherjee, (eds.), *Literature and Gender*, 248.

67 Pothik Ghosh, *Akhtaruzzaman Elias,* 17

68 Khalikuzzaman Elias, 'Khowabnamar Majhi O Chashira', in *Akhtaruzzaman Elias: Phirey Dekha Sharajibon*, 70.

69 From a poem by Mohammed Rafiq, 'Swadeshi Nishash Tumimoy', quoted in Sibaji Bandopadhyay, *Bangla Uponyashey Ora*, 172–73. Translation mine.

6

Uncanny Landscapes and Unstable Borders: Politics and Identity in Geo-Narratives of the Partition (2005–10)

My memory is again in the way of your history.

Agha Shahid Ali, *Farewell*

Edward Said has alerted people to the fact that the imagination of anti-imperialism has an inherent geographical element:

> For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of the locality to the outsider: its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination.[1]

However, this symbolic recovery of the land on the part of a colonial/postcolonial subject is deferred in the case of Bengal because colonialism's end ushers in a partition of the very land that needed to be imaginatively recreated and restored. The history of dispossession and dislocation that partition brings in its wake is corroborated and memorialized by the works of literature of belonging and habitation in Bengal (both in West Bengal and Bangladesh) that form a distinct body of literary work. The history they chart is not the history of the nation's progression from colonialism to independence but embedded within it as another history: the accounts of the day-to-day life of those people who are 'outside' the realm of that history: the religious/ethnic minorities of the nation. Whether it is in India or in Pakistan, many of them did not leave their homes in 1947 or perhaps their 'homes' were reconfigured by the vagaries of the arbitrary borders. If the nation is not just a sovereign space but also 'imagined communities' as Benedict Anderson suggests, then what does it mean to imagine oneself *into* the nation especially if one's location is outside it? As a Muslim living in India or a Hindu in Bangladesh, how does one imagine one's national belongingness? In

what ways can identity be fashioned by moving or staying in a particular place? Can that place be called 'home' even when history intervenes to say one does not belong there? In Bengal's partition fiction, geography becomes deeply implicated in history and politics: the bio-geo-political implications of being a refugee or a minority in a land where one no longer belongs is fraught with issues of livelihood, homelessness and citizenship. Yet the self remembers the not-so-forgotten past and tries, through a process of recuperation that is never complete and never stable, to recreate a time and a place of belonging that would confer a meaning and purpose to broken lives. The struggle to be heard from the margins then confers on the contingencies of partition another set of images that articulate other realities: not exile or refugee-hood but being the 'Other' within the space of the nation. As anthropology suggests, margins are not peripheral spaces but are forms and practices through which the state is both experienced and undone and 'margins (are) sites that do not so much lie outside the state but rather, like rivers, run through its body.'[2] Agamben's theorization of 'homo sacer' (1998) as 'not simple natural life, but life exposed to death (bare life or sacred life) is the originary political element' can be used to decipher and understand the life lived at the margins that yet 'exhibits an essential link with the terrain on which sovereign power (of the state) is founded.'[3] Therefore, margins are spaces between bodies and states and Agamben's bare bodies, when they live in the borders of nation-states, become 'marginal and expendable' bodies that can be killed with impunity and sacrificed as pawns for nationalist causes.[4] Agamben's concept of the 'bare life' contains within it the idea of margins and interstices: the bare life is separated from its context and cannot 'dwell in the city of men.'[5] Partition's direct effect was to create borders where none existed and to give rise to two categories of 'bare life': the 'refugee' and the 'minority'. Although sometimes overlapping, being minority is not the same as being a refugee and one's relationship to the state is also different. A refugee, as a legal category, experiences state support as well as state control although the term signals a point of radical crisis because the state is confronted by people who had lost all relationships and qualities except the fact that they were human.[6] A minority on the other hand may have a set of laws guarding his/her interest but may face an insidious form of harassment or may experience being in the margins in indeterminate ways that allows him/her to resist majoritarian discourses in creative and heterogenous ways. Both these examples of the 'bare life,' *homo sacer* and *homo marginal,* proliferate in West Bengal's postcolonial political discourse as terms indicative of territoriality and sovereignty. The Indo-Bangladesh border is highly volatile and the border guards on both sides are known to use excessive force on unarmed populace that has led Schendel to name this the 'killer border'

and illustrate again and again how the border fence shapes migrant bodies and how 'border maps' are also 'body maps.'[7] However, the newly-created boundaries do not manage either to contain or keep out 'aliens' and the question of belonging has been a contested issue among the nations' religious minorities in both India and Pakistan as well as for people who live in 'enclaves' contiguous to borders. The continued violence, both state sponsored and tolerated, on those who are 'different' is a political reality of the subcontinent and has a profound effect on the social and cultural fabric of the two nations. The brutal separation of people through religion has been undone in Bangladesh in 1971, yet that nation continues to see unmitigated violence directed towards its religious minorities, as do both India and Pakistan.[8] The reality, of living either on the right or wrong side of the border, has created unbelievable hardships to thousands of people and has destroyed their fundamentals right to their land and homesteads. This existential marginalization of a whole people, within and outside the nation-states, has translated to living on the fringe of society with material deprivations and often, because of nationality and gender, to suffer double marginalization. When India was partitioned, the reality of migration also encompassed those who did not leave: many Hindus from East Pakistan stayed back either for political reasons or because they thought that the division was temporary; some had ancestral property or jobs.[9] Lower caste peasant communities like the Namasudras, with strong ties to the land refused to move following the example of their leader Jogen Mondol who stayed back.[10] Similarly, the Bihari Muslims came to East Pakistan to settle in and later, under duress or willingly, joined the Pakistan Army to perpetrate crimes against the Mukti Bahini and ordinary citizens. Many of them still live in large camps in Dhaka and Syedpur as stateless people as Pakistan has refused to accept them as citizens. Only recently has India's historiography begun to pay attention to their stateless plight.[11]

This chapter looks at some texts that bring about these different accounts of the self that live in the margins of the state. Partition has made clear that there are no linear histories of habitation and sojourn and these histories are complicated by movements of people who move, only to come back or who do not move at all. Often, the place of the 'home' where one chooses to stay on becomes a sacralized space that carries within it the markers of past struggles and future hopes; a way to reclaim the land and language and way of life that had been shattered with 1947. The imperatives of the story of this attachment to the land nullify and question the ways in which the same land was divided and mutilated in the past. In these narratives, the landscape and the people living in them confer a web of meaning to the displacement or rupture of the partition to give a template of how land, both real and symbolic, imagines an identity implicated within and without the nation.

The four texts under discussion in this chapter represent, in their diverse forms, the lived realities and politics of belonging either to the nation or outside it and to reconfigure the perceptions of national/regional locations. Defying boundaries, the lives they represent become an enactment of belonging that is constructed across disjuncture and dislocation. Hasan Azizul Huq's *Agunpakhi,* Selina Hossain's *Bhumi O Kusum*, Sunanda Shikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha* and Mihir Sengupta's *Bishadbrikhyo* are texts that consciously engage with a project of telling stories that have not been a significant part of partition literature in the sub-continent. The first two are novels while the last two are memoirs, all written within the last decade that show us just how widespread the reverberations of the partition have been on disparate lives and what one historian calls 'the sheer scale of internal displacement *within* the territories that became "India" and "Pakistan."'[12] These texts chart out these smaller upheavals among the religious minority, Hindus and Muslims, who stayed behind due to familial or other reasons in nations that were often hostile to them. They allow one to confront a history that is perhaps still subterranean: the subtle, hidden processes of identity formation through the land where people belong and are forced to leave or in the exercise of power by one community over another through class, religion and caste. Geographical domains (not territories) or land underlie all social spaces: in these texts one sees how the partitioned postcolonial subject narrates his or her social space, existentially referential yet unique in a concrete historical moment. These narratives bring out the inextricable relationship bertween memory and history to show not just the impact of the partition but the impact of history as partition: by sculpting the line that binds together memory and narration.[13]

Under colonial rule, undivided Bengal's geography has played out a complex association to the construction of a political landscape within the rubric of nationalism. Bengali literature of that period is replete with writings extolling the beauty and serenity of the land. From Tagore to Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, from Syed Waliullah to Kazi Abdul Wadud, from Jibanananda Das to Ritwik Ghatak, Bengal is 'a landscape…of the mind' and its 'scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.'[14] Tagore's writings give the clearest indication of this relationship between the landscape, meaning and the perceiving mind where the tranquility that he finds in the landscape is not a source of nostalgia but a source of an alternative mode of creativity marked by solitude and saturation:

> The living essence of the outside world floats in freely in verdurous waves of light and air and sound and scent that mingle with my

> bewitched mind and mould it into story after story. The intoxication is especially strong in the afternoons. Heat, hush, solitude, birdsong – particularly the cawing of crows- and languid, limitless leisure together move me from reality….I believe, though I have no proof, that the Arabian Nights came into being upon such sunbaked afternoons, in Damascus, Samarkhand and Bokhara….[15]

This creation of a non-utilitarian mode of perception, very different from the colonizer's gaze, marks the fiction of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay specially his novel *Aronyak* that explores the Burkian sublime but through the optics of caste and class.[16] From Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay onwards, one sees how the colonized Bengali tried to map and to invent a 'motherland' that was 'not pristine and pre-historical…but deriving from the deprivations of the present.'[17] This cartographic imagination and impulse, fostered under an alien rule, was bent on recreating a land that had been usurped to subjugate its people. These early writers celebrated the power of the landscape that was both symbolic and uncanny in that the land gave their narratives the impetus to turn their imaginative gaze on the desires and assertions of a colonized people. The pull and power of the land was both mysterious and beyond 'reasonable' explanations in that they forced the writers to seek an alternative history and a different meaning of subjectivity that was outside the empirical models of European rationality. The land was also uncanny because when one looked at it, it looked back to confer meaning and identity to the people.[18] To the colonial Bengali writers, both Hindus and Muslims, the land was not just an object of perception but a source for the rich diversity of flora, fauna and traditions that were destroyed by the British and that could now only be recovered through an act of remembrance or rebellion. This recuperation of the land through imagination was cut short with the partition: the project of 'nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonized identity' came asunder with the partitioning of the very land that made these imaginings possible and probable.[19] It was to take many years to begin anew the postcolonial project of recuperating the land through fiction, although in reality, the land was simultaneously divided and sovereign. The selves writing themselves in these narratives reject the politics of difference and although their identities are tied to the making of boundaries, their life stories create spaces where different identities come together to create 'a discursive space' of meaning production through motifs taken from the land. They re-imagine places and spaces as 'inclusive and hybrid' where the power of the politics of hate is somehow thwarted.[20] In the last few years writers, on both sides of West Bengal's borders, have begun with a new urgency to revisit this issue of being a minority and to see how other effects (apart from riots or migration)

of the vivisection have transformed or shaped their lives. Fictions and memoirs written in the past decade talk precisely and openly of the partition with special emphasis on locality and belonging: in them the geography and landscape of East and West Bengal (two halves that resulted from the partition) are sites of meaning making, both in the context of the text and as its historical setting. All of them draw their inspiration from the Bengal landscape that is present in vivid and allegorical ways within their narratives. The land surveyed, mapped and ruled by an imperial power and now left divided, becomes the site of differing practices of the self and a postcolonial search for justice and equality. The divided land becomes a site of contestation and recuperation for people who are suddenly left at the wrong side of the borders but who try to construct a geography of space that is contingent yet critical of the terrain of the state's sovereignty. The resistance to colonial rule that meant a reclamation and re-inhabitation of the land is deferred for these subjects who in postcolonial times come to inhabit a divided land, or a land contested or disputed. In the new nations, religious identities become entangled with national identities and people find themselves forced to move because they were considered aliens by a particular nation. Even after many months after the division of the country, Muslim families left their homes to move to Pakistan while Hindus moved into India. Still others went to safer places that housed people they knew. This dogged discourse, of belonging somewhere else but in the place that one finds oneself, eddies beneath some of the texts to complicate the territoriality and finality of nation states in postcolonial South Asia. Many of these narratives deal with 'an impossible homeward bound-ness, performed through narratives that carry the sense of justice in a way that cannot be legally enforced but invested obliquely, ethically and aesthetically, although not without a sense of irony.'[21] The ethical and moral implications of this concept of 'home' in the wake of a divided land and nation is immense: both in terms of territory but also as terrains of politics and history especially for people who are a demographic minority. These novels and memoirs dislodge the binary oppositions of religion, citizenship and belonging, to seek new alignments and new identities marked across the borders of the postcolonial nation states. All these writers bear the partition within them; as stigmatas of past wounds that however enable them to investigate different practices of belief and discourse in their lives as writers.

Agunpakhi: The Firebird

Hasan Azizul Huq's novel *Agunpakhi* (The Firebird, 2008) can be seen as an enquiry into the meaning of home, belonging and habitus. Huq was born in the district

of Burdwan in undivided Bengal but left for East Pakistan soon after the country was partitioned. He became a teacher in philosophy and continued writing short stories. This novel, his first, won the prestigious Ananda Puraskar in 2008 and can be considered a departure of sorts from mainstream Bangla partition fiction because it attempts an altogether different aesthetic exploration of language and form through a subjectivity that is doubly marginalized. Written in a dialect spoken in areas of southern Bengal, it is a narrative in the first person that foregrounds minority (in terms of gender, language and religion) subjectivity, and brings out the less visible and delayed effects of displacement and violence in the family and community spaces. A first person account by a Muslim woman describing her life in a village in undivided Bengal, the novel describes how the village (and the self) changes through the events of war, famine and the division of the country. The phenomenological time of the narrator's adolescence and adulthood (seen as a duration) is destroyed by the partition that irrevocably brings a schism in her and many other lives. It also changes the definition of her experiences of belonging to the land that is now supposed to be alien. The occurrences of the events leading to the partition interact and modulate other experiences of collective life: the novel explores both the synchronic and diachronic processes of history and memory. Her life, hitherto intricately connected to the land, comes under scrutiny as her family leaves for East Pakistan, the country designated for 'Muslims'. The unnamed narrator, known only as Meter Bou (the second daughter-in-law) refuses to leave her home and her land where she belongs. The primacy of region over religion is part of her self-imagining: home is the village rather than the new nation. This act of transgression marks her, in her body's relationship to space and to language: her identity as a woman, hitherto defined by her role as a wife and mother, is now moulded into another set of aspirations. Refusing territorialism as a precondition of nationalism, she sets into play new gendered notions of citizenship and subjectivity. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (2001) is useful to understand the construction of Meter Bou's gender identity that is made, negotiated and performed through her habits of thoughts and feeling. Bourdieu's idea of 'habitus' is an 'open system of dispositions' that are constantly shaped by experiences: so the woman who comes as a young bride to the village is different from the woman who refuses to leave her home after the partition. The 'malleability' of habitus is underlined and embodied through 'understanding and articulation' and is better termed 'postcolonial habitus' to suggest how habitus can be created and reproduced.[22] Through Meter Bou's narratorial voice one begins to see how her identity is constructed through significant moments of personal and social history and is mediated by location and culture:

> The ponds, lakes and the earthen houses with their ribs exposed told everyone that our village was ancient. The roads were paved only during the last war. Throughout the day only two cars went by over that paved road, one in the morning and another at dusk. Otherwise the day was silent: the village did not seem of this world. I know the village quite well! The large pakur tree in front of the homestead, isn't that unlucky? Pakur is a large tree (*maharuha*) it should be in the middle of a field or at the centre of the village – where people gather to smoke their hubble bubble – but no - it was right in the middle of the courtyard. Isn't that unlucky?[23]

In the novel, the village that the narrator describes is not just a place where she lives; it is also where one's loved child has died and dead spirits hover in the air. The homely and the unhomely traverse and conjoin in the soil that gives a rich harvest every season: the village is inhabited by the living as well as by the dead:

> People think that there were two kinds of humans – dead and living. They must exist together. All those living people who roam inside and outside, who can tell one or two of the dead are not among them? There is no way to know. (20)

The narrator is defined by her experiences of marriage and adulthood in a landscape that is remembered through language, a language that is both uncanny and sublime. In her remembrances, nostalgia plays a creative role and the surfeit of memory, instead, constitutes the 'affective' dimensions of loss of the everyday markers of lived experience. Thus, in this novel, place/space (and time) are not passive containers for historical events but a vital and living presence whose mysterious and subtle properties transform and thread the lives of people. The physical topos is thus transformed through memory into the mysterious and subtle marker of a 'home'. How does the landscape confer meaning to the self? To belong to a place is not only to be embedded in its geography but also to be immersed in the linguistic, cultural and social practices that emerge in relation to the place. The narrative that unfolds in the first years of the twentieth century and ends a few years after the partition of Bengal (and India) in 1947 is both linear and meandering with its own pace. The span of time captures the changing intercommunal realtionship in the village where the Muslims are a minority. The village, a self-contained and independent site is yet marked by clear divisions of caste and religion. The quotidian world of labour is a shared world of work between Muslims and Hindus (76–77) although each group knows the taboos that govern their realtionships. So Kattama, the matriarch of the landed gentry welcomes the

narrator as a young bride to the village. She decks her out in her own jewels but does not touch her. Yet the narrator does not understand the politics of difference that is on the rise:

> What is the use of thinking about the differences between Hindus and Muslims? Religions are different from each other…there are no end of differnces between Hindus and Hindus! Aren't there differences among Muslims? In this world we are all different. What is the use of thinking about it? (77)

In the novel, the domestic world of a well-to-do Muslim household at the turn of the century is drawn in meticulous detail, but the domestic is aligned and complemented with the world outside. Although Meter Bou lives in purdah, she is aware of her thirst for the world and the changes that come slowly and inevitably upon it (*pithimite elom kintuk pithimir kichui dekhlom na*/I came to the world but saw nothing of the world). The Roys, a prominent Hindu Brahmin family, are on the decline. They have lived on ancestral wealth and the present generation has neither educated themselves nor have they worked for a secure future. The Hindu eclipse is in contrast to a new Muslim awakening. The narrator's husband becomes the first minority President of the District Union Board and buys the Roy land at an auction. As the century unfolds its turbulent history, Meter Bou tries to understand what each of the events presage for her family and the small village community. The isolation of the village is broken by the World War II when white soldiers come to live in a camp nearby. The war and the subsequent famine destroys the insurmountable difference between the city and the country: the skyrocketing prices, the 'gora' soldiers, guns and cannons bring the two spaces in interlocking relationship with each other. The pre-partition riots also show how the differences have merged: the riots in the city soon spread to the village communities as well. Yet they bring out new questions about identity that have never seemed so important before:

> Human beings have lived their lives, with their children, their homesteads; everyone to their own lives…who was a Hindu and who was a Muslim?...I don't want to think of it even now but from time to time the thoughts came to my mind: what if the riots started here too? Maybe the husband of Napit Bou or Hola Bagdi's father will come to kill my two sons? Impossible!

One of Roys' sons is killed in Calcutta and the pastoral idyll is shaken with a metaphysical question:

> Here I am, living in a village in one corner of this world where the sun and the moon rise and set quietly, softly the crops ripen, the fruits blossom stealthily, quietly our children are born, grow up and die. What have we done to anybody that one son of a mother will have to be cut into two?(216)

When the narrator hears that the Muslims are demanding a separate state it is equally impossible for her to grasp the concept and reality of Pakistan. Her gendered undertsanding of the call for separation is ultimately a sharp ctitique of masculine politics of aggrandizement and self serving nationality, as she challenges the structures of habitus by contesting the dominant communal view: 'Shame! Has everyone forgotten everything? One field, one riverbank, one road, one drought, one monsoon and one harvest that we all share – Alas for a few men on both sides, everything is spoilt!' (226) When her family decides to move to East Pakistan, she expresses her anger:

> I have not understood, never understood the separation into two of the country; homes, buildings, society, household will keep on breaking into pieces: bowls and cans, boxes and cases will all break. One entire human being will not remain whole. (239).

Her refusal to participate in this senseless destruction is couched within a gendered creation of a new ethos of nurture, a new mode of being.

> Humans leave somethings to get other things instead. What did I leave for what else? At last I thought of something: I have left so much to find myself. I was not obstinate, I did not disobey anyone. I only wanted to undetstand things my way. Nobody could explain to me why a separate country has been created through a sleight of hand….Nobody could explain why that country becomes mine because I am a Muslim and this country is not….If my husband leaves what can I do? My husband and I are not the same beings: we are separate. He is my heart, my own but he is distinct.(252)

Meter Bou's realization that 'when it is morning and there is light, I will face the East. I will look at the rising sun and I will stand up again' is a language of agency and self-reliance. Taken at a symbolic level, the East would mean the birth of Bangladesh, whose flag is a rising sun, and whose coming into being will challenge the 1947 partition of the country on the basis of religious nationalism.

Allegorically, the text posits an idea of pastoral that is charged with the energy of a changing world where all the old certainties are set to collapse and what remains

is infused with a strong mytho-poetic colouring through which the history of the subcontinent and especially of the partition can be reassessed. In the Western pastoral tradition, the idyllic natural world is self-contained although it may point to a critique of the civilized artificial world outside. In this novel, the elements of the pastoral landscape are used to create a history of the people. This world is far from self-contained and has diverse currents that give it a shape and direction. The individual story of a Muslim woman's narrative of her life, her sufferings and her agency, is indispensibly magnified by situating them in a particular space; in a landscape that is at once real and remembered. The everyday experiences of the narrator and all that she loves, her negotiations and contestations create a narrative that construct a transnational locale of justice and freedom that seriously destabilizes the nationalist cartographies of nationmaking. This counterhegemonic geography create identities of rebellion or freedom that is a whole new story vibrating within the singular story of a woman's life or the life of a community. In the everyday lived experiences of the ordinary, marginalized people: of the lower caste peasants, women and children, one stumbles upon a range of responses to the partition. History has not articulated these stories and has been, very often, unable to capture all the resonances of loss, trauma and the workings of memory on identity. Huq's text lays down a strong political and existential imperative to separate religion and nationality as well as an artificially civic and a culturally vibrant form of identity that may be both heterogenous and fluid.

Dayamoyeer Katha: Dayamoyee's Tale

This memoir by Sunanda Shikdar was published in 2008 to critical acclaim. The narrative centres on the writer's first 10 years that she spent in East Pakistan with an aunt (between 1951–61) while her family lived in West Bengal. Set in a remote village Dighpait in East Pakistan, the text is strongly nostalgic in tone and allows the writer to create a world of affect that is personal yet suffused with aspects of memory and identity of a community. Living as a minority in East Pakistan, the writer raises a number of questions regarding religious and caste identities that critique the new nation's formation. Strongly attached to the land and the people around her, including the lower castes and Muslim field hands who work for her family, the child is able to question and critique the taboos of religion and caste through the intricate acts of love and compassion that she learns from the people around her.

Shikdar presents a gallery of portraits of her childhood, both Hindus and Muslims, whom she had known both as *bargadaars*, field hands or *kaamla*,

neighbours, zamindars, traders and peons who formed an integral part of the village economy. Her own family was a middle class landowning one, headed by her widowed aunt who brings her up. The narrative unfolds a warm intimate agriculturally sustained world of harvests, village fairs, voyages by boats, *pathshalas* and playmates that the precocious girl is a part of.

> Big happenenings seldom took place in Dighpait. There was no riot in Dighpait. The road to Dighpait was full of waterbodies and rivers; between their watery paths the news of our village did not reach the world outside. Just as there was no riots here, nobody cared or knew how many people died in floods or famines, how many people lived on grass seeds, leaves and creepers, wild fruits and vegetables (people who lived off the land, marginally existing were said to live sucking the earth, *mati chaitya khaiyya*) who tried to eke out a living and failed to do so, that news never reached the ears of the world. The government did not care; nor did the landowners who ruled over us care for the lives or sorrows of people. (45)

Yet this world is also an idyllic one. There is implicit understanding that the fruits of the forests, the fish in the ponds are to be shared amongst each other. So when a field hand takes a fish from Chand Khan's pond, Daya's aunt tells him, 'In god's world, the fruit under the trees and the fish in an open pond belongs to everyone…where have you come from that you do not know this?' (53) The village is riven with caste and religious divisions but there is also equity and justice, however ephemeral. The tribals from the Garo hills sometimes come down to hunt for wild potatoes in the jungle next to Daya's home and they are allowed to roam the area in search of small animals like porcupines, mongoose or wild cats that were edible. (55)

Daya, as she is called by everyone, refuses to follow the taboos of a Hindu life and eats and drinks in the homes of her Muslim and lower caste playmates and gets the sobriquet 'jaitkawuni' (someone who has lost her caste status). She transgresses the rules of religion and caste and her social world allows her to do that because it cherishes freedom. Everyone tells her that she is a child so it is not a sin for her to do whatever the heart tells her. Yet Daya's understanding of pain is also an important part of her that is nurtured by the land. The pain of being different, the pain of being a Muslim ruled over by Hindu zamindars, the pain of being hungry: all that is accessible and knowable in that world. In this way the idyllic world that Daya inhabits is both self-reflexive and goes beyond the self-contained world of the conventional pastoral. It allows her to be more than acquainted with pain, of

poverty and of being different. Sudhirdada, the effeminate boy of the village who is mysteriously killed is also a part of this world. Daya's transgression allows her to be at one with people with whom she shares not only food but also an ethos of life. So she keeps *roja* with Majomdada with whom she shares a special affinity. Majomdada is a Muslim field hand who carries her on his shoulder and who will one day sell his only existing cow to come and visit her in India years later. Riding high on Dada's shoulders, she watches the Bongshi river, the clump of dandakalash, the grass flowers, the mango and the jackfruit trees. Every aspect of the village she will eventually leave is drawn with meticulous care, as if the trees, bushes, rivers are to be remembered with love yet never with sentimentality. The landscape is suffused with a fierce morphological fervour, as if to name and remember every flora and fauna will ascribe a new enormity to them. Desire is the narrative trope of this memoir: a desire to recreate a lost world, a lost memory, a lost childhood that in a way would make sense of everything that comes after. It is this hermeneutic of desire that encloses the narrative with such a powerful trope of the pastoral by creating a circle of love and compassion that the memoir constructs intelligibly and without maudlin sentimentality. Yet unlike the conventional pastoral, Daya's world is not enclosed: it is ever-expansive in that it points beyond the organically connected world of people and nature; it points to hsitory and the creation of that history through the everyday living of an ordinary life with freedom and an ability to savour the hidden and the unknowable human self. The expanse of the self, into the knowable story telling *shashtor* (sacred books) that Daya hears from others and the *mukto antyokoron* (open mindedness) that she recognizes in Bhulipishima is to enunciate and celebrate the selfhood that is at once layered and constructed through the vagaries of imagination and action.

The little girl/narrator is not untouched by the larger events taking place around her. As she waits to read the newspaper *Ittefaq* although she knew no conjuncts and was often berated for knowing so little of the written word, Daya is eager to learn about the world if not always through the word but certainly through observation and participation. Although what she knows and learns may be seen as useless in the paradigms of modernity:

> I had learnt at an early age how to use the dhenki and make rice and chira, to use the pounding stones and break lentils, and bathe the many cows and calfs we had at home named Buri, Tepi. Bisshut, Shukkur, Mangal. ….although all these knowledge did not come to any use later in my life.

Other kinds of knowledge too would be a part of Daya's life: the names of

different varieties of rice, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the teachings of Islam, the divisions of religion and caste. When the cow Buri dies, Daya asks, 'Was Buri a Muslim?' because a grave was being dug for her. 'How good it would have been if humans too had no jaat' she ponders on hearing that Buri was an animal and did not have any! The knowledge of the self and the world intertwines in Daya's consciousness not to give herself an narrow personhood but a realization that she lives with a 'baundulepona' an eccentric creative quest for the wide open vistas and a hatred of constrictions. Daya's knowledge also encompasses pain and separation; a realization of what it means to leave home forever and to be uprooted along with a systemic destruction of the village economy sustained by the rentier Hindu landowners or the service providers: 'I saw how Poluda's house was left empty. Atop the buffalo cart were piled utensils, the *piris* made of jackfruit wood, bags filled with *muri* and *chirey*, trunks and beddings tied in rugs.' The implication of that is not lost on her : Majomdada has lost his *barga* because the landowning Dey family has left for India. The partition has meant a pauperization of the poor Muslim *bargadaars* who had lived by working on Hindu land or had depended on Hindu revenue. The new owners of the land are either the wealthy Muslims or the Hindu tradesmen like the Karmakars who buy the land at throwaway prices. However an important difference exists between them: the Hindus rent out the field because they do not want to be seen as agriculturists 'mathey nayma chash karar himmat nai'. The economic vacuum created by the Hindus are filled by the new entrants, the Muslims from West Bengal whom the village folk called 'ripuchi' (refugee). Daya's aunt tells her that they were not to be compared with the Muslims of the village, *bhumiputras*, who belong to the land and are not rootless. (21) The loss of their Hindu neighbours fill the Muslims too with great sorrow. Modinabhabi who waits for Suresh Lahiri to return tells Daya: 'Never forget your village….Sureshdada went to Hindustan and never came back. His home is now a ruin, there the birds and the trees weep.'

Shikdar's narrative lays bare a project of recovery: a recovery of a way of life now irrevocably lost yet whose memories have a strong pull on her even many years later. In the memoir, the recreated landscape and the people living on them are connected seamlessly. The difference between the *kalojira* and the *hashkhol* rice, the courtyard filled with harvest, the bamboo partition between the main room and the granary, the waterbodies filled with piscian life, the small stiches of the embroidered quilt are aspects of some or the other characters in Daya's world. Every living thing, whether it a plant or her favourite cow Buri is memorialized, archived to create a quasi 'theoritical' landscape of affect: it is not wholly theoritical in that it is so tangible and sensuous but elements of the logos suffuse through it

making it a living topography through which humans love and labour. The logos/landscape is invoked with a certain epistemological plea: the land is not only a reference point to understand partition and what it did to people's lives, however marginal or insignificant but also to task the readers, to read it as a world that contained the seeds of its own destruction. In this way the pastoral markers of a self-contained community cut off from the world outside are visibly torn asunder when Hindu families leave the village for India, walking the last stretch of the path that wind through Daya's house, wailing their anguish to Daya's aunt: 'We shall meet in Hindustan.' The larger project of this memoir, to sacralize the geography, where the narrator had her early roots, is to understand the ways in which the vivisection of the country had de-territorialized, uprooted and displaced the long-shared traditions of an agrarian community, divided by religion and caste and class, but nonetheless conjoined through love. The story of Madinabhabi is a case in point. From an young age Madina was a playmate of Suresh Lahiri. The boy would sit in the courtyard studying while Madina would sit nearby listening to him. They would play hide and seek and if they touched each other while playing, Suresh would have a bath and then go to school. Suresh's father Ganesh Lahiri wanted to leave as soon as the country was partitioned ('the sky fell on our head the villagers often said') but he had to stay on because his large property took time to be disposed off. When the final date was set, Suresh asked Madina to sew him a *kantha.* Madina had wept inconsolably when she heard that the Lahiris were to leave but she began to stitch a quilt where she embroidered childhood scenes that she had shared with Suresh. But before the kantha was finished the Lahiris left. Madina stopped embroidering, and roamed the village paths; everyone began to call her mad. Daya knows Madibhabi is not so; she promises that she would take Suresh Lahiri's kantha to Hindustan if Madibhabi would only finish it. Like the stitches of the kantha, the relations between Hindus and Muslims are invisible and interdependent; weaving together a monadic sense of dependence and fellow feeling. Yet the taboos are also strongly upheld. Daya's aunt, a widow, tells her that she must never drink water in a Muslim household and does not allow her Muslim neighbours to enter the threshhold even when there is a downpour. Daya is a rebel: she keeps *roja* with Majomdada and would pray at sundown 'Khodatala, keep everyone well. Let there be no hunger, no passport-visas, no quarrels and fights.' During the month of Ramadan, Daya's aunt would keep a big basket of puffed rice and a terracotta jug of water for the farmers and traders who would come down the path outside their homestead in the evening to help them break their fast. Daya's knowledge of the major religions are from Eyadalikaka and Sobhandada who tell her about the teachings of Islam and of Buddha. She is scolded by her aunt when

she protests against the treatment meted out to Muslim neighbours and early on decides that Eyadalikaka's teachings are right: first came humans; then religion and caste that were made to divide one from the other.

Dayamayeer Katha is about history writing in the guise of a memoir. Memory's invisible tug and pull does not just evoke nostalgia although it is an important ingredient of the text. The narrative points to a world that is rife with meaning, not because it is dead but because it contains within it other possibilities: of being and becoming. It contains the possibility of another kind of history of the subcontinent: a history that is evoked through the closeness of its people and the pangs of hunger and pain that knew no difference of caste or religion. Dayamoyee's book is ultimately the history writing that never happened: the partition brought, in one fell swoop, an end to that long syncretic tradition of closeness and interdependence that lived in our villages. In a sense it is an idealistic history that will always hover over the material history of animosity that partition articulated.[24]

Bishadbrikhyo: The Tree of Sorrow

Mihir Sengupta's *Bishadbrikhyo* (The Tree of Sorrow), part of a trilogy, was published in 2005.[25] The narrative is about his life as a minority Hindu in East Pakistan through the decade of the 1950s till he leaves East Pakistan in 1963 at the age of 17. This memoir carries 'the trauma' of his exile from his land and describes 'the melancholy that has beset Hindu and Muslim lives' in the wake of the partition.[26] However the author is quick to state that his memoir is composed not only through the trope of 'nostalgia' but carries within it the sense of a country's continuity, a real country 'that is now transformed into a sentient country' what he calls 'deshbohota'.[27] The writer's family lived in a village named Kirtipasha where they were the respected landed gentry fallen on hard times. Set in the riverine Barisal, the narrative lays out the topography early on: the *picharar khal,* the small stream that connected the house with the larger river outside, the two large raintrees that flanked the road into the village, the small bridge, the fruit garden with the *kamranga* tree and other such landmarks create a visual topography that becomes the stage for the playing out of the decline of the rentier Hindu class in East Pakistan and along with them the pauperization of the lower caste artisans and small farmers who had depended on them for generations. Sengupta's narrative self is mediated through a series of discourses: the folk stories he heard from the women of his family, the songs of the rural folk, the peasants, boatmen, fishermen and artisans who lived inextricably linked to the land, the tales about how the

land was tilled and cultivated rescuing it from a dense forest and the intertwinning agrarian rituals shared by both Hindu and Muslim men and women during harvest or planting. Although the text is self narration it is also a personalized history of the partition: basing his observations on the everyday, the ordinary and the marginalized, Sengupta weaves a narrative enmeshed with a community of lives but with a crucial difference. The self that narrates this tale is not an integrated one; melancholy has split the self into one that had lived in East Bengal and the other exiled from that verdant landscape. This text is a testmony of a divided self. A deep melancholy creates a rift in his selfhood: his childhood in East Pakistan and his latter life in West Bengal are two selves that are tenuously linked through it. This makes his memoir partly autobiographical and partly confessional in the interplay of identity and guilt that he supposes the entire rentier Hindu landowning class had to undergo and whose price the latter generations had to pay.

Yet this divided self has a certain degree of self composure in that it understands and analyses the past through its relations with others. Throughout his memoir, Sengupta's strong sense of other lives, relationally and uniquely bound to him through time and place, makes his text different from conventional autobiographies. Judging his past through the multiple lenses of caste and class, his remembered childhood is anchored in family, community and a regional history rather than the national event of the partition. For Sengupta, his memory is an account of how things happened, discursive yet tangible, and always in a symbiotic relationship with the individual and the collective. *Bishadbrikhyo* is the archival memory of a land he will forsake for ever.

In the memoir, the small stream running behind the sprawling house transforms itself to the stream of memory that touches the narrator again and again to awaken within him the wistfulness and melancholy that has coloured his life all through. These objects from the remembered landscape are 'the molecules of my memory, an inevitable and ever conscious force, filled with tenderness, who never leave me; in my wakeful, sleeping, dreaming hours they are ever present.' Throughout the text, the touch of *bishad* or sorrow lay their sombre weight heavy on him. Not only in the narrative meanderings of his story but also the word 'bishad' blends in itself the ideas of reflection and the workings of the imagination. Therefore, the tale Sengupta narrates is less a linear history and more of a *brotokatha*: keeping in tune with the tales that accompanied the worship of the many gods and goddesses of rural Bengal who were revered by the villagers as part of their nature worship rituals. These tales formed a kind of primordial link between an agrarian community wholly dependant on the forces of nature and their quotidian struggle for existence. The tales, fantastical and always optmistic, laid bare the hopes and aspirations for

plenitude: a wish fulfilment, a cornucopia of health and wealth by a people who had a precarious life far removed from the urban metropolitan modernity that was unfolding in colonial centres like Dhaka or Calcutta. By comparing his text to a *brotokatha,* Sengupta in one stroke accomplishes a serious act of rewriting the history of a minority. Like the *brotokatha,* his story would also encapsulate elements of hope and dashed aspirations as it meanders through sub stories, folktales, rural myths and legends. Like the tale of worship, his memory also has a performative function: it would bring together a motley group (us the readers) to partake of a tale rich in symbols yet ordinary in its appeal to an essential justice that humans have always craved for, a justice that is carved out of their hope to live and die in the land of their ancestors. Sengupta's melancholy has very little resemblence to Romantic melancholia, an anomie of being out of tune with the world. Rather it is its exact opposite: a deep and perennial involvement with the world whose weight casts a deep shadow on the self. It is the author's total abandonment, a deep sensitive undertsanding of what the self is capable of suffering, that marks this memoir with a whole new urgency and delight. Thus sorrow or *bishad* is an important formative influence on his tale of living in a time that in one fell swoop took away the feudal wealth of the rentier Hindu landowners in East Pakistan; it is a past that he revisits with its mixture of memories of humiliation, poverty and insults meted out by the majority and the thoughtless profligacy of his own ancestors. Sengupta describes a turbulent time in the history of the subcontinent through a language that is at once familiar yet opaque: like the water of the many streams and rivers that were the memorable playground of the village children the memoir waters the rich and syncretic traditions of rural Bengal through the dialects spoken in the area. Since memory is bound both by place and time, the chronotropic flashbacks in the text invoke this lost dialect, a way of life that is sublimely rooted in the agrarian world order and a class hierarchy that is strong and rigid. So the mutual dependence of the artisans and the 'projas' with their landlords: during festivities, the ordinary people gather in the courtyard of the rich farmer or landlord to recite the poems appeasing the tigers, crabs and alligators who had once infested the land and who had threatened the early inhabitant/pioneers who had farmed it. Reciting the rhymes of Barobagh or dressing up as the *swang* (fool) was a way in which the lower castes vented their suppressed ire against the rich landowners.[28] Evoking the rich dialect of Barisal, in the songs of worship and the tales of the wrath and benevolence of gods, Sengupta's melancholy plays an altogether different role of remembrance. His tale foreshadows the creation of the new nation (Pakistan) and the simultaneous social and 'moral' breakdown of the Hindu society in the loosening of familial bonds, the increasing conflicts with a

rising Muslim middle class who were eager to take over the land and property of the families leaving for India and the lack of education since most village schools that once ran with the patronage of the Hindus have closed for lack of students:

> The just born new nation of Pakistan was beginning to sharpen its fangs and teeth. The world that lay encompassed within the *picharar khal* was beginning to show cracks. Was that the time when the cracks of slow devastation had actually begun in the social fabric of the world that I knew in that green land? (24).

Yet this destruction of the Hindu society could not be wholly blamed on the rising Muslim identity of the new nation:

> The situation at that time was peculiar. The newly aquired freedom, the pain of discrimination inflicted by former upper caste Hindus,the easy access to feed the fire of lust and most importantly, the desire for revenge that were fueled by the everyday news items in newspapers and magazines, all these influences were impossible to avoid

by the Muslim villagers who naturally sought to occupy the social position and prestige of the Hindu landed gentry. (43) Sengupta's memoir gives a complex picture of a society that had a long and intricate history of community relations: the men and women belonging to the lower clastes like the Jugis, Namashudras and Napits had a long standing dependence on the landed gentry for seasonal work. Nor did the Muslim tenant farmers, dependant on Hindu benevolence, keep abreast of the larger tumultous happenings that were creating such ripples in the world outside:

> The times that I am discussing were filled with riots and mass killings that had disturbed the elders of the family and had made the families on the two sides of the canal, the Bakshis, Guptas, Bannerjees or the Gangulis, leave the country; yet in our area the marginal inhabitants like the jugis, napits, kamar, kumor, namasudras were still living undisturbed with a kind of hope. The tenant (Muslim) *projas* had never behaved with the Hindu family patriarchs in any way that may make them feel compromised about safety. Actually, to many of them, riots, partition, the frantic search for a home by refugees were not known fully. They were all bound by the rules and safety of the tenancy….To a boy like I and many others like me, their simple, primitive life and lack of worry regarding the future was a great cause of astonishment. (47)

The memoir refuses to apportion blame to only one community just as it does not hesitate to critique the hollow aristocracy of the landed Hindus whose enormous wealth is frittered away on litigations and family quarrels. The memoir instead turns one's attention to the act of representation of a world that has hitherto never been a part of the subcontinent's history:

> Many historians have told us about the partition and the resulting riots but they have all been tales of the cities, towns and trading centres. They knew little about our world that lived by the back canal and in their writings nothing has been written about such a world……It was the riots in 1950s that brought about a horrible ripple in this world of ours, the nearly five hundred year old foundations of a society began to develop cracks. All these times, we had lived with differences and divisions; maybe left to ourselves we could have naturally reached an equality of sorts. But the partition's irrevocable poundings made that process silent for ever. (66)

Yet this recounting of the history of dependance and division seems to the writer to be the harmonious melody of his life. If the memories of festivals, love, wealth and the steadfast happiness of a life lived amidst plenitude are the ingredients so are the horror, suspicion and bloodied destruction a part of his remembrances. The Hindu community's destruction accompanies the freedom of the writer to leave his ancestral village and to absorb the urban modernity of the city life but the tentacles of memory of the backwater, the raintrees that had protected the community from the vissicitudes of political change and the sights and smells of that faraway green land still bubbles up in his mind. Sengupta's sojourn in West Bengal for many years have not lessened the tug and pull of his memories so that even now in his sleep he feels the muddy waters of the canal awash over his body: 'in reality the canal has dried up ages ago and is now a field but my roots are still awash with their perennial currents.' (77) so much so that the writer talks of his 'life that is ultimately a melancholy life.'

The meaning of Sengupta's landscape cannot be found simply in the facts of history nor in the stories of deprivation and humiliation of a particular community. The logos of the landscape rests totally on the affective dimension of what is felt, seen and retold to people as a tale that may evoke a lost world yet whose value and meaning cannot be seen or realized in any discernible logical method. It is a world of feeling, of a sense of loss and melancholy that is the perpetual companion of an exile; of being in the world through an invisible web of relationships not only with other human beings but with plants, animals

and the landscape. The symbolism of the two rain trees is thus apparent even to someone unfamiliar with Bengal's landscape. The trees stood for a way of life both complex and inclusive; their message was a message that is resolutely ingrained with the last leave taking that the author remembers of his aunt, crying with her head against its ancient roots.

Bhumi O Kusum: Land and Flowers

Published in 2010, *Bhumi O Kusum* (Land and Flowers) by Selina Hossain is probably the only novel in Bangla that is based on the lives of people in the *chhitmohol* or enclaves between the borders of India and Bangladesh. Although rationally a nation's territories should be contiguous or geographically adjacent, sometimes they are not so. An example of geographically non-contiguous territories belonging to one state is that of Pakistan before 1971. This possibility of territories lacking geographical contiguity forming parts of one state sometimes results in some parts being surrounded by the territory of another state. Such areas are termed enclaves. The situation can be further muddled by the existence of an enclave within an enclave (counter-enclave) or even an enclave within a counter-enclave (counter-counter-enclave). Locally known as *chhitmohol,* where *chhit* means a sliver of something, enclaves are pockets of India within Bangladesh, and vice versa. The reasons that lead to the birth of these anomalous geographical areas are obscure but it is probable that the highly fertile lands belonging to the *chhits* became negotiating tools between the neighbouring rulers of the princely states of Cooch Behar and Rangpur, when the former integrated into India and the latter into Bangladesh. As per the joint verification carried out by the Indian and Bangladesh Governments in April 1997, there are 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India although these numbers can be disputed.[29] In India, these portions of Bangladesh can be found in the states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. The residents of these enclaves do not enjoy the same basic amenities that the mainland citizens of their country possess, for practical problems of access. They find it difficult to travel outside their enclaves as they have no opportunity to obtain valid travel documents. They are essentially prisoners within those areas, or stateless people, with fewer facilities than prisoners held by the state. To all intents and purpose, the residents of the enclaves are illegible/invisible to their governments because they possess no documents that mark a nation's citizen, like passports or identity cards. Deception becomes a common practice in the absence of identity cards that can ensure some civic rights. There have been several contradictory population estimates,

while the number may be as high as 51,000 people who are residents of enclaves both Indian and Bangladeshi. As Willem van Schendel remarks in his book *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia,* 'understanding and unraveling the post-1947 realities of partition requires an intimate knowledge of the borderlands that were created and permutations they experienced. The role of borderlands in the shaping of post-partition societies, economies and states remain almost completely unexplored.'[30] The newly-created borders between India and Pakistan covered some 4,000 km to the east between India and East Pakistan and Burma (now Myanmar) and even after the decisions of the numerous boundary commissions were implemented, the long periods of uncertainty and change over actual demarcations of territory remain a contentious issue between the nations.[31] The Indo-Bangladesh border was thus a result of political cartography that is still in a state of flux and continuous political interventions and is thus inserted in an 'unstable landscape.'[32] The overlap between migration, politics and national security makes this border one of the most contingent and hostile in the subcontinent yet they have attracted little attention in mainstream media unless there are shootings between border patrols of the two countries. Recent writings on the border have stressed this lack of awareness of the border in Indian partition writings that seem to stress trauma, violence and agency instead. For historians and anthropologists and sociologists, it remains a challenge 'for narrating border-crossings as interweaving spaces of loss and abjection on the one hand and material and social possibilities on the other.'[33] The indiscriminate torture, shooting and brutalization of a migrant border-crossing population, with divided families and homesteads deserves urgent international measures to redress the inequalities and absurdities of the 'live' (in the sense of a communally charged) border between India and Bangladesh. The statistics of border guards shooting and killing people may be disputed by the two nations, yet it is undoubtedly true that people who continue to cross these borders face state repression and violence while they try to connect with divided families or travel for work without valid documentations during seasonal times. In the midst of this serious anomaly of the national (and notional) border there are also the enclaves that are beset with other problems of livelihood and displacement and have not drawn the social/political attention they deserve.[34] The time is ripe now for us to turn attention to these unfinished projects of the partition to see how they have shaped cross border movements of people and goods that have accommodated yet resisted the realities of boundaries. Both India and Bangladesh have, from time to time, tried to address these issues politically, rationalizing for instance, the fact that 1000 km of the Bengal border runs through the meandering rivers of the lower Indo-Gangetic Plain (an active

delta region) and their shifting courses and the sudden rise of *chor* land or silt banks and islands that was often claimed by respective parties as their territory. By the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 between the two countries, India and the newly independent Bangladesh decided to complete the demarcation of the land border between the two countries and the questions of the enclaves also came to be addressed. They listed 15 sectors of the border that were yet to be demarcated and although the Bangladesh Parliament ratified this agreement, the Indian side did not.[35] In the 2011 Protocol to the said Agreement, India and Bangladesh again agreed to exchange these small parcels of land and better demarcate the land boundaries between them. The borders of the Indian States of Assam, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Tripura would be affected by this exchange of territory. This Agreement has now been passed in the two Houses of the Indian Parliament (May 2015). The Constitution (One Hundred and Nineteenth) Amendment Bill, 2013 proposes to give effect to this proposed land exchange. This long overdue exchange will try to harmonize India's land boundaries and, more importantly, improve the lives of all those residents of the enclaves who, by an unfortunate twist of fate, have been living without a national identity and without enjoying or ever knowing the quality of life enjoyed by their neighbours.[36]

For her novel *Bhumi O Kusum,* Selina Hossain visited the enclave of Dohogram-Angarpota a number of times to get to know the inhabitants. In her own words, the idea of the novel came when she realized that

> the chhitmohols were a creation of the partition. Those who live here are controlled by international relations….Dohogram-Angarpota belongs to Bangladesh but is surrounded and controlled by India. People have no freedom to go anywhere. This crisis of the human subject moved me profoundly.

She also knew that there were hardly any narratives based on the enclaves and her novel would in that sense, be a pioneering work that would address issues that were often hidden in statistics.[37] Hossain's novel brings *chhitmohol* dwellers, and their 'divided lives' lived on the margins as centre-stage of her text. Peopled with a wide range of characters both Hindus and Muslims, the novel's narrative timeline begins with the formation of the *chhitmohol* called Dohogram[38] that is surrounded by India (although the land belonged to East Pakistan) and ends with the formation of independent Bangladesh. The inhabitants of the enclave feel like 'proxy citizens' (156) of the new state of Pakistan because they enjoy nothing of the benefits that citizenship brings. The novel, in keeping with its subject, has a loose structure with a number of characters, both men and women although Golam Ali,

Namita Bagdi, Monjila, her daughter Barnamala, and Bashar are important ones. Hossain does not set forth a novel with a clear narrative structure but one that is episodic and fluid, without tight characterizations or intricate plot structures. This loose structure 'retains the sense of little histories' that gives a panoramic view of enclave subjectivities.[39] In opposition to the daily constrictions and abjections faced by the enclave inhabitants, the novel is expansive and generous in setting out the existence of the people who live on the margins of nations. The small farmers and traders, their struggles, their loves and their friendships form the 'coda' of the novel. The daily skirmishes with the Indian Border Security Force, the midnight flights to other territories, the quiet lives lived with desperation and violence yet encompassed within the cycles of nature are shown in meticulous details. The interlocutory discursive trope of the text is land and belonging: this in turn constructs the ideal of a 'home' that gathers within it both a goal and a method: the inhabitants of the *chhitmohol* unite to form a responsible society although they are denied citizen rights just as they participate in the formation of their collective identity. Hossain effects a change in the paradigm of her political sensibilities in a way that is evolutionary: the novel celebrates the birth of Bangladesh but also suggests that it can be a nation only when it is truly inclusive: to deny citizenship to the enclave inhabitants is to construct a nation deeply flawed:

> We are Pakistani…inhabitants of the chhitmohol called Chandraghana. We are surrounded by India on all sides. Our flags are decorated with the moon and stars. We can see Pakistan when we look at that flag….Pakistan lives in every breadth that we take. But Pakistan is an absence in the vessel in which we cook rice. (251)

Later on, Golam Ali describes the enclave inhabitants as the 'the deaf-mute children of Pakistan.' (270). The text posits an important question regarding freedom. If the independence of a country is followed by the 'tearing of the rope of life' then 'how can freedom bring anything new!'(290). *Bhumi O Kusum* is a novel about the novelist's quest to 'work through' (to use Adorno's phrase) the subcontinent's past and its connections to the present: not only in the synchronic life of the nation but the diachronic inheritance of identities who live within an organic cycle of nature's seasons and the trope of partition. Hossain hopes to capture the world of the *chhitmohol* to subject it to the structure of her novel and give it a meaning that the *chhitmohol* inhabitants lack in the structure of a nation. Therefore her meticulous recordings of births and deaths, however trivial or fleeting, create a recognition of a history that has found no takers and an acknowledgment of bare lives that have gone unrecorded.

One day, Dohogram's residents have to contend with a sudden presence of the state when all their lives the state had been a distant entity. Suddenly the state seems to be everywhere: the ubiquitous presence of the Indian security forces and the Pakistani officials who come to carry out a census: the inhabitants of the *chhitmohol* realize however marginal their existence may be, they now needed to reinvent themselves as citizens of a new state (twice over) and as inhabitants of a divided land. They need to be legible to the state. The state's attempt to restrict their movements across land they had historically considered their own and its interference in their livelihoods create tragic situations where the inhabitants of Dohogram realize the new impetus to their lives: to rebuild a social world where the older and newer inhabitants will have space to live peaceably yet constantly resisting and transforming their responses to the newly created borders. Their strategies of resistance, accommodation and innovation form the most important tropes of this text. Hossain's earlier novels *Japito Jiban* (A Life Spent, 1980) and *Gayatri Sandhya* (The Pious Evening, 1994-96, in three parts) both looked at the creation of Pakistan as necessary and right in the context of Muslim nationality and deplored the communalization of that aspect within the larger forces of Indian nationalism. *Bhumi O Kusum* is to a large extent a movement away from Hossain's preoccupation with national level politics and the birth of Bangladesh that subverted the notions of religious nationalism. Moving away from the centre, the novelist seems to be focusing attention on the border and the borderlands to ask important new questions about nation, identity and home that resonate through the post-partition history of both India and Bangladesh.

Dohogram, situated next to the Teen Bigha Corridor, is a small space packed with people of all faiths and creeds. Hossain's strategy to explore this marginal community in constant dialogue with hegemonic state structures opens up a space that is between the factual and the metaphorical: the imagination of a 'home' is mediated through issues of territory and sovereignty yet it is also something more than just land. Nitai the singer, who had left his ancestral home in another 'chhit', remembers his grandmother telling him 'Jey bhitar swad bujhey na taar jibon andhaar'(Someone, who does not understand the taste of home, lives a dark life.) Nitai ruminates:

> Now there will be another turn and another new life will start: another kind of soil, another kind of grass, trees and plants. Birds and bird-calls. Humans and the way they turn their heads to speak, the way they look at you; a sigh and a long life that calls out for love. The glance of love and a naughtiness in its depth. To make a path and then to find another again. And again –. (273)

The passage points to a 'third dimension' working within temporal markers of the idea of home: a home that is beyond the factual or metaphorical but consistent with the journey of humans through the earth, at once real and sublime. If the novel has been taken as 'the form of transcendental homelessness', then Hossain's novel performs an extremely important task in its suggestive nature.[40] The novel's meandering structure seems to create a bridge between contesting ideas of everyday territoriality and human lives lived within cross border movement and migration where borders are not forgotten national frontiers but are formative spaces of post-national identity formation. The aggressive margins of postcolonial borders constrict lives yet also enhance a desire to translate the loss and grief of these lives, however marginal, into the larger questions of diversity of moving, settling and living in the otherwise ever compiling migration data of nation states in the subcontinent. Barnamala, whose name means the (Bangla) alphabet, scripts this new language of living and loving. The day she gets married to Ajmal she watches the soft light spread over the *chhit* under whose benediction the huts, the grass, the wild bushes, the mud track and the rice fields look ever new. Ajmal tells her that in the soil of the *chhitmohol*, Barnamala is the best flower to bloom. Like the changes in Barnamala's life the political fortunes of the *chhit* changes too: East Pakistan becomes independent Bangladesh and Ajmal dies fighting for it. The political fate of Dohogram however does not change: India has to relinquish some territory for it to merge with Bangladesh and that decision is forever postponed. The inhabitants of the *chhitmohol* realize

> they had been prisoners earlier and they remain so. They have not been freed. The country has been freed, the name of it has changed, the flag has changed, but the enclave has remained an enclave. Nothing has changed inside the chhit. (399)

Barnamala, at the end of the novel, possesses the self-consciousness of someone who has historically evolved: through living and suffering the contingencies of borders. Imprisoned within the territoriality of the enclave, Barnamala tries to enter Bangladesh to pay obeisance to her dead husband; the sentries stop her and she cries out, 'I want the people of the *chhit* to be free. You cannot keep us prisoners.' In her last cry the geo-bio identity of the citizen is effaced and Barnamala, 'a citizen with no rights, in permanent deferral' refuses to be the 'living dead.'[41] Her cry tears into the silence that surrounds her: she enters a perennial language of protest with her demand to be free. Like her mother, Barnamala too finds herself at the border, trying to make sense of all that those invisible lines mean to many like her. But her cry for freedom is greeted with silence all around her: a metaphor for

how the larger events in political history lock into the lives of ordinary people. If one takes Agamben's idea that only the bare life is authentically political, then Barnamala's cry to be free is the way in which she writes herself back into the body of the nation. Her cry is shot through with the 'uncanny' for it reappears after the nation state has been formed and freedom has been proclaimed. It is a reminder of how the postcolonial realities of border conflicts remain the marker of the enclave dwellers' life circumstances. The uneasy confluence of state repression and border porosity that had made Barnamala a 'divided body' asserts its right to be free, not just from the prison of legality but in the momentum set off by her grieving and dying.

Endnotes

1 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 271.

2 Veena Das and Deborah Poole (eds.), *Anthropology in the Margins of the State,* 13.

3 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 88–100.

4 Agamben contends that the bare life can be killed bur cannot be sacrificed (as in the Roman law) but in the states of marginalization that one finds the modern day refugees and minorities, they can be killed and sacrificed, for the sake of polity and nationalist stakes of 'belonging.'

5 Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 100.

6 Hannah Arendt, quoted in Agamben (126) states: 'The conception of human rights based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relations - except that they were still human.'

7 Malini Sur, 'Divided Bodies; Crossing the India-Bangladesh Border,' *EPW*, 29 March 2014, 32.

8 In India, the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by right wing Hindus was followed by unprecedented rioting in many parts of India just as the recent riots in Muzaffarpur, UP show how the politics of hate continue to have currency. In Bangladesh, in recent years conservative estimates suggest that around 15 lakhs of minority people have left the country between 1961–74. See Ashrukumar Shikdar, *Bhanga Bangla O Bangla Sahityo*, 11. At Multan in Pakistan, the Sarraiki speaking Punjabis push for regional autonomy as fallout of the war in 1971. See Nukhbah Taj Langah, '1947, 1971 or new Partitions?' paper presented at the International Conference, 'Partition Literature: Memory and Inheritance of Self', Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata, 8–10 February, 2014.

9 Himani Bannerjee, 'Wandering Through Different Spaces' in *The Trauma and the Triumph*, vol. 2, 105, recollects how her father, a sub-judge in Midnapore, opted for East Pakistan.

'When the bulk of the Hindus were coming to India from old East Bengal, my father chose the reverse path.' She states 'Through my own different migrations, from India to Pakistan, back to India and then to Canada, this feeling of loss and migration from my childhood sent down its roots into my sense of space, my own location and sense of being.'

10 Anwesha Sengupta, "Preserving' an Identity: Schedule Caste Politics in East Pakistan 1947-1952', paper presented at the International Students Conference, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), April 2012. See also, Dwaipayan Sen, 'Representation, Education and Agrarian Reform: Jogendranath Mandal and the nature of Scheduled Caste politics, 1937-43,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 48(1): 77–119.

11 Papiya Ghosh, *Community and Nation: Essays on Identity and Politics in Eastern India,* remains the best study of the political fate of the Bihari Muslim community in Bangladesh. For a West Pakistani account of the Bihari predicament see Abdul Rahman Siddiqi, *Partition and the Making of the Mohajir Mindset,* (OUP), 106–18.

12 Joya Chatterji, 'Partition Studies: Prospects and Pitfalls', 310.

13 Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992) asks an important question regarding the Holocaust if narrative can historically bear witness not simply to the impact of the Holocaust but the impact of 'history as Holocaust' that has modified and affected the relationship between narrative and history. Literature undertakes an important act of witnessing but in Bangla partition fiction discussed here the stance is less of a witness but as a phenomenological and sociological exploration of bodies to spaces, of multiple subjectivities shaped by ethnicity and region.

14 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 279.

15 Rabindranath Tagore, *Chhinnopatra* (Torn Leaves, 1912) letters to his niece Indira, quoted in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: the myriad- minded man*, 111–12.

16 Bikash Chakraborty, 'Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay: Kolponar Bhugol O Bhugoler Kolpona' in *Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyayer Sandhaney,* Rusati Sen (ed.), 2014, 33. I am grateful to Rimli Bhattacharya for this reference. See also Rimli Bhattacharya's introduction to *Aranyak* (Of the Forest), 2002, translated by her.

17 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism,* 272.

18 Rashmi Doraiswamy describes an 'active' landscape in her essay 'The Panoramic Vision and the Descent of Darkness', 79. She sees this a rare example in Punjab's partition fiction.

19 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 273.

20 Willem van Schendel, 'The dangers of belonging: tribes, indigenous peoples and homelands in South Asia,' 38.

21 Rajarshi Dasgupta, 'The Lie of Freedom: Justice in a Landscape of Trees,' n.p.

22 Meenakshi Thapan, 'Habitus, Performance and Women's Experience: Understanding Embodiment and Identity in Everyday Life' in *Reading Pierre Bourdieu in a Dual Context*, Ronald Lardinois and Meenakshi Thapan, (eds.), 202.

23 Hasan Azizul Huq, *Agunpakhi*, 18. All translations from the text are mine. The novel uses a dialect that is impossible to translate and I have not even tried to do so but here

is an example that may be of use to a reader familiar with Bangla: 'Hayre! manush likin buddhiman perani.'

24 Prasanta Chakravarty, ' The Return of Daya', in http://kafila.org/2010/29/the-return-of-daya-prasanta-chakravarty, accessed 7 December 2013 reads the memoir as a text of 'daya'/ philia inserted within the everyday: 'The overarching rubric of *daya* (she uses *meherbani* too) Sikdar wields like a master craftsperson in order to achieve such an effect. This particular mode of interaction—individually and collectively— surely comes from a cultural sense of cooperative mutuality, a natural form of straightforward camaraderie that springs forth and develops from actual liking of other human beings and creatures. The important idea is to *really know* another person, investing in every single social relationship or a situation with passion and investment. This is what in ancient Greece would be called *philia* (though its origin is brotherly love): when one refers to a character or disposition that falls between obsequiousness or flattery on the one hand and surliness or quarrelsomeness on the other. This form of mutuality may also lead to a self sufficient mode of fulfilled life and act as a strong buffer against the excesses of rampant individualism/ communicative interaction and a resilient provocation to the obverse ethical modes of non–engagement and surpassing detachment from our everyday political predicament.'

25 The trilogy comprises of *Siddhiganjer Mokam*, *Dhansiddhir Porobkatha* and *Bishadbrikhyo.*

26 Mihir Sengupta, *Bastudebotar Anweshan* ,n .p. unpublished article. I am grateful to the writer for allowing me to cite from this. This was presented at the International Seminar 'Partition Literature: Memory and Inheritance of Self,' Kolkata.

27 Mihir Sengupta, *Bastudebotar Anweshan.*

28 Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Street: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth century Calcutta*, (1998), 84, sees the urban poor as drawing on their traditional folk repertoire of songs while commenting on their immediate cultural contexts. He mentions *sawng* as comic pantomimes.

29 However, Schendel gives the figure of 197 enclaves: 74 Bangladeshi and 123 Indian ones, *The Bengal Borderland,* 80, n54. See also Urvashi Butalia, 'The Nowhere People', *Seminar*, 2002, http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/510/510%20urvashi%20butalia.htm, accessed 18 February 2015.

30 Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland,* 31.

31 Paula Banerjee ed. *Unstable Populations, Anxious States: Mixed and Massive Population Flows in South Asia*, details some of the aspects of border crossings through inhospitable and alien territories.

32 Malini Sur, 'Divided Bodies: Crossing the India-Bangladesh Border', *EPW*, 32.

33 Malini Sur, 31.

34 There are some notable exceptions. Contemporary Indian artist Shilpa Gupta has engaged with the realities of the border as in her last installation at the Dhaka Art Summit 2014. Also, Viswajyoti Ghosh (curated), *This Side or That Side: Restorying Partition: an anthology of graphic narratives from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh*, Delhi: Yoda Press, 2013.

35 Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland,* 66.

[36] *The Hindu,* 13 Aug 2013.

[37] Interview with me through email, 6 April 2014.

[38] The tiny Bangladeshi enclave of Dohogram in North Bengal, next to the river Teesta, is encircled by a ring of 11 Indian check-posts and 17 observation towers erected by the Border Security Force. Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland,* 110

[39] Rashmi Doraiswamy, 'The Panoramic Vision and the Descent of Darkness', 77.

[40] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 99 where he discusses Lukaćs' idea in the context of Leskov's storytelling.

[41] Paul Virilio, 'The Politics of Disappearance', in *Negative Horizons: An Essay in Dromoscopy*, 170.

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Index