Revisiting Partition and Bangladesh Liberation War

Contemporary Perspectives

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Edited by

Sharmistha Chatterjee (Sriwastav)

Himadri Lahiri

Foreword by

Manan Kumar Mandal

Centre for Language, Translation & Cultural Studies
School of Humanities
Netaji Subhas Open University

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: Message :

I am extremely happy to note that the first publication is coming up of a centre created under the School of Humanities of Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU). Since 2017, the "Centre for Language, Translation & Cultural Studies" (CLTCS) has developed a praxis of collaborative research in the field of humanities which is marked by enthusiasm. The centre has taken up an optimistic project of creating a digital repository on Bengal Partition by collecting memories from the people using the huge network of study centres that this Open University has. Seminars, workshops and field studies are being organised regularly to exchange ideas and details of research to be carried out within the public domain of discussion. This title has emerged from one of the seminars organised in January 2018 as a sequel to the project activity on Bengal Partition. The blend of senior academicians and young scholars have made the title praiseworthy.

It is great pleasure for me to mention that the CLTCS has successfully completed a collaborative research project with Khulna University and going to move further with Bangladesh Open University. I extend my thanks to the editor(s) of this title and to Prof. Manan Kumar Mandal, the coordinator, CLTCS. I also congratulate Akhand Publishing House, New Delhi for having come forth to share this effort with us. This publication is a mark of appreciation to the effort that CLTCS and the publishers have jointly made it possible.

I wish all success to the publication.

Vice Chancellor
Netaji Subhas Open University

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Foreword

At the outset of a publication it is always preferred that it may be placed in a praxis in which it has been shaped. Being instrumental in publishing this volume on behalf of Centre for Language, Translation & Cultural Studies (CLTCS) of Netaji Subhas Open University, I take this opportunity to introduce our work for developing a digital repository on Bengal Partition. This is a project bound publication followed by a seminar titled "Partition O Muktijuddha : Smaran O Bismaran" held on 17th & 18th January of 2018. The seminar was preceded by an initiative to pursue a research project funded by UGC-DEB under the School of Humanities & Social Sciences by Manan Kumar Mandal as P I in the FY 2015-16 on Bengal Partition. As a sequel to that the Centre (CLTCS) has decided to incorporate the project findings and go forward for further research. Then a collaborative research proposal was mooted by the CLTCS, NSOU with the English Discipline of Khulna University, Bangladesh in September, 2017. Finally it was worked out and a MoU was signed on 20th September, 2017. Subsequently a year-long research activities have been carried out successfully by the CLTCS. After the completion of the same, a comprehensive digital repository project on Bengal Partition has been taken up, this year. Now, the question arises, why do we undertake such a project? What are the objectives of this project? Truly, it is difficult for me to explain why several such attempts (projects) were pursued periodically by the scholars, and are still being taken up after seventy

years of our independence and almost fifty years after the emergence of Bangladesh. However I wish to put forth something what has provoked us like a 'spectre of partition' to go for another one.

The Divide & Escape

The known fact of India's independence has not essentially been the point of departure while discussing Bengal Partition. The province was divided thrice; but the aftermath of 47 Partition is nascent in socio-political sphere of Bengal till date. It is true that the collective memory of 1947 divide became important in the last three decades for its impulsive connotation to study Bengali psyche in contemporary milieu in reference to Bengal Partition. The literature written in Bengali after the 50's was not sufficiently reactive to the issue of the long migration or the world of refugees. Responses from the writers of East Pakistan about the divide, was not much heard in comparison to the deprivation or social crisis they faced. Attempts for building up new genealogy for Muslim literature had not worked. In general, the writers from the either side were not so impulsive about the migration as they have been about the split or divide. It was observed that the cultural context of Bengali psyche was not ready to accept the border, though essentially they managed co-existential rift over religious community of Hindus & Muslims. Thus the divide of Bengal in 1947, essentially for the second time, had not put down the issue of that co-existence. Bengali language & literature, culture has expanded its praxis and has become more inclusive in the last five decades after the emergence of Bangladesh; while the divide remains as a departure in West Bengal. The enigma or riddle it created could have been existed for long in the collective consciousness of Bengali speaking people of the subcontinent.

Partition had forced people to flee, become unsettled and to start a new life as well. Escape from homeland or "Desh" has become a metaphor due to migration. Crossing over a territory, entering into a separate state that is not known geographically, though used to its climate as they lived; but the commonality in language and expression created an ambivalence with the Partition of the western part of India. Flow of migration persisted decade after decade, refugee influx mounted phase by phase creating tremendous pressure over the administration of either side. In 1947 when India was partitioned on the basis of 1941 Census data[1] (which was supposedly erroneous in various aspects), by a committee headed by Sir Cyril Radcliff, it was found that Pakistan having 62,000 Sq KM of land and 1,58,00,000 people of which 1,18,50,000 Muslims, while East Pakistan having 49,400Sq KM of land and 3,91,00,000 people of which 2,77,00,000 Muslims[2]. Therefore, either side of India that was torn apart, had a large number of minority population as the division was accomplished. 420Lakhs Muslims in India and 200Lakhs of non-Muslims in Pakistan became vulnerable[3]. At the same time, 42% of non-Muslim Bengali population lived in East Pakistan before Partition, of which, 11 Lakhs people fled to West Bengal[4]. Dept of Rehabilitation data[5] shows that 13 Lakhs people have crossed over to West Bengal till 1949 which was raised up to 15Lakhs in 1951. From then it

1 Bandopadhyay, Sekhar.2006. *Pallassey to Partition and After*, Second Edition, 2016. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan

2 Ibid

3 Ibid

4 Chakrabarti, P.K. 1999. *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*. Calcutta: NayaUdyag

5 Report on the Working of Ministry of Rehabilitation. 1945-50:5 .

continued till 1971, furthermore till 1975. This huge influx had severe impact over the socio-economic and cultural settings of West Bengal. So, divided by land, as well as by identity, the migration of refugee population simultaneously epitomizes the escape from captivity and creation of a new 'Home'.

The Emergence

The aftermath of 1947 partition had manifold impact over the Bengali society, economy, culture as well as the psyche. The divide it unleashed was not only erected by boundaries; rather, the trajectory it took was much more classified by the communal rift which affected the welfare measures of the state; a state, torn apart not only by distance but by language. In East Pakistan, the majority of Muslim community was divided on the question of their language. State crafted deprivation in economy towards the East Pakistan, largely hazed the dream of million Muslims. But the resistance came through the issue of language; in effect we have seen the "Bhasha Andolan" in 1952 which actually lead to penultimate struggle for Bangladesh nation-state. People who fled in late forties were morally engaged with this struggle for separate state, though they are mostly of other religion and marked as 'refugee'. The future of "Desh" remained alive with the victory over 'Pakistan'. It is sensibly metaphoric that the western part of India, where another 'partition' took place, was not responsive to this extent as their religious counterpart about the formation of a 'nation'. After severe communal insurgency, exchange of population took place modestly in Punjab. On the other hand, the emergence of Bangladesh put forth us a continuous flow of refugee across the border that was not aphoristically marked.

In this trajectory, it was observed that the "Unified Bengal", for which efforts were being made by the then

political leaders like Sarat Chandra Bose, Abul Hashim, Sohorabardi, failed to deliver any meaningful impact in the high politics of pre-partition India. But the idea remains in the progression of the emergence of a new nation-state. Bengali identity has become a political entity with the struggle for homeland that followed in subsequent development as in 1952, 1964, 1969 and finally in 1971. Therefore it is implicit that the re-reading of partition would be contextualized while studying the Liberation war of Bangladesh. This heroic struggle has shifted the cannon of Bengali literature from west to east, from Kolkata to Dhaka, from Hindu *Bangali* to Muslim. Coordinates have been altered with this epoch-making emergence.

Remembrance

The relation between history and memory 'has always been unstable one—more so perhaps than historians have acknowledged'[6]. Gyanendra Pandey quotes relevantly from Pierre Nora, a leading French scholar, who said 'history has conquered memory'. Modern memory is above all, archival'. The historicization of memory or should we rather say that this 'memory-history' hybridization, is one of the distinguishing marks of our time[7]. Several attempts have been made by the scholars to study memory of survivors of holocaust. The memory-history equation has addressed some important issues which needs attention. With the advent of modern time the complex relation between nation-state, the 'power' and memory has evoked several 'point of departure' from the narrative of holocaust and mass violence like partition. Gyanendra Pandey has correctly argued that "the world today is

6 Pandey, Gyanendra.2001. *Remembering Partition*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, p8

7 Ibid. p9

populated not only by the 'historical memory' of various groups, dependent upon museums, flags and publicly funded celebrations; it is also flooded with the mythical histories of nations and states, histories that are themselves an institutional 'site of memory', locked in a circular, and somewhat parasitical, relationship with other, more obvious *lieux de memoire*"[8]. In the light of this new dilemma of history, we need to find more space while studying the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation-state. The aftermath of 71 shows us how the Bengali 'nation-state' formation has introduced new overarching narrative of a democratic sovereign state over the chasm of nationalist views that it had in 1947. Remembering '47 in West Bengal is different from doing so in Bangladesh; On the other hand remembering '71 in Bangladesh is surely very much different from that in West Bengal. The pronouncement of 71's history lies in the collective memory of '47, vis-à-vis the aftermath of 47 of Indian history would not be read in exclusion to 71, as it is remembered in the memory of the Bengali lives in West Bengal as well.

Truly speaking Bengal Partition is historians' despair. The emergence of Bangladesh nation-state has brought a significant shift to the study of Indian Partition. It includes people's view into history along with the 'high politics' negotiations about the Partition that was susceptible to the reader for long. The trajectory of geopolitical developments in East Pakistan from 1947 to 71 has immensely shaped the Liberation War movement. So, the remembrance of partition for a Bengali refugee had become intricately associated with 1971. The constitutional divide and political arrangements that was made in 1947—transpired as a statist argument of official history of Partition, should be read with a different connotation. The epical

[8] Pandey.2001.p8

narrative of people's voice about the violence of Partition can be located in this awful connotation of remembering that great event of history. Scholars have argued that trauma caused due to partition is not easy to remember. It actually epitomizes the violence that broke out. An agreed upon arrangement of state apparatus, however intensely written in official history, does not reach the mind of the survivor. It is always a traumatic experience to a person who needs to maneuver on his own. Identity, location and other praxis oriented metrics become important in this remembrance; collective consciousness is what matters.

The Project

However it is difficult to develop a comprehensive repository on Bengal Partition though needed. It is because of non-linier movement of socio-political occurrence that took place in Bengal province. A thrice partitioned state with multi -faceted nuances and shades in narratives can be identified as one of the special features of the aftermath of Bengal Partition in particular. Cohesive knots of family, mass-density, cultural diversity, caste and the livelihood of Bengal is so associated with this feature that it cannot be undone. 'State' has become subdued to some extent in the face of overarching dominance of language in the life spread across the Bengal delta. For several years after independence, West Bengal and Bangladesh had not even been marked by fenced border. Crossing over had continued and migrants have settled in new life safely.

Achieving people's narrative, collection of personal writings, mementos, letters, diaries, etc which are essentially major components of re-reading Bengal Partition is definitely not an easy task to do. Several projects and initiatives have been taken up and hopefully there will be more to come. We have started one under the aegis of School of Humanities of Netaji Subhas Open

University. The ongoing endeavor precedes two such project initiatives on Bengal Partition primarily funded by UGC-DEB in 2015-16 and 2016-17. Using the study centre based network of an Open University, this project is now extended beyond institutional barrier and has become a people's initiative. Fifty researchers are actively involved in developing a digital repository focusing on personal documents of Bengal Partition and its aftermath. Memories, stories and other personal testimonies are being collected from each administrative block located in distant districts of West Bengal. The project has also involved researchers from Bangladesh to collect personal testimonies of partition survivors living there. Two international seminar(s) were organized in Kolkata and Khulna respectively in 2018 and the papers presented in English there have been compiled in this volume. Another specimen in Bangla, containing the research articles on more issues relating to a broad area of Bengal Partition and Literature is also coming up.

The project aims to develop a digital repository on Bengal Partition mainly focusing on the people's documents and memory; the story of their past and renewed life thereafter. The project is critically engaged in collecting personal narratives and its variables from district migration of West Bengal due to Partition and subsequent exodus that had taken place. The occurrence of migration in districts following Partition and subsequent developments, have some unique quality of livelihood. The demographical changes seen in districts of West Bengal, broadly the *'Maphaswali culture'* needs to be examined. The major influx of Hindus in West Bengal and Muslims on the opposite side cannot be assessed without the study of district migration. The lower or 'scheduled' caste migration, the fragile border etc. have made the scenario more complex. With the advent of district cities in West Bengal like

Canning, Barasat, Krishnanagar, Berhampore, Burdwan, Midnapore, Malda, Balurghat, Raigunge, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar etc, the partition migration issue can be seen little differently. Therefore, it is not sufficient to study only Kolkata and its suburbs' migration(including the colonies), one needs to go to the districts as well to feel the pulse that is nascent in socio-political sphere of West Bengal. On the contrary, Dhaka centric development of a newly emerged nation had gradually been challenged by the 'others' in the periphery. Middle class elite has attained 'space' in districts. Generations coming up with the advancement of new technology are creating new 'space' over the reality. 'Power' and 'periphery' have become more complex in relation than it had been in the past. The tangible assets that few have in this new nation, certainly echoes the power they unleashed to the periphery. People's narrative cannot be maneuvered to such direction in which hard realities are suppressed. Therefore, collection of narratives from the margin can only illuminate the darkness of hegemony of a state. People's voice, however, not succinctly fitting into the corpus of seventy years of deliberation on the subject, is now considered to be one of the requisite criteria for new intervention in the study. 'Bengal Partition Repository' is trying to mark this point of juxtaposition in reading Bengal Partition with contemporary issues that bridge the survivor of the past and the present. Collecting oral testimonies and personal writings from the margin is the goal, as far as the voices are audible.

At the end I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks on behalf of the CLTCS, NSOU to Professor Himadri Lahiri and Dr Sharmistha Chatterjee (Sriwastav) as the joint editors of this book. Professor Lahiri is a senior Professor of English and has interest in Migration & Diaspora Studies while Dr Chatterjee (Sriwastav) is an active member of this endeavor. The Centre notes their

sincere effort to bring this well shaped volume timely. Further I must appreatiate the initiative taken by Akhand Publishing House, Delhi for getting the book done finally. Hope the book will add some attention to the enthusiasm seen in recent times on the issue of Partition of this subcontinent.

Manan Kumar Mandal
Professor in Bengali & Director
School of Humanities, NSOU

15 May, 2019

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