

Thinking of Migration through Caste: Reading Oral Narratives of ‘Displaced Person(s)’ from East Pakistan (1950-1970)

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Introduction

This paper studies the 1947 Partition of India, more specifically the Partition of Bengal, which took place along with the Independence of India and Pakistan. Discourses around the Partition— an event of enduring socio-political significance — have predominantly focused on the moment of rupture that compelled individuals as well as their families to cross the Radcliffe Line¹ in search of a distant land touted as the safe haven. The word ‘safe’ here is loaded with significance. As unruly mobs wallowed in an orgy of reciprocal violence, commonly known as the Partition riots, trauma constituted the dominant theme that defined the miserable plight of individuals who were rendered refugees overnight (Menon & Bhasin 1998; Butalia 1998; Pandey 2001; Khan 2007; Bagchi & Dasgupta 2009; Saint, Jalil & Sengupta 2017). The drastic change in the geographical contours, in both Punjab and Bengal, “imprinted deep psychological scars on the mindscape of the people” (Nandrajog 2018, p.112). If the violence of the period resulted in trauma, for many the sudden loss of ancestral hearth and home caused a festering of deep nostalgia for a lost homeland (Rahman & van Schendel 2003; Bagchi & Dasgupta 2009; Sengupta 2011).

The Partition historiography has been leavened with the themes of trauma and nostalgia, narrated mostly from the vantage point of those who had the economic resources and social capital to sustain themselves through the cataclysmic events. A common critical consensus is that the two most dominant themes that characterise the 1947 Partition are trauma and nostalgia, and these have multiple connotations for those who migrated during the Partition. This paper focuses on the Partition of Bengal and the argument that the vivisection of land initiated a process of cross-border migration that continued unabated for three decades (Murshid 2013; Ghosh 2017). Though it was decided that Bengal and Punjab would be partitioned together, Bengal did not witness an exchange of population like Punjab did. In the introduction to the second volume of *The Trauma and The Triumph*, Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (2009: xiv) state:

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“[I]n Punjab the migration was accomplished in one fell swoop, that is within a brief period (1947 to 1950), in the east the migration from ‘East Bengal’ first and later from ‘East Pakistan’ and ‘Bangladesh’ has continued till this day.”

Migration from East Pakistan occurred in an episodic fashion, and the reason for such periodic migration was rooted not only in the deteriorating relationship between India and Pakistan but also in the social identity of individuals. For instance, by 1st June 1948, 1.1 million Hindus had migrated from East Pakistan to West Bengal, comprising about 3,50,000 urban *bhadralok*² and 5,50,000 rural Hindu gentry, with the rest being businessmen (Chakrabarti 1990). In *The Spoils of Partition*, Joya Chatterji (2007: 119) notes the “remarkable paradox” that those who had land and assets in East Bengal were the first to migrate whereas the “lowly Hindus who had the least to lose, and who had no social status or economic independence and were most vulnerable to violence and discrimination, were the most reluctant to leave and hung on at home as long as they could”. While Chatterji points to a fascinating aspect of cross-border migration following the Partition, she glosses over the entire history of the politics of the lower caste individuals in East Bengal. Those “lowly Hindus”, for the most part, were the Namasudras who launched the Namasudra Movement, one of the most powerful political mobilisations in colonial Bengal (Mallick 1999). That the Bengal Congress was mainly an upper-caste-dominated party meant that the Namasudras refrained from participating in the mass agitations led by the Congress such as the Non-Cooperation, the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India Movement (Bandyopadhyay 1997). In undivided Bengal, under the leadership of Jogendra Nath Mondal, the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) had emerged as an organisation to reckon with. The appointment of Jogendra Nath Mondal as the first Law and Labour Minister in the Pakistan cabinet suggested that lower-caste people could choose to stay in East Pakistan. This sense of security, however, did not last long. In fact, Mondal time and again regretted the way minorities were being treated in the newly formed nation-states and how it forced people to migrate from one region to other³. In the riots that occurred after 1950, the minority population in East Pakistan was iniquitously attacked, leading to a large-scale migration to West Bengal. Citing incidents of violence against the Namasudra community, Mondal resigned from office — thus bringing to an end his political career⁴.

It is interesting to note that scholars have mostly studied cross-border migration in Bengal against the backdrop of nationalism and nation-state formation (Das 2003; Rahman and van Schendel 2003; Chatterji 2007; Roy 2010; Sengupta 2011; Murshid 2013; Ghosh 2017; Chakraborty 2018). By briefly mapping out the trajectory of the lower-caste politics in East Pakistan, and also in East Bengal, this paper aims to reread refugee migration from East Pakistan to West Bengal from 1950 onwards in the backdrop of lower-caste socio-political dynamics. The paper intends to study the life-stories of refugees to determine if it is empirically productive to think of migration in terms of caste and not just the nation-state parameter. It is often believed that caste as a social category is hardly relevant in West Bengal because of

the secular nature of its politics (Sinharay 2012). Exceptions to the situation have largely been attributed to electoral mobilisations which tend to subsume individual subjectivity. The political movement of the Namasudras in colonial Bengal, on the one hand, lost its organisational footing after the Partition as they were scattered in various parts of West Bengal (Bandyopadhyay 2012); on the other hand, the rhetoric of lower-caste politics went through a transition as ideas of nation and religion, as well as those of relief and rehabilitation, superseded the exigencies of caste categorisation. On crossing the borders, the lower-caste individuals were appropriated as 'Hindu refugees' (Bandyopadhyay 2009, 12), and it made the 'idiom of caste disappear' in West Bengal (Ray 2019, 3). Such hypotheses have been challenged by those who believe that a caste continuum does exist in West Bengal, even though it might not have manifested itself in electoral politics; instead, the caste continuum has primarily affected individual subjectivity and its emancipation from the former (Samaddar 2012; Ray 2019). Given the structural imperatives in West Bengal, caste has evidently undergone multiple changes in terms of territorial, cultural and bodily practices⁵. This paper studies caste against the backdrop of the Partition but does not restrict itself to a chronological reading of the history of caste in Bengal; rather it attempts to move beyond its epistemological determinations to see how 'lived-experiences' can lead to an alternate canon formation that might interrogate the way narratives of displacement have been studied so far (Das & Sengupta 2019). In the midst of assertions of national modernity, archival records and narratives of displacement become shrouded in their own aphasia and silence; studying lower-caste narratives helps in foregrounding caste from its erstwhile silence.

Statist's Response to Refugee Crisis in Bengal

While it is a fact widely acknowledged that the Statist's response to the Partition of Bengal was different from that in Punjab, what remains less studied is how the nature of institutional support for lower-caste refugees was also different in the two regions. In Delhi and Punjab, lower-caste refugees were called 'displaced Harijans' who were rehabilitated by Harijan Sewak Sangh (HSS), a Central government agency headed by Rameshwari Nehru⁶. Colonies were specifically designed to cater to the needs of lower-caste refugees. No such organisations looked after the refugee crisis in West Bengal. Moreover, in the eastern corridor, the refugees crossed the border without being made to adhere to a particular timeframe; this is certified in the words of Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay who was the Commissioner of Rehabilitation and Secretary of Relief for West Bengal (1949-1955). In his seminal work *Udbastu*, he observes that the numbers of refugees rose so exponentially, especially after 1950, that the government had to construct camps of various kinds— transit camps, work-site camps, permanent liability camps and women's camps— to shelter the different types of refugees (Bandyopadhyay 1960, 97). In sharp contrast to the policies adopted in Punjab, the Nehru-Liaquat Pact (1950) initiated a collaborative effort from both the dominions in order to send the newly arrived refugees in West Bengal back to their home (Bandyopadhyay 1960, 93)⁷. Time and again, the government insisted on closing down camps in Bengal⁸. Intriguingly enough, Hiranmoy

Bandyopadhyay classifies the refugees into three different gradations. First, those who were economically better off, and so did not require the government's support. He designates them as "energetic" souls who had considerable willpower to resettle themselves (translation mine)⁹. The second group comprised refugees who did not have any resources, and yet possessed a degree of mental strength to survive. Those refugees took over areas and self-settled themselves, in what are famously known as *jabardakal*¹⁰ colonies. The third group consisted of the refugees who took shelter in camps, and lacked the necessary willpower and psychological stability to sustain themselves (ibid.: 31). Since he was a representative of the State, Bandyopadhyay's stratification based on psychological stability and economic footing of the refugees betrayed the mentality of the government as well. The projected idea was that the refugees who lived in camps were regressive, lethargic and uncooperative by temperament. What conveniently remained unsaid is that these camps were mostly populated with lower-caste refugees from East Pakistan. Spatially segregated, with people clustered together in a defined area, the camps did not feature as sites that simply held large sections of refugees. Instead, being in a camp was symptomatic of an individual's differential identity by virtue of which s/he was excluded from the society. Hence, camps can be viewed as 'exceptional' sites that, according to Giorgio Agamben (1995: 115) represented a 'paradigm', conferring on the inmates a kind of reputation that resulted in their existential alienation. The camps became a visible affirmation of the lower-caste refugee's absence of a home. These camps, populated with lower-caste refugees, were situated at obscure locations to keep public spaces sanitised, pointing again to how discourses of im/pure arose from the framework of caste.

This study follows the journey of lower-caste refugees who, after migrating from East Pakistan, were placed mostly in camps as they lacked the necessary resources to self-settle themselves. The paper intends to bring to the fore the life-stories of lower-caste individuals— recorded as nameless numbers in the State enumerative system— so as to examine the shifting phases of a refugee's engagement with hierarchies and how they negotiated their caste identities to develop strategies of survival and resistance.

Methodology

The introduction of oral history as a methodology has had a significant impact on the field of Partition Studies as scholars began to converse with eye-witness participants who had experienced the event¹¹. The new inquiries have made interventions in the sense that these have moved away from a *nationalistic account* of the event to focus on the lives of ordinary individuals or, what we can call the *people's history*, remembered and recollected in ways that provide an alternative discourse to the established facts of the event (Butalia 1998). After all, oral history involves the process of "interviewing eye-witness participant in the events of the past for the purpose of historical reconstruction" (Grele 1996, 63) (. The framework of oral history takes the form of conversational retelling of an event where the

narrative is co-created between the interviewer and the interviewee (Sheftel & Zembrzycki 2013). It does not follow a definite pattern of putting questions before the interviewee. For this study, it relies mostly on the spontaneity of the moment where questions are asked on the basis of the narrative that is being presented before the interviewer. For ethical purposes, the transcribed document is made available to the interviewee where s/he can make amendments where s/he deems fit. It helps tackle what is defined as interpretive conflict in the oral history narrative (Borland 1998). In the process, to quote Joan Sangster (1998: 92) the narrative emerges as “a historical document created by the agency of both the interviewer and the interviewee”

Leaning on fieldwork experience, the paper discusses oral history narratives of three ‘displaced persons’— Mr Bijan Kanti Sarkar, Mr Bhadro Biswas and Mr Manoranjan Mondal—who belong to the Namasudra community. The interviews were conducted in Hooghly and Dum Dum in West Bengal. The study did not follow a strict ethnographic framework. Interviews were conducted with those who were comfortable to talk about their experience of migration from East Pakistan. The bulk of the refugees came to Kolkata, 24 Parganas (both North and South), Nadia and Hooghly districts in West Bengal for resettlement, and the interviews were mostly conducted in these regions (Chatterji 2007; Sengupta 2011). The issue of caste appears quite naturally in these narratives as the subjects’ experiences and perceptions are conditioned by the social location that they inhabit. Evidently, the methodology of this study is qualitative in nature. The interviews were recorded in a field diary along with other observations, notes and remarks.

Documenting the Migration

Bijan Kanti Sarkar, Chinsurah, Hooghly

Located on the western bank of the river Hooghly, the town of Chinsurah attracted the colonial powers for its closeness to the river. Long before the British, the Dutch East India Company had come to Chinsurah, and remnants of the colonial heritage and architecture are visible even today. From the Gorosthan More (the Cemetery Square), the road leading to Mr Bijan Kanti Sarkar’s house is flanked on the left by the famous Dutch Cemetery which, at present, is under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India. With towering banyan trees flanking lining the entire path, Mr Sarkar’s is a quaint, secure neighbourhood with people conversing with each other at every corner. It is easy to find Mr Sarkar’s house. One of the most renowned teachers of Bengali literature in Chinsurah, people readily recognise him as ‘Sir’. On entering Mr Sarkar’s house, however, it becomes evident that social recognition has not necessarily translated into economic upgradation. Dressed shabbily in a yellow kurta and white pyjama, Mr Bijan Sarkar mostly spends his days in the room to the left of the house’s entrance. Old age has almost taken the life out of his right leg, but his memory remains as is expected of a teacher who has taught students for over four decades¹².

Born on 16th November, 1935 at a village named Dighnagar in Jessore district in southwestern East Bengal, Mr Sarkar was twelve years old when the decision to partition Bengal was implemented. “Ours was a joint family”, he reminisced—“quite a big joint family where my father and his four brothers, along with their seven-eight sons and daughters, lived together.” His father was a doctor of repute who had earned his degree from Dhaka Midford College—it was renamed as Sir Salimullah Medical College in 1962. “I am a Namasudra. We belong to the Namasudra community,” said Mr Sarkar, but despite belonging to a lower caste, his father’s status as a doctor earned their family a social importance in the village. “I liked reading a lot; I used to spend my days reading. Two magazines were regularly delivered at our home—Basumati and Probashi. I used to read the magazines as soon as they arrived,” recollected Mr Sarkar. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2009: 4) observes that since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Namasudra movement was evolving along two different paths: the first was formed by the educated members of the Namasudra community leading the movement against Congress; the second, by the emergence of the Vaishnava religious sect called Matua that emphasized their Namasudra identity. Mr Sarkar’s family belonged to the former section. His uncle contested the local elections as a SCF candidate but unfortunately lost to his Congress counterpart. Interestingly, Mr Sarkar’s village was mainly populated by lower-caste people; many of them were from Jele and Malo communities whose traditional occupation was fishing. Unlike the Malos in their village, Mr Sarkar’s family possessed substantial tracts of land. “A Muslim named Khayal used to look after our lands. We also had boats. I used to go to school on a boat”, recollected Mr Sarkar. Though he was one of the youngest members, he remembered the patriarchs of the family often discussing politics. He said, “We believed that Jessore and Khulna would be part of Hindustan after the Partition. So, we did not make any preparation to leave.” The fact, however, is that the mapmaking process preceding the Partition clearly placed Jessore in East Pakistan. “No sooner had the Partition been declared, the Brahmins along with the Sahas started migrating. We stayed back. But under considerable tension”, remarked Mr Sarkar. It is often argued that the sudden rise in the status of the landless Muslims in East Bengal disturbed the sense and sensibilities of the upper caste Hindus, making them decide to leave for India. While conversing with refugees who came from East Bengal and settled in Mohitnagar Colony, Bandyopadhyay (1960: 14) was apprised of this notion. He opines that “initially those who migrated did so because of political reason and not because of riots” (ibid.: 56). Mr Sarkar remembered, “Khayal, who generally used to sit on the porch, came and sat next to my father. He said, ‘I will not listen to you anymore. This country is mine. Your lands are mine’. But we decided to stay back. We had nowhere to go. I took my Matriculation Examination from East Pakistan Secondary Board, Dhaka. However, my cousin brothers migrated by 1950. My mother wrote a letter to *borda* [eldest brother], asking him to take me so that I can continue my studies. I migrated in 1955”, recounted Mr Sarkar. He received his migration certificate from the border check-post in Gede. He said, “I was asked at the check-post, ‘Do you want to go to a camp?’ I answered, ‘No, I will stay with my brother’. Those who travelled with me

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mostly waited for government-sponsored trucks to take them to one camp or the other. I took a train to Kalyani and soon reached Chinsurah.” Initially, he hardly had anything to do. He spent his days looking after his cousin’s children. “*Borda* asked me to teach his children. I decided to do so.” He recollected painfully how difficult it had been for him to move in with his cousins — “one day, while teaching the kids, I asked them to read clearly, and they replied that this was not Pakistan. People in India read in this manner. Since I am from Pakistan, a refugee, my opinion does not matter”. He added, “at times, they did not let me walk in a particular direction. They said only Indians can walk in this path. Pakistanis have to take a different route.” In spite of securing good result in the Matriculation Examination, he was refused admission in the prestigious Hooghly Mohsin College. “One professor said, ‘He does not have any passport.’ I showed them my migration certificate. They were not convinced. They held the views that taking a student from East Bengal will disturb the academic ambience of the campus. It was so disheartening to be on the receiving end of such treatment!” exclaimed Mr Sarkar. Mr Sarkar, however, remembers that a few other students from East Bengal were granted admission. When asked what the reason could be, he said, “I have always been discriminated against because of my caste in India. So it is obvious that my caste, and not my result, mattered to them. I remember another incident: when I started giving private tuitions, I attracted many students. One of the neighbours kept saying that a lower caste might be able to teach, but he will not be able to educate our children.” Mr Sarkar was ultimately appointed as a teacher in Deshbandu School, Chinsurah. Soon he started sending money to his family in East Pakistan, and also asked his younger brother and his sisters to migrate to West Bengal. He took care of them. One of his sisters, who was the Headmistress of the Binodini Primary School, was awarded the President’s Medal for her contribution to education. “As a brother, I was very proud that day. My sister, whom I helped throughout her formative years, was awarded the *Rashtrapati Award*.” He regretfully informed, “I never went back to Dighnagar. My parents never came to India. Father believed that one day this cartographic division will be rejected by the people. Even I thought so. But after the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, I realised that the Partition is an irrevocable reality. My parents, my ancestral home are a part of the enemy state.” Dighnagar, the village where Mr Sarkar was born, is right next to the river Madhumati. He has named his house Madhumati as a way of fondly remembering his ancestral land. “Am I a citizen of this country? I think, yes. I have friends here. My family is here. But, these days, as I get old, I often dream of the *Krishnachura* tree right next to our home in Dighnagar—the place where I grew up, spent twenty years of my life. I wish I could go back and see if anything remains of my home”, ruminated Mr Sarkar. Unfortunately, being mostly bedridden, Mr Sarkar could not trace his migration certificate. He narrated, “That certificate helped me a lot. I was enlisted as a Scheduled Caste after I produced the certificate. I was also the President of the SC & ST Association in Chinsurah.”



Mr Bijan Kanti Sarkar has named his house *Madhumati*, 1390 (Bengali Calendar 1390 is 1983 in English Calendar. Mr Sarkar built the house in 1983. Photo: Sumallya)



The nameplate of the house reads: Sri Bijan Kanti Sarkar, M.A (Bengali & Political Science) Former Principal Teacher & Chief Examiner (Higher Secondary School & Higher Secondary Examination. Photo: Sumallya)

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Mr Sarkar's narrative underscores how lower-caste refugees were doubly subjugated: firstly, on account of being refugees from East Pakistan, and secondly, because the caste identity further alienated them when they needed support the most. In the introduction to *Looking Back*, Tarun K. Saint (2017: xviii) opines that the "ironic prospect of Partition survivors whose stories have been largely consigned to oblivion or silenced for seventy years", now actually having a choice about telling their life stories. Ironic as it may seem, it is also an important exercise because these narratives showcase how the subjectivity of the lower-caste individual is fractured, in a sense conjuring what Gail Omvedt (2008: 15) terms as a utopic social vision that creates an ideological community based on shared experiences. Caste-based discrimination against refugees in West Bengal has hitherto hardly ever found expression in words; the experiences of discrimination will finally be narrated in the words of these individuals. Quite contrary to the upper-caste Hindus who were normally assimilated, the likes of Mr Sarkar were doubly marginalised. They eventually emerged as self-made individuals—agentive, ambitious and enterprising in nature. However, calling them agentive individuals does not mean that they acted entirely out of their free will. When individuals react against structural failures, they try to move beyond the interdependent and relational nature of the society to project their uniqueness and individuality (Rutherford 1990). It results in a dynamic interaction between the individual and his/her immediate surrounding where the social and material operations of a society get shaped by the individual's self-sustaining desire. In other words, the productive capacity of the individual influences social transformation. Therefore, the agentive nature of the lower-caste refugees cannot be singularly defined; it is multivalent and layered, contingent on the individual and his/her desire to change circumstances. The following narratives demonstrate this.

Mr Bhadro Biswas, Patipukur, Dum Dum

Dum Dum is one of the most well-connected places in West Bengal: it has an airport along with metro and railway stations. Parts of Dum Dum were wetlands before 1947 and were developed as colonies and residential areas to accommodate refugees (Bandyopadhyay 1960). Situated right next to the metro station is the Dum Dum railway station; it is always packed with people. Corporate employees, workers, daily labourers, college students and others get down at the railway station and take the metro to come to the City of Joy. From the station, if one wants to go to the Jessore Road, s/he has to take the Patipukur connector road. Mr Bhadro Biswas resides in Patipukur, some ten minutes away from the Patipukur bazaar. He lives with his wife, Mrs. Reena Biswas. Their daughter is married and lives nearby with her husband. The interview was conducted in Reena's presence; she often added to the story that Mr Biswas was narrating.

Born at Moshkul village that fell under Kaliganj Thana in Khulna district, East Pakistan, Mr Bhadro Biswas does not remember his date of birth¹. However, he said, "I was ten years old when I migrated to Bengal in 1955." One can safely assume that he was born two years

before the Partition. Unlike many others, his family was never threatened by the finality of the Partition. “Whenever my mother got pregnant, we shifted to East Pakistan, at my maternal uncle’s place. I remember going to our maternal uncle’s house in 1968. My youngest brother was born in 1968”, remembered Mr Biswas. On being questioned about border security forces, he laughed and replied, “Barbed wire fences are recent developments. We used to walk the entire stretch and come to East Pakistan. I never saw any officer.” Initially his family rented a room in Bidhan Colony, Duttabagan, Dum Dum. Partha Chatterjee (2012) remarks that refugee colonies in West Bengal tended to have a homogenous composition, with East Pakistan refugees of the same district and belonging to the same caste staying together. Those not belonging to the same district and caste would be relegated to the fringes. Mr Biswas poignantly recalls, “We were allocated a room at the end of the [Bidhan] colony. My father could not continue with his business. People hardly bought anything from him. No one talked to us. So, we decided we would move to a camp. After my youngest brother was born, we came to Hashnabad camp.” When asked if he had faced caste-based discrimination, Mr Biswas was noncommittal— “My suffering is not different from anyone else’s. We all suffered.” His is a narrative that draws on shared suffering to alleviate his pain. By couching individual suffering within the framework of the commonality of the experience, a utopic community is fashioned that actualises in imagination. Such a community exists in the promise of a ‘partial, fragmented reality of a prosperous society’ that nurtures the ‘productive possibilities of the present’ (Omvedt 2008, 11). The possibility of a productive society pushed Mr Biswas’s father to go to a camp. Mr Biswas narrated, “Staying in the camp did not cost us much. We were given refugee ration, but after some time the authorities decided to shift us. We needed to leave because more and more refugees kept pouring in every day. It was impossible to accommodate everyone in the camp.” In her essay, ‘Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives’, Jhuma Sen (2015: 104) notes that while “*jabardakal* colonies sprang up to house *bhadralok* refugees...lower caste refugees were placed in transit camps and forced out of the state. Calcutta, and largely West Bengal, continued to be sanitised of lower caste presence by a carefully pursued state policy of discrimination in rehabilitation”. Mr Bhadro Biswas’s narrative corroborates the argument Sen is trying to make. “In government-sponsored trucks, we travelled to Raipur. There were four camps in Raipur: Mana, Kurud, Manabhata and Baroda. We were provided a place in Mana camp, house number twenty one”, recalled Mr Biswas. His family stayed in Mana camp for five years— from 1970 to 1975. “After staying in Mana camp, we were shifted to a region called Basta in Madhya Pradesh. Apparently, the government officials had cleared fifteen acres of jungle to make space for refugees”, recollected Mr Biswas. In a confessional tone he lamented, “But we did not like it there. Being fishermen, we always loved the rivers. We craved for the river and the sea. The soil was extremely infertile too. We barely managed to make both ends meet.” On hearing that tracts of land were being allocated for refugees in Sundarbans, West Bengal, he decided to migrate again. “I took the chance. I migrated”, he said. Mr Biswas remembered how settlers formed committees that oversaw the construction of embankments to counter tidal waves— “We built a school; drinking water was provided to

all. I took to fishing again. We did this all on our own.” He self-settled with others like him at Marichjhapi islands in Sundarbans. “I liked living there. We looked after each other. But my family fixed my marriage, and so I decided to come back”, said Mr Biswas. After he got married, Mr Biswas’s in-laws gifted him a piece of land in Bhirpara, Sayid Colony, Dum Dum, where he and his wife shifted soon after. Unlike Mr Sarkar, Mr Biswas was not endowed culturally to carve out a place for himself in the society. He had barely managed to educate himself, and his existence relied mostly on living together as a community with others who had experienced the same suffering.

Mr Manoranjan Mondal, Patipukur, Dum Dum

Though Mr Manoranjan Mondal was interviewed at Patipukur, he was not a permanent resident of the place². “I keep travelling. I stay here for some months. I go to stay with my sisters. I have a small house in Madhya Pradesh. At times, I stay there too”, stated Mr Mondal, who happens to be a distant relative of Mr Bhadro Biswas. The interview was conducted at Mr Biswas’s house.

Born in 1931 at Bamundangha village in Khulna district in East Pakistan, Mr Mondal took pride in the fact that he had witnessed some great political events in his lifetime. “I have seen the Quit India Movement, the Second World War and the Independence of India”, said Mr Mondal. His village remained unaffected by the riots during the Partition, so he decided to stay back. “I did not have any land,” lamented Mr Mondal, “others migrated very quickly. They left their land, houses, and also their cattle in the village itself.” Belonging to a lower caste, he did not find much work in his village. “I was the youngest member in the family. My brothers wanted me to take care of our mother. I stayed at home and did that”, he recounted. When asked about the riots that broke out in East Pakistan after 1950, he said, “My brothers went to Dhaka to work. Often they narrated how people migrated to India after their homes were destroyed. They migrated collectively, in groups so as to resist being attacked. My brothers migrated during 1965 when war broke out between India and Pakistan. I stayed back because I had a set-up a small *bidi* business, but the army took control of the streets. They used to flog anyone who violated even the smallest orders. I got beaten up for I was walking on the right side of the street. The order was to walk on the left side, one after another.” On the issue of caste, he mused, “Our caste did not matter in [East] Pakistan. We were Hindus there. In India, we were Hindus but of a different caste. That is what I felt after coming here.” Mr Mondal migrated with his mother to West Bengal in 1970. He was stationed at Hasnabad camp. He vividly remembered how Ramakrishna Mission provided relief and succour to the innumerable refugees placed there. “They gave us a tent, also daily ration. After a month, we were asked to leave.” Having nowhere to go, he took the option of going to Dandakaranya in Chhattisgarh. The Chairperson of the Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA), Saibal Kumar Gupta (2017: 162) remarked that the project of Dandakaranya was “undertaken to solve an intractable human problem”. Ironically, the problem, far from

getting solved, aggravated so much that refugees started returning to West Bengal. Dejected and defeated, Saibal Kumar Gupta resigned from his position. Like Mr Biswas, Mr Mondal said, “The land in Dandakaranya was uncultivable. So I started trading kerosene oil and garments, and afterwards settled down quite well.” He soon got married in the camp itself. The authorities of the camp, however, insisted that Mr Mondal give up his business. This points to a pertinent aspect of life in the camps: personal endeavours to self-sustain were discouraged by camp authorities. On being probed on the issue, Mr Mondal said, “The camp officials wanted us to clear the forest area. We were paid every little. I did not want to be dependent on them.” In the official scheme of things, it appeared that these lower-caste refugees were to only perform designated jobs. Denying autonomy and agency to the refugees through inimical camp-based policies constricted their aspirations of social mobility. Mr Mondal, however, resisted such policies, went to Delhi and sought permission to continue with his business. Despite the uninhabitable circumstances, one understands that dissident refugees often displayed exemplary courage and fortitude, and emerged as agentive individuals. Mr Mondal said, “In [West] Bengal, it was announced that lands would be offered to refugees who desired to come here. I heard about it from my brother. Hence, I decided to come back. We were many in numbers. Some twenty thousand people moved to [West] Bengal and settled down in Marichjhapi in the Sundarbans.” Like Mr Biswas, Mr Mondal was not interested in the community life. He recounted, “I was not part of any of the committees. I set up a shop. I sold daily ration. I got my supplies from the islands next to Marichjhapi, the Kumarmari islands. It worked perfectly for me.” The West Bengal government, however, did not look at the settlements in Marichjhapi favourably. It accused the refugees of running a parallel government. The government implemented an economic blockade, and when it failed to dampen the irrepressible spirit of the refugees, the government deployed forces to oust those who had made Marichjhapi their home. “I could not trace my mother after the police firing”, said Mr Mondal, “I never found her after I left.” Mr Mondal was arrested on 18th May 1979 during the police raids in Marichjhapi. In the ensuing crisis, he lost his border slip and the migration certificate. He continued, “I know why we were attacked. Everyone was jealous of how, we landless lower-caste people from [East] Pakistan, could manage to live so well, all by ourselves.” He said, “I have been uprooted so many times that I decided not to live in one particular area. I nurture no nostalgic longing for my home back in East Pakistan. Whatever happened, happened for the good, and I have made peace with it”, said a resolute Mr Mondal.

On being asked about the migration certificate, Mr Bhadro Biswas’s wife Reena said, “I still have that certificate. His [Bhadro Biswas’s] father gave me the certificate and said, ‘Reena, if anyone says we are not citizens of the country, show them this’.” For those who migrated from East Pakistan, the migration certificate remains an essential document. Not only does it prove that they have left East Pakistan once and for all, it justifies their claim for citizenship in India.

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FORM V
(See rule 10)
Certificate of Registration

No. ER 263/77.

Name of Registration Authority Sri S. Raha

Place Barakpore

This is to certify that the person whose particulars are given below has been registered by me as a citizen of India under the provisions of section 5(1) (a)/(d) of the Citizenship Act, 1955.

- Name Sri Banamali Biswas
- Name of father/mother or husband Paban Biswas
- Place of birth vill. Rajibpur P.S. Kaligang at. Chhala
- Age 53 yrs 4 M. 10 days
- Present Address 114/B Bidhan colony Anand Road P.S. Dum Dum 24 P.S.
- Special peculiarities and identification marks A cut mark on the left hand.
- Occupation Business

Signature of Registering Authority [Signature]
Designation Barakpore

Stamp:

Place of issue Barakpore

(Form V: Certificate of Registration of Sri Banamali Biswas [Father of Mr Bhadro Biswas]. Photo: Sumallya)

In the context of the National Register of Citizen (NRC), the migration certificate qualifies as a legacy data. While Mr Mondal has lost his migration certificate, Mr Bijan Kanti Sarkar has misplaced his. Perennially lost, in what Tarangini Sriraman (2018 :.23) calls “the political economy of bureaucratic papers”, these individuals will be called illegal immigrants if NRC takes place in Bengal.

Conclusion

Often considered “core to the Indian tradition”, as Nicholas Dirks (2001: .3) observes, “caste has become a central symbol for India”. While it is a fact that there have been limited studies on the casteist aspect of refugee migration against the backdrop of the Bengal Partition, it does not mean that lower-caste individuals were ‘physically absent from the partition drama’ (Kaur 2007: 58). This study revisits refugee migration from East Pakistan to West Bengal from 1950 onwards to examine migration through the lens of caste, because narratives of displacement are marked by a specificity of experience and shaped by one’s identity. The primacy accorded to ‘lived-experience’ facilitates a theorizing that presents a contrast to universality (Guru and Surukkai 2012, p.3). The dominant discourses of the Partition happen to have emerged from upper-caste remembrances; exploring the idea of lower-caste experience intervenes to project lower-caste refugees as agentive subjects, and not just passive victims of circumstances. Often these refugees have adopted differentiated and competitive positions to engage with hierarchies and negotiate with caste identities to develop strategies of survival and resistance. If Statist hospitality is intrinsically laced with power (Samaddar 2003), how does the specificity of experience feature in it? Is it possible to frame an understanding of caste and migration by studying these narratives? Is it possible to build a theoretical framework that dwells on agency of refugees? Based on this study, these questions need to be analysed further.

Notes

1. The cartographic borders between Pakistan and India, Bangladesh (East Pakistan) and India are called Radcliffe Line, named after Cyril Radcliffe, the joint commissioner of the Boundary Commission in both Bengal and Punjab.
2. The term *bhadralok* is used to define the educated, upper caste, landowning Hindu elites of Bengal who form a distinct social category at the intersection of class and caste. For a detailed analysis of the term *bhadralok*, one can read Partha Chatterjee’s “The Nationalist Elites” in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993, pp.35-36).
3. Jogendra Nath Mondal’s interview with Globe- “Minority has Every Right of Protection from State: Mondal Regrets Evacuation”, in *Dawn* (R 7703), 11th October 1947, p. 6, NMML.
4. “What is Happening inside East Bengal: Sri Jogen Mondal Resigns in Despair”, in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (R 2818), 9th October 1950, p. 1 (continued to p. 4), NMML.

5. One of the basis for envisioning caste politics differently in West Bengal can be directed to the Left Front government's insistence on its party structure that replaced all other social institutions in West Bengal. For more on this topic, see Partha Chatterji's "Historicising Caste in Bengal", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 47.50, 2012, pp. 69-70.
6. Rameshwari Nehru papers, Subject File 1, 2, 3, "Reports on Harijan Work done by smt. Rameshwari Nehru", NMML.
7. An entirely different policy was taken in Punjab. The Indian State formed the Administration of Evacuee Property, 1950 and the Claims Act, 1950 which helped refugees get houses as part of the rehabilitation process.
8. 15th June 1960: "Repeated Hitch Over DP Camp Closure" (p.1); "Camp Life Demoralises Refugees: Nehru's note on Rehabilitation Sent to W. Bengal Govt." (p. 1), *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (R 5519); 19th December 1960: "Centre to Take Charge of Assam Evacuees: All Camps in WB to be closed by 31 Jan 1961", (p. 1), *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (R 5521), NMML
9. All the quoted passages from Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay's Bengali text *Udbastu* are translated into English by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay.
10. For a detailed account of what exactly these *Jabardakal* colonies are, see Uditi Sen's "The Myths Refugees Live By: Memory and History in the Making of Bengali Refugee Identity", *Modern Asian Studies*, 48.1, 2014, pp. 37-76. Also, Manas Ray's "Growing Up Refugee: On Memory and Locality", *India International Centre Quarterly*, 28.2, 2001, pp. 119-137.
11. To see how oral history has been used to peel the various layers of history to focus on, what Urvashi Butalia calls, the "hidden histories" of the Partition, one can read Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's collaborated work *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998); Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998); Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (2001); Ravinder Kaur's *Since 1947: Partition and Punjabi Migrants of Delhi* (2007); Jasodhara Bagchi, Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Subhasri Ghosh edited volumes *The Trauma and The Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (2003 & 2009); Devika Chawla's *Home Uprooted: Oral History of India's Partition* (2014); Anam Zakaria's *The Footprints of Partition* (2015); Aanchal Malhotra's *Remnants of Separation: A History of The Partition Through Material Memory* (2017) & Kavita Puri's *Partition Voices: Untold British Stories* (2019).

12. Interviewed by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay on 3rd and 4th June 2018

13. Interviewed by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay on 28th June 2018.

14. Interviewed by Sumallya Mukhopadhyay on 15th March 2017.

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