



The Partition of Bengal: History, Migration, and Literary Reflections

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Abstract— This paper attempts to present the history of the partition of Bengal and the literature produced on the theme of the Bengal partition. It presents the stories of the transformation of the socio-political scenario of Bengal province before partition, conflicts between various political and religious sections and the migration that took place because of the partition of the province. It would bring an account of the Hindu-Muslim relationship before partition and the lack of trust due to various political developments among the communities. The paper will also deal with the larger politics of India concerning the Bengal province and the reaction of various political agents in the province. Bengal province witnessed a movement for 'Sovereign Bengal' led by Sharat Bose, Sohrawardy, and others; the paper will briefly study this movement. The paper will introduce literary works written on the theme of the partition of Bengal by Bengali writers both in Bengali and English. It would also provide a brief study of films in the Bengali language on the theme of the partition of Bengal.



Keywords— Bengal Partition, Partition Literature, Indian Freedom Struggle, Partition and Migration, Refugee Issue and Rehabilitation, Sovereign Bengal Movement

Introduction

Partition, undoubtedly the most important determining factor in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh's destiny, is much more than a historical fact; it has served and continues to serve as a compelling literary theme that has engendered a substantial body of literature on the subcontinent. The partition of India took place in 1947. However, there was a long silence regarding the violence and trauma during and in the aftermath of the partition. Historians prefer the event of independence by sidelining the traumatic events of partition. They have come up with the official or nationalist version of the Indian partition where there is less account of partition violence being represented. The issue of violence, rape, abduction, and forceful conversion is the sub-marginal issue within the marginalised representation of partition history by historians. Gyanendra Pandey says that the absence of partition from the national historiography means that the partition of India is regarded

as something like a set of political incidents caused by the divide between Gandhi and Jinnah.

It was only after the 1980s that several communal violence started happening around the country. It started with the anti-Sikh riot in Delhi and its surroundings after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. This was followed by the 1989 Hindu-Muslim riot in Bhagalpur, the Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad in 1990, and the nationwide Hindu-Muslim violence after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6th December 1992. After these incidents of communal violence in post-partition India, scholars seriously began to think about the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947. The partition corpus began to take definitive shape in the milieu created by these unwanted incidents. Surpassing the nationalist version of the Indian Freedom Struggle, the partition scholars were compelled to reconsider the forgotten part of Indian Independence: the partition.

Who is responsible for the Partition of India?

Historians and critics have blamed various agents for the unfortunate event of partition. Historians belonging to the main current of Indian Nationalism blamed Imperialism for tearing the two major communities apart, disrupting the bonds that had joined them together for centuries. According to this perspective, the partition is the logical conclusion of the divide-and-rule policy of the British by which they had successfully created a rift between the communities. According to historians like A. K. Banerjee, Sumit Sarkar, and Bipin Chandra, the British attempted this political strategy of divide and rule first in the case of the partition of Bengal in 1905.

Indian nationalists more often raise fingers at Muhammad Ali Jinnah for the partition. In India, he was not seen as a father of Pakistan but as a collaborator of the British. A man who, in his capacity as the leader of the All-India Muslim League, instigated the division of India by not willing to accept "nothing sort of a sovereign state for Muslims" in the subcontinent.

Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal has presented a counter-thesis on the partition. According to her, partition was forced upon Jinnah by the Congress High Command in the penultimate phase of the British rule in India. She believes that the main reason behind the partition of India was not the schemes of the British but the constitutional struggle for greater representational power in the government between Congress and the Muslim League.

For a group of historians, the most controversial figure is not any Indian or Pakistani but the British Viceroy Lord Louis Mountbatten himself. In his *Shameful Flight: The Last Years of The British Empire in India* (2006), Sir Stanley Wolpert declares, "Among all the important players of that time, none played as tragic or central role as Mountbatten". (2006, 2)

Joya Chatterjee, in her book *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932-1947*, identifies the 1930s as the decade when the communalisation of politics reached a higher level in the Bengal province. Chatterjee demonstrates that the threat of enduring servitude to a Muslim majority convinced many Hindus that Bengal must be partitioned along religious lines. That is why the provincial congress committee strongly supported the plan of partition, which Nehru and Patel accepted. She argues- "Bengalis were not passive bystanders in the politics of their province; nor were they victims of circumstances entirely out of their control, forced reluctantly to accept the division of their 'motherland'. On the contrary, a large number of Hindus of Bengal, backed up by the provincial branches of the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, campaigned intensively in 1947 for the partition of Bengal

and for the creation of a separate Hindu province that would remain inside an Indian union". (1994, 227)

Writing about the partition histories which both India and Pakistan have generated, Tai Yong Tan Gyanesh Kudaisya rightly notes in *Partition and Post-Colonial South Asia: A Reader* (2008) that 'often, the heroes in one national discourse, end up as the villains of another'. (pp-9)

Partition of Bengal

Bengal has witnessed three partitions to date. These are the partition of Bengal province in 1905, the partition of Bengal in 1947 and the separation of East Bengal from West Pakistan by giving birth to a new country called Bangladesh in 1971.

In 1905, Lord Curzon attempted to divide Bengal to curb the nationalist movement dominated by the Bengali Hindu middle classes. The British believed that if Bengal could be divided into East Bengal, Muslims would dominate, which would counteract the nationalist movement spearheaded by the Bengalis. The Bengali Hindus protested against the move, and due to the continued struggle, the British were forced to revoke the decision. The Muslims of Bengal felt alienated because of the Hindu agitation against the 1905 partition. The Bengali Muslims believed that the Swadeshi Movement was geared to prevent the emergence of a separate province of East Bengal where Muslim life and culture could flourish independently. Under the constitutional reforms of 1935, religious identity as a demographic category became the most important factor in determining the distribution of government in Bengal. Under the first Fazlul Haq Ministry (1937-41), the Bengali Muslims came into conflict with the privileged high-caste Bengali Hindus.

Joya Chatterjee extensively discussed the Bengali partition issue in her book *Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (2007). She has compared the first (1905) and second (1947) partitions. She argues, "On the first occasion Bengalis in Calcutta congregated at the feet of the monument and declared that they would 'unsettle the settle' fact but the same Bengalis in 1947 had accepted this with no regret what Sir Cyril Radcliffe had done to them".

Direct Action Day

Indian Union Muslim League demanded a separate homeland for the Muslims. They called for Direct Action Day on 16th August 1946 to pressurise the British. The Muslim League provincial government had declared 16th August as a public holiday. Though it was planned against the British, it was converted into a Hindu-Muslim riot. Yasmin Khan writes- "Three days later, at least 4000 of Calcutta's residents lay dead and over 10000 were injured" (Khan 2007, 63).

Movement for Divided Bengal

Following the incidents in Calcutta and Nokhali, the campaign for a partitioned Bengal gained traction. Even for the Bengali elite (Bhadralok), the partition of Bengal began to appear as a solution for both points of view- to resolve the ongoing crisis and to protect their business interest. Petitions and telegrams from landowners, merchants, businessmen, and tea planters were flooded into the Congress and government offices demanding the partition of Bengal, and under the leadership of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, Hindu Mahasabha had demanded the partition of Bengal even earlier.

When the Hindu Mahasabha and Congress leaders proposed the partition of Bengal and Punjab, Neither Jinnah nor Bengal League leaders were pleased. Jinnah requested Mountbatten not to play with the unity of Bengal and Punjab, which have "national characteristics in common: common history, common ways of life and where the Hindus have stronger feelings as Bengalis than they have as members of Congress." (Pandey 2001, 30) Even the Bengal Muslim League leader Hussain Suhrawardy asked the Viceroy to postpone the decision on partition till November 1947 in order to give their 'United Bengal' campaign more time. Joya Chatterjee presents the situation of Bengal during partition in her book *Bengal Divided*. She argues that the Bhadrakal Bengali Hindus, who thought of Bengal as their province, were not ready to live under the permanent domination of Muslims and were persuaded by the incidents that occurred during the first Muslim League Ministry in the province that partition was necessary. She says that once the pioneer of nationalism in India, they used every available 'stratagem and device' to demand that their province be divided. (Chatterjee pp 253)

Sovereign and United Bengal Movement

When the British government, Congress, and Muslim league discussed the partition of the subcontinent, Bengal province witnessed a movement for a 'sovereign and united Bengal'. Abul Hashim, the secretary of the provincial Muslim League, joined Husain Suhrawardy, the Muslim League chief Minister of pre-partition Bengal, Sarat Bose, and others started their campaigning for the demand of united Bengal.

The United Bengal plan was floated around April 1947 by certain Bengali politicians like Sarat Bose, K. S. Roy, H.S. Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim. Bidyut Chakrabarty's article "The 1947 United Bengal Movement: A Thesis without a Synthesis" brings a business angle to the discourse of partition of Bengal. Chakrabarty presents the role of GD Birla in accelerating the Bengal Partition. A separate West Bengal would be more conducive to Marwari business interests, which were facing competition

from the Muslim business interests of East Bengal. On the other hand, the Muslim businessmen pressurised Jinnah for the Suhrawardy plan. Patel and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee of Hindu Mahasabha also believed that Jinnah wanted to grab the whole of Bengal under the United Bengal plan. The United Bengal scheme faced opposition from the anti-Suhrawardy lobby in the Bengal Provincial Muslim League. Nehru believed that Bengal could remain united if it remained within independent India. Finally, the consequence of Direct Action Day under Suhrawardy's administration made Hindu-Muslim relations more bitter than ever. As a result, the Bengal assembly approved the decision to partition the province.

Migration in Post-Partition Bengal

The portrayal of partition favours the Punjab side in both literature and history. Historical researchers and writers are interested in the events that occurred in Punjab. Still, the partition reality differed significantly in the Punjab and Bengal regions. The Punjab situation was viewed as a national emergency; communal violence escalated into genocide, forcing the Western government to act quickly. The sense of immediacy surrounding the eastern boundary was completely lacking. Hindu minorities in East Bengal were not thought to be in grave danger, and the refugees' westward flight was viewed as the result of irrational concerns and false rumours.

Partition resulted in one of the greatest displacements of people in human history. Approximately 20 million people were affected, making it the greatest exodus in the twentieth century, with 12 million relocated in Punjab alone. This unusual forcible relocation occurred despite the party leader's and British authorities' assurances. The Indian subcontinent was partitioned to avoid war, but it became the source of the worst genocide that might have existed. The partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan is a well-known example of a "refugee-generating process". It left millions of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs on the wrong side, which is responsible for the greatest exodus in world history.

Migration in Bengal happened in three phases. The first phase of migration occurred between October 1946 and March 1958. Those who entered West Bengal during this period are called "old migrants." They were composed of upper-caste and upper-class Hindu migrants who did not impose a burden on the province administration. Many migrant workers had socially or economically powerful families or properties in the newly created West Bengal.

The second batch of migrants arrived between April 1958 and December 1963. These refugees were dubbed "in-between migrants" by the authorities. The second group of migrants belonged to the middle and upper-middle classes.

This group was not recognised as displaced persons. It received no financial help since the government viewed the organisation as a bunch of economic migrants driven by government benefits. The national government asked the West Bengal government to shut down the rehabilitation ministry. Roy asserts that many of these rich and upper-middle-class people who had previously lived in Calcutta did not register as displaced persons even though they significantly increased the population sizes of post-partition West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam. (Roy, 53).

The third phase of migration happened from January 1964 to March 1971. This wave of migration started with the incidents of Hajratwal in 1964 when a few miscreants desecrated Hajratbal Dargah. In reaction to that incident, there were communal riots in various parts of Bangladesh (East Pakistan). The peasantry and the artisan section of East Pakistan left their home for India in this phase. This migration continued to infiltrate into India until the late 1970s. The poor and Dalit migrants were entitled to rehabilitation only if they wanted to resettle outside of West Bengal because they were seen as an economic burden.

The reasons behind the first and second waves of migration were mainly the fear of losing *dhan* (wealth/property) and *maan* (honour/prestige). The third phase of migration, also known as 'new migrants', comprises the lower castes of Bengal, and the reason behind their migration was *praan* (Life).

Nilanjana Chatterjee, in her article "Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali Refugee Narratives of Communal Violence", analyses the reasons behind the migration of East Bengali people. She says, "East Bengali claims to victimhood used the language of Muslim communal violence- fear of losing life, property, and honour (Pran, Dhan and Maan) to legitimate their claim to be political refugees and to gain public sympathy in India (pp-20).

Reverse Migration

There were incidents of reverse migration during partition because of the confusion regarding national boundaries—one on the western side and another on the eastern side of the subcontinent. Preet Nagar Town near Amritsar and Malda district in Bengal province witnessed such reverse migration. These two areas were first declared to be part of Pakistan, and most of the non-Muslims residing in that area vacated for a 'new' country. However, after a few days, both places were declared part of India and people who left again returned to their places; thus, reverse migration happened.

Bengali Partition Literature

The Bengal partition has left a huge imprint on the intellectuals and creative minds over the years. The Bengali language has also produced a large number of writings based on the partition theme, which has contributed to the Bengali literary spectrum. Some of the exemplary works are: Atin Bandopadhyay's *Nilkontho Pakhir Khoje* (1971), Manik Bandopadhyay's *Sarbojanin* (1974), Pratibha Basu's *Samudra Hriday* (1983), Samaresh Basu's *Khandita* (1987), Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (1967), Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Purba Poshchim* (1988), Amarendra Ghosh's *Beaini Janata* (1952), Amarendra Ghosh's *Bhangche Sudhu Bhangche* (1951), Jagadish Chandra Mandal's *Banga Bhang* (1977), Shanta Sen's *Janmer Mati* (2007), only to mention a few. A few English novels are also available on Bengali Partition, like Amitabh Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Tahmina Anam's *The Golden Gate*.

Several Individuals have tried to pen down their personal experiences of partition. Some of the memoirs which represent the partition violence, trauma, and refugee camp experiences are Sunanda Sikdar's *Doyamoyeer Kotha* (Bengali, 2008), Adhir Biswas' *Deshbhager Smriti* (Bengali, 2010) and Manoranjan Byapari's *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* (2012) etc.

The demographic changes in Kolkata after the partition also changed literary activities. The city refugee life can be seen in the poetry of Jibananda Das, Samar Sen, Buddhadeb Bose, Naresh Guha, Premendra Mitra, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Shankho Ghosh, and so on.

However, some notable writers in Bengali engage in partition writing, such as Sunil Gangopadhyay, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Samaresh Basu, etc. According to Harrington, the short story is the preferred genre for Bengali partition narratives. He mentioned Bhasabi Phraser, who has developed a collection of translated short stories based on the theme of partition, i.e. *Bengali Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter* (2006).

Sarbani Banerjee, in her PhD thesis, challenges the Bhadrakalok (Upper caste) perspective of Bengali Partition narratives. She has presented some partition works by upper caste writers like Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel *The River Churning* (*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, 1967 Bengali) and Ritwik Ghatak's film *The Cloud-Capped Star* (*Meghe Dhaka Tara*, 1960, Bengali) which according to her, stereotypically represent the Bhadrakalok Bengali refugees' immigration and settlement. She has brought up some partition writings by non-bhadrakalok (lower caste) Bengali writers to compare and contrast the Bhadrakalok narrative of partition. These are Adhir Biswas' memoir *Deshbhager Smriti* (*Memory of Partition*, 2010, Bengali) and Allar

Jomine Paa (*Stepping on the Land of Allah*, 2012, Bengali), Manoranjan Byapari's autobiographical work *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* (*Memoir of Chandal Life*, 2012, Bengali) and Sunanda Sikdar's memoir *Doyamoyeer Kotha* (*Doyamoyee's Tale*, 2008, Bengali). According to Banerjee, these writers "represent a point of departure from the Bhadra refugee's romanticised description of refugee memory." (2015, 3).

Besides these novels, considerable numbers of films have been produced in Bengali, which hinge on several issues concerning the partition of Bengal. Some notable works are: Nimai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* (1951), Nirmal Dey's *Sare Chuattar* (1953), Sukumar Dasgupta's *Ora Thake Odhare* (1954), Ritwik Kumar Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1975), Satyajit Rai's *Mahanagar* (1963), Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Tahader Kotha* (1993) etc.

Conclusion

Historical events such as these have an impact on politics and on history, society, and culture in colonial India. The Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the reunion in 1911 broke its events, voluminous enough to change India during the colonial times, in terms of politics, society, and culture. The division opened the door for religious and political division, which finally culminated in the great and dreadful partition of India in 1947. The events preceding Bengal's bifurcation show how challenging it was to deal with the colonial government at the time, the unexpected consequences of its dividing tactics, and the immense power of collective resistance—so far strong in Indian history.

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