

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE UNWANTED CHILDREN: UNHEARD VOICES OF HINDU BENGALI REFUGEES IN THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS

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Abstract: Concept Note & Objectives: Partition of Bengal in 1947 owing to India's Partition probably witnessed the longest history of migration. However, our discourse around migration from East Bengal has mostly focused on the states like West Bengal and Assam resulting in the omission of a significant place of migration for the Bengali refugees- Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which has been ill famous for its cellular jail. As a second-generation Hindu refugee who grew up in a refugee colony, I have always tried to understand the intricate reasons for which the Bengali Hindu people from the Eastern side of Bengal decided to migrate. In this research paper, I would like to represent the unheard factors that prompted the migration in 1950s. We have not brought forth the discourse on Violence coupled with economic factors which was going unchecked in East Bengal (which later officially became East Pakistan) after 1947. The existing historical discourses primarily focus on rehabilitation in West Bengal and completely ignore the reason of this continuous migration and also the governmental apathy in independent India to send these Bengali Hindu refugees to a place which was neither habitable nor ideal for agriculture. Methodology: To reconsider the construction of partition experiences in Bengal as anthologized by writers and scholars, oral history is possibly the only way to explore the neglected stories of Hindu partition survivors. In the last couple of years, I have extensively visited the Andaman Islands and interviewed several Hindu Bengali Partition survivors. In this research paper, their Oral narratives shall bring forth many layers which were hidden by the state-sponsored historical distortions. Relevance: As we have already spent more than 75 years after Indian's Partition and Independence, it is the call of the hour to show the genesis of Hindu migration from East Bengal lying in the communal hatred, which has been largely ignored in our mainstream discussion around Partition. This paper attempts to unearth the untold history.

Keyword: *Partition, Violence, Hindu, Andaman, State-sponsored.*

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INTRODUCTION

Ashis Nandy, an Indian political psychologist of repute, locates the historically memorable and celebrated but thematically problematic nuance of a post-colonial beginning of India in Sadaat Hasan Manto's refusal to accept 15th August, 1947 as the day of independence. In Nandy's words, "Saadat Hasan Manto's refusal to remember 15th August 1947, as the day of deliverance from colonialism... came packaged in genocide, necrophilia, ethnic cleansing, massive uprooting and the collapse of a moral universe." (Nandy, 2011, p. xi)

Millions were killed and raped in 1947. Millions were uprooted from their land and became homeless following the Partition of India into two nations. Alok Bhalla tries to capture this unprecedented conjuncture in

the history of Indian subcontinent when he says, "one of the most unexpected and tragic consequences of the political decision to divide the Indian subcontinent was that millions of people were forced to leave their homes, their *bastis*, their *desh*, their *watan*...(who) didn't want to leave the places that they had come to regard as their *zameen*..." (Bhalla, 2007, p. 5)

Words like 'homes', 'bastis', 'desh', 'watan', and 'zameen' evoke a sense of nostalgia and reluctance to leave the root with a pervasive desire to ask the question as to why should one leave his or her home.

This significant juncture in the postcolonial history of India has been represented in many ways.

However, despite this rift between several ways of representing history, one would agree with the fact that Partition of India was violence getting personified. It was so sudden and outrageous in nature that one could hardly be psychologically prepared. This quintessential form of real violence was most apparent in Punjab and the severest forms of violence were perpetrated by a religious community on the women of other religious community. What was happening in 1947 must have been sown long ago.

On 26th March 1940, the Muslim League had passed a resolution that could be read to clearly signal an impending partition on religious lines. In fact, the propaganda of the formation of 'Pakistan' and 'Hindustan' initiated by Rehmat Ali in 1933 could now gain stronger grounds. (Ambedkar, 1945, p. 15) In the same Muslim League meeting at Lahore (Biswas, 2011), Fazlul Huq said in clear terms: "We have stated definitely and unequivocally that what we want is not merely a tinkering with the idea of federation but it's thorough overhauling so that the federation may ultimately go.

This idea of federation must not only be postponed but abandoned altogether. On many an occasion on the platform of the Muslim League and the other day on the floor of the House in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, I made an emphatic and definite assertion that the Mussalmans of India will not consent to any such scheme which is framed without our approval... I hope those who may have in their power to shape the future constitution of India will take the Muslim feelings into consideration and not take any step which may be regretted."

There was an implied communal reaction in his speech which even got more prominent expression when Huq said, "I am Muslim first and Bengali afterwards. I will take revenge on the Hindus of Bengal if Muslims are hurt in Congress-ruled provinces." (National Archives of India, 1940) This was clearly signalling the death-knell of any form of communal solidarity in India, especially in Bengal.

Huq's political and communal stand was seen with more suspicion by the Bengali Hindus because Krishak Praja party was initially seen as something fundamentally different from the Muslim League. However, this was gradually fading since April 1, 1937 when the

Krishak Praja Party and Muslim League coalition came into existence and attracted millions of Muslims. The Muslims of Bengal could see in this new political coalition the chance of a Muslim dominance and authority in the province and showed the highest admiration towards the Huq Ministry. Such propaganda reached its culmination point in 1946 when the newspaper 'Dawn' quoted Muhammad Ali Jinnah saying "In Pakistan, we will do all in our power to see that everybody can get a decent living." (*Dawn*, 1 March 1946, cited in Pandey, 2001, p. 28)

In this paper, as I try to complicate the existing Partition historiography by looking at the experience of Bengali Hindu refugees who were fleeing from their ancestral land and were eventually sent to Andaman Island, the year 1946 becomes a significant starting point to understand the modus operandi of violence. In the context of Bengal's history, 1946 needs to be seen in the light of two violent events- the Direct Action Day in Calcutta in the month of August and Noakhali Riots on the Eastern side of Bengal in October. A renewed interest in these violent episodes is going to unearth some important historical junctures helping to understand the continuous episodes of migration of the Bengali Hindus from East Pakistan in the post 1947 scenario.

Oral History Challenging the State-sponsored History

As a third-generation Bengali Hindu refugee, Partition has been a personal story of loss, belonging and memory. In the last few years, I have travelled across different parts of India and interviewed several Bengali Hindu Partition survivors. I have heard stories of death and displacement and formed a relationship with the survivors. This relationship between the time in which the storyteller/ oral narrator/ interviewee/ respondent went through the psychological or physical trauma and the time in which it is transmitted to the second or third generation has been defined as 'post-memory' in recent times.

According to Hoffman: "The paradoxes of indirect knowledge haunt many of us who came after. The formative events of the twentieth century have crucially informed our biographies, threatening sometimes to overshadow and overwhelm our own lives.

But we did not see them, suffer through them, and experience their impact directly. Our relationship to them has been defined by our very 'post-ness' and by the powerful but mediated forms of knowledge that have followed from it." (Hirsch, 2008, p. 103)

As I began interviewing these people, I had to consider the possibility of respondents forgetting, distorting or even misrepresenting events. However, this could be merely a deviation from the state sponsored historiography making their narratives vulnerable or likely to be discarded as a distortion of truth. As Joan Sangster quotes from Personal Narratives Group, "When people talk about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a little, exaggerate, become confused, get things wrong.

Yet they are revealing truths...the guiding principle for [life histories] could be that all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, and for what purpose." (Perks and Thomson, 2015, p. 91)

In this paper, I bring forth the importance of Oral narratives to understand the need to re-examine our understanding of Partition violence, migration and how some Bengali Hindu refugees were treated by the contemporary Union and West Bengal government. The existing literature and other forms of creative work mostly complement the state-owned history which needs a kind of new historical nomenclature.

These people were never considered to be worthy to recount their tale and their individual stories have been overshadowed in the name of collective memory. One of the problems with collective memory is that it tends to represent history as homogenous. This is where a mere collective memory of Bengal violence during and after the Partition of India falls short of a comprehensive historical representation.

It needs (a) historical treatment of personal narratives of the suffering souls and bodies. As Peter Novick says in his book 'The Holocaust in American Life', "Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes." (Novick, 2000, p. 3) For unearthing the hidden tales, this paper explores the domain of Oral history in the

context of Partition violence in and around 1947 and even after this.

Partition Violence in Bengal

Bengal lacks in historical narratives that focus on the episodes of violence. Since there was no avalanche like exodus in Bengal, as was the case in Punjab, West Bengal lacks in the representation of collective memory. As opposed to Bengal, Punjab has brought the unforgettable yet forgotten history of partition out of mere textbook history and accommodated it in the lived experience of common people of Punjab.

The Partition Museum in Amritsar stands as a living history of remembering the Partition Violence. Ashis Nandy, however, considers this to be of negligible volume as he compares the volume of work with the body of work on the Jewish, Armenian or even the recent Bosnian and Rwandan genocides. (Nandy, 2011, p. xiv)

I don't, however, consider Nandy's observation as sacrosanct since creative engagement with the memory of partition has been quite voluminous in case of Punjab as compared to Bengal. However, one has to keep in mind that India's partition can't be critically nuanced in a single frame by holding the tragedy of Punjab and Bengal together. They are different in the scale of violence, nature of migration, governmental assistance in rehabilitation and most importantly in temporal reality.

Noakhali riot was the result of communal frenzy that first targeted the rich caste Hindus of Noakhali. Reportedly, the first outburst was the Muslim mob on 10th October 1946 attacking the residence of Raybahadur Rajendralal Chowdhury. Then on the same day, they attacked the residence of Suren Basu, a landlord of Narayanpur. Gradually, they started targeting the middle class and lower middle class caste Hindus as well. During this tumultuous time, the womenfolk of such families, for the first time, came out of the 'andarmahal' to witness the turmoil in public life.

Jogendranath Mondal dreamt of a union between the Dalit Hindus and Muslims, which resulted in his decision to remain in Pakistan and become the first Law Minister of independent Pakistan. However, he was also aware of the Minority Hindu repression

which had been going on since Noakhali riot in 1946. Mondal clearly writes in his resignation letter, "The Calcutta carnage was followed by the 'Noakhali Riot' in October 1946. There, Hindus including Scheduled Castes were killed and hundreds were converted to Islam. Hindu women were raped and abducted. Members of my community also suffered loss of life and property. Immediately after these happenings, I visited Tipperah and Feni and saw some riot-affected areas. The terrible sufferings of Hindus overwhelmed me with grief, but still I continued the policy of co-operation with the Muslim League." (Mandal, 1950)

This never changed in East Pakistan. There were several incidents which were going on in East Bengal after 1947. Jogendranath Mondal's resignation letter mentions many such incidents. In December 1949, the incident of Kalshira Village was strong evidence to show the minority repression in East Bengal. However, something more significant happened in Dhaka in 1950 which clearly showed the Governmental policy of Pakistan against the Hindus. This was clearly a state-sponsored incident creating unrest and putting the minority lives at perils.

Around 10:00 AM on February 10, 1950, a woman with red paint smeared on her body-simulating a breast amputation from the Calcutta riots-was paraded around the East Bengal Secretariat in Dacca. This display triggered an immediate strike among Secretariat government employees, who abandoned their posts to march and shout retaliatory slogans against Hindus. The crowd grew steadily as it marched over a mile, culminating in a midday rally at Victoria Park. There, various speakers, including government officials, gave inflammatory speeches targeting the Hindu community.

The violence erupted simultaneously across the entire city at approximately 1:00 PM. Instantly, every neighbourhood descended into chaos as mobs began systematically murdering Hindus, looting their homes and businesses, and setting properties ablaze. As Mondal writes in his resignation letter, "I got evidence even from the Muslims that arson and looting were committed even in the presence of high police officials. Jewellery shops belonging to the Hindus were looted in the presence of police officers.

They not only did not attempt to stop loot, but also helped the looters with advice and direction." (Mandal, 1950)

However, in the post 1950 scenario, the rift was not merely in terms of communal identity. Many survivors' narratives firmly proclaim the fact that economic exploitation or material extortion became the features of what Sandip Bandyopadhyay merely terms 'new phenomenon' (Bandyopadhyay, 2013, p. 61) of changing social relationship.

Kironmoyee Mondal narrates her story of suffering in East Pakistan and eventually coming to India as a refugee in the book *Bhagfol 71: Meyeder Katha* edited by Jharna Basu. Kironmoyee writes: "Gagan Molla said 'we have come to safeguard you since you all are Hindus and the new country wouldn't accept you. So, all of you can give us rice and in return we will protect you from any outsiders coming to attack you.'" (Basu, 2019, p. 39)

One of the most significant perspectives brought forth by Kironmoyee Mondal is that the initial communal frenzy of pre-partition days of Noakhali riot was solely the result of communal outrage seemingly without any economic or deeply political intent. On the other hand, people like Gagan Molla (as shared in Kironmoyee's narrative) gradually started utilizing the communal tension and problems of nationhood in order to fulfil their personal interests in post 1960 period.

So, what was initially a sense of fear of being killed, molested or abducted gradually turned into a fear psychosis in all spheres of life. The oral narrations of my respondents suggest that the lower caste Hindus became the targets of such fear psychosis more than the caste Hindus. However, popular mainstream history has remained oblivious to these sufferings.

Bengali Hindu Refugees in Andaman

Official historiography in the context of Bengal's Partition in 1947 has mostly focused on the Hindu refugees who came and settled in Calcutta. Even in our creative engagement like Salil Sen's 'Natun Ehudi' (The New Jews) or Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak's 'Meghe Dhaka Tara' (The Cloud Clapped Star), we have focused on the process of rehabilitation of the refugees either in squatter's colonies or government sponsored colonies in West Bengal.

The mainstream delineation of refugee rehabilitation hardly ever talked about those people who were sent to Andaman Island, where they were made to cross the ill famous *Kaalapani*.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are situated in the Bay of Bengal between 6° to 14° North latitude and 92° to 94° East latitude. Five hundred big and small Islands and rocks form the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a Union Territory of the Union of India. Port Blair is the capital located in South Andaman on the east coast. It is situated at a distance of 1,255 kilometres from Calcutta, 1190 kms from Madras and 1,200 kms from Vishakhapatnam by sea.

Being empowered by the Relief and Rehabilitation Ministry of Indian government in October 1949, an official team with members from Punjab and West Bengal visited Andaman. Whereas the delegates from Punjab summarily rejected the proposal of rehabilitation of Punjabi refugees in the islands, Nikunja Bihari Maity of West Bengal was confident that the agriculturist refugee families would prefer to get rehabilitation in Andaman. The state government was entrusted with the task of making the refugees aware of this 'Colonisation Scheme' in Andaman but the scheme was implemented by the central government.

The scheme came into operation by December 1949. On December 3, 1949, reputed English daily *Amrita Bazar Patrika* published a report titled "Rehabilitation of Refugees-Andaman Islands". The report writes, "The Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, said in Parliament today in reply to Mr. Satis Chandra Samanta that 187 families of displaced persons, all of them from East Bengal had so far been rehabilitated and settled in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. They included 176 families of cultivators, seven families of artisans, one confectioner, and one compounder." (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1949)

Initially, the poor agriculturist families were given some lucrative offers like 10 acres of land, free of cost transportation, a monthly dole system of Rs 30/ adult and Rs.15/ child for a period nine months, two bullocks for each family and many other things like seeds, wood etc. However, after 1950 these offers were radically revised and all the necessary prerequisites to begin cultivation

were now given as loans. For example, a loan amount of Rs. 700 allotted for each family to buy two bullocks, house building loan of Rs. 500, a loan amount of Rs. 230 per family for fertilizer, seeds and other necessary things, loan amount of Rs. 500 for irrigational facilities and most importantly the monthly dole amount was slashed to Rs. 12/ adult and Rs. 6/ child and that too for merely 6 months. (Chakraborti, 2012, p. 27)

When I met Hemanta Sarkar at his residence near Port Blair, he shared his experience of crossing the border and then eventually cross the turbulent sea to reach Port Blair. There was no riot in his village in the Khulna district of East Bengal. However, the little boy of 12 years often heard of what was going in many parts of East Bengal. Minority Hindus were being targeted, killed and women were raped. On February 2, 1950, Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* wrote, "Arrival of Refugees from East Bengal to West Bengal: Result of Unbridled torture on the Hindus in Barishal and Khulna" (*Jugantar*, 1950) When the Hindus, who were yet to migrate to West Bengal, were facing the communal hatred in East Bengal, West Bengal was seemingly busy with cultural negotiations and rehabilitation in and around Calcutta.

Hemanta's father thought that the pain and drudgery of living at the Sealdah station in West Bengal or at some temporary government camps will be over once they reach Andaman with governmental assistance. This was, however, not the case. Despite the governmental assistance, Andaman and Nicobar Islands was neither habitable nor cultivable.

It is significant to note here that the Dalit peasant Hindu refugees started migrating from East Pakistan mainly after 1950. So, when the agriculturists were actually pouring into West Bengal in alarming numbers, the governmental impetus in terms of financial assistance had already been cut short. When Bikash Chakraborty says in his memoir that "in spite of the Left political parties' consistent efforts to desist the refugees from going to Andaman, it had already become a place of interest for so called lower caste communities like Namasudra, Halua and Das" (Chakraborti, 2012, p. 28) One doubts the objectivity of Chakraborty's memoir since agricultural

labourers who had already migrated by 1950 were very few in number.

Moreover, had the Andaman rehabilitation project been so popular, initially the total number of rehabilitated families wouldn't have been as low as 3695. In fact, as he mentions Cossipore camp as one of his places of visit as an officer in charge of this rehabilitation project, it is worthy to mention that these Calcutta centric camps were mostly populated by caste Hindu refugees economically belonging to middle and lower middle class.

Chakraborty categorically mentions that they were looking for —young and sturdy cultivators and as instructed by I.C.S officers like Sankar Maitra, —any application of so-called caste Hindu bhadraloks (gentlemen) should be summarily rejected and only the hardworking scheduled caste communities are welcome. (Chakraborty, 2012, p. 30)

In the name of ideal and prospective agriculturist people to be sent to an island yet to be habitable, one can find a subtle casteism moulded in an economic oeuvre. Prafulla K. Chakraborty writes, “It was the Central Government that restricted the inflow of the migrants to the islands. Obviously, the Central Government didn't quite relish the idea of the Islands developing into an appendage of West Bengal.” (Chakrabarti, 1999, p. 230) In support of this, Chakraborty refers to a Parliamentary proceeding on 3rd December 1974, where the Central Labour and rehabilitation minister R. K. Khadilkar categorically says: —So far as the Andamans are concerned, I have said earlier that it is a special category. We want to develop it in a different way. I want to say one thing. The ex-Army people got a colony there. We must look to the defence side also. (Chakrabarti, 1999, p. 231)

Bikash Chakraborty also shares a somewhat similar approach when in his conversation with Chitta Basu (Basu was an M.P in the Morarji Desai ministry) Chakraborty clearly said that-it was no more possible for the government to rehabilitate in Andaman since the Government could now hardly ignore the sentiment of the local people of Andaman along with the South-Indian groups. (Chakraborty, 2012, p. 48) So, the Andaman rehabilitation plan could only accommodate a few agriculturist Namasudra refugees who

had to initially fight against all the natural adversities to somehow eke out a living.

How were the refugees sent to Andaman? One of my interviewees Ananda Mondal told me what he had seen in those days. When he crossed the border with his parents to come to West Bengal towards the end of 1950, things had started worsening in Khulna. Hindu girls were getting abducted and other social humiliations for the minority Hindus were also on rise.

However, the West Bengal government was and the Union government of India were seemingly silent on the reason of such continuous refugee migration. Amrita Bazar Patrika, in its report dated September 26, 1949 writes, “Referring to the refugees, Dr. Roy (Bidhan Chandra Roy) said that without going to the question of the reasons for evacuation he could say that the fact remained that over 15 to 16 lakhs of people had migrated from East to West Bengal. He paid a tribute to the people of Bengal who had withstood at these vicissitudes boldly.” (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 1949)

CONCLUSION

The governmental indifference towards the cause of migration of the minority Hindus from East Bengal eventually resulted in an incomplete representation of history. The oral narratives of Bengali Hindu refugees, mostly Dalits and settled in Andaman, thereby posit a challenge to the monolithic form of history. This destabilizes the flat history. The existing literature, art or academic engagement mostly deals with the episodes of rehabilitation, that too in and around Kolkata. This paper tries to unearth the factors which are beyond the scope of a socio-economic representation of Bengali refugee rehabilitation.

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