



Narrated Time, Constructed Identities: Displaced Hindus after Partition in West Bengal¹

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The partition of the Indian sub-continent displaced a large number of people from East Pakistan (or East Bengal as it was popularly known). Unlike the relatively well-off migrants, who could sometimes reconstruct their lives in newer pastures on the other side of the border, for those who were economically not affluent, this was almost an impossible feat. Many had to spend decades in refugee camps before embarking on the vision of a better life. Many could not return to their original occupations leading to a sense of alienation and irreparable occupational loss despite partial rehabilitation in *jabar dakhal* (squatters') colonies. Refugees who have been surviving in the camps in West Bengal for over six decades and have not yet been rehabilitated are, in a sense, prisoners of the past. It seems that their life and time have been frozen within the boundaries of the camps (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2009: 2-4).

This article emphasises the experiences of those displaced Hindus, who crossed the newly-constructed international border between India and Pakistan after 1947, and took refuge in the refugee camps and squatters' colonies in West Bengal. In order to present a social history of the partition, the article captures the lives and experiences of refugees who lived through that "partitioned time". It delves into the ways



in which they have retained the events accompanying partition and the identities as well as uncertainties that the partition produced or reinforced.

Although the structure of camp life imposed a fixed identity on the refugees, they were also confronted by and had to negotiate with numerous new choices. Their identities were thus also forged through their everyday micro-level struggles. While giving due cognisance to the overarching circumstances that conditioned their lives, it is nonetheless equally important to pay heed to the refugees' perceptions of themselves. These self-perceptions quite often challenge the fixed identities that are ascribed to them. Despite being subjective in nature, memories can serve as a rich archive of experiences of the displaced persons. This is perhaps why Pradip Kumar Bose has argued that 'memory begins where history ends' (Bose 1997: 85). Based on the displaced persons' narratives of the past, this article will engage with whether they perceive their past by resorting to the vocabulary of victimhood and victimisation, if so then how, and how these self-perception(s) may or may not come in conflict with the homogenising identity that is ascribed to them.

The article relies on official publications of the Ministry of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation of the Government of West Bengal and the Department of Rehabilitation of the Government of India, Lok Sabha debates and West Bengal State Legislative Assembly proceedings along with interviews capturing the memories and narratives of some of the persons whose lives were deeply impacted by partition. The time period under consideration is from 1947 upto 1958. This is for two primary reasons: firstly, the year 1957 marked the end of an era of the first popularly elected Congress government at the centre and signified changes in government policies towards the relief and rehabilitation of the displaced persons; and secondly, the Government of India took the decision to wind up the work of relief and rehabilitation in the transit camps in West Bengal by 31 March 1958, and to not recognise any 'immigrant' as a 'displaced' person in need of relief and rehabilitation beyond that date (Government of West Bengal 2001: 1f.).

Following the definition of 'refugee' as stated in the government rehabilitation "Notification number 3370" dated 18 September 1956, the term 'refugee' here stands for a person who has been uprooted from his/her desh,² and is not used in the context of the UN Convention of 1951 or the subsequent UN Protocol of 1967.³ In the aforesaid



notification, the Government of West Bengal defined a 'refugee' as a person who migrated into West Bengal for reasons of safety, in apprehension of disturbances endangering the person or his/her property in his/her usual place of residence in East Pakistan. In contrast, the legal definition of a refugee as mentioned in the UN Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol as well as the 1969 Convention and the Cartagena Declaration of 1984, refers to a refugee as a person compelled to leave his/her country of nationality as he/she feels insecure and is afraid of persecution of his/her life, belief in his/her native land. As India was not a signatory to any of the International Refugee Protection Regimes, the officials of the Government of India and West Bengal preferred to use the term 'displaced' rather than 'refugee' when it came to the question of rehabilitation.

The historical background

Partition did not have the same impact on Punjab and Bengal. For the Punjab, partition and the accompanied exchange of populations—Hindus and Sikhs coming from Western Punjab to India and Muslim moving from Eastern Punjab into Pakistan—was primarily a singular experience of three years, an event of brutality and violence. This exchange was neither peaceful nor a voluntary decision for those compelled to move and was accompanied by large-scale massacres. However, a difference does emerge when one follows how the borders between West Pakistan and Indian Punjab were increasingly concretised in the years following partition. During the ensuing years, the boundaries between the two states of India and Pakistan became increasingly less porous and an established material reality on the western front, especially for divided families.

In Bengal, however, the influx continued for many years following partition, and is ongoing in different forms even today. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta have rightly pointed out in their volume entitled *The trauma and the triumph: gender and partition in Eastern India* (Volume 1) that, while 'the Partition of Punjab was a one-time event with mayhem and forced migration restricted primarily to three years (1947-50), the Partition of Bengal has turned out to be a continuing process' (Bagchi Dasgupta 2005: 2). However, it is important to keep in mind that such comparisons of equivalence do not serve the larger purpose at stake here. Social histories of partition should not give precedence to one region's experiences over those of the other, therein distracting academic engagement from the larger pur-



pose of writing such histories, which would profit more if these different experiences were brought together under one comprehensive framework. Thus, rather than engaging with linear differences, it can be more fruitful to look at the nuances of myriad experiences through the same theoretical and methodological lens. Displacement and migration from East to West, that is former East Pakistan and today's Bangladesh to West Bengal is still 'an inescapable part of our reality.' (ibid.)

This ineluctable constant, etched in our minds, has always reminded us of the horrors of the past and at the same time has enabled the government to look at the people in a different light altogether. Immediately after partition, when the mass exodus was in full swing in the eastern part of former British India, the Government of India defined the term 'displaced' in the following words:

A displaced person is one who had entered India (who left or who was compelled to leave his home in East Pakistan on or after October 15, 1947) for disturbances or fear of such disturbances or on account of setting up of the two dominions of India and Pakistan. (Government of India 1956: 107)

Hindus who had left East Pakistan before 15 October 1947 due to the communal frenzy, were excluded from the abovementioned official definition. The "passport system" was yet to be launched at the time, and it was regarded as a special case as the refugees had citizenship rights in both the states. Therefore, the Indian Government deemed the term 'displaced' to be more suitable than 'refugee'. Moreover, although India became independent on 15 August 1947, people were allowed an extended period of two months for settling in the country of their choice. In the later phase, however, these 'displaced' people were referred to as 'migrants' and were divided into two broad categories—'old migrants' and 'new migrants'. According to the *Manual of Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation* '(a) those who migrated between October 1946 and 31 March 1958 are known as "old migrants". Their rehabilitation was governed by the West Bengal Act XVI of 1951 [...]. (b) Those who came between 1 January 1964 and 25 March 1971, are known as "new migrants"' (Government of India 2001: 1). This article deals with 'old migrants', who left their home between 1946 and 1958 to seek shelter on the other side of the border.

A large number of people left their homes in the event of either being directly victimised or due to the fear of violence, hoping to find peace and security on the other side of the border. In Bengal, the Hin-



dus displaced from the newly created East Pakistan had to take shelter in the Indian federal states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura on the other side of the new and arbitrarily drawn boundary. In such a situation, the upper castes, educated Hindus mostly belonging to the upper and middle class, could avail new opportunities of livelihood in their adopted land within a comparatively shorter period of time, which perhaps reduced their agonising experiences at least to some extent (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury 2015: 60-85). But this would not be the case for most of the poor agriculturists, who usually came to inhabit makeshift refugee camps.

As the cross-border influx continued during the second half of the 1940s and early 1950s, the uprooted people reached the reception and interception centres at Sealdah station, Calcutta. It was only in the early 1950s that the government recognised the necessity of making planned arrangements for the refugees. Several transit camps were created in the bordering districts of West Bengal to give the refugees temporary relief. Cooper's Camp, established on 11 March 1950, was one of the major transit camps in Ranaghat located in the Nadia district of West Bengal, where the displaced people stayed for 10-15 days before their permanent resettlement. Later on, Cooper's Camp was converted into a permanent relief camp. At the peak of the inflow of refugees from across the border, the government mainly set up three types of camps, namely, women's camps, worksite camps and permanent liability (PL) camps.

The residents of the women's camps mostly comprised women and children, who had no male members from their families to look after them. Bhadrakali, Bansberia Women's Camp in Hooghly district, Ranaghat Women's Home and Rupasree Pally in Nadia district, and Titagarh Women's Home in North 24 Parganas district were examples of such women's camps (Government of India 1956: 107). Over time, many of the residents of these women's camps have been permanently rehabilitated along with their family members in and around the camp area. The permanent liability camps provided shelter only to refugees who were considered unfit for any gainful employment i.e. persons who were old, infirm, invalid and orphans. PL camps were located in Dudhkundi in Midnapore district, Bansberia in Hooghly, Chandmari, Cooper's Camp (partially), Chamta and Dhubulia in Nadia district, Habra, Ashoknagar and Titagarh in 24 Parganas district. Indeed, partition came as one of the tormenting stretches of time that made people witness numerous tribulations.



As there was a time gap between preparing for partition and preparing to face the consequences of the partition, the Government of West Bengal treated this period as a 'passing phase'. As a result, the state Statistical Bureau conducted its survey—the first of its kind—in the region only in 1950-51. On 30 November 1952, the population of these camps and the homes was 34,000, including the population of the orphanages. The number soon increased to 37,000. According to the Report on the Relief and Rehabilitation of the Displaced Persons in West Bengal, in 1953 the camp admissions numbered 10,474, 46,904 in 1954, eventually rising to 109,834 in 1955 (ibid.). In order to undo the demoralising effects of a prolonged stay in the camps, the government introduced a system of keeping able-bodied men engaged in useful work for the development of the area, where they were supposed to be rehabilitated. Accordingly, 32 such worksite camps were set up in West Bengal. Bagjola Camp and Sonarpur R5 scheme in 24 Parganas are examples of such worksite camps. The refugees were also kept engaged in many Central Government-aided projects like the Damodar Valley Corporation projects etc. (ibid.: 2).

Frozen time: voices from the camps of West Bengal⁴

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Even after 70 years of independence, nearly 410 persons still live in PL camps in West Bengal. Over time, a majority of PL camps have been transformed into rehabilitated areas. However, there are still 8 PL camps in West Bengal which are located at Chandmari, Dhubulia, Habra, Bhadrakali, Bansberia, Chamta, Cooper's and Ranaghat Women's Home (Refugee and Rehabilitation Department 2017).

In most of the cases, military barracks and tunnel-shaped huts made of iron originally constructed for Allied soldiers during the World War II were converted into camps for the refugees. Thousands of refugees, displaced persons who arrived either by train or truck from across the border, were placed in these camps. As some of the camps became overpopulated, with the government unable to provide any further space in the makeshift military barracks or huts, the additional refugees were given tents as a means of shelter. Each refugee family comprising four members received one tent whereas larger families (exceeding four members) were given two tents.

Living conditions in the camp were unsatisfactory and rather sub-human in nature. In fact, in 1955, after visiting the camps of West Bengal, leading social workers, including Bina Das, Sudha Sen, Sheila Davar, Ashoka Gupta, and Amar Kumari Varma, accompanied by Suniti



Pakrashi, Deputy Director of Women's Rehabilitation in West Bengal submitted a report entitled *East is East: West is West* to the Government of India about the miserable conditions of the camps. The report revealed that,

the lack of privacy and of kitchen space is notorious. Scanty water supply with hand pumps and congested rooms with leaking roofs have led to a number of strikes in PL camps. All the camps that we have visited here in West Bengal for PL women and children lack workroom, crèche rooms, playground, separate kitchen, common prayer room even after seven years. No home or a PL women's camp, however long it may have been established, has been provided with any facilities for education at nursery or pre-basic stage [...].

In PL camps and homes for the aged and the infirm no such regular work centre was ever sanctioned to enable them to learn and earn something. Even when some work centres or training centres were sanctioned, it was for a short period only and no wages were paid for the goods produced by them after the training was completed. The plea given for this is that they are fed and clothed at government expense. Women are therefore reluctant to come and work at the work centres or training centres. Allowance for clothes at Rs 2 per capita is never given to the camp inmates in cash. Sarees, dhotis and garments are supplied by the department twice during the year, but the result of such bulk purchase is that the garments seldom fit the person to whom it is given. No charpoys or *razais* are provided as is done for West Punjab refugees. In the damp Bengal climate, the bedding provided is very inadequate [...].

Women refugees taking a course of training in teaching or nursing in a recognised institution or hospital are not given any stipend but are only allowed to attend the vocational training centres specially set up for refugees. Except in Titagar and Gariahat work centres (which are for men) the grants for women under these heads in West Bengal are very meagre. (cit. in: Jasodhara Bagchi & Subhoranjan Dasgupta 2003: 235-7, italics in the original)⁵

While narrating her experiences in Coopers' Camp, Sarajubala Ghot (80, name changed), a resident of the Ranaghat Womens' Home, said:

Oh! What a situation [...]. Even in the dormitories of those barracks, each of our refugee family was allotted a little space. Each family marked its occupied area with pebbles, stones and tit-bits and sometimes did not even have a sleeping space for the members of the refugee family. So far as the tent was concerned, each refugee family comprising four members got one tent, and a bigger family (with more than four members) got two tents to live



in. Under such circumstances, there was absolutely no question of any privacy. It is true that, we, as the refugees definitely got shelter far away from our homes and communal hatred, but drinking water! Health care! Oh! What a miserable condition! Scarcity of water, lack of proper health care, and oh yes, irregular supply of ration made our lives unbearable. You know, in such a situation, many children died of dysentery in our camp. The dead bodies of children were sometimes buried, but very often were simply thrown away in the jungle for paucity of funds. The government used to pay only palpable amount of money for cremation of a body. Oh! There were also hyenas around our camp. Usually the hyenas appeared after sunset and took away children from the tents or huts of the overcrowded refugee camp. While memorising those days it appears like a nightmare to me [...]. (Ghot 2001)

Ashalota Das (name changed), a widow, nearly 90 years of age of Bansberia Women's Home mentioned the scarcity of the proper maternity units in the camps at that time.⁶ The big, heavy green coloured gate of the entrance of the house led way to meeting Ashalota. As witnessed by the author on her first meeting, Ashalota was fair, thin and full of wrinkles on her face. She had a typical, aged, Bengali widow haircut⁷ and wore white *thann* (piece of cloth). She had become paralytic due to rheumatic arthritis. She stayed at the dormitory of the camp, where each PL member had been allotted a little space marked with pebbles. Earlier, when this home was full of refugees, the area allotted per person was too inadequate to provide sleeping space for all members of the camp at the same time. Now the dormitory is almost deserted. Old habits indeed die hard. The residents no longer have the urge to move beyond their demarcated territory (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2006: 155-74). Like other invalid camp-dwellers, Ashalota was also served cooked food in an aluminium *thali* (plate) by the camp administration. While reminiscing those partition days she said,

the riot began on the day of *Shib-choturdashi* (an auspicious day of the Hindus when Lord Shiva is worshiped). So far, I can remember it started immediately after the riot that took place at Muladi, Barisal. The outsiders created trouble. I lost everything. They chopped everyone. [...] Burning our houses, they killed my elder uncles. *Dada* (elder brother), *bhai* (younger brother) got separated from us. Who knows where they had gone. They never returned. My parents and I only stayed back for a little more. But, then one day, Fakir Mollah and Rafiq *chacha* (uncle), two good Muslim *projas* (cultivators) of our village, advised my father to leave. So, we left. (Das 2008)



Ashalota did not have to directly witness the brutality of the killings. She was inside her house with her mother. Married women used to stay inside their homes, a habit Ashalota had imbibed in her childhood, rarely coming out of their *andarmahal* (private space of their houses) to meet the male guests of the family. The male guests (beside the close relatives) and neighbours did not have access to the *andarmahal* of these women. Ashalota explained:

I was not only a married woman, but also a widow. I rarely came out of the room. Me, my mother and other girls and married women of our neighbourhood also shut themselves up inside the premises. What a terrible situation outside! We could peep through our windows that the houses nearby were aflame. We understood that we would not be spared. We fled. So many people of our village ran away from their own ancestral land! We came by steamer and then by train. Before we reached Darshana my father died. My mother and I knew nothing where to go. After reaching the border we registered ourselves as refugees. They sent us to Dhubulia camp. We stayed there for two years. After that, they brought us to Bhadrakali at Uttarpara and from Bhadrakali we came here [...] we got our new identity [...] refugees. (Das 2008)

Maya Saha (78 years of age, name changed), a resident of Dhubulia refugee camp, which was one of the biggest camps situated near Krisnanagar, the district head quarter of Nadia in West Bengal, expressed almost the same view on the conditions in the camps (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2009: 12f.). In her words,

Many of us from our village Jalisha of Barisal left our *desh* together. It was because of the riot. Though our family was not directly affected by the riot however, my father and other elderly relatives told the time has come to leave our place. Just imagine [...] a poor Muslim *proja* (subject) demanded to marry a rich Hindu girl! At the other, we got information that they started stealing harvest, cows, and boats and so on. We decided to leave our place. Leaving our land, our home, everything we were on the streets! With all men! The riot changed our identity. I was indeed a bride of a well-established family! My father-in-law had some land. We used to survive on agriculture. After losing my husband I came back to my *baaper bari* (father's place). The riot snatched everything from us.

Alas! Now I am a refugee—a poor, old dependent of government's help for my survival. [...] when we first crossed the border, we registered our names as refugees. We were sent to Cooper's camp and from Cooper's we came here in Dhubulia. Oh! What a crowded place it was. There



was absolutely no privacy for women. You know, in our *desh* we, the womenfolk of the society were ignorant and unaware of the outside world. We used to stay in our houses. All of a sudden, the riot placed us on the crowded streets. Growing up in the traditional Hindu families, as young girls, we never had the chance to socialise with any male from outside our own families. Becoming a refugee, we had to adjust ourselves with that changed situation. I don't know where everything was gone! I could not trace anyone again. I came here with my fellow-villagers. My son became mentally unsound. I did not have money. So, I could not arrange for his treatment. Now, his situation is even worse! Who will feed us? So, I don't have any way other than begging. My son and me somehow survive in this small room. I don't really know what will happen to him after me. (Saha 2001)

Maya and Ashalota not only tell us about the camps, but also about their understanding of their 'old world', the communal relationships and their experiences of displacement. Like Maya and Ashalota, numerous other refugee women displaced from their *desh*, their "foundational home", changed their perspectives towards life. Partition thus left a deep scar on their psyche. The communal riots and pogroms ruptured the lives of numerous such women in many ways. Some of them faced abduction, molestation or rape, whereas some were even murdered. On a few occasions, these displaced women were forced to marry Muslim men and convert to Islam. However, most of them preferred to remain silent about the physical violence, in case they had faced any (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2006: 155-74).

It is noteworthy that the narratives collected from the campmates who took shelter in the PL camps of West Bengal were centred on victimhood, displacement, trauma of loss of relatives and homes, while those who were rehabilitated in the Andaman Islands during the initial phase of resettlement, possessed different perspectives. Dibakar Mistry's (name changed) family is one among many such refugee families, who decided to get rehabilitated in the Andamans as soon as they crossed the border in 1950. Mistry's family came from Barisal and Mistry, and as a second generation 'refugee' still considers Barisal as his *desh* though he was born and brought up in Rangat, Andaman Islands. Mistry still believes that his family took the right decision to come to the Andamans as they received land as 'Bengali settlers' which helped them in the reconstruction of their lives after migrating to an alien land. To quote Mistry, "we got a new identity [...] from 'refugee' we became 'settlers' in these islands" (Mistry 2017).



According to a survey made by Surajit Sinha, the largest number of refugees resettled in Andamans came from Barisal (nearly 50 per cent) followed by Faridpur, Dhaka, Khulna, Tipperah and Noakhali (Sinha cit. in Anderson, Mazumdar & Pandya 2016: 181; Sen 2011: 219-44). According to Mistri, like other uprooted families, they also enrolled their names in the government register after crossing the border of Darshana. As an agriculturalist family they were sent to Cooper's Camp, Ranaghat. Staying at Cooper's for three-four months they were rehabilitated in the Andamans (Mistri 2017). The first two batches of refugees comprising 198 families reached Port Blair on 13 and 31 March 1949 respectively. They were first accommodated in temporary barracks at Manpur, Colimpur, Homfrey Gunj, Manglutan, Nayashahar in the South Andaman district. Between 1949 and 1952, a total of 420 families (Mazumder cit. in Anderson, Mazumdar & Pandya 2016: 176) came to the Andaman Islands. This number increased to 3,421 in July 1954 (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2000: 134).

According to Mistri, they were allotted agricultural land, land for homestead and land for growing fruits and vegetables. Five acres of agricultural land, five acres of non-agricultural land of homestead were allotted to the refugees at Rangat in Andaman. However, there were allegations that although the refugees settling in the Andamans were given five acres of agricultural land, all of them did not really receive another five acres of non-agricultural land. Financial assistance was given to them to meet their costs of travelling from the Indian mainland. They also received financial assistance for the construction of their huts, purchase of plough animals and agricultural implements and for their own maintenance until the harvests of the first crop. No land revenue was recovered from them during the initial period of their settlement. The financial assistance provided to these refugees was in the form of loans eventually to be repaid in easy instalments. A very small amount of interest was charged on this loan (ibid.).

While conversing with Mistri it was evident that as a member of a refugee, displaced family he was more eager to tell a story of their struggle for existence after arriving at Andaman from the 'mainland'. Each individual refugee story in the camps in West Bengal has been a tale of individual loss, of escape and survival in a new land; a narrative rendered especially poignant by the sudden whiff of nostalgia for a lost homeland or desh. In a more jingoistic present, desh has taken a connotation similar to the patriotic fervour that the word "nation" evokes. However, for campmates, as evident in their personal narratives, desh persists to be one's homeland, now only sustained by



memories. But, in Mistri's case the memories of displacement have been replaced by narratives of personhood and more recent memories of the articulation of their survival stories, whereby nostalgic feelings for their lost desh have faded.

Government policies

The Government of West Bengal had no carefully thought-out plan for the rehabilitation of camp refugees who were mostly agriculturalists in the initial stage. It was only in 1955 and thereafter that the Government of India decided to look at the problem of the East Pakistani refugees on 'a rational basis.' (Lok Sabha report 1959-60:15) Between 1947 and 1955, the Indian Government provided ad hoc assistance to enable the refugees to resettle under the Byanama Scheme. According to this scheme, a camp refugee was allowed to choose a plot of land that he wanted to buy with the government loan (Chakraborty 1999: 162). The government granted loans for the rehabilitation of refugees in the rural and urban areas depending upon the occupational background of the displaced (Das 2003: 126-36). In many cases, however, there were tremendous irregularities to grant loans to the refugees for purchase of lands. Sometimes, when the refugee somehow managed to get money, there was a scarcity of cultivable land.

A lack of access to the cultivable land for a long period of time naturally annoyed them. The scarcity of cultivable land coupled with the poor living conditions in the camps, including irregular supply of food and cash doles gradually increased the grievances of the camp-dwellers. Incidents of passive and active resistance emerged in numerous camps. According to Prangobindo Das (76), once involved in the refugee movement in Coopers' Camp:

Initially we used to follow the non-violent methods to make the government aware about our demands for a better livelihood. At that time, we used to prefer the method of negotiation with the officers of the "RR" Department of the Government as well as the method of satyagraha. Of all the camps in West Bengal, we were more organised in Coopers' and always took a leading part in launching any protest movement. We used to gather on the playground in front of the Kali temple [Hindu goddess of power], and all movements usually started from this place [...]. (Das 2001)

However, the camp protests entered a new phase in 1958 when the Government of India decided to wind up the camps in the eastern



region by July 1959. In view of the continuing exodus from East Pakistan, the Government of India gradually realised that it would be difficult for cash-starved West Bengal to give shelter to all the incoming refugees from the other side of the border. Therefore, it was deemed better to select some of the displaced persons, who could not be rehabilitated in the economy in West Bengal, and send them to other parts of the country (Lok Sabha Debate 1957: 3378). The Government had already made it clear that there was a serious lack of available land for rehabilitation in West Bengal, especially for agriculture. In such a situation, the incoming refugees were additional liabilities for West Bengal. Against this backdrop, the Government of India decided to treat the East Pakistani refugee problem 'absolutely on a national level' (ibid.: 3888). It is interesting here to note one of the statements of Sucheta Kripalani, a Member of Parliament, in this connection, who said: 'It was not on West Bengal's decision that this country was partitioned. This country was partitioned by a decision of India [...]. Therefore, it is a national problem and all the states should pull their weight in rehabilitating them' (ibid.).

This was the spirit that was perhaps responsible for the Government's decision to send the "excess" refugees outside West Bengal to places like Dandakaranya of Madhya Pradesh and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (Gupta 1999; Ghosh 2000: 106-29; Basu Ray Chaudhury 2000: 131-9).

It was decided at the official level that primarily the refugees belonging to the agriculturalists, who took shelter in the refugee camps and received doles from the Government, had to go to Dandakaranya. However, the refugees, the original inhabitants of the Indo-Gangetic plains were reluctant to go to the dry, "alien land". Anadi Mondal, a PL member of the Chamta Camp of Nadia, said in his interview with the author on 15 March 2002, that he, like other camp dwellers opposed to go to Dandakaranya and as a result the government stopped their doles temporarily. Hence, they did not have any other option but to go to Dandakaranya. In his own words:

When the wave of Dandakaranya came, the government tried to persuade us to go to that dry area. We are people from an area with water. How could we live in that rocky area? So, we did not agree to go there. The government stopped all assistance to us. Whatever assistance we used to get, that also was gone! We, however, managed to receive assistance once again after a lot of request, but that was after about five years. Meanwhile, our fami-



ly was shifted from the Coopers to the Chamta camp. (Mondal 2002)

Gradually, the resentment of the camp-dwellers in West Bengal against the Central Government's decision to send them outside the state encouraged them to raise their voice. The numerous forms of agitation and protest are presented in the next section.

Stories of reconstruction and refugee agitation in camps and squatters' colonies

The refugees, who crossed over to West Bengal from East Pakistan from the late 1940s and early 1950s, primarily belonged to the upper or middle classes. Due to their class background, their natural choice of destination was Calcutta, where they hoped to find jobs or professional opportunities suitable for them. Many of them had friends, relatives and acquaintances in Calcutta, who initially helped them to resettle. The social network system of these displaced people thus played an important role in helping reconstruct their lives on the other side of the border. Neither of these two groups of people wished to go to the relief camps. Even those who did not belong to well-off families and did not possess numerous resources but were from a higher caste, did not want to settle in the refugee camps mainly because of their *maan* (honour). Almost all respondents at the squatters' colonies in and around Kolkata⁸ revealed that refugee camps were meant for *choto jat* (lower caste people). They were conscious about their caste identity and decided not to take shelter in the camps.

It was against this backdrop, that the squatters' colonies, an important part of the life and landscape of West Bengal and definitely a significant part of Calcutta, mushroomed (Anil Sinha 2002).⁹ In some cases, where the land was acquired through legal means and procedures, the government termed the areas of refugee settlement as 'private colonies'. But, in other cases, apparently vacant land, owned by the government or by big landowners, was acquired through forcible occupation. This process of 'collective takeover' was known as *jabar dakhal* (Waber 2003: 67). Though the squatters' colonies also flourished in other parts of West Bengal, in December 1950, there were about 149 squatters' colonies, all of which had emerged in the Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly districts. A large concentration of these squatters' colonies was found in the south-eastern portion of the Calcutta Metropolitan District, especially in the areas like Jadavpur,



Tollygange, Kasba and Behala. Approximately 40 such colonies had been established by 1950.

The refugees built up their own shelters virtually without any government aid in these areas. In order to link their habitation with livelihood, the colonies were set up near towns or industrial areas. But the squatters' colonies were not limited to the cities and suburbs. In rural areas, the refugee peasants took over uncultivated wasteland. Such land was seized not only for habitation, but also for cultivation. Such agricultural colonies were established in the Bankura, Birbhum, Midnapore, Burdwan, Nadia, Murshidabad, 24 Parganas, West Dinajpur, Malda, Coochbihar and Jalpaiguri districts (Sinha 2002).

While recollecting his memories of those days' struggle for reconstructing their lives in not so alien a place like Calcutta, Himanshu Majumder (75, name changed), a resident of Bijoygarh colony said:

There was no colony as such when I came here with my father from our *desh*, Barisal. Perhaps it was November or December 1947. I knew Santosh Dutta quite well due to my political connection since the pre-partition days. Santoshda sent me a message that if we want to resettle in Calcutta, we must come here as early as possible [...]. In fact, when I arrived here I came to know that Santoshda, with the help of others, already formed an informal group who met and decided about a piece of land, which appeared alright. I got a plot of five or six cottah on my first night in Calcutta. We constructed a thatched hut to live in. We used *Hogla* leaves to cover our roof. The land was low-lying and marshy. We cleared the land, installed tube-well and made the place liveable [...]. (Majumder 2001)¹⁰

Amiyaprova Debi (74, name changed), another resident of Bijoygarh, who came from Chittagong of East Pakistan, portrayed almost a similar picture. In her words:

There was a military barrack in the area which was constructed for the Americans during the Second World War. So, a wide concrete road already existed there connecting Jadavpur to Tollygunge. Besides the military barracks, there were huge, vacant lands, the property of the private landlords, like Layelkas. There were sometimes fierce battles with the hired goons of the landlords, who also had the support of the police. We fought back refusing to yield. At the same time, we also carried on negotiations with the private owners of the land and the Government. The area was full of snakes. There were least possible public amenities. We had to carry drinking water on our own as there were initially no tube-wells in the area, no electricity, [...]. We were quite well-off there in our *desh*, and here we had to start



our lives again like beggars living in a *basti* (slum)-like area without electricity, water supply, drainage and other basic sanitary amenities [...]. (Debi 2001)¹¹

Both the abovementioned excerpts show how people struggled to make a new life for themselves in new circumstances. Whether the absence of basic amenities like water supply, drainage and electricity, the skirmishes with landlords and their hired goons, the presence of snakes or having to build a shelter from nothing—these examples indicate not just the nature of their strife but also how they choose to narrate those struggles decades after partition. The refugees' narratives thus serve as an important window to distance from ascribing them fixed identities and rather relying on their own voice that describes their experience as one of victimhood or that of accomplishment, survival and agitation.

Agitation did not just occur in the form of claiming and occupying physical space and beginning a new life on it but also came to acquire a more organised face, both in squatters' colonies as well as the camps. In 1948, with the formation of the Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Karma Parishad (All Bengal Refugee Council for Action), the politics of agitation among the refugees of the squatters' colonies took a concrete shape for the first time. In the initial phase, the Parishad had two groups of members: the pro-Congress group wanted permanent rehabilitation of the refugees without antagonising the government authorities at the Centre and the State, and the other group mostly comprised left-minded members. In 1949, those Left-leaning members took over the leadership of the Parishad. Since then, the Parishad organised meetings and demonstrations in the squatters' colonies, and this sort of "unionisation" helped the refugees to launch the protest movement in an organised manner.

Against this backdrop it became clear to the shelter-seekers in the jabar dakhil colonies by the early 1950s that they had no other option but to raise their voice to get justice so far as relief and rehabilitation was concerned—what Anil Sinha calls as 'the epic battle of Kurukshetra' in order to attain 'just and legitimate' demands. Sinha argues that, these jabar dakhil colonies were classic examples of the organised resentment of the East Pakistani refugees against the rehabilitation policies of the Congress government (Sinha 2002).

The United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), primarily led by the left parties, attempted to help the refugees to increase their consciousness about their rights and thereby made the civil society more vibrant for



the first time since independence (Das cit. in Samaddar 2003: 109), which Nilanjana Chatterjee has termed as a dynamic interplay between 'official discourse' and the refugee counter-discourse (Chatterjee 1990: 70). Although the Leftists gradually became influential among the squatters' colonies in this way, the refugees never became puppets of the Communists (Sinha 2002). Rather the UCRC worked as the mouth-piece of the displaced persons from East Pakistan. In other words, the politics of rehabilitation by the Government triggered off a new politics, which may be termed as 'the politics of agitation.'¹² This agitation was an active resistance to the politics of rehabilitation initiated by the Governments (the Government of India and that of West Bengal together). Moreover, this agitation by the displaced persons, along with their shared memories, provided the shelter-seekers a specific identity. The refugees were no longer the recipients of rehabilitation discourse but became participants of the discourse.

As has been mentioned earlier, the role of refugees and refugee leaders who were members of the UCRC was quite crucial in other popular movements of the time. Starting from archival documents to several memoirs, such as Prafulla Chakrabarty's *Marginal men*, and newspaper reports indicate the same. Chakrabarty writes that all refugee men from colonies near Calcutta had been actively involved in the Tram movement of 1953.¹³ Various colonies of Dumdum, Azadgarh, Bijaygarh, Poddarnagar, Regent Colony, Nehru Colony, Ray Mallik Colony, Lake Colony, and Pratapaditya Colony of South Kolkata took an active part in the movement. On 25 July 1953, these colonies were attacked by the police. Refugees who were seen participating in the Tram movement were beaten up and arrested.

At this stage refugees in the colonies were relying more on the UCRC than any other refugee committees as evident from their increasing participation in the protest rallies called by the UCRC. UCRC's policies regarding rehabilitation of refugees were linked to the question of land and eviction. Refugee activists were concerned that, over the question of land, the government was pitting refugees against the poorer sections of the locals and returnee Muslims (Sengupta & Banerjee cit. in Sengupta, Banerjee & Sengupta 2016: 13-15). The refugee leadership in the colonies thus made an effort so that the landless locals and small landowners should not be the focus of their agitation. The refugee agitation was thus expected to be more against the big landowners or the zamindars.



This is how the land movement was born from the 'womb of the question of refugee rehabilitation' (ibid.). The resentment of the refugees against the Central Government's policies of rehabilitation was carefully nurtured by the Leftist leaders in West Bengal. As most of the Leftist leaders had migrated from East Bengal initially they were also in search of a strong political base. Organising the refugee movements could be a golden opportunity to achieve their goal. As a consequence, the squatters' colonies soon became the ideal recruitment ground for the Left parties. Under these circumstances, the refugees from the squatters' colonies became the participants of the discourse of relief and rehabilitation movement in a larger way.

At the same time, agitation also became a reality for those refugees who lived in camps. The camp-dwellers of Bettiah in Bihar had launched a peaceful satyagrahamovement in May 1958 for the fulfilment of their demands of improved living and economic conditions in the camp to rehabilitate them. This also showed a way out to the refugees living in the camps of West Bengal. When the Government tried to force them to go to Dandakaranya, these refugees revolted. They launched a massive civil disobedience movement in the Gandhian way and more than 30,000 camp refugees were arrested. Though this movement did not last long, it left a major impact on the psyche of the refugees. It helped them to come out of their shell. Initially, the refugees living in the camps expected that the organisations of the squatters' colonies would join this movement, and would give it a stronger shape. However, this was not so in reality. The squatters' colonies stood apart with their own problems. They did not intend to take part in this movement primarily because of two reasons: first, they had already acquired lands through jabar dakhla to start their lives afresh, and second, most of them belonged to a higher class as well as an upper caste than their contemporaries in the camps. Moreover, when the government took the decision to recognise 133 squatters' colonies in the beginning of 1958, the camp-dwellers got frustrated and felt somewhat alienated from their contemporaries who were in the squatters' colonies (Basu Ray Chaudhury 2012: 61-88).

Apart from the Communist Party of India (CPI) the Proja Socialist Party (PSP)-led organisation Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan (SBBS), (All Bengal Refugee Conference), and the organisation called Bastuhara Kalyan Parishod (Refugee Welfare Council), led by the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), started playing dominant role in the camps. The RCPI was more active in the camps of Nadia. Nevertheless, the left political parties led the United Central



Refugee Council (UCRC) also started to bring together the camp refugees with the help of PSP on a programme acceptable to all. Slowly but steadily, rallies and demonstrations took the place of satyagrahas the weapon of the refugee movement. In due course of time, the "politicisation" and "unionisation" of the refugee movement inspired these uprooted people to become a part of the larger movement against the Union and State Governments, and the struggle of the refugees through the politics of agitation continued to counter the policies of rehabilitation since then.

Conclusion

This article has shown how the experience of partition and coping with new circumstances was multi-layered for different refugees. Whereas those in squatters' colonies had a relatively more resourceful material existence in their previous desh and sometimes networks in their new country of residence, the camps became sites of worse adversities. It also shows that caste identifications, linked to discourses of honour, were a factor of distinction among the different refugee groups. Whereas members of the squatters' colonies combatted landlords and their hired goons to claim space in the city but managed to develop better means of subsistence, the residents of the refugee camps continued being dependent on cash doles and government provisions. As time passed by, most of the refugee families of the squatters' colonies in and around Kolkata have got *pattas* (deed) for their land while the camp-dwellers, who still have not been rehabilitated, remain 'prisoners of the past'. For them, the present only entails receiving a fixed amount of cash dole and rations (sometimes irregular) from the camp authorities. They, therefore, live in and with their past—with their trauma as well as their childhood memories. Their desh has become someplace else which is now a place of no return.

The nature of the respective struggles and the politics of agitation for the two kinds of refugees was also more layered and complex than is usually presented in discourses that club these identities under the homogenising rubric of "the refugee". A distinction can also be discerned from the government's perspective in some cases as most of the squatters' colonies were recognised whereas not much changed in the official status of the residents of the camps. Both, however, organised themselves in different ways to nonetheless develop agitative methods of protest, whether through umbrella organisations like the UCRC or through civil disobedience mechanisms.



In light of the abovementioned findings, this article has thus emphasised two aspects: firstly, given the diverse nature of these layered experiences, they should not be packaged under one generalising category of "the refugee" and secondly, in spite of these differences, one commonality is that in both cases partition pushed individuals into new circumstances and new physical landscapes where they had to start afresh. Their individual narratives graphically show how, whether by fighting snakes or in reclaiming government provisions after refusing to go to Dandakaranya, at all stages, refugees' lives were shaped by intense struggles, protest and agitation. Discourses attempting to pay heed to their self-ascribed identities thus ought to give due cognisance to how this vocabulary of agitation informs their own narrative of their lives after partition.

Endnotes

¹ Many partition-refugees in the camps and squatters' colonies were kind enough to share some of their painful memories with the author, who talked to them. The author is indebted to them for their cooperation. The author has learnt immensely through her interactions with Ashis Nandy, Ranabir Samaddar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay to understand the dynamics of partition, displacement and politics of rehabilitation in the East.

² *Desh* stands for abode, homeland. Dipesh Chakrabarty would translate *desh* as 'foundational homeland' (Chakrabarty 1996: 2144).

³ According to the 1951 UN Convention, a refugee is a person owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. For legal exposition of the status and rights of refugees see (Hathaway 1991; Goodwin Gill 1996; Chimni 2002).

⁴ Some interviews of the respondents have been used in author's earlier writings. All respondents (excluding the respondent interviewed in Port Blair, Andaman) were interviewed by the author while she was working as Research Associate in a project "Reconstruction of lives after partition" at Centre for Studies in Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi. All interviews were conducted in Bengali and later translated by the author.

⁵ The report said that, "cash dole for food in the refugee camps is not paid in uniform rates for an adult and a child. The scale of doles here is Rs. 12 for an adult and Rs. 8 for a child below 8, and upto a maximum of Rs. 60, whatever may be the number in the family" (cit. in: Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta 2003: 236).

⁶ Ashalota Das was interviewed on 5 March 2008 in Bansberia Women's Home located on the bank of river Hooghly at Hooghly district. It is on the way to Tribeni from Bandel. The total allotted area for this PL Camp is not too big in comparison to the Coopers' Camp, Dhubulia camp and the Ranaghat Mahila Shibir. Like Ranaghat and Bhadrakali, the residents of this home comprise only women. Out of total 40 residents living in the camp, some camp-dwellers are physically as well as mentally disabled.

⁷ In traditional Bengali Hindu families, the portrayal of widows succumbs to the dismal conventions of the societal norms that often led to the shaving of hair. Acknowledged as a symbol of fertility and abundance, the hair was sacrificed as part of the "vidava-vrata", which finally made



the woman renounce the worldly pleasures of family life. The survival of penance and that of an ascetic is involuntarily taken up and it is not really the hair which is lost, but the entire zeal of life and betterment.

⁸ Before 2001, the capital of West Bengal was known as Calcutta, in continuity with the colonial pronunciation. This was changed to Kolkata in 2001. The change indicated a shift to the colloquial version of enunciating the city's name i.e. as it was pronounced by the inhabitants. The author has used two different versions in the article to capture the temporal context of the two separate instances of use. While Kolkata is a reference to contemporary times, Calcutta indicates the time before the change of name as well the references made to the city during colonial times.

⁹ Anil Sinha is the Former Secretary of the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC).

¹⁰ Cottah is primarily a measure of land in Bengal, equivalent to 720 English square feet. The etymological affinity of this word can be traced back to colonial India or even before, rooting majorly in the southern part of the country. The Cottah River flows through here making the region highly rich in natural resources. Hogla (*Typhaelephantina Roxb*) is an abundant NWFSP species found in the mangroves and tidal forests of coastal belts adjoining the Sundarbans. Hogla leaves are woven into mats used for beds, to dry crop on and for prayer mats. They are also used for making storage containers and hut walls.

¹¹ It may be noted that, from the early 1950s, the Government of West Bengal seemed to be unable to deal with the refugee influx due to the paucity of land for rehabilitation and resettlement of the refugees. It is interesting to note here that, according to a report of the Department of Rehabilitation of the Government of West Bengal, in the mid-1950s, the total amount of evacuee land for distribution was 206,000 acres out of which 104,000 acres were restored to the owners. Thus, only 102,000 acres of evacuee land were at the disposal of the state. The total amount of land occupied by the refugees was 59,000 acres. 26,000 acres of land were fallow, which could have been utilised for the purpose of rehabilitation. Thus, the State Government's excuse of scarcity of land for refugee rehabilitation did not have a strong enough ground. For details, see (Bandopadhyay 1970: 217).

¹² I have borrowed the terms from Abhijit Dasgupta, "The politics of agitation and confession: displaced Bengalis in West Bengal" (Dasgupta 2001: 96).

¹³ On 25 June 1953 the company announced its decision to increase second class fares from the July 1. The decision was supported by the government of West Bengal. On 27 June, a joint statement issued by the leaders of the opposition parties, including the CPI, Praja Socialist Party (PSP), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), Socialist Unity Centre (SUC), Forward Bloc, etc., opposed the government move to increase the fare. The same evening witnessed the formation of the Tram and Bus Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee comprising leaders of these political parties. Eventually this committee came to be known popularly as Resistance Committee or *Pratirodh Committee*. Apart from students, teachers from high schools and colleges, workers from various fields and ordinary women of the neighbourhoods' refugees also took active part in this agitation. At that point of time the refugees were trying to gain a foothold in the city and a scheme like this would quite naturally attract their attention.

Interviews

Interview with Ashalota Das. 2008. Bansberia Women's Home, Hooghly, 5 March.

Interview with Prangobindo Das. 2001. Cooper's camp, Nadia, 13 December.



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- Interview with Amiyaprova Debi. 2001. Jadavpur, Kolkata, 10 October.
- Interview with Sarajubala Ghot. 2001. Ranaghat Women's Home, Nadia, 13 December.
- Interview with Himanshu Majumder. 2001. Bijoygarh, Kolkata, 9 October.
- Interview with Dibakar Mistri. 2017. Port Blair, 20 July.
- Interview with Anadi Mondal. 2002. Chamta Camp, Krishnanagar, 15 March.
- Interview with officials of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal. 2017. Kolkata, 27 July.
- Interview with Maya Saha. 2017. Dhubulia PL camp, 10 October.
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