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Nostalgia and the Construction of 'Home:' Inter-Generational Memory and Remembrance of the East Bengali Migrants

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Introduction

Taking the 1947 Partition that created the two nation-states of India and Pakistan as the backdrop, this paper attempts to explore the intense sense of nostalgia deeply embedded in the psyche of the Hindu migrants from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) who had to abandon their motherland following the Partition and seek refuge across the border in the Indian state of West Bengal. Culling information from oral narratives as also personal documents in the form of memoirs, the paper would highlight how, through the memories of a lost homeland, these first-generation migrants try to cling to their roots and heritage and try to pass these on to the next generations. Although the concept of a museum to honour the memories of a lost homeland is steadily gaining ground in India, on the lines of Holocaust memorials in Europe, it is essentially these memories that help in unravelling the human dimension of Partition and thus open up knowledge about its unknown facets.

At the stroke of midnight on 14 August-15 August 1947, as the whole world slept, India awoke to light and freedom. While for many it meant freedom from nearly two hundred years of colonial bondage, for some, it was a time of uncertainty and trauma—thousands of minorities began their tryst with destiny trekking across the border to seek succour amongst their fellow co-religionists. Uprooted from their home and hearth, East Bengal, to the migrants on the eastern side of India, is "not merely a physical structure or a geographical location but always an emotional space…" to be sustained essentially through memory (Rubenstein 2001, 1). Most had to leave their homeland for good with the very clothes they had on. For some that this was the final adieu to their homeland was not clear. Snehalata Biswas of Tangramari village in undivided Nadia took several years to understand that they would never return. In her words, "My husband assured me that we would return after some time. I therefore buried all the utensils in our courtyard." (Bandyopadhyay 1997, 65) Thus bereft of material possessions on this side of the border, they hang on to their precious memories of East Bengal, which many still consider their 'motherland.' Preservation of memory of the

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eye-witnesses is cardinal since there is less emphasis on the non-material aspects of cultural heritage. There is, however, increasing recognition that intangible values do play an important role in the conservation of the past. In this case, through remembrances and reminiscences, the now-elderly migrants translate and transmit the essentials of life gone by, namely, the dialect, the rituals, from being obliterated. Within academia, as also through informal means, of late there is a growing awareness for the conservation of these memories for posterity. Initiatives like recording and archiving the reminiscences through projects like the 1947 Partition Archive[1] that aim to collect nearly 10000 narratives across the globe is, thus, acquiring a firm foothold and gaining in popularity.

Collective memory, Peter Novick (2001) notes, is a form of 'myth making' shaped by the needs of a group. Hence, it is an essential ingredient in the formation of group identity. Memory, thus, gives new shape and form to the past so that it can easily blend in a cultural script. Contextualising the boom in memory studies in recent years, Francois Hartog (2015, xvi) concurs, was essentially due to a general epistemological shift – "the emergence of a new regime of historicity." With the emphasis on what he terms as 'presentism' or present-oriented regime of historicity, the ever-growing importance of memory studies has been felt in academia. The rise of memory studies can be traced back to the turn of the 1970s when various factors encouraged a proliferation of a scholarly dig into what and how people remember something and, in the process, forget others. The Holocaust and the idea of the 'duty to remember' undoubtedly played a part, as did some of the new social history of the 1960s. The decline of Positivism's standing in historical method and the turn towards cultural studies must also be taken into account. History is essentially looked at as a dialogue between the past and the present, but there has been a reorientation in this perspective when time is considered not in such linear terms where the past and the present can be singled out separately. The two enmesh and what was considered the past in the past leaves its vestiges on what was deemed present in the past. The complex web of time often opens up an alternative space (often in literature) where all the remembrances meet, interact, and often adapt to the time and space of the reader. Such alternative remembrances have often remained outside the peer approved sources of history for rewriting, rather reconstructing, the past. As a result, as Keith Jenkins (2003, 4) remarked, History does not always emerge as the real past. Thus, recollections of the days gone by, or the 'lived experiences' are now treated as integral components of history-writing since it helps the scholar to unravel the complex phenomenon of 'time.' What Pierre Nora (1989) terms as 'memory-history' has been recognised as adding value to the understanding of history. Paul Ricoeur (1994, 7) suggests that "…the discipline of history…allows both for widely varying descriptions of the same series of events, and sanctions the use of a variety of equally acceptable rules or preferences for interpreting a given slice of the past."

It must be borne in mind that historians do not approach memory just as a source, but as a subject, meaning "they seek evidence not only of memory (what is remembered), but evidence about memory (how and why past is remembered in one way and not another)" (Tumblety 2013, 2). Historians in search of memories try to sift through the grains to understand why a certain view of the past is incorporated, sustained or alternatively eclipsed in the mediums of the present – at individual and social levels. Memory is now an inescapable feature of the historiographical landscape.

In the context of the sub-continental memory, one has to negotiate; the complex and challenging task is the reconstruction of three stretches of memory, which are distinct yet related. Hence, any discussion of this perspective cannot be limited to the configuration of only one flow of remembrance confined within the present political borders of one single country. Whereas for India and its citizens, the Partition of 1947 was a thoroughly tragic and traumatic event leading to the cruel vivisection of the motherland, for the newly-born Pakistan, it was something radically different. The trauma was evidently the common point, but the citizens of Pakistan, by all counts the majority, welcomed the separate political formation of their 'Islamic homeland'. This was the prevailing mood in both West Pakistan and East Bengal, which came to be known as East Pakistan from 1956. Obviously, reconstructions of the past based on these two divergent territorial-national experiences are bound to be different. The complexity increases when one concentrates on the dramatic course of events in East Bengal, where history and memory cross the limits imposed by the realisation of the 'Islamic homeland'. From 1952 onwards, when the historic Language Movement erupted demanding the recognition of Bengali as one of the national languages, people of this part of Pakistan (East) began to challenge the 'colonial' domination of West Pakistan and ultimately broke free in 1971 to establish sovereign, secular Bangladesh. As this momentous event rejected the two-nation theory based on religion, the reconstruction of memory in this part of the subcontinent has followed yet another distinctive path.

This article, however, focuses on one trajectory of this memory-history, i.e., the experiences and psyche of the Hindu migrants from East Bengal (East Pakistan from 1956 and Bangladesh from 1971). Partition of the sub-continent has ignited scholarly minds to produce tomes on the issue. The first phase, which roughly covers the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s, concentrated on the 'why' and 'how' of the traumatic dislocation without emphasising the aspect of memory, in particular. The examination in this period focused on the genesis, nature, causes and impact of the division. Two well-known examples of this meticulous, though conventional, historiography are Penderel Moon's *Divide and Quit* (1961) and Anita Inder Singh's *The Origins of the Partition of India 1936-1947* (1987). The second phase highlighted one or two causes as the predominant ones and tried to explain the cataclysm with the help of these primarily exclusivist approaches. An excellent example of this kind of scholarship is Joya Chatterji's *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932-1947* (1995), an elegantly written analysis underlining the role of upper-caste Hindu communalism in bringing about Partition of Bengal. These temporal divisions, nevertheless, are neither strict nor final. All these decades have seen the publication of texts which conform to varying types of interpretations.

A notable shift was perceptible in the late 1990s when memory, as a conscious and powerful instrument of historical reconstruction, came to the fore. Social scientists like Gyanendra Pandey and Ranabir Samaddar contributed to this stream significantly. It can be recalled, in this context, texts like Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (2001). Along with this shift came the expected emphasis on the emotional-psychic-nostalgic-gender-creative dimensions, which, together, constituted the crucial 'Human History of Partition'. Indeed, since the 1990s, we have witnessed the publication of many texts that have explored this multi-faceted human aspect with sensitivity. Some examples: Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998, gender dimension), Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries* (1998, gender dimension), Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (ed), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (2003, gender dimension), Prafulla Chakrabarti's *The Marginal Men* (1990, on the magnitude of displacement and resettlement in West Bengal), Sukrita Paul Kumar *Narrating Partition* (2004, creativity prompted by Partition).

Layers of emotions, especially in the context of sub-continental memory, are an inextricable segment of these narratives. As Thomson (2015) argues, "human emotions are…rather shaped by historical and cultural circumstances." This resonates all the more in the case of Partition narratives, where memories hinge on the dreadful event. Delineating the primacy of emotions, Rob Boddice (2018, 10) outlines that unearthing of emotions helps a researcher "to rehabilitate the unsaid – the gestural, affective and experiential – of traditional historical narratives."

Partition memory thus forms the leitmotif of a plethora of scholarly works. Ananya Jahanara Kabir (2013, 10) weaves in the memories of her family sprawled across the three sub-continental entities of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, once con-joined, later disjointed, to amplify the concept of 'Prolonged Partition' where Partition is seen as an 'ongoing process.' The author concludes that "the creation of India and Pakistan, in 1947 and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, as profoundly interrelated aspects of that process." Jayanti Basu's exploration of the psyche of the first-generation migrants from East Bengal to West Bengal foregrounds the experiences of the middle and upper-class Bengalis to analyse the continuing impact of Partition and how, in the process, the 'wound still bleeds' (2013). Falling in this rubric, this essay, by reaching to the pith of the inter-generational narratives, thus tries to open up unexplored vista in memory-history and add and enrich the existing historiography.

I: Backdrop

The policy of divide and rule, which the colonial rulers had been relentlessly pursuing from the end of the nineteenth century and which gained momentum in the twentieth century with the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the Morley-Minto Act of 1909 ensuring for the Muslims the right of a separate electorate, finally culminated in the creation of two separate sovereign nations, India and Pakistan, on religious lines in 1947. The Mountbatten Plan, passed by the British Parliament on 18 June 1947, formally laid down the framework for Partition. Accordingly, two separate commissions were formed, one for Bengal and the other for Punjab, with Sir Cyril Radcliffe as the common chairman, to finalise the scheme of boundary demarcation. The main task of the commission was "to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of Bengal on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous areas of Muslims and non-Muslims. In doing so, it will also take into account other factors" (Government of India 1958, 1). After listening to the depositions of the concerned parties, Sir Radcliffe prepared a report based on which the boundary demarcation between India and Pakistan was effected on religious lines. The event triggered large-scale cross-border migration on the Bengal and Punjab sector in India, with the surging tide of uprooted masses lashing the newly demarcated borders of these two states. Though both regions went under the scalpel in 1947, Punjab was scarred much more by violence than Bengal. In the days immediately following Partition, the violence in Punjab was explicit—with large-scale looting, arson, defilement of minority women and plain massacre. In Bengal, while the pre-Partition days witnessed widespread riot and killing in Calcutta and Noakhali, no repetition of the ***same magnitude*** and ***intensity*** accompanied the announcement of Partition.

The word 'violence' in the context of Bengal has a different connotation. Violence in Bengal was more of an implicit nature. Migration from East Bengal was often provoked by an intense fear psychosis, the phenomenon of 'what if…' Saving the honour of women, life, and property were undoubtedly the deciding factors, but they played out differently in Punjab and Bengal. Whereas in Punjab, the actual occurrence of widespread violence prompted the exodus, in Bengal, it was often more of hearsay that prompted people to leave. However, it will be a denial of truth to dismiss the existence of explicit violence in Bengal. The most pronounced evidence of post-Partition violence of an explicit nature occurred three years after Partition in 1950, when riots scarred large parts of East Bengal, primarily Barisal, with the echo being felt in the industrial suburbs of Calcutta.[2]

Nevertheless, there is no denying the fact that direct experiences of violence were not as horrific and widespread in Bengal as it was in Punjab in 1947-48. For example, there was no train carrying corpses between Calcutta and Dacca. The oral and written testimonies of many women reveal that they had no direct experience of physical violence. Some even acknowledged that the neighbouring Muslims, with whom they had shared a cordial relationship for generations, urged them not to leave. Yet they left everything behind to begin their 'tryst with destiny' in a new state and a new country, the reason being the fear of living in perpetual tension, "when a tap on the door could mean death or for women, rape" (Guhathakurta 1999). Saraswati Biswas, a resident of Chamta Permanent Liability Camp, recollects, "Our village was not affected by the riots. The local Muslims assured, "You stay put, and we will guard you." But I was a young widow with two small kids (a son and a daughter). The village elders (primarily Hindus) advised against my stay. Hence, I came along accompanied by my sister-in-law."[3]

II: Home on the Other Side

After reaching the destination, comes the question of adaptation. Psychological problems may play a major part in adaptability. It is also true for the refugee experience, conditioned to a large extent by the interaction between the refugees and the members of the host society, which may either amplify the state of shock and depression and the dependency syndrome that the refugees tend to acquire; or may convert into a healthy atmosphere, with both sides interacting and exchanging ideas.

Michael Banton (1967) identifies a step-by-step adaptation process based on the concept of power. The refugees are a less powerful group vis-à-vis the host society. Acculturation, Banton points out, is mainly a one-way process where the less powerful group sheds its cultural values and traditions in order to become more like the group in power and, in the process, perhaps lose its identity. Banton next coins the concept of 'integration' where racial distinctions are disregarded or given only minor considerations. Integration means interaction between the groups at most levels in housing, schooling, employment, interest groups, friendships, and social relationships such as marriage.

The next is assimilation or amalgamation, which refers to inter-racial marriage and its variations, including intimate social interaction and living in harmony. Assimilation can occur without acculturation and is often regarded as an inevitable consequence of interaction. Once a group enters freely into the social clubs, cliques, organisations and institutions of the other group on a peer basis, intermarriage and other levels of assimilation will generally follow.

Adaptation among the refugees depends on a large extent to the 'survival syndrome', that is, a will to survive come what may. Furthermore, in the adaptive mechanism, the proper adjustment and integration of any migrant community into the receiving society depends on certain other factors like pre-migration characteristics, including economic ones. This includes the worldview and the way of life of the migrants as well as the degree of traditionalism. For the receiving society, the degree of urbanisation, industrialisation and demographic composition would determine the extent of the adjustment and adaptation process. For the process of adaptation, we have to look from both perspectives, i.e., of the refugees as well as the host society, which would include the government and the local people. Only through these would one be in a position to observe the extent of reciprocity, intermingling and interpenetration. The adaptation process depends on the interplay and interaction of both communities.

Middle-class East Bengali Hindus had made Calcutta their temporary abode even before Partition befell, from the second half of the nineteenth century, because of the opportunities the city offered in terms of education and employment. Even during the pre-Partition days, when they had the freedom to shuttle to and fro, they could never adjust to the rubric of urban living. It is the vision of an otherwise insignificant tiny hamlet with a small rivulet flowing by, the sound of the blowing of conch-shells in the evening, the lilting tunes of the agomoni song, the endless vista of golden harvests, that sustained the East Bengalis amidst the humdrum and the drudgeries of city life. A typical recollection:

> Every night before going off to sleep, I strike out the date in the calendar and count the days when I will start off for home. One of my classmates once sarcastically asked me – 'why do you always run off to the village during the holidays? What attracts you to the village life? What is there – except mosquitoes, malaria, jungles, nothing but a monotonous life?' How can I make them understand the charms of a village life? How can I make them understand the joy, the pleasure that one can derive by plunging into the waters of the Ichhamati, by inhaling the scent of 'siuli' during the festive season in autumn? How can I make those, who have not seen our village resplendent with the first ray of the sun, understand what is there in my village? The moment I step onto the banks and touch the ground, my whole body starts shivering with excitement. At least, I will be able to spend a few days in peace and tranquility away from the mechanical city life. (Basu 1975, 13-14)

When temporary separation evoked such strong feelings, it is understandable that many would deny that the uprooting was permanent and there was no going back. Benumbed with grief, the metropolis of Calcutta and its surroundings seemed to them a hostile city whose heart had turned to stone. The migrants craved for sympathy – warm and full-blooded – from their fellow brethren, which they felt were sorely lacking. The sentiment finds an echo in the narration of one erstwhile resident of Chittagong. To put it in her words, "We felt like aquatic weeds floating from one place to another. People here were oblivious of our hardships, our sufferings and consequently devoid of any fellow feelings, love and compassion."[4] Ashim Ranjan Guha of Barisal believed that such indifference stemmed from the local's fear that the more energetic Bangals[5] would leave them far behind in every sphere of life and make life difficult for their coming generations. At that point, the refugees, he felt, were perceived more as competitors than fellow brethren desperately in need of their healing touch.[6] The locals, as Prafulla Chakrabarti (himself a refugee) points out in his seminal work on government perception and refugee rehabilitation, thus chose to ensconce themselves in a shell of cultural 'superiority'. This exclusiveness was the defence mechanism of the traditional West Bengali society against the inroads of the "uninhibited children of the Padma" (Chakrabarti 1999, 406).

The migrants accused the locals of failing to understand the refugee mind, 'a tormented psyche', which needed attention and care. A child is attached to his mother through the umbilical cord, which provides all the necessary nourishment. But even after the umbilical cord is severed, the sense of belonging, closeness, warmth, and exuberance never dies. So it is but natural that the forbidden shores of the Padma would exercise a 'cruel' charm upon them. As Edward Said (1996, 61-62) has pointed out, "once you leave your home, wherever you end up, you simply cannot take up life and become just another citizen of the new place." For that, you need time. How can you forget your own mother and overnight start calling somebody else your mother? Thus, it is but natural that the people from East Bengal would carry "their 'homes' on their back" (Roy 2000, 182)

That, "… homeland is the landscape…of historical memory that offers tangible images of rootedness…" is best portrayed in the writings of the refugees themselves, as in *Chhere Asha Gram* (The Abandoned Village) – a collection of nostalgic writings of the inhabitants of the different villages of East Bengal, overnight whose status in the eyes of their Muslims co-habitants changed from friends to foes of the country of their birth. It was perhaps a cathartic attempt by the marginal men to find solace in their sufferings by giving an outlet to their pent-up feelings and emotions as also "creating a positive emotional response in the city." (Chakrabarty 1998, 319). The particular words that echo through all the writings are *abohelito* (ignored), and *abanchhito* (unwanted). Not that these words appear specifically in print in all the essays, but when one goes through these, the feeling of isolation and alienation can be easily detected.

A refugee from the Sabhar area of Dacca district compared himself to a fallen star. Another unfortunate soul from Dhamrai lamented that by a strange twist of fate, the Bangals – the connoisseurs of good food – who took great pleasure in throwing lavish feasts, were themselves knocking from door to door with their begging bowls to gather two square meals a day.

A few selected lines from their writings will offer a better insight (Basu 1975, 69-73):

> Being a sharanarthi (one seeking 'sharan' or refuge), I spend my days in one corner of the city. When I first arrived in Calcutta, the great city turned its face away from me and tried to push me away from its *angina* (precincts). My wants are limited to a few bare necessities… All I crave for is a roof above my head and a decent livelihood that would allow me to live like a human being and not as a parasite…. But the cruel city has rejected me time and again…. Lost amidst the teeming millions of the great city nobody spares a minute for me to inquire – 'Yes dear, how are you? After all, I am not a native of Calcutta, I am a *sharanarthi,* an *udbastu* (refugee).
>
> Pleasure, security, peace, love and affection have also left the land with us. On all four sides exist the filthy picture of mean intrigues.

> Only a true human being (perhaps taking a dig at the people of West Bengal) can appreciate the miseries of an *udbastu* (refugee).
>
> Leaving my prosperous village homeland, I now spend my nights on pavements of Calcutta in abject poverty roaming from door to door with my infant son begging for food.
>
> There is hardly a soul in independent India who sympathise with us – the victims of political power game.

They spent a lot of time regretting what they had lost, envying those around them "who had always been at home near their loved ones, living in the place where they were born and grew up without even having to experience not only the loss of what was once theirs but above all the torturing memory of life to which they cannot return." (Said 1996, 62). They remained prisoners of the memories of their homeland – the Padma, Meghna and Arialkha, the beauty of nature, the relaxed village life, the atmosphere of peace, tranquillity and camaraderie, i.e., an idyllic life torn to pieces by the tornado called Partition.

With the migrants yearning for their home back in East Bengal and the local host population, in many instances proving to be unaccommodating, assimilation and integration thus proved a near-impossible phenomenon in the years immediately following Partition. In the initial years, life here was fraught with trials and tribulations. As Hena Chaudhuri looks back, "We came over to Chandmari Camp in Nadia district. Our camp-life was fraught with hardships. Tents were pitched in the middle of a sprawling field with grasses five to six feet tall!! The toilets were about half a mile away though the tube-well was quite close by. Thus started an altogether different life—a life full of struggle…We finally got permanent accommodation after three months. These were essentially army barracks abandoned after the Second World War. Once we were settled, friends and relatives started pouring in, in search of help. Our financial condition turned from bad to worse; since we had to support our relatives also… it was difficult to make ends meet."[7] Thus, they were akin to what Stephen L. Keller (1975, XVII) defines as the "epitome of the transitional man, a man whose roots have been torn out of the soil of his traditional life." Negotiating the uncertainties of the present made them more and more home-sick and pine for the 'lost home.' West Bengal remained and still remains the *basha* or the temporary abode and has failed to graduate into *bari* or permanent residence. As one gentleman reminiscences in 2005, "I feel 'bastuhara' (homeless). My house here is nothing more than a shelter of brick and cement. Our home in Parashkathi was surrounded by gardens and orchards on all four sides, a pond full of fish, huge courtyard. Home, to me, cannot be short of anything than this. Compared to what I have lost, I have gained nothing."[8]

Has the scenario changed over the decades? Even after finding some sort of material stability on this side, the tug of the motherland on the other side of the Padma remained as strong as it had been in the initial days. As Hena Chaudhuri ruminates, “Yes, I still do feel the tug of the other side, which still exercises its charm on me. The pain of being uprooted is still raw. It has been 51 long years. But the desire to visit the other side has not waned a bit. Well, we have never faced any untoward situation in East Bengal. Perhaps that is why I do not nurse any grievances. I have fond recollections of my childhood days in the idyllic village surroundings. I have heard that the locals have occupied our house. Perhaps if I go back now, I will be disillusioned. But even then, I still nurse the wish to go back.”[9] Sarama Dutta Majumdar echoes the same sentiment, “It all seems to have happened yesterday…though so many years have passed by. I am now in the twilight of my life. But I live in my past… the Shiva temple and the Kali temple at Ramna with the chant of mantras fleeting in…I want to go back to those days. When I close my eyes, I have this dream…I could hear the bells ringing…the exams have started…I am running towards the examination hall, but the distance never seems to lessen how fast I run. I wake up and realise that it was a dream—the manifestation of my desire to return but the inability to do so. I have not forgotten anything, nor will I ever forget.”[10]

These narratives prove that East Bengal still pulls a chord in their hearts and has not allowed them to accept reality. It is interesting to note that women like Hena Chaudhuri and Anima Dhar had spent the better part of their lives on this side and, strictly speaking, have vague recollections and dim memories of their villages and homes. But they live with them and add as well to conjure up the concept of an ‘ideal life’ amidst the sylvan surroundings, which may well be imaginary. Their trauma of being cut off from the natal set-up becomes enmeshed in the nostalgia for a lost homeland.

Even for those still mired in the struggle for survival, the yearning for the lost home has not waned a bit. As Sishubala Das of Chamta P.L. Camp rues, “My heart aches for my *bari* back in East Bengal. For years, I cried for my lost home. Despite repeated requests from my parents, I never remarried because I wanted to cling to my husband’s home. But alas! By a strange twist of fate, I was forced to sell off that precious home and leave forever.”[11] These narratives help to decipher the relevance of Gyanendra Pandey’s thesis on the confluence of memory and violence. In this context, one can recall Pandey’s reflection on the nature of remembrance fuelled by Partition, “…Partition *was* violence, a cataclysm, a world (or worlds) torn apart.” (Pandey 2001, 7)

Thus memory, both hymnal and elegiac—the former invoking nostalgia and the latter evoking trauma—layers the narratives, making them palpably human and poignant. The narratives presented here—oral testimonies and written memoirs—crisscross with one another to construct that complex structure of feeling in which several emotional conditions prevail and interpenetrate. Thus, the past continues to haunt and cast its shadow on the present. “Harmony, haphazardness, curves, bends, the dialects, the proverbs, stories of our roots: all this gave the place its nativity a structure of feeling —and we were serenely mirthfully cocooned in it.”

(Roy 2000, 182). Through memory they sought to preserve their distinctiveness, their identity, their place in the world. They live and relive this loss day after day. John Ruskin (1864, 148), while ideating on the definition of home, outlines what constitutes a 'home', "…the home is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home..." The first-generation migrants embody this concept of home that they have left behind, where they have spent their carefree days, which envelopes them into its bosom and offers them succour from the adversities of the external world. Partition snatched away that 'home'.

For them, the pain and scar are perhaps as raw as it was in 1947. Their mental make-up has not allowed their psychological assimilation. Thus, they are living embodiments where the past and the present enmesh, and it is their earnest desire to percolate these memories to the next generation so that this distinct identity is preserved where the past, present and the future would be intertwined. As Sandipan Deb writes, "The last few years of his life, when my father was with me for six months of the year, we would only argue. We would be angry with each other… I would tell him to forget, and he would insist that I remember."[12]

The second and third-generation migrants, being fed on a healthy dose of such nostalgic stories, deploy modern-day technologies like blogs and social media platforms to perpetuate the legacy of their forefathers. It is true that having been born and brought up in West Bengal, they do not feel the same kind of attachment. Interviews reveal such nostalgic pining for a lost homeland, such emotional attachment, to a large extent being sublimated and diluted. East Bengal identity holds no special significance to Archana Bhattacharya, born and brought up in Netaji Nagar Colony. She considers West Bengal—her birthplace—her home. At an age when children listen to fairytales, she heard stories of a lost land, destroyed by the ogre called 'Partition.' But even then, she feels no special bonding with East Bengal. Although some like Shanta Chaudhuri would like to visit Barisal—the district from which her paternal family hails—the desire stems more from curiosity to see the land of which she has heard so much rather than 'coming back home.' The younger generation no longer speaks the dialect, nor are sticklers of East Bengali customs and traditions. They clearly feel rooted in Calcutta. Their social setting is transformed into what Olwig (1996) calls 'cultural sites.' While for the first-generation migrants, landed property, rivers, joint-family system, religious festivals like Durga puja at the ancestral home represented the cultural sites, for the second-generation migrants, the cultural site has shifted to the country of immigration. For the first-generation migrants, marrying their children outside the community was a strict no-no. Marrying a Ghati was taboo. As a result, most second-generation migrants were married into East Bengali families. However, they (second-generation migrants) do not harbour such strict notions. As Shanta Chaudhuri of Bijoygarh Colony stresses, "I cannot think of East Bengal the sole criterion for fixing a match for my children."[13]

However, it would be a truism to conclude that they are scissored from their past. They are tied down by what Hirsch (2008) terms as 'Postmemory' in the context of Holocaust survivors.

While Hirsch's trans-generational structure of postmemory hinges on the three elements of 'memory, family, photography,' for the post-Partition generations, memory was essentially transmitted and transmuted through story-telling. As Eastmond (2007, 251) argues, "Story-telling in itself, [is] a way for individuals and communities to remember, bear witness, or seek to restore continuity and identity…" Thus, Sandipan Deb, whose forefathers hail from Sylhet, could vividly recount the days leading to Partition despite being a third-generation migrant. He confesses, "I can't speak Sylheti."[14] But at the same time, Sylhet is very much an integral part of his emotional space, "I grew up listening to—and listened to even as an adult—to my father's memories of loss."[15] Although he is eloquent, "I can look back at the event with some detachment" and never intends to visit Bangladesh, melancholy and a sense of remorse seep in through his write-up what with Sylhet, from a bustling and intellectually-rich town of the 1930s with the second-highest readership of *Prabasi*, degenerating into a hub of religious fanaticism.[16] With his father gone, Deb is caught up in a miasma of memories, "As I grew older, and now that he is long gone, I can understand the pain he felt."[17] His mental scape, too, knowingly or unknowingly, has been conditioned to look for that Sylhet connection in whichever part of the world he is in. Amal Kumar Saha still feels proud to identify himself as a 'Bangal.' Born and brought up by migrant parents, listening to the saga of post-migration struggles, his mother's 'Dhakai' dialect, he, thus cannot sever his umbilical cord.[18]

Social media has now emerged as a powerful tool for re-connection. Memories of intra and inter-generation migrants are enshrined through pages like the 'Banga Bhita' where the overt emotion of nostalgia oozes through in the write-ups. That progenies have become the repositories of inherited memories is evident from these reminiscences, where the same pangs of yearning infuse the search for roots, "My forefathers hail from Rajshahi and Natore…I have never been to Rajshahi or eaten the famous rasogollas of Natore…I am born and brought up in Kolkata. But in my mind, I have travelled to Bangladesh umpteen times…I have listened to the tales of Rajshahi and Natore from my childhood…I feel a strong sense of belonging…my father was proud of his heritage…so am I."[19] Thus, although Hirsch (2008) points out that postmemory "is not an identity position," when one unpacks these memories, one can detect a similar tinge of longing embedded in these narratives, whereby they cannot completely sever themselves from their inherited past. As Amartya Sen (2007, 31) argues, "Each of us invokes identities of various kinds in disparate contexts...and one's identity is a matter of choice." Thus, Sen points out that an individual is multi-identitied, with each identity enriching one's self. This holds true in the case of the second-generation migrants where they often make a conscious choice to invoke their 'East Bengal' identity, take pride in their heritage and their past and thus feel the need to carry forward the legacy.

Associations and organisations have been formed under the initiatives of the second generation of migrant families, namely, Srihatta Sammilani and Ulpur Sammilani, to perpetuate the feeling of brotherhood and disseminate the heritage as also to bind together the country cousins.

Facebook pages are dedicated to bringing together people from the same village. The erstwhile Syhletis of Kolkata have their own Facebook page—Kolkata Sylheti Group. Culture is one of the main markers of one's identity. Amongst different parameters that define such cultural identity are dietary habits, religious festivals, and languages. Apart from organising annual get-togethers, these associations aim to spread the distinctive cultural traits that would help preserve their exclusivity. The Bangal dialect, the aroma of food, cookery competitions, song and dance recitals permeate the gatherings.

Conclusion

Time and again, what came out of these narratives is that migrants could boast of identity back in East Bengal, and it is this loss of identity, often tied with the strangling of religious festivities, that is lamented the most. One unfortunate resident of Dhamrai village of Dacca district recollects:

> Dhamrai was famous for the Rathayatra festival. The chariot was five-storey high – perhaps the one of its kind in the whole of Bangladesh… its peak could be seen even from the outskirts of the village. Nearly a lakh visitors thronged Dhamrai on the occasion of the Rathayatra. A fair was held that continued for three weeks.
>
> But alas today! The chariot stands still; under the stringent implementation of Shariyati law, fairs and festivities have stopped. The sacred and holy village of Dhamrai now stands forlorn and deserted – the air no longer reverberates with kirtans, sound of conchshells or drumbeats. (Basu 2013, 26)

They desperately want to cling to that identity manifested by, amongst other activities, the organisation of Durga Puja. The greatest of the festivals for any Bengali, Durga Puja, signifies a communal feeling, camaraderie, and togetherness. Even when Kolkata boasts of more than 5000 community Pujas with decorated, theme-based pandals, the various East Bengali associations strewn across the city celebrate their own pujas, where more than the flashy, money-splurging show of grandeur, puja is still celebrated as a time of home-coming not only of the Goddess but also of her mortal children. Thus, the Ulpur Sammilani Durga Puja is marked by the laughter, recollections and also misty-eyes of the aged ably supported by the new generations. For many of them, congregation during the Durga Puja signified home-coming, just as it was a good seventy years back, "I remember the days of autumn. How long people would wait the whole year for this season to come. And what preparation! The people who lived afar were returning home. Every day new boats would come and lay anchor on the banks of the Dhaleshwari. We boys would crowd the [riverside]. For a few days, Gangkhali was full of people. And everybody would renew their acquaintances" (Quoted in Chakrabarty 2000, 332). Amidst the cacophony and concrete jungle of Calcutta/Kolkata, Durga Puja thus helps the seniors rewind to the good old days, and the shared space with the next generations helps keep alive the tradition.

Individual households, too, abide by the specificities when it comes to celebrating festivals. For example, Lakshmi puja, venerating the Goddess of wealth on the first full moon after Dashami, is a distinct feature of the East Bengalis. Inhabitants of West Bengal celebrate the puja several times a year, but for the East Bengalis, it is a one-time affair every year. Basanti Saha recalls the grandeur with which the puja was celebrated with fervour back in Dhaka, "Lakshmi Puja was a three-day affair. Large numbers of people were invited and the ceremonial worship of Goddess Lakshmi was accompanied by music and performances by professional dancing girls."[20] In their new set-up, too, the Bangals tried to maintain their religious practices, albeit on a low scale, owing to economic hardship. For many, it was a symbol of their identity, "When we first moved here, we faced a lot of discrimination. No one allowed us to enter their house because we were Bangals. We used to perform Lakshmi Puja to show the Ghati[21] our culture."[22] Such festivities were also linked to portray culinary excellence, where local dishes were rustled up to give the Ghati-s a taste of the Bangal cuisine, "We used to perform Lakshmi Puja in order to give a taste of our bhuna khichuri (a local dish usually served to Goddess Lakshmi on the occasion of worshipping her) to the Ghati."[23]

The trauma of losing one's sense of home – be it physical, emotional, or psychological – manifests in the everyday lives of those affected and proves to be the chassis of nostalgic yearnings. They live and relive this loss day after day. For them, the pain and the scar are perhaps as raw as it was in 1947. Thus, despite being citizens of India, they still consider themselves migrants, whose memory remains frozen at 1947, who cling to the sepia-toned images of their erstwhile home in East Bengal. The chiaroscuro of trauma and nostalgia laced in the narratives portray how memory remains crystallised in the past, how they try to recreate the past and maintain their distinct identity as East Bengalis even 75 years after migration and how in the process, the past and the present converge and tries to bring the future into its fold. The mental make-up of the migrants is perhaps best encapsulated in the following lines of Iraqi-American poet Dunya Mikhail:[24]

> Yesterday I lost a country
> If anyone stumbles across it,
> return it to me, please.
> Please return it, sir.
> Please return it, madam.
> It is my country. . .

The search for home thus continues unabated in the psyche of the migrants, notwithstanding failing health and physical discomfort. Home is thus a problematic term, and the question, “Where is my home?” continues to haunt and gnaw them and, to an extent, for the subsequent generations, also. For them, “Memory signals an affective link to the past.” (Hirsch 2008, 111) The various shades of memory continue to inform, mediate and reconstruct the experiential world of the migrants and their progenies and, in the process, focus on the changing conceptions of home and belonging, thereby challenging the static notion of home. By predicating on the narratives of the migrant families, the paper, thus, stresses fluidity in terms of time and space. Home thus emerges as a place that can and needs to be invested with meaning and constantly (re) negotiated.

Notes

1. For details, see https://in.1947partitionarchive.org/.
2. For a detailed first-hand account of the 1950 riot in East Bengal, see Pravash Chandra Lahiry. 1964. *India Partitioned and Minorities in Pakistan*. Calcutta: Writers’ Forum
3. Interview, November 2005
4. Interview 2000
5. Bangal is a term used to refer to the people of East Bengal, now in Bangladesh.
6. Interview 2000
7. Interview, 2005
8. Interview, 2005
9. Interview 2005
10. Interview 2005
11. Interview, November 2005
12. Sandipan Deb, “My Memories of Partition” 15 August 2017, https://www.livemint.com/
13. Interview 2008
14. Deb, op. cit

15. Deb, op. cit

16. Ibid

17. Ibid

18. Interview, 2020

19. Write-up of a second-generation migrant (name withheld on request) on Banga Bhita facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/107801564321676/posts/265020585266439/

20. Indian Express, “In Lakshmi Puja a Ghastly Memory of Partition and Struggle to be Recognised” 15 October 2016

21. Ghati, also called **Pashchimbangiya,** are native to the state of West Bengal, in India.

22. Ibid

23. Ibid

24. Dunya Mikhail, “I was in a Hurry” Translated by Elizabeth Winslow https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147223/i-was-in-a-hurry

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