

## Passage through Partition: Stories of Five Families

Sayeed Ferdous

---

### From India to East Bengal

Drawing upon the journey of five families across the Bengal border, this piece attempts to explore Partition narratives through the accounts of the second-generation migrants. Three of these families had establishments on both sides of the border, with roots in East Bengal. Of the rest, one came from Haora (or Howrah), near Calcutta (now Kolkata), and the other from Jangipur, near Murshidabad.

With a degree of variation, the migrating generation from all these families was educated, with some holding excellent academic credentials, and endowed with social and cultural capital. In most cases, these families had members doing salaried jobs in both the private and public sectors; there were business persons and politicians. Some were landed gentry. Two families had *zamindari* during those years of Partition. One family had seen the decline of their *zamindari*, with education saving them. One family member from a relatively rural area was determined: '*Ekta kichhu korte hobe*' (I have to do something). Calcutta, the hub of opportunities, seemed to be a long way from him and his family. The remaining four, however, had close contact with Calcutta if not residing there permanently. They were accustomed to an urban lifestyle.

While these differences impacted the way they encountered Partition, migration, and life on 'this side', with their varied professional and economic abilities, descendants of these families are well established in present-day Bangladesh (earlier East Bengal) with more or less great control over social capital. Does that mean educated, middle-class Bengali Muslim migrants from India had a smooth transit through Partition? Did they experience very little of the hardship or bitterness associated with the series of events that took place in the years preceding and following 1947?

---

**Sayeed Ferdous** (sferdous70@gmail.com) is Professor, Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka.

---

## Pretext

Researchers into the 1947 partition of Bengal have been prone to confine themselves to West Bengal. East Bengal has tended to come up only in the accounts of those who migrated from there to West Bengal/India (Basu 1975; Chakrabarty 1996; Chakravarty 2005; Biswas 2010). Without denying the horrific experiences of the departing non-Muslims from East Bengal, I have argued elsewhere that through such consistently one-sided narratives, East Bengal has been rendered the ‘other’ place, where people were not able to stay on (Ferdous forthcoming). But people did stay on there; they *had* to in many cases. Many of the departing non-Muslims from the province left behind relatives and co-religious friends amidst sheer horror and fear. Apart from the refugee narratives from West Bengal, socioeconomic research in Bangladesh shows the journey of the departing non-Muslims had prolonged over the decades (Barkat et al. 2009). A few also detail how the current political ups and downs have affected the religious minorities in the country (Guhathakurta 2012). Exodus and sufferings of the minorities, therefore, should be considered one of the aftermaths of Partition.

On the flip side of history, East Bengal was a site of joy, hope, and aspiration for many. An Indocentric approach in Partition studies fails to address this aspect (Kabir 2014; Ferdous forthcoming).

East Bengal was predominantly a Musalman majority area before the Partition. But then came the newly migrated Musalmans, who themselves were far from being a homogeneous category. The division among the Musalmans in East Bengal primarily was along the line of ethnicity: the Bangla-speaking Bangalees and non-Bangla-speaking ‘Biharis’. The category dubbed ‘Bihari’ refers to the non-Bangla-speaking people who came from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, or other areas. They came to East Bengal with the hope of a secure life in the newly created Musalman land of Pakistan. For many, that hope was a short-lived one. Researchers have addressed the issues of ‘Biharis’ in East Bengal/Bangladesh, examining their experiences of Partition and their shattered dreams (Hashmi, 1996; Ahmad 2012; Siddiqi 2013; Sajid and Ferdous 2021). Among the domiciled Bengalis of East Bengal, the majority were peasants. Most of these poor people had dreamed of a post-Partition utopia (Hashmi 1992). Following Partition, Bangalee Musalman (Bengali Muslim) migrants arrived in the province, a place they assumed would be familiar to them; but the reality that confronted them was strikingly different. The socio-economically marginal ones often had to find a shelter close to the border they had just crossed (Chatterji 2013). Researchers exploring Bengal borderland and border making have discussed the everyday sufferings of the marginal lives along the frontier line (Chatterji 1999; van Schendel 2001; van Schendel 2005). Only in recent years have the ‘returnees’ to East Bengal received the attention of researchers. Identifying the different categories of returnees, Ghoshal, for example,

focused on issues of refugee resettlement and suffering and related state policies in East Bengal (Ghoshal 2018).

### **The Unheard Partition Migrants**

Apart from Bengali non-Muslim, non-Bangalee Musalman, rural peasantry, and borderlanders, there is a small section among the Bangla-speaking Musalmans who are yet to find their place in Partition studies. These are the educated middle class – some are salaried, some are business people from the landed gentry. A handful of government servants had come to this land as ‘optees’: they either opted to join the public service of Pakistan or took early retirement and came back to their ancestral place. Among the other migrants, there were ‘exchangees’ who had managed to exchange their entire or partial property with departing non-Muslims. Many among the newly arrived ones already had ancestral or matrimonial links with this side with varying levels of attachment. People without any family ties relied on those who had acquaintance with the province. As educated strugglers, they either had to find a job or start a business in their new life. They managed to get settled in cities and towns through their social networks.

Whether they came from Calcutta, Burdwan, Murshidabad, or Malda, the journeys of these people have seldom been visible in Partition studies. Research has been conducted on the Bengali elite literary persona, artists who had migrated to East Bengal from India, their family history of migration, and their creations (Kabir 2018). However, apart from a few autobiographies, memoirs (Anisuzzaman 2003; Huq 2008; Umor 2015), and some fictions, the category of Bangla-speaking Musalman migrants to East Bengal has received little attention and has rarely been addressed in Partition research. Probably, it has been assumed that being Bangla speakers, these people faced no real challenges of dis/relocation and assimilated easily with the existing Bengali community. Focusing on a rarely unexplored aspect or group of migrants of the 1947 Bengal Partition, this research, therefore, will contribute to broadening the scope of Partition studies by challenging its Indocentric bias. How did the urban/educated middle-class Bangla-speaking refugees in East Bengal fare during Partition? How did they end up in East Bengal? What was the aftermath of this meta event in their personal/family lives?

### **‘That Side’: Life Leaving Behind**

Unlike in typical Partition stories of displacement, no instant decision had to be taken by these families whose stories I have drawn upon. None of them had to migrate or shift overnight; for most of them, it was not an abrupt but a calculated decision. Afsan’s father had a job in a private bank; the authority nominated him for their Dacca (now

Dhaka) branch. Ameenah's father, a Shibpur Engineering College graduate, was an employee in a multinational shoe company. At Partition, he decided to come to Dacca and joined the Ahsanullah Engineering College as a teacher.

At the time of Partition, Khushi's father, a government employee, had to submit a form provided by the government. He left blank the box where he was supposed to enter his choice of the two dominions. Khushi had questioned her father as to why had he turned in the form without setting down his preference. Neither the father nor any of his brothers were in favour of the idea of Pakistan. Why then had he not written 'India' there? Her father had a clear answer: 'I did not want to end up there as a refugee.' His ancestors were from East Bengal, and the family remained there all along – that was the justification.

None of these people from the first generation who decided to migrate to or stay back in East Bengal is alive to be interviewed. We only have accounts from their heirs. Who can tell what went through their minds while making such decisions? By not providing an option, had Khushi's father made a statement about the lack of choice for the Partition migrants? Or, had he indicated that for a secular individual like him, Pakistan was not a choice, but neither was India, because he did not want to embrace the fate of the refugee? As a Musalman from East Bengal, could Khushi's father foresee the not-too-distant future? Many on both sides of the border could not. In other research I carried out, a marginal non-Muslim border-lander from Bangladesh described his parents' belief that, whatever happened, they would still be able to maintain frequent contact with the 'other side'. That it would become an inaccessible place without a passport and visa was inconceivable for them (Ferdous forthcoming).

Najma's father was the first person from his family to look for a job at the demise of their family zamindari. In his first interview in Calcutta in the early fifties, someone told him, 'Why are you looking for a job here? Go to that side. There are abundant jobs for you.' This incident hurt him so much that he decided to migrate to East Bengal immediately. On the other side of the picture, a Bangalee Hindu in East Pakistan spoke of declining refuge in India as an option, even at the departure of his family: 'To 'go' was not an easy matter! You can't just say, "Let's go" and move accordingly; it was not that simple' (Ferdous forthcoming). He indicated that besides many other issues, their economic situation was the deciding factor for him not going to that side. The families I have been discussing had the ability – financially and otherwise – to migrate to 'this side'. All this reflects how people's decisions about their future during Partition were related to their social orientation and economic strength, along with their understanding of how events would unfold.

During the Calcutta riots of 1946, Afsan's family was in a Musalman neighbourhood in Park Street. His mother had seen the milkman being attacked by some goons in front of their house. The women of the house came out and tried in vain to save him. For these women, his identity was that of the milkman who supplied milk for the children of the house; they were unconcerned about his religious affiliation. The goons stabbed him to death. In another incident, Kalo *chacha*, a family retainer, was stabbed in the head but managed to survive, even as a relative accompanying him was murdered. Afsan remembers, as a child, touching Kalo *chacha*'s scar. Afsan's parents were not politically oriented, but his mother said, 'I don't want to stay in this city of murders.' The family concluded they would not be able to survive there.

Apart from the above instances, none of these five families had any direct experience of overt violence. However, the pretext of Lucky's journey to East Bengal would remind us of typical Partition stories of dilemma and disenchantment of the millions. Lucky was born in 1944 in Jongipur, a subdivision of Murshidabad. He had heard from the elders of his family that, initially, the Musalmans in and around Murshidabad were jubilant about their town being marked as part of Pakistan. But then, after a few days, the boundary line was 'amended', with Murshidabad included in Indian territory. In the years immediately after Partition, the atmosphere appeared to be not very communal to them. However, a gradual increase in population made access to jobs and education difficult for the Musalmans. The lack of resources and the unfavourable social environment impacted their state of mind. While nobody attacked them or came to kill them, they could not gather the strength/energy to compete by using their talent and networks. This situation of uncertainty, and not overt violence, as the force of eviction for the Murshidabad Musalmans, is akin to the pre/post-Partition scenario for the East Bengal Hindus; they, too, did not often witness incidents of violence, but fear acted as the driving force for them to take refuge in India (Guhathakurta 2002).

Like Lucky, many among the Murshidabad Musalmans thought that 'to do something in life we have to go to our *desh*'. That 'our *desh*', for the Musalmans, was East Pakistan. Lucky, after completing undergraduate from the local college, decided to move to 'this side'. His family's economic situation was not sound enough to send their sons to Calcutta. Two of his elder brothers had already moved to East Pakistan by the late 1950s. One night in 1965, Lucky hopped onto a boat to leave Jangipur.

Researchers have discussed elsewhere that the decades following the Partition were the darkest period for the minorities on both sides of the Bengal border (Guhathakurta 2012). East Bengal, during this period, was marked by military rule, and minorities had gone through sheer hostility by the local administration and law enforcement agencies (Ferdous 2022). Minorities in India had gone through similar trajectories. Riots and war were the crucial incidents. 1965 was a turbulent year in the region. Indo-Pak war

this year had an enormous impact on the lives of the minorities on both sides of the border and often compelled people to migrate along with their religious affiliation. These five families as well had a lot to say about 1965. Let us continue with Lucky's story.

Lucky was a promising footballer of the district. He had been given a job by the Farakka Barrage authority, trying to set up an official football team.<sup>1</sup> They provided him with accommodation as well. But Lucky aimed for something better and was, therefore, actively considering migrating to East Bengal. The family was concerned that if a well-known figure like Lucky sought refuge in East Bengal, the news would spread fast with consequences for the family he would be leaving behind. The prediction came true. As an employee of Farakka Barrage, Lucky had access to sensitive documents relating to the project. It was alleged that he took some of these to East Pakistan. With his migration coinciding with the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, this rumour of Lucky being an 'agent'/spy of Pakistan gained strength among the community. Researchers have shown how rumour played a crucial role in evicting people and forcing them into exodus in those years (Guhathakurta 2002). There was no instant communication at the time. Still, Lucky received the news about the situation in Jangipur, along with a warning that he should not attempt to visit the place soon. It was only in 1971, during the *muktijuddho* (liberation war of Bangladesh), that Lucky finally managed to return to Jongipur for a visit -- that too for just one night. Soon after their arrival, police raided the house; thankfully, a niece helped Lucky escape by the back door. That night he had to sleep in a neighbour's house and hastily left for Bangladesh before dawn.

While Lucky managed to escape arrest, many others, sadly, could not do so. Afsan's family, including his *mamas* and *nani*, shifted to Dhaka. But his *nana* stayed back in Shillong, Meghalaya, looking after his business. In 1965 he was labelled a 'Pakistani agent' and arrested for two nights. The arrest had no further legal consequences, but the gentleman realised his days on 'that side' were over. One of Najma's paternal uncles, a life-long Congress activist and an influential figure in local politics, too, was apprehended by the police in 1965. The central government's policy seemed to imprison any influential Musalman political figures. It was a shock for Najma's uncle. Incidents like this probably had a far-reaching effect on people's life. Afsan's *nana* bore the pain for the rest of his life. The economic loss was high, but far more damaging was his mental agony. He had the feeling that his nearest ones never understood his state of mind.

The use of this notion of being an 'agent'/'spy' of the neighbouring enemy state to vilify a person from the minority community was not rare at all (Ferdous forthcoming). Blame or stigma served – and still serves – as the weapon of the majority on both sides

of the border. Like Najma's uncle, two of Khushi's uncles had distressing experiences in their political careers. They considered themselves wholeheartedly secular. During Partition, they did not want to continue living in East Bengal and had shifted to the Indian side to stand by their co-religious minorities. One of them held crucial positions in national politics. However, they both became disillusioned with the politics of Congress, and they had given up politics. Therefore, it is simplistic to assume that being Musalman, all these families were keen on Musalman's utopia. Indeed, some harboured determinedly secular dreams; it is another matter that most of them found them shattered later in life.

After all these years, do such scars matter? Were there long-lasting, generational impacts? The success of these families post their migration to East Pakistan seem to have obliterated most of the visible traces. However, a subtle impact of Partition is apparent. People I talked to were from different economic strata, with different socio-cultural orientations. Regardless, most of my interlocutors seemed to agree on one issue: Musalmans would not be able to rise on 'that side'. Lucky came from a not-so-wealthy family of a mofussil town. In contrast, Ameenah's family was economically well-off and regarded as influential in their locality, a suburb of the metropolis Calcutta. During the pre-Partition riots, the family provided training to Musalman youths for self-defence and provided shelter to riot-affected people. The socioeconomic standing of these two families was significantly different. Yet, in both cases, the fate of the next generations seemed similar. Even in the recent past, the brightest youngsters from Lucky's family could not access higher education in Calcutta. Likewise, even growing up in a Calcutta suburb, many of Ameenah's relatives struggled to access good education and jobs. They had chosen professions relating to crafts or artisanship or, at best, own shops at Chandni Chawk to make a living. Lucky made it clear that he believed there had always been 'silent violence' and that Musalmans in India had lost the mindset to prosper. Such realisation, of course, varies with people's divergent experiences.

All these five families have maintained close contact with the family and property they had to leave on 'that side'. Najma shared a recent picture of their house at Burdwan. Afsan recounted the story of his visit to his mother's place of origin at Hooghly. In the two decades following Partition, and even after the independence of Bangladesh, most of them had visited relatives living on the other side, and vice versa. In some cases, such visits continued until very recently. For extended families on both sides, matrimonial events had become moments of family reunion. Dates would be arranged so that kin on the other side of the border could attend.

Ameenah remembered the last of her visits to the other side: it was in 1968 when her father took her to Haora to meet the relatives there before her marriage. Ameenah's

great-grandfather had a grand establishment there. In some cases, to avoid the tentacles of the Enemy Property Act 1968<sup>2</sup>, migrating family members registered their immovable properties in the name of relatives who continued living on that side. At times, there were instances of property fraud committed by local people, including neighbours backed by local political leaders, or in the worst-case scenario, by close relatives. Often the greed of individuals intersected with the policy of the state. One of my interlocutors shared the story of an unfortunate Musalman family. A renowned Musalman educator and Parliamentarian, born and brought up in West Bengal, had died sometime before Partition. Of his descendants, several decided to continue living there, while others had shifted to East Bengal. Following their departure, all their properties were declared 'enemy property' and snatched from them. The notion of 'enemy property', or 'vested property' as it has been named in the legal system of Bangladesh, has prolonged the legacy of Partition, compounding the bitterness and sorrow of the Partition migrants (Chakravarty 2005; Barkat et al. 2009; Guhathakurta 2012; Ferdous forthcoming). The passage through Partition was, in the main, similar for the emigres from and to India, as people became minorities in their own hometowns, which had enormous material as well as extra-material consequences.

### **Life on 'This Side'**

So, people had come; or in some cases, should we say they had to come. In every migrant family, it seems, there was a mixed attitude to the life they began in East Bengal. Many had not wanted to come. Afsan's father was a man from Bhola, Noakhali, but he considered Calcutta his place. Najma's *nani*, whose ancestral place was in Jessore, never wanted to migrate. According to her, Najma's *nana* was the civil surgeon of Calcutta. Their daughter, Najma's mother, had a strong bond with the city as she grew up there. She spoke of how her father became lonely on 'this side' as none of his brothers came with him. He had no friends in Dacca. His career track record in Dacca was of resigning from one job one after another. Najma believes this resulted from an unhappy state of mind related to his non-acceptance of East Bengal/Pakistan. Now, one must not forget that most of these people were urban-based and educated. Calcutta was the most desirable place for them. In East Bengal, there was then no city that was comparable to Calcutta.

Researchers have pointed out that the Calcuttan Muslims looked down on their Dhakaiya counterparts as backward in terms of education and culture (Ghoshal 2018). This classist attitude was evident among a large part of the educated middle-class emigres, who perceived East Bengal as uncultured/raw compared to West Bengal at large. At a wedding, a guest from Calcutta shared with Afsan's mother that they would never allow someone from their family to marry a Noakhailla, that is, a person from Noakhali, a southern district of East Bengal. Afsan's mother, a loyal daughter-in-

law of Noakhali, had no response to this. Ameenah said that her own match with a man from North Bengal was still acceptable to their relatives in Calcutta. However, if the groom had been from Noakhali or Chittagong or Sylhet, that would not have been the case. 'North Bengal' in Bangladesh refers to the areas adjacent to the West Bengal districts of Calcutta, Malda, Murshidabad and Dinajpur. In the pre-Partition era, people from these areas had close contact with West Bengal for education or jobs. Therefore, to the people from that side, 'North Bengal' appeared to be more acceptable than the areas known as 'South Bengal' in today's Bangladesh. On the other hand, the original inhabitants often frowned at the newcomers, asking, 'Have you come from that side?' The question had an in-built element of doubt about the genuineness of these people's Bengali identity.

Further, people, in some cases, were half-hearted about shifting. Some were sceptical about the future of Pakistan. Ameenah's father encouraged relatives on that side to come to this side of the border. Many heeded his advice. When he tried to persuade his grandfather-in-law to buy business establishments of the migrating Hindus, like Dhakeshwari mill, the old man responded with the question, 'Pakistan has materialised, but will it survive?' He did not come. However, he sent his only son to the East Bengal district of Pabna, and according to Ameenah, he bought half of the Pabna town. One of their relatives decided to migrate following the riot of 1964 in Shibpur, Haora. He visited Dacca and bought some properties there. In 1970, when that family finally started living in Dacca, they were stuck there for nine months because of the 1971 war. The war and the post-war scenario made them rethink their decision, and they went back to Calcutta. This story reminds me of something I heard long ago. There were apparently many Musalmans in West Bengal who were not happy with the liberation of Bangladesh. The potential reason could be that they believed that if East Bengal had continued as part of Pakistan, it would have offered them a safe refuge during any future communal riot in India. With the sidelining of religious nationalism as they saw it, these people became sceptical about how far Bangladesh would be their safe 'home' anymore. These Musalmans in West Bengal, like many Hindus of East Pakistan, probably saw themselves as 'proxy citizens' of the neighbouring state (van Schendel 2002, 127).

The uncertainty, disapproval and even non-acceptance amongst many about Pakistan/East Pakistan did not, of course, impede the unfolding of life for many others on 'this side' following Partition. Despite being hobbled by the prevalent derogatory image of East Bengal, Bangla-speaking refugees targeted Dacca for jobs and other professional opportunities. But it was not all about the professional and economic opportunities. Unlike his father, Afsan's mother seemed happy on this side. She had left her sister in Calcutta and used to visit her every year. However, Afsan remembered how his mother's face would take on a glow on the day of their return to East Bengal after each visit. For

him, this indicated her happiness at returning to the place she now considered as home. Ameenah, too, believed life was better for her mother on this side. Upon her father's untimely demise, she and her mother stayed for years in Haora under her nana's guardianship and supervision, like dependents. But in Dacca, her mother was in charge. She enjoyed her freedom, made friends, ran her household and took care of her in-laws. She eventually became the matriarch, said Ameenah.

Life evolved not merely at the individual level. Ameenah's account details the development of the physical and social life of Dacca as a city with planned residential areas. Research has shown how migration contributed to the urbanisation of Dacca (Ghoshal 2018). At the time of Partition, the major streets of the city were yet to be built, and there were few landmarks. Ameenah's father bought a government plot in Dhanmondi, an area that became a dedicated residential area decades later. None of their relatives or other families who arrived in Dacca in the following years chose this area to live in; they usually opted for the older part of the city near the river. In 1951, Dhanmondi was still a purely rural area with forests, paddy fields and villages. The place seemed wild and unsafe. Her father erected a bungalow type of house there, bought a revolver and a double-barrel gun for safety and adopted a dachshund dog as a pet. It was the first house in Dhanmondi, and they were the first settlers. Ameenah's father was a forward-looking person who saw the potential of the place. He established good terms with the local *matbor* (community leader) and created goodwill and a friendly atmosphere there through steps such as installing a tube well for the community. Some of the villagers used to visit the house for *adda*. Ameenah, with her two sisters, used to go for walks in the village. The market area was yet to be constructed. The entire area from their house to the present-day new market was a barren field.

Viquarunnesa Girls school, still regarded as an elite institution in the city, was the first school Ameenah attended. She recounts that one of her schoolmates found it amusing that the school bus had to come all the way down to this remote part to fetch one girl. Ameenah then shifted to Holy Cross, another big name among Dacca schools. She was then sent to a boarding school in Shillong on the other side. Ameenah remembered the regular forms of transport in the Dacca of her childhood: rickshaw and *tanga*. Her father bought a jeep which the family used to visit their relatives and friends living in the city proper. Sometimes, they would go out with friends, such as to picnic in nearby areas like Kurmitola. In the evening they played badminton. The family evidently enjoyed the newly growing urban life of Dacca to the fullest.

Ameenah and her parents arrived in Dacca in 1947. One of her paternal uncles was admitted to Dacca Medical College before this. By 1948, six of her father's siblings had come to Dhaka, and in the next year, her *dadi* also arrived after the demise of her *dada* on that side. But this was a family of early birds. Many families came after a

few years. For some, however, it took almost two decades for the decision to be taken. Ameenah remembered many of their relatives and family friends who moved from different parts of India to Dacca and other towns of East Pakistan over two decades. Afsan reported a wave of migration from Shillong in the 1960s. Many who had ended up on 'this side' from India had kinship ties here, and they pulled each other along this journey prolonged over decades. Often, families, discovering their similar fate as emigres, became close to each other and developed long-term relationships. Men who came from that side had shared memories of life in Calcutta. There was the Shibpur Old Boys' Association in Dacca founded by the alumni of Shibpur Engineering College. People maintained their old circles. Afsan recalled that his father had only three friends in Dacca; all came from Calcutta. Was this mere friendship of like minds; or can it partly be attributed to the classist attitude we have spoken of: an element of distancing from/looking down at the locals or a sense of superiority of the urbanised, metropolis-educated class; or was it a marker of the loneliness of the migrants?

From these narratives, it would be simplistic to conclude that those with strong socioeconomic backgrounds did not suffer during Partition. Afsan's *nana*, for instance, could not regain the footing he had found in Shillong. He had no way to make a fresh start in the business. His sons could not prosper here, as they had not received a good enough education. Nevertheless, the stories show that those with a solid education and good social capital could quickly establish themselves in the new land. As Ameenah put it, 'Life smiled at us.'

### **From Educated, Salaried Musalman to Secular Bangalee Nationalist**

'Our story will not match those of many others. We have kin in all the three countries, and they all did well,' said Khushi. Her family had produced qualified persons in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh who served in important political positions and bureaucratic offices for the respective governments. Khushi's Oxford graduate uncle was involved in the national politics of India and served as a minister under both Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri. Her eldest uncle, a government servant, was sent first to Saudi Arabia and then Iraq by the British government to look after the Indian Musalmans there. Later he continued in service for the Pakistani government and sent his family to Pakistan. They received their education there and married Pakistanis, even before the independence of Bangladesh. All these branches of the family were rooted in Faridpur, now a district of Bangladesh. However, to meet their regular as well as occasional needs, they would go to Calcutta, not to Dacca. Long before Khushi's father was born, the grandfather was posted in Dacca only for a while. After many years, when Partition occurred, Khushi's father came to East Bengal on his own for a short period. Soon he got posted in Pakistan and spent more than a decade and a half there. His retirement was due in January 1971, and before that, in

1968, he came back to ‘this side’. The case of this family indicates that at the level of exceptional attainment of material and socio-cultural capital, some people had managed to absorb the shocks and bumps of Partition. However, this trend was not an exception as most of the families I spoke to survived Partition and prospered through education and social networks.

But the main aim of this essay is not to illustrate the success stories of the more elite Partition migrants or how their economic and social capital helped in their transit and prosperity in their new home. At this point, I would like to address how in East Bengal, this educated and mostly urbanised middle class became inseparably linked to the newly emerging identity of Bengali Muslim that focused more powerfully on Bengali nationalism undermining the religious aspect.

To give an idea of the social position and lifestyle of the elite, well-connected and urbanised families I spoke to, I share some bits and pieces from different family stories. At least two of these five families had alumni from renowned universities like Oxford and Cambridge. One of Khushi’s uncles, Humayun Kabir, secured a scholarship at Exeter College, Oxford, graduating with first-class honours. He became Maulana Azad’s secretary, and later, the education minister of India, among other things. Khushi’s cousin was another Oxford graduate in the family. Afsan’s family was dependent on the business. But they also had Cambridge graduates from both his paternal and maternal sides. His father’s *chacha* and mother’s *mama* became roommates there, and that friendship led to the somewhat unusual match-making of Afsan’s parents: the groom from Noakhali and the bride from Hooghly. Afsan’s mother’s *mama*, S. Wajid Ali, was a man of fame. He was one of the key figures among the Muslims in Bangla literature. Najma’s family had a *zamindari*. Her *nana*’s commercial complex in Calcutta was inaugurated by the pan-Indian political leader A. K. Fazlul Huq. Ameenah’s great-grandfather was like a king in his area, Mollapara, near Haora. However, the family did not have the social capital of the other cases mentioned here. Her father was initially educated at a madrasa with a scholarship. However, he realised that he needed to access mainstream education to do well professionally. That took him to the Presidency College, Calcutta, and later to Shibpur Engineering College. In the case of Lucky, when he came to East Bengal from the mofussil town of Jangipur, one of the first things he did was to get admission to a university. Apart from Lucky’s family, the families had close contact with the metropolis, Calcutta. Members of these families accessed renowned institutions of the city, like Presidency College, St Xavier’s and Islamia College, the latter founded by notable Muslim leaders of India. It had significance in the political life of East Bengal, as many vanguards of the Bangalee Muslim leadership, including the first President of Bangladesh and the proponent of Bangalee nationalism, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had their grooming in Islamia College and its student dormitory, Baker Hostel.

When the Bangla-speaking urbanised and educated emigres – with elite family backgrounds, in some cases – arrived in Dacca following Partition, they became prime movers of the social life in the new land. Belonging to the salaried class, they had little connections with active politics in East Bengal. Regardless of their support for the Muslim League or Congress, whether they welcomed Partition or not, or whichever of the two dominions they preferred to stay in, if at all, their arrival in East Bengal became the marker of their identity. As Afsan put it in, ‘We were Pakistani, only to the extent that we are anti-Indian.’ On the one hand, willingly or not, they had accepted the idea of Pakistan. Some were even enthusiastic about Pakistan and considered it as ‘*amader desh*’ (our land); some believed Musalmans could not prosper in India. Often, as people narrated the trajectories of their families, it sounded as though the decision and the decision-making were inevitable; it was as though, as Musalmans, they were bound to move to ‘this side’, and that requires no further explanation.

On the other hand, unlike non-Bangla-speaking emigres from different parts of India, they were not keen on prioritising their Musalman identity over the Bengali one. Rafiuddin Ahmed has noted the tendency of Bengali Musalmans in India to claim a Middle-Eastern ancestry as an element of the aristocracy (Ahmed 1988). They stressed taking up Urdu, Persian and Arabic as their language, prioritised the Musalman name and identity over the Bengali ones, and attempted to distance themselves from the latter. Following Partition, some of the aristocratic Muslim families of Bengal continued with that legacy, showing a preference for Urdu over Bangla. However, the families I talked to, who had moved to East Bengal, assert that such practices were rare among their relatives and acquaintances. Those who had roots and affinal ties in East Bengal were also loyal to its culture and language. Afsan observed that other than one of his *fupas*, posted in Pakistan, he had never heard anyone praising Pakistan in their family. Nor had he found *Rabindrik* Bengaliness around him, he adds. By that, Afsan was referring to the ‘cultured’ and ‘elite’ attitude that locates Rabindranath Tagore at the centre of their Bengaliness. Instead, he found the emerging identity attached to ‘East Bengaliness’. This reminds me of Neilesh Bose’s discussion on Bengali Musalman writers and editors who claimed a Pakistani (or should I say anti-Indian) identity but also asserted their linguistic and cultural East Bengal heritage (Bose 2014). This claim of distinctiveness set the East Bengalis apart from both the Indian/West Bengal and Pakistani/West Pakistani identities. Coming from educated and elite backgrounds, many were exposed to cosmopolitan culture and secular lifestyle. Najma found people on ‘this side’ more orthodox in the religious sense. My interlocutors discovered that when the families were bi/tri-furcated into two/three lands, those branches that ended up in India or Pakistan had a different, more anglicised lifestyle than their own families. Should this rejection of anglicisation be seen as a sign of appropriation of the Musalman identity in a changed scenario?

As discussed previously, frequent cross-border journeys for these families continued in the following two decades. However, during this time, the political scenario in East Pakistan changed drastically. The Muslim League started to lose its hegemonic control over the people (Kamal 2009). Anti-Pakistani Bengali nationalism was on the rise. The honeymoon phase of unified Musalman identity was over, and the Bengali–non-Bengali relationship reached its lowest point. Scholars have noted the West Pakistani disapproval of the Bengalis and a more sympathetic approach towards the non-Bengali migrants (Ghoshal 2018). This might have been one of the major factors that pushed Bangla-speaking Musalman emigres towards the emerging Bangalee nationalism. Among these emigres, a section who considered themselves secular had always blamed the Muslim League for Partition; to them, there could be no acceptance of Pakistan. For the rest, Pakistan became their default choice at Partition. But, for the latter as well, the hope they had at the beginning about ‘our land’ or ‘land of eternal eid’ (Kamal 1989, in Siddiqi 2013, 153) was about to crumble. Alongside discriminatory economic policies, the central government ruthlessly cracked down on the freedom of expression of the Bengalis (Ferdous forthcoming).

Lucky described an incident that reflects the rupture in the Bengali–‘Bihari’ relationship. There was a clash between the Bengali students of the Physical Institute at Mohammadpur, Dacca, and the ‘Biharis’ living around. Lucky was an eyewitness, and he recounted how the Biharis attacked the Bengali students. When the latter retaliated, the army arrived and arrested them, along with the instructors and principal of the institution. The next day there was a protest rally organised by the Awami League, where an eminent student leader delivered a fiery speech, demanding the immediate release of all. At the meeting, Lucky described the incidents he had witnessed. His description clearly expressed his support for the Bengali students over the non-Bengali Musalmans. He accused the latter of being oppressive toward the Bengalis. One must not forget he is the man who had once been labelled a ‘Pakistani agent’ in his hometown on the other side. He had then realised that Musalmans would not be able to prosper in India. And now, in this changing trajectory of history, Lucky distanced himself from his co-religious ‘Bihari’ Musalmans and embraced the Bengali identity.

Many of the people I interviewed articulated this loyalty to the emerging phenomenon of Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan. They were often explicit in expressing their disapproval of Pakistan and Pakistanis. Khushi asserted that she found it difficult to accept Pakistani contemporaries. Because of her father’s government service (he was with the information ministry of Pakistan), the family had stayed in West Pakistan for many years. She claimed that she never made friends with West Pakistani classmates during her time there. In school, she had to study Urdu. Khushi remembered that she barely obtained pass marks in the Urdu exams every year. This was because of her

resistance to the language. In those days, Khushi's younger sister was a singer on the radio and liked to sing Rabindra Sangeet (Tagore songs). But because the Pakistani state at that time saw Tagore as anti-Pakistani or pro-Indian, she could not sing Tagore's songs; she chose to sing songs penned by Atul Prasad, another Bengali icon.

Afsan's mother was from the Hooghly district. East Bengal was her in-laws' land. Nevertheless, while her husband seemed more a Calcuttan and an exile in his own land in East Bengal, the mother embraced the homegrown Bengali nationalism instead of clinging to the identity of Musalman. In December 1971, when the Indo-Pakistan war was in its last phase, the Indian air force raided Dacca. There was a rumour that a few locals were participating in these raids, alongside the Indian pilots. When the fighter jets thundered overhead, Afsan remembered his mother's excitement. '*Amader chelera!*' she exclaimed. 'Our boys! Our boys are in charge!'

The term *ghoti*, referring to the emigres from that side, has a certain connotation in Bangladesh. It was often assumed that the *ghotis* were more loyal to the Musalman part of their identity than their Bengaliness and supported the Pakistani rulers. Some of my interlocutors, too, remarked that migrants with low socioeconomic capital had clung to their Musalman identity because for them, with scant chances of social mobility through education or jobs, the Musalman land was their only achievement. Someone also said that the marginal migrants had merely crossed the border and started a new life right at that place adjacent to the frontier. It indicates why Islamist politics flourished in some border areas, particularly in northern Bangladesh.

In contrast, as we have noted, the five families I interviewed found their niche in their Bengali identity, which eclipsed their Muslim one. These primarily educated middle-class emigres who often claimed a secular position found the working-class and poorer people, regardless of whether they were locals or migrants, leaning strongly towards their Musalman identity. Some observed that the people from this side of the border tended to be more conservative in the religious sense. My interlocutors expressed pride in their relatives who had played an active role in Bangladesh's war of independence, with many receiving gallantry awards. At this point, without questioning the genuineness of these people's utterances, we should ask: could the expression or assertion of such loyalty be a strategy of the migrants? Are these, in a way, disclaimers of their Indian past?

When the tables of history were turned during the war of independence, the identity of the migrants in East Bengal became twisted. Before and after the rise of this new nationalism, Bengali Musalmans discovered themselves marked by two nationalisms. Siddiqi has coined the notion of 'double burden' (Siddiqi 2013, 155) in explaining the state of Bengali Musalmans, who struggled to prove their ownership of both parts of

their hyphenated identity. This burden has lingering aftereffects, continuing till today. Here I would like to add that at the moment, such flipped identities appeared to be advantageous for the Bangalee Musalmans in East Pakistan compared to the other groups living here, such as the Bangalee non-Musalmans and non-Bangalee Musalmans. At least they had managed to escape the stigma of being minorities by prioritising either of the hyphenated parts of their identity at different turns of history, be it 1947 or 1971. One should, however, not scrutinise this aspect through the binary of agency and victimhood. The reality grounded in history and together in flux is often far more complex than we assume.

The stories I have shared have colourful characters, such as Ameenah's father, a forward-looking man who had a vision about his individual and family mobility. Most importantly, he could foresee a vibrant city unfolding in a remote place. There is Lucky, a self-made protagonist who changed his fortune successfully but still regrets not being able to bring the next generation from Jangipur to Dhaka. There is the lost *zamindari* of Najma's family and the elegance, culture and education of Khushi or Afsan's family. Partition had left its mark on individuals and families. But for the most part, the educated, middle-class, neo-elite protagonists equipped with social and economic capital survived the rupture and flourished.

Along with the ups and downs in the lives of individuals and families, these accounts also offer glimpses of class and identity formation. These Bangla-speaking Musalman emigres, originating mainly from the landed gentry a generation ago, managed to access education and jobs at the decline of *zamindari/jotedari*, and adopted elite lifestyles prevailing in the metropolis of Calcutta. Through Partition in 1947, this newly emerged salaried class arrived in the Musalman's dreamland of East Bengal, and upon disillusionment with this unrealised utopia, asserted the cultural distinctiveness of the Bangalee that eventually led to a homegrown nationalism. The latter flourished on its hotbed in Puran Dacca neighbourhoods like Abhay Das Lane, Tikatuli, etc., but also found its way in the barren areas like Dhanmondi. A new identity with its new ruling class was finding its way in the newborn city centre of Dacca.

[Note: This essay is an outcome of research conducted under a faculty research project supported by the Faculty of Social Science, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka. I am grateful to them for allowing me to publish this revised version of the research report. I am also hugely indebted to my friend and colleague Sharmind Neelormi and her father, Khairul Islam Khan, my friend Parsa Sanjana Sajid and her mother, Professor Najma Hasin, the social activist Khushi Kabir, Ameenah Ahmed and eminent historian Professor Afsan Chowdhury for their generosity in sharing their family stories over hours of their precious time.]

## Notes

1. [https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Farakka\\_Barrage](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Farakka_Barrage); <http://fbp.gov.in/>.
2. Following the Indo-Pak war of 1965, the Parliament of India has formulated an act to regulate the appropriation of property owned by Pakistani citizens in India. For the act: <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A1968-34.pdf>

## References

Ahmad, Irfan. 2012. 'Modernity and Its Outcast: The Why and How of India's Partition.' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 35 (2): 477–492.

Ahmed, Rafiuddin. 1988. *The Bengali Muslims 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Anisuzzaman. 2003. *Kal Nirabadhi*. Dhaka: Sahitya Prakash.

Barkat, Abul, Shafique uz Zaman, Md. Shahnewaz Khan, Avijit Poddar, Saiful Hoque and M. Taheruddin. 2009. *Deprivation of Hindu Minority in Bangladesh: Living with Vested Property*. Dhaka: Pathak Shamabesh.

Basu, Dakshinaranjan Basu, ed. 1975. *Chere Asa Gram*. Calcutta, 1975

Biswas, Adhir. 2010. *Deshbhager Smriti*. 4 Vols. Kolkata: Gangchil.

Bose, Neilesh. 2014. 'Purba Pakistan Zindabad: Bengali Visions of Pakistan 1940–1947.' *Modern Asian Studies* 48 (1): 1–36.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1996. 'Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition.' *Economic and Political Weekly* 31 (32): 2143–2151.

Chakravarty, Gargi. 2005. *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal*. New Delhi: Blujay Books.

Chatterji, Joya. 1999. 'The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947–52.' *Modern Asian Studies* 33 (1): 185–242.

Chatterji, Joya. 2013. 'Dispositions and Destinations: Refugee Agency and "Mobility Capital" in the Bengal Diaspora, 1947–2007.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55 (2): 274–275.

Ferdous, Sayeed. 2015. '“Surgery” in rush and affected lives: Make-Believe stories in Understanding History.' *The Journal of Social Studies* 146 (April-June): 25-44.

Ferdous, Sayeed. Forthcoming. *Partition as Border-Making: East Bengal, East Pakistan and Bangladesh*. London/New York/Delhi: Routledge.

Ghoshal, Anindita. 2018. 'The Invisible Refugees: Muslim “Returnees” in East Pakistan (1947–71).' *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 63 (1): 59–89.

Guhathakurta, Meghna. 2002. 'Uprooted and Divided.' *Seminar* 510 (February).  
<https://www.india-seminar.com/2002/510/510%20meghna%20guha%20thakurta.htm>

Guhathakurta, Meghna. 2012. 'Amidst the Winds of Change: The Hindu Minority in Bangladesh.' *South Asian History and Culture* 3 (2): 288–230.

Hashmi, Taj-ul-Islam. 1992. *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Hashmi, Taj-ul-Islam. 1996. 'The “Bihari” Minorities in Bangladesh: Victims of Nationalism.' *Conference Paper Presented in the 20th Anniversary Conference of the Asian Student Association of Australia* (Melbourne, 8–11 July).

Huq, Hasan Azizul. 2008. *Agunpakhi*. Kolkata: Dey's.

Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. 2014. *Partition's Post-Amnesias: 1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. 2018. 'Utopias Eroded and Recalled: Intellectual Legacies of East Pakistan.' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41 (4): 895–900.

Kamal, Ahmed. 2009. *State Against the Nation: The Decline of the Muslim League in Pre-Independence Bangladesh, 1947–54*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

Sajid, Parsa Sanjana, and Sayeed Ferdous. 2021. 'Longing and Belonging.' *Inherited Memories*. Dhaka: Goethe Institute. <https://longingbelonging.net/>

Siddiqi, Dina. 2013. 'Left Behind by the Nation: Stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh.' *Site: New Series* 10 (1): 150–183

Umor, Badruddin. 2015. *Amar Jibon*. Kolkata: Dey's.

van Schendel, Willem. 2001. 'Working Through Partition: Making a Living in the Bengal Borderlands.' *International Review of Social History*, 46 (3): 393–421.

van Schendel, Willem. 2002. 'Stateless in South Asia: The Making of the India Bangladesh Enclaves.' *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61 (1): 115-147.

van Schendel, Willem. 2005. *The Bengal Borderlands*. Amsterdam: Anthem Press.